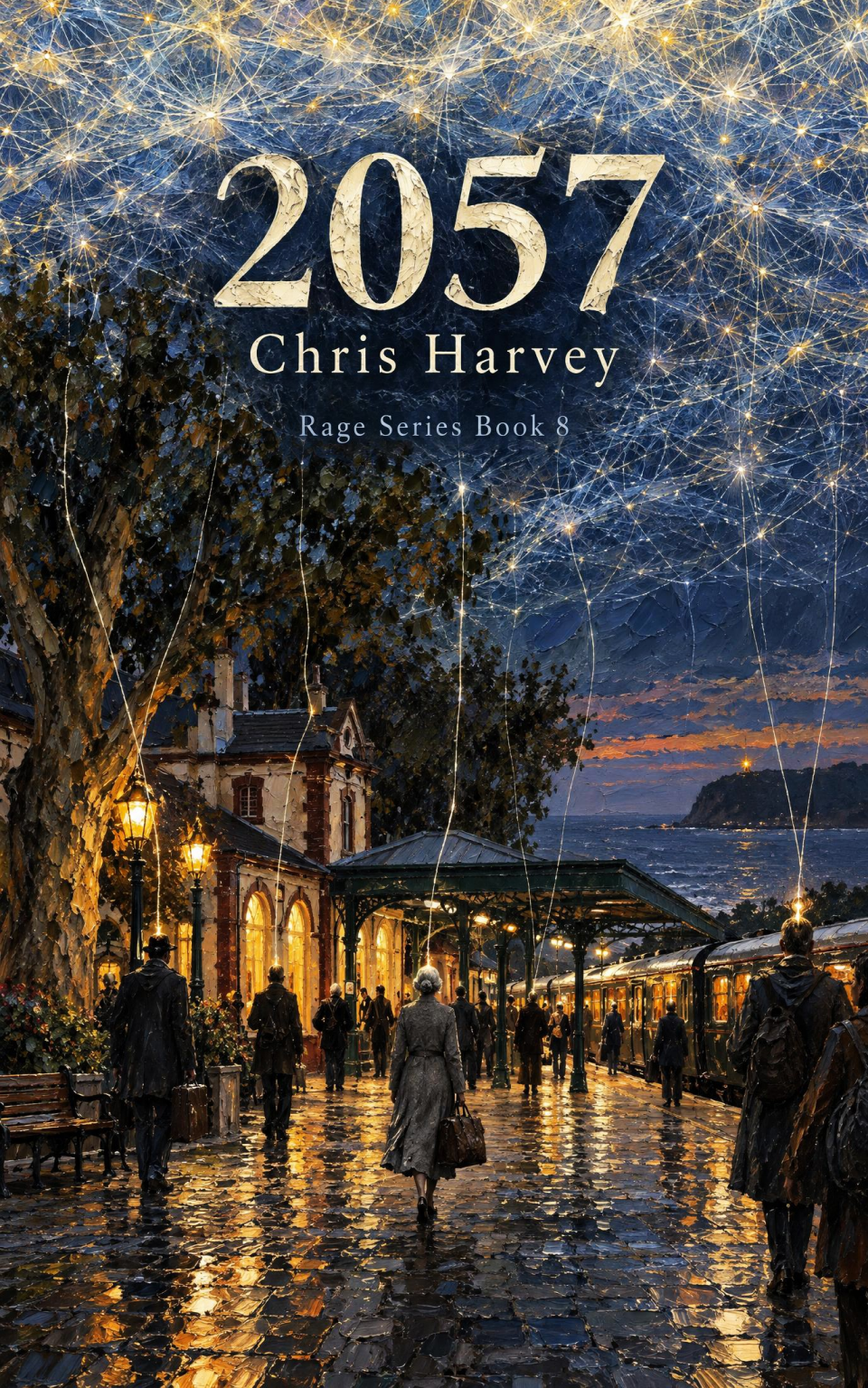
2057

Chris Harvey

Rage Series Book 8



2057

Chris Harvey



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Chapter 1 – *Five*

Mon. 3 Sept. 2057. Bailey's, the back room, 8.02 a.m. K. in the window. "Five." The Exchange, top floor, 9.10 a.m. C.H. at the desk. C.D. rang, 4.40 p.m.: the 29th. Eight weeks.

Jo Hills had sat across a table from the same young man most mornings for eleven years, and he had not aged a day, and she had.

She noticed it on the first Monday in September, at two minutes past eight, coming in through the door from the public bar with her coffee. She did not know why that morning and not another. Perhaps it was the light. The first of the autumn light, low and clean, coming in through the window of the back room off Station Square and lying across the table with the brass plate on it. RESERVED. And across the young man sitting at it, with a cup in both hands and his thumbs hooked over the rim, looking out at the square.

He looked about thirty. Dark hair. A white shirt and a dark jacket. A long jaw and deep eyes a little too far apart, a Harvey face. He had looked about thirty in 2046, when she first came to sit across from him in the mornings. He had looked about thirty, her father said, on a wet night in April 2028, when he first walked into Bailey's and turned a cup a quarter turn on its saucer.

She was forty-seven. There was grey in her hair, at the front, that she had stopped pulling out. She had a knee that went on the stairs, like her father's.

She sat down across from him.

"Five," said Keith, without looking round.

* * *

He always said it first. Before good morning. Before anything. It was the first thing he did every day, her father said, and had done since before she was born: count the list on the inside of his head, of the things he would not let the line have. Ten, once. Then eight. Then seven. Then, since a Sunday in November 2031, five.

Five for twenty-six years.

"Still five," said Jo.

"Still five." He turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer, by the handle. "You've got a new pocketbook."

She had. She had started it on Saturday. The first of September. Black, with an elastic band, from the stationer's on Fleet Street in Torquay where her father had bought every one of his since 1997, and the woman behind the counter, who was the granddaughter of the woman who had sold him the first, had looked at Jo over her glasses and said *same again, love?*

"How did you know?"

Keith looked out at the square.

"You sit differently," he said. "With a new one. Like you've got a stone in your pocket." He drank his tea. "Your father does it too. Did it. Every March."

* * *

They sat in the window for half an hour. That was what they did. She had come in one morning in the spring of 2046, the week she left the police, because she had to sit somewhere at eight in the morning that was not a police station, and the window had been there, and so had he.

He did not talk much. Neither did she. They watched the square.

Station Square at eight on a Monday morning in September 2057. The station, cream and maroon, with its green iron canopy, nearly two hundred years old in parts and twenty-six in others. The forge on the corner, doors open, the fire going: Fred at sixty-one with his beard gone white, watching four apprentices draw out a bar. The plane trees, very big now, their leaves just starting to turn. People going to work, going to the campus on Torbay Road, which was not three buildings any more but nine.

And over every head, a lamp.

Jo saw them. She had seen them since the August she was twenty-one. Amber and steady and every one of them different, going about the square in the morning sun like a field of something blowing. Most days she did not notice them. This morning she did.

She looked at the air above his head.

His lamp. Steady. Bright. And behind it, further back, fainter, the other one. The far one. The one her father had seen every day for ten years and never understood, and that she had seen every day for eleven and never asked about.

Keith did not look round. But she saw him feel her look. A very small thing, at the corner of his mouth.

"Clifford rings today," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Because it's today," said Keith.

* * *

At ten to nine she left him in the window and walked up the hill.

Out of Station Square. Along Torbay Road, past the campus. Up the long hill into Torquay, the way her father had walked it for thirty years. Up Union Street.

Past a street door with a brass plate on it, *STUDIO ANIA*, and the stairs going down behind it to a cellar where a stone sat in a cradle of grey foam under a cover of thick glass, and had sat for twenty-nine years, and been watched every hour of every one of them.

And on up the street, to the corner.

There had been a telephone exchange on the corner once. Five storeys of grey stone, with GPO carved over the door. It had stood empty for half a century, and in 2031 a man had been held in the dark for three weeks in the cable chamber under it, and her father had gone down a riser on iron rungs to find him.

It had been knocked down in 2044. Rage had bought it, finally, for almost nothing, and taken it down to the ground and kept the ground. And on the ground they had built a new building. Glass and pale stone, five storeys, the same height as the one before. A wide door in the middle, where the old door had been, with a step.

They had called it the Exchange. Nobody had suggested anything else. Karen had suggested it, at the long table in the back room at Widecombe Cot, quite quietly, and everybody had looked at Chris, and Chris had said, *that's a nice name. Why?*

Nobody had told him.

Jo went up the step and in at the door, and the security man at the desk, who was Dennis's son, looked up and said *morning, Jo*, and she went to the lift.

* * *

The white room was at the top.

It was not white, exactly. It was very pale, the colour of the inside of a shell, and the light in it came from everywhere and nowhere, the way light comes off snow. It was long and low and

quiet, with windows at the far end that looked down Union Street to the sea, and in the middle of it, two desks.

Side by side. Facing the windows. With a gap between them the width of a chair.

On the left-hand one, hers. A screen, a cup, a black pocketbook, a photograph of her mother in a frame. On the right-hand one, nothing at all. A bare surface, very clean. And behind it, in a chair that was made for him, a big pale chair with arms that curved round like hands, an old man.

He was sitting very still with his eyes shut and his bad hand in his lap and his good hand flat on the bare surface of the desk.

Chris Harvey was ninety-five years old.

He was very thin now. His hair had gone to something like silk, very fine, lifting a little in the air from the vent above him. His bad hand lay in his lap the way it had lain for thirty-five years, curled. His good hand lay on the desk. Flat.

The desk was not a desk. Under the pale surface, under his palm, there was a fibre that went down through the floor of the Exchange, through the old cable chamber under Union Street, which they had kept, cream paint and all, and along under the street, four hundred yards, to a cellar with a brass plate on the door. To a stone, in its cradle. And from the stone, through a thing behind his left ear the size of a grain of rice that a surgeon at the campus had put there in 2046, into him.

He opened his eyes.

"Jo," he said.

His voice was thin, and very clear, and slow. He had always spoken slowly, since the stroke. At ninety-five he spoke the way a man walks across ice: carefully, one word at a time, testing each one before he put his weight on it.

"Morning, Chris."

"Is he still five?"

"Still five."

Chris nodded, slowly. He looked at the bare desk under his hand.

"Good," he said. "That's good."

* * *

She did not know, some mornings, which of them she was talking to.

She had stopped minding in about 2049. You could not do this job and mind. You sat down at a desk beside a man of ninety-five, and you knew, because you had been told, that a young man in the window of a pub two miles away was the same man. The same mind. Sent, and living backwards and forwards at once, in two bodies, in one town.

They had met. Of course they had. Jo had seen them look at each other, the way you would look at a photograph of yourself that you do not remember being taken. They did not talk much, either.

"You walked past it," said Chris.

Jo looked at him.

"This morning," said Chris. "Coming up. You went past the street door with the brass plate, and you looked down the stairs. You always do." He was looking out of the windows at the far end, down Union Street to the sea. "And then you came up here, and you came in through the door downstairs, and you looked at the step." He was quiet. "You always look at the step."

"Do I?"

"Every morning," said Chris. "For eleven years." He turned his head, very slowly, and looked at her. Pale eyes. Very old. The same

eyes as the young man in the window, with sixty-five years more behind them. "What's on the step, Jo?"

She did not answer.

She thought about a building that had stood here, five storeys of grey stone with GPO carved over the door. About an old man on a pavement across the road on a bright morning in March 2039, with a woman's hand on his collar, saying *what is that? That building. What is it?*

"Nothing," said Jo. "It's a step."

Chris looked at her for a long time.

"It's a nice building," he said. "Somebody did something with it." He looked back at the windows. "I come here every day. I like it. I don't know why I like it." He was quiet. "Karen says I used to work near here. When I was a boy."

"Yes," said Jo.

"On the telephones."

"Yes."

"I don't remember," said Chris, quite comfortably, the way a man says he does not remember what he had for breakfast. He put his good hand flat on the desk again. "Shall we go to work?"

* * *

They did not go anywhere that morning.

Some mornings he shut his eyes with his hand on the desk, and was gone, for an hour, for three, and came back grey and shaking, and she gave him tea with sugar in it and asked him the question, and wrote down the answer. Some mornings they sat side by side and looked at the things on her screen. Every written thing the stone could reach, laid out in lines like the wires in a frame, every one of them a door.

This morning they looked at doors.

Five of them. Five moments, written down, that he had to go through before the end of October. She had them on her screen in a column. She had had them there since June, when he first said the list out loud.

Thurs. 31 Oct. 1895. Bailey's, public bar. About 5 p.m.

Autumn 1915. Widecombe Cot.

1943. Torquay. A Canadian.

2026. His own head.

Thurs. 6 April 2028. Bailey's, back room.

And then a sixth, at the bottom, that was not a door. That was the thing all the doors were for.

2057. Station Square.

"Edward first," said Chris. "Or the flies." He was looking at the column. "I don't know. I never know which." He breathed. "Next week."

"Next week," said Jo.

She wrote it down.

* * *

Clifford rang at twenty to five.

She was alone in the white room. Chris had gone home at three, in the car that came for him, to Widecombe Cot. The phone went, and it was Florida.

Clifford was eighty-two. He sounded it. His voice had gone thin and dry, like paper. But it was the same voice that had said *Lit* to her father on Christmas Eve in 2038.

"Jo."

"Clifford."

"I've got a date," said Clifford.

She put down her pen.

"Nineteen years," said Clifford. "Ten thousand birds, and every one of them with a box, and every box on, and dark, and listening. Nobody's seen it but your three ladies and the handful we've given the little grain behind the ear." He breathed. "My friend's son runs the company now. His father's dead. He doesn't know what's in the boxes either. He's going to send them a word." A pause. "He's going to send them the other word."

Jo waited.

"Not *now*," said Clifford. "Not the stealth one. The other one. The one where everybody sees." He was quiet for a moment. "Every head on Earth, Jo. Every one. Lit. And everybody able to see it. Not just the lamps. The strings. Who answers to who. Everywhere, at once."

Jo sat very still at her desk in the white room, with the windows at the end of it looking down Union Street to the sea.

"When?" she said.

"The twenty-ninth of October," said Clifford. "A Monday." He paused. "The last Monday. Keith picked it. Nineteen years ago. In a cellar. He said the last Monday in October 2057 and he wouldn't say why." Another pause. "I figured you'd know why."

Jo looked at the column on her screen. At the bottom of it. *2057. Station Square.*

She knew why.

"Eight weeks," she said.

"Eight weeks," said Clifford. "Write it down, kid."

* * *

She walked back down the hill at six.

Down Union Street. Past the street door with the brass plate. She stopped there, the way she always did, and looked down the stairs into the dark. Then along the front, and back to Paignton the long way, with the light going gold on the water.

The window at Bailey's was empty at six. It always was. She did not know where he went. She had never asked. Nobody had.

She stood on the pavement outside Bailey's and looked in through the glass at the empty table with the brass plate on it.

RESERVED.

Then she took out the new pocketbook, and wrote the rest of the day. *The Exchange, top floor, 9.10 a.m. C.H. at the desk.* And the call. *C.D. rang, 4.40 p.m.: the 29th.*

Then she wrote the last two words, because they were the only thing she knew for certain, and because her father had taught her that you write down what you know and say what you don't.

Eight weeks.

She closed the book, and put the elastic round it, and walked home to Abbey Road.

At ten o'clock she wound the watch.

Chapter 2 – *The White Room*

Mon. 10 Sept. 2057. The Exchange, top floor, 9.41 a.m. C.H. went in: 2026, his own head, the second reel. Back 12.17 p.m. Grey. Shaking. Asked him. "A boy's name. On a beach. Not mine. His."

The car came for him at half past eight, the way it did, and Chris Harvey was ready for it at a quarter past, the way he was.

He sat in the hall at Widecombe Cot to wait, on the bench under the barometer where guests sat to take their boots off. He sat with his coat on and his stick between his knees, his good hand over his bad one on the top of it, and looked at the desk.

The register was shut on it. Brown leather, gone soft and dark at the corners. He knew what was in it. He had not opened it since last October, and he would not open it again until this one.

Karen came down the stairs at twenty past. Slowly. Her hand on the rail, and a stick in the other, and her hair, which had been red-brown once, white and short now and brushed. She was ninety-six, a year older than him, and she had never let him forget it.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked at him on the bench.

"You've got your going-in face on," she said.

"Have I?"

"You've had it since breakfast." She came across the hall, one step and then the stick, and stopped in front of him, and put her hand on his collar. Straightened it. The way she had straightened it every morning for twenty years. "Where to?"

"Myself," said Chris.

Karen looked at him for a long time.

"Mind you come back," she said.

* * *

He did not know the building.

That was the first thing every morning, and he had stopped minding it a long time ago. The car stopped on Union Street, at the corner, and Dennis's boy came out to help him up the step, and he looked up at it. Glass and pale stone. Five storeys. *The Exchange*, in letters cut into the stone over the door. A nice building. Somebody had done something with it.

He knew he had worked near here once. Karen said so. On the telephones, when he was a boy. He knew it the way he knew the date of the Battle of Hastings: as a thing he had been told, that was true, and that had nothing to do with him.

There was a feeling, sometimes, when he came up the step, like a word on the tip of your tongue, or a step that isn't there in the dark. Then it went.

He went in. He went up in the lift with Dennis's boy holding his elbow. He went along the corridor, which was pale and smelled of nothing, and through the door at the end, into the white room.

Jo was at her desk.

* * *

She looked up. She always did, when he came in. And every morning he had the same small shock, the one he never told her about, because it was foolish, and because she would not have known what to do with it.

She was forty-seven. She sat at her desk in a dark jacket with her pocketbook open beside her screen, very straight, with her head a little on one side. And she looked, every morning, for half a

second, like somebody he had known a very long time ago and could not place.

Then she said, "Morning, Chris," and she was Jo.

"Morning, Jo."

"Is he still five?" It was the question he asked her every morning, about the young man in the window at Bailey's. She had turned it round, years ago, and asked it of him.

"Still five," said Chris.

He sat down in his chair. The big pale one, made for him, with arms that curved round like hands. He hung his stick on the left arm, where it always went. He put his bad hand in his lap. He looked at the desk in front of him: the bare surface, very clean, the colour of the inside of a shell.

He put his good hand on it. Flat.

It was cool. It always was. And under it, a long way down, through five floors and a chamber under the street that he did not remember, and four hundred yards of dark under the pavements, a stone in a cradle of grey foam knew him.

He shut his eyes.

* * *

Only what was written can be reached.

He said the rules to himself every time. He did not need to. But he said them, under his breath, the way some people say their prayers whether they believe in them or not, because the saying was the thing.

Only through blood.

A nudge, not a hand.

Every change costs.

Eden has a key.

Physical travel only under the star.

Six. He said them, and the lines came up out of the dark.

That was how it was. Not pictures. Not voices. Lines. Every written thing the stone could reach, laid out in the dark like the wires in a frame, humming.

He heard them now. Jack's, very far, very deep, very steady. His mother's. Jono's: sixty books now, from 1997 to last month, every one of them a man walking on a wooden floor. Jo's, beside him, at the next desk, newer, lighter, round. And his own.

His own was the loudest. It always was. Not because he had written more. Because it was his. Fifty years of notebooks and setlists and letters and waybills, and a film archive of three hundred and eighty hours, and sixty thousand photographs. The Goldmine. Every frame of it a door.

He went to the door he had chosen.

* * *

2026. Widecombe Cot. The room at the top of the stairs. About 3 a.m.

He knew it before he was in it. The way you know a room in the dark by the smell. His own bedroom, at the top of his mother's house, the room he had been born in, with the window over the bay. The bed by the wall. The wardrobe. The smell of the place in 2026, before Karen: books, and old carpet, and the dust on the radiator, and a man of sixty-three who did not open the window enough.

And in the bed, asleep, on his side, with his bad hand under the pillow and his face to the wall, himself.

He had done this before. Many times, now. A reel a night, on seven nights in 2026, and he had been to most of them already, from

this chair. The first one, the night the Albion burned, with a boy of eleven in a striped tank top on platform one at Newton Abbot and a ship in the bay with no flag. He had sent that one in the spring. This one was the second.

He was not *in* the room. That was the thing he had tried to explain to Jo and never could. He was in the man. Behind the eyes. In the dark under the eyelids, where the dreams were. A voice in a head that was his own head, thirty-one years younger.

He could feel the stroke. That was always the worst of it. The left hand under the pillow, numb and heavy and not quite his. He had had it for thirty-five years and he still felt it, every time, as if it were new.

Chris, at ninety-five, behind the eyes of Chris at sixty-three, in the dark, chose a photograph.

* * *

There were sixty thousand. He had been through them all, over and over, for eleven years. Not looking for the right one. Looking for the one that would make a man of sixty-three, with a stroke and a box of his father's videotapes and a town burning down around him, keep looking.

He chose the beach.

Paignton beach. August 1978. Five teenagers on a striped towel in front of the pier: three boys and two girls, squinting into the sun. A transistor radio. A bottle of Tizer. A tube of Ambre Solaire. Himself at sixteen, at the end, with his knees up. And next to him, laughing, with his hair in his eyes, a boy from the chemistry class. Thin. Clever. Three years side by side at the bench. Fishing off the breakwater at Brixham on Saturday mornings. An eighteenth birthday party, later, with a terrible disco.

Phil.

He put the photograph in the dark behind his own eyes. The way you put a slide in a projector.

And the man asleep in the bed turned over, and made a sound.

* * *

It went the way it had gone. He knew, because he had seen it from the other side.

A film. Black and white, scratched, the kind they showed on Sunday afternoons when he was a boy, with the music too loud and a title that came up in jagged letters: *IT CAME FROM THE BAY! PART TWO: THE SWARM SPREADS*. Made of his own photographs. The beach coming to life: the transistor playing, the girls laughing, the tide coming in. And then, low over the water from the direction of Thatcher Rock, in a dark droning wave, the size of deckchairs:

The flies.

He had not invented them. He put a photograph into the dark behind a sleeping man's eyes, and nudged, very lightly, the way you would touch somebody's sleeve, and the nudge cost what it cost, and the cost came up out of the dark the way it always came. As flies.

They came in over the beach. The whole beach ran. And one of them came down on the striped towel, enormous, with its faceted eyes, and fed. And where it fed, a boy's face went. The laugh. The hair in his eyes. Smoothed away, like a thing rubbed out with a thumb.

* * *

In the bed, the man of sixty-three sat up in the dark with the sheet wet through and his heart going, and said, out loud, to nobody:

"Who's that?"

He was looking at the dark. At the photograph that was not there.

"Who's that," he said again. "Next to me. On the towel. I know him. I know him." He put his good hand over his face. "What's his name?"

Chris, at ninety-five, behind his eyes, said nothing.

He could not. That was the rule. *A nudge, not a hand.* He could put a photograph in the dark. He could not say a name. He could not say *it'll come back, one night, near the end, and you'll say it out loud to the ceiling.*

He sat in the dark behind his own eyes and listened to himself, at sixty-three, try to remember a boy's name on a beach, and fail.

That was the price. He had chosen the beach knowing.

He let go.

* * *

The white room came back at seventeen minutes past twelve, and it came back the way it always did, from the edges in, like a film being wound back onto a reel.

The desk under his hand. Cool. The chair round him with its curved arms. The windows at the end of the room, and Union Street going down to the sea, and the sea grey and flat with the light on it. The hum of the room. His own breath, going too fast.

He was shaking. He always was. From the shoulders down, the way a dog shakes when it comes out of cold water.

He opened his eyes.

Jo was beside him. Not at her desk. Beside his chair, crouched, with a cup in both hands, the way she always was when he came back. She did not touch him. She held the cup a few inches from his good hand, so that he could feel the warmth of it, and waited.

He took it. Tea. Too much sugar. The way she always made it, for this.

He drank half of it before he could do anything else.

Then she said it. The thing she always said, every time, in exactly the same voice, very level, very plain. And he had come to wait for it, the way you wait for a lighthouse to come round.

"Right," said Jo. "What did it cost?"

* * *

He sat with the cup in his good hand for a long time.

"A boy's name," he said. "On a beach."

Jo waited. She had her pocketbook open on her knee, crouched beside his chair, and her pencil on the page.

"Not mine," said Chris. "His." He looked at the bare desk. "Him at sixty-three. In the bed. The flies took it out of him. He sat up and couldn't remember who it was. He'll not remember for months." He drank. "He'll know the boy, and he'll not know his name. And it'll eat him."

Jo wrote it down. He watched her write it. Round, upright letters, a bit too big.

"Will it come back?" she said. She knew. She had read every page of the Goldmine. She asked anyway. It was what she did.

"One night," said Chris. "Near the end. When it was all done." He put the cup down on the desk. "It came back. I remember it coming back. Lying in the dark, and the name just there, like it had never gone. *Phil.* I said it out loud to the ceiling." He was quiet. "And then I slept. Properly. For the first time in longer than I could remember. I didn't know why. I didn't know it had been me that took it."

"I know now," he said.

* * *

She did not ask him anything else. She never did, after the question. She wrote what he said, and the time, and closed the book, and got up from her crouch beside his chair with her knee going, the way it did, and went back to her desk.

He sat in the white room with his hand flat on the bare surface and looked out of the window at the far end, down Union Street, to the sea.

He thought about a boy on a beach in 1978, laughing, with his hair in his eyes.

He thought: *I can still see him.*

That was the strange thing. He was ninety-five. He had lost a great many things. Rooms in a building he walked into every morning and did not know. He had lost them in 2038 and 2039, one after another, and he did not mind, because you cannot mind a thing you do not know you had.

But he could still see the boy on the beach. And he knew his name.

Every change costs. It takes from the nearest place it can reach.

He had always thought that the nearest place was always himself. That he paid. And he did pay, in the shaking, in the tea with too much sugar. But the man in the bed, in 2026, paid more. And the young man in the window at Bailey's, counting to five every morning for twenty-six years, paid more than either of them.

He sat with that for a long time. He did not tell Jo. She would have written it down.

* * *

At three o'clock the car came, and Dennis's boy helped him down the step.

On the pavement, at the corner, he stopped, the way he did most afternoons, and looked back up at the building. There was the feeling again. The step that isn't there in the dark. Then it went.

"It's a nice building," said Chris to Dennis's boy, who had heard him say it every afternoon for eleven years.

"Yes, Mr Harvey," said Dennis's boy. "It is."

At Widecombe Cot, Karen was in the hall, on the bench under the barometer, waiting. She looked up when he came in, and looked at his face, and got up, slowly, with her stick, and came across the hall to him, and put her hand on his collar.

"You came back," she said.

"I came back."

"Who did you go and see?"

Chris thought about it.

"A boy I used to know," he said. "On a beach."

Karen did not ask any more. She straightened his collar, and kept her hand there for a moment, flat, warm, the way she had once kept it on the collar of a boy of eighteen on a platform at Torquay with a train already moving.

He stood very still and let her.

It was on the list. He knew that without counting. It had always been on the list, and it always would be, as long as there was a list. He did not know how he knew. He did not need to.

Karen's hand on his collar.

He would write it down, he thought, one day soon. In the little room at the top of the house. With the window over the bay.

Before he forgot why it mattered.

Chapter 3 – *The Bank Box*

Wed. 12 Sept. 2057. The Exchange, top floor, 2.15 p.m. A.L. from Singapore. The copy. Fourteen lines after Carole's. Twelve gone. Two left. The thirteenth: Tues. 30 Oct., 2.47 a.m. The fourteenth: Station Square.

Ai Li had locked it away on a Saturday night in October 2031 and taken the key to the bank on the Monday, and in twenty-six years she had not once been back to look at it.

She told Jo that in the lift, going up, at two o'clock on the Wednesday afternoon, with a small black case on her knee.

She was seventy-two. Small and quick still, though the quick had gone careful at the edges. Her hair was white and cut very short, and she wore a dark linen jacket and the kind of trainers that cost more than a suit, the way she always had, and glasses on a chain round her neck that she put on and took off and put on again. She had flown from Singapore on the Monday night and come down from Heathrow on the train and not slept, and she sat on the little fold-down seat in the lift with the case on her knees and both hands flat on the lid.

"I went to the bank on Saturday," she said. "In Singapore. On Cecil Street. The same bank. A different manager. A young man, very polite. He took me down to the vault, and he put his key in, and I put mine in, and the little door opened, and there it was." She looked at the case. "A key on a chain. That's all. In a box the size of a shoebox. Twenty-six years."

"And then the cabinet."

"And then the cabinet. In Joo Chiat. In the office." She almost smiled. "It's a cake shop now, two doors along. Where the incense

shop was. Basil moved Rage upstairs and across the road in 2040. But the cabinet's still in the back room, behind a wall of filing, because nobody could ever move it." She took her hands off the lid, and put them back. "I opened it on Sunday night. On my own. At half past eleven. The way I locked it."

The lift stopped.

"I didn't look," said Ai Li. "I want you to know that. I took it out, and put it in the case, and closed the case, and came here." She looked up at Jo. "I didn't read them. In 2031 I covered the screen with my hand. I haven't read them since." She stood up, with the case. "I thought somebody else should be there. When I do."

* * *

Chris was at his desk.

He was not at the interface. He was sitting in the big pale chair with his good hand in his lap, not on the desk, and his stick on the arm, looking out of the window at the far end at Union Street going down to the sea. He looked round when the door opened.

"Ai Li," he said.

"Chris."

She went to him. She bent and kissed him on the cheek, the way she always had, and he put his good hand up and held her wrist for a moment.

"You look tired," he said.

"I flew."

"You always fly." He looked at the case in her other hand. "Is that it?"

"That's it."

He looked at it for a long time. Then he looked at Jo.

"I'm not going to read it," he said. "I'll sit here. I'll listen, if you read it out. But I'm not going to look." He turned his chair, very slowly, with his good hand, until he was facing the window again, with his back to the room. "I've had enough of other people's handwriting for one life."

* * *

Jo cleared her desk.

The screen. The cup. The photograph of her mother. She put them on the floor. Ai Li set the case down on the bare desk and opened it.

Grey foam. A small black drive, the size of a matchbox, old, the kind nobody had used for twenty years. And a cable, and a little grey box with a socket on one side and a socket on the other, that Ai Li said was the decoder, or what was left of it; the rest was in a data centre in Jurong that had been knocked down in 2042, but the part that mattered was in the box.

"It still works," said Ai Li. "I tried it. At the airport. In the lounge." She put her glasses on. "The man next to me thought I was watching a film."

She connected it. To Jo's screen. The old drive to the little grey box to the screen, with two cables, the way you would have connected things in 2031.

The screen went dark, and then it filled with numbers.

Rows and rows of them, very small, going down the screen and off the bottom. Then the decoder began to work, the way it had worked in an office above a shophouse in Joo Chiat on Saturday nights for three years and seven months, and the numbers began to come apart, one stroke at a time, into lines.

Into handwriting.

* * *

Ai Li did not go to the beginning. She went to the end.

She scrolled with one finger, very fast, past four thousand lines, past a hundred and sixty years of Hills and Harveys and Mallyons writing everything down. Jack's square capitals. A child's capitals in the 1940s, growing up across the pages. Chris's, small and fast and leaning forward. Jono's, block capitals, never a word more than he needed.

And then, in the summer of 2031, a hand that was none of them.

She stopped.

Tues. 16 Sept. 2031. Cheltenham, the kitchen. 10.47 p.m.

Jo looked at it.

She had seen it before. Not this line. The hand. Very upright. Very regular. Every letter the same height, like print. Like the hand of somebody who had been taught to write a long time ago, in another country, and had never let it slip.

She had seen it every October since 2046, at the bottom of a column in a brown leather register on a desk in the hall at Widecombe Cot.

Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.

She did not say anything. She looked at the window, at the back of the old man in the big pale chair, looking out at the sea.

He had not turned round.

* * *

"There," said Ai Li quietly. "That's Carole's. That's where I stopped, in 2031." She took her finger off the screen. "Fourteen after it. I counted them by the tick. With my eyes shut." She looked at Jo. "Do you want to, or shall I?"

"You," said Jo. "Out loud. He wants to hear."

Ai Li looked at the back of the chair.

Then she scrolled down one line, and read it.

"*Friday, seventeenth October 2031. Widecombe Cot, the dining room. Four thirty p.m.*"

At the window, very slightly, Chris's head moved.

"She drank her tea," he said. "The first time. In the house. Mum was in the doorway with her hand on the frame." He did not turn round. "Go on."

* * *

Ai Li read them.

One after another. Slowly. The date, the time, the place, in the even voice she had used for forty years to commentate on games in arenas with eighteen thousand people screaming. Jo wrote each one down in her pocketbook as Ai Li read it, in her round upright hand, in a column.

Sunday, twenty-sixth October 2031. Daddyhole Plain. One thirty a.m. Ai Li stopped. "There's a note. In brackets. *The first one.*"

"The clocks went back," said Jo. "That night. The hour happened twice. My father was there." She wrote it down. "He wrote that too. In his. *The first one.*"

Sunday, twenty-sixth October 2031. Fleet House, the cable chamber. Six fifty-two a.m.

At the window, nothing. Chris did not know what Fleet House was. Jo watched the back of his head not know.

Sunday, ninth November 2031. Widecombe Cot, the back room. Seven ten a.m.

"The sun came up over Berry Head," said Chris, to the window, "and I put two white marks on a canvas." He was quiet. "Carole's glasses."

Monday, twenty-fifth October 2038. Newton Abbot, platform three. Ten thirty-one a.m.

"That's her," said Jo. "That's Ania, getting off the train. The first time she didn't stay on." She looked at the screen. "She wrote her own."

Ai Li looked at her sharply over her glasses. Jo did not explain.

Friday, fifth November 2038. Kit Hill. Nine p.m.

Friday, twenty-fourth December 2038. Preston, the kitchen. Two minutes past nine p.m.

Jo's pencil stopped.

She had been in that kitchen. At that minute. Across a table from her father, with an Argos tree between them and a terrible dinner, watching a phone go round in a little circle on the wood. *Lit.*

She had not known that anybody had written it down. Before it happened.

She wrote it down again, in her own column, under the others. Her hand was quite steady. She noticed that it was.

Saturday, twelfth March 2039. Union Street, the corner. Ten forty a.m.

"I don't know that one," said Chris.

"No," said Jo.

Wednesday, twenty-third March 2039. The House of Lords. Six forty-eight p.m.

Tuesday, fourteenth June 2044. Union Street, the corner. Eleven fifteen a.m.

"The last wall," said Ai Li. "When they knocked it down. I saw it on the news." She looked at the window. "Fleet House."

Chris said nothing.

Monday, second April 2046. The Exchange, the top floor. Nine a.m.

Jo sat very still.

That was hers. Her first morning. The first time she had walked into this room, at thirty-six, the week after she left the police, and seen two desks side by side facing the window, and an old man in a big pale chair with his hand flat on a bare surface, and sat down at the other desk. Nine o'clock. She had looked at the clock.

Somebody had written it down, in 2028 or before, in a hand like print.

Thursday, ninth November 2051. Ellacombe, the flat over the club. Three ten a.m.

Ai Li read it, and stopped, because Jo had put her pencil down.

"Eric," said Jo.

Nobody said anything.

"Three ten," said Jo. "In the morning. I found him at half past seven. I came up the iron stairs to open up for the kids and the lamp was on in the window, the way it always was, and he was in bed, on his side, with his face to the wall, the way he always slept." She looked at the screen. "The doctor said in the night. Peacefully. He couldn't say when." She picked up the pencil again. "Three ten."

She wrote it down.

* * *

That was twelve.

Ai Li sat with her finger on the screen, on the twelfth line, and did not move it.

"Two more," she said.

"I know."

"I didn't read them in 2031. I covered them. The last one I read, because I'd counted, and I knew it was the last. But the one before it..." She stopped. "I've never seen it."

At the window, Chris said, very quietly, without turning round: "Read it."

Ai Li moved her finger down one line.

The decoder took it apart. One stroke at a time. The upright hand. Every letter the same height.

Tuesday, thirtieth October 2057. The line, Johor. Two forty-seven a.m.

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time.

Jo looked at it. She did the sum, because she could not help it. Singapore was eight hours ahead of England, once the clocks went back on the twenty-eighth. Two forty-seven on the Tuesday morning in Johor was a quarter to seven on the Monday evening in Paignton.

The last Monday.

The line, Johor. There was a railway line from Singapore across the causeway into Malaysia. A new one. It had opened when she was sixteen and had never heard of Singapore.

She did not know who it was. She knew who it was.

"Forty-seven," said Ai Li, very quietly. "Ten forty-seven. Two forty-seven." She took her glasses off. "The same minute."

At the window, Chris had turned round.

He had turned the big pale chair with his good hand, very slowly, until he was facing the room. He was looking at the screen. Not reading it. Looking at it. The way you look at a word in a language you do not speak but know the shape of.

"Karina," he said.

Nobody answered him.

"She'll be ninety-five," said Chris. "The same as me. Born the same year." He looked at the line on the screen. "Two forty-seven in the morning. On a railway line. On her own." He was quiet for a long time. "She never slept. Did you know that? Not really. Not the way we do." He looked down at his good hand in his lap. "She'll be awake."

"Chris," said Jo.

"I can't stop it," said Chris. "I know. Don't tell me. *A nudge, not a hand.* I can't reach her. She's not blood." He breathed. "I can't stop it, and I'll know it's coming, every day, for seven weeks." He looked up at Jo. "That's what this costs. Isn't it. Knowing."

Jo did not answer.

She wrote the thirteenth line in her column, under Eric's, in her round upright hand. The date. The time. The place.

She did not write the name.

* * *

"And the last," said Ai Li.

She did not need to read it. They all knew it. She read it anyway, because that was what you did.

The decoder took it apart, and gave them almost nothing. The line was damaged, the way it had been damaged in 2031, as if something had gone through it. The day gone. The month gone. A gap where something had been, and was not.

And two things, clean, the way a name comes through on a bad line when everything around it has gone.

2057.

Station Square.

Ai Li read it out. Then she took her finger off the screen.

"Fourteen," she said.

* * *

Jo looked at her column.

Fourteen lines, in her own hand, in pencil, going down the page of the new pocketbook she had started eleven days ago. Twelve with a small tick beside them, which she had not meant to make and had made anyway, one after another, as Ai Li read. Two without.

The thirteenth. A railway line in Johor, at two forty-seven in the morning.

The fourteenth. A square in front of a railway station in Paignton, in a year that had only seven weeks left to run before it got there.

She thought about a woman with grey in her hair, mostly grey now, sitting at a little table in a bay window every October with her back to the room. Writing these. All of them. Before any of them happened. In a hand like print. Carole's minute, and Eric's, and the kitchen in Preston at two minutes past nine, and Jo's own first morning at this desk.

Mine, she would say, if anybody ever asked her.

Nobody ever had.

"She knew," said Jo.

Ai Li looked at her.

"All of it," said Jo. "Every one. Before." She closed the pocketbook. "She's known since before I was born what time I'd sit down at this desk."

At the window, Chris had turned his chair back to face the sea.

"She knows what time I'll stand up from it," he said.

* * *

Ai Li disconnected the drive at four. She put it back in the case, in the grey foam, and the decoder beside it, and closed the lid.

"I'm leaving it with you," she said to Jo. "I've carried it twenty-six years. I'm seventy-two. I'd like to sleep." She put her hand flat on the lid. "Put it somewhere safe."

Jo took the case.

At the window, Chris did not turn round. Ai Li went to him and bent and kissed his cheek again, and he held her wrist again for a moment with his good hand, and neither of them said anything.

Then she went.

Jo sat at her desk with the case on the bare surface in front of her and her pocketbook beside it, and looked at the column.

Twelve ticks.

She took her pencil and, very carefully, beside the thirteenth line, where there was no tick, she wrote the date she would have to wait for. And beside the fourteenth, the same.

29.10.

Then she put a circle round both of them, and closed the book, and sat in the white room with the old man at the window until the car came for him at five, and neither of them said anything at all.

Seven weeks.

Chapter 4 – *The Seat*

Tues. 18 Sept. 2057. London, 2 Marsham Street, the seventh floor, 11.00 a.m. H.P., R., T.T. T.T. said nothing. Somebody is looking up. The chair is taken.

The lamps went out at Newton Abbot.

They always did. Her father said it was like going deaf in one ear, and he was right. She had come into the bay at twenty-one, in the August of 2031, and for the first six hours she had seen nothing, and then she had seen everything, and she had never quite got over it. And then a train pulled out of a station in the middle of Devon, and it was gone, like a hand taken off a shoulder.

She sat by the window with her bag on her knees and watched the woman across the aisle stop having a light.

She did not stop having a face, of course. She went on reading. But Jo looked at the air above her, the way you go on looking for a step in the dark that isn't there, and it was only air.

Six weeks.

* * *

Rani was at the end of platform one at Paddington, under the clock, in a long dark coat with her hands in the pockets.

She was sixty. Her hair had gone all the way grey and she wore it pinned up at the back the way she wore it in the clean room. She had spent eighteen years of Mondays and Thursdays in a city she did not like, doing a job she could not tell anybody about. She still came up on the 5.48, and kept the same room in a hotel in Pimlico.

"Weather?" said Jo.

Rani did not smile. She looked at Jo's face, and then, out of habit, at the air over Jo's head. Not at the lamp. At the cord. The thin bright string going up out of the top of Jo's head and away, west, back down the line, to a white room on a hill in Torquay.

"Fine in Devon," said Rani. "Front coming in off Westminster." She took her hands out of her pockets. "Come on. She doesn't like to be kept."

They walked. Rani did not like the Tube any more; she said there were too many strings in a carriage, and she could not stop reading them. They walked down through Hyde Park in the thin September sun, and Rani talked the whole way, low and quick, without looking at anybody.

"The knot by the river's thinner," she said. "Since the summer. The one past the Tower. Half the size it was in 2040. The City's the same; the City's always the same." She stepped round a man with a dog. "Marsham Street's clean. Mostly. She cleaned it."

"Hannah."

"She went through it like a housekeeper. The week she moved in. Three years ago. People moved on, moved sideways, moved to Leeds." Rani almost smiled. "She didn't know why. She just didn't like them. She said they had a look." She was quiet. "They had cords, Jo. Every one of them. Going up and out and off to the river. She can't see a thing. She did it by the look on their faces."

"And the ones she missed?"

Rani did not answer for a while.

"One," she said.

* * *

Two Marsham Street was three pale blocks joined at the back, with coloured glass over the entrance. A young man in a lanyard

took them up to the seventh floor, and along a corridor, and opened a door. "The Home Secretary," he said, and went.

It was a big room. A long window down one side over Westminster, the Abbey and the river behind it, and a long table, and at the end of it a desk with nothing on it but a tablet face down and a cup of tea.

Hannah Price got up from the desk.

She was fifty-three. Tall, with her dark hair cut short and grey at the temples now, and a plain navy suit, and reading glasses pushed up on her head that she seemed to have forgotten. She shook Rani's hand, and then Jo's, and held on to Jo's for a moment longer than she needed to.

"You've got his eyes," she said.

"So I'm told."

"How is he?"

"Eighty-four," said Jo. "Still writing."

"Of course he is." Hannah let go. "He sat across a table from me in the tea room for eighteen years, and in all that time I never once saw him not have that little book in his pocket." She turned. "Sit down. Both of you. I've asked one other person to come. He's late. He's never late." She looked at the door. "I don't think he wants to be here."

"This was his office," said Hannah, when they were sitting at the long table. "White's. Five years. He had it panelled. Oak. Very dark. I had it taken out the week I came in. They found a little box behind one of the panels, by the light switch. Very small. Very old. Nobody could tell me what it was for." She paused. "I've still got it. In a drawer."

* * *

The door opened at ten past.

He came in without knocking, a tall thin man in a grey suit with a grey coat over his arm, and stopped just inside the door, and looked at the three of them.

Jo had never met him. She knew him from her father's books. *T.T.* A line here and a line there for twenty-nine years, and never a word more than her father needed.

And she knew him from a Friday in November 2038, though she had not known it then. She had been twenty-eight, a detective constable in Paignton, and she had found Callum Rowe herself, alive, in a caravan at Talland Bay. The case had gone to London on the Tuesday and stopped there on the Friday, with the Super putting the phone down for the last time and saying: *It stops at Great Smith Street.*

Years later her father had told her whose voice had been on the other end of that last call. Quiet. Pleasant. *Thank you, we'll take it from here.* He had not said how he knew.

Tarquin Talland was sixty-three. His hair was white and very fine. His face had gone the way faces go when they are thin to begin with: all the bones showing. He did not look at Jo. He looked at Rani, once, very quickly, and then at the window.

"Home Secretary," he said.

"Tarquin. Sit down."

He sat at the far end of the table, by the door, with his coat on the chair beside him, and folded his hands on the table in front of him, and did not say anything else.

* * *

Hannah did not use the tablet. She talked.

"I'll tell you what I know," she said, "and then you can tell me what you can, and I won't ask for the rest. That was the arrangement with your father." She looked at Jo. "He told me half of it. The night he stood down. Eight years ago. I've never known which half."

Jo said nothing.

"There's a network," said Hannah. "There's always been a network. Of people who answer to people who answer to somebody else. You call it one thing; the files call it nothing at all, because there are no files, because every time anybody opens one, it closes. It had a man in this office for five years. It nearly had a law." She turned her cup a little on its saucer. "And it had a chair. At the top. That's what we heard, in the forties. Not a name. A chair. Empty since about 2028. And two men who wanted to sit in it."

"White," said Jo.

"White. And the other one." Hannah looked at the window. "White lost. The second bill went down in 2040, and he was finished. Not publicly. Not straight away. But you could see it on him. Like a man who's been told a date by a doctor." She looked back. "He lives in Surrey now. He grows roses."

"And the other one's in the chair."

"The other one's in the chair," said Hannah. "Since about 2044. We think. And I can't tell you a single thing about him. Not his name. Not his age. Nobody has a photograph. We had a man on him once, in 2047, for three days, in Exeter, and at the end of three days the man couldn't describe him. He said: *ordinary*. He said: *you'd walk past him*." She was quiet. "He couldn't remember his own daughter's birthday, for about a week. Then it came back."

Jo thought about a man at the next table at Bailey's in 2038, with a lime and soda. Her father had told her. A man who was not there, under the lamps. A hole. *The man Eden wrote out.* She did not say it.

"He's old now," said Hannah. "That's all we know. He must be. He was old in the forties." She looked up. "And he's started asking questions."

* * *

She turned the tablet over, then.

She did not show it to them. She read from it, with her glasses down off her head, the way Jo's father read the Order Paper, every line, to the end.

"Over the summer," she said, reading from the tablet. "Somebody bought time. On radar. Two tracking stations, one in Norway, one in Western Australia. Through four companies and a trust in Jersey that closed the week after. About eleven million pounds since June, watching one shell of the sky. The shell the Cornish launches go into." She looked up over her glasses. "Ten thousand of them, give or take, since 2038. Broadband for ships, the filings say. Somebody's counting them. And somebody's noticed that they don't all do what the filings say they do."

"They can't see it," said Rani. "Nobody can. That's the point."

"Nobody can see *what*?" said Hannah.

Rani did not answer.

Hannah looked at her for a long time. Then at Jo.

"There," she said. "That's the other half. Isn't it."

Jo said nothing. At the far end of the table, by the door, Tarquin Talland had not moved. His hands were folded on the table in front of him. He was looking at them.

"I don't want to know," said Hannah. "I mean that. I've got eight weeks of something coming, I can feel it, the way you feel weather in a bad knee, and I don't want to know what it is until it's

here." She put the tablet face down. "But somebody else does want to know. Very badly. And has started looking up."

* * *

"Six weeks," said Jo.

Hannah looked at her.

"Not eight. Six." Jo kept her voice quite level. She had been a police officer for fifteen years and she knew how to say a thing to a room without saying anything else. "Monday the twenty-ninth of October. In the evening. I'd like you to be in this building, Home Secretary. And I'd like you to have your people in it. All of them. The ones you trust."

"Why?"

"Because you'll want to see it," said Jo. "And because you'll need to know, afterwards, who was in the building and who wasn't."

Hannah did not say anything for a long time.

"Your father," she said at last, "said a thing like that to me once. In the tea room. In March 2039. *Four,* he said. And it was four." She almost smiled. "One day you're going to tell me how."

"One day," said Jo.

* * *

It was over at a quarter to twelve.

Hannah walked them to the door. She shook Rani's hand, and Jo's, and held on to Jo's again, and said: "Give him my love. Tell him I still sit at his table. Nobody else will." Then she turned to the room.

"Tarquin. Stay a minute."

Tarquin Talland got up, with his coat over his arm, and came down the long table towards the door, and for a moment the three of them were very close in the doorway.

He looked at Jo then. For the first time.

It was only for a second. Grey eyes. Something in them that she had seen before, in interview rooms, at three in the morning, in men who had done a thing a long time ago and lived with it so long it had become the shape of them. Not guilt. Something older than guilt. Tiredness.

He did not say anything now. He stood aside to let them pass.

Then the door closed, and Rani took Jo's arm, quite hard, above the elbow, and walked her to the lift without a word.

* * *

She did not say anything until they were on the Embankment with the river on their left and the wind coming up it. Then Rani stopped by the wall and let go of Jo's arm and put both hands flat on the stone.

"His cord," said Rani.

Jo waited.

"It used to go to Marsham Street. In 2038. Annie saw it first. To White. Thin. Like a thread. I told your father: it'd break if anybody pulled." She was looking at the river. "When White went, it went somewhere else. Down to the river. To the knot past the Tower. I watched it go, in 2041. I thought, that's it, then. That's where they've put him."

"And now?"

"Now it goes into a hole," she said.

Jo looked at her.

"It goes up out of his head, the way they all do," said Rani. "Thin. Very thin. Out of the window. South-west. A long way. I followed it as far as I could, the way you follow a kite string into the sun." She swallowed. "And then it stops. Not at a person. It goes into something and there's nothing there. Like a socket with the plate unscrewed. Like Bailey's in 2038. The man at the next table." She turned and looked at Jo. "Tarquin answers to a man who isn't there."

"How far?" said Jo.

"I don't know," said Rani. "It went past where I could see. But it didn't go east. It didn't go to the City." She looked at Jo. "It went home."

* * *

Jo got the four o'clock back from Paddington.

She sat by the window with her pocketbook open on her bag, and wrote it all down. The date. The time. The place. *H.P., R., T.T.* And then: *T.T. said nothing.*

She did not write what Rani had said by the river. She did not know how to write it. *A cord into a hole.* It was not a thing you could put in a column.

She wrote instead: *Somebody is looking up.*

And under it, after Reading, with the light going over the fields: *The chair is taken.*

And then, at Newton Abbot, the lamps came back.

The woman across the aisle. The boy with his headphones. The guard coming through with his machine. One, and then another, and then the whole carriage, the way the lights come on along a street at dusk.

She thought: *he's here. Somewhere. In this. Sitting in a chair at the top of something, in the bay, with no light, the only dark place in all of it.*

She thought: *and he's looking up.*

She took out the watch, the plain gold hunter with the crack across the glass, and held it in her hand, closed, the way her father used to, until the train came round the curve into Torquay, and above the town, very small, the one window in the Exchange that was always lit.

Chapter 5 – *Mei Ling*

Fri. 21 Sept. 2057. The Exchange, 4.30 p.m. B. rang from S. A man from London took M.L. to lunch. Charming. Knew the name Petrick. She said no. He left a card. B.: "She doesn't know. Don't tell her." Five weeks and three days.

Mei Ling had always slept facing north-west.

She did not know why. She had never thought about it until she was nineteen, in a hostel in Melbourne, in a bunk by the door, and the girl in the bunk above had leaned down at two in the morning and said, *why do you keep turning round?* And she had found that she had turned round in her sleep, with her pillow at the wrong end, so that her head was towards the door and her face was towards the corner of the room. And in the morning, with the compass on her phone, out of curiosity, she had found that the corner was north-west.

It was the same in every room she had ever slept in. Her bedroom in her parents' flat in Tiong Bahru, at the top of the block, where she had moved the bed when she was six and nobody had known why. The flat she had now, off Joo Chiat Road, three floors up, with the bed pushed into the corner at an angle that made her mother laugh. Hotels. Tents. A sleeper train in Thailand. If she lay down facing any other way she lay awake.

She did not tell people. It was a small thing. Everybody had a small thing.

She thought about it that Friday morning, for no reason, lying in the half-dark at a quarter to seven with the fan going round and the first of the traffic starting down on the road, and her face

towards the corner. North-west. Over the shophouses, over the strait, over India, over a long way of everything.

Then she got up, and went to work.

* * *

The office was across the road and up a flight of stairs, over a shop that sold phone cases.

It had been there since 2040. Before that, her father said, it had been on the other side of the road, two doors down from an incense shop, behind a steel door with three locks. The incense shop was a cake shop now. The steel door was still there, in the back room of the cake shop, and nobody could move it, and the cake shop used it as a wall to pin their orders on.

Her father's company did football. That was what it said on the door and the website and the tax returns. Scouting data. Player tracking. Match analysis for clubs in Japan and Korea and Australia and the Gulf. Forty people at screens in a long white room over the phone-case shop, watching footage from three hundred leagues and turning it into numbers. Mei Ling had worked there since she was twenty-four, in the long white room, at a screen by the window, turning Korean second-division full-backs into numbers. She was good at it. She liked it.

And she knew, the way you know there is a room in your house you have never been into, that her father's company did something else as well.

There was a smaller room at the back. Her father went into it. Her grandfather's old friend Clifford went into it, when he came from Florida, which was not often now. A woman called Ai Li went into it, and had been in it for thirty years, and had flown to England the week before last with a small black case and not come back yet. Nobody else went into it. Nobody talked about it. And on certain

nights, very late, Mei Ling had looked up from her screen and seen her father come out of it with a face she did not have a word for.

She had never asked. Her mother had never asked either, in all the years she had been married to him. Mei Ling had watched her not ask, all her life. She thought it was probably the bravest thing she had ever seen anybody do.

* * *

The man was waiting at the bottom of the stairs at twelve.

She had been told he would be. A message on Wednesday, very polite, through the company's ordinary address, from a firm in London she had never heard of: Hollis Grey LLP. *Mr Edward Hollis would be grateful for half an hour of Ms Mei Ling's time, on a matter of a family nature, at her convenience, while he is in Singapore.* She had shown it to her father. Her father had read it twice, standing by her desk, and gone very still, and said: *I'll come with you.*

And she had said: *Papa. I'm twenty-eight.*

And he had looked at her for a long time, the way he did, along, not at, and said: *Yes.* And then: *Lunch. Somewhere busy. And ring me after.*

So it was lunch.

He was about fifty-five. Tall, and well made, and very easy, in a pale linen suit that had been made for him and an open-necked shirt, with a good face, open and intelligent and a little amused, as if he had just heard something funny and was too polite to say what. Grey at the sides. A good watch. He held out his hand at the bottom of the stairs and smiled, and the smile went all the way up, and she liked him at once and did not trust it.

"Mei Ling," he said. "Thank you. I know this is odd."

"It is odd."

"Then let me buy you lunch," said Edward Hollis, "and make it less odd, and if at the end of it you'd like me never to come back, I won't."

* * *

He let her choose. She took him to the food centre at the end of the road, because it was busy, and because it was hers, and because she wanted to see what a man in a suit like that did with a plastic tray.

He did very well with it. He queued. He asked her what was good and had it. He ate laksa in a linen suit without getting any on the linen, and talked, easily, about nothing, about London and the heat and the football, which he knew more about than she expected. He had seen a match in Seoul last year with her numbers on the screen at half-time. He said they were good numbers. He said it as if he meant it.

Then he put down his spoon.

"I'll tell you why I'm here," he said, "and then you can tell me to go away." He took a slim folder out of the inside pocket of the jacket, not a tablet, paper, and put it on the table between the trays. He did not open it. "My firm acts for a trust. In Hamburg. A very old one. A family trust, set up in 1902, for the descendants of a shipping family. Petrick. Petrick and Company." He watched her face. "Does that name mean anything to you?"

"No."

"It wouldn't. It's been very quiet for a long time." He turned the folder a little on the table, so that it lay square. "The trust holds a house. On the Elbchaussee. On the river. White, with a garden going down to the water, and a terrace where you can watch the ships go out." He smiled. "And some other things. Quite a lot of other things. And it has been looking, for some years, for an heir."

Mei Ling looked at him.

"Your grandmother," said Edward Hollis, gently, "was a Petrick."

* * *

She did not say anything for a while.

Round them the food centre went on. The noise of it. The clatter of trays and the shouting from the stalls and the old men at the next table arguing about a horse. The smell of frying shallots and coffee and the drain. The fans going round under the roof.

Her grandmother.

She did not know anything about her grandmother. That was the truth of it. Her father's mother had left when he was thirteen, on the morning of his birthday, and he had never seen her again, and he did not talk about her. Mei Ling had asked once, when she was eight. Her mother had taken her into the kitchen afterwards and said, very kindly, *don't ask Papa that again.* So she hadn't. She had a name, from a form once, that she had not been meant to see. That was all.

Karina.

And for a moment, sitting at a plastic table in a food centre off Joo Chiat Road, with a man in a linen suit watching her across the trays, she was not there.

She was very small. And something was holding her. Not her mother. Somebody taller, who smelled different: not her mother's smell but something cool and clean like the inside of a cupboard, and jasmine, and frying. And she had a fist closed tight on something soft and rough at once. Linen. A collar. And there was a hat. A big hat with a brim, and the light coming through the weave of it in little points, like stars, on a face she could not see.

And a voice. Very quiet. Not English. Not any language she knew. Two words.

She had heard them in her sleep all her life and never known what they were.

"Are you all right?" said Edward Hollis.

She came back. The food centre. The fans. The old men and the horse.

"Fine," she said. "It's hot."

* * *

He told her the rest. Very well. Very gently.

The trust had been looking for a long time. There had been a son: her father. The trust had written to her father, years ago, and her father had not answered. "He's a very private man, your father," said Edward Hollis, and smiled. "I've never managed to get a meeting. I'm not sure he knows I exist."

Mei Ling thought about her father at her desk on Wednesday, reading the message twice, very still.

"There's a granddaughter," said Edward Hollis. "You. And the trust would like to meet you. That's all. Nothing more. Not yet. A visit. To Hamburg, at the trust's expense, whenever you like. To see the house. To meet the trustees. To hear a little about the family." He opened the folder then, and turned it round, and pushed it across the table to her between the trays.

A photograph. A white house on a slope above a wide grey river, with a garden going down to the water in terraces, and tall old trees, and a ship going by in the background, very big, very slow, with containers on it in coloured blocks. A summer day. The windows open.

"Your grandmother grew up there," said Edward Hollis. "In the room at the top, on the left. With the round window. You can see the river from the bed."

Mei Ling looked at the round window for a long time.

"Which way does it face?" she said.

He looked at her, a little puzzled, a little amused. "The house? South, I suppose. To the river."

"The room."

Edward Hollis looked at the photograph, as if he had never thought about it.

"I don't know," he said. "I could find out."

* * *

She said no.

She did not know she was going to until she said it. She had liked him. She liked him still: the laksa and the linen and the good face, and the way he had not pushed. She liked the photograph. She liked, very much, the round window with the river in it.

But there was something.

She could not have said what. It was not anything he did. It was the way the old men at the next table had stopped arguing about the horse when he sat down, and not started again, and not looked at him. It was the way she could not, already, quite remember the colour of his eyes, though she had been looking into them for forty minutes. It was the way her father had gone still.

And it was a fist closed on a linen collar, and a hat with the light coming through it, and two words she did not know.

"No," she said. "Thank you. It's very kind. But no."

Edward Hollis did not argue. He looked at her for a moment, and then he smiled, and the smile was just as good as the first one, and she trusted it just as little.

"Of course," he said. He closed the folder and put it back in his jacket. Then he took out a card, plain white, with a name and a number and nothing else, and laid it on the table by her tray. "In case you change your mind. Things change. People change their minds about families." He stood up. "It was a real pleasure, Mei Ling. Truly. Thank you for lunch."

He had paid for it. She had not seen him pay.

He went out through the food centre, between the tables, in his linen suit, unhurried, and she watched him go, and by the time he reached the road she found she was not sure, if she were asked, that she could pick him out of a line.

She looked down at the card. *Edward Hollis.* A London number.

She left it on the table.

Then she went back, and picked it up, and put it in her pocket, and did not know why she had done that either.

* * *

She rang her father from the stairs.

"He wanted me to go to Hamburg," she said. "To see a house. A trust. He said my grandmother was a Petrick."

Silence on the line. A long one.

"Papa?"

"What did you say?"

"I said no."

She heard him breathe out. She heard it go all the way out of him, down the line, from the long white room at the top of the stairs, thirty feet above her head.

"Good," said her father. "Good girl." He was quiet. "Come up. Don't come up. Take the afternoon. Go home." Another silence. "Mei Ling. Did he give you anything?"

She put her hand in her pocket on the card.

"No," she said.

She did not know why she had said that either.

* * *

She did not go home. She took the train to Tiong Bahru, the way she did some Fridays, to have dinner with her mother, and got there too early, at a quarter past five, and walked.

Down past the market. Past the flower stall under the first awning, with the jasmine in buckets, the same stall that had been there all her life. Into the park at the end of the road. Not a park, really. A patch of grass with rain trees round it and a playground in one corner, with a climbing frame shaped like a ship, new paint on it, the same ship.

The aunties were coming down with their grandchildren. The heat was going off. The playground was filling up with noise.

She sat on a bench under the rain trees on the far side, and watched.

She had been brought here every evening, her mother said, when she was very small. And then not. Her mother had stopped coming, one October, when Mei Ling was two, and never said why, and from then on taken her to a different park, further away, with a fence round it and a man at the gate. Mei Ling did not remember this one. Not really. Except that sometimes, at half past five, when the heat went off, she would find herself facing this way. North-west. Over the market. Over the rain trees. Over everything.

She sat on the bench, and found that she was facing that way now.

Over the playground, past the climbing frame, through the trees, at the edge of the market, under the first awning by the flower stall, there was a woman.

She was standing quite still, in the shade, with her back to the stall. A white linen dress. A straw hat with a wide brim. Fair, under the brim. Tall. Mei Ling could not see her face. The light was behind her, and the hat was in the way, and she was a long way off across the grass.

She was looking at the bench.

Mei Ling stood up.

A boy ran across in front of her after a ball, and an auntie shouted at him, and Mei Ling looked down for a second, at the boy, at the ball. Just a second.

When she looked up the woman had gone.

There was the flower stall, and the jasmine in buckets, and the awning, and the shade, and nobody in it.

* * *

Mei Ling stood on the grass in the park at Tiong Bahru for a long time, with her hand in her pocket on a plain white card.

Then she took the card out, and looked at it, and tore it very carefully in half, and in half again, and put the pieces in the bin by the swings.

She went up to her mother's for dinner. She did not say anything about Hamburg, or a house with a round window, or a woman in a hat. Her mother did not ask. They ate, and talked about the football, and her mother's knee, and a cousin's wedding in December. And at nine she took the train home, and climbed three floors, and lay down on the bed pushed into the corner at an angle, with her face to the wall.

North-west.

She lay awake for a long time, in the dark, with the fan going round.

And then, very quietly, at the edge of sleep, the way she had heard them all her life, she heard the two words again. In a low even voice. Not English.

Hallo, Kleine.

She did not know what they meant.

She thought that, one day, somebody would tell her.

Chapter 6 – *The Pocketbooks*

Sun. 30 Sept. 2057. Preston, the kitchen, 3.00 p.m. Dad. Four boxes. Fifty-nine and thirty-one. He kept the sixtieth. I asked him. He smiled. Four weeks and one day.

The boxes were on the kitchen table when she let herself in.

Four of them. Archive boxes, the grey cardboard kind with lids and handholes, from the stationer's on Fleet Street; she knew because the price was still on one of them, in the corner, in the woman's pencil. They were stacked two and two, very square, with their labels facing the door so that anybody coming in would read them first. Block capitals, in black marker. Slightly shaky now, the capitals. But still capitals.

J.H. 1–15. 1997–2012.

J.H. 16–36. 2012–2035.

J.H. 37–59. 2035–2051.

And the fourth, older, the cardboard gone soft at the corners, the label in a different marker, from years ago:

J.H. (JACK). 1–31.

Jo stood in the doorway with her coat still on and her keys in her hand and looked at them for a long time.

"You're early," said her father, from the window.

* * *

He was in the chair by the window, the big one, with the blanket over his knees, looking out at the bay.

He was eighty-four. He had been a big man once. Not tall; broad, with a boxer's shoulders and a policeman's way of standing in a doorway so that you had to ask to get past. It had gone off him over the last three years like water off a beach when the tide turns, slowly and then all at once. He was thin now. His wrists came out of the cuffs of his cardigan like sticks. His hair was white and very short, the way it had always been. He had a frame for the hall and a stick for the kitchen and a woman called Bev who came in the mornings and a boy from the club who came in the evenings and put him to bed and did not let him argue about it.

His eyes were the same. Pale, and steady, and very tired, and missing nothing.

"Shannon sent soup," said Jo. She held up the bag.

"Shannon always sends soup."

"Then you'll eat it."

"I'll eat it," said her father. "Sit down."

* * *

She did not sit down. She put the soup in the fridge and the kettle on and stood with her back against the counter, looking at the boxes, while it boiled.

"When did you do this?"

"Over the summer. A bit at a time. Bev carried them." He did not look round from the window. "Bev thinks they're tax returns."

"Why?"

"Because I told her they were tax returns."

"Dad."

He turned his head then. Slowly. It took him a long time to turn his head now.

"Because you'll need them," he said. "In four weeks. And after. And I won't be any use to you. I can't get up the hill to that building. I can't sit at a desk all day. I can barely read my own hand any more, half the time; the early ones, the nineties, I can't read at all." He looked at the boxes. "But you can. You've read it all your life. You read it upside down across a kitchen table when you were twenty-one and I didn't know you were doing it."

Jo said nothing. She had. She had read it upside down across this same table, the August she came, the night he told her who she was. *C. left 2009.* She had read that, in block capitals, upside down, before he said a word.

"They're yours," said her father. "All of them. Mine and his." He nodded at the soft old box at the bottom. "Jack's came to me when I was twelve. Mine were always going to you. I only didn't know it until you walked into Eric's." He paused. "I'm giving them to you now because I want to see you take them."

* * *

She made the tea. She brought it to him and put it on the little table by his chair where he could reach it with both hands, and then she sat down at the kitchen table, with the boxes, and took the lid off the first one.

The smell came up out of it. Pencil, and old paper, and something else that she could not name and knew at once. Her father's coat. The inside pocket of his coat, the August she was twenty-one, the first time he had put his arm round her.

Fifteen books, standing on their spines, black, with the elastic gone slack on the early ones. She took out the first.

J.H. 1. On the inside of the cover, in pencil, in a younger hand, still block capitals but bigger and less sure:

BOUGHT FLEET ST 8 MAR 1997. 4.20 P.M. RAIN.

And on the first page:

Sat. 8 Mar. 1997. Torquay, Fleet St. 4.20 p.m. Bought this. Going to write it all down. Like Jack. Don't know why. Rain.

She read it twice.

"I was twenty-three," said her father, from the window. He could not see the page. He knew. "I'd just been moved to Paignton. I'd been a policeman four and a half years and I'd already learned that the official notebook is for what you can prove." He was quiet. "I wanted one for the rest."

* * *

She did not read them all. Not then. She would. She would read all ninety of them, over the winter, at the desk in the white room, beside an old man with his hand flat on a bare surface, until she could hear her father's voice in every line.

But that afternoon she only went through them, the way you go through a house you are about to move into. Opening doors. Looking in.

The second box. A book from 2018, with a strip of paper marking a page, and on the page, very small: *Paignton, Station Square. The 4.10. Karina.* And under it, underlined twice: *Case open.*

The third box. The forty-first: *Tues. 2 Mar. 2038. Whitehall, the Committee's room.* The forty-first had a crease right across it, as if it had been sat on, for a long time, in the inside pocket of a man on a green bench.

And the forty-second. 2039.

She turned the pages without meaning to stop, and stopped.

Tues. 19 Apr. 2039. Westminster, the Members' Lobby, 2.31 p.m.

And nothing else.

The rest of the page was empty. The next page began two days later, in a train, at Dawlish, with the lamps. But that line was alone. A date, a place, a time, and a white page under it, as if he had held the pencil there for a long time and then put the book away.

Her father had never left a line empty. Not once. Not in fifty-nine books. She knew it without looking. *You write down what you know, and say what you don't.*

She looked at it for a long time.

* * *

"Dad," she said.

"Mm."

"The nineteenth of April 2039. The Members' Lobby. Half past two."

He did not answer straight away. He was looking at the bay. The tide was out and the sand at Preston was wet and shining and there were people walking on it with dogs, very small, and the sun on the water beyond them, and Paignton pier, and the long curve round to Goodrington and the headland and Berry Head at the end of it in the haze.

"That was the first day back," he said. "After Easter. The year the bill went down."

"There's nothing after it."

"No."

"You never leave a line."

"No," said her father.

He turned his head again. Slowly. And looked at her across the kitchen, at the table, with the forty-second book open in her hands.

"What did you see?" said Jo.

He looked at her for a long time.

"A young man," he said. "New. Elected in February. A seat in the Midlands. He came past me in the Lobby, talking, laughing. And I looked at him." He paused. "The way I look at everybody. The way you do. Out of habit."

"In London."

"In London."

"There's nothing to see in London," said Jo. "Not for us. The lamps go out at Newton Abbot."

"Yes," said her father.

And did not say anything else.

* * *

She put the forty-second book back in its box, very carefully, in its place, between the forty-first and the forty-third. She put the lid on. She sat with both hands flat on the lid.

She had been a police officer for fifteen years. She had sat across tables from men at three in the morning and known, before they opened their mouths, which of them were going to lie. She had learned that from him. *Don't look at the glove. Look at the man.*

She looked at the man.

He was eighty-four, under a blanket, by a window, with a cup of tea going cold beside him in both hands. Pale eyes. Steady. Tired. Missing nothing.

Nineteen years ago, on a Christmas Eve, at this table, with a little tree from Argos between them, he had looked at the air over her head at two minutes past nine, when the phone went round on the wood. She had seen him do it. She had not known why. She knew now.

Twenty-six years ago, in 2031, in Eric's club, he had told her about the lamps. Inside the bay. Six hours. Everybody. *Except at Newton Abbot it goes, like going deaf in one ear.*

And there were three women in the world who could see more than that, anywhere, on any train, in any lobby. Because something had been put behind their eyes, on the campus, years ago, and a man who looked about thirty had trained them to use it.

Her father had driven them to the hills.

She had never once, in twenty-six years, asked.

"Dad," said Jo.

He waited.

"Did you have an implant?"

* * *

The kitchen was very quiet.

The fridge. The clock over the door, the one he had had since Kennington. A gull, outside, on the roof. Far off, down on the front, a bus.

Her father looked at her.

And then, very slowly, the way the light comes up over Berry Head in November, he smiled.

It was not a big smile. It never had been. It came up at one corner of his mouth and stayed there and went into his eyes and stayed there too. It was the smile he had given her across the canvas in Eric's ring when she was twenty-one and had put him on his back for the first time. The smile he had given Hannah Price in the tea room, she supposed, for eighteen years. *One day.*

He did not say anything.

He picked up his tea, with both hands, and drank some of it, and put it down again on the little table, very carefully, so that it did not spill. And turned his head, slowly, back to the window. To the bay. To the people with their dogs on the wet sand, and the sun on the water, and Berry Head in the haze at the end of everything.

Jo sat at the kitchen table with her hands on the lid of the box and waited for him to say it.

He did not say it.

After a long time, she found that she was smiling too.

"Hannah sends her love," she said. "She says to tell you she still sits at your table. Nobody else will."

Her father did not turn from the window. But his hands moved on the blanket.

"Good," he said.

* * *

At five she carried the boxes down to the car.

Two at a time, down the stairs, and the boy from the club, Danny, who had come early, carried the other two, and put them in the back of her car on the seat with the seatbelt across them as if they were a child, without being asked. She did not tell him what was in them. He did not ask. He had been coming up those iron stairs since he was eleven. He knew what Jono Hills carried in his inside pocket.

When she came back up for her coat her father was still in the chair by the window, and he had something in his hands.

A book. Black. The elastic tight. Newer than the others.

"The sixtieth," she said.

"The sixtieth." He held it on the blanket, in both hands. "I started it the morning after Eric. Six years. I don't write much now.

A line a week. Some weeks not that." He looked down at it. "I'm keeping it."

"I know."

"Till the twenty-ninth. I want it with me. At the station." He looked up at her. "I want to write it down. Whatever it is. I want to be there and write it."

"You'll be there," said Jo.

"I'll be there." He put the book in the pocket of his cardigan, on the left, over his heart. "Bev'll push me in the chair. Danny'll carry the chair. Shannon'll shout at both of them." He almost laughed. "I'll be the oldest Hills that ever stood in that square."

"Dad."

"I know." He was quiet. "How many left? On Ai Li's list."

He knew about the list. He had been in the cellar under the Studio in 2031, on the call, when Ai Li read Carole's line and then the last one and would not read the ones between. He had asked her how many. Fourteen.

"Two," said Jo.

He nodded, slowly.

"Station Square," he said. "And the other one."

She did not tell him who the other one was. He did not ask. He looked at her, along, not at, the way he looked at men in interview rooms, and she knew that he knew she was not telling him, and that he would not ask, and that he would write that down too, tonight, in the sixtieth book, in one line.

* * *

She drove home along the front with ninety books on the back seat and the sea on her left.

Past the beach huts, and Preston Green, and the long curve round to Paignton, with the lights coming on along it, and the pier, and the Pavilion, and into Station Square, and round it, slowly, past the forge with its doors shut, and the station, and the plane trees with the first leaves coming down, and Bailey's.

The window of the back room was dark. It was Sunday.

She thought about a young man in a Lobby in London in 2039, laughing, talking, going past. And her father, standing still in the middle of six hundred people, with his eyes on the air above the young man's head. And a line in a book with nothing under it.

There's nothing to see in London.

Yes.

She did not know what she had wanted him to say. She did not know which answer would have been worse.

At ten o'clock, in her own kitchen, with the four boxes on the floor by the table and the lid off the first one, she took the watch out of her pocket, the plain gold hunter with the crack across the glass, and opened it on her palm, and wound it. Carefully. Not too far.

Then she took out her own pocketbook and wrote the date, and the time, and the place.

Dad. Four boxes. Fifty-nine and thirty-one. He kept the sixtieth.

And then: *I asked him.*

She held the pencil over the page for a long time.

He smiled.

She did not write anything after that. She looked at the line, and at the white page under it, and thought that perhaps that was how it was done. That perhaps that was the only way to write a thing like that down.

She closed the book, and put her hand flat on it, and sat in her kitchen with ninety books and a ticking watch until it was very late.

Chapter 7 – *Further On*

Mon. 1 Oct. 2057. Paignton sands, below Roundham, 7.40 p.m. H. Prints from nothing. The Exchange, 10.00 p.m. I wound it. He watched. He said nothing. Four weeks.

"He's coming tonight," said Chris.

It was ten to seven, and dark outside, and the car had come for him at five and gone away again empty, because he had sent it. He had been sitting with his hand flat on the bare desk and his eyes shut for two hours.

Jo looked up from Jack's eleventh book.

She did not ask who. There was only one person Chris said *he* about like that, in that voice, as if the word were a cup he had to carry without spilling.

"Where?"

"The sands." Chris opened his eyes. "Below Roundham. Low water's at a quarter to eight." He looked at the window, at the dark, at the lights of the town going down the hill to the sea. "He'll be wet. He's always wet. Take a coat."

* * *

She had met him three times.

The first was in the spring of 2049. Chris had said the same thing, in the same voice, and she had driven down to Paignton and walked out across the wet sand in the last of the light, and found a tall thin man in a black frock coat standing at the edge of the water with the sea round his boots, looking at the pier as if it had personally offended him.

He had turned round. Pale. Forty, perhaps. A long narrow face, and grey eyes that went over her once, top to bottom, the way a hand goes over a pocket. "Hills," he had said. Not a question.

He had stayed four days. He had sat at the bare desk in the white room with his hand flat on it, from eight in the morning until long after dark, and talked. Very low. Not to Chris, not to her. To the desk, and whatever was at the other end of it. And once, when Jo asked in the corridor what the man was doing, Chris had said:

Teaching her to look.

He had not said who *her* was. Jo had not asked. She had known, the way you know which door in a house is the one nobody opens.

The second time was 2052. Two days. The third was 2055. One afternoon.

And every time, afterwards, Jo had written in her pocketbook the date, and the time, and the place, and then one letter. *H.* Never the name. Her father had told her that on the first night, the only time he had ever told her *not* to write a thing down.

Rage hasn't written that name since October 1915, he had said. *Jack stopped. Edward stopped. Johnny made everybody stop.* He had looked at her. *What's written can be found, Jo. He's the one thing in a hundred and sixty years they've never been able to find. Keep it that way.*

* * *

The tide was right out.

She walked down the slipway by the harbour wall with the torch off. The lights along the Esplanade were enough. There was no moon. The sand at Paignton was wide and flat and shining, the colour of a knife. The pier to her left. Roundham Head dark on her right.

The beach was empty. She walked out across the wet sand towards the water, and about two hundred yards out, below Roundham, at the place where the sand stopped being sand and started being sea, she found the prints.

* * *

They began from nothing.

Long. Narrow. A man's. A boot: a heel, a narrow sole, the nails in the heel showing in the wet as little dark dots. Going away from her, along by the water, towards the pier, quite steady, the stride of a tall man walking with his hands behind his back.

And behind the first one, nothing.

Not a smudge. Not a print going into the sea. The wet sand behind the first heel was as smooth as glass, the way the tide leaves it. As if whoever made them had stepped down onto the beach from somewhere just above it, and walked on.

Jo stood over the first print with the torch in her hand and thought about Jack.

It was not in his pocketbooks. She had looked. *Wed. 18 Mar. 6 a.m. Home. S.H. returned last night. Thinner. Hand bound.* And nothing about the sands. But in the soft old box there was the long account he had written out as an old man, for whoever came after; and in that, he had told it. A spring night in 1896. A lamp by the end of the pier. A line of prints going along by the water's edge towards Roundham, and stopping. *I did not measure them.*

His stopped. These started. Below Roundham. In the same place.

She took out her phone and photographed the first print. Then she put the phone away, because she knew already that she would never show the photograph to anybody, and followed them.

* * *

He was at the end of them, about a hundred yards on, standing at the edge of the water with the sea round his boots, looking at the pier.

The same black frock coat, soaked to the knees. The same narrow back. He had his hands behind him, one holding the other at the wrist, and he did not turn round when she came up, though he must have heard her on the wet sand.

"Hills," he said, to the pier.

"Mr H."

He turned his head, then. The lights of the Esplanade were on his face, and she saw that he was older than in 2055. A year, perhaps. Thinner. But the eyes were the same. They went over her once, top to bottom, and stopped.

"You have lost weight," he said. "Not by design. You have been sleeping badly for about three weeks. You have been reading a great deal, in pencil, small, by artificial light, much of it upside down." He paused. "And something has happened to your father."

"He's eighty-four."

"Yes," said Holmes. "That is what has happened to him." He looked at her a moment longer, and something went across his face that she could not read, and was gone. "I am sorry."

He was shivering. She saw it now, close to. A fine fast tremor in the shoulders, under the wet wool, that he was not letting reach his hands.

She took the coat off her arm and held it out.

* * *

It was her spare, from the boot of the car. Dark blue, very light, with a hood that rolled into the collar; it packed down into its own pocket to the size of a grapefruit.

Holmes took it. He weighed it in both hands, the way you weigh a letter to guess what is in it. He felt the cloth between his finger and thumb. He looked at the seams, which were not sewn but welded, and the zip.

"What is it made of?" he said.

"Nothing," she said. "Not really. Oil, I think. Plastic."

Holmes looked at the coat for a long time.

"Not made of anything," he said, very quietly, to himself, as if he were putting the words away somewhere for later. Then he took off the wet frock coat and put her coat on, and did the zip up to his chin, with some difficulty, and looked, for the first time since she had known him, almost happy.

"Thank you, Hills," he said. "Shall we go? I believe Mr Harvey is waiting. He usually is."

* * *

They walked back across the sand together. She kept her eyes on her own feet.

She did not look back at the prints. The tide would come in at two in the morning and take them, and nobody would ever know they had been made. Except that somebody had. In 1896. Under a lamp by the end of the pier.

She thought: *the other end. His stopped there, and these start here. The same walk.*

They went up the slipway, and across the Esplanade, and she put him in the car.

* * *

Chris was waiting.

He had not moved. He was in the big pale chair with his good hand flat on the desk, and when the door opened he did not open his eyes, but he smiled.

"You're wet," he said.

"I am always wet, Mr Harvey," said Holmes. "You have remarked upon it before."

"You're in Jo's coat."

"I am in a coat made of nothing," said Holmes, "which is a great improvement on the alternative." He crossed the room and looked down at Chris in the big chair. "You are older."

"So are you. A bit."

"A year," said Holmes. "For me. For you?"

"Two," said Chris. "Since the last time. Ninety-five." He opened his eyes then and looked up at the tall thin man in the blue waterproof. Very old eyes, pale, looking at a face that had not changed in a hundred and sixty years except by one year. "Four weeks, H."

Holmes did not say anything for a moment.

"So soon," he said.

"So soon."

"Then she must learn the last thing," said Holmes, and pulled out Jo's chair, and sat down in it, and put his left hand flat on the bare desk.

* * *

Jo had watched it three times. She watched it again.

It did not look like anything. A tall thin man sitting very still at a white desk with his hand flat on it and his eyes half shut, talking. Low. In a voice she had only ever heard him use here: patient, and

very clear, the way you talk to a child who is clever enough to understand you if you are careful.

"Observe," he said. "Not see. Observe. You have been told the difference. Now I will tell you why it matters."

The room hummed. It always hummed, very faintly, like a wineglass with a wet finger going round the rim. But it changed when Holmes talked. It went lower. It went still, the way a room goes still when somebody in it is listening very hard.

"You will know everything," said Holmes, to the desk. "That is the difficulty. That has always been your difficulty. You will sit in a house in a little room with a window over the bay, and you will know the minute a woman's heart will stop in Cheltenham, and the hour a man will die in a flat over a boxing club, and the name of every person who will ever come up that path. You will know it all. You will write some of it down." He paused. "And you will want to tell them."

The hum went very low.

"You must not," said Holmes. "That is the last thing. It is the hardest. I learned it late, and badly, and it cost me a great deal. You must learn it now, here, before you go." He was quiet for a long time. "You must know, and sit with them, and pour the tea, and not say. Because the moment you say, it is a hand and not a nudge. And they will stop being the ones who do it." His hand moved on the desk, very slightly, flattening. "They must be the ones who do it. Always. It is their bay."

Across the room, in the big pale chair, Chris had his eyes shut, and there was water on his face.

Jo looked down at Jack's eleventh book, open on her knee, and did not read it. *She knew,* she thought. *All of it. Every one. Before. And she sat in the bay window every October and poured the tea, and said nothing. He taught her that. Here. Tonight. In my chair.*

* * *

At ten o'clock, out of habit, without thinking, Jo took the watch out of her pocket.

She had done it every night for twenty-six years. Wherever she was. Her hand went to the pocket at ten the way it went to a light switch in the dark. The plain gold hunter. Worn smooth. With the crack across the glass.

She opened it on her palm and took the little key out of the back, and fitted it, and wound. Carefully. Not too far.

And looked up, and found that the room had gone silent. Holmes had stopped talking.

He was sitting at her desk, half turned in the chair, with his left hand still flat on the white surface, and he was looking at the watch in her hand.

* * *

He looked at it for a long time.

Jo did not move. She sat on the floor by the boxes with the watch open on her palm and let him look. She had seen him, in 2052, look at a cup of coffee for nearly a minute and then tell Chris which café on Union Street it had come from and that the girl who made it was in love with somebody who did not deserve her.

He was reading the watch.

She could see him do it. His eyes went over the case, the gold worn soft at the edges where a hundred and sixty years of hands had held it. The crack across the glass, from the twelve to the four. The hinge, a little loose. Her fingers on it. Her father's before hers. Douglas's. Johnny's. Jack's.

His face did not change. But something went out of the room, or into it; she could not tell which. Across the room Chris had opened his eyes, and was looking, too. Not at the watch. At Holmes.

Then Holmes looked up from the watch, at her face. Grey eyes. Very steady. Something in them that she had seen once before: across a kitchen table in Preston, the afternoon before, in her father's, when she had asked him the question and he had smiled. He did not smile. He did not say anything.

He turned back to the desk, and settled his hand flat on it again, and shut his eyes.

"Where was I," he said.

"The last thing," said Chris, from the big chair, very quietly.

"The last thing," said Holmes. "Yes." And after a moment, in the low clear patient voice: "Observe."

Jo closed the watch. She put the key back. She put it in her pocket and kept her hand on it.

* * *

She drove him to Widecombe Cot at midnight.

Karen was up. She was in the hall in her dressing gown with her stick, under the barometer, and she looked at the tall thin man in the blue waterproof coming up the path under the monkey puzzle, and did not seem surprised at all.

"Room One," said Karen. "It's made up. There's ham on a plate in the kitchen, if you're hungry. I always leave ham." She looked at him over her glasses. "Somebody told me once you liked it."

Holmes stopped on the step.

He looked at her for a long moment. Jo watched him read her the way he had read the watch. And something happened to his face, at last. Very small. At the corner of the mouth.

"I do," he said. "Thank you, madam. I do."

* * *

Jo did not go in. She stood on the path under the monkey puzzle and watched the door close, and the light go on in Room One at the front, and then off.

He had not said anything. Not a word. He had looked at it for a long time, and then he had shut his eyes and said *observe*.

Yet, she thought. She did not know where the word had come from. It was simply there, in her head, the way the words in Jack's books came, upside down first and then the right way up. *He hasn't said anything yet.*

She went home, and wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Paignton sands, below Roundham, 7.40 p.m. H. Prints from nothing.* And under it: *The Exchange, 10.00 p.m. I wound it. He watched.*

And then, after a long time: *He said nothing.*

Then she wrote the only other thing she knew for certain, and closed the book.

Four weeks.

Chapter 8 – *1895*

Thurs. 4 Oct. 2057. The Exchange, 2.10 p.m. C.H. to 1895: Bailey's, Thurs. 31 Oct., dusk. Through E.H. H. at the window, watching. Back 3.02. Cost: the Bible in 2016. H.: "There was somebody else at the table." Three weeks and four days.

"You'll be there," said Chris.

Holmes was standing at the window at the far end of the white room, with his hands behind his back, one holding the other at the wrist. He was in a jacket of David Harvey's from the 1970s that Karen had found for him in a cupboard, and it was too short in the arms.

"I shall be there," he said, to the glass. "I have been there. It is the same thing, from where you sit."

"Not from where you stand."

"No," Holmes agreed. "From where I stand it is a Thursday evening at the back end of October in a public bar that smells of gas and wet coats, and I am about to be told about wolves by a tram conductor." He turned his head. "I remember it very well, Mr Harvey. It is the evening I first said a thing I did not understand." He paused. "I understand it now."

"Did you know?" said Chris. "Then. In the bar. Did you know I'd be there?"

Holmes did not answer straight away.

"Go and find out," he said.

* * *

Chris put his good hand flat on the bare desk.

It was cool. It was always cool. And under it, a long way down and four hundred yards under the street, a stone in a cradle of grey foam that had come out of the Irish Sea in 2028.

He shut his eyes. He said the six. And the lines came up out of the dark.

* * *

Jack's first. Always Jack's, when he went this far down. Very deep, very steady, like an organ heard through a church wall. Not the pocketbooks. The long account Jack had written out as an old man, for whoever came after, beginning *I was not there.* Jack had not been at Bailey's that night. But Edward had told him, many times, and Jack had written it down.

Written. Twice written. Once by Jack, from Edward's mouth. And once by Edward himself, in pencil, on the back of a piece of card, in his lodgings, later that same night. *31 OCT 1895.*

Chris could hear the waybill. He had never told Jo, because he did not know how to say it without sounding mad. Very faint. Very thin. A young man's pencil on card, trying hard to be neat.

It was in the Bible at Widecombe Cot now. Between Malachi and Matthew. He had found it himself, in 2016, after his father died. He went down the line of it, into the dark, the way you go down a rope into a well.

* * *

Paignton. Thursday 31 October 1895. Bailey's Hotel, the public bar. About half past five.

Gas.

Coal gas, sweetish and dirty, hissing in the brackets on the wall. And under it beer, and pipe smoke, and wet wool, and the sea.

Then the body.

Twenty-six. He felt it all at once, the way you feel cold water. A young man's body, sitting, with a damp collar and tired legs. Broad across the shoulders, from three years of carrying crates off the down line. A callus on the right thumb, from the punch, hard as horn. Nothing hurt. Nothing at all. He sat inside it for a moment, behind the eyes of his great-grandfather, and simply felt it.

Edward.

He was looking at his beer. He was thinking about nothing very much. The last car, and a woman on it who had not paid, and the wind on the front. His feet. Whether to have another.

Through the window, out in Station Square, the dusk was coming down. *Dimpsy.* Cabs at the rank, with their lamps lit. A brewer's dray, the horses steaming. The station on the far side, smaller than Chris had ever seen it and exactly the same. And the down train from Newton Abbot coming in, the long sigh of the brakes and the doors. Edward did not look up. He was looking at his beer.

* * *

This was the part. *Edward heard it and did not look up. Then, he said, he did look up, and he could never tell me why.*

That was him. That was the nudge. A young man in a bar who looked up from his beer for no reason, and the reason was a man of ninety-five in a white room with his hand on a desk.

If Edward did not look up, he was looking at his beer when the man came in, and the man found him anyway; but it was different. A man looked at and a man not looked at are two different men in a doorway. Chris did not know what was lost in the other version. Nobody did. That was why it had to be the version that was written.

He did the smallest thing he knew. He thought, behind Edward's eyes, in Edward's own voice, the way a thought comes to you that you take for your own:

Look.

And Edward looked up.

* * *

A tall man had come out of the station and was crossing Station Square.

Edward saw a gentleman. Thin, upright, neat, in a grey travelling coat and a cloth cap, coming between a cab and the dray without breaking his stride. Edward felt the small cold drop in the stomach of a working man who sees a gentleman coming straight at him across a square.

Chris saw Holmes. The man who had stood at the window in the white room twenty minutes before, in a jacket too short in the arms. A year younger, not soaked, in his own coat, walking across Paignton station square as if it had been laid out for his convenience.

The tall man came straight towards the window where Edward sat, as if he had known all along that Edward would be sitting in it.

* * *

It went the way it had gone. Chris let it. He sat behind Edward's eyes and did nothing at all, while the tall man came in and said *Mr Harvey*, not as a question, and sat down before he was asked, and read Edward like a timetable. The callus. The cash bag. The salt drying on the left side. And Chris felt something he had not felt since he was a boy in a cinema watching a film about a detective. Delight, at a thing being done perfectly.

My name is Holmes. The brandy and water, not drunk.

The crate. *Nothing that barked.* Edward, unable to let a door close without putting his foot in it, saying the thing about the big dogs. Billy Narracott and the milk pony. The howling off

Roundham. The prints at Goodrington going into the sea. Edward, telling it badly, in the order it happened to other people.

And Holmes, kind and final: *Then you have brought me a noise, a milkman's fright, and a puzzle of the tide.*

Chris felt Edward go small. A young man who had carried a thing about for three months that nobody believed, and had finally told it to the one man in England who might, and been told it was a noise.

He wanted, very badly, to say something. *You'll see. It's all true. You'll name a thing in a temper over a policeman calling you boy, and a hundred and forty years later it'll be the name of a network that lights the world.* He did not. *Not a hand.*

He sat in the dark behind his great-grandfather's eyes, and let him feel small.

* * *

Holmes stood up. He stood by the table pulling on his gloves, finger by finger, and looked out of the window at the square.

And Chris felt it. Not anything Edward felt. Something in the room. The way the air in the white room went still when Holmes talked to the desk. Holmes was listening.

He had stopped pulling on the glove. He was standing quite still by the table in the gaslight, and he was listening, with the whole of himself, the way a dog listens to a sound in another room that no person can hear.

Then, very slowly, he turned his head and looked down at Edward.

Not at Edward. Into him. Chris knew the difference. Holmes was looking into the young conductor's face, past it, at the back of the eyes, where a man of ninety-five was sitting with his hand on a desk.

Grey eyes. Very steady. And something in them that Chris had seen three days ago, in the white room, when Jo wound the watch. *He knows I'm here.*

* * *

"There is a friend of mine," said Holmes, to Edward, "who believes me to be in London. I should like him to go on believing it a little longer. I would be grateful if you did not speak of this evening."

Edward promised. And then, because he was Edward: *And if I hear more, sir? Where'm I to find 'ee?*

"Nowhere useful, I'm afraid," said Holmes.

He buttoned the second glove. He took his time over it. And all the while he was looking into the young man at the table, and Chris sat very still in the dark and looked back.

Then Holmes said, quite lightly, the way a man says *good night*:

"I would give you my mobile number, but that would do no good."

* * *

It was not for Edward.

Chris knew it the moment it was said. It went past Edward like a ball past a man who has not seen it thrown, and into the dark behind his eyes, and landed. It was the only thing Holmes could say to a man of ninety-five sitting inside a tram conductor's head that the tram conductor would not understand and the man inside him would. *I know you're there. I know where you're from. It's all right.*

And *that would do no good*, because there was no number Holmes could give in 1895 that would reach 2057. The only way anything reached 2057 from here was in pencil, on the back of a

piece of card, written down by a young man who did not know why. *A message home.*

Edward said: "Your what, sir?" And Holmes stopped.

The look. *The look of a man who has put his foot on a stair that is not there.* Chris saw it from inside, from a foot away, in the gaslight. And it was not that. Edward had got it wrong, for a hundred and sixty years, because he could not see what Chris could see.

It was a man deciding to let it be thought that he had slipped.

"A London expression," said Holmes. "It means nothing whatever. Good night, Mr Harvey."

He went out.

* * *

Chris stayed. He had meant to come back then. But there was the other line. The waybill. *He did not know why.*

He stayed while Edward walked home the long way, along the sea front, with the tide coming in over the sand like somebody breathing in the next room. While Edward stopped by the pier, and the howling started, out over the water, and Edward counted to forty. Chris counted with him. He felt Edward understand that it was coming from the sea.

And then the lodgings. A room at the top of a house in a back street. A table. A lamp. Edward lit it with hands that were not quite steady, and took off his coat. There was a waybill in the pocket. The day's. *31 OCT 1895.*

Write it down, thought Chris.

The second nudge. Smaller than the first. Just the shape of a word, in Edward's own voice.

Edward took the waybill out of the coat. He turned it over. He sat down under the lamp, and licked the pencil, and wrote, trying hard to be neat and not quite managing:

I would give you my mobile number, but that would do no good.

He did not know why he had written it. Chris felt it go through Edward like a draught under a door. And then, after it, slower, colder, the thing Jack had written down last of all: that those words frightened him more than the howling.

I'm sorry, thought Chris. *You'll keep it all your life. And your son will. And his. And a man of fifty-four will find it in a Bible in 2016, clearing his father's house, and sit on the floor for an hour and not know what to do. That's me. Thank you.*

He let go.

* * *

The white room came back at two minutes past three.

From the edges in. The desk. The windows. His own breath, going too fast, and his whole body shaking from the shoulders down, the old body, ninety-five, after a young man's body that had not hurt anywhere at all.

Jo was beside him. Crouched. The cup. Too much sugar. He drank half of it.

"Right," said Jo. "What did it cost?"

He thought about the waybill. He knew where it was. He had shown it to Jono in April 2028 on a white tea towel, and Keith had read it and said *that's how I get there.* He knew he had found it in 2016. He knew it the way you know a date in a history book.

He went to look for it. The finding. His father's back bedroom. A Bible. His own hands. There was nothing there.

Not dark. Just a room he knew he had been in, with the door shut, and no way to open it. He could not see himself find it. He could not see the Bible in his hands, or the waybill fall out, or how long he had sat there, or what he had felt.

"The Bible," he said. "In 2016. When I found it. I know I did. I can't see it."

Jo wrote it down. "Will it come back?"

"No," said Chris. "That one's mine. That one doesn't come back." He looked at his good hand on the desk. "I said, in the bar. To him. I said *thank you.* For keeping it. That's what it cost. The day I found out what he'd kept."

* * *

Holmes had not moved from the window.

He was standing exactly as he had been when Chris went. "Well?" said Chris. Holmes did not turn round for a long time.

"There was somebody else at the table," he said at last. To the glass. "I knew it the moment I sat down. I had been to this room twice by then, from where I stand. I knew what it was to be looked out of. And I sat down in Bailey's opposite a young man with salt on his coat, and somebody looked out of him at me, and I knew the look."

"You didn't say," said Chris.

"I said what I could. The only thing I had that you would understand and he would not." Holmes turned round. "And I let him think I had slipped. I have told a great many lies in this bay, all of them to keep people safe, and that is one of the few I have never regretted."

"Did you know?" said Chris again. "Then. Before. Did you know I'd come?"

Holmes looked at him for a long moment. Then at the boxes of books on the floor by Jo's desk, and the soft old one at the bottom with *JACK* on it.

"I knew a man would come," he said. "I did not know it would be you. I did not know you would be so old. Or that you would say thank you." He turned back to the window. "Nobody had ever said thank you to me from inside another man's head."

"Three weeks and four days," said Jo, quietly, to her book. Nobody answered her.

Chris sat with his good hand flat on the desk and thought about his father's back bedroom, that he would never see again, and a young man under a lamp, licking a pencil, trying hard to be neat. Of all the things he had lost, this was the one he minded least.

He had been in the room when it was written.

That was better.

Chapter 9 – *What It Cost*

Tues. 9 Oct. 2057. Bailey's, the back room, 8.14 a.m. K. in the window. R. with me. A gap on the bench under the plane tree, 8.14 to 8.31. I saw nothing. Tried to write him. Could not. Fri.: C.H. did not say. Twenty days.

She had asked it, by her own count, four hundred and twelve times.

She knew because it was in the books. Every time. The date, the time, the place, and then the answer. A column of answers, going back eleven years, through nine of her own pocketbooks.

A street name in Plymouth. His.

A goal. Basil's, Bedok, 2028. Came back after a week.

The words to a song. Not his. Mine; he says I'll not miss it. (She had not. She did not know which song.)

Karen's birthday. Came back the same night. He cried.

A boy's name on a beach. Not his. His at sixty-three.

His father's back bedroom, 2016. The day he found the waybill. His. Permanent.

Four hundred and twelve. Most of them small. A tune. The colour of a front door. The name of a dog. He came back from the dark shaking and she crouched by the chair with the cup and asked, and he told her, and she wrote it down. That was the arrangement.

And sixteen times, in eleven years, he had not told her.

Those were in the books too. Sixteen lines with the date and the time and the place, and after them, in the same hand, two words.

Did not say.

* * *

The sixteenth was Friday.

He had gone at half past ten in the morning. A short one, he said. A Friday morning with rain on the glass and nobody there but the two of them. He had not said where, which he always did. He had simply put his hand down, and come back at four minutes past eleven.

She crouched by the chair with the cup. He drank all of it, this time, not half.

"Right," said Jo. "What did it cost?"

Chris looked at the window for a long time. At the rain. At Union Street going down to the sea, grey on grey.

"Not that one," he said.

She waited. She had learned that *not that one* sometimes meant *in a minute*, and sometimes meant *tomorrow*, and once, in 2051, had meant *in three weeks, on the day of the funeral, in the car*. He did not say anything else.

She wrote it down. *Did not say.* And watched him out of the corner of her eye for the rest of the day.

She was a detective. She watched for the thing that was missing. You usually could find it, if you watched. A pause before a name. A hand that went to a pocket that was empty.

She did not find it. Not on Friday. Not on Monday. He was exactly the same. That frightened her more than anything he could have said.

* * *

Rani came down on the Tuesday.

She was not supposed to; her days in London were Monday and Thursday, and on Tuesdays she was meant to be at the campus. But she rang Jo at half past six in the morning and said *Bailey's, eight o'clock, I'll be in the back room*, and rang off.

The back room. The October light, thin and gold, the plane trees half bare now. The brass plate on the table in the window. RESERVED. And the young man at it. Cup in both hands. Thumbs hooked over the rim.

"Five," said Keith, without looking round.

"Still five," said Jo.

"Still five." He turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer.

Rani was at the table behind him, by the wall, with her coat buttoned and a cup of coffee she had not touched, looking out of the window past Keith's shoulder at the square. Jo sat down next to her.

"What," she said.

Rani did not answer. She was very still. Not frozen. Reading.

"Wait," said Rani. "He's not here yet."

* * *

The square filled up. The 7.52 from Exeter came in under the green canopy and let its people off, and they came across the square in twos and threes with their lamps over their heads. Students, mostly, with bright young lamps, flickering a little. A man in a suit. Two women with a pushchair. The forge doors opening, and Fred's lamp in the doorway, steady, the colour of the fire behind him.

Jo watched them. Every head. Out of habit. She had been watching lamps in this square for twenty-six years.

"There," said Rani.

* * *

Jo looked where she was looking.

The bench under the big plane tree, at the station end of the square, by the cab rank. There was nobody on it.

Then there was.

She did not see him sit down. That was the thing that went cold in her afterwards. She had been looking at the bench. There had been nobody on it, and then there was an old man on it, with his hands on the top of a stick between his knees, looking out across the square towards Bailey's.

She looked at his face. She made herself. The way she had been trained to, in a classroom at Middlemoor: one feature at a time, and fix it. Hair. Grey, she thought. White. A coat. Dark. A face. It went.

Not suddenly. It was like trying to remember a word that is on the tip of your tongue, and having it slide away every time you reach for it. She looked away for a second to the pigeons on the pavement in front of the bench, and looked back, and could not have told you one thing about it.

She looked at the air over his head.

And found that she was looking at the pigeons again.

She had not meant to. Her eyes had gone to the pigeons instead, all on their own. She made herself look up. At the air above him.

And found that she was looking at the forge.

* * *

"I can't," she said. Very quietly. "Rani. I can't look at him."

"I know," said Rani. "Nobody can." She had not taken her eyes off the bench. "I can. Just. It's like looking at the sun with your eyes half shut."

"What do you see?"

"A hole," said Rani. "The shape of a man. Sitting. With its hands on a stick. Not dark. Not empty. The plate off the socket. Like at Bailey's in 2038. Exactly the same." She was quiet. "Older."

"No lamp."

"No lamp. Nothing ever there." Rani's hands had closed on the strap of her bag, and the knuckles were white. "And the cords, Jo. Look at the square. Not at him. At everybody else."

Jo looked. The students. The women with the pushchair. The cab drivers by the rank, leaning on their cabs. Lamps. Forty of them, going about their morning in the October light.

"I see lamps," said Jo.

"I know you do. I see cords." Rani's voice had gone very low and flat. "Most of them going up. Going away. To home, to work, to people in Exeter and Leeds. And some of them not."

"Going to him."

"Going to him. Eleven. In the square. Right now. Eleven people, walking past, going to work, with a cord coming out of the top of their heads, thin as a hair, going down, not up. Across the square. Into the hole."

Jo did not know which eleven. A student with a bag. A cab driver laughing. Any of them. They walked across Station Square with their ordinary morning faces, and eleven of them answered to a man on a bench that Jo could not look at.

"Who are they?"

"They don't know," said Rani. "That's what a cord is, Jo. It's not a spy with a radio. It's a man who'll do a thing when he's asked and not know why. It's a cab driver who'll be on the rank at the right

time." She breathed. "In 2038 there were forty-one strings out of two counties."

* * *

At the window, in front of them, Keith had not turned round.

He had not turned round once. He sat with his cup in both hands, looking at the square, at the bench under the big plane tree by the cab rank.

He turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer.

"Tuesdays," he said. "Since August. Eight fourteen. He sits for seventeen minutes and goes. He's looking at the window."

"At you," said Jo.

Keith did not answer that.

Jo looked at him. At his lamp, steady, bright. And behind it, fainter, the other one. The far one. "Keith. What's he looking at?"

Keith turned the cup a quarter turn.

"Not me," he said.

* * *

At eight thirty-one the bench was empty.

Jo did not see him go either. She blinked, because her eyes were watering, and when she opened them there was nobody on it.

Something lay on the slats where he had been.

She was out of the back room and across the square before Rani could stop her, between a cab and the kerb, to the bench. It was a newspaper.

The *Herald Express*. Tuesday's. Folded once, lengthways, the way you fold a paper to read on a train, and laid on the slats of the

bench exactly square to the edge. As if somebody had taken a set square to it.

She did not touch it. She photographed it, the way she had photographed a boot print on the sand eight days ago, with the same feeling, in the same place under her breastbone.

Rani had come up beside her, out of breath.

"Which way?" said Jo.

Rani shut her eyes and opened them. She turned slowly on the spot, the way a dowser turns, with her hand half up.

"Gone," she said. "Up the road. I had him at the bakery and then I didn't." She swallowed. "The cords went with him. All eleven. Like kite strings when the kite goes over a hill." She looked at Jo. "And then he wasn't anywhere."

* * *

Jo sat on the bench.

She sat down on it, next to the newspaper, where he had sat, because she was a detective and that was what you did. The slats were warm. A little. The way a seat is warm when somebody has just got up from it.

She took out her pocketbook. She wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Tues. 9 Oct. 2057. Station Square, the bench under the plane tree by the rank. 8.14 to 8.31.*

Then she tried to write him down.

She held the pencil on the page. She had looked straight at him for seventeen minutes, from a window forty yards away. She was a trained observer. She had stood up in court and described men she had seen for four seconds in the dark.

She wrote: *A man.* And stopped.

She knew what she wanted to write next: *old, about eighty-five, grey hair, dark coat, a stick.* She could see the words. She could not make the pencil move. Every time she went to write *old*, she found she did not know whether he had been old. The words were there in her head, and the man was not.

Two words and a full stop. That was all.

She thought: *Dad got that far. In 2031, in the cellar, with the crate gone. MAN. Nobody's ever got further.*

Then she closed the book.

* * *

She told Chris at two o'clock.

He was in the big pale chair; he had not gone since Friday. Holmes was at the window, in David Harvey's jacket, with his hands behind his back.

She told it all. The bench, and the eleven cords, and Keith saying *Tuesdays*, and the newspaper folded square. And the two words. Chris looked at them for a long time.

"He's come home," he said.

"Rani says he lives here. In the bay. She followed his cord from London. Tarquin's. It went south-west."

"He was always here." Chris looked at the window. "He was here in 2026, in a grey hatchback, with a lime and soda. He was here in 2031, at a kitchen table in Cheltenham. He was here in 2038, two feet from Keith, at the next table." He was quiet. "He's never been anywhere else. He's just never been anywhere."

At the window, Holmes had not turned round.

"He sat on a bench," said Holmes. "In the open. Every Tuesday, for two months, at the same minute. A man who cannot be seen does nothing in a public place by accident, Hills. He sat there

so that the window would know he was watching. And he left the newspaper so that you would come out and stand over it."

"Why?"

"Because he wished to see who would." Holmes turned his head, then, and looked at her. "And now he knows."

Jo did not say anything. She thought about the warm slats, and the pencil stopped on the page, and the eleven people walking past in the gold light with a thread going down out of the tops of their heads, into a hole.

* * *

At four o'clock, before the car came, she crouched by Chris's chair.

She did not have a cup. He had not been anywhere. But she crouched there anyway, with her knee going, and looked up at him.

"Friday," she said.

"I've watched you for four days. I can't find it. I always find it. I found it in 2051, in the car, three weeks after. I can't find anything." She kept her voice quite level. "That's worse."

"I know," he said.

"Then tell me."

He put his good hand on her shoulder. It was the first time in eleven years he had ever touched her, in this room. Light. Dry as paper.

"After," he said. "After the twenty-ninth. If I still know what it was. That's the trouble, Jo. With the ones I don't tell you. I'm not sure, when I've lost them, that I've lost anything."

She went back to her desk, and under *Did not say* she wrote one more line, small, in the margin, the way her father wrote the things he did not want to be the main thing on a page.

He says: after. If he still knows.

Then she looked at the old man in the big pale chair with his eyes shut, and at the column of four hundred and twelve answers going back eleven years.

Twenty days.

Chapter 10 – *1915*

Thurs. 11 Oct. 2057. The Exchange, 10.30 a.m. C.H. to 1915: Bailey's, the back room, Fri. 1 Oct., 1 p.m. Through E.H., 46. One word: "Ask." H. at the window. Back 11.41. Cost: the tea. The first time. Eighteen days.

"Not Harold," said Chris.

He had his good hand on the bare desk as if there were a plan on paper under it.

"I'd thought Harold," he said. "For 1915. For years I thought Harold. He was there for so much of it after. London, and the ledger, and the war." He shook his head. "But he was twenty-two in 1915, and he's not in Jack's book for that October. Not once. And he's not mine." He looked at Jo. "Not blood. I can't go through a man who isn't blood. Nobody can."

"Then who?"

"Ted," said Chris. "Edward Harvey. My great-grandfather. Twenty years on. Forty-six, with a regulator's watch on a chain and every tram crew in the bay in his pocket. He was in the back room at Bailey's on the first of October 1915, on his dinner hour, with his cap on the table." He put his hand flat. "And he asked her a question."

* * *

At the window, Holmes turned round.

He had been standing there since nine, in David Harvey's jacket. Karen said she had never seen a man look out of so many windows in her life.

"1915," he said.

"Twenty years after you," said Chris.

"Nineteen and a half. I have never seen it. I left in the May of 1896." He looked at Chris. "She was there?"

"She was there."

"Then you will see her," said Holmes. "And I shall not." He turned back to the window. "Give her my regards, Mr Harvey. Silently. She will know where they come from."

* * *

Chris put his good hand on the desk. He shut his eyes. He said the six. The lines came up.

Jack's, deep and steady. The pocketbook itself, a dark red one. *Fri. 1 Oct. 1915. 2.30 p.m. Bailey's, back room. E.H., S.H., J., Ania, self.* And under it, the line Chris had come for. *E.H. asked, what next war. She did not answer.*

And Ted's own. A waybill again. Always a waybill, with Ted, sent down to Market Street in an envelope marked *Personal*: *Ivy Mudge, cond., 8.40 car from Paignton.* Chris went down the line of it into the dark.

* * *

Paignton. Friday 1 October 1915. Bailey's Hotel, the back room. One o'clock.

Gas again. Even at midday. The shutters were up and the lamp was lit, and the room smelled of the lamp and of tea and of four men who had come in from a fine October morning in a hurry.

Forty-six. A heavier body than the young man of 1895, broader through the middle, with a knee that ached on the left side from twenty years of jumping off moving platforms. Still strong. Worried, very much. With a Company cap on the table in front of him that his hands were turning round and round by the peak. *Ted.*

Jack Hills at the end of the table, in his own clothes, with the red book closed under his hand. Nearly fifty, grey at the temples, a square face, very still. Sam Hannaford, the printer, with ink on his cuffs. Johnny, in uniform, twenty-five, sitting very straight on the edge of his chair.

And at the end of the table, with a cup of tea held in both hands and her thumbs hooked over the rim, Ania.

* * *

He had known she would be there. He had read the line a hundred times. It made no difference. She was exactly the same.

The same grey. The same small grey hat, on the table beside her now. The same way of sitting, very upright, with the cup in both hands. Not a day older and not a day younger than the face that had come up the path under the monkey puzzle every October for twenty-six years.

And her hands round the cup. Thumbs hooked over the rim.

Chris had seen those hands do that every October. He had seen another pair of hands do it every morning in a window at Bailey's for twenty-nine years. He had never put the two together. He put them together now, and something turned over in him that he did not have time to look at. *Later*, he thought. *Not now.*

* * *

It went the way it had gone. Johnny told them about the platform and the tram. Jack read out Ivy Mudge's report: *did not turn a page. Who is he? A German naval officer.* The *Dresden*. Chile. Buenos Aires. Rosas. Twenty-eight years old.

Chris felt Ted's hands go still on the cap. A working man sitting across from somebody who knew a thing that could not be known, and the cold drop in the stomach.

How do you know that? Any of that. How can you possibly—

That was Ted. Not Chris. Ted could never let a door close without putting his foot in it, at twenty-six or forty-six.

Ted, said Jack Hills, without looking round. And Ted stopped.

Chris felt him stop. In the jaw, and the hands, and the back of the neck: a man of forty-six stopping like a boy because another man said his name in that voice. *He'll not ask again,* Chris thought. *Not today.* And that was the problem.

* * *

Johnny spoke. *Then he's an enemy officer. We arrest him. No,* said Ania. *He must not be stopped. He must go home. Why?*

The silence. Sam Hannaford's breathing, and the gas, and somebody laughing in the public bar on the other side of the wall. And Ted's hands starting again on the cap.

Because he will matter. More than any man in this war. And in the next one, more than any man but one.

* * *

This was the line. *E.H. asked, what next war.* And Ted was not going to ask.

Chris could feel exactly where Ted was, the way you feel where your own foot is on a stair in the dark. Ted had heard *the next one*. He was turning it over, with the cap. And he was not going to say anything, because Jack Hills had said *Ted* in that voice, and a man who has been stopped once in a room does not start again in a hurry.

If Ted did not ask, the line was not in Jack's book, and Johnny did not stand at the entrance to the booking hall at Paignton station on the third of September 1939, in his sergeant's stripes, and think *she knew*. And Rage did not go into the next war believing her. Everything Rage did in that war would be done by men who had not been told.

A man told and a man not told are two different men. He did the smallest thing he knew. Behind Ted's eyes, in Ted's own voice:

Ask.

* * *

Ted's hands stopped on the cap.

"The next one," said Ted Harvey.

His own voice, a deep Paignton voice with the burr still in it. It surprised Ted. Chris felt the small jolt of a man who has spoken before he decided to.

"What next one? There's not going to be a next one. This is the war to end them all. Everybody says so."

Those were Ted's. Every word after the first three. Chris had given him *ask*, and Ted had gone on, the way he always went on, with what everybody said.

And Ania looked at him.

She did not answer. It was in the book. *She did not answer.*

But she looked at him. She turned her head from Jack Hills, very slowly, the way she turned her head in the bay window at Widecombe Cot when the door opened, and looked down the table at Ted Harvey. Not at him. Into him.

Chris knew the look. He had been looked at that way once, in 1895, by a tall man pulling on his gloves. She knew he was there.

She looked into the back of Ted's eyes for perhaps two seconds. And there was something in her face that Chris had never seen in twenty-six Octobers. She was glad.

Then she looked away. Deliberately. Back up the table to Jack Hills, as though the others were not there, as though nobody had asked her anything.

He will be the most dangerous man in Germany. And he will be the most useful. Both, at once.

And Chris understood what he had just watched her do. *The last thing.* Holmes at the desk, ten days ago. *You must know, and sit with them, and pour the tea, and not say.*

She knew who he was. She knew what year he had come from and what it would cost him and what he would do on the twenty-ninth. And she did not answer Ted Harvey. And she looked away. *It is their bay.*

* * *

He stayed for the rest. He did not need to; the line was made. He stayed while Ania leaned forward across the table, the only time Johnny ever saw her lean towards anybody, and told them what they had. He stayed for *the arm*. He felt Ted hear Jack say *H. called it the arm*, and felt Ted put his hand flat on the cap and decide, there and then, never to write that name again.

And he stayed for the end, when Ania picked her cup up again in both hands and drank. *Give her my regards. Silently.* He thought it, behind Ted's eyes. Not a nudge. Just a thing thought, in the dark, towards the woman at the end of the table.

She did not look up. But her hands moved on the cup. Very slightly. A quarter turn. He let go.

* * *

The white room came back at eleven forty-one.

The desk. The windows. The shaking, from the shoulders down. Ninety-five, after forty-six. Jo was beside him with the cup. He drank it all.

"Right," said Jo. "What did it cost?"

He knew straight away. It was the thing he had been holding most tightly since Ai Li read out the first line in the upright hand, and he had said, to the window, *she drank her tea. Friday, seventeenth October 2031. Widecombe Cot, the dining room. Four thirty p.m.*

He knew it had happened. He could recite it. The first time Ania had sat at the table and drunk the tea she was given. He went to see it.

There was nothing there. Just a door with no handle. He could not see the table. He could not see her lift the cup, or who else had been in the room, or what he had felt when she did it.

"The tea," he said. "The first time. I said it to you. Two weeks ago." He looked at Jo. "What else did I say?"

"You said it was the first time," said Jo. "In the house. You said somebody was in the doorway with her hand on the frame."

Chris looked at the window for a long time.

"I don't know who," he said.

Jo wrote it down. "Will it come back?"

"No," said Chris. "Not that one." He was quiet. "Eight days, and she'll be on the path. The last time. And I'll take the tea up, and she'll drink it, and I'll not remember that she never used to."

* * *

At the window, Holmes had not turned round.

"Was she well?" he said.

"She was the same," said Chris. "Exactly the same. To the day."

"Yes," said Holmes. "She would be." He was quiet. "Did she know you?"

"She knew I was there. She looked into me, the way you did, in 1895. And then she looked away. On purpose. She knew everything, H. What I'd come to do, and what it'd cost me, and the twenty-ninth. And she sat there and drank her tea and looked away."

Holmes turned his head, then, slowly, and looked at Chris.

"Then she learned it," he said. "The last thing. I was afraid she would not. It is the hardest. I learned it badly." He turned back to the window. "She learned it well."

"I gave her your regards," said Chris.

"And?"

"She turned the cup," said Chris. "A quarter turn."

At the window, very slowly, Holmes bowed his head. Not much. The way a man bows his head in church, at a name.

Jo wrote the date, and the time, and the place, and closed the book.

Eighteen days.

Chapter 11 – *Painting Seven*

Sat. 13 Oct. 2057. Bailey's, the back room, 8.05 a.m. K. in the window. R. with me. R. followed the far cord. Roundham, the white house, 11.40 p.m. Amber, top left window. Petherick's. The whistle is for K. Sixteen days.

"It's not his," said Rani.

She said it at five past eight on the Saturday morning, at the table behind Keith in the back room at Bailey's, so quietly that Jo did not at first know what she meant.

Then she saw where Rani was looking.

Not at the bench under the plane tree, which was empty, because it was Saturday. At Keith. At the air above his head.

"The far one," said Rani. "The faint one. Behind his own." She did not take her eyes off it. "It's not his."

* * *

Jo had seen it every morning for eleven years.

Her father had seen it every morning for ten years before her. Keith's lamp, steady, bright. And behind it, further back, fainter, as if it were further away though it was in the same place, the other one.

Nobody had ever had two. Not in the bay, not on the trains, not in twenty-nine years of looking. And nobody had ever known why, and Keith had never said.

"How do you know?" said Jo.

Rani was quiet for a long time.

"I've been looking at the wrong thing," she said at last. "For twenty years. I looked at the lamp. The colour. The grain. It's faint, so I thought, that's him, older, or a part of him further on. Vicky thought it was an echo." She shook her head. "None of us looked at the cord."

"It's got a cord?"

"Everything's got a cord, Jo. Every lamp in the world. That's what a lamp is: a thing that's tied to something." Rani's hands were flat on the table on either side of the cold coffee. "His own goes up. Out. Through the roof. To the white room. To Chris. It always has. That's who he answers to." She swallowed. "The far one doesn't go up."

"Where does it go?"

"In," said Rani.

* * *

She did not explain straight away. Jo let her. Rani reading was like Chris going: you did not interrupt it. At the window, Keith turned his cup a quarter turn on its saucer.

"It comes in," said Rani at last. "From outside. It comes from somewhere to him. Into the far lamp. Thin. Thinner than Tarquin's. Like a hair. Coming in through the window, over the square, from the south-east." She turned her head, very slowly, a dowser with her hand half up. "There."

She was pointing past the station. Past the roofs. Towards the headland on the far side of the harbour.

"Roundham," said Jo.

"Somewhere on Roundham. Something up there has a lamp. And the cord comes across the harbour and in through that window and into the far lamp over his head." She looked at Jo. "And the far

lamp is the same as the thing at the other end. The same grain. The same colour. It's like looking at a person in a mirror."

Jo looked at the back of Keith's head. "Keith. What's on Roundham?"

He did not answer for a long time. He looked out at the square, and past the canopy and the roofs, towards the hill you could not see from here.

"Her," he said.

* * *

Jo had been a police officer for fifteen years.

She went home and did it properly. She did not have a warrant card any more. She had a laptop and a kitchen table and twenty-six years of knowing where the records in Devon were kept, and that the most useful thing in any investigation is the thing nobody thinks to hide because it is too boring to hide.

There was nothing to find about the man. There never had been. But Rani had not said *a man* was on Roundham. She had said a lamp. And a lamp had to be somewhere. In a room. In a house. And houses were written down.

* * *

There were forty-one houses on Roundham Head that you could see the harbour from. Jo took the list from the council and the list from the Land Registry and went through them, one by one, the way her father had gone through the Order Paper. Every line, to the end.

Thirty-six were what they looked like. Four were owned by companies. One was owned by a trust.

It was at the top of the hill, the last house on the road before the headland, with its garden going down to the cliff. A white house.

The Land Registry had it back to 1871, when it was built, for a man called George Petherick, a shipping agent, of Paignton. In 1916 it passed by will to a cousin in Hamburg, and then to a company, and another, and another. Jersey. Guernsey. Liechtenstein.

And since the spring of 2044, by a family trust in Hamburg. The Petrick Trust.

Care of Hollis Grey LLP, Great Smith Street, London.

Jo sat back. She thought about a white house on the Elbchaussee, in a photograph pushed across a plastic table in a food centre off Joo Chiat Road. She thought about a churchwarden of St John's who had walked a young man in a borrowed grey suit up the Roundham road in October 1915, to a quiet white house on the hill.

2044. Hannah Price, at Marsham Street: *The other one's in the chair. Since about 2044.*

She wrote it all in her pocketbook. *Petherick. Petrick. Hollis Grey.* And under them, very small, as if it might break:

G.P.'s house. He's living in G.P.'s house.

* * *

They went up at half past eleven at night.

Rani and Jo, in Jo's car, with the lights off for the last two hundred yards. They parked at the end of the road where the tarmac gave out, and sat in the dark with the engine ticking.

Below them, Paignton. The harbour. The sands beyond it, wide and black, where twelve days ago a line of prints had begun from nothing. The long curve of the front going round to Torquay, all lit, a necklace of lights round the dark bay.

And above them, behind a high hedge and a gate with no name on it, the white house.

It was dark. Every window. Jo could not see a light anywhere. "Rani."

Rani had her hands flat on the dashboard, looking up at the roofline against the stars. "Top left," she said.

The top floor. The left-hand window, under the eaves. Small. Round. Dark.

"There's nothing there," said Jo.

"There's a lamp there," said Rani.

* * *

She described it.

She did not have to. But she sat in the dark car with her eyes on the round window, and talked, very low, the way she talked in the white room when she was reading the stone.

"Amber," said Rani. "Small. About so big." She held up her thumb and finger, a little apart. "Warm. Steady. Like a lamp on an old switchboard, lit, waiting for somebody to answer it. It's not on a person. It's on a wall. In the middle of the window, as if somebody's hung something there so they can see it from the bed."

"A painting."

"A painting." Rani did not take her eyes off the window. "I've seen it before. In the cellar. In 2031. Before he took it." Her voice had gone very quiet. "Two eyes. Crying. And one more under the left one. Amber. Not a tear."

"Chris painted her a lamp," said Rani. "In 1994. Before anybody could see them. He didn't know what he was doing. And it was real. It was the only lamp anybody ever saw on her. It had a cord, and the cord went along the row, to the last painting. To Keith's face."

"And now?"

"And now it comes out of that window," said Rani, "and goes down the hill, and across the harbour, and into the far lamp over Keith's head. Not to a painting of him any more. To him."

She turned and looked at Jo in the dark.

"It's the same lamp, Jo. The one on the wall up there, in the paint. And the far one over Keith. The same grain. The same amber. One's a picture of it, from 1994. And one's the real thing." She swallowed. "The far lamp's hers. It's Ania's. It's the one she lost. Keith has got it. He's had it for twenty-nine years."

* * *

Jo sat very still. She thought about the woman in grey who came up the path at Widecombe Cot every October with no lamp over her head. A gap. And in six days she would come up the path again. For the last time.

And the young man in the window at Bailey's had her lamp. Behind his own. Every morning for twenty-nine years, he had carried it. *Her*, he had said. Not *it*. *Her.*

"Does he know? That the man's got it?"

"He knew in 2031," said Rani. "He watched him take it. He had his hand on the stone, keeping Eric alive. He let him."

"And the man's had it on his wall for twenty-six years."

"On his wall. Where he can see it from the bed." Rani looked up at the round window. "Looking at a lamp he can't have, because he's never had one. And a cord, going out of it. Every night. Watching where it goes."

* * *

Jo thought about Tuesdays.

A bench under the plane tree. An old man with his hands on a stick. Every Tuesday since August. *At you,* she had said to Keith. *Not me.*

Not Keith. The far lamp. The thing at the other end of a cord that had come out of a painting on Roundham every night for twenty-six years.

He had been learning it. Lying in a bed in a white house on a hill, following its cord with whatever he had instead of eyes. Until he knew exactly where it went, and who was carrying it. And then, in August, he had started coming down on Tuesdays, to look at it in the flesh.

* * *

And then Jo understood the rest.

It came the way things came in interview rooms at three in the morning: all at once, whole.

She had read her father's book from 2031 a week ago, sitting up until two. Daddyhole Plain, the night the clocks went back. Ania on the Plain with her hand raised. And a man on the grass with a bone whistle in his hand that Ania had let him take.

It is not a whistle for calling them.

It is a whistle for telling them who to come for. When they come. And they will come. Not now. Not under this sky. But they will.

Jo looked at the round window. *He has the whistle. It tells them who to come for. He's spent twenty-six years finding out where her lamp went. And on the twenty-ninth he'll be in Station Square.*

"Rani. It's for Keith." Her voice was quite steady. "The whistle. On the twenty-ninth. He can't blow it for her. She's a gap; the grey ones can't find a gap. He's going to blow it for whoever's carrying her lamp."

Rani did not say anything for a long time.

"For Keith," she said.

"For Keith."

* * *

They sat in the car in the dark for a long time. Below them the bay. In Station Square, behind the canopy, the back room at Bailey's would be shut, with nobody in the chair. Jo did not know where Keith went at night. Nobody did.

"Can you see where it goes now?" she said. "The cord. From the window. Tonight."

Rani looked up at the round window. She was quiet for a long time.

"North," she said. "Not to Bailey's. North. Over the harbour. Over Preston. Towards Torquay." She shut her eyes. She opened them. "Widecombe Cot."

* * *

Jo drove home along the front at a quarter past one, with Rani asleep against the window.

At the lights by Preston Green she stopped, though there was nobody coming, and looked up the hill towards Torquay, to where Widecombe Cot would be, behind its monkey puzzle, with the hall light on.

She thought about a young man who had sat in a window for twenty-nine years and never once been seen anywhere else. Standing in the dark in the garden of Widecombe Cot. Under the monkey puzzle. Looking up at the house where, in six days' time, a woman in grey would come up the path for the last time.

Carrying her lamp. Bringing it to her house. Every night, perhaps. For twenty-nine years. The lights changed. She drove on.

At home she wrote it all down. The date, the time, the place. *Roundham, the white house, 11.40 p.m. Amber, top left window. Petherick's.*

And then, because it was the only thing she knew for certain now, and because her father had taught her that you write down what you know and say what you don't:

The whistle is for K.

She looked at it for a long time. Then she wrote one more line under it, very small, and did not show it to anybody, not then, and not after.

Sixteen days.

Chapter 12 – *1943*

Mon. 15 Oct. 2057. The Exchange, 2.00 p.m. C.H. to 1943: Widecombe Cot, the hall, Mon. 1 Feb., about 4 p.m. Through the girl at the desk? He would not say. H. at the window. Back 2.52. Cost: Room 1. A face. He told me the cost. Fourteen days.

"Through whom?" said Jo.

Chris had his good hand on the desk. He did not take it off.

"1943," he said. "The first of February. A Monday. Widecombe Cot, the hall, about four in the afternoon, when the light was going." He did not look at her. "There's a line in the register. In a child's hand. The arrivals."

"I know the line." She had read the whole of the register for 1943, in the office at Widecombe Cot, two winters ago. *Arrivals: Flight Lieutenant —, R.A.F. Room 5.* The name written out in full in round seven-year-old letters. "Through whom, Chris?"

He was quiet for a long time.

"Leave it, Jo," he said.

There was only one person of his blood in that hall at four o'clock on the first of February 1943, so far as anybody knew. A child at the reception desk, writing in the arrivals. So it would be the child. *He doesn't want to say he's going to sit behind her eyes.*

She did not ask again. She wrote in her book: *Through the girl at the desk?* With the question mark. And put her pencil down.

At the window, Holmes did not turn round. But Jo saw his hands, behind his back, one holding the other at the wrist, go still.

* * *

Chris shut his eyes. He said the six.

Only through blood.

He said that one more slowly than the others. Today he said it the way you test a stair in the dark that you have been told will hold, and are not sure. The lines came up.

A thin bright one, very near the surface: a child's hand in a register, in 1943, writing in the arrivals in her best letters. And beside it, so close that at first he took it for the same line, another. Tall. Upright. An educated hand, writing a name and a rank and a unit in the same book, with the same pen.

Two hands in one line. A girl's, and a man's.

He had known for twenty years which one he would go down. He had known since a white envelope with Canadian stamps on it was opened at the long table at Widecombe Cot in 1965, when he was three and asleep upstairs. *I would have been very proud to be what your mother never let me be.* He had never tried it.

He had told himself it did not matter. Because there was a Bible in the back room with a line in it, written by a grocer from Hendon on the morning a child was born, and that line was true whatever else was.

He had never tried it because, if the door did not open, he would know. And if it did, he would know.

He went down the tall upright line.

* * *

It opened.

It opened the way his own front door opened. He had gone down a hundred lines in eleven years. His own, more times than he

could count. Edward, twice: older, but his. A Harvey door. It gave a little at the hinge, and let him in.

This was the same. Not a Harvey door. Something he had no name for. But it opened under his hand like the door of a house he had lived in all his life and never once been told the name of. *Only through blood.* He was in.

* * *

Torquay. Monday 1 February 1943. Widecombe Cot, the hall. About four o'clock.

Cold. The front door had just shut behind him, and the hall smelled of floor polish and coal and the sea, and of the house. He had smelled it every day of his life, for ninety-five years, and it was the same.

And the body. Tall. Taller than he had ever been. Thirty-seven or thirty-eight. Tired. A greatcoat over a tunic, an officer's. A cap in one hand. A suitcase in the other. A stick. And the leg.

Broken in three places, in a field in Lincolnshire, two years ago. Set badly. A deep dull hurt from the hip to the ankle that the man had stopped noticing a long time ago, and that Chris noticed all at once, and knew. A body that had been broken once and had learned to carry it.

He looked out through the man's eyes. The hall. The barometer. A clock, ticking. The desk.

And behind the desk, on a high stool, with the register open in front of her and a pen in her hand, a child.

* * *

Chris did not look at her.

He made himself not. He looked at the barometer, and the clock, and the stairs. If he looked at her he would not be able to do anything else, and he had not come to look.

The man looked at her. He walked to the desk, with the catch in his step, and looked down at the child, and smiled. Chris felt the smile from inside. It was not a pretend one. It went up from somewhere low in the chest, warm, and he had not expected that.

"Good afternoon," said the man. "I think you have a room for me. The Billeting Office sent me up."

A wireless announcer's voice. Canadian, with the corners knocked off.

"Are you in charge here?"

"No," said the child. "My mother is. I'm doing the book."

"Then I had better sign the book."

And she turned the register round. And gave him the pen.

* * *

He signed it.

Chris felt him sign it. A tall upright hand, steady, practised. He felt the pen. He felt the name go down onto the page in ink, every letter of it.

He did not read it. He kept the man's eyes on the shapes, not the letters, the way you keep your eyes on the road in fog. *I'll not know it,* he thought. *I'll know who. I'll not know his name. That's enough.*

"And you are?"

And the child told him her name.

The man did not say anything.

He stood at the desk with his stick in one hand and his cap in the other and looked at her, and Chris was inside him, and felt it go through him like a train through a station that it does not stop at.

A room in London, in 1934. A young woman of twenty with her hair pinned up and a laugh like a door banging. A courtship far too quick. The man going away, back to Canada, because the people who had flattered him and paid him had other plans for him. A grocer. A wedding. A child, a little sooner than a wedding date would explain. And eight years of knowing.

And orders. They were in him like a stone in a shoe. *Bring her away.* Not in so many words. But the man knew what the people he had worked for since 1934 did with the things they wanted out of the way. He had been sent to this house, to this child, by people who would send somebody else if he did not.

And here she was. On a high stool. In a cardigan. With ink on her middle finger, and her hair in a plait, and a round careful face looking up at him over the register.

His.

Chris knew what happened next. It was written. *His face did something I did not understand, and I thought perhaps his leg was hurting him.* He could feel it about to happen. And he could feel which way it was going to go.

That was the thing nobody had ever been able to tell from the outside. Not the child. Not the woman in the office with a pencil in her hand. Not even the man himself, perhaps, twenty years on, on a verandah by a lake. Which way it had gone, in the hall, with the clock ticking and the child looking up.

Chris could feel it. It was going the wrong way.

Not cruelly. There was nothing cruel in the man: a long tired kind man, weak in the places that weak men are weak, flattered

once and owned ever since. But the orders were in him, and he was thinking, very quietly, in his own voice:

Then it's to be me. Not some other man. At least if it's me, I'll be kind about it.

Kind about it. Taking her away. For them.

A nudge, not a hand. He did not argue. He did not put a picture in the dark. He found the man's own thought, *then it's to be me*, and he did not change a word of it. He only turned it round. In the man's own voice:

Then it's to be me.

Not for them.

For her.

The man's face did something.

Chris felt the muscles go, round the mouth and the eyes, the way a face goes when it has been held in one shape for a very long time. He felt the stone in the shoe shift. Not go. It would never go. But turn over, so that the edge that had been cutting one way was cutting the other.

If I don't take her, somebody else will. So I'll take her. Myself. Not to them. Away from them. To the lake. To my sister's. Four thousand miles of sea. And let them think I've done what I was told.

It was all there, in a second, whole. Eighteen months of it. The sweets, and the papers, and the begging, and the car at dawn in June, and a girl in the back of the car shouting, and his hand on the edge of the door. *Put your hand over her mouth.* And not doing it. Chris saw the whole of a man's war go a different way.

The child at the desk thought perhaps his leg was hurting him.

"How do you do," said the man, at last.

And he said her name.

Chris stayed for the second thing. There was a line in a letter on blue airmail paper, written in this hand, twenty-one years from now, in Toronto, that he had read so many times he could see the words with his eyes shut.

Keep the boy away from the station square.

The man would write that in 1964. He would write that a woman had said it to him on a verandah, as if it were a pleasantry, and that he had not slept properly since. Chris had always wondered why a pleasantry should frighten a man of nearly sixty so badly.

Because he'd heard it before, Chris thought. *Because it was already in him.*

He did not know if that was true. He did not know if he was about to make it true. He did it anyway.

Not a nudge. Smaller than a nudge. Just a thing laid down, in the dark at the back, where the man would never go looking for it, the way you put a letter at the very back of a drawer.

Keep the boy away from the station square.

The man took the key to Room 5 from the child, and said thank you, and turned, with the stick, towards the office door, where a woman was standing with a pencil in her hand. The pencil snapped. Chris let go.

* * *

The white room came back at eight minutes to three.

He did not shake. That was the first thing Jo noticed. He always shook. He was sitting quite still in the big pale chair with his eyes open, looking at the window, and his face was wet.

She crouched by the chair with the cup. He took it. He held it. He did not drink.

"Right," said Jo, after a while. Quite gently. "What did it cost?"

He did not answer for a long time. He was looking past her, at the window, where Holmes stood with his back to the room.

"Room One," he said.

"At Widecombe Cot. The room at the front." He put the cup down. "My grandfather had it. From 1965. When he came down from Hendon for good. He used to sit in there in the afternoons in a chair by the window, with his hands folded on his cardigan. And when I was little I used to sit on the floor by his feet and do jigsaws. He never said anything. Every so often he'd put one hand down on the top of my head."

"I can't see his face," said Chris.

"I can see the cardigan. I can feel the hand, on my head. I can see the chair, and the window, and the jigsaw." He looked at the desk. "There's a chair, and a man in it, and his hands. And where his face was, there's nothing."

Jo wrote it down. *Room 1. His grandfather's face. Harold.* "Will it come back?"

"No," said Chris.

"Chris. Was it worth it?"

He turned his head and looked at her, and he was not crying any more. He was looking at her as if she were very far away and very precious.

"He was my grandfather," said Chris.

He said it quite simply. The way you say a date.

Jo did not understand why he said it. She thought he was ninety-five, and very tired, and had lost a face, and was telling her whose. She wrote it in the margin, small: *He said: "He was my grandfather."* And closed the book.

At the window, Holmes had turned round.

Jo looked up from the book and he was facing the room, looking at Chris. She knew that look. She had seen him turn it on a cup of coffee and on her watch.

She watched him read the old man in the big pale chair: the hand flat on the desk, the cup untouched, the wet face that had not shaken. She watched the thing arrive in his face, whatever it was. She saw it land. She saw it stay. He did not say anything.

Something went between the two of them, an old man and a younger one who was older, that Jo was not part of. Then Holmes turned back to the window.

"I have been sleeping in Room One," he said, to the glass. "It is a very quiet room. There is a chair by the window. I sit in it, in the evenings, and look at the bay."

"Whoever chose that chair," said Holmes, "chose very well."

Chris did not answer. After a while he picked up the cup, and drank the tea, all of it, cold, too much sugar. And shut his eyes.

Jo looked at the line in her book. *Through the girl at the desk?* With the question mark.

She left it.

Fourteen days.

Chapter 13 – *Hamburg*

Tues. 16 Oct. 2057. The Exchange, 6.30 p.m. B. rang from S. Somebody has paid three months' rent, cash, through a lawyer in Hamburg, on a room in Tiong Bahru over the market. Window on the park. C.H.: "She's going back." Thirteen days.

Karina Petrick had slept facing south-east for twenty-eight years, and on the morning she decided to go, she woke facing the wall.

She lay for a while and looked at it. The wall of the bedroom in the flat in Altona, white, with the morning coming in grey across it from the window over the street. She had moved the bed in the spring of 2029, a week after a child was born in a hospital in Singapore at ten past six in the morning, and she had never moved it back. Her head to the north-west. Her face to the corner. South-east, over the roofs of Altona, over the river and the docks and the whole of Europe and the sea and India, ten thousand kilometres, to an island.

This morning she had turned over in the night, for the first time in twenty-eight years, and woken with her back to the corner.

She lay and looked at the wall for a long time. Then she got up, and made coffee, and did not drink it, and stood at the window in her dressing gown, very still. *It's started, then.*

* * *

She knew only that something had been coming for eighteen years. Since a wet night in London in 2039, on the step of a house in a square off Ebury Street, with a man nobody could describe walking away from her under the plane trees, saying *your granddaughter is nine now* as if he were remarking on the rain.

She had felt it then. Not in her head. Lower. In the bones of her back and her hips and the long bones of her legs, the way she had felt weather all her life, the way her grandmother had: a pressure coming, a long way off, very slowly. She had walked to Victoria that night in the rain and felt it settle into her, and stay.

Eighteen years. It had grown. The way a sound grows when a train is coming through a long tunnel towards you and you are standing on the platform at the end: so faint at first that you think you have imagined it. This autumn she could hear it all the time.

* * *

She was ninety-five years old.

She did not look it. The woman in the mirror in the hall was about forty. Fair, going a little grey at the temples. Grey eyes. A face that was handsome rather than pretty, and strong. The same face that had looked back at her from her grandmother's mirror on the Elbchaussee in 1990.

She did not need to eat much. She did not feel the cold. She did not get ill. She did not sleep the way other people slept; her mind went somewhere grey and quiet for a few hours, and came back. Her grandmother had been like that. Her grandmother had died at a hundred and four, in a chair, looking out of a round window at the river, with her face still about fifty.

Karina had thought, for most of her life, that this was a gift. She had stopped thinking that in 2031, in a park in Tiong Bahru, with a child on her hip.

A gift was a thing you were given. This was a thing that had been made. She did not know how, or by whom, or when. She knew only that it ran in the blood, her grandmother's and her own, the way the house on the Elbchaussee ran in the family, and the trust, and the habit of standing very still in a room until people forgot you were

there. And that whoever had made it had made it for a purpose. And that the purpose was not hers.

* * *

She went out at nine. Her feet went east, along the river, the way they had gone in June 2038 on the morning she went to sell Eden a lie. The cranes on the far side very tall, moving slowly, like herons. To the round building with the green copper dome. The old tunnel.

* * *

It was a hundred and forty-six years old now. The great iron cages, going down twenty-four metres under the river. The cold coming up out of the shafts, smelling of wet stone and iron. She went down alone, and thought about her grandmother's hand. Very tight. In a fur glove. In the winter of 1968, when she was six. *To show them the shape of a thing.*

The cage stopped. The gate slid open.

The two tubes, side by side, going away under the river. The white and cream tiles. The reliefs: a crab, a fish, an eel, a rat with a boot in its mouth. And the lamps on the walls, going away in a line, each one a little warm orange glow, getting smaller until they met at the far end in a point.

* * *

She did not count her steps this time. She walked down the middle of the left-hand tube with her hands in her coat pockets, under the orange lamps. A cyclist, two boys with a ball, and then nobody. The river was over her head, and she could not hear it, and she could feel it.

She thought about a painting. She had never seen it. She had read about it in a letter addressed in her son's hand, in the summer of 2038. *I painted you once, in 1994, in the room above the Lims'*

shop, with you on the other side of the door. I painted you at the far end of the old tunnel under the Elbe, listening.

Orange and black. The lamps going away. A small face at the far end.

He had never been to Hamburg. He had painted it anyway, with a palette knife, at three in the morning, because she was on the other side of the door. And he had painted her at the far end. Listening. She had laughed, a little, when she read that. Because it was true, and she had not known anybody knew. She had been listening all her life. For a train. In a tunnel. Coming.

* * *

She stopped, about two-thirds of the way along, under a lamp with a relief below it that she did not remember: a small boat, with a man in it, rowing.

She stood with her back to the tiles and looked down the tunnel towards the far end, and listened.

She could hear it. With the bones of her back and her hips and her legs. Coming down a long straight tunnel towards her with its lights on, the way trains come, so slowly at first that you think it is standing still. Today, for the first time, she thought she could tell how far.

Two weeks, she thought. *About that.*

She thought: *and it's not here. It's not under this river. It's somewhere hot.*

She thought about an island. And a railway line going north off it, across a causeway, over water, into the dark. She had seen it once, from a taxi, in 2031, being built: the concrete legs of it going out across the strait like the legs of a pier.

* * *

When she came up in the lift on the far side, among the cranes at Steinwerder, there was a man on the bench outside. An ordinary man. Fifty, perhaps. A newspaper.

She could remember him. Every feature. The grey at the sides of his head. The mole under his left ear. So it was not *him*. It was one of his.

He did not look at her. He was reading the newspaper. He did not turn a page.

She walked past him to the ferry stop and stood there with her back to him, very still. She knew exactly where he was, the way you know where the edge of a platform is in the dark.

When the ferry was halfway across, she watched him stand up, and fold the newspaper once, lengthways, and lay it on the slats of the bench, exactly square to the edge. And walk away.

* * *

So they knew.

They had known for some time, probably. Since the crate on the *Kota Bharu* with a stone in it that was only ever a copy, and the network that went live dark on Christmas Eve 2038 while Eden was looking at the wrong ocean. Somebody had worked backwards and found the place where the lie came in. A tunnel under the Elbe. And then a step in Pimlico in 2039, and three men in a drawing room.

They had let her alone for eighteen years. Perhaps because the man who could not be written down liked to let things ripen. Now it was coming. *We know where you walk. We know what you listen for.*

She did not mind. She had known in the tunnel in 2038 that they would kill her for it. It had been nineteen years. Longer than she had any right to.

She minded only one thing. *Your granddaughter is nine now.* She was twenty-eight now.

* * *

She had been to Singapore in September. A fortnight. She had not meant to be seen.

She had sat in a room over a shop in Tiong Bahru, with the window on the park, and watched. She had followed the young woman across the city to a food centre off Joo Chiat Road, and watched her sit down with a tall man in a linen suit, and had known, the moment he laid a slim folder on the table, exactly what was in it.

The house on the Elbchaussee. The room at the top on the left, with the round window, where Karina had slept from the age of thirteen to seventeen. They had used her room. They had put a photograph of it in front of her granddaughter, and said *grandmother*, and smiled.

And her granddaughter had said no. Karina had seen it from across the road: the young woman's face, and the way the old men at the next table stopped talking. That night her hands had shaken, which they had not done since 1990.

And then she had made the mistake. On the Friday, at a quarter past five, the young woman had come to the park and sat on the bench under the rain trees on the far side. Karina had watched her from the window, and then, because she could not stop herself, she had gone down. To the flower stall, under the first awning. The same stall.

She had stood there in a straw hat, in the shade. Just to see. And the young woman on the bench had stood up, and looked straight at her, across the grass.

Karina had gone, while a boy ran across after a ball. But she had been seen to stand there, and she had flown home to Hamburg the next morning and not slept for three days.

Hallo, Kleine.

Hallo, Kleine. She had said it once, in 2031, into a child's face, from a foot away, under the brim of the same hat. She thought, from the way the young woman had stood up on the grass, that she might have kept it.

* * *

She went to the lawyer's office in the Neuer Wall at two o'clock.

She had used him for thirty years. He did not ask questions. He did not keep copies.

She told him what she wanted. A room in Tiong Bahru, over the market, with a window on the park. The same one, if it was free. Three months, in cash.

"Three months," said the old lawyer. He looked at her over his glasses. He had known her thirty years. He had watched her not age.

"You will be back before then," he said. Not a question. Something he wanted to hear.

"No," she said.

He wrote it down, the only thing he ever wrote down for her. And then he got up, which he never did, and came round his desk, and shook her hand, and held it a moment longer than he needed to.

* * *

The flight was at six the next morning. Frankfurt, and then Singapore. One way, in her own name. There was no point in any other name now.

She packed one bag. A few clothes, linen, light. The straw hat, from the top of the wardrobe; she turned it over in her hands for a long time before she put it in. And a letter in a cream envelope, soft at the creases now, with a Singapore stamp and her name in her son's hand.

She did not read it again. She did not forget things. *I am asking you for something I have no right to ask.* And under it, the line he had crossed out, back and forth, until the paper was nearly through. She had read it once through the scoring, against the morning. She had never told anybody what it said.

She put the letter in the inside pocket of her coat. Over her heart. For as long as there was.

* * *

She lay down at eleven, in the flat in Altona, for the last time. And at some point in the night, without deciding to, she turned over.

When she woke at four, in the dark, she was lying with her face to the corner. South-east. Over the roofs, and the whole of Europe and the sea and India. To an island, and a park, and a room over a market, and a railway line going north across the water into the dark.

Then she got up, and dressed, and picked up the one bag, and the hat, and went down the stairs, and out into the street, and did not lock the door behind her.

There was no point.

Chapter 14 – *2026*

Wed. 17 Oct. 2057. The Exchange, 10.00 a.m. C.H. to 2026, his own head, twice. Reel Three: the dead line. Reel Seven: the fire. Back 11.20. Cost: the boy on the beach. His name. I gave it him back from the book. "That's a told thing now." Twelve days.

"Two," said Chris.

Jo looked up from Jack's twenty-eighth book.

"Two reels. Today. Three and Seven." He had his good hand on the desk already. He had come in at half past eight with the car, which he had not done all week, and he had not taken his coat off, and he had sat down in the big pale chair and put his hand flat and left it there, as if he were afraid that if he took it off he would not put it back. "I've done Four, and Five, and Six. In the summer. You were there."

"You said you'd do Three last week."

"I didn't." He looked at the window. At Union Street, going down to the sea, grey. "I kept not doing it."

"Why?"

He did not answer that.

At the window, Holmes turned his head. He had come in the car with Chris, which he had never done before; Karen had put him in it at the gate with a coat over his arm, David Harvey's again, and said *go on, the pair of you*. He had been standing at the window since, as he always did, with his hands behind his back. He was looking at Chris now.

"Because of Walter," said Holmes.

Chris did not answer.

"You do not wish to use his voice," said Holmes. "You have his words. They are written; you can reach them. But they are not yours. They are a dead man's, said to a living one, in a room in Paignton, the week before they took him away. And you are going to put them in a telephone in a dream and make yourself hear them. In his voice." He was quiet. "It is a great liberty. You know it is. That is why you kept not doing it."

"He'd not have minded," said Chris at last. "He'd have said *took you long enough*." He breathed. "He'd have minded. A bit. He'd have let me."

"Yes," said Holmes. "I expect he would."

* * *

Chris shut his eyes. He said the six.

The lines came up. His own, loudest, the way it always was. Fifty years of notebooks and setlists and letters and waybills. Three hundred and eighty hours of film. Sixty thousand photographs. The Goldmine. And down in it, near the bottom, a box of his father's videotapes, and the sound of a projector.

He went to the door.

* * *

2026. Widecombe Cot. The room at the top of the stairs. Thursday night, late.

The room. The bed by the wall. The wardrobe. The window over the bay with the curtains not quite shut, and a line of orange streetlight coming through the gap and lying across the floor. The smell: books, and old carpet, and a man who did not open the window enough.

And in the bed, on his side, with his face to the wall, himself.

Sixty-three. Asleep, but not well. Chris could feel it from inside the moment he was in: the sleep thin and shallow, like ice on a puddle, ready to go at a touch. The man had driven back from Taunton that afternoon in the rain with a friend beside him who had said nothing for seventy miles. He had stood in an empty crematorium car park and looked at a chimney with nothing coming out of it. He had put his left hand in his coat pocket and felt it go.

The left hand, under the pillow. Not the old numbness, the one from the stroke, heavy and familiar. Something else. A fizzing. Cold. Running from the wrist down into the fingers like water into sand. It had come back an hour after the car park and gone away halfway down the A38, and the man had told nobody. And now, in the night, in the bed, it was there again, faintly, at the edge of his sleep, and some part of him, under the sleep, was frightened of it.

I remember that, thought Chris. *I remember lying there with it. I thought, if it's another, I'll not have time to finish.*

He put his own good hand, the one that was ninety-five, flat on the dark behind his own eyes. The way you put your hand on a child's back when it cannot sleep. Not a nudge. Nothing. Just there.

Then he chose a photograph.

* * *

Newton Abbot, autumn 1984. The yard behind the telephone exchange.

A row of yellow vans with ladders on their roofs. A young man of twenty-two in a donkey jacket and a new tie, with a hard hat under one arm, standing awkwardly beside an older engineer who has a hand on his shoulder. On the back of the print, in biro: *First day.*

Chris had chosen it in 2026, at sixty-three, in the back bedroom, without knowing he was choosing it. That was the strange thing about the reels. He had made them twice. Once at ninety-five,

sitting here, choosing from sixty thousand doors. And once at sixty-three, lying in the bed, dreaming what was put there, and waking up, and going straight to the back bedroom and finding the photograph in the Goldmine and thinking, *why that one? Why did I dream that one?*

Because it was an exchange. Because it was the first night of his working life, in a building full of copper wire and voices, carrying the voices of millions. Because it had a telephone in it.

And a telephone was the only way he could think of to let a dead man speak.

He put the photograph in the dark. The way you put a slide in a projector.

* * *

It went the way it had gone.

The title, jagged. IT CAME FROM THE BAY! PART THREE: THE LINES GO DEAD. The narrator's voice, too loud, the voice from every Sunday-afternoon trailer of his childhood. *The nerve centre of the nation!* The switch room at night, the racks going away in rows, the relays clicking like a thousand typewriters. A young man with a torch and a clipboard, alone, on his first night.

The flies coming in through the cable ducts. The sparks. The copper hanging loose. Panel after panel going dark. All the lights on all the racks going out at once.

And then a single telephone on the supervisor's desk, ringing.

The young man in the dream walked towards the telephone through the dark, with the flies crawling on the racks round him. Slowly. The way you walk towards a telephone that is ringing at three in the morning.

"Hello?"

And Chris, at ninety-five, behind the eyes of Chris at sixty-three, in the dark, reached down the line into everything that had ever been written down of an old man in a flat opposite Paignton station, and found his voice.

* * *

It was there. Of course it was. Jono had written it down, every word, in his book, on a Saturday morning in a small hot room with the Lightwave photograph gone from the wall: *All of it? Have you looked at all of it?* And Chris had filmed it, at the window, the week before, with the fire on the old man's face: *We used to make things, you know. Here.* Three hundred and eighty hours of film, and Walter was in it. His voice was in it. Slow. Steady. A big man gone small, with the kind of hands that had spent fifty years holding tools.

Chris took it. Gently. The way you take a cup from somebody whose hands are not steady.

"Have you looked at all of it?"

And it was Walter's voice.

He heard it come out of the receiver in the dream, into his own ear at sixty-three, and he felt himself at sixty-three go cold from the top of his head to his feet. He felt it from both sides at once. The young man in the dark exchange with the telephone, and the old man of sixty-three in the bed, and the old man of ninety-five behind both of them, all three of them hearing a dead man speak.

"Walter? Walter, where are you? I can't..."

I'm sorry, thought Chris. *I'm sorry, Walter. One more.*

"All of it, son," he said, in Walter's voice. "Not just the front."

"What do you mean? What's at the..."

A fly landed on the cable.

The line went dead.

* * *

He stayed while the man in the bed woke.

He felt it from inside: the sleep breaking like ice, the eyes opening in the dark, the dialling tone still going in the ears though there was no telephone in the room. The man lay for a moment with his heart going. He did not do the list. He did not do anything. He got straight up, with the left hand still fizzing faintly, and went out of the room and along the landing to the back bedroom without putting the light on, and sat down at the screen.

He sat behind his own eyes at sixty-three, in the dark, in the back bedroom, and watched himself open the Goldmine. Open the scan of the last photograph. *THANK YOU PAIGNTON, 1958–2001.* The front. The faces. The placard. The women holding on to each other.

All of it, son. Not just the front.

Chris did not touch it. He did not need to. He only sat there, behind the eyes, very still, and let himself at sixty-three do it on his own: zoom out to the whole frame. Look past the crowd. Past the gate. Out along the factory road, to the edge of the picture.

A car. Dark. Parked.

And beside it, small and blurred, three figures.

The man at sixty-three leaned towards the screen.

Chris let go.

* * *

He did not come back.

Jo had the cup in her hand. She had seen his face change at four minutes past ten, the way it changed when a reel ended: the eyes moving under the lids, the breath catching. She had got up

from her desk and come across with the tea, too much sugar, and crouched.

His eyes stayed shut. His good hand stayed flat on the desk. His breath went on, too fast, but even. And she crouched beside the chair with the cup going cold and watched his face, and saw the eyes start to move again under the lids, and understood that he had gone straight on. Not back. On. Down another line. Without coming up for air.

"Chris," she said.

At the window, Holmes said, without turning round: "Leave him, Hills."

"He hasn't come back. He doesn't know."

"He is aware of it." Holmes did not move. "He has gone to the last reel. He told you he would. He did not tell you he would go to it without stopping." A pause. "I think he was afraid that if he stopped, he would not go."

* * *

2026. The same room. Another night, later.

The man in the bed was asleep differently now. Chris felt it straight away. Still thin, still ready to break, but warmer. Fuller. A sleep with people in the house: a boy on the sofa downstairs with a dog, a friend's car outside in the road. It had been a long time since there had been anybody in the house.

He chose a photograph. He did not have to think about it. *Torquay, this summer. Bright morning. Flat calm sea, turquoise in the shallows.* Paddleboarders. A coffee kiosk. A man in a branded fleece taking a photograph for a tourism brochure.

The swarm from Thatcher Rock, more than ever. A black cloud the size of the bay. The paddleboards, the kiosk, the brochure fading to grey. Along the front, over the hotels, across the bay, towards

Paignton. Towards Station Square. The square full of people. Nobody running. Standing together and not running.

And under Thatcher Rock, at the mouth of the tunnel, with a golf club wrapped in rags and burning, a woman.

Ai Li.

Chris thought about her now. Ai Li, seventy-two, five weeks ago, at Jo's desk, with her glasses on a chain, scrolling past four thousand lines with one finger and stopping. *I covered the screen with my hand.* Twenty-six years with a key in a bank.

No, she said, in the dream. Quietly.

She threw the torch.

* * *

Fire.

All at once, through the tunnels and the cavern and up out of the top of the rock like a beacon. The whole bay lit. The swarm faltering over the square, turning, breaking up, wheeling back towards the burning rock as if called. And burning. One after another, catching the light and burning. Little sparks, thousands of them, falling into the sea like the end of a firework display.

Chris felt it come. He was inside it. He was the one doing it, at ninety-five, with his hand flat on a desk a mile and thirty-one years away; and he was the one it was being done to, at sixty-three, in the bed, asleep. Both. He felt every one.

The Western at Newton Abbot, its nameplate gleaming. The yellow vans in the exchange yard, yellow again. The fishing boats in Boulogne, blue and white. The envelope on the quay with the university crest. The back garden. The roses. The deckchair. The teapot. Grandad in his braces. Nan in her pinny. Somebody laughing on the grass. The brothers. The cats.

And a boy on a beach in 1978. With his arm round the neck of his friend from chemistry.

His face. Thin. Clever. Laughing, with his hair in his eyes.

And his name.

* * *

He felt it from inside, the way you feel a tooth that has been aching stop: not a thing arriving, a thing being suddenly, completely, there. Three years side by side at the bench. Fishing off the breakwater at Brixham on Saturday mornings. An eighteenth birthday party with a terrible disco.

It came up through the man in the bed like water up through sand. Into the dark. Into the mouth.

And said it, aloud, very quietly, to the ceiling.

And he felt it go out of him.

Not out of the man in the bed. Out of *him*. The one behind the eyes. Ninety-five. Sitting in the dark with his hand flat on a desk he could not feel any more. He felt the name leave him the way breath leaves you on a cold morning: you see it go, a little white cloud, and then it is not there. He had been holding it for thirty-one years. Since this night. Since this ceiling. He had been holding it so long he had forgotten he was holding it.

He did not have it any more.

The man in the bed turned over, and pulled the duvet up, and for the first time in longer than he could remember, went straight back to sleep.

Chris let go.

* * *

The white room came back at twenty past eleven.

And the shaking. Worse than it had ever been. From the shoulders down, from the jaw down, all of him, the old body jerking in the big pale chair like a dog out of cold water, and his teeth going, and a sound coming out of him that he could not stop.

Jo had his hand. Not the good one; the other one, the bad one, numb and heavy, the one she had never touched in eleven years. She had it in both of hers, in his lap, and she was holding it.

He did not know how long. Holmes had brought the tea. Jo held it for him. He drank it, some of it, with her hand round his on the cup.

"Right," said Jo. Very level. Very plain. "What did it cost?"

* * *

"The beach," he said. "1978. Five of us on a towel. In front of the pier. A transistor, and a bottle of Tizer." He breathed. "I can see it. I can see all of them. The two girls. The other two boys. Me at the end with my knees up." He stopped. "And the one next to me. With his hair in his eyes. Laughing. With my arm round his neck."

"I can see his face," said Chris. "I know him. Three years at the bench. Brixham, on Saturdays. A terrible disco." He looked at her. "I don't know his name."

Jo did not write. She did not need to look. She had it in the book, and she had it in her head, from five weeks ago, from the same chair: *He said it out loud to the ceiling.* She had written it down that day, in her round upright hand, because he had said it, and because you write down what you know.

"Do you want it?" she said.

"Yes," he said.

"Phil," said Jo.

* * *

"Phil."

He said it the way you say a word in a language you are learning. Carefully. Getting the shape of it right.

"That's a told thing now," he said. "Not mine. I know it because you said it. The way I know the date the Albion burned." He was quiet. "He's got it. Him at sixty-three. In the bed. He's got it back, and he'll keep it, and he'll have it for thirty-one years. He'll say it to Jono at a bar one night in 2030, and to Karen, and to Keith in the cellar, and on the beach at Paignton on his birthday, every year, to the sea." He breathed. "And then he'll give it to himself again. Here. Now. And not have it any more."

"Every change costs," he said. "That's the rule. I knew it was going to be that one. I've known for years. Since I first worked out what Seven was." He almost smiled. "That's why I kept not doing Three. Because once I'd done Three, I'd have to do Seven. And once I'd done Seven, I'd not have him."

* * *

"You gave it to yourself," said Holmes, from the window.

"Yes."

"Knowing you would lose it."

"Yes."

"I have known a great many brave men," said Holmes at last, to the glass. "Soldiers. Policemen. A tram conductor, once, who told me about wolves when he knew I would laugh at him." He paused. "I am not sure I have known one who gave himself back a friend's name, knowing it would be taken from him to do it."

"He would have been glad," said Holmes. "Your friend. To be the one you chose to give back."

"He doesn't know," said Chris. "He's somewhere. Ninety-five, if he's alive. He'll never know."

"No," said Holmes. "That is usually how it is done."

* * *

Jo let go of his hand at twelve, when the shaking had stopped.

She went back to her desk, and opened her pocketbook, and wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Reel Three: the dead line. Reel Seven: the fire.* And under it, the cost.

Then she wrote it. *The boy on the beach. His name.* And, after it, because she had said it to him and he had said it after her: *I gave it him back from the book.*

At the other desk, the old man in the big pale chair had his eyes shut, and his good hand flat on the bare surface, and his lips were moving. Very slightly. Over and over. A word.

She did not need to hear it to know what it was.

She closed the book.

Twelve days.

Chapter 15 – *Ten Things*

Thurs. 18 Oct. 2057. Widecombe Cot. C.H. did not come in. Karen rang at 8.40: he is in the top room with the door shut, and wants paper, "the kind that lasts". R. took it down from the campus at 11. He came down at 6. Eleven days. Tomorrow, 4.10.

The room at the top of the house was the smallest in it, and the coldest, and it had the best window.

Chris had been born in it. In 1962, in the bed by the wall. He had been told that so many times that he could see it, though of course he could not; he had been there, and could not remember it, and had been told, and could. A told thing.

He had not slept in it for twenty years. Karen did not like the stairs.

He climbed them at eight in the morning, on the Thursday, one at a time, with his stick in his good hand and the bad one on the rail, and it took him twenty minutes, and when he got to the top he sat on the bed for a long time with his heart going and the room going round, and waited for both of them to stop.

* * *

The bay.

All of it. That was why this was the best window. From the top of the house, over the roofs below and the monkey puzzle and the gardens going down, you could see the whole of Torbay at once, the way you could from nowhere else he knew except the top of Berry Head. Hope's Nose on the left, low and dark. Thatcher Rock. The long curve of the front going round from Torquay to Paignton to

Goodrington. Roundham. Brixham, in the haze. And Berry Head at the far end, with the lighthouse on it, very small.

He had written the list here. In 2057, at ninety-five, in this room, sitting on this bed, the list of ten things. He knew he had. Keith had told him so in a cellar in 2031, at two in the morning, with his voice very tired: *I made it in the little room at the top of the house. With the window over the bay. In 2057.* And now it was 2057, and he was ninety-five, and he had not written it yet.

A told thing, thought Chris. *Going the wrong way.*

* * *

Rani came at eleven.

He heard the gate, the latch and the hinge, and Karen's voice in the hall, and then Rani's feet on the stairs, two flights, quick and light, the feet of a woman of sixty who still took stairs two at a time. She knocked. He said come in. She came in and stood in the doorway of the little room with a flat grey box under her arm, out of breath, and looked at him on the bed, and at the window, and did not say anything for a moment.

"Karen's in a state."

"Karen's always in a state."

Rani almost smiled. She came in and put the box on the bed beside him, and sat down on the other side of it, and opened it.

Paper. A small stack, A4, the colour of milk. She took the top sheet out and gave it to him.

It did not feel like paper. It was heavier, and smoother, and a little cold, and when he bent it between his finger and thumb it did not crease; it went back. He held it up to the window and the light came through it evenly, with no grain, no fibres, nothing.

"We use it in the clean room," said Rani. "For the logs. The ones that have to be kept. It's not paper. It's a polymer. Stone dust and resin, pressed." She looked at the sheet in his hand. "It doesn't yellow. It doesn't rot. You can put it in water. It'll last longer than the building." She was quiet. "Nobody could have made it in 1895."

"I know what it's for," said Rani. "I don't know what's going to be on it. I don't want to." She closed the lid of the box and left it on the bed beside him. "There's twenty sheets. And envelopes. The same stuff. They seal when you press them." She stood up. "I'll tell Karen you're all right."

"You'd better use a pen that lasts too," she said.

* * *

He had one. In the pocket of his cardigan. An old fountain pen of his father's, black, with a gold nib worn to the shape of three generations of hands, and a cartridge of ink that Rani had told him once would outlast the building. It wrote small, and steady, and dark.

Then he wrote, at the top, very carefully, in a hand that shook a little, because he was ninety-five, and he was taking great trouble to write clearly:

Ten.

* * *

It was for nobody but himself. To look at once, in his own hand, before he put it where it was going. Inside his eyelids.

That was what Keith had said. *I wrote them on the inside of my own eyelids, as near as I could.* You could not take paper down the line. You could not take anything. A nudge, not a hand; a voice, not a body. You went with what you were, and the line took what it wanted on the way, and you did not get to choose. All you could do

was decide, before you went, what you would hold on to hardest. And hold on to it.

So he would write them. And read them. And learn them, the way you learn a poem at school, until he could say them with his eyes shut. And then he would put the sheet in the grate in this room, and put a match to it, and watch it go, because a thing written down can be found, and Eden had a key.

He began.

* * *

1. The song.

He did not write which. He did not need to. He knew which, and nobody else ever had, and the line would know it was a song and nothing else, if it went looking. A song in a room, a long time ago. Somebody singing it who did not know he was listening.

2. The waybill.

Two weeks ago he had sat in the dark behind Edward Harvey's eyes in a room off a back street in Paignton and watched him lick a pencil and write *I would give you my mobile number*, trying hard to be neat. And it had cost him the day he found it. The back bedroom, his father's house, 2016. Gone.

But he had the writing of it. He had been in the room. He had felt the pencil.

The waybill, he wrote. And under it, small: *the pencil. Not the finding.*

3. The lighthouse, and the counting.

Berry Head. Down at the end of the bay, very small in the haze from this window. A Mini on the grass at the top in 1979 with the windows misted up from the bottom like frost, and the beam coming round and lighting the whole windscreen white from

outside, and a girl beside him, and him counting. Not the seconds. The flashes. Because he did not know what else to do with his hands, and because he wanted it never to stop, and because if he counted it, it was real.

He had counted the lighthouse all his life. Every time he was frightened.

4. Mum's book.

He wrote it and did not stop. He could not afford to stop on that one. Green exercise books, in a hand that was plain and exact and never crossed out a line. He had them. They were downstairs in the back room in a tin box. He would not need them where he was going. He would need to know they had been written.

5. Jono at the bottom of the cellar stairs.

The cellar under the Studio, in 2028. Jono, fifty-five, at the bottom of the stone stairs, with his pocketbook in his hand, looking up. Not knowing anything. Waiting to be told. And coming down anyway.

6. Basil's left foot.

Rahim had said God taught it. A boy of eight on a dirt pitch going past three bigger boys like they were furniture, with the ball on the outside of his left foot as if it were glued there. And Chris on the touchline with a camera he forgot to lift.

Basil had had to give it back to him once already. In a hospital. *It's my left.* Keith had told him that. A told thing.

7. The bootlace.

Brown leather. Tied in a bow at the back of a head of dark curly hair. On a cabinet in a lab in Stoke in 1982, with a smear of flux on her cheek. And at the foot of a cliff at Berry Head, on a ledge above the tide line, in April 1992, on a woman lying on her right side facing the sea. And in his own hand, in a garden in

Paignton, a week after, when a young constable came up the path and he did not know what to do with it except hold it.

He had held it for sixty-five years. He did not know how to stop.

8. Karen's hand on his collar on the platform at Torquay.

Downstairs, two floors down, an old woman with a stick was standing in the hall under the barometer, in a state. He could hear her. Not the words. Her voice, going on at Rani, the way it had gone on at him every morning for twenty years. And on the platform at Torquay in 1980, at nineteen, in her brother's jumper, with her hand on his collar, straightening it. The day he went. And on the platform at Torquay in 2018, at fifty-seven, with her hand on his collar again. The day he came home.

He did not have to write that one down. He did not have to learn it. He knew he would hold on to it harder than anything, all the way down the line, and that the line would not get it, and that it would still be there in 2057, on a morning in September, in a window at Bailey's: *five*.

* * *

He stopped there.

Keith had had eight. In the arrivals hall at Changi, in April 2028, standing on the pavement with Clifford waiting. *Eight. He counted again. Eight. He did not know what the other two had been.*

Chris knew what the other two had been. He knew because he was about to write them. And he knew, writing them, that the line would take them first. Before Singapore. Before the cellar. On the way down, somewhere in the dark between 2057 and a back room at Bailey's in 2028, they would go, and Keith would stand on a pavement in the heat and count eight and not know what he had lost.

He was going to write them anyway.

* * *

9. The gate.

The gate at the bottom of the path. The latch, and then the hinge. He had been going to oil the hinge since 2018, and had been told every year not to, because it was how you knew. Who was coming. Before you saw them. A latch, and a hinge, and you looked up from whatever you were doing, from the register or the tea tray or the jigsaw on the floor of Room 1, and you knew somebody was at the gate, and you knew, by the weight of the hinge, roughly who.

And once a year, at ten past four, on the third Friday in October, so light you could hardly hear it at all.

How you knew.

He wrote it. *The gate. The latch and the hinge.*

He knew it would go.

10.

Tomorrow.

Ten past four.

He had poured the tea for nearly twenty Octobers, since he took over the big brown pot. He had carried it up the stairs to Room 3, on the first floor, over the dining room, and knocked, once, the first time, in 2038, and never again, because she knew. He had stood in the hall under the barometer at four o'clock on the third Friday and listened for the gate. Every year. With his heart going. He had seen her come up the path under the monkey puzzle in the low gold light with her carpet bag, mostly grey now, a little more each year, and look up at the glass panel in the front door, and see him behind it, and not smile. Never smile. And come in.

And tomorrow she would come up it for the last time.

And he would see it.

And he would not be able to keep it.

10. Ania on the path. Ten past four.

He wrote it very small. It was the last line. There was not much room.

He thought: *I'll have it till 2028. Till the back room at Bailey's, and the first cup, and a quarter turn on the saucer. And somewhere between here and there, in the dark, it'll go. And I'll sit in that window for twenty-nine years and watch her come across the square, every October, from the station, with her bag, and not know that I ever saw her come up the path.*

He thought: *I'll know there were ten.*

* * *

He learned them.

He sat on the bed with the sheet on his knee and the window in front of him and said them, under his breath, with his eyes open, and then with his eyes shut. Over and over. The way you learn a poem at school. The way he had learned the books of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, in this room, at seven, sitting on this bed, for a sixpence. Malachi, Matthew.

The song. The waybill. The lighthouse, and the counting. Mum's book. Jono at the bottom of the cellar stairs. Basil's left foot. The bootlace. Karen's hand on his collar on the platform at Torquay. The gate. Ania on the path.

Ten.

Then he got up, slowly, with the stick, and knelt, with a great deal of trouble, in front of the little cast-iron grate under the window, where nobody had lit a fire since 1980. He put the sheet in it. It did not want to burn. It was stone and resin; it was made to last.

He held the match to the corner for a long time, until it caught, and curled, and blackened, and went, with a smell like a hot iron on a shirt, and a thin grey smoke that went up the chimney into the October sky over Torquay.

Then he sat back on his heels on the floor of the room he had been born in, and shut his eyes, and said them once more.

* * *

The other list was easier. He had known it for sixty years.

He sat down on the bed again and took a second sheet out of Rani's box, and took the cap off the pen, and wrote. Not *Ten*. Nothing at the top. Just the names, in a column, the way you write a register.

Karen Tozer. Torquay. March 1979. 18 months.

Carole Bayliss. Stafford. March 1981. 10 months.

He stopped, then, for the first time, with the pen just past the full stop. Carole. A face on a jug, with round eyes, and a tear. A kitchen table in Cheltenham. *Ten forty-seven.*

He wrote, in brackets, very small: *(Cheltenham will want her. Let her go.)*

Angela Shenton. Stoke. Dec. 1982. 18 months.

The bootlace.

(Take her away early. You will not be able to keep her. I am sorry.)

Karina Petrick. Stoke, June 1983, and after.

And beside it, where the term should be, not a number.

He knew where she was. Basil had rung on Tuesday night. A room in Tiong Bahru, over the market, with a window on the park. Three months, cash, through a lawyer in Hamburg. She would be

there by now. She would have landed at Changi that morning, in the heat, with one bag and a straw hat, and taken a taxi to Tiong Bahru, and climbed the stairs, and stood at the window. Very still. Looking at a park.

Eleven days.

He knew what was in Ai Li's book. The thirteenth line. A railway line in Johor. Two forty-seven in the morning.

He could not stop it. He knew that. She was not blood. *A nudge, not a hand.* And even if he could have; even if there had been a door; he knew what he was about to write, because it was what had happened. He had lived it, at twenty-one, in Stoke, and for a long time after. It was the only line on the sheet he had always known he would have to write, and the only one he had never once let himself rehearse.

He wrote it.

Do not stop it. Let her stay.

* * *

Sue. London. April 1989. 6 months. (Berlin will need her. She will tell him so on the first day.)

Deborah M. Camden. March 1990. 18 months. (She will ask for longer. Say no.)

Six lines. Six names. Every one of them a door he had walked through, a long time ago, at nineteen and twenty and twenty-seven, not knowing that somebody old had stood on the other side of it first and held it open. Not knowing that it had been held open by himself.

He looked at Karen's name at the top. The first.

Eighteen months, said the list.

He had written it. It was what had happened the first time. It was what had to happen, so that the rest could. And she had never known. Not then, not since. *The one who never knew.* She was downstairs, in the hall, at ninety-six, not knowing, and in eleven days he would go into the white room, and come out not knowing where he had been, and she would still not know.

He did not cross anything out. Somebody else would do that, he thought. As each one came. Neatly. Once.

* * *

He took an envelope out of Rani's box. The same stuff: milk-coloured, heavy, smooth, cold. He put the list in it. He pressed the flap down with his thumb, and held it there, and felt it warm, and seal, and become one thing with no join in it.

Nobody could have made it in 1895.

He would give it to her tomorrow. At the little table in the bay window in the dining room, at half past four, with the tea. She would take it without looking at it. She would put it in the lining of her carpet bag, folded small, and carry it to the train, and down the line, and into 1895, and through a hundred and sixty-two years of Octobers.

He did not know what she would do with it after that. He did not need to.

He put the envelope in the pocket of his cardigan, over his heart, and sat for a while longer with his hand on it.

* * *

He came down at six.

It took him half an hour. Two flights, one stair at a time, with the stick in his good hand and the envelope in the pocket of his cardigan over his heart. At the bottom, in the hall, under the

barometer, Karen was sitting on the bench where guests took their boots off, with her stick across her knees, in a state.

She looked up at him.

"Well?" she said.

"Well," said Chris.

She got up. It took her a while. She came across the hall to him, one step and then the stick, and stopped in front of him, and looked at his face for a long time. Ninety-six. Grey-green eyes. The girl in the Mini at the top of Berry Head with the windows misted up and the lighthouse going round.

She put her hand on his collar.

Straightened it.

He stood very still and let her, and counted, under his breath, with his eyes shut. Not the flashes. The ten.

The song. The waybill. The lighthouse, and the counting. Mum's book. Jono at the bottom of the cellar stairs. Basil's left foot. The bootlace. Karen's hand on his collar on the platform at Torquay. The gate. Ania on the path.

"What are you counting?" said Karen.

"Nothing," said Chris.

She did not believe him. She never had. She took her hand off his collar, and patted it, once, flat, the way you pat a thing you have finished with, and went back to the bench.

"Your tea's cold," she said. "You'd better have a fresh one."

He went into the kitchen.

Outside, at the bottom of the path, the gate was shut. The latch, and the hinge.

Tomorrow.

Chapter 16 – *4.10*

Fri. 19 Oct. 2057. Widecombe Cot, the hall, 4.10 p.m. The gate. A. with the carpet bag. Mostly grey. The line in the register before her. C.H. and Karen at the desk. H. in the door of Room 1. She drank the tea. C.H. gave her an envelope. 11.50 p.m.: K. under the monkey puzzle. Ten days.

The line was in the register at three o'clock.

Jo saw it when she came in. She had not meant to look; she had come in out of the wind with her coat still on and her bag over her shoulder, and Karen had said *wipe your feet* from the bench under the barometer without looking up, and Jo had wiped them, and turned, and there was the desk, by the foot of the stairs, with the register open on it at the page for October, and the lamp on, though it was the middle of the afternoon.

And at the bottom of the column, under a family from Solihull and a couple from Leeds and a man on his own from Exeter, in black ink, very upright, every letter the same height, like print:

Friday, 19th October. Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.

Nobody had written it. Nobody had been at the desk since breakfast. Karen had told her on the phone, at nine, in a voice that was trying very hard to be ordinary: *it's there. It came in the night. It's always there.*

She thought about a line on a screen in the white room five weeks ago. *Friday, seventeenth October 2031. Widecombe Cot, the dining room. Four thirty p.m.* The same hand. Ai Li's finger on the glass. The first of the fourteen.

She thought: *she's written her own arrival. Every year. For a hundred and sixty years.*

* * *

Chris was at the desk.

He had been there since half past two. Karen said he had come down at two and stood in the hall looking at the clock until she made him sit. He was in the chair behind the desk, the old one with the arms, in his good jacket, with his stick against the wall and his good hand flat on the open register beside the line, not touching it. His bad hand in his lap. His face turned to the front door, to the glass panel in it, and the path beyond, going down under the monkey puzzle to the gate.

Karen was beside him. She had moved from the bench. She had brought a kitchen chair through and put it next to his, at the end of the desk, and sat in it with her stick across her knees, and she did not say anything, which Jo had never known her not do for an hour together.

Jo took her coat off. She stood against the wall by the door to the back passage, where her father had stood in 2031. She had read it in his book the week before last: *Jono had not moved from the wall.* She did not know why she stood there. It was where you stood.

"He's up," said Karen, very low. "Your friend. In Room One. He's been up since six."

"Is he coming down?"

"He's not coming down. He said not." Karen looked at the door of Room One, across the hall, shut. "He said it wasn't his to watch. He said he'd watched enough doors." She was quiet. "I don't know what he meant."

Jo did.

* * *

At five past four the light changed.

It always did, Karen said afterwards; it did every year; she had never once known it not. The sun came round the end of the house and down through the monkey puzzle and lay along the path, low and gold, and came in through the glass panel in the front door and across the floor of the hall, and up the side of the desk, and across Chris's hand on the register, and the line beside it.

Jo watched him. She watched his face. Ninety-five, and pale, and very still, looking at the glass. She had sat beside that face every working day for eleven years and she had never seen it like this. Not frightened. Not waiting, exactly. The way a man looks at the sea when he has been away from it a long time and is coming round the last bend in the road.

At ten past four the gate went.

* * *

The latch.

And then the hinge.

Jo heard it. Everybody in the hall heard it. And she saw Chris's good hand close, very slowly, on the edge of the register, and open again.

He did not look round. He was already looking. Through the glass. Down the path.

And she came up it.

* * *

Jo had seen her before. Of course she had. Every October since 2031. Coming across Station Square from the station with her bag. Sitting at the little table in the bay window in the dining room with

her back to the room. Once, in 2040, on the bench outside Bailey's, for three minutes, with her hands in her lap, looking at the forge.

She had never seen her come up this path.

She came up it with her carpet bag in her right hand, the way, Jo's father had written, she had come up it every October for as long as the house had been a hotel. A woman in a grey costume, very straight, with no coat, though it was October and the wind was coming up off the bay. Not hurrying. Not slow. The way you walk up a path you have walked up every year of your life and know every stone of.

And her hair was grey.

Not all of it. Most of it. Put up the way it always had been, at the back, with a few pins, and the light from behind coming through it, so that it looked for a moment, coming up under the monkey puzzle with the sun behind her, as if she had a light round her head. It was not a light. Jo knew that. There was nothing over Ania's head. There never had been. A gap. A socket with the plate unscrewed. It was the sun, coming through grey hair.

The face under it had not changed.

That was the thing Jo would try to write that night and fail, the way her father had failed, the way a woman with a green exercise book had failed in 1965. A young woman's face. Twenty-five, perhaps. Neither pretty nor plain. Clear steady eyes. Not one line on it. Not one hair of it changed in a hundred and sixty-two years. And above it, grey hair, nearly all of it, as if the years had been happening to her all that time somewhere you could not see, and had come out, at the end, only there.

Twenty-six years ago there had been one grey hair. Above the left temple. In front of the ear. Her father had written it down. *Since the summer.*

She came up the steps.

She opened the front door.

* * *

She came in, across the hall, and stopped at the desk, and put the carpet bag down at her feet.

Chris had not stood up. Jo saw that he could not; saw him try, with the good hand on the desk, and the legs not do it, and stop. He sat in the old chair with the arms and looked up at her across the register.

Ania looked at them. At the old man in the chair, with his hand on the book. At the old woman beside him, with her stick across her knees. At the line in the register between them, in her own hand.

"Good afternoon, Chris," she said.

"Good afternoon, Miss Ania," said Chris. "Room 3. It's ready for you."

It was what his mother had said. Every year. Jo had read it in her father's book. *Good afternoon, Miss Ania. Room 3. It's ready for you.* And Chris had said it for nearly twenty years since, in the same words, at the same desk.

And then Ania turned her head, a very little, and looked at Karen.

"Good afternoon, Karen," she said.

"Good afternoon," said Karen. And then, after a moment, quite gruffly, the way she said everything she meant: "You've gone grey."

"Yes," said Ania.

"Suits you."

Ania looked at her. And something happened at the corner of her mouth that Jo had never seen there in twenty-six years, and did not see again. It went up. A very little. And stopped.

"Thank you," said Ania.

* * *

The door of Room One opened.

Jo had not heard the handle. Nobody had. It was simply open, and Holmes was standing in it, in David Harvey's jacket, too short in the arms, with his hands at his sides. Not behind his back. At his sides. As if he had been about to do something with them and decided not to.

He did not come into the hall. He stood in the doorway of Room One with the light from the window behind him and looked at the woman at the desk.

Ania turned round.

The clock ticked. The one from Hendon. The light lay along the floor of the hall in a long gold bar from the glass panel in the door, between them, and neither of them stepped into it.

Then Holmes inclined his head. Very slightly. The way, Jo thought, a man bows to someone in church whom he has not seen for a long time and does not expect to see again.

"You learned it," he said. Very low.

She did not answer. Jo saw her not answer. She saw her know the answer and hold it, the way you hold a cup that is full to the brim, and not let it spill.

And then Ania inclined her head too. The same. Exactly the same. A very little.

Holmes stepped back into Room One, and the door closed, and Jo did not hear it close either.

* * *

Ania sat at the little table in the bay window in the dining room. With her back to the room and her face to the bay. The way she always sat.

Chris brought the tea.

He would not let Karen. He would not let Jo. He got himself up out of the chair with the stick and the edge of the desk and a sound that Jo would remember, and went along the passage to the kitchen, very slowly, one step and then the stick, and came back with the tray in his good hand and the stick under his arm, and the cup rattling on the saucer the whole way, and the big brown pot. It took him four minutes. Nobody helped. Karen stood in the dining-room door with her hand on the frame and watched him do it with her face set like a stone.

He put the tray down on the little table. He poured. From the big brown pot. Very carefully, with his good hand, the spout shaking.

Then he stood back, by the door, with Karen, and Jo behind them both in the passage, and watched.

Ania picked up the cup.

In both hands. Thumbs hooked over the rim. She held it, and looked out of the bay window at the sea, grey and silver in the late light, with Berry Head going out into it at the far end, long and flat, like the bow of a ship.

And drank.

* * *

"She always drinks it," said Chris.

He said it quietly, to nobody. To Karen beside him in the door. With a kind of satisfaction. The way you say a thing about a person you know very well.

Karen did not answer.

Jo stood with her back against the wall of the passage and thought about a line in her own pocketbook from eight days ago, in her own round upright hand: *Cost: the tea. The first time.* And under it, in the margin, small, what he had said to her: *Eight days, and she'll be on the path. The last time. And I'll take the tea up, and she'll drink it, and I'll not remember that she never used to.*

He did not remember.

He stood in the door of the dining room at ninety-five, with his hand on the frame where somebody else's hand had been, once, in 2031, and watched a woman in grey drink her tea, and thought it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

She found that she had her hand over her mouth, and took it away.

* * *

When the cup was half empty, Chris went across the room.

He went slowly. One step and then the stick. To the little table in the bay window. Ania did not turn round. He stood beside her chair, a little behind it, the way you stand beside somebody at a window to see what they see.

He took an envelope out of the inside pocket of his cardigan.

He put it on the table. Beside the saucer. Square to the edge.

Ania did not look at it. She drank her tea. She put the cup down on the saucer, very carefully, so that it made no sound. Then she put out one hand, without looking, and picked up the envelope, and held it for a moment on her knee, under the table, where Jo could not see.

Then she bent, and opened the carpet bag at her feet, and put her hand inside it, deep, into the lining, the way you put your hand

into a pocket you have used for a very long time, and took it out again, empty.

She picked up the cup again, in both hands, thumbs over the rim, and looked at the bay.

Then he put his good hand, very lightly, on the back of her chair. Not on her. On the chair. The way, Jo thought, you might put your hand on the gate of a house you were leaving.

And took it away, and came back across the room, one step and then the stick, to the door, where Karen was waiting, and went past her into the passage, and past Jo, and along to the hall, and sat down in the old chair behind the desk with the register open in front of him, and put his good hand flat beside the line.

And shut his eyes.

* * *

Jo did not go home.

She sat in the kitchen with Karen until it was dark. Karen made cheese on toast, which neither of them ate, and talked about the price of fish, and her knee, and a woman from the WI who had died in the summer, and did not once mention the woman at the little table in the bay window, or the old man in the hall with his eyes shut. At eight Karen went up to bed, one stair at a time, with her stick. At the top she stopped, and looked down at Jo in the hall, over the banister.

"Ten days," said Karen.

Jo looked up at her.

"I'm not daft," said Karen. "I've been in this house twenty years. I know a man that's counting." She looked down the hall, at Chris in the chair behind the desk, asleep now, with his hand on the register. "I don't know what he's counting to. I've never asked. I'm not going to start." She was quiet. "But I know it's ten days."

She went into her room and shut the door.

* * *

At a quarter to twelve Jo went out.

Chris was still asleep in the chair. She had put a blanket over his knees. The dining room was dark; the little table in the bay window was empty, the cup and the pot gone, the tray gone. Ania had gone up at nine. Jo had heard her on the stairs, very light, and the door of Room 3, on the first floor, over the dining room, and nothing since.

The garden was dark. The wind had dropped. Above the house, over the bay, the stars were out, very many of them, and very clear, the way they were in October when the air came off the sea and there was no moon. The monkey puzzle stood against them, black, with its arms going up.

And under it, at the edge of the path, in the dark, there was somebody.

* * *

A young man. About thirty. In a dark jacket, with his hands in his pockets. Standing on the grass under the monkey puzzle, a little off the path, looking up at the house.

Not at the front door. Not at the hall, where a lamp was still on behind the glass panel and an old man was asleep in a chair. Up. At the first floor. At a window over the dining room, with its curtains drawn and no light behind them.

Room 3.

His lamp was over his head. Steady. Bright, in the dark, the way lamps were at night. And behind it, further back, fainter, as if it were further away, though it was in the same place, the other one.

Jo stood on the path and looked at it. The far lamp. Ania's. Amber, faintly. Not much. A little warmer, a little more there, than it was in the mornings at Bailey's in the window with the light coming in round him. As if it knew where it was. As if it had come home, to the bottom of the garden, under the window, and could feel the house.

And from it, very faintly, Jo thought, though she could not see cords, though she had never seen a cord in her life, something went up. Towards the window. And did not arrive. Because there was nothing at the window to arrive at. Because the woman behind the curtain had nothing over her head, and never had, and would not have, for ten more days.

He had heard her. She knew he had. He stood under the monkey puzzle with his hands in his pockets and his face turned up to the dark window and did not move.

She thought about Rani in the car on Roundham six nights ago, with her hands on the dashboard. *Widecombe Cot.* She thought: *every night. Perhaps. For twenty-nine years. Standing here.*

She thought: *carrying it to her house. And not giving it to her. Because it isn't time.*

* * *

"Go home, Jo," said Keith.

Jo stood on the path for a moment longer. Then she went down it, past him, on the far side, not close, under the monkey puzzle, to the gate.

The latch.

The hinge.

He was still there. Under the tree. Looking up. With two lamps over his head in the dark, and the nearer one steady, and the far one, faintly, warmly, amber.

She went home and wrote it down. The date, the time, the place. *Widecombe Cot. 11.50 p.m. K. under the monkey puzzle.*

And then, after a long time: *Looking at Room 3.*

She did not write what she thought. She did not know how. She wrote the number instead, because it was the only thing she was sure of, and because Karen had said it at the top of the stairs as if it were a thing everybody knew.

Ten days.

Chapter 17 – *The Ticket*

Sat. 20 Oct. 2057. Paignton station, the booking office, 10.02 a.m. C.H. bought A. a ticket. Card. Single, Newton Abbot. Stamped 20 OC 57. She put it in the little cloth bag. There was something in it already. The bench under the plane tree, 10.14 to 10.31. Nine days.

"I want to buy her a ticket," said Chris.

He said it at half past eight in the morning, in the hall at Widecombe Cot, in his good coat, with his stick, standing at the bottom of the stairs looking up them. Jo had come because he had rung her at seven and said *bring the car* and nothing else, and put the phone down.

"A ticket."

"For the train." He did not look round. "At Paignton. At the window. I want to buy it myself. With money." He was quiet. "I've never bought her anything. All my life. Not a cup of tea in a café. Not a stamp. She's never let anybody." He looked up the stairs. "I want to buy her a ticket."

She did not ask why. She knew why. She had read it in Jack's account, the week before last, in a school exercise book in a soft box on her kitchen floor. *A young woman came through the gate. She was not on the platform and then she was.* And in a dozen places since, in her father's books and in Chris's, in the same five words, like a line in a hymn everybody knows: *off the four o'clock from Newton Abbot, with no ticket.*

With no ticket.

She did not say anything. She went and got the car.

* * *

Ania came down at a quarter to nine.

She came down the stairs the way she had come up the path: not hurrying, not slow. In the grey costume. With the carpet bag in her right hand. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked at Chris in his coat, and at Jo in the open door with the keys in her hand and the car on the road beyond the gate, and did not seem surprised.

She did not ask where. She never did. Jo's father said he had never once heard her ask anybody where they were going.

Karen was on the bench under the barometer. She looked at the three of them. At Chris. At the woman in grey. At the carpet bag.

"You'll be back for lunch," said Karen. Not a question.

"We'll be back for lunch," said Chris.

Karen looked at Ania.

"She will," said Karen. "I'm not asking about you."

* * *

Jo drove.

Down the hill into Torquay, and along the harbour, and out along the front, past the Pavilion and the long gardens and Livermead and Preston, with the bay on the left, flat and grey and silver under a high white sky. Chris in the front beside her with his stick between his knees and his good hand on the head of it. Ania in the back, behind him, with the carpet bag on her knees.

Jo watched her in the mirror.

She had never been in a car with her. She did not think anybody had, much. Ania sat in the middle of the back seat, very straight, with both hands flat on the bag, and looked out of the window at the sea. Not at the road. Not at the town. At the sea. All

the way along the front, with her head turned a little to the left, as if she were counting something out there on the water, or listening.

There was nothing over her head.

Nine days, and then something. She did not know what. Nobody did. Rani said the far lamp over Keith's head had been warmer this morning, at eight, in the window at Bailey's. Rani had rung her at five past to say so. *Warmer. Like it's waiting.*

* * *

She parked at the side of Station Square, by the forge, where Fred had kept a space with a cone in it since half past seven because Chris had rung him too.

Saturday morning. The square was full. The market was up on the far side, under the plane trees, with its striped awnings: fish, and bread, and a man selling honey, and a woman with a van full of chrysanthemums in buckets, rust and yellow and white. Families. Students from the campus with their coffee. A busker by the bench with a fiddle, playing something Irish, badly. The forge doors open and the fire going and Fred inside at the anvil with two apprentices, and Fred looking up when the car stopped, and putting the hammer down.

And Bailey's, on the corner. The back room. The window.

He was there. Of course he was. In the window, at the table with the brass plate on it, with a cup in both hands and his thumbs hooked over the rim, looking out at the square. His lamp over his head. And behind it, further back, fainter, the other one.

It was warmer. Rani was right. Jo could see it from across the square: not brighter, exactly, but more there. Amber. Like a coal that somebody has breathed on.

Jo got out and went round and opened Chris's door.

* * *

It took them six minutes to cross the square.

Chris walked. He would not let Jo bring a chair. He would not let her take his arm. One step and then the stick, across the paving, past the bench under the big plane tree, past the cab rank, past the busker, who stopped playing and looked at the old man going by and then, for no reason he could have given, started again much more quietly.

And Ania walked beside him.

People looked at them. Jo saw it. An old man of ninety-five with a stick and a woman in grey with a carpet bag going very slowly across Station Square on a Saturday morning. People looked, the way people look at anything slow in a place where everything else is quick, and then looked at the air above the old man's head, at his lamp, steady and amber and very old, and then at the air above the woman's.

* * *

The booking office was on the left as you went in under the canopy.

They had kept it. When the station was rebuilt in 2031, after the night of the fire, the council had wanted machines and a glass wall and a café, and the campus people had wanted the old building back, the 1859 one, from the photographs, and in the end they had done both. The machines were on the platform. And the booking office was in the front, where it had been in 1895: a little wood-panelled room with a high counter and a window in a frame of brass with a slot under it, and a clerk behind it, because the line was a heritage line now as far as Kingswear, and people liked to buy a ticket from a person.

There was a queue. Two people. Chris stood in it.

Jo waited by the door with Ania. Ania stood very still, with the carpet bag in her hand, and looked at the booking-office window. At

the brass frame. At the slot. At the little rack of card tickets behind the glass, in their pigeonholes, buff and green and white, and the old iron dating press on the counter beside the clerk's hand, with its brass lever.

Jo thought: *she's seen one of those before.*

Then it was Chris's turn.

* * *

The clerk was young. Twenty, perhaps. A lad from the campus doing Saturdays, in a maroon waistcoat that the heritage line made them wear, with a name badge that said SAM. He looked at the old man at the window, and at his lamp, and smiled the way young people smile at very old people, kindly and a little too loud.

"Morning! Where are we off to?"

"Newton Abbot," said Chris. "Single. One." He paused. "On the card, please. Not the paper. The card."

Sam looked surprised, and then pleased. "The Edmondson? Nobody ever asks for the Edmondson." He turned to the rack behind him and ran his finger along the pigeonholes. "We've only got them for the heritage. They're not proper tickets, really; the inspectors take them, but they're for the visitors, mostly, to keep. Souvenirs." He found the one he wanted, and pulled it out: a small stiff oblong of buff card, the size of a playing card cut in half, with printing on it. "Paignton to Newton Abbot. Single. Standard." He turned to the press. "I'll date it for you."

"Yes," said Chris. "Date it."

Sam put the card into the slot of the iron press and pulled the brass lever down, hard, with a clunk that Jo felt in the floor.

"It only does two figures for the year," he said. "Look. *Twenty Oc, fifty-seven.* Could be any century." He held it up to the window so that Chris could see. "It's from 1890-something, the press. They

found it in a shed at Kingswear." He slid the card under the brass frame through the slot. "That'll be four pounds sixty, please."

Chris paid.

He paid in coins. He had them ready in his good hand, counted, in the pocket of his coat, and he put them on the counter one at a time, very slowly, with his good fingers, the way you lay down cards you have been holding for a long time. Four pounds sixty. Exactly.

Then he picked up the ticket.

* * *

He looked at it for a long time, standing at the window, with the queue behind him.

A small stiff oblong of buff card. *PAIGNTON* at the top, and *NEWTON ABBOT* under it, in black capitals, and *SINGLE*, and *STANDARD*, and a serial number, and the name of the line. And in the corner, pressed into the card so hard that it stood up a little on the back, in purple ink:

20 OC 57

Jo watched his face. It did not do anything at all. He was ninety-five, and he was standing at a booking-office window with the queue behind him, and he was holding a ticket.

He turned round.

* * *

Ania was by the door. She had not moved.

He stopped in front of her and held out the ticket.

She looked down. Not at him. At the ticket. At the small buff card in the old man's shaking hand, held out to her, at the level of her heart. At the printing, and the serial number, and in the corner, the purple date.

Then she put the carpet bag down on the floor at her feet.

And put out her hand, and took it.

* * *

She did not look at it again. She held it in her left hand, against her palm, the way you hold a thing you are not going to drop. With her right she opened the carpet bag at her feet, bending to it, and put her hand in, and brought out a small bag.

Cloth. Grey. Old, very old, worn soft, the colour gone out of it, with a drawstring at the neck, a thin cord of something that had once been black.

Jo had heard of it. Her father had seen it once, in 2038, in a cellar, when Ania opened the carpet bag on the end of a long desk in front of everybody to put a glass lens in it. *A cardigan. A hairbrush. A small cloth bag with a drawstring, closed.* He had written it down. *Nobody has ever seen inside it.*

Ania loosened the drawstring with two fingers.

She opened the neck of the bag, a little. Not much. Enough.

And Jo, standing three paces away by the door of the booking office, with the light from the canopy coming in behind her, saw inside it.

* * *

There was something there already.

Small. Flat. The size of a playing card cut in half. Lying on the bottom of the bag, against the grey cloth. Gone soft at the corners, and dark at the edges, the colour of weak tea, as if it had been handled a great many times by somebody who did not take it out to look at it but only to know it was there.

A ticket.

Jo could not read it. She was too far away, and the bag was open only a little, and it was only for a second. She saw the shape of it. The size. A line of printing across it, faded nearly to nothing. And in the corner, something that had once been purple and was now the brown of an old bruise, two figures and two letters and two figures, pressed into the card so hard that even now, after however long it had been, they stood up a little from it.

Ania put the new ticket into the bag.

Beside the old one. Flat. The crisp buff card beside the soft brown one. The same size. The same shape.

And drew the string.

* * *

She put the cloth bag back in the carpet bag. She closed the carpet bag. She picked it up.

She looked at Chris.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," he said.

Chris had not seen it. He had been looking at Ania's face.

* * *

They went out under the canopy into the square, and Ania stopped.

She stood on the edge of the paving, in the thin white light, with the carpet bag in her hand, and looked across Station Square. Past the market and its awnings and the chrysanthemums in their buckets. Past the busker, who had stopped again. Past the cab rank. To the bench under the big plane tree at the station end, by the cab rank, which was empty.

She walked to it.

Not fast. The way she did everything. And sat down on it, in the middle, with the carpet bag at her feet, and her hands in her lap, and her back straight. Facing the square. Facing Bailey's. Facing the window of the back room, and the young man in it with a cup in both hands.

Jo looked at the clock on the front of the station.

Fourteen minutes past ten.

* * *

Chris did not follow her. He stood under the canopy with Jo, with both hands on the head of his stick, and watched.

"That's his bench," said Jo, very low. "Tuesdays. Fourteen past eight."

"I know," said Chris.

"She's sitting where he sits."

"I know."

Across the square, in the window of Bailey's, Keith had put his cup down.

Jo had never seen him put it down. Not once in eleven years. He had it in both hands when she came in and in both hands when she left, and he turned it a quarter turn on its saucer and lifted it and put it back and turned it again, but he did not put it down and take his hands away.

He had put it down. His hands were flat on the table, either side of it.

He was looking at the bench.

And the woman on the bench was looking at him.

* * *

They sat like that for seventeen minutes. The market went on round them, and the busker, and the Saturday crowd with its coffee.

And across the middle of all of it, between a bench under a plane tree and a window in a hotel, a woman with no lamp and a young man with two looked at each other and did not move.

Jo watched the far lamp.

Over Keith's head, behind his own, the faint one. It had been warmer at eight, Rani said. It was warmer now. Not much. A little. Amber, faintly, like a coal breathed on, steadily, for seventeen minutes, while the woman on the bench looked at it.

And Jo thought: *she can see it. She's always been able to see it. She's been looking at it every October for twenty-nine years, from the station, from the bench outside Bailey's, from the gate. Her own lamp. Over somebody else's head.*

And not asking for it back.

Because it isn't time.

* * *

At thirty-one minutes past ten Ania stood up.

She picked up the carpet bag. She looked once more at the window. Then she turned, and came back across the square, between the market stalls, to the canopy, where Chris and Jo were standing.

In the window of Bailey's, Keith picked his cup up again, in both hands, with his thumbs hooked over the rim. He turned it a quarter turn on its saucer.

And on the bench under the plane tree, where the woman had sat, there was nothing. No newspaper. Nothing folded square. Only the slats, and the light coming through the leaves onto them, moving.

* * *

They drove back along the front. Chris in front with his stick. Ania in the back with the carpet bag on her knees, looking at the sea.

Nobody spoke until Livermead.

Then Chris said, to the windscreen, quietly: "I've always wanted to do that."

Jo did not say anything.

"Buy her something," said Chris. "All my life." He was quiet. "It's a stupid thing to want."

"It's not stupid," said Jo.

In the back seat, Ania turned her head from the window. Jo saw her in the mirror. She looked at the back of Chris's head, at the white hair, the collar of his good coat that somebody had straightened that morning in a hall under a barometer.

She did not say anything. But she looked at it for a long time. All the way to Torquay.

* * *

At ten that night, at her own kitchen table, with the four boxes on the floor and the watch open on her palm, Jo wound it. Carefully. Not too far.

Then she wrote it down. The date, the time, the place. *Paignton station, the booking office. C.H. bought A. a ticket.* The card, the single, the stamp. *20 OC 57.*

She thought about a small brown card on the bottom of a grey cloth bag, soft at the corners, the colour of weak tea. Two figures and two letters and two figures, in a purple gone the brown of an old bruise. She had not been able to read them. She had been too far away. It had been only a second.

She thought: *a hundred and sixty-two years.* She thought: *from 1895. In that bag. Every October. Up the path. Under the monkey puzzle.* She thought: *and today he bought it for her.*

She thought: *and in nine days she'll get on a train with both of them.*

She did not know what that meant. She did not know if it meant anything, or if it was simply a thing that was, the way the watch was, the way the stone was, with no first owner and no beginning. She did not know what happened to one of them, after. She did not know if one of them was the other.

She wrote: *She put it in the little cloth bag.*

And then, small, in the margin, the way her father wrote the things he did not want to be the main thing on a page:

There was something in it already.

She closed the book.

Nine days.

Chapter 18 – *The Thread*

> *Mon. 22 Oct. 2057. Talland's, Warwick Way, 8.20 a.m. Closed on Mondays. T.T. let me in. A quarter of Darjeeling. Her chair. I showed him the bench. He promised nothing. R., across the road: "Like a thread." Seven days.*

Talland's was closed on Mondays.

Jo knew that because her father had written it down, in 2038, in the forty-first book: *Closed on Mondays. My grandmother's voice is still on the machine.* And because Rani had told her on the train, on the Sunday night, on the last one up, in the dark, somewhere past Exeter, with the lamps gone out of the carriage at Newton Abbot like a hand taken off a shoulder: *he goes in anyway. Every Monday. Half past seven. Before the office. He sits in the back. I've watched his cord go in there for eighteen years.*

So Jo stood outside it at twenty past eight on a Monday morning in October, in Warwick Way, with the street lamps still on and the tall white houses going away on both sides, and looked at the shop.

Dark green paint, very old, very glossy. Gold letters on the glass, with their old-fashioned shadows. *H. TALLAND & CO. TEA AND COFFEE. EST. 1947.* The sign on the door said *CLOSED*. Behind the glass, the long counter, and the rows of little wooden drawers with their brass labels, going back into the dark.

Jo knocked on the glass.

* * *

Rani was across the road.

She had not wanted to come in. She had stood on the corner of Warwick Way at a quarter past eight with her coat buttoned to the throat and looked at the shop for a long time, and then she had said *no*, and gone and sat on the bench outside the church opposite, with her bag on her knees, where she could see the door.

"I'll watch from here," she had said. "I don't want to be in the room. I want to see it from outside."

"His cord," she had said. "When you talk to him. I want to see what it does."

* * *

A figure came down the shop between the rows of drawers.

Tall. Thin. A grey cardigan, not a suit. White hair, very fine, not much of it. A cup in one hand. He came down to the door and stopped behind the glass and looked at her through it, between the gold letters, for a long time.

Tarquin Talland unbolted the door.

"Miss Hills," he said. "We're closed on Mondays."

"I know," said Jo. "A quarter of Darjeeling. Too dear."

Something moved at the corner of his mouth. Not a smile. The place where a smile had been once, a long time ago, and had been put away very carefully, the way you put away a good coat you will not wear again.

"Your father said that," said Tarquin. "In this door. In 2038."

"I know. I've read it."

"Of course you have." He stood aside. "You'd better come through."

* * *

The coal fire, unlit. A round table with green baize. A window onto a little yard with a fig tree in it, the leaves going yellow. Shelves of old ledgers, the shop's accounts back to 1947, in a hand that changed every twenty years or so and then, at some point in the 2040s, stopped changing.

And the armchair. In the corner, by the grate. High-backed. Green velvet, worn pale on the arms. Paler than her father had written. The pale had spread, the way it does, until the arms were nearly grey.

Empty.

Jo did not look at it for long. She had come to look at it. She looked at it for the length of one breath, and then at Tarquin, so that he would see her look at it and look away.

He put his cup down on the round table. He did not sit. He went behind the counter, to the drawers, and took one down, a little wooden one with a brass label: *DARJEELING, FIRST FLUSH*. A brass scoop. A square of brown paper. The old scales with their brass weights.

He began to weigh out a quarter.

"Your father sat there," he said, without looking round. "At the table. In 2031 and in 2038." The scale went down. He took a little tea off with the scoop. "He never sat in the chair. Nobody does."

"She sat there every Tuesday afternoon for forty years," said Tarquin. "When she was in London. With her crossword. In ink." He folded the brown paper round the tea, very neatly, and twisted the ends. "I keep meaning to have it re-covered. I don't."

He put the packet on the counter. "Seven pounds. Too dear."

Jo paid. In coins. She had brought them for it, counted, in her coat pocket, the way Chris had counted his for a ticket two days ago. Tarquin put them in the old till, which rang.

* * *

"You were at Marsham Street," said Tarquin. "Five weeks ago. With your friend from the campus. I held the door for you."

"You looked at me. In the doorway." He was standing behind the counter with both hands flat on it, either side of the packet of tea. "You looked at me the way your father looked at me across a committee table in 2038. As if you'd read something about me that I hadn't written." He was quiet. "You've read the books."

"Yes," said Jo.

"All of them, I expect, by now." He looked at the packet of tea. "So you know."

"I don't need you to say it," said Tarquin. "Your father didn't say it either. He stood in that doorway in 2038 and told me he knew what it cost and that he wasn't going to tell me anything else. And then he went and sat on the Embankment and wrote it down." He looked up. "I know what I am, Miss Hills. I've known since 2032. I've had twenty-five years to know it. I don't need a Hills to come and tell me in my grandmother's shop on a Monday."

"I didn't come to tell you that," said Jo. "I came to show you something."

* * *

She took out her phone.

She did not hand it to him. She went to the counter and put it down on the wood, between his hands, beside the packet of tea, face up, and stepped back.

A photograph. Taken from above, a little to one side, in the thin gold light of an October morning. The slats of a bench. Wooden, dark with weather. And on them, laid along the middle, a newspaper. The *Herald Express*. Folded once, lengthways, the way

you fold a paper to read on a train. Laid exactly square to the edge of the bench. As if somebody had taken a set square to it.

"Station Square," said Jo. "Paignton. The bench under the plane tree by the cab rank. Tuesday the ninth of October. Eight thirty-one in the morning." She kept her voice very level. "A man sat there for seventeen minutes. Every Tuesday since August. Eight fourteen to eight thirty-one. Looking at the window of Bailey's." She paused. "Nobody can describe him. I sat across the square from him for seventeen minutes, and I'm a trained observer, and I couldn't tell you if he was old. When he went, he left that."

"I sat on the bench afterwards," said Jo. "It was warm. I tried to write him down. I got two words." She looked at the photograph. "*A man*."

* * *

Tarquin looked at the photograph for a long time.

Jo watched his hands. Flat on the counter, either side of the phone. Long hands, thin, with the knuckles standing up. She watched for the thing she always watched for, in rooms like this, at times like this. The small thing. The one that gives.

His right forefinger moved.

Very slightly. On the wood. Towards the edge of the phone. As if to touch it. To straighten it. It was lying a little crooked, where she had put it down. Not much. A degree or two.

He did not touch it. The finger stopped.

"I read the file," said Jo, quietly. "On Cheltenham. The night of the sixteenth of September 2031. You wrote half of it; you told my father so. A man nobody could describe. Who sat at her kitchen table." She held his eyes. "And pushed the chair in square when he left."

"It's the same man," said Jo.

* * *

Tarquin stood behind the counter with his hands flat on the wood and looked at her. His face did not change. Jo had not expected it to. He had spent forty years in rooms without windows being looked at by people who wanted to see his face change.

But his hands did. They came up off the counter, both of them, a little. Not much. As if the wood had gone hot.

"You don't know that," he said.

"No," said Jo. "I can't prove it. Nobody can prove anything about him. That's what he's for." She did not look away. "But I know who you answer to, Mr Talland. Since 2044. Since White went to grow roses in Surrey and the chair at the top got filled." She paused. "We can see it. Some of us. Where it goes. Yours used to go to Marsham Street. To White. And then to a knot by the river." She took a breath. "And now it goes south-west. Two hundred miles. To Paignton. To a white house on Roundham Head with a round window. To a man who sits on a bench on Tuesdays and folds his newspaper square."

She looked at the armchair.

"To the man who sat at her kitchen table," she said. "And pushed the chair in."

* * *

Tarquin took his hands off the counter.

He came out from behind it. Slowly. Round the end, past the scales, past the drawers. He did not look at Jo. He crossed the back room to the corner by the unlit grate and stopped beside the green velvet armchair, and stood there, with his back to her, looking down at it.

He put his hand on the back of it.

The hand was shaking.

"I was at the funeral," said Tarquin. To the chair. "In Cheltenham. September 2032. The memorial, a year after. Your father was at the back of the church. I knew he was there. I couldn't turn round." He was quiet. "I stood at the front and thought: *they did this. The people in Torquay. With their basement and their paintings and their stone. She's dead because of what they keep in that cellar.*" His hand moved on the velvet. "I thought it for twelve years. I went to White with it. I went to whoever White went to. I took the money; I didn't need the money. I took it so I'd have something to hold." He breathed. "And when White went, I went where I was sent. I didn't ask who. I didn't want to know who. It was easier not to know."

"And all that time," said Tarquin. "Thirteen years." He did not finish it.

* * *

He turned round. His face had not changed. That was the thing Jo would remember. He had turned round and she had expected something, the line at the mouth gone, the man under it; and there was nothing. The same face. Pale, and all bone, and tired, the way she had seen it in the doorway at Marsham Street. A man of sixty-three who had been tired since 2031.

"What do you want?" he said.

Jo had thought about this on the train the night before, and in the narrow bed in Rani's hotel in Pimlico, for most of the night. What she would say, if he asked. She had thought about it the way her father would have: short, and plain, and nothing in it that could be written down and found.

"Next Monday," she said. "The twenty-ninth. In the evening. The Home Secretary will be in her office. On the seventh floor. With her people. The ones she trusts."

"I know. She's asked me to be there."

Jo had not known that. She did not let him see that she had not known it.

"Then be there," she said.

"And?"

"And that's all," said Jo. "Be in the room. At about a quarter to seven." She looked at him. "Something's going to happen. I can't tell you what. I'm not going to. But when it does, you'll see. Everybody will." She paused. "And then you'll know whether you want to go on not knowing."

* * *

Tarquin looked at her for a long time.

"You're asking me to do something," he said.

"No," said Jo. "I'm asking you to be in a room."

"It's the same thing. In my line of work." Something moved at the corner of his mouth again. The place where the smile had been. "Your father never asked me for anything. Not once. In twenty-nine years. He came in and bought tea and told me he knew and went away. It drove me mad."

"I know," said Jo. "I've read it."

"You're not your father."

"No," said Jo. "I'm Claire's daughter too."

She did not know why she said that. She had not meant to. It came out of her the way things came out in interview rooms at four in the morning, after hours of nothing: true, and sideways, and not what you had planned.

"I won't promise you anything," he said.

"I didn't ask you to."

"I won't promise you anything," said Tarquin again, quieter. "I don't promise things. I stopped in 2031." He looked down at the armchair beside him. At the pale velvet on the arms. "She used to say I made promises the way other people make tea. Too many, too strong, and none of them finished."

"What did she say about Hills?"

"That a Hills who knows when not to write something down is worth ten who don't," said Tarquin. "I told your father that. In 2038."

"I know," said Jo. "He wrote it down."

* * *

For a moment, then, it was there. Jo saw it. Not in his face; in his shoulders. Something went out of them, the way air goes out of a room when a door opens. A second. Two. A man standing by an empty chair in his grandmother's shop, very tired, very thin, who had been carrying something for twenty-six years and had just, for a second, felt how heavy it was.

"Thank you for the tea," said Tarquin Talland.

Jo picked up the packet of Darjeeling from the counter, and her phone beside it. She put the phone in her pocket without looking at it. She did not need to.

At the door, with her hand on the brass handle and the bell over it about to ring, she did not stop. Her father had stopped, in 2038. She did not.

* * *

Rani was on the bench outside the church, where Jo had left her, with her bag on her knees.

She had not moved. She was looking at the shop. Not at the door: at the window, the gold letters, the dark behind them, and

above them, Jo thought, at something in the air over the roof that Jo could not see.

Jo crossed the road and sat down beside her.

"Well?" said Jo.

"It was like a rope," said Rani. "When you went in. Coming out of the roof. Going south-west. Thin, for a rope. But a rope. I've watched it for eighteen years. It's been a rope since White went." She was quiet. "It got thinner while you were in there."

"How thin?"

Rani held up her hand. Her thumb and forefinger. Very close together. Not touching.

"Like a thread," she said.

* * *

Jo looked at the shop.

The dark green door. The sign that said *CLOSED*. The light at the back, behind the drawers. A thin man in a grey cardigan somewhere back there, in a room with a fig tree and an unlit fire and an armchair nobody sat in.

"Will it break?" she said.

"It moved," said Rani. "That's the thing. In 2038 I watched it on the stairs of the Lords and it didn't move. It just got thinner. Like something wearing through. But just now, about ten minutes after you went in, it moved." She swallowed. "It shook. The whole length of it. All the way south-west, as far as I could follow it. Like somebody had touched the end of a kite string. Like a man with his hand on it had felt something at the other end and pulled back."

"For a second." Rani looked at her. "And then it went still again. And thinner." She held up her thumb and finger again, a hair apart. "It'd break, Jo. If anybody pulled."

Jo looked down at the packet of tea in her lap. A quarter of a pound of Darjeeling, first flush, in brown paper, with the ends twisted. Very light.

"He didn't promise anything," she said.

"No," said Rani. "They never do. The ones that mean it."

* * *

They got the ten o'clock back from Paddington.

She wrote it down. The date, the time, the place. *T.T. let me in. A quarter of Darjeeling. Her chair.*

And then: *I showed him the bench.*

She looked at that for a long time. She had not shown him the bench. She had shown him a photograph of a newspaper folded square. She had shown him a man's habit. She had put it on the counter between his hands, a little crooked, and watched his finger move to straighten it, and stop.

She wrote: *He promised nothing.*

At Newton Abbot the lamps came back.

And Rani woke up, at the moment they came, the way she always did, as if somebody had said her name, and looked out of the window, south-east, towards the sea and the bay and the hill above Paignton where a white house stood on Roundham Head with a round window at the top.

"Still there," she said, very quietly. "The other end." She swallowed. "But it's further away than it was this morning. From here. I can't explain it better than that. It's further away."

Jo wrote that down too. In the margin. Small.

R.: "Like a thread."

Seven days.

Chapter 19 – *The Glass*

Tues. 23 Oct. 2057. Studio Ania, the cellar, 7.00 p.m. (2.00 p.m. at the Cape). C.D. on the screen, with the lens. R., V., me. R. put her hand on the glass over the stone and said: "It's mine." C.D. is bringing it Thursday. Six days.

Clifford rang at a quarter to seven and said: "Is Rani with you? Get her in front of the stone. Don't ask. Just get her there."

Jo was in the white room. Chris had gone home at five. She had been sitting at her own desk with Jack's thirtieth book open in front of her and not reading it, the way she had not been reading anything for a week, and the phone went, and it was Florida, and Clifford's voice, thin and dry as paper, with something in it she had not heard in it for years.

"She's at the campus," said Jo.

"Then get her out of the campus. Get Vicky too. Seven o'clock, your time. The cellar." A pause, and a sound like a man breathing through his teeth. "I'm going to show you something. I've been looking at it for three hours and I can't tell if I'm right, and I'm eighty-two, and my eyes aren't what they were. Rani's are."

"Clifford, what is it?"

"The glass," said Clifford. "Our glass. Rani's." Another pause. "I think it's finished growing."

* * *

The long desk down the middle, under the pavement lights, with the screens on it, most of them dark now. The shelves along the back wall: the archive, the boxes from Avonmouth, the six pine crates with their fronts off, and the gap where the seventh had been,

with the pale rectangle on the wall behind it where the dust had never settled. The swivel chair from the shop, at the end of the desk, that nobody sat in now. The hum of the cooling. The smell of old paper and warm electronics and the damp that came through the walls from under Union Street, however much you dried it.

And at the end of the desk, in its cradle of grey foam, under a cover of thick glass, the stone.

Jo looked at it. She always did. A stone. Smooth, dark grey, the size and shape of a goose egg, a little flattened, with a dull sheen on it like slate after rain. It did not glow. It did not do anything. It sat in its foam and was a stone, and a fibre went out of the cradle under it, through the wall, and under the street, four hundred yards, to a white room at the top of a building on the corner, and to a desk, and to an old man's hand.

Rani was standing over it.

She had come in at five to seven, still in her campus fleece, with her hair coming down at the back, and Vicky behind her, seventy-one, very straight, very neat, in a dark coat. Neither of them had asked why. Clifford had rung them too. Rani had come down the stone stairs and gone straight to the end of the desk and stood over the stone with both hands flat on the desk on either side of the glass cover, and she had not moved since.

At seven o'clock, Florida came up on it.

* * *

A room with a lot of glass in it.

Jo had heard it described. Her father had heard it described, in 2038, by Clifford on the airfield at Newquay with his hands in his pockets, watching a plane go out to the west with a lens in it in a steel case the size of a lunchbox. *There's a building near the Cape. A room in the building with a lot of glass in it. They put the lens in the room, and they read it.*

She had never seen it. Nobody in Torbay had. It came up on the screen now, a long white room in afternoon light, with tall windows down one side and a flat grey sea beyond them, and glass. Glass everywhere. Panels of it, standing on the floor in steel frames, at angles to each other. Lenses, and mirrors, and things Jo had no names for, in rows, going away down the room. And light going through all of it. Bending, and splitting, and coming together again, in thin bright lines across the air, from one end of the room to the other.

And in the middle of it all, on a steel table, under a glass dome, something small.

Clifford was eighty-two. He looked it, on the screen. Thin, and stooped, in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, with his hair gone to nothing and a pair of glasses on his nose that he kept pushing up with one finger. He had a camera in his hand, a small one, on a stick, and he did not say hello.

"Rani," he said.

"I'm here," said Rani.

"I'm going to take the dome off. I've never taken it off. Nobody has. Nineteen years." His voice was not steady. "I've had the boys clear the room. It's just me. I'm going to take it off and put the camera right on it and you're going to look and tell me if I'm crazy."

"Take it off," said Rani.

* * *

He took it off.

He had to put the camera down to do it, on the table, so that for a moment the screen showed only the steel of the tabletop, very close, and the edge of a cradle of grey foam, the same foam, Jo thought, the same kind exactly, as the cradle under the stone at the end of the desk. Then the sound of Clifford breathing. A soft clink

of glass on steel. And then his hand came back and picked up the camera and turned it, and brought it down, close, over the foam.

* * *

Jo had never seen the lens. She had read it. In her father's forty-first book, on a Friday afternoon in July 2038, in this cellar, on this desk, in a steel case, the day Rani brought it from the campus and opened the lid and everybody looked in.

A disc of glass the size of a saucer. As thick as a thumb. Clear, and then grey, and then green, and then something warm at the centre, and never the same colour twice.

What was on the screen was a stone.

Smooth. Dark grey. The size and shape of a goose egg, a little flattened. With a dull sheen on it, like slate after rain.

Jo looked at it on the screen. Then she looked down the length of the desk at the end of it, at the cradle of grey foam under its cover of thick glass.

* * *

"It started in about 2045," said Clifford. His voice came out of the speakers very quietly, as if he were in a church. "The edges. They went soft. We thought it was the polish going; we thought it was wear. Then it got thicker in the middle. A millimetre a year. Then two. It got heavier." He swallowed. "It weighs four times what it did when Rani cut it. Nobody's put anything into it. Nothing's touched it. It's sat under that dome on that table in this room with the light going through it, teaching. And it grew."

"The colour," said Vicky. Her voice was very calm, the way it always was when something was very wrong.

"Went darker every year. Grey. Clouded. We thought it was failing. The readings never dropped. Never once. The boxes on the birds kept learning. Every year better." Clifford moved the camera,

a little, round the side of the thing in the foam. "And about three years ago it stopped changing. It just... stopped. Like it had got where it was going."

"And this," he said. "This is what I want Rani to see."

* * *

She was standing at the end of the desk with her hands flat on either side of the glass cover over the stone, looking at the screen on the wall. She had been looking at it since the dome came off. Jo had watched her look. She had watched her face go very still, and then stiller, and then something beyond still, the way a pond goes when the wind drops at evening and the surface stops being a surface and becomes a window.

"Closer," said Rani.

The end of the stone. The narrow end, where it flattened. And just in from the tip, under the dull grey sheen, very small, a mark. Not on the surface. In it. Inside. A dark curved thing, like a comma, or a tadpole, or the print of a fingernail pressed into wax, about the size of a grain of rice.

Then, without taking her eyes off the screen, she took her right hand off the desk and put it on the glass cover over the stone at the end of the desk. Flat. And then she moved it. Slid it, very slowly, along the glass, to the narrow end of the stone underneath. And stopped.

And bent down, and looked through the cover. At the stone. At its narrow end. Just in from the tip.

Under the grey sheen. Inside. Very small. A dark curved thing, like a comma, about the size of a grain of rice.

* * *

"C-one," said Rani.

Her voice was perfectly level. Jo had heard it like that once before, in the white room, in 2050, standing over the hole in the floor where the fibre went down.

"Inclusion C-one," said Rani. "That's what I called it. In the log. The first night it was down here. April 2028. Keith had his hand on it, and I put the lamp down close, and I saw it, and I wrote it down. *Inclusion, comma-shaped, approx. two millimetres, narrow end, eight millimetres from tip.* C-one. The first thing I ever wrote about this stone." She did not take her hand off the glass. "I've looked at it every night for twenty-nine years. I could draw it with my eyes shut."

"And the lens," said Rani. "In 2038. The second one. The one that didn't crack." Her voice did not change. "There was a bubble in it. One. Near the edge. Tiny. I found it the night we cut it, on the Friday, under the lamp, before I brought it here. I nearly cried. I thought I'd ruined it. A bubble near the rim, where the wire started. Comma-shaped." She breathed. "I called it B-one. In the other log. The campus log. And I never put the two logs side by side. Why would I? One was a stone out of the sky. One was a thing I made in a furnace on Torbay Road."

"It grew," she said. "The edge came in. The middle came up. And the bubble near the rim ended up eight millimetres from the tip of the narrow end." She took a breath that shook, very slightly. "B-one is C-one, Jo."

* * *

She looked at the stone at the end of the desk, under the glass, under Rani's hand. A stone. Smooth, dark grey, the size and shape of a goose egg, with a sheen on it like slate after rain. A stone that had come down out of the sky in February 2028 in a burst of light over the Irish Sea, and been pulled out of the water by a man in a boat in the dark with his hand flat on it and his face doing something her father had only ever seen on one other face in his life.

And she looked at the screen. At the thing in the grey foam on a steel table in a room full of glass four thousand miles away. A stone. The same. A lens, grown in a furnace in Paignton in the summer of 2038, from a pattern read off the stone every night for nine weeks, cut with a wire as thin as a hair, polished, carried in a carpet bag, flown to Florida, and left in a room with the light going through it for nineteen years.

The same.

* * *

"It's mine," said Rani.

"I made it," she said. "I made the stone." She shut her eyes. "The thing that came out of the sky. The thing that lit the bay. The thing Keith put his hand on in a boat in the dark and cried. The thing I've read every night for twenty-nine years and never understood, and grew a copy of, because I couldn't understand it." She opened her eyes. "I made it. In 2038. On Torbay Road. And it's going to go back."

"Back where?" said Vicky.

"To where it came from," said Rani. "Keith knew. In 2038. When I said *in glass*. In this room. He looked at me. You remember, Jo. Your father wrote it down. *It was not surprise. It was recognition.*" She swallowed. "And he said: *she can do it. It'll crack. The first one. And then it won't.*"

"He knew it would work," said Vicky.

"He knew it *had* worked," said Rani. "He'd had his hand on it for ten years. He'd had his hand on it in 2057, before that, in the white room, before he came back. He'd been holding the thing I was going to make since before I was asked to make it." She looked at the stone under her hand. "He knew the first one would crack because this one didn't. Because this one's the second one. Because it's here."

* * *

On the screen, in Florida, Clifford had put the camera down on the table. He was standing with both hands on the edge of the steel, looking at the thing in the foam, and he was crying. Not much. An old man in a white shirt with his sleeves rolled up, in a room full of glass and light, with water on his face that he did not wipe.

"Who made it, then?" he said. His voice came out of the speakers cracked. "The first time? Who made the stone that came out of the sky, before Rani made it? Somebody had to. It had to start somewhere."

"No," said Rani.

"It didn't start, Clifford." She took her hand off the glass cover, at last, and stood up, and turned round, and looked at the screen. "That's the thing. That's what I couldn't see. I read the stone every night for ten years and grew a copy because the stone taught me how. And the copy went to Florida and taught itself, for nineteen years, until it was the stone. And now it goes back. To 1895. And it sits in the sky over Berry Head and Edward Harvey sees it from a tram and tells a man called Holmes about a star that doesn't move with the others. And then it goes. And then it comes back down, in 2028, over the Irish Sea. And Keith pulls it out. And it sits here. And teaches me how to make it." She was quiet. "Nobody was first. It doesn't have a first. It's a circle. Like the watch."

"Like your watch," she said.

* * *

Jo put her hand in her pocket.

The watch was there. The plain gold hunter with the crack across the glass. Holmes's. Jack's. Johnny's. Douglas's. Her father's. Hers.

She had wound it every night since 2031. She had never once asked where it came from before Holmes. Her father had never asked. Jack had never asked; he had sat at a table at Gran's in May 1896 and taken it from a man who said *where I am going, they tell the time differently*, and not asked.

She thought: *a stone on a table in Florida. And a stone on a desk in Paignton. And they're the same stone.*

She thought: *nothing in this has a beginning. Nothing.*

* * *

"What happens to this one?" said Vicky.

She was looking at the stone at the end of the desk. Under its glass cover. In its foam.

"When that one goes," said Vicky. "On Monday. To 1895. When the lens goes back and becomes the star and comes down in 2028 and becomes this." She did not take her eyes off it. "What happens to this?"

Jo looked at her. Rani was standing in front of the screen with her hands at her sides, very still, looking at the stone in its foam, and her face had gone the way it went in the white room when she was reading something nobody else could see.

"I don't know," said Rani at last.

"Will it still work? The lamps? The interface? Chris's desk?"

"Vicky," she said, "I don't know. Nobody's ever done this. Nobody's ever sent a thing back to be itself." She was quiet. "There are two of them now. Tonight. In the world. The same thing, twice. One that's been round, and one that's about to go round." She looked at the screen, and then at the desk. "I don't think there can be two of them for very long."

* * *

On the screen, Clifford had wiped his face with the back of his hand.

"I'm bringing it," he said.

"Thursday. I'm flying it over. Myself. In the case. The same case." He picked up the glass dome from the table beside him and held it in both hands, over the thing in the foam, and did not put it down yet. "I've had it nineteen years. I'm not putting it on a plane with a courier. I'm eighty-two. I'm flying it myself, and I'm going to sit with it on my knees from the Cape to Heathrow, and on the train from Paddington, and I'm going to bring it down those stone steps and put it on that desk next to the other one." He swallowed. "And then I want to see them side by side. Before it goes. Once."

He put the dome down over it, very gently, with a soft clink of glass on steel. And the screen went dark.

* * *

After a while Rani bent down, and looked through the cover, at the narrow end of the stone. At C-one. Just in from the tip.

"I nearly cried," she said, very quietly, to the stone. "In 2038. When I found the bubble. I thought I'd ruined you."

The stone did not do anything. It sat in its foam, smooth, dark grey, a little flattened, with a sheen on it like slate after rain.

"It'll crack," she said. "The first one. And then it won't." She almost laughed. "He said that to me. In this room. Nineteen years ago. And I thought he meant he had faith in me."

"He did," said Jo.

Rani looked at her.

"He did," said Jo again. "He knew it would work. And he had faith in you. Both." She looked at the stone. "It's not one or the other, Rani. It never is. With him."

* * *

Jo walked up Union Street at nine, in the dark, past the clock tower, to the corner where the Exchange stood.

She stopped on the pavement across the road and looked up at it. Glass and pale stone. Five storeys. A wide door with a step. And at the top, the one lit window. The white room. Empty tonight; Chris had gone home at five. The light left on, the way it always was.

She thought about Thursday. A man of eighty-two on a plane with a steel case on his knees.

She thought about Monday. A woman in grey with a carpet bag, and a ticket in a cloth bag, and a list in the lining, and a stone that had been glass.

She went home and wound the watch at ten, carefully, not too far, and sat with it open on her palm for a long time, looking at the crack across the glass, from the twelve to the four.

Then she wrote it down. The date, the time, the place. *C.D. on the screen, with the lens. R. put her hand on the glass over the stone.*

"It's mine."

Six days.

Chapter 20 – *The Park Again*

Thurs. 25 Oct. 2057. The Exchange, 12.40 p.m. (7.40 p.m. S.) B. rang. Hollis in the park at Tiong Bahru, 5.30 their time. Asked him. B. said no. Asked for M.L. B. said no. Hollis: "Monday. Johor." A woman at the window over the market. B.: "She's here." C.D. landed at Heathrow at 6.10 this morning with the case. Four days.

Her father asked her to come to the park.

He did not ask her to come with him. He asked her to come to the park, at half past five, on the Thursday, and sit on a bench under the rain trees on the far side, and watch. He said it at her desk by the window in the long white room over the phone-case shop at eleven in the morning, standing beside her chair, in a voice so quiet that the analyst at the next screen did not look up.

"Watch what?" said Mei Ling.

"Me," said her father. "And a man." He looked out of the window at Joo Chiat Road in the heat. "The man from London. Hollis. He asked for a meeting. With me, this time. He said, at a place of my choosing." He was quiet. "I chose the park."

"Why do you want me there?"

Her father looked down at her, along, not at, the way he did. Sixty-two. Grey in his hair, a lot of it now. The long Harvey jaw that she had seen in a photograph of a man she had met three times in her life, in a hotel in Torquay, an old man with a stick who had held her hand at the door of a room and said nothing at all.

"Because he'll ask me for something," said her father, "and I'll say no. And then he'll ask me for you." He did not look away. "And

I want you to hear me say no to that too. With your own ears. So you know it was said."

* * *

It rained at four.

It always did, in October. The inter-monsoon. A grey wall coming over the island from the south-west at about half past three, and the light going green, and then the sky opening, all at once, as if somebody had turned it over, rain so hard it bounced a foot off the pavements and filled the monsoon drains in five minutes and drove everybody under the five-foot ways. And then, by five, gone. Steam coming off the roads. The rain trees dripping. The air washed and hot and smelling of wet earth and drains and frangipani.

Mei Ling took the train to Tiong Bahru at a quarter to five and walked down past the market in the steam.

The flower stall under the first awning, with the jasmine in buckets, and the chrysanthemums for the festival. The same stall. She did not stop at it. She did not look at it. She had not looked at it since a Friday in September, when a woman in a straw hat had stood in its shade and then not been there.

She went into the park.

* * *

Not a park, really. A patch of grass with rain trees round it and a playground in one corner, with the climbing frame shaped like a ship, and the benches round the edge. The grass was soaking. The playground was empty; the aunties had not come down yet; it was too wet. A man was sweeping water off the path with a broom.

She sat on the bench under the rain trees on the far side. The same bench. She had not decided to; she found she was sitting on it.

She looked at the market, across the grass. The awnings. The flower stall. And above them, the row of old shophouse windows

over the market, the upstairs rooms, with their shutters, most of them closed against the afternoon, some of them open now that the rain had gone.

One of them was open all the way. On the corner, over the flower stall. A window with green shutters, folded back.

* * *

Her father came at twenty past five.

He came across the grass from the road side, in a white shirt and dark trousers and good shoes that he did not seem to mind getting wet, with his hands in his pockets, and he did not look at her. He went to the bench by the swings, at the edge of the playground, the bench nearest the climbing frame, and sat down on it, in the wet, and took his hands out of his pockets and put them on his knees.

Mei Ling knew that bench.

She did not know how she knew it. She had been brought to this park every evening, her mother said, until she was two. And then not. She did not remember it.

But she knew that bench. The one by the swings. The one where a woman would stop a pushchair, and put the brake on, and bend down to undo the straps.

* * *

Edward Hollis came at half past five exactly.

From the market side. Out from under the awnings, past the flower stall, across the wet grass, in a pale linen suit, the same one or another like it, with a slim folder under his arm, unhurried. He did not look at the bench under the rain trees on the far side. He did not look at Mei Ling at all. He crossed the grass to the bench by the swings and stopped in front of it and looked down at her father, and smiled, and the smile went all the way up.

"Mr Tay," he said. "Thank you. I know this is odd."

"Sit down, Mr Hollis," said her father, without getting up.

Hollis sat. On the other end of the bench. With the folder on his knees. He crossed his legs, and the linen did not crease, and he looked out across the park the way her father was looking, at the market, at the awnings, at the windows above.

* * *

She heard some. Enough. Her father's voice was low, and flat, and very even; it carried the way flat things carry across water. Hollis's was warmer and quieter and she lost it, sometimes, under the drip of the trees. But she watched. She had been told to watch.

Hollis opened the folder. He did not hand it to her father. He laid it on the bench between them, open, and turned it a little, so that her father could see, and her father did not look down.

"…your mother's family," said Hollis. "A very old trust. You know this. We wrote to you."

Her father said nothing.

"It has had a head. Always. For a very long time. Somebody to sit at the top of the table." Hollis's hand moved on the folder. "Your mother sat there. Did you know that? For two years. A long time ago. And then she stood up, and walked away from it, and the chair has been…" he paused, choosing the word, "…kept warm. By others. Not of the family."

"The family would like it back," said Hollis. "In the family. Where it belongs. The trustees have asked me to ask you." He smiled. "I'm only the messenger, Mr Tay. You understand. I'm asking you, very respectfully, on their behalf, whether you will take your grandmother's chair."

* * *

Her father looked at the market for a long time.

Mei Ling watched his face. She had watched it all her life. She knew it better than her own. And she saw something go across it that she had seen only once before, at her desk on a Wednesday in September, when he read a message twice from a firm in London and went very still.

Not fear. She did not think her father was afraid of anything. Something older than fear. The face of a man who has been waiting for a thing a very long time and is almost relieved that it has come.

"No," said her father.

* * *

"I thought you might say that," said Hollis. "Your mother said it too. In the end. In 2028, I believe, to a man in a hotel. *No.* Just like that." He tapped the folder with one finger. "And here you are, sitting in the same park."

"I'll tell them," said Hollis. "Of course. But I should be honest with you, Mr Tay, because I think you'd prefer it. They won't stop asking. They have been asking for a very long time, and they are very patient, and they have never once, in all that time, taken no for an answer from your family." He looked across the park. Not at the market. At the bench under the rain trees on the far side. At Mei Ling.

He looked straight at her.

For the first time. Across the wet grass. And smiled.

"There's a granddaughter," he said.

* * *

She sat on the wet bench with her hands in her lap and looked back at him across the park and did not move, the way she had not moved at a plastic table in a food centre five weeks ago when he

said *your grandmother was a Petrick*. And she found, looking at him, that she could not quite see the colour of his eyes. Even now. Even at forty yards, in the clean washed light after the rain. She knew they were there. She could not say what they were.

"No," said her father.

"I haven't asked yet."

"You don't need to," said her father. "No."

"Mr Tay," he said, very gently, "with the greatest respect, that's not really yours to refuse. She's twenty-eight. She'll make up her own mind." He smiled. "She already has, once. She said no to me too. In September. Very charmingly. And then she put my card in her pocket." He paused. "And then she tore it up. In this park. And put the pieces in that bin." He nodded at the bin by the swings. "So you see, I do know her a little."

Sitting in the steam, in the heat, on the wet bench, she went cold all through, from the top of her head to her feet, the way you go cold when you hear a noise in the house at night that should not be there.

He had known. About the card. About the bin. He had not been there; she had looked. There had been nobody in the park that evening but the aunties and the children and a boy with a ball and a woman in a straw hat by a flower stall who was not there when she looked again.

* * *

"The trustees will be in Johor on Monday," said Hollis.

He stood up. He put the folder under his arm. He straightened his jacket, though it did not need straightening.

"At a house. Just over the causeway. They'd very much like to see her there. Monday night. Late; they keep late hours, I'm afraid. A car will come." He looked down at her father. "I'm telling you, Mr

Tay, not asking. As a courtesy. Because I'd rather you heard it from me." He was quiet a moment. "Whether she'd like to come is, I'm afraid, becoming less important to them than it was."

Her father stood up too. He was taller than Hollis. Mei Ling had never noticed that. He stood up from the bench by the swings in his white shirt and his wet good shoes and looked down at the man in the linen suit, and his face did not change at all, and something came off him across the wet grass that Mei Ling felt on the bench under the rain trees forty yards away like heat off a road.

"Mr Hollis," said her father.

Hollis waited.

"I'm going to say it once more," said her father. "So that you can tell them I said it to your face. In this park. Where a man went for her pushchair when she was two years old, and a woman got there first." He did not raise his voice. "No. Not me. Not her. Not the chair. Not the trust. Not the house. Not Monday. Not ever." He was quiet. "Tell them that's from the family."

Then Hollis smiled, and the smile went all the way up, and Mei Ling trusted it less than anything she had ever seen.

"I'll tell them," he said.

* * *

He went across the grass, towards the road side, past the playground, past the bin by the swings. And as he passed the bench, the empty end of it where he had been sitting, he stopped. And took something out of his inside pocket. And bent, and laid it on the wet slats.

A card. Plain white. With a name and a number and nothing else.

He laid it down exactly square to the edge of the bench. Precisely. As if somebody had taken a set square to it.

Then he straightened up, and walked away across the grass towards the road, unhurried, in his pale linen suit, and Mei Ling watched him go, and by the time he reached the road she found she was not sure, if she were asked, that she could pick him out of a line.

* * *

Her father stood by the bench by the swings with his hands at his sides and looked at the card on the slats. He did not touch it. He did not pick it up. He looked at it, square on the wet wood, the way, Mei Ling thought, you look at a thing that has been left for you to understand.

Then he looked up. Not at Mei Ling. Past her. Across the park, over the grass, past the playground, to the market. To the awnings. To the flower stall under the first one, with its jasmine in buckets.

To the window on the corner, with the green shutters folded back.

* * *

There was a woman in the window.

She was standing back a little from it, in the shadow of the room behind, the way you stand at a window when you want to see out and not be seen. But the light after the rain was very clear and very low, and it came in at the window from the west, from behind Mei Ling, across the park, and lay on the woman's face.

Fair. Tall. Very straight. A face that was handsome rather than pretty, and strong. About forty. Grey at the temples, a little.

No hat.

She was not looking at Mei Ling. She was looking at the man by the swings. At Mei Ling's father, sixty-two, in his white shirt, standing by a bench in a wet park, looking up at her window.

They looked at each other across the park for a long time.

Mei Ling sat on the bench under the rain trees and looked from one to the other. At her father's face, turned up. At the woman's face, in the window, turned down. And she saw something she had seen once before, in a photograph, on a form she had not been meant to see, a long time ago. The way he looked at people. Along, not at.

Like you, her mother had said once, about somebody, to her father, in a kitchen, when Mei Ling was very small and was supposed to be asleep. *Round the eyes.*

* * *

Her father looked down first.

He looked down at the card on the bench. And then he turned, and came across the grass, slowly, in his wet shoes, to the bench under the rain trees on the far side, and sat down next to her. Not close. A little apart. With his hands on his knees.

"Who is she?"

Her father looked at the window over the flower stall. It was empty now. The green shutters still folded back. The room behind dark.

"She's my mother," said her father.

* * *

She sat on the wet bench and looked at the empty window and felt the thing she had felt at a plastic table in a food centre, when a man in a linen suit said *grandmother*. A hand holding her. A smell like the inside of a cupboard, cool and clean, and jasmine, and frying. A fist closed on a linen collar. A hat with the light coming through the weave in little points like stars.

And two words.

"Papa," she said. "What does *Hallo, Kleine* mean?"

Her father turned his head very slowly and looked at her.

She had never seen his face do that. Not once. Not in twenty-eight years. It did not go still, the way it went still when something was wrong. It came apart. Very quietly, all at once, the way a sandcastle comes apart when the first wave reaches it: not falling, just softening, going.

"Where did you hear that?" he said.

"I don't know." She looked at the window. "I've always heard it. In my sleep. All my life. A woman's voice. Two words." She swallowed. "I never knew what they meant. I always thought somebody would tell me."

"It's German," he said at last. His voice was not quite steady. "It means *hello, little one*." He looked down at his hands. "She said it to me. When I was small. Every night. At the door of my room in the flat at the top of the block. Before she turned the light out." He was quiet. "I haven't heard anybody say it since I was thirteen."

* * *

They sat on the bench until it was dark.

The aunties went home with the children. The lights came on in the market. The flower stall closed, and the man took the jasmine in, bucket by bucket. The window over it stayed open, and dark, and nobody came to it.

Her father did not tell her anything else. Not that night. She did not ask. She sat beside him in the warm dark under the rain trees, with the drip coming down off the leaves onto the bench, and thought about a woman who had left on the morning of her son's thirteenth birthday, and stood in a corridor outside a delivery ward in a grey coat on the morning her granddaughter was born, and lifted a child out of a pushchair in this park three strides ahead of a man with a newspaper, and said two words, and gone.

And was in a room over the market, now. Tonight. Watching.

"Monday," said Mei Ling, at last.

"Johor. A car. He said they'd send a car." She looked at him. "Papa, what's in Johor?"

"Nothing," said her father. "A house. People who've been asking my family for things for a hundred and sixty years." He stood up. "You're not going."

"Papa—"

"You're not going anywhere on Monday. You're staying in the flat. With your mother. With the door locked." He looked down at her. "I'll have people outside. Ai Li's back. She knows people."

"And if they come anyway?"

"I said no," said her father. "To his face. In this park. You heard me." He held out his hand to her. "It was said."

She took his hand. He pulled her up off the wet bench.

At the edge of the park, by the swings, he stopped by the other bench. The card was still there. Plain white, on the wet slats, square to the edge. He looked at it for a long time.

Then he picked it up, and tore it in half, and in half again, and put the pieces in the bin by the swings, the way she had in September.

As they walked away across the grass towards the road, she felt it. On the back of her neck. The way you feel somebody watching you across a room.

And that night, in the flat off Joo Chiat Road, three floors up, she lay down on the bed pushed into the corner at an angle, and found, for the first time in her life, that she was not facing north-west.

She was facing south-west. Towards Tiong Bahru. Towards a market, and a park, and a room over a flower stall with the shutters folded back.

Then she slept.

Chapter 21 – *The Watch*

Sat. 27 Oct. 2057. Studio Ania, the cellar, 10.20 a.m. The two of them side by side. H. put his left hand on the younger. Burned. I dressed it. Paignton sands, below Roundham, 7.52 p.m. H. asked for the watch. I gave it him. He wound it once. 10.00 p.m.: nothing to wind. Two days.

There were two of them on the desk.

Clifford had brought it on the Thursday night, down the stone stairs into the cellar with the steel case in both arms, the way you carry a child that has fallen asleep in the car. He had sat with it on his knees from the Cape to Torquay. He put it down next to the cradle with the glass cover, and opened it, and stood back.

And there they were. Side by side. In two cradles of grey foam.

Two stones. Smooth, dark grey, the size and shape of a goose egg, a little flattened, with a sheen on them like slate after rain. The same. Not alike. The same. And at the narrow end of each, just in from the tip, under the sheen, inside, a dark curved mark like a comma.

Nobody had said anything for a long time. Rani had stood between them with one hand flat on each and her eyes shut. Clifford had cried again. And the hum of the cellar had gone lower. Gone very still, the way the white room went still when Holmes talked to the desk.

"They know each other," Rani had said. With her eyes shut.

On Saturday morning Holmes asked to see them.

* * *

He came down the stone stairs at ten past ten, in David Harvey's jacket, too short in the arms, with Jo behind him.

He had not been down to the cellar before. Not in this visit, not in any of the others, not in 2049 or 2052 or 2055. He had sat in the white room with his hand on the bare desk and talked down the fibre to the thing at the end of it, four hundred yards away under the street, and he had never once asked to see it.

He walked down the length of the desk towards them, slowly, with his hands behind his back, one holding the other at the wrist, and stopped in front of them, and looked.

Jo stood by the stairs. Rani was not there. Nobody was. Holmes had asked for that too.

* * *

"So that is what she travels in," said Holmes.

"I knew there was something. In 1895. The star over Berry Head that Mr Harvey told me about, that did not move with the others. I watched it from the headland for an hour. And the next week a young woman came through the gate at Paignton station with no ticket, and the week after, the star was gone."

He looked from one to the other.

"I have been carried by it myself," he said. "Several times, from where I stand. I did not know it was a thing. I thought it was a place. A door. I have never seen it." He bent, a little, from the waist, the way a tall man bends to look at something in a shop window. "It is very small, Hills. To carry so much."

"Which is the younger?"

"That one," said Jo. "The one in the case. Clifford's. It was made in 2038."

"And the elder has been round."

"Through 1895. And the sky. And the sea." Holmes straightened. "And this one will go round on Monday." He looked at the two of them, side by side. "There cannot be two of them for very long. Your friend from the campus is right. I have been two of myself, once or twice, in a manner of speaking. One does not care for it."

* * *

He put out his left hand.

Jo did not see it coming. She had learned his hands the way she had learned her father's, and she did not see it coming. He did not hesitate. He put his left hand out, flat, the way he put it on the bare desk in the white room, and laid it on the younger stone.

And the cellar went white.

Not the light. Something else. Jo felt it in her teeth and the backs of her eyes and the hair on her arms all at once, the way you feel a storm in the half-second before the thunder. The hum dropped away to nothing. The dark screens on the long desk all came on together, white, and went off. Up on Union Street somebody said *Christ* and a car braked.

He stood with his hand flat on the stone and his eyes shut and his face very still, and Jo saw the muscle at the hinge of his jaw stand out like a cord. One second. Two. Three.

* * *

The cellar came back. The hum. The screens dark again. Somebody on Union Street laughing, now, the way people laugh when they have had a fright and it was nothing.

Holmes stood in front of the desk with his left hand held a little away from his body, palm up, and looked at it.

His palm was burned. Not badly. Not deep. A line, across the middle of it, from the base of the forefinger to the heel of the hand,

red and raised, as if he had laid it on a hotplate, or the bar of an electric fire. And at the edges of the line, where the skin had split a little, blood. Not much. Beading. And a smell coming off it that Jo knew and could not at first name, and then could.

Electricity. The smell in the white room when Chris came back from a long one. The smell of the air after lightning.

"Sit down," said Jo.

"It is nothing," said Holmes.

"Sit down." She put her hand on his shoulder and pushed, the way she had pushed men into chairs in interview rooms, and he sat, on the swivel chair from the shop, which nobody sat in, and looked up at her with an expression she had not seen on him before. Faintly surprised. Faintly amused.

"You are your great-great-grandfather's," he said.

"I'm my father's. Hold it up."

* * *

There was a first-aid box on the wall by the stairs. Rani's people had put it there in 2038; it had not been opened since. Jo took it down and opened it on the desk and found what she wanted: a burn dressing in a foil packet, the gel kind, clear and cold and a little sticky, that you laid over a burn and that sealed itself at the edges and stayed there.

She tore the packet open. She took his left hand in hers, palm up.

His hand was cold. Long and thin and very cold, with the burn across it hot as a coal in the middle. She laid the dressing over the line, from the forefinger to the heel, and pressed the edges down with her thumb, all the way round, and it sealed, clear and shining, over the red.

"What is it?" he said.

"Gel. A hydrogel. It cools it. It keeps it clean." She pressed the last edge. "You can get it wet. It'll come off on its own in a week or so."

Holmes held his hand up in the light from the pavement lights, and turned it, and looked at the clear dressing over the burn. It was not a bandage. It was not anything he had a word for. It shone like a thin sheet of ice over the red line and the blood, and it smelled, faintly, of the burn under it, of electricity.

"I shall come back to Paignton with this on my hand," he said, very quietly. "And a young policeman will see it under a lamp at the end of the pier, and ask me who I am." He lowered the hand to his knee. "And a week later it will be gone, and there will be no mark. And he will write that down too." He almost smiled. "He wrote everything down. You know that. You have his books."

Jo did not answer.

"Then you know what I am going to ask you," said Holmes. "This evening."

* * *

He said goodbye to Chris at one, in the white room.

When he came down he did not say anything about it. He got into the car and sat with his dressed hand on his knee and looked out of the window at the sea at the end of the street.

"He gave me this," he said, after a while.

He opened his right hand. In it was a photograph. Small, square, old. A colour print, the colours gone soft. Five teenagers on a striped towel on a beach in front of a pier, squinting into the sun. A transistor radio. A bottle of Tizer. A boy at the end with his knees up. And next to him, laughing, with his hair in his eyes, with the boy's arm round his neck, another.

"He said I was to take it," said Holmes. "He said he had sixty thousand, and one more or less would not matter. He said he could not remember the name of the boy next to him, and that I should know it, and that somebody should, a long way back." He closed his hand over it. "He did not tell me the name."

"Phil," said Jo.

"Phil," he said. And put the photograph in the inside pocket of David Harvey's jacket, over his heart.

* * *

He said goodbye to Karen at five, in the hall at Widecombe Cot.

Karen was on the bench under the barometer. Holmes came out of Room One with nothing in his hands. He had folded David Harvey's jacket on the end of the bed, very square. He was in his own clothes, the black frock coat he had come in, dried and brushed, and over it, zipped to the chin, Jo's blue waterproof.

"You're off," she said.

"I am, madam."

"You've not eaten your ham."

Holmes looked at her for a long moment. Then he went past the desk, through the door to the back passage, and along to the kitchen, and Jo heard the fridge, and a plate, and a knife. And he came back with a slice of ham on a plate, and sat down on the bench beside Karen under the barometer, and ate it. All of it. Slowly. As if it were the best thing he had ever tasted.

"Somebody told me you liked it," she said.

"Somebody was right," said Holmes.

He gave her the plate. Then he took her old knotted hand in both of his, the burned one and the other, and bowed over it, very low, the way, Jo thought, he would have bowed to a duchess.

Karen did not say anything. She looked down at the top of his head. Her face did not move. But her free hand, the one on the stick, went white at the knuckles.

Upstairs, on the first floor, over the dining room, a door was open. Jo had not heard it open. She looked up the stairs.

Ania was standing on the landing, at the top of the first flight, in the grey costume, with her hands at her sides. She did not come down. She stood and looked down the stairs at the tall thin man in the hall in a blue waterproof, and he stood at the bottom and looked up at her, and neither of them said anything at all.

Then he turned, and went to the front door, and opened it, and went out, and down the steps, and down the path under the monkey puzzle.

The latch.

The hinge.

* * *

The tide was right out.

Jo had looked it up. Low water at Paignton at seven forty-seven. She drove him down and parked on the Esplanade by the pier and they walked down the slipway onto the sand together in the dark.

No moon. The stars out over the bay, very many, very clear. The pier to their left. Roundham dark on their right, and at the very top of it a white house, dark, with a round window under its eaves.

They walked out across the wet sand towards the water. The lamps went with them: hers, over her own head, and nothing over

his. Clear air. A man with no lamp in a coat made of nothing, walking out across Paignton sands in the dark.

At the edge of the water, below Roundham, he stopped.

* * *

"Hills," said Holmes.

"May I have my watch?"

* * *

She had known since the cellar. Perhaps since the white room on the first of October, when he looked at it in her hand for a long time and said nothing. Perhaps since a line in Jack's long account: *He took out his watch, on its chain. A plain gold hunter, worn smooth, with a crack in the glass. He laid it on the table in front of me.*

She had known where it came from. She had known where it had to go.

She put her hand in her pocket.

It was there. Where it had been every day since a cold morning in November 2031 at the war memorial on the Strand, when her father put it in her hand and said *you wind it every night, and when you're old you give it to whoever's next*. She was forty-seven. She was not old. She took it out.

It was warm from her pocket. It was always warm. She held it on her palm for a moment in the dark, with the starlight on the case, and the lights of the Esplanade, and felt it tick against her skin, the way she had felt it tick every night for twenty-six years. Steady. Not too fast. It had never lost more than a minute in a week, in all those years.

* * *

He took it with his right hand. The one without the dressing.

He did not look at it at first. He held it, closed, in his palm, the way she had, and looked at her. Grey eyes. Very steady. The look he had given her on the sand on the first of October, top to bottom, and stopped.

He opened it on his palm, in the dark, and looked at the face for a long time. The hands. The crack across the glass. Jo could not see his face; it was turned down, to the watch. She could see his thumb move on the case. Over the place where it was worn smooth. Over the place where a hundred and sixty years of hands had held it. Jack's. Johnny's. Douglas's. Her father's. Hers.

He took the little key out of the back.

He fitted it. And wound. Once. Carefully. Not too far.

And put the key back, and closed the watch, and held it in his hand.

* * *

"Where I am going," said Holmes, "they tell the time by this."

He put it in the pocket of his waistcoat, under the frock coat, under the blue waterproof. On its chain. Where it had been, Jo thought, in Bailey's, in 1895, when he looked at his bare wrist for the time and it was not there. Where it would be at a table at Gran's in May 1896 when he unhooked it and laid it in front of a young policeman.

"You will want to wind something," said Holmes. "Tonight. At ten." He looked at her. "Do not. Sit with it. Let your hand go to the pocket and find nothing there. Write that down."

"Your great-great-grandfather wound it every night of his life," said Holmes. "And his son. And his. And your father. And you. Every night. A hundred and sixty years." He was quiet. "And now it goes back to the first of them. To be wound. So that it can come to

you." He looked out at the water. "It does not start, Hills. It never started. It is only ever being handed on."

He turned his head and looked along the edge of the water. Towards Roundham. Towards the dark headland and the lights along the top of it.

"Your friend from the campus would say it is a circle," he said. "I think it is more like a hand. One hand. Holding the same thing, at different times."

* * *

He walked away along the water's edge.

Towards Roundham. In the dark. In a blue waterproof made of nothing, over a black frock coat, with a burn on his left hand under a clear dressing, and a photograph of a boy on a beach in his inside pocket, and a gold watch on a chain in his waistcoat, wound once.

She stood at the edge of the water with her hands at her sides and watched him go. Long narrow steps. A tall man walking with his hands behind his back, one holding the other at the wrist. Along the wet sand, just above the line where the sea was. Getting smaller.

About a hundred yards along, below the dark of Roundham, he stopped.

And then he was not there.

* * *

Then she walked along the water's edge, the way he had gone, in his prints. She did not put the torch on. She did not need to. There was enough light from the Esplanade, and the stars, and the wet sand shining.

Long. Narrow. A boot. Nails in the heel. One, and then another, and then a long line of them, quite steady, going along by the water towards Roundham.

And then stopping.

Not turning. Not going into the sea. Simply stopping, in the middle of the wet sand, as if whoever made them had come to the end of where he was, and stepped off it.

She did not photograph it. She did not measure it. She stood over it for a long time and looked at it, and looked up, at the sky over Berry Head, where the stars were very many and very clear, and one of them, a little to the south of the lighthouse, very small, very steady, did not seem to move.

She went back up the beach to the car. She did not look back. The tide would come in at two in the morning and take them, and nobody would ever know they had been made.

Except that somebody would. In 1896. In March. Under a lamp at the end of the pier.

* * *

At ten o'clock, at her kitchen table, with the four boxes on the floor, her hand went to her pocket.

She did not tell it to. It went the way it had gone every night for twenty-six years, the way your hand goes to a light switch in the dark, to the pocket of her jeans, for the plain gold hunter, and the little key in the back.

There was nothing there.

Then she took her hand out, and put it flat on the table, and sat with it there, and did not wind anything.

The kitchen clock ticked. The one on the wall over the door. It was electric. It had never needed winding in its life.

Then she took out her pocketbook, and opened it, and wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Paignton sands, below*

Roundham, 7.52 p.m. H. asked for the watch. I gave it him. He wound it once.

And under it, because he had told her to, and because it was the only true thing she had:

10.00 p.m. Nothing to wind.

Then she wrote one more line, small, in the margin, the way her father wrote the things he did not want to be the main thing on a page. She wrote it the way Jack had not written the prints, in 1896, under a lamp at the end of the pier. Because somebody should.

They stopped.

Two days.

Chapter 22 – *2028*

Sun. 28 Oct. 2057. The Exchange, 1.29 a.m. BST. C.H. to 2028: Bailey's, Thurs. 6 April, about 9.40 p.m. Through K., in the window, his first night. "Don't move." Back 1.29 a.m. GMT. The same minute, twice. Cost: her voice, singing. One day.

"Tonight," said Chris. "Not tomorrow. Tonight."

He said it at ten o'clock on the Saturday night, in the hall at Widecombe Cot, on the bench under the barometer, with his coat already on. Jo had come up from Paignton sands at nine with sand in her shoes and nothing in her pocket and found him there, waiting, with Karen standing over him with her arms folded and her face like a stone wall.

"He's been sat there since seven," said Karen. "In his coat. He won't say."

"The clocks go back," said Chris. To Jo. Not to Karen. "Tonight. At two. The hour happens twice." He looked at the glass panel in the front door, at the dark beyond it. "I want to go in the first one and come back in the second."

She knew what he meant. She had read it in her father's book from 2031. Sunday the twenty-sixth of October, the night the clocks went back. Daddyhole Plain. *The first one.* A woman on the grass with her hand raised and a man with a whistle, and the hour happening twice, and something done in the first that was not undone in the second.

"Where?" said Jo.

"2028," said Chris. "The sixth of April. Bailey's. The night it opened." He looked at his hands. "The last door on the list. Before Monday."

"Through whom?"

"The young man in the window," he said.

* * *

Karen did not argue. She stood over him for a long time with her arms folded. Then she unfolded them, and bent, slowly, with her hand on the arm of the bench, and did up the top button of his coat, which he had left undone. And straightened his collar.

"You'll want your scarf," she said. "It's cold up there at night. The heating goes off."

She went and got it from the hook by the door and put it round his neck herself. A long grey one, wool, that Jo had seen on him every winter for eleven years. She tucked the ends into the front of his coat, the way you do for a child going out in snow.

"I'll be up," she said. "When you get back. I'll be in the kitchen."

"You don't have to," said Chris.

"I know I don't have to," said Karen. She went past him to the kitchen door. At the door she stopped, with her back to them, and her hand on the frame. "I've been in this house twenty years," she said, to the kitchen. "I know what Sunday is. I've known since September." She was quiet. "Go on. The pair of you."

* * *

The white room was cold. Karen was right. The heating went off at ten. The big window at the end looked down Union Street to the sea, black, with the lights of the harbour on it and nothing else. The bare desks. The big pale chair.

Chris sat down in the big pale chair in his coat and scarf and put his good hand flat on the desk.

"I'll go at twenty-nine minutes past one," said Chris. "The first one." He shut his eyes. "Wake me at twenty past."

* * *

She did not wake him at twenty past. She did not need to. At nineteen minutes past one his eyes opened, by themselves, the way they opened at Bailey's in the mornings for Keith at two minutes past eight, and he looked at the window, and at the black sea at the end of the street.

"Right," he said.

Jo crouched beside the chair. Not with the cup; she had it ready, on her desk, in a flask. But crouched.

"What's the nudge?"

He had never told her before. Not once, in eleven years. He told her where, sometimes, and when, and through whom. He never told her what he was going to do.

"Don't move," said Chris.

"That's all. Two words. To the young man in the window." He looked at the desk under his hand. "There's a man coming along the bar with his hand inside his jacket. And the young man knows; he's read every second of it in your father's book. Everything in him wants to move. And if he does, the man fires, across the bar, through the crowd, with your father three yards away. Your father has to get there first. And the young man has to give him the time to. By sitting still."

"And he can't? On his own?"

"He could," said Chris. "He's me. But it's his first night. He's been here six hours, and he's frightened half to death." He almost

smiled. "I remember being frightened. I don't remember why. I'm going to find out."

"It's twenty-nine minutes past," said Jo.

He shut his eyes, and said the six.

* * *

The lines came up.

Jono's, first. Close and loud and square, like a man walking on a wooden floor. The thirty-third book, black oilcloth, a pencil in the loop. *Thurs. 6 April 2028. Bailey's, back room.* And under it, later, at three in the morning at a kitchen table in Preston, going through it frame by frame, everything. The glass. The wrist. The jacket. The crack. The young man at the window table, who had not moved.

He had sat through the crack and the screaming and the chairs going over with one hand flat beside his cup.

He did not go into Jono. He could not. He went past Jono, along the line, the way you go past a man in a corridor, and found the other thing at the end of it. Not written. Seen. A young man at a window, who had never written anything down in his life and never would, but who was in every line Jono had written that night, and whose blood was Chris's own, because it was Chris.

It did not open like a front door. It opened like a hand. His own. Turning over.

* * *

Paignton. Thursday 6 April 2028. Bailey's, the public bar, the window table. About twenty to ten.

Noise.

That was the first thing. A wall of it. A public bar on opening night, packed to the doors, two hundred people talking at once and a

band in the corner, and glasses, and somebody laughing too loud by the door, and under it, from across the square, very faint, a hammer.

Thirty. He felt it all at once, the way you feel cold water. A young man's body sitting at a small table in a window with its back to the room, lean and quick and not hurting anywhere. Not anywhere. He sat inside it and for a moment he could not do anything at all, because he had forgotten. Ninety-five years. A stroke at sixty. A hand that had been dead for thirty-five years. A back that had been on fire since 2039. And here was a body that did not hurt, and two hands, both of them, flat on a table, both of them working, both of them his.

He could feel every finger. The grain of the wood under them. The edge of the saucer against the side of the little finger. He had not felt that hand since 2022.

* * *

He looked out through the young man's eyes.

Station Square. At night. Gold. The light from the big windows lying across the wet paving in long panels, over a crowd that filled the square from wall to wall, and on the far side the long oak workshop with its doors open and its chimney going and the forge-light red inside. The station, the old one, the eighties one, brick and glass, with its canopy, before the fire. The plane trees, young, much smaller than he had ever seen them, with their leaves just coming.

And he was frightened.

That was the next thing, and it came up through the young body like water through sand, so strong that Chris nearly let go. The way you are frightened the first night in a strange house. Six hours in 2028, in a body that was thirty, with a head that was ninety-five, with no way back.

He had sat down at the window table because it was a window, and he did not know where else to sit.

And he had ordered tea. And put both hands round it. And turned it, a quarter turn, by the handle, the way you turn a dial to find a station.

Chris felt himself do it. From inside. He felt the young hands turn the cup.

So that's where it started, he thought. *I always wondered.*

* * *

And then he felt the young man know.

It was not seeing. The young man was looking at the square. It was something else: a thing at the back of the neck, the way you feel weather. The young man had come from a white room where he had sat with his hand on a desk for eleven years and read every written thing the stone could reach, and he had read this. He had read Jono's thirty-third book. He knew what happened at twenty to ten on the sixth of April 2028 at the window table at Bailey's. He had known it since he sat down.

Chris felt it in him. The man at the bar. Without looking. A man in his forties, in a dark jacket, putting down a glass of lime and soda, square, carefully, the way you do when you will need both hands. Starting along the bar. *Sorry. Excuse me.* Not quickly. Moving with the crowd.

And the young body wanted to move.

Every part of it. The back. The shoulders. The legs under the table. Everything in the young man wanting to turn, to get up, to go sideways into the crowd, away from the thing coming along the bar. He knew how it ended. He had read it. And he could not make himself believe it.

* * *

He did not argue with the fear. He did not tell the young man it would be all right. He did not show him anything; there was no time

to put a photograph in the dark. He found the young man's own hand on the table, the left one, the one that worked, flat beside the cup, and he did not move it.

He only thought, in the young man's own voice, the way a thought comes to you that you take for your own:

Don't move.

And then, because it was the young man's own voice, and Chris knew that voice better than he knew anything, and knew what it needed to hear:

Jono's coming.

* * *

The young man did not move.

Chris felt him not move. He felt the fear go through him from top to bottom like a wave going through a pier, and the pier stand. He felt the shoulders stay. The back stay. The left hand stay flat beside the cup, on the grain of the wood, with the little finger against the saucer.

Behind him, ten feet away, at the end of the bar, a man put his right hand inside his jacket.

The young man looked at the square. At the forge across the stones, with its doors open. At a gold panel of light on the wet paving. At a young plane tree, just coming into leaf. He looked at all of it very hard, and did not turn round.

And behind him, somebody moved.

Not the man with the jacket. Somebody else. Somebody heavy, and quick, and quiet, coming through a gap between two people, saying *excuse me* in a perfectly ordinary voice. Chris knew that voice. He had known it since a christening in a pew in Preston, through a knitted hat.

The crack.

Flat and hard and smaller than in films. A smell of burning. A long splintering sound from somewhere low behind him, under the bar.

* * *

Through all of it. The second when nobody did anything, and the second after when everybody did. The glass going, and a woman screaming, and a dog barking high and furious, and chairs going over, and the long wail of a fire alarm in the back. The young man sat at the window table with his back to it all and his left hand flat beside his cup, and Chris sat behind his eyes and held him there.

Not with a hand. With nothing. With the two words, going on, under everything, in the young man's own voice, the way a heartbeat goes on under a noise. *Don't move. Jono's coming. Don't move.*

He felt the young body shake. Not outside; inside. The way a wire shakes with too much current. He felt the left hand want to close on the table, and not close.

And then, at the edge of everything, through the noise, under it, he heard something else.

* * *

Singing. From the corner. By the fireplace. Under the big framed photograph of the square in 1900 with a tram in it.

The band had stopped. Of course it had stopped. The drummer was under his kit and the bass player was on the floor in his cardigan and Chris, sixty-six, was being steered towards the door by a constable with a guitar still round his neck. Everybody had stopped. Everybody was running.

But somebody in the corner was still singing.

Very quietly. Under the alarm. Under the screaming. A woman's voice, low, and even, and very clear, with nothing in it you could place. Setting each word down in the air, one after another, the way you lay a table. Not loud. Not for the room. Not for anybody in the room.

For the window.

Chris did not know the words. He did not know the tune. He had never heard it before in his life. It was not anything Ania's Rage had ever played. It went on, under all of it, for the length of time it took a man to go out of a side door into a yard and an engine to start somewhere towards the Torquay road, and it was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard.

Chris felt him hear it. He felt the shaking go out of the young body. Not all at once. The way the shaking went out of himself in the white room when Jo held the cup close to his hand and he could feel it was warm. A little at a time. Until the left hand on the table was only a hand, flat, beside a cup.

She knows, thought Chris. *She knows I'm here. She knows what this costs him. She's singing him still.*

* * *

The alarm went on. The running. A woman outside on the pavement saying *nobody's hurt, nobody's hurt*, over and over. But in the corner by the fireplace, the singing stopped, and did not start again.

The young man took his hand off the wood and put both hands round the cup. The ordinary way. As if he were cold.

And Chris, behind his eyes, felt something go out of himself. Not out of the young man. Out of *him*. The one behind. Ninety-five. Holding a young body still at a window in a public bar in 2028 with his hand flat on a desk in a cold white room in 2057.

He felt it go the way breath goes on a cold morning. A little white cloud, and then not there.

He let go.

* * *

The white room came back at twenty-nine minutes past one.

Jo looked at her phone. She looked at it twice. It said 01.29. He had gone at 01.29. He had been gone an hour; it should have said 02.29. It said 01.29.

GMT.

The clocks had gone back while he was gone. At two o'clock in the morning, British Summer Time, every clock in England that knew how to do it had gone back to one. And he had gone at twenty-nine minutes past one, the first one, and come back at twenty-nine minutes past one, the second one.

The same minute. Twice.

He was shaking. Worse than she had ever seen. The whole of him, in his coat and the long grey scarf Karen had tucked into the front of it, jerking like a dog out of cold water, his good hand flat on the desk, pressing down, as if the desk were the only solid thing in the world. His bad hand was in his lap.

It was moving.

* * *

Jo saw it. She would not tell anybody, afterwards, for a long time. She would write it down, that night, at her kitchen table, and look at it, and not believe it.

His bad hand. The left. The one that had lain in his lap curled and still for thirty-five years. The fingers were moving. Not much. Twitching. Opening, a little, from the curl. As if somebody had told them, a long way off, that they were allowed.

She held the cup for him. Both her hands round his good one, round the cup. He drank, some of it. Then more. The shaking went on for a long time.

"Right," said Jo. Very level. Very plain. "What did it cost?"

* * *

"The night it opened," he said. "Bailey's. 2028. I was there. Not in the window." He breathed. "In the corner. By the fire. On a stool. With the guitar. Sixty-six." He looked at the desk. "I played. I know I played. Jono wrote it down. *Chris played under her, not showing off.* I know the set. I could tell you the songs."

"I can't hear her," said Chris.

"She sang that night," he said. "In the corner. With her hands at her sides. Setting the words down. Your father wrote that too. *A room full of people went quiet and leaned forward.*" He was quiet. "I was right next to her. Three feet away. I played under her for an hour." He shook his head, very slowly. "I can't hear her. I can see her. I can see her mouth. I can see the room leaning forward. I can't hear one note."

"And the other," he said. "After. When everything stopped. When it was only her." His voice was very quiet. "I heard that. Just now. From inside him. In the window. I heard her sing him still." He breathed. "And it's gone. Both. The one I heard at sixty-six, and the one I heard just now. Gone."

Jo wrote it down.

Her voice, singing.

"Will it come back?"

"No," said Chris.

* * *

They sat in the white room until three. He did not want to go. He looked out of the window at the end, down Union Street, to the black sea, and round the curve of the bay to the lights of Paignton, where the back room at Bailey's would be shut, and the window empty.

"Monday's tomorrow," said Chris. "He'll be in the window at eight. And he'll be sitting the way he sat tonight. In 2028. With his hand flat beside his cup. Not moving." He swallowed. "He's been sitting like that for twenty-nine years, Jo. Because an old man told him to, in his own voice, on his first night."

"I never told him he could," he said.

* * *

The light was on in the kitchen at Widecombe Cot. Karen was at the table in her dressing gown with a pot of tea gone cold and her stick against the chair. She did not get up when they came in. She looked at Chris in the kitchen door, in his coat and the scarf, grey, shaking a little still, and her face did not change.

She came across the kitchen to him, one step and then the stick, and stopped in front of him, and untucked the ends of the scarf from the front of his coat, and unwound it from round his neck, slowly, and folded it over her arm.

Then she put her hand on his collar.

Straightened it.

And Jo, in the passage behind them, saw Chris shut his eyes, and saw his lips move, under his breath. Counting.

She went out quietly, and down the path under the monkey puzzle, and through the gate. The latch, and the hinge.

At home she sat at the kitchen table, with nothing in her pocket and the four boxes on the floor, and wrote it down. The date, the

time, the place. *1.29 a.m. BST. 1.29 a.m. GMT. The same minute, twice.*

Cost: her voice, singing.

And then, in the margin, small, the thing she would not tell anybody for a long time:

His left hand moved.

One day.

Chapter 23 – *Karen's Hand*

Sun. 28 Oct. 2057. Did not go up. Rang
Widecombe Cot at 9.10 p.m. Karen answered.
"He's here. We've had our tea. He's in his chair.
Go home, Jo. Go to bed." She put the phone down.
Tomorrow.

He slept until eleven, and woke in his own bed, and did not know for a moment which year it was.

It happened more often now. Not every morning. Some. He would surface out of the grey place where his mind went at night, and lie with his eyes shut, and listen, and the house would tell him. The tick of the radiator. The gulls. The wind in the monkey puzzle. A floorboard going on the landing, under somebody light. And he would put it together, piece by piece, the way you put together a room in the dark by touch: *Widecombe Cot. The front bedroom. Ninety-five. Karen downstairs. It's Sunday.*

He had been thirty, last night. For an hour. In a window. With two hands that worked. He lay in the bed with his eyes shut and felt for the left one, under the covers, and it was there, and it was dead, the way it had been for thirty-five years. Curled. Heavy. Not his.

Then the house told him. *Sunday. The twenty-eighth. Tomorrow's Monday.*

* * *

The house was very quiet all day.

He sat in the hall, on the bench under the barometer, where guests sat to take their boots off. He did not go to the desk. The register lay open on it at the page for October, with the line at the bottom in the upright hand, *Friday, 19th October. Miss Ania. Room*

3. No address, and he did not look at it. He sat on the bench with his stick between his knees and his good hand on the head of it and looked through the glass panel in the front door, down the path, under the monkey puzzle, to the gate.

In the dining room, at the little table in the bay window, Ania sat with her back to the room and her face to the bay. She had been there since nine, Karen said. She had not had breakfast. She had had tea. She had sat with the cup in both hands, thumbs over the rim, and looked at the sea, and not moved, and the tea had gone cold, and she had drunk it cold, all of it, and put the cup down square on the saucer, and gone on looking.

Chris could see the back of her head from the bench. Through the open door of the dining room, down the length of the room, against the window. Grey hair, put up. The light coming off the bay round it.

* * *

Jono came at four.

Chris heard the gate. The latch, and the hinge. Heavier than it used to be. Slower. With something else in it: wheels.

Jono was coming up the path under the monkey puzzle in a wheelchair, with a blanket over his knees, and a boy from the club pushing it, a big lad of twenty with his hood down, and a woman in a carer's tunic walking beside it with a bag. They got him up the step between them, the boy and the woman, chair and all, and the boy opened the front door, and Jono came into the hall in his wheelchair and stopped in front of the bench.

Eighty-four. Thin as a stick. His hair white and very short. His eyes the same.

"Danny," he said, without looking round. "Bev. Go and have a cup of tea with Karen. Ten minutes."

* * *

It was how they had always been. All their lives. A pew in Preston, and a knitted hat. A garden in Paignton in 1992, with a screwdriver on the gatepost. A platform at Torquay in 2018. A back room. A cellar. A thousand Sunday nights at the long table. They had never needed to say very much.

"I'll be there," said Jono at last.

"Tomorrow. At the station. Bev's pushing. Danny's carrying. Shannon's shouting at them." He almost smiled. "I'll be at the edge of the square. By the forge. Fred's keeping me a space."

Jono looked at him for a long time. Along, not at. The way he looked at men in interview rooms.

"You're not going to be there," he said.

Chris did not answer.

"You're going to be in that white room," said Jono. "At that desk. With your hand on it. Going wherever it is you go." He was quiet. "And Jo will be in the square, with me, writing it down. And you won't."

He put his hand in the pocket of his cardigan. The left one. Over his heart. And took out a book. Black. The elastic tight. Newer than the others.

"I'll write it for you," he said. "Whatever it is. Tomorrow. In this." He looked up. "Every line. The way you'd have wanted it. And then I'll give it to Jo. And she'll read it to you. After." He paused. "If you want."

"I'll not remember," said Chris. "After. Jo'll read it to me and I'll not know it was me."

"I know," said Jono. "Jo told me." He put the book back in his pocket. "I'll write it anyway. Somebody has to." He was quiet. "You

taught me that. In the back room at Bailey's, in 2028, the night it opened. A young man with a cup in both hands. *You'll want to write that down.*" He smiled, a little. "It took me a while to work out who'd said it."

* * *

At ten past four Danny came back and stood in the doorway to the passage without saying anything.

Jono did not put out his hand. He did not say goodbye. He looked at Chris on the bench under the barometer for a long time, the way he had looked at him across the long table on a thousand Sunday nights.

"Same time next week," said Jono.

"Same time next week," said Chris.

Danny took the chair. Bev came out of the kitchen with her bag. They got him down the step, chair and all, and down the path, slowly, under the monkey puzzle, to the gate.

The latch. The hinge.

In the dining room, at the little table in the bay window, Ania had turned her head. Not much. A little. Towards the hall. Towards the front door.

* * *

Karen made the tea at six.

Not tea. Tea. The meal. She had always called it tea, the way her mother had in Brixham, and nothing in twenty years at Widecombe Cot had made her call it supper. Shepherd's pie. She had made it in the afternoon, between the kitchen and the office and the stairs, without saying anything, and it was in the oven when he came in from the hall, and the kitchen smelled of it, and of the range, and of the house.

They ate at the kitchen table. The two of them. Not the dining room; Ania was in the dining room. The kitchen table, with the oilcloth on it, and the radio on low, and the window over the sink going dark.

He had not been hungry for a week. He ate all of it.

* * *

"You counted the flashes," said Karen.

She was not looking at him. She was looking at her plate, with her fork in her good hand, pushing a bit of carrot round.

"On Berry Head," said Karen. "In the Mini. In 1979. When the windows went white." She pushed the carrot. "The lighthouse. You counted it. Under your breath. Every time it came round." She almost smiled. "You thought I couldn't hear you. I could hear you. I lay there with my feet on your dashboard and listened to you count, and I thought, *he's frightened*. And then I thought, *no, he's not frightened. He doesn't want it to stop*."

The lighthouse, and the counting.

"Seventy-eight years," said Karen. "And you're still doing it." She looked up at him, then. Grey-green eyes. Ninety-six. "In the hall. When I do your collar. I've heard you. Every morning for twenty years." She put her fork down. "What do you count, Chris?"

He had told her *nothing* in the hall, ten days ago. He had told her *nothing* every time she asked, for twenty years. It was the only lie he had ever told her, and he had told it every morning, and she had known it was a lie every morning, and let it go.

"Ten," said Chris.

"Ten what?"

"Things," said Chris. "Ten things." He looked at the oilcloth. "That I don't want to lose."

"Am I one?" she said.

"Yes."

"Good," said Karen.

* * *

She talked, then, which she never did. About Berry Head. About the 400, the disco in Brixham, upstairs over the old cinema, with the mirror ball and the floor that bounced. About the summer of 1979. About his Mini, that would not start in the wet, that she had pushed down Overgang a dozen times with her shoulder while he sat in it with the clutch in and laughed.

"And the dress," said Karen. "The first night. At the 400. You remember the dress."

Chris did not say anything.

"The green one," said Karen. "My sister's. Too big at the top; I had it pinned. You came across the floor in that terrible jacket and asked me to dance and I said no, and you stood there, and I said yes." She almost laughed. "You said you'd never seen anything so green. You said it was the colour of the sea off the breakwater in the morning."

The 400. Upstairs over the old cinema. The mirror ball. The floor that bounced. He could see that. He could see the jacket; God, the jacket. He could see himself crossing the floor. He could see her, at the edge, by the wall, with her sister and two other girls. Her face. Her hair. Her hands.

He could not see the dress.

There was a girl at the edge of a dance floor in 1979, and her face, and her hands, and where the dress should have been, round her, there was nothing. Not dark. Not a gap. Just a girl, standing there, in nothing he could see, the way you see somebody in a

dream and do not notice what they are wearing until you try to remember.

* * *

Friday, he thought.

The fifth.

He had not told Jo. *Not that one.* She had asked him every day since. *After the twenty-ninth. If I still know what it was.*

He had gone to the platform. Torquay. Sunday the twenty-eighth of September 1980. The day he went. In through his own blood, at eighteen, standing at the drop window of a train with his head out and a girl in her brother's jumper at the end of the platform under the canopy, getting smaller.

The young man at the window had been going to pull his head in. Chris had felt it, from inside. At the footbridge. With his father sitting behind him in the compartment with the box on his knee, saying nothing, and his eyes stinging, and his face going, and a boy of eighteen does not let his father see him cry. He had been going to pull his head in at the footbridge and sit down and look at the floor.

And then, at the last moment, as the train went round the curve and the station began to slide out of sight behind the cutting wall, she put up both her arms. Straight up. Out.

A man who had not seen her arms go up would not have painted them, in 1994, as wind. White wind, going across a sea of red and green, with two eyes in the middle of it, looking at him. A man who had not painted that would not have stood in a room in Singapore and known he was homesick. A man who had not known that would not have come home, in 2018, on a train, to a platform, for good.

So he had gone, on the fifth of October, in the rain, with Jo at the next desk and nobody else, and sat behind his own eyes at

eighteen at the drop window of a train, and thought, in his own young voice:

Keep looking.

And it had cost something. He had known it had. He had come back at four minutes past eleven and looked for it and not found it, and told Jo *not that one*, because he could not tell her what he could not find. And because, if it was what he was afraid it was, it was about Karen. And Karen was downstairs, at ninety-six, and had never known anything. And he would not have it written down.

It was the dress.

The green dress at the 400. The first night. The colour of the sea off the breakwater in the morning.

He did not have it any more.

* * *

"You've gone quiet," said Karen.

"You've gone quiet like you go quiet when you can't remember something." She looked at him across the table. "I've watched you do it for years. You go still, and your eyes go somewhere else, and you look like a man who's put his hand in his pocket for his keys." She was quiet. "What can't you remember?"

He thought about telling her. *The dress. Your sister's. Green. I can't see it.* He thought about her face, if he told her. He thought about her sitting at this table at ninety-six knowing that he had lost the first sight of her he ever had, and not knowing why, and not being able to ask, because she never asked.

The one who never knew.

"Nothing," said Chris. "It's gone. It'll come back."

She did not believe him. She never had. She picked up his plate and her own, and got up, slowly, with her stick, and took them to the sink.

"It was green," she said, with her back to him, running the tap. "Too big at the top. I had it pinned." She did not turn round. "In case you were wondering."

* * *

At eleven she went up.

He was in the chair in the hall. Not the bench; the old chair behind the desk, with the arms, that he had sat in on the nineteenth to wait for the gate. The register was open in front of him. The lamp was on. The house was dark everywhere else.

She went past the desk, towards the stairs. In her dressing gown, with her hair down, grey, all of it, to her shoulders. He had not seen it down for years. She stopped at the foot of the stairs, with her hand on the newel post, and looked up them, the way he had looked up them on the Saturday when he wanted to buy a ticket.

Then she turned round.

She came back across the hall to the desk. One step, and then the stick. Slowly. She came round the end of the desk to the chair. And stopped in front of him, and looked down at him.

Ninety-six. Grey-green eyes. Grey hair, down. A girl in her brother's jumper at the end of a platform, getting smaller.

She put her hand on his collar.

* * *

He wrote it down.

Not on paper. There was no paper that could hold it, and no pen. He wrote it the way he had written the ten, in the top room, ten days ago: on the inside of his own eyelids. He shut his eyes and let

her hand be there, on the collar of his cardigan, straightening it, which it did not need, and he wrote it.

The weight of it. Not much. An old woman's hand. Light. Dry. The knuckles big now, and the fingers a little bent, and the skin very soft, like paper that has been folded and unfolded a great many times. Warm.

The way it moved. Not quickly. The thumb along the edge of the collar, from the back of the neck round to the front, smoothing it. The fingers following. Then a little tug, at the front, at the point, to set it straight. The way her grandmother had straightened her grandfather's tie on a step in Brixham. The way his grandmother had straightened his grandfather's on the step of this house.

The way she had done it on a platform at Torquay on the twenty-eighth of September 1980, at nineteen, in her brother's jumper, out of breath, with her hair coming out of its ribbon, and the guard coming along the train with his whistle in his mouth.

The way she had done it on the same platform in October 2018, at fifty-seven, in her good coat, when he got off the train and said *for good*.

The way she had done it every morning since, in this hall, for twenty years, under the barometer.

He wrote it all. Every one of them. Over the top of each other, the way you write a word over and over on the same line until the pencil goes through. *Karen's hand on his collar on the platform at Torquay.* And in the hall. And tonight. All of them one thing. One hand. Holding the same thing, at different times.

Number eight, he thought. *That's number eight.*

He did not count the others. He did not need to. He held that one, with his eyes shut, with her hand on him, and he held it harder than he had ever held anything, harder than the bootlace, harder than the song, harder than the lighthouse; and he thought, very

clearly, the way you think a thing you are going to need to find in the dark:

Whatever else it takes. Not this one.

* * *

She took her hand away.

She was looking down at him. Her face had not changed. It never did. Karen's face had been the same since she was nineteen: set, and stubborn, and a little cross, as if the world had been put together by somebody who had not read the instructions.

But her hand, the one that had been on his collar, had gone to her own throat. And stayed there. Flat. At the neck of her dressing gown.

"You were counting," she said.

"Yes."

"Was I one?"

"You were all of them," said Chris.

Then she bent, very slowly, with her hand on the desk and the stick, and kissed him on the forehead. Once. Dry and quick and a little cross, the way she did everything she meant.

"Go to bed," she said. "You've got a busy day."

She went to the stairs. She went up them, one at a time, with her stick, with her grey hair down her back, and he watched her go, all the way, to the landing, and round, and out of sight. And heard her door. And nothing.

* * *

Outside, under the monkey puzzle, in the dark, he thought there was somebody. He could not see. The lamp was on in the hall and the glass panel in the front door gave him back only himself, an

old man in a chair at a desk. But he thought there was somebody. Standing on the grass. Looking up at a window.

He put his good hand flat on the register, beside the line in the upright hand. *Friday, 19th October. Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.* Not touching it.

And shut his eyes, and said them. Under his breath. In the dark. The way he had said them every morning for ten days, and would say them once more, tomorrow, in a white room, at a desk, before he went.

The song. The waybill. The lighthouse, and the counting. Mum's book. Jono at the bottom of the cellar stairs. Basil's left foot. The bootlace.

Karen's hand on his collar on the platform at Torquay.

The gate. Ania on the path.

Ten.

He opened his eyes. He turned off the lamp. He went up to bed, one stair at a time, with the stick in his good hand and the bad one on the rail.

On the landing he stopped outside her door. It was shut. There was a line of light under it. He stood there a moment.

Then he went on, to his own room, and lay down in the dark, and slept.

Tomorrow.

Chapter 24 – *The Last Monday*

Mon. 29 Oct. 2057. Bailey's, the back room, 8.02 a.m. Dad with me. K. in the window. "Five." The bench: a paper folded square, nobody on it. Studio Ania, the cellar, 12.10 p.m.: A. took the younger stone. One left. C.D. at the dish with Tamsin. Annie at Marsham Street. M.L. in the flat, door locked. C.H. at the desk since nine. Tonight.

Her father was at Bailey's before her.

Jo saw him through the window from across the square at five to eight, coming round the corner from Torbay Road with her coffee, and stopped on the paving. He was in the back room. Not at the window; at the table behind it, by the wall, where Rani had sat. In the wheelchair, with the blanket over his knees, and his back to the wall, the way he always sat. Bev was at the bar with a cup of tea. Danny was outside on the step, with his hood up, in the cold, watching the square.

Jo had not told him to come. She had not told him anything. She had rung him at seven, to say she was going to Bailey's, the way she had every Monday for eleven years, and he had said *I know* and put the phone down.

It was cold. The first proper cold of the autumn. A high pale sky with no wind in it, and the sun just up over the hill behind the station, low and thin and gold, coming across the square in long bars between the plane trees. The trees nearly bare now, the leaves on the paving in drifts, wet, the colour of the tea in a pot gone cold. The forge doors shut; Fred did not open on Mondays till nine. The station, cream and maroon, with its green canopy, and a train under it, silent. The cab rank, two cabs. The bench under the big plane tree.

There was nobody on the bench.

There was a newspaper on it.

* * *

She did not go over to it. She did not need to. She could see it from where she stood, by the forge, forty yards away. A newspaper on the slats, folded once, lengthways. Laid along the middle of the bench. Square to the edge.

He came on Tuesdays. Eight fourteen to eight thirty-one. Every Tuesday since August. Never Monday. Never once.

It was two minutes to eight, and there was nobody on the bench, and the paper was already there. Dry. In the cold. As if it had been put there before it was light.

* * *

"I saw it," said her father.

She had not said anything. She had come through the public bar and into the back room with the two coffees, and put one down in front of him, and he had not looked at it. He was looking at the window. Past the young man sitting at it. At the square.

"When?"

"Half seven. Danny saw it first. Came in and told me." He did not take his eyes off it. "It was there when we came."

"He's never come on a Monday."

"He hasn't come," said her father. "That's not him. That's his paper." He was quiet. "He wants us to know he's been."

She thought: *he's been looking at that bench for thirty-one years. Since a car park in Paignton in 2026 and a carer's pocketbook with lime and soda in it.*

* * *

At two minutes past eight, she looked at the window.

He was there. Of course he was. At the table with the brass plate on it that said RESERVED. A cup in both hands, thumbs hooked over the rim. Looking out at the square. At the station. At the plane trees. At the bench.

His lamp over his head. Steady. Bright.

And behind it, further back, the other one.

It was not faint any more.

Jo looked at it and felt her coffee go still in her hands. The far lamp. Ania's. It had been warmer for a week; Rani had said so; Jo had seen it under the monkey puzzle on the night of the nineteenth, warm, amber, a coal breathed on. It was not a coal now. It was a lamp. Nearly as bright as his own. Amber, clear, steady, sitting behind his own lamp in the low gold light coming in through the window, so that for the first time in twenty-nine years Jo could see that there were two of them, plainly, the way you can see two candles in a window when you have only ever thought there was one and its reflection.

* * *

"Five," said Keith.

He did not look round. He never did. He said it to the window, to the square, the way he had said it every morning for twenty-nine years, before good morning, before anything.

"Still five," said Jo.

"Still five." He turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer, by the handle.

"Jono," said Keith.

Her father looked up.

"Thank you," said Keith. To the window. "For 2028. The night it opened." He turned the cup. "I never said it properly. I said it in the back room afterwards, with a pint going over on Richard's floor. *Thank you, Jono.* You'd not told me your name." He was quiet. "You came through a gap between two girls from the council and closed your hand on a man's wrist, and I sat at the window and didn't move." He looked at the square. "Somebody told me not to. In my own voice. I didn't know who. I've known since yesterday."

"You'll be by the forge tonight," said Keith.

"Fred's keeping me a space."

"Good." Keith turned the cup. "Stay there. Whatever happens. Don't come into the square." He was quiet a moment. "Write it down."

"I always do," said her father.

"I know," said Keith. "That's why you're there."

* * *

At ten past nine her phone went. Clifford, from the dish at Newquay, where he had driven down on the Sunday to be with Tamsin.

"Weather," said Clifford.

"Clear over Cornwall. Clear over the Channel. Clear over most of the Atlantic, which is more than anybody's got a right to in October." His voice was thin and dry, like paper, and it had the thing in it that it had had on Tuesday, in the cellar, when the dome came off. "Tamsin's here. Seventy-five, and she's been in since five, and she's made eleven cups of tea and drunk two. The boys in Florida are on the line. Every bird's up. Every box is awake." He was quiet. "We've got everything, Jo. We've had everything for a week. The lens finished teaching about three years ago, the boys reckon. They just didn't tell anybody, because nobody asked."

"So you don't need it."

"We don't need it," said Clifford. "Not any more. That's the thing. That's why it can go." His voice did something. "Nineteen years in a room in Florida, teaching ten thousand little boxes how to see. And now they can. On their own. Without it." He breathed. "It's like watching a kid ride off on a bike with nobody holding the saddle."

"What time?"

"A quarter to seven," said Clifford. "Your time. On the dot. Six forty-five and nought seconds." He was quiet. "I'll say it. Tamsin says I've got to. She said it in 2038, she says it's my turn." He laughed, a little, a dry old cough of a laugh. "One word, Jo. *Now.*"

* * *

At half past nine, Annie rang from London.

"Weather," said Annie.

"Go on."

"She's in. Hannah. Since seven. Seventh floor. Her people are coming in all morning; I've counted thirty-one." Annie's voice was very low and very quick, the way all three of them talked when they were reading. "Clean, most of them. A few cords. Going up and out and off to the river. They don't know. They're just people." She was quiet. "And him."

"Tarquin."

"Came in at eight. Through the barriers. Grey coat. He saw me." Annie paused. "He looked at me for about two seconds. In the lobby. I don't know if he knows what I am. He looked like he did." She swallowed. "His cord's still there. South-west. Thin. Rani said it was like a thread last Monday. It's thinner than that now. I can hardly see it."

"Is it moving?"

"It's shaking," said Annie. "All the time. Very fine. Like a wire with a train coming."

* * *

At ten, Basil rang.

"She's in the flat," said Basil. "Mei Ling. With Grace. Door locked. Ai Li's got three people on the stairs and one in the street." He was quiet. "She's not happy about it. She's twenty-eight. She says she's not a child."

"And the window?"

"The shutters are open," he said. "Over the flower stall. They've been open all day. I went past at noon. I didn't look up." He breathed. "I didn't have to look up, Jo. I could feel her."

* * *

At a quarter past ten, Jo went up the hill to the Exchange.

Her father stayed at Bailey's. He said he would. He said he would sit at the table by the wall until four and then Danny would take him home for an hour and Bev would give him his tablets and then they would come back down to the forge. He said it as if it were an ordinary day. He took the sixtieth book out of the pocket of his cardigan as she went, and put it on the table in front of him, and opened it, and took the pencil out of the loop.

* * *

The white room was warm. Somebody had turned the heating on.

Chris was in the big pale chair at his desk with his good hand flat on the bare surface. He had been there since nine. Dennis's boy on the desk downstairs had told her: the car at half past eight, from Widecombe Cot, and Mrs Harvey in it with him, all the way to the

door, which she never did. She had got out on the pavement with her stick and stood there while Dennis's boy helped him up the step. She had straightened his collar on the step. And then she had got back in the car and gone home.

"Morning," he said. "Is he still five?"

"Keith said five." She sat down at her own desk. "And he said thank you. To Dad. For 2028."

"Good," he said at last.

* * *

"What happens tonight?"

He did not answer straight away. He sat with his hand on the desk and looked out of the window at the end, down Union Street, to the sea. Flat. Silver. With the sun on it.

"I go," he said.

"Where?"

"Back." He was quiet. "To the sixth of April 2028. An afternoon. A train coming into Paignton. A young man getting off it with nothing in his hands." He looked at his good hand. "And at a quarter past six, in the back room at Bailey's, a woman at the window with a cup in both hands, saying a thing about the stars."

"I'm him," said Chris. "I'm the one who goes. At ninety-five. From this chair. I've been going for eleven years, through other people, through myself at sixty-three, through a boy at a train window. Tonight I go all the way. Not a nudge. Me." He breathed. "And I'll be thirty. In a body that doesn't hurt. With two hands. And a list of ten things on the inside of my eyelids. And somewhere between here and there I'll lose two of them. And I'll stand on a pavement at Changi with Clifford waiting and count eight."

"And here?"

"Here I'll be ninety-five," said Chris. "In this chair. With my hand on the desk." He was quiet. "I don't know what I'll be, here. After. Rani doesn't know. Nobody's done it." He looked at her. "I think I'll be an old man in a chair who doesn't know where he's been. I think you'll ask me what it cost, and I'll not know there was a question."

"Ask me anyway," said Chris. "Tonight. When I come back. If I come back. Crouch down by the chair with the tea, too much sugar, and ask me." He almost smiled. "Somebody has to."

* * *

At ten past twelve she was in the cellar.

Rani was there. And Vicky. And the two stones, side by side, on the long desk, in their two cradles of grey foam. The old one under its glass cover. The new one bare, in Clifford's steel case, with the lid open.

At eleven minutes past twelve the street door opened at the top of the stone stairs, and Jo heard the bell, and feet on the stairs. Light. Not hurrying. Not slow.

Ania came down into the cellar with her carpet bag.

* * *

She walked down the length of the long desk, under the pavement lights, past the screens, past the shelves and the six crates and the gap where the seventh had been. She stopped in front of the two stones.

Then she put the carpet bag down on the desk beside Clifford's case, and opened it.

The little cloth bag with the drawstring. The hairbrush. The grey cardigan, folded very small.

She took the cardigan out and shook it open and laid it flat on the desk. Then she put out both hands, and lifted the younger stone out of its foam, the bare one, Rani's, the one that had been glass, in both hands, the way you lift a cup.

It made no sound. The cellar did not go white. Nothing happened. Jo had braced for it, the way you brace for thunder after lightning, and nothing happened at all. Ania stood at the desk with the stone in her hands and held it, and looked at it, and it lay in her hands like a stone.

She put it in the middle of the cardigan. And folded the cardigan round it, corner by corner, the way you fold a flag.

She put it in the bottom of the carpet bag. The hairbrush on top. The cloth bag on top of that.

It went down on her arm. Not much. The weight of a stone and a cardigan.

"It is heavier than it was," said Ania.

* * *

Rani made a sound. Jo looked at her. Rani was standing at the end of the desk with her hands flat on it on either side of the old stone, the one under the glass. She had not moved while Ania took the other. She was looking at the old one now. Bent over it. Very close.

"It's still here," said Rani.

"I thought it might go," she said. "When she picked up the other one. I thought there couldn't be two. I thought one of them would just..." She did not finish. "It's still here. It's still humming." She swallowed. "For now."

Then Ania looked at the old stone. Under the glass. In its foam. Smooth, dark grey, the size and shape of a goose egg, with a sheen

on it like slate after rain, and a mark in it, near the narrow end, like a comma.

"Until tonight," said Ania.

She turned and went back down the length of the cellar with the carpet bag in her hand, and up the stone stairs, and the bell rang, and she was gone.

* * *

Then Vicky went to the steel case and closed the lid on the empty cradle, very quietly, the way you close a door on a room somebody has died in. And put her hand flat on the lid.

"Until tonight," said Rani. To the stone. "She said until tonight."

"What happens tonight?" said Vicky.

Rani looked up. At the pavement lights over the long desk, with the feet going past on Union Street above, ordinary people, on an ordinary Monday, in October, going about their lunch.

"Everything," she said.

* * *

Jo walked down to Paignton at four.

It was cold. The sky had stayed clear all day, high and pale, and now it was going gold in the west over the hill behind the town, and the sea was flat and silver and very still, the way it was before the weather turned. Past the Pavilion. Past the long gardens. Past Livermead and the red cliffs. Past Preston, and the beach huts, and the green.

* * *

At half past five she came round the corner into Station Square.

The lights were on. The streetlamps, and the lights in the station under the canopy, and the gold windows of Bailey's on the corner, four storeys of them. The forge doors were open and the fire was going, red, and Fred was in the doorway with his arms folded, and four apprentices behind him, and none of them were working.

Beside the forge, in the angle of the wall, out of the wind, in the wheelchair with the blanket over his knees, was her father. Bev beside him. Danny behind. The sixtieth book open on the blanket. The pencil in his hand.

He looked up when she came round the corner, and lifted the pencil, very slightly. The way you lift a hand to somebody across a square.

And at the station end, by the cab rank, under the big plane tree, the bench.

There was a man on it.

* * *

Jo did not see him sit down. She looked at the bench and there was an old man on it, sitting, with his hands on the top of a stick between his knees, looking out across the square towards the window of Bailey's. Beside him on the slats, the newspaper, folded square.

She looked at his face. It went. The way it always went. Like a word on the tip of the tongue. An old man. Ordinary. She looked at the pigeons in front of the bench, and back, and could not have told you one thing about him.

She looked at the air above his head.

And found that she was looking at it.

Not at the pigeons. Not at the forge. At the air above his head. For the first time. She held it there. She did not know how. Perhaps because it was the last time, and she had decided. Perhaps because

something in the square had changed, in the cold, in the gold light, with the far lamp in the window opposite burning like a second sun.

There was nothing over his head. Not a dim lamp. Not a lamp going out. Not clear air, the way a visitor off the train has clear air. Nothing. The opposite of empty. A place on a wall where a picture has hung for a long time and been taken down so carefully that you are meant never to know what it was.

She thought: *a man.*

She thought: *tonight I write the rest.*

* * *

In the window of Bailey's, the young man had put his cup down.

His hands were flat on the table, either side of it. He was looking at the bench. His lamp steady over his head. And behind it, the other one, burning.

And at the corner of Torbay Road, coming into the square from the direction of the front, the way she had come up the path under the monkey puzzle every October for as long as anybody could remember, not hurrying, not slow, a woman in a grey costume with no coat, with her grey hair put up and a carpet bag in her right hand.

Jo looked at the clock on the front of the station. Twenty-two minutes to six. An hour and seven minutes.

She took out her pocketbook. She wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Mon. 29 Oct. 2057. Station Square. 5.38 p.m.*

And then, under it, very small, the only thing she was sure of:

Tonight.

Chapter 25 – *Now*

Mon. 29 Oct. 2057. Station Square, by the forge, 6.45 p.m. C.D. on the line from the dish: "Now." The strings. Everybody's. Eleven into the bench, and they broke. Annie, from Marsham Street: T.T. put it all on her desk; his broke at 6.46. The man on the bench stood up.

At twenty to seven the square was nearly full.

Not with a crowd. Jo kept telling herself that, standing by the forge with her back to the warm wall and her father's wheelchair beside her. Not a crowd. Not a march, not a vigil, not anything anybody had called. A Monday evening in October in Station Square, Paignton, at twenty to seven, with the trains coming in from Exeter and Newton and letting their people off, and the bus queue, and the bakery shutting, and the man with the *Herald* by the cab rank, and Bailey's lit gold on the corner, four storeys of it.

There were more of them than there should have been. Jo could not have said why. Perhaps because the evening was clear and cold and still, the first like it that autumn, and people did not want to go in. Perhaps because Fred's forge was open late, with the fire up and the doors wide and four apprentices standing in them doing nothing, and people stopped to look at a fire. Perhaps because something in the square had changed, in the last hour, in the cold and the dusk, and people felt it the way you feel weather, and did not know what it was, and slowed down.

Two hundred, perhaps. In the dusk. Amber and steady, and some flickering, the young ones. Going about the square under the plane trees like a field of something blowing.

And two places in it where there was nothing.

* * *

The bench under the big plane tree at the station end, by the cab rank. An old man on it, with his hands on a stick between his knees, and a newspaper beside him, folded square. Looking across the square at the window of Bailey's.

Jo could look at him now. At the air above him. She had found she could at twenty to six and she had not stopped since. A hole. The shape of a man, sitting. Not dark. The plate off the socket.

And the other.

By the station. Under the green canopy, at the edge of it, in the light from the booking hall, by the door Jo had stood at with Chris nine days ago while he bought a ticket. A woman in a grey costume with no coat, very straight, with her grey hair put up and a carpet bag at her feet. Standing still. Looking at the window of Bailey's too.

Nothing over her head either.

And across the square from both of them, in the gold window on the corner, a young man at a table, with his cup put down and his hands flat on either side of it, and two lamps over his head.

* * *

"Rani," said Jo.

Rani was on her other side. She had come at six, from the cellar, and stood against the wall of the forge beside Jo with her coat buttoned to the throat and her hands in her pockets and had not said anything for forty minutes. She was looking at the square. At all of it. The way she looked at the stone.

"I know," said Rani.

"What can you see?"

Rani did not answer straight away.

"Everything," she said. "The way I always do. Lamps. Cords." She swallowed. "Eleven going into the bench. The same eleven. A cab driver and a girl from the bakery and a man with a dog and eight others. Going about their evening. Thin as hair." She was quiet. "And the far one. Over Keith. And the cord going out of it. Up. South. Over the harbour. To Roundham." She breathed. "To a round window, with a painting in it."

"And her?"

Rani looked at the canopy. At the woman under it.

"Nothing," she said. "Same as always. A socket with the plate off." She was quiet for a long time. "But it's not the same as his, Jo. It never was. I couldn't tell you how. His is a place where nothing was ever put. Hers is a place where something was taken out." She looked at the window of Bailey's. "And put somewhere else."

* * *

Her father had the sixtieth book open on the blanket on his knees.

"Dad."

"I'm watching," said her father. He did not look round. "I've been watching that bench for thirty-one years. Since a car park in 2026 and a pocketbook with lime and soda in it." He was quiet. "I'm not going to miss it now."

* * *

At twenty-two minutes to seven Jo's phone went.

"Jo," said Clifford.

"I'm here."

"Tamsin's here. The boys in Florida are on the other line. Every bird's up. Every box is listening." His voice was thin and dry and shaking very slightly. "Seven minutes."

"I know."

"Is she there? In the square?"

Jo looked at the canopy. At the woman in grey.

"She's there."

Clifford was quiet for a moment.

"Then that's everybody," he said.

* * *

Rani's phone went at twenty to.

"Weather," said Annie.

"Go on," said Rani.

"I'm on the seventh floor." Annie's voice was very quick and very low. "She sent somebody down for me at six. I'm in the outer office. The door's open. I can see into hers." She swallowed. "Hannah's at the window. Standing. With her back to the room. Looking out at the river. Thirty-four of her people in the outer office and the corridor. Nobody's sitting down." A pause. "He's in there. With her. Tarquin. By the door. He hasn't taken his coat off."

"His cord?"

"Still there," said Annie. "South-west. Out of the window. Over the river. Thin. So thin I keep losing it." She breathed. "It's shaking, Rani. Like a wire with a train coming."

"I know," said Rani. "I can see the other end."

* * *

At a quarter to seven, by the clock on the front of the station, Jo stopped breathing.

In the window of Bailey's, the young man had not moved.

Under the canopy, the woman in grey had not moved.

On the bench, the old man had not moved.

And in the angle of the forge wall, Jo's father had lowered his pencil, very slowly, to the page.

* * *

"Now," said Clifford.

* * *

It did not come like a light going on.

It was like a breath.

The whole square breathed in. Two hundred people, at once, without deciding to, the way a crowd breathes in at a firework before it bursts. Jo heard it. A soft sound, all round, from every side, under the plane trees and the canopy and the gold windows. Not a gasp. Quieter than that. The sound people make when they see something they have always known was there and never once looked at.

And then she saw what they saw.

* * *

The strings.

Out of every head in the square. Every one. Out of the top of every lamp, the way Rani had always said, the way Jo had never once seen. Thin. Bright. Very bright, at the root, where they left the lamp, and fainter as they went, like a line of light drawn on the dark with a fine pen. Going up.

Up. Out of the square. Over the roofs. Over the station and the canopy and the hill behind it, into the dark blue sky, in every direction, hundreds of them, going away. To each other. To home. To work. To a mother in Exeter and a son in Leeds and a woman in a kitchen in Plymouth waiting for the kettle. Crossing each other, overhead, above the plane trees, the way the wires used to cross

over a street before they put them underground, so that the whole sky over Station Square was a net. A web. A thing so fine and so bright and so full that Jo put her hand up, without meaning to, as if to touch it.

She heard her father say something. One word. She did not hear what.

And then she looked down.

* * *

Not all of them went up.

Some of them came down.

Out of eleven heads in the square, eleven strings came down. Not up into the sky with the others. Down. Across. Low, at the height of a man's shoulder. Across the paving and the drifts of wet leaves and the bus queue and the cab rank. To the bench under the big plane tree at the station end.

And into the old man sitting on it.

Into the hole over his head where a lamp should have been. Eleven bright threads going into nothing, and stopping, the way a kite string stops when it goes into cloud.

The square saw it.

And she watched eleven people, in the middle of their evening, look down at the string coming out of the top of their own lamp, and follow it with their eyes, across the square, to a man they had never met.

* * *

The cab driver saw his first.

He was leaning on his cab at the rank, ten yards from the bench, with a coffee in his hand, a big man in his fifties with a fleece and a lanyard. Jo saw him look up at the net, and laugh, the

way you laugh at a thing too big to be frightened of. And then look down. At his own chest. At the bright thread coming out of the top of his own head, going down, not up, across ten yards of paving, to the old man on the bench.

He stopped laughing.

He looked at the thread. At the bench. At the man on it. At the air above the man's head. His face did a thing Jo had seen on men's faces in interview rooms at four in the morning: the moment when they understand that the person across the table knows.

He took a step back.

And the thread broke.

* * *

Jo heard it.

She would never be able to explain that, afterwards. To Hannah, to Clifford, to anybody. You could not hear a cord. There was nothing to hear. But she heard it: a sound like a hair pulled out of a bow, very high, very fine, at the edge of hearing, from ten yards off the bench. And the thread from the cab driver's lamp went slack, and fell, and was gone, like a cobweb when you put your hand through it.

The cab driver put his coffee down on the roof of his cab, very carefully, without looking at it.

The girl from the bakery was next.

She was by the bus queue, in her apron, with the shop keys in her hand. Nineteen, perhaps. She looked down at her thread. At the bench. At the old man. She put her hand over her mouth.

It broke.

A man with a dog. A boy with a bag from the campus. A woman in a good coat coming off the Exeter train. One after

another, across the square, in the cold, in the dusk, under the net, people looking down at a thread they had never known was there, and following it to a bench, and seeing who was at the end of it.

And stepping back.

And the thread going. That sound. Like a hair pulled from a bow. Again, and again, and again.

Eleven.

Jo counted them. She did not mean to. She counted them the way Chris counted the lighthouse.

Eleven.

And then there were no threads going into the bench at all.

* * *

"Annie," said Rani.

"I'm here." Annie's voice was not steady. It had gone high and fast. "Rani. Rani, they can all see. All of them. In the outer office. In the corridor. Thirty-four people standing up and looking at their own heads." She breathed. "The cords are going out of the windows. All directions. Up. Most of them up. And some of them..." She stopped.

"To the river," said Rani.

"To the river. To the City. Out of this building, out of the windows, across Westminster, to the knot past the Tower." Annie's voice cracked. "Six of them. Six of Hannah's thirty-four. And they're looking at them. Rani, they're *looking* at them."

"And?"

"And they're going," said Annie. "One. Two. Like... like somebody snipping thread. They look at it, and they see where it goes, and it goes." She was quiet a second. "Hannah's watching. She's turned round. From the window. She's standing in the middle

of her office watching the cords out of her own building go dark one at a time." A breath. "She's crying, Rani. She's not making any noise. She's just standing there."

* * *

"And Tarquin," said Jo.

Annie did not answer straight away.

"He's moving," she said.

"He's taken his coat off. He's putting it on the chair by the door. Very slowly. Folding it." Annie's voice was a whisper. "He's got something in his hand. Out of the inside pocket. A case. Small. Black. Like... like a cigarette case. Old." She breathed. "He's walking to her desk. Hannah's desk. She's watching him. Everybody's watching him."

"His cord," said Rani.

"I can see it. Everybody can see it. It's the longest in the room. Out of the window. Over the river. South-west." Annie swallowed. "It's shaking so hard I can see it from the door."

"What's he doing?"

"He's put it down," said Annie. "The case. On her desk. In front of her. And he's opened it. And there's... drives. Old ones. A lot of them. And papers, folded small. And a book. A little book, like your father's, Jo, black." She stopped. "He's saying something to her. I can't hear. He's not looking at her. He's looking at the case."

"Annie."

"He's said it. He's stepped back." Annie's voice went up. "Rani, it's going. His. The long one. It's going so thin I..."

"It's broken," said Annie, very quietly. "Just now. Like a hair in a flame. It went from the window, from the glass, all the way back, very fast, out across the river, south-west." A long breath. "He's just

standing there. By her desk. With his hands at his sides. There's nothing going out of him now but one. Up. Like everybody's."

* * *

On the bench, the old man moved.

His head. A little. To the left. North-east. As if somebody had said his name, a long way off, and he had heard it.

"There," said Rani. Very low. "The long one. From London. It just came in. At this end." She swallowed. "It came in like a whip, Jo. Fast. All the way from London, two hundred miles, in a second. And it hit the bench. And it went." She breathed. "He felt it."

The old man's head turned back.

Back to the window of Bailey's.

* * *

"Rani," said Annie, from the phone. "Hannah's got her phone out. Somebody's sent her a message." A pause. "She's showing it to her PA. The PA's gone white."

"Who?"

"White," said Annie. "William White. From Surrey. From his house, I suppose, with his roses." Her voice did something. "Three words."

"What?"

"*I can see*," said Annie.

I can see.

And everybody could see him.

* * *

"Jo," said Clifford, from the other phone, from the dish. His voice was very thin. "Jo, what's happening? The boys in Florida

have got the whole planet up on the screens. It's... it's everywhere. Every head. Every string. Tokyo. Lagos. São Paulo. People in the streets with their hands up." He made a sound. "There's knots. Big ones. All over. Cities. And they're going dark. One by one. Like a fuse going along a wire." He breathed. "What's happening in the square?"

Jo looked at the square.

At the bench.

At the old man on it, with nothing going into him any more. No threads. No lamp. Nothing. A hole the shape of a man, sitting, in the middle of a square full of light, with every person in it looking at him.

The only dark thing in Torbay.

The only one it could not show.

"He's on his own," said Jo.

* * *

The old man stood up.

Slowly. With his hands on the top of his stick. An old man, eighty-five, getting up from a bench. Jo watched him do it. She found that she could see him do it. Not his face; his face still went, the moment she looked at it, like a word on the water. But his body. An old man's body, thin, in a dark coat. Standing up. Leaving the newspaper on the bench behind him, folded square.

He looked at the window of Bailey's.

At the young man in it. With two lamps over his head. The near one, steady. And the far one, burning, amber, and out of it a cord, bright, long, going up, south, over the harbour, to a round window on a hill.

The old man took his right hand off the top of his stick.

He put it in the inside pocket of his coat.

* * *

Beside Jo, in his wheelchair, in the angle of the forge wall, her father had written something.

The date. The time. The place.

Mon. 29 Oct. 2057. Station Square. 6.46 p.m.

And under it, in his square capitals, slightly shaky now, but still capitals:

HE STOOD UP.

And Jo, standing beside him, with two phones in her hand and an old man's voice from a cliff in Cornwall saying *Jo? Jo?*, looked across Station Square at a man taking his hand out of his inside pocket with something in it.

Something small. Pale. The colour of old bone.

She did not need to see it to know what it was.

She had read it. In her father's book. Daddyhole Plain, the night the clocks went back, 2031.

It is not a whistle for calling them. It is a whistle for telling them who to come for.

When they come.

And they will come.

* * *

Under the station canopy, the woman in grey bent, and picked up her carpet bag.

And walked out into the square.

Chapter 26 – *Station Square*

Mon. 29 Oct. 2057. Station Square, 6.46 to 6.51 p.m. He blew it. The dogs stopped. They came up from the sea. A. turned them. "It will not save you." I wrote him down.

He put it to his mouth.

Jo watched him do it. Everybody in the square watched him do it. Two hundred people with their lamps on and their strings going up into the net over the plane trees, standing still, in the cold, in the dusk, looking at an old man by a bench with a thing in his hand the colour of old bone.

Small. Curved. A whistle. Bone. Mongol, she had heard it called once, bought in Peking a very long time ago by a man called Eden.

He did not hurry. He lifted it to his mouth the way a man lifts a cigarette, without thinking about it, the way he must have lifted it a hundred times on his own, in a white house on a hill with a round window, at night, to see what it felt like. He looked over it, across the square, at the window of Bailey's.

At the young man in it.

At the lamp behind the lamp.

He blew.

* * *

There was no sound.

Jo had known there would not be. She had read it, in the book from 2031. *Jono did not hear it. There was nothing to hear. No*

note. No sound at all. She had read it a dozen times, sitting up at her kitchen table with the four boxes on the floor.

There was no sound, and the whole square heard it.

Not with their ears. Jo felt it in her teeth, the way she had felt it in the cellar when Holmes put his hand on the stone. The air went thin and sharp. The net over the square shivered, every string at once, the way a spider's web shivers when something lands on it. Two hundred lamps flickered, once, together, like candles in a draught.

And every dog in Paignton stopped barking.

* * *

She heard it go.

The dog in the house at the top of Torbay Road that had been yapping since six. Cut off. In the middle of a bark. Something big and deep, over towards Preston. Two terriers behind the bakery. One by one, spreading out from the square like rings from a stone thrown into a pond, every dog in the town stopping, nearer and further, until there was nothing.

On Daddyhole Plain in 2031, her father had written: *Nothing came. Not now. Not under this sky.*

Jo looked up at the sky.

It was full of light. Ten thousand boxes, going round the Earth every ninety-six minutes, lit, and every string on Earth going up to them, and the net over Station Square so bright now in the deep blue dusk that the first stars were lost in it.

Not under this sky.

It was a different sky.

* * *

"Rani," said Jo.

Rani did not answer. She was not looking at the bench. She was not looking at the window. She was looking past the station, past the canopy, south-east, over the roofs of the houses towards Roundham, towards the harbour, towards the sea.

Her face had gone completely still.

"They're coming," said Rani.

* * *

Jo saw them first at the corner of Torbay Road.

Where the road came into the square from the front. Where Ania had come in at twenty to six. Where Edward Harvey had walked home along the sea front from Bailey's on a night in October 1895, and stood by the pier with his hands in his pockets, and counted to forty, and understood that it was not coming from the moor.

Grey.

Low. Long. At the height of a man's knee. Coming up off the front, out of the dusk, round the corner, into the light of the square. Not running. Not walking. Moving the way water moves over a weir, all of a piece, low and quick and with no sound at all. She could not count them. She could not see where one ended and the next began. Grey backs, going in and out of each other, the way fish go in a shoal, the way Billy Narracott had seen them go over the hedge above the beach at Preston in August 1895 with his pony shaking in the shafts.

They came into the square.

* * *

The crowd did not scream.

They stepped back.

All of them. At once. Not running. Stepping back, to the edges of the square, to the walls of the station and the forge and Bailey's and the bakery, the way a crowd steps back from a horse that has got loose. Leaving the middle empty. The paving. The plane trees. The drifts of wet leaves.

And the grey went through the middle of it. Fast. Low. Straight.

Not at the crowd. Not at the forge. Not at the bench.

At the window of Bailey's.

* * *

The young man in the window had not moved.

His hands were flat on the table on either side of his cup. His face was turned to the square. To the grey coming across it. He did not stand up. He did not step back from the glass. He did not do anything at all.

Don't move.

He's been sitting like that for twenty-nine years. Because an old man told him to, in his own voice, on his first night. I never told him he could.

Jo felt it go through her like cold water. She looked at the window. At the two lamps over his head, the near one steady, the far one burning amber, and the cord going up out of the far one, bright, to Roundham. She looked at the grey going across the square towards him, low and quick and straight as a thrown line.

It is a whistle for telling them who to come for.

And somewhere in a drawer at Widecombe Cot, in a tin box, there was a letter on blue airmail paper from Toronto, from a man who had been dead for ninety years, in an upright educated hand

that was not steady at the end. *Keep the boy away from the station square.*

Nobody had.

Nobody could have. He had been in it for twenty-nine years.

* * *

Ania was in the middle of the square.

Jo did not see her get there. She had walked out from under the canopy with her carpet bag at a quarter to seven and Jo had looked at the bench, at the old man with the whistle, and then at the grey, and when she looked again Ania was there. In the middle of the paving. Under the biggest of the plane trees. Between the grey and the window.

Small. Straight. In a grey costume with no coat. With her grey hair put up. With her carpet bag in her left hand.

Her right hand raised.

Not high. Not in a fist. Open. Palm out. At the height of her shoulder. The way, Jo's father had written, she had stood on Daddyhole Plain in 2031 at the top of the grass with her hand up, towards the cliff edge and the sea, when the man with the whistle put it to his mouth and nothing came.

The grey reached her.

* * *

Jo did not breathe.

It went round her.

It did not stop. It did not slow. It reached her and parted, the way water parts round a post in a river, and went round her on both sides, close, so close Jo could not see the paving between them and the hem of her skirt. And closed again behind her. And went on.

Towards the window.

And then it stopped.

* * *

All of it. At once. Ten yards past her. Ten yards short of the window of Bailey's. The grey, all of it, whatever it was, stopped on the paving in the middle of Station Square the way a shoal of fish stops in clear water when a shadow falls across it.

And went still.

Ania had not turned round.

She stood with her back to it. With her hand up. Facing the bench. Facing the old man by the bench with the whistle in his hand, forty yards away, under the plane tree at the station end.

And she spoke.

* * *

"I told you," said Ania.

The old man did not move.

"On the grass. Above the sea. Twenty-six years ago. When I gave you that." She did not lower her hand. "I told you what you would do with it. I have known for a very long time."

Silence. The square. The grey, behind her, still.

"You will be very old," said Ania. "And you will still not be written down."

She lowered her hand.

"And it will not save you."

* * *

She turned round.

Slowly. The way she turned her head in the bay window at Widecombe Cot when the door opened. She turned until she was facing the grey, the whole of it, stopped on the paving ten yards past her. And she looked at it. Not at any part of it. At all of it at once, the way you look at weather.

She did not raise her hand again. She did not say anything. She only looked.

And the grey turned.

* * *

It turned the way a flock of starlings turns over a pier at dusk. All at once. Without a signal. Without a sound. The whole of it, whatever it was, swinging round on the paving in the middle of Station Square, away from the window of Bailey's, away from the young man with two lamps, round, past Ania, on both sides of her again, close, the way water goes round a post.

Towards the bench.

* * *

The old man saw it come.

He did not run.

He did not try to. Jo would think about that too. A man who had never been caught. Who had sat at kitchen tables and pushed the chairs in square and walked away. Who had stood outside a caravan at Talland Bay all night and not knocked. Who had carried a painting up the stairs of a cellar with a man watching him who could not take his hand off a stone. Who had sat on a bench every Tuesday since August and been looked at by people who could not see him, and left his newspaper folded square.

He lowered the whistle. Slowly. He looked at it, in his hand. The way, her father had written in 2031, a man looks at a thing he

has wanted for so long that he has stopped believing it is in the world.

Then he looked up. Not at the grey. Not at Ania.

At Jo.

He looked straight at her.

And she saw his face.

* * *

It did not go.

She looked at it, and it stayed. For the first time. For the first time in her life, and her father's, and anybody's. It did not slide. It did not go like a word on water. It was a face, and it stayed where it was, under the plane tree, in the dusk, in the light coming down from the net over the square, and she looked at it.

An old man's face. Thin. Very ordinary. You would walk past it. Grey, at the sides, gone white. A thin mouth. Pale eyes, a little too close together, tired, very tired, more tired than any eyes she had ever seen, even Chris's. And on the left cheek, under the eye, small, a scar. Pale. Old. Like somebody had hit him with a ring, a long time ago.

He was looking at her.

He knew. She saw him know. He knew what she was. He knew what she had in her hand. He had known Hills for sixty years: a constable at a gate in 1992, a carer with a lanyard on a slipway in a storm in 2026, a Member of Parliament two feet away at the next table at Bailey's, an old man in a wheelchair beside her now, with a pencil. He had spent sixty years making sure that every one of them, when they went to write him down, found nothing to write.

He was not doing it now.

He was letting her look.

* * *

Jo opened her pocketbook.

The date. The time. The place.

Mon. 29 Oct. 2057. Station Square, Paignton. 6.48 p.m.

And then she wrote him down.

* * *

A man.

She wrote it, and the pencil did not stop.

She had written those two words on the ninth of October, on the slats of this bench, with the wood still warm under her, and the pencil had stopped after them like a car at a wall. It did not stop now. It went on. Across the page. In her round upright hand, a bit too big. Not fast. Steady. The way her father wrote. The way Jack had written, in a square in 1895, *the date, the time, the weather.*

A man. About eighty-five. Thin. Dark coat. A stick. Grey hair gone white. A thin mouth. Pale eyes, close together, tired. A scar, left cheek, under the eye, small, old.

She looked up. He was still looking at her. The grey was nearly at him.

She looked down and wrote the last thing. The thing that was true. The thing nobody had ever written, in sixty years, in any hand.

He let me look.

* * *

The grey reached him.

It went round him, the way it had gone round Ania. Low. Close. Grey moving in grey. Like water coming up round a post in a river when the tide turns. It went round him and closed, and for a second he was standing in the middle of it, an old man with a

whistle in one hand and a stick in the other, under a plane tree, by a bench, looking at a woman with a pocketbook forty yards away.

And then he was not.

Not fallen. Not taken. Not gone anywhere that Jo could see. He was standing there, with the grey round him, and then there was the grey, and the bench, and the plane tree, and the paving, and a stick lying on it.

And then there was not the grey either.

It went the way it had come. Low and quick and silent, back across the square, between the plane trees, round the corner into Torbay Road, towards the front. Towards the sea. Like water going back over a weir.

Gone.

* * *

The dogs started again.

The town came back.

The square breathed out.

Two hundred people at the walls, with their lamps on and their strings going up into the net over their heads, looking at the middle of Station Square. At a plane tree. At a bench. At a newspaper on the slats, folded once, lengthways, square to the edge.

And a stick, lying on the paving beside it.

And a whistle. Small, pale, curved. The colour of old bone.

* * *

Ania walked over to it.

She bent, and picked up the whistle.

She held it for a moment on her open palm, the way she had held it out on Daddyhole Plain in 2031. Looking at it.

Then she put it in the pocket of her grey jacket.

She did not look at the newspaper. She did not touch the stick. She straightened up, and stood by the empty bench under the big plane tree at the station end of Station Square, by the cab rank, with her carpet bag in her hand, and turned her head.

And looked at the window of Bailey's.

* * *

Jo looked down at her pocketbook.

The page. Her own hand. *A man.* And then everything after it, line after line, that she had never been able to write and had written. The thin mouth. The pale eyes. The scar.

He let me look.

She thought: *he's written down now.*

She thought: *for the first time in sixty years, somebody's put him on paper.*

She thought: *in my hand.*

* * *

Beside her, in his wheelchair, her father had started writing again.

He stopped.

She looked down at him. He was looking up at her. Eighty-four. Thin as paper. His eyes, pale, steady, very tired, missing nothing.

They were wet.

"You wrote him down," said her father.

"Yes."

He looked at her for a long time.

"Good girl," he said.

* * *

She looked at the station clock.

Ten to seven.

She had looked at it at six forty-seven. She knew she had. In the middle of it, with the grey coming across the square, she had looked up at the clock on the front of the station, without meaning to, the way your eyes go to a clock in a room when something is happening. And it had said six forty-seven.

Tuesday, thirtieth October 2057. The line, Johor. Two forty-seven a.m.

The thirteenth line.

Beside her, Rani had made a sound. A small one. Jo turned and looked at her. Rani was looking up. Not at the square. At the net over it. At the strings going up, all of them, into the dark blue sky, crossing, a web so fine and bright the stars were lost in it.

She was looking east.

"One's gone," said Rani. Very quietly. "Just now. A long one. A very long one. From the other side of the world." She swallowed. "I could see it. Since six. Coming in over the sea from the east, and up the hill to Torquay. To the Exchange. To the white room. I didn't know whose." Her voice did not change. "It went at six forty-seven."

Jo did not say anything.

She looked down at her pocketbook. At the line at the top of the page. *6.48 p.m.*

One minute.

She wrote it in the margin, small. The way her father wrote the things he did not want to be the main thing on a page.

6.47.

And did not write the name.

* * *

In the window of Bailey's, the young man had stood up.

Chapter 27 – *The Railway*

Tues. 30 Oct. 2057. The line, Johor. 2.47 a.m. (Mon. 29 Oct., 6.47 p.m. here, by the station clock.) I was not there. B. rang at 8.10 p.m. our time: M.L. safe. Ai Li's people found her on the walkway, running, towards Singapore. The woman was on the line. Not written.

At ten to midnight Karina Petrick was standing at the window of a room over a market in Tiong Bahru, in the dark, with the shutters folded back, looking at a park.

She did not need to sit. She never had. She stood very still, the way her grandmother had taught her in a house on the Elbchaussee eighty years ago, *you become part of the room*, and the room did not know she was in it, and the park below did not know it was being looked at. The rain trees, dripping still from the evening storm. The playground with its climbing frame shaped like a ship. The benches round the edge, wet, empty. The bench by the swings, where a pushchair had stopped once with its brake on.

She was not looking at the park. Not really. She was listening.

* * *

It was very close now.

Eighteen years. Since a step in Pimlico in the rain. A pressure, very far off, in the bones of her back and her hips and the long bones of her legs, the way she had felt weather all her life. Growing. So slowly at first that she thought she had imagined it. And then not so slowly. And then, this autumn, all the time.

Tonight it was in the room.

She stood at the window and listened, and felt it coming, and did not move.

* * *

At twenty to two something moved.

Not in the park. Not in the room. In her.

Since she came to the room over the market eleven days ago, it had been different. The pull had not been south-east. It had been east. A little north of east. Across the city. Five miles, perhaps. To a flat off Joo Chiat Road, three floors up, where a young woman slept on a bed pushed into the corner at an angle.

And at twenty to two, standing at the window, Karina felt it move.

North.

* * *

She had not been still in this park in October 2031, with a man with a newspaper three strides behind a pushchair.

She was not still now.

She was down the stairs and out into the street before the pull had finished moving. In the dark, in the warm wet air, past the shuttered market and the flower stall with its buckets taken in. Out onto the main road. A taxi, coming along it with its light on, the only thing moving. She stepped into the road in front of it and it stopped.

"North," she said. "The Woodlands road. The causeway."

"Causeway's closed, lady. Checkpoint shuts at midnight for the new line work."

"Then as far as it goes," said Karina.

* * *

Karina sat in the back with her hands in her lap and her eyes shut and followed it.

She could not see it. She had never been able to see a cord. She had sat in a room in Pimlico in 2039 with three men and their whisky and lied to them about a man who could, and she had never once seen what he saw. She could only feel it. The way you feel a hand in yours in the dark. A pull, very fine, from the middle of her, going ahead of the taxi, north, up the road. Moving. Faster than the taxi. Getting further away.

And the other one.

That one she had always felt. Since 1983. A thread from the top of her own head, going out of her, the other way, north-west, over everything, to a long way off. She had never known where it went. She had thought, for a long time, that it went to Hamburg. To her grandmother's people. To the trust. To the chair at the top of the table.

* * *

The taxi stopped at Woodlands at a quarter past two.

"This is it, lady. Checkpoint's there. Closed." The driver pointed. A long low building with lights on and nobody in it, and barriers down, and beyond it, the causeway going out across the strait in the dark, and the lights of Johor on the far side. "Train station's over there. The new line. Doesn't run till five."

Karina paid him. She did not wait for change.

She got out and stood on the pavement in the warm dark and turned, slowly, on the spot. The way a dowser turns. With her hand half up.

There.

* * *

The new line went out over the water on legs.

She had seen it being built, from a taxi, in 2031. The concrete legs of it going out across the strait like the legs of a pier. She saw it finished now: a long pale viaduct, high, lit along its length by a row of small white lights, going out from a station on the Singapore shore, across the black water of the strait, to another station on the Johor side, a mile away, among the towers. Two tracks, on top. And along the side of it, below the tracks, a narrow walkway for the men who looked after it, with a rail, and a light every fifty yards.

The station on this side was dark. The gates were shut. But there was a gap, at the end of the platform, where the line went out from under the canopy onto the viaduct, and a gate in a fence there, for the maintenance men, and the gate was open.

And beside it, at the kerb, a car. Long. Dark. With its engine running and nobody in it.

Karina looked at the car for a long time.

Then she looked at the viaduct. At the walkway along its side, going out over the water under its little white lights.

There were people on it.

* * *

Three. Two hundred yards out. Small, at that distance, under the lights. Two men, one on either side, and between them somebody smaller, in something pale, walking. Not struggling. Walking. The way a person walks between two people when they have been told that if they do not walk something will happen to somebody else.

Karina went through the gate.

* * *

She did not run.

She walked, very fast, along the walkway, with her hand on the rail. The way you go across a station concourse when the train is already pulling out. In a white linen dress, in the dark, at twenty past two in the morning, high above the black water of the Strait of Johor, under a row of small white lights.

She closed the distance. One hundred and fifty yards. One hundred.

Seventy yards. She could see them now. The two men. Ordinary. Dark jackets. One of them, the one on the right, older, with grey at the sides of his head, and a mole under his left ear, and a newspaper folded in the pocket of his jacket.

She knew him.

A bench outside a tunnel at Steinwerder, two weeks ago, with the cranes moving slowly behind it like herons. A man reading a newspaper and not turning the page.

And between them, in a pale grey dress, with her hair down, with her arms at her sides, walking: a young woman of twenty-eight, with big dark eyes and her father's way of looking, along, not at.

Mei Ling.

* * *

At fifty yards, Karina felt the time.

Two minutes.

And then, at a quarter to three in the morning, out over the Strait of Johor, the sky changed.

* * *

The sky over the strait was dark. A deep warm tropical dark with the haze in it and the lights of two cities on either side.

And then it was full of light.

Not from above. From everywhere. From the towers of Johor ahead and the new towns of Singapore behind, from the causeway, from the road, from every window that had somebody awake behind it at a quarter to three in the morning. Threads. Fine. Bright. Going up. Thousands of them. Hundreds of thousands. Out of every head in two cities, going up into the haze, crossing, a net, a web, so fine and bright and full that Karina stopped on the walkway, fifty yards behind three people, and put her hand up, without meaning to, as if to touch it.

And looked down.

At the two men ahead of her. And the young woman between them.

* * *

She saw the threads.

Out of the top of each man's head. Not going up. Going away. North-west. Low over the water, over the towers of Johor, the same way her own went, but lower, a long way, further than she could follow. Thin. Very thin. Going to the same place, both of them. To one place. A long way off.

And as she watched, they shook.

The two men had stopped walking.

They were looking up. At the net. And then down, at their own chests, at the threads going out of their own heads, north-west, shaking. The man with the mole under his ear put his hand up to his head, slowly, the way you put your hand up to a place where somebody has touched you in the dark.

And between them, the young woman had turned her head.

Not to them. Back. Along the walkway. Towards Singapore. Towards Karina.

There was a thread out of her too. Out of the top of her head. Bright. Short. Very short. Not going up. Not going anywhere far.

Fifty yards. Along the walkway. Low. Steady.

To Karina.

* * *

Karina looked at it.

She answers to me.

Vicky had seen it, in 2038. From a balcony in Tiong Bahru. A child of nine in her pyjamas on Christmas morning, with a thread going north-west, over India, towards Europe. Karina had not known. Nobody had told her. Nobody ever told her anything.

She knew now.

And her own thread went out of the top of her head the other way, north-west, so long and thin it was out of sight in a second. She did not need to see the other end. She knew where it went. She had always known. She had carried a letter over it for nineteen years, in the inside pocket of whatever coat she was wearing, over her heart, with one line crossed out so hard the pen had nearly gone through.

You'd know what it costs better than anybody.

C.

* * *

The man with the mole had let go of Mei Ling's arm.

The other man had not.

The other man, the younger one, had his hand on Mei Ling's other arm still, and he had seen Karina, and he had turned.

Karina was already moving.

* * *

She did not touch the man. She touched the girl.

She took Mei Ling by both shoulders, from behind, and turned her round, all in one movement, the way you turn a child round on a pavement to face the way she should be going. And for one second, under the little white light, on the walkway, high over the water, they were face to face.

A foot apart.

Big dark eyes. Her father's way of looking. And under them something else, something Karina had seen once, in a mirror, in a hall, on the Elbchaussee, in 1990. Something that did not get ill, and did not feel the cold, and would not, in thirty years, have changed very much at all.

Mei Ling looked at her.

She knew. Karina saw her know.

"*Hallo, Kleine,*" said Karina.

* * *

She did not wait for an answer. There was no time for an answer. She pushed.

Not hard. Firmly. In the middle of the back. The way a woman on a platform at Torquay in 1980, in her brother's jumper, had pushed a boy towards the door of a train. Towards Singapore. Along the walkway. Back the way they had come.

"Run," said Karina. In English. Low and even, with nothing in it. "Don't look back. Run."

Mei Ling ran.

* * *

Karina turned round.

The younger man had something in his hand. She did not look at it. She did not need to. She had seen a great many things in men's hands in seventy years. She looked at him instead. At his face. Thirty, perhaps. A good haircut. A face that had never once in its life been hit.

And at the thread going out of the top of his head.

North-west. Low over the towers. Shaking. So thin now she could hardly see it.

She watched it break.

It went like a hair in a flame. From his head, all the way out, very fast, over the towers, north-west, out of sight. And he felt it. She saw him feel it. His face did a thing she had seen once on a boy in a lab in Stoke when the fuse went on the bench and the lights came on again and he understood that what he had been holding for an hour was not live.

The man with the mole's thread broke too. A second after. She heard it. You could not hear a cord. She heard it.

The younger one's hand did not move.

Karina looked at him. At the thing in it. At his face.

He did not know any more why he was holding it. Whoever had told him to was gone. But his hand did not know that yet.

Hands are slower than heads. She had learned that in a stand in Bedok in 2028, watching her son not celebrate a goal.

* * *

Two forty-seven.

She felt it come. Not on a clock. In the bones. The train. Out of the tunnel. Its light filling the white and cream tiles, the crab and the fish and the eel and the rat with a boot in its mouth, all lit up at

once, every relief, every tile. The air pushed ahead of it, warm, smelling of iron, lifting her hair.

She did not mind.

It was relief.

Like a woman who has been standing very still for a very long time, and is allowed to sit down.

* * *

She did not hear the sound. She felt it. Low, in the chest. Like a door closed hard in a house a long way off.

She sat down.

On the walkway. On the steel grating, with the black water a long way below it and the lights of the causeway lying on the water in broken lines. With her back against the rail. In her white linen dress. She did not fall. She sat. The way you sit down on a bench in a park when you have walked a long way and the evening is warm.

The two men were gone. She did not see them go. She heard their feet on the grating, running, north, towards Johor, and then she did not.

She looked the other way.

South. Towards Singapore. Along the walkway, under the little white lights, getting smaller.

A young woman in a pale grey dress, running, with her hair flying. Not looking back.

And beyond her, a long way off, at the far end of the walkway, where it came in under the canopy of the dark station on the Singapore shore, a light. Moving. Torches. Three, four. Coming out along the walkway towards the running girl. Fast. People. A small woman in front, white-haired, with her glasses on a chain, running,

at seventy-two, the way she had never once run in her life. And behind her, taller, in a white shirt, a man of sixty-two.

Ai Li.

Karina watched them meet. The girl and the torches. Far off. Small. Under a light. She watched the small white-haired woman reach her first, and then the man. She watched him put his arms round the girl and hold her, very hard, against his chest, the way Grace had held her in a park in 2031, with his face in her hair.

* * *

She looked up.

At the net, and at her own thread in it.

She could see where it went. She could not see the top of her own head. Nobody can. But she could see it go. Out of her. Up. North-west. Long, and thin, and very bright now, brighter than it had ever been, bright as a wire, going out over the water and the towers and the curve of the Earth, out of sight.

To a hill. To a white room at the top of a building on a corner, in a town by the sea. To a desk. To an old man's hand.

She had answered to him for seventy-four years. Since a corridor at a polytechnic in Stoke in June 1983, and a young man with a stroke still forty years away, looking up from a terminal. She had not known. She had thought she answered to her grandmother, and the trust, and the chair. She had sat in the chair. She had stood up from it.

It had never been any of them.

* * *

She thought about a tunnel.

The old tunnel under the Elbe, with its lamps going away. A man in a room in Singapore in 1994, who had never seen it, had

painted it. Orange and black. The lamps going away. And at the far end, small, a face.

Listening.

I didn't know it was you till this year.

It had come.

She sat on the walkway with her back against the rail and her hands in her lap, and listened to it arrive. The light filling the tunnel. Every tile. Every lamp. The whole length of it, four hundred and twenty-six metres, lit, from one end to the other, so that for the first time she could see all the way back to where she had come in.

And at the far end, where she had always been, a small face. Listening.

Not frightened.

Waiting to be told.

* * *

The thread went at two forty-seven.

Out of the top of her head, north-west, over the water. She felt it go. Not like a hair in a flame. Not like a string snapping. Like a hand, letting go of another hand, very gently, at the end of a long walk, at a gate.

She did not mind.

The last thing she thought, on the walkway, with the water below and the net above and the warm air on her face, was not a word. It was the shape of one. In German. Which she had not spoken aloud for twenty-three years, until a park in Tiong Bahru.

Not *Kleine*.

The other one. The one she had said at the door of a room at the top of a block of flats every night for thirteen years, before she turned the light out. To a boy who could not sleep.

She did not say it. There was nobody there to say it to.

She thought it, very clearly, towards the south, towards a shore, towards a city where a man of sixty-two was standing on a walkway with his arms round his daughter and his face in her hair, not knowing yet, looking north.

And then she listened.

And the tunnel was very quiet.

Chapter 28 – *You Found the Train*

> *Mon. 29 Oct. 2057. Station Square, 6.52 p.m. K. came out. Gave it back. A light over A.'s head. The first I ever saw. K. gone. Platform 1, 6.58 p.m.: "You found the train." "I found the train." The Exchange, 8.05 p.m.: I asked him. He did not know there was a question.*

He came out of the window.

Jo had never seen him anywhere but the window. Eleven years. Every morning. At the table with the brass plate on it, with a cup in both hands. Once, under the monkey puzzle at Widecombe Cot, in the dark, looking up. Never in the square. Never walking. Never anywhere you could have put your hand on his arm.

He came out of the side door of Bailey's, the one into the back passage, onto the pavement, into the light from the gold windows. And stopped. And stood there, at the edge of Station Square, at the corner, with his hands at his sides, and looked across it.

Two lamps over his head. The near one, steady. And the far one, behind it, burning. Amber. Bright now as the near one. Brighter. With a cord going up out of it, high, south, over the station roof and the harbour, to a round window on a hill.

The square looked at him.

Two hundred people, at the walls, with their lamps on and their strings going up into the net, and a stick on the paving under the big plane tree and a newspaper on the bench folded square. They had been looking at the bench. They turned their heads, now, the way a crowd turns when a door opens, and looked at the young man on the corner.

He did not look at them.

He was looking at the woman by the bench.

* * *

Ania had not moved.

She stood by the empty bench under the big plane tree at the station end, by the cab rank, with her carpet bag in her left hand, and looked at him across the square. Forty yards. The way she had sat on that bench nine days ago, on a Saturday morning, from fourteen minutes past ten to thirty-one minutes past, and looked at him through the glass.

There was no glass now.

He walked across the square.

* * *

Jo watched him come. Everybody did.

Not fast. Not slow. Across the empty middle of Station Square, between the plane trees, through the drifts of wet leaves, under the net of light, with two lamps over his head. The way you walk across a room to somebody you have been sitting across from for a very long time and have never once stood up for.

Beside Jo, her father had stopped writing.

Stay there. Whatever happens. Don't come into the square.

He did not move.

* * *

Keith stopped in front of her.

A yard. Not more. Under the plane tree, by the bench, in the light coming down from the net. A young man with two lamps and a woman with none, a yard apart, looking at each other.

Neither of them said anything.

* * *

Then Ania put her carpet bag down.

And Keith put up his hand.

His right hand. Open. He put it up, slowly, the way you put your hand up to a window, and laid it flat. Not on her. In the air. In front of her face. A few inches from her cheek. The way, in the autumn of 2031, on a platform at Torquay, a woman in a train window had put her hand flat against the glass, and a young man on the platform had stood very still and looked at it.

He held it there.

And the far lamp moved.

* * *

Jo saw it.

It did not jump. It did not fly. It went the way a lamp goes when you carry it from one room to another in an old house at night: steadily, with the light swinging a little, from over his head, behind his own, forward, through the air, along his arm, past his hand, the open hand held up in front of her face, and over her.

And stopped there.

Over Ania's head.

* * *

Jo looked at it.

There was a light there.

Amber. Clear. Steady. Not very big. Not as bright as Brindley's, that Rani had said was white. Warm. Like a lamp on an old switchboard, lit, waiting for somebody to answer it. Sitting over her grey hair, put up, in the dusk, under the plane tree, as if it had

always been there and somebody had only just turned round and seen it.

In painting seven, Ania has a lamp.

Her father had written that. In 2031. In the cellar, with the crate gone, with the dust pale on the wall where it had stood.

Ania had a lamp.

And out of the top of it, the way they all did, the way every head in the square did now, a string. Going up. Not south, to Roundham, to a round window. Not across the square. Up. North. Over the roofs, over the hill, along the bay, very fine and very bright, towards Torquay.

Towards a white room at the top of a building on a corner.

* * *

Beside her, Rani made a sound.

"It's hers," said Rani. "It's hers. It fits." Her voice was shaking. "It went back where it came out. Like a stone into a ring." She had both hands over her mouth. "Jo. Jo, she's not a gap any more."

Jo did not answer.

She was looking at Keith.

* * *

He had lowered his hand.

He looked at the light over Ania's head for a long time.

Then he looked at Ania.

And then, for the first time, he turned his head and looked across the square. Not at the window. At the forge. At the angle of the wall, out of the wind, where an old man in a wheelchair sat with a book on his knees and a pencil in his hand, and a woman of forty-seven stood beside him with nothing in her pocket.

He looked at Jo.

"Five," said Keith.

Jo did not say *still five*.

She did not say anything. She looked at him, and he looked at her, and she saw his face do the thing it had done on the first morning in September, at two minutes past eight, when she came in with her coffee and he said *you've got a new pocketbook*. A very small thing. At the corner of the mouth.

Then he looked at her father.

And her father, in the wheelchair, eighty-four, lifted the pencil off the page. Very slightly. The way you lift a hand to somebody across a square.

Keith nodded.

* * *

He was gone.

And then there was the woman, and the plane tree, and the bench, and the light, and the paving.

And nobody else.

Over the place where he had been standing, nothing. Not a gap. Not a socket with the plate off. Just air.

The square breathed in.

* * *

Ania did not look at where he had been.

She bent, and picked up her carpet bag.

She stood with it in her left hand, under the plane tree, with the light over her head. And she looked up the hill. North. Along the bay. Along her own string, very fine and very bright, going up into

the net and away towards Torquay. To the top of a building on a corner.

Then she turned round, and walked towards the station.

* * *

Jo went after her.

She did not decide to. Her feet did it. She heard her father say something behind her, one word, she did not hear what, and she did not stop. She went out from the angle of the forge wall into the square, across the paving, past the bench and the stick and the newspaper folded square, past the cab driver at his cab with his hand over his mouth, past the girl from the bakery, under the net, after a woman in grey with a carpet bag and a light over her head, walking very straight, not hurrying, not slow, towards the station canopy.

Ania went in under the canopy.

There was a train in.

* * *

The 6.58 to Newton Abbot.

The guard was walking along the platform. He had his whistle in his hand.

Ania walked along the platform to the second carriage, the rear one, and stopped by the open door.

She did not get on.

She turned round.

* * *

Jo had stopped at the end of the platform, by the gate. Ten yards. She did not go nearer. She did not know why. It was where you stood.

Ania looked at her.

The light over her head. The young face under the grey hair. And something else.

Something in the face that Jo had never seen in it. Not in twenty-six Octobers. Not at the little table in the bay window. Not on the path. Not at the desk, ten days ago, when Karen said *suits you* and the corner of her mouth went up.

Ania looked at Jo across ten yards of platform, and her eyes were wet.

* * *

Jo knew what to say.

She had read it. In Jack's long account, in a school exercise book in a soft box on her kitchen floor. A Saturday afternoon in November 1895. A still, bitter afternoon. A platform. A young woman coming through the gate who was not on the platform and then was, with a carpet bag. And a tall man waiting for her, who had been to the white room, and back, and knew. *It was not the look of two people meeting. It was the look of two people checking something.*

She had never known, until now, why he said it. Why that. Of all the things a man might say to a woman coming off a train.

She knew now.

Somebody had to say it first.

"You found the train," said Jo.

* * *

Ania looked at her for a long moment.

Then she smiled.

Not at the corner of the mouth. All of it. All the way up. Into the wet eyes, and stopping there. Jo had never seen it. Nobody had seen it, that she knew of, in a hundred and sixty years. Not Jack. Not Edward. Not her father. Not Chris, carrying the tea up the stairs.

"I found the train," said Ania.

* * *

She got on.

She stepped up into the rear carriage, with her carpet bag, and turned, in the doorway, and stood there. The guard came along the platform. He looked at the woman in the doorway in her grey costume, with no coat, with a light over her head like everybody else's now, and then at Jo at the gate, and then at the clock.

He did not ask for a ticket.

He blew his whistle.

The doors closed. With Ania behind them, in the doorway, looking out through the glass.

She put her hand up. Flat. Against the glass. The way she had on a platform at Torquay in 2031, at a young man who had stood very still.

The train moved.

* * *

Jo watched it until it went round the curve.

She watched the light over the woman in the rear door, very small, amber, going away along the bay in the dark.

And then the curve came across, and it was gone.

* * *

She stood at the gate for a long time.

Above her, the sky over Station Square was full of strings.

She looked up. Not at the net. Past it. South-east. Over the station roof, over the harbour, over Roundham, to Berry Head at the end of the bay, very dark against the sea. And the lighthouse on it, very small, going round.

And above the lighthouse, a little to the south of it, a point of light.

Very small. Very steady.

It was there.

And then, while she was looking at it, it was moving. Very slowly. Not down. Not across. Away. Up, and out, the way the lights of a ship go when it is very far out and turning for the open sea. Getting smaller.

Jo watched it until she could not tell whether she was seeing it or wanting to.

Then she took out her pocketbook and wrote the date, and the time, and the place.

* * *

Her phone went at two minutes past seven.

Vicky. From the cellar.

"It's gone," said Vicky.

Jo did not ask what. She knew what.

"The old one," said Vicky. "In the cradle. Under the glass. At six fifty-eight. Rani said until tonight." Her voice was very calm. It was always very calm when something was very wrong. "It didn't crack. It didn't do anything. It went dark. It stopped humming. And then it was a stone." She was quiet. "Just a stone, Jo. Smooth, grey, the size of an egg. I've got my hand on it. It's cold."

"And the desk?" said Jo. "In the white room. The fibre."

Vicky did not answer straight away.

"I don't know," she said. "It went down the fibre. Whatever went out of it. It went up the line, Jo, not down. Up the fibre to the Exchange. I felt it go." She breathed. "I don't know what's at the other end."

* * *

Jo walked back across the square.

Her father was not writing.

He was looking at the square.

At the people in it. Two hundred of them, at the walls, under the net, beginning to move again, slowly, the way people move after something has happened that they will tell their grandchildren about and never be believed. The cab driver. The girl from the bakery. The man with the *Herald*. Students. A woman with a dog. Fred in the forge doorway with his arms folded and his beard white and his four apprentices behind him.

Her father was looking at the air above their heads.

At the lamps. Every one. The way he had looked at the air above people's heads in rooms and on trains and in the Members' Lobby of the House of Commons, out of habit, the thing he had never been able to stop doing, for twenty-six years.

Then he looked at Jo.

She looked at the air above his head. She could not help it. She had been doing it since the August she was twenty-one.

His lamp. Steady. Not bright; he was eighty-four. Warm. And out of the top of it, a string, the way they all had now. Going up. Into the net. Away.

She did not know where his went.

She did not ask.

* * *

She went up the hill to the Exchange at eight.

Karen was in Jo's chair.

She had come at six. Dennis had brought her up. She was sitting in Jo's chair, at Jo's desk, pulled round so that it was beside the big pale chair and touching it, with her stick across her knees and her coat still on. She was holding Chris's hand. The good one. In both of hers.

She looked up when Jo came in.

Jo went across the room to the big pale chair.

* * *

He was sitting in it. In his coat. With the long grey scarf still round his neck, tucked in at the front. His good hand in Karen's. His eyes open, looking out of the window at the end, down Union Street, to the sea.

His bad hand was in his lap.

It was open.

Not curled. Not the way it had lain for thirty-five years, the fingers bent in like a claw. Open. Flat. On his knee. Palm up. The fingers a little apart. The way a hand lies when it has been holding something for a long time and has let go.

Jo looked at it.

She went to her desk and got the flask, and poured, and put in too much sugar. And came back, and crouched down beside the big pale chair, with her knee going, the way it did, and held the cup a few inches from his good hand, where Karen's were, so that he could feel the warmth of it.

He turned his head and looked at her.

Pale eyes. Very old. Ninety-five.

Not shaking. Not grey. He was not shaking at all.

He looked at her the way you look at somebody you are fond of and have not seen for a while. Kindly. A little puzzled.

"Hello, Jo," he said.

* * *

"Right," said Jo.

She kept her voice very level. Very plain. The way her father said *the date, the time, the weather*. The way she had said it four hundred and sixteen times before.

"What did it cost?"

Chris looked at her.

He looked at the cup, and at Karen, and back at Jo, crouched by his chair with the tea.

"What did what cost, love?" he said.

* * *

Jo did not say anything for a long time.

Then she put the cup into his good hand, very carefully, with Karen's hands still round it, and he took it, and drank, and made a face at the sugar, and drank again.

She got up. Her knee went. She went to her desk and sat down on the edge of it, because Karen was in her chair, and took out her pocketbook.

She wrote the date, and the time, and the place.

The Exchange, 8.05 p.m. I asked him.

Then she wrote the only true thing she had.

He did not know there was a question.

At the other desk, Karen had not let go of his hand. And Chris was looking out of the window at the end of the white room, at the net of light over the bay, with the cup in his good hand, and his other hand lying open in his lap, and on his face, Jo thought, was the look of a man who has come home from somewhere a long way off, and cannot remember where, and does not mind.

Chapter 29 – *The Last Entry*

Tues. 30 Oct. 2057. Bailey's, the back room, 8.02 a.m. The window. Nobody in it. Nobody said it.
Sun. 11 Nov. The Strand, the war memorial, 11.00 a.m. Nothing in my hand. Nobody knows what comes next.

The window was empty at two minutes past eight.

The light was coming in. Low and thin and grey, the first morning after, with rain in it. Across the square. Through the window. Onto the table with the brass plate on it.

RESERVED.

And the chair.

Empty.

* * *

The chair was pushed in.

She did not sit in it. She went to the table behind it, by the wall, where Rani had sat, where her father had sat yesterday morning with the sixtieth book, and sat down there. With her back to the wall. With the window in front of her and the chair between her and it.

She waited.

Nobody said *five*.

At half past eight she got up and went out into the square.

* * *

It was still there. The net.

People were looking at it.

The bench under the big plane tree was empty. The stick was gone. Somebody from the council had taken it, or a policeman, or Fred. The newspaper was gone.

There was a chalk mark on the paving where the stick had been. Jo did not know who had put it there. A circle. Small. Neat.

She did not write it down.

* * *

Basil rang at nine.

"Ai Li found her," said Basil. "On the walkway. At about three. After they'd got Mei Ling to the station." His voice was very flat and very even. "Sitting down. Against the rail. With her hands in her lap. Like somebody sitting on a bench in a park." He was quiet. "She had a letter in her pocket. Inside. Over the heart. In my father's hand. From 2038."

"She was ninety-five," said Basil. "She looked about forty. The police didn't believe the passport." Something in his voice moved, and was put back. "They've let me have her. Today. I'm taking her home on Friday."

"Home?"

"Tiong Bahru," he said. "There's a park. I'm going to put her under the rain trees on the far side. By the bench. Nobody will know but us." He breathed. "Mei Ling wants to. It was her idea. She said: *that's where she watched from*."

"How is she?"

"She hasn't slept." He was quiet. "She lies on her bed in the corner at an angle and looks at the wall. North-west. She says it doesn't pull any more. She says it's like a tooth that's stopped aching and she keeps putting her tongue where it was." He swallowed. "She said one more thing. This morning. At breakfast. To me and

Grace. She said: *she said it to me. On the walkway. Before she pushed me*."

"*Hallo, Kleine*," said Basil. And then nothing at all, for a long time, and then the line went, and Jo sat in the car on the side of Station Square with the phone in her hand and the rain on the windscreen and did not move until ten.

* * *

The white room was just a room.

Rani was at Chris's desk with both hands flat on the bare surface and her eyes shut. She opened them when Jo came in.

"Nothing," said Rani.

"It's a desk," said Rani. "There's a fibre under it. The fibre goes down five storeys and through the cable chamber and four hundred yards under the street to a cellar, and at the end of it there's a stone in a cradle. And the stone's a stone." She took her hands off the surface. "Vicky's had her hands on it all night. Cold. Nothing in it. No hum. No pattern. Nothing behind the eyes. Just grey. Like a pebble off Goodrington." She looked at the desk. "It went at six fifty-eight. Up the fibre. To here. To him." She was quiet. "And then it went out of him. At the same second the train went round the curve."

"Where?"

Rani did not answer.

"Can anybody go back?" said Jo. "Through it? Ever?"

"No," she said. "There's nothing to go through. The door's not locked, Jo. It's not there." She stood up. "Nobody can reach anything any more. Not Jack. Not Edward. Not 1895, or 1915, or a beach in 1978. It's all written. It's all still in the books. But it's just written now. It's just the past." She looked out of the window at the end, down Union Street, to the sea, grey, with the net faint over it in

the rain. "If anything goes wrong now, from here on, nobody can go back and fix it."

"Then we'll have to get it right first time," said Jo.

"Your father would have said that," said Rani.

"He did," said Jo. "In 1997. In his first book. *Get it right first time. There is no second time.* He was talking about a breathalyser."

* * *

On the Wednesday she opened the case.

Ai Li's case, the small black one she had carried from Singapore. Jo opened it at her desk in the white room, at ten in the morning, with Ai Li on the screen from Singapore, at six in the evening there, in the office over the phone-case shop, with her glasses on a chain and her face grey with three nights of no sleep.

The screen went dark. Then it filled with numbers. Rows and rows of them, very small. And then the decoder began to work, and the numbers came apart, one stroke at a time, into lines.

* * *

"Go to the end," said Ai Li.

Jo scrolled. Past four thousand lines. Past a hundred and sixty years of Hills and Harveys and Mallyons writing everything down. Jack's square capitals. Johnny's. A child's round hand in the 1940s. Chris's, small and fast and leaning forward. Her father's, block capitals.

Carole's line. *Tues. 16 Sept. 2031. Cheltenham, the kitchen. 10.47 p.m.*

And then the fourteen. In the hand like print.

The tea. Daddyhole. The cable chamber. The ninth face. Newton Abbot. Kit Hill. The kitchen in Preston. Union Street. The Lords. Union Street again. The Exchange, the top floor, nine a.m.,

the second of April 2046. Ellacombe, the flat over the club, three ten a.m.

Tuesday, thirtieth October 2057. The line, Johor. Two forty-seven a.m.

And the fourteenth.

* * *

It was not damaged.

In 2031, in an office in Joo Chiat, Ai Li had read it with her eyes shut by the tick of the decoder, and opened her eyes, and seen almost nothing. *The line was damaged, as if something had gone through it. The day gone. The month gone. A gap where something had been, and was not.* In September, at this desk, it had been the same. *2057*. And a gap. And *Station Square*.

It was not damaged now.

The decoder took it apart, stroke by stroke, and gave her all of it. Clean. In the upright hand. Every letter the same height, like print.

Monday, 29th October 2057. Paignton, Station Square. 6.58 p.m.

"It's whole," said Ai Li. Very quietly. From six thousand miles away. "Jo. It's whole."

She thought: *it was damaged because it hadn't happened yet. Because something had to go through it first.*

She thought: *a train. Going round a curve. With a light in the rear door.*

* * *

There was nothing after it.

"Ai Li," she said.

"I know."

"There's nothing. After."

"There never was."

"So nobody knows."

"Nobody knows," said Ai Li. "What comes next. For the first time since 1895." She looked at Jo through the screen for a long time. "Not her. Not us. Nobody."

* * *

Jo took out her pocketbook and opened it at the column. Fourteen lines, in pencil, in her own hand. Twelve ticks. Two circles, round two dates. *30.10. 29.10.*

She took her pencil and, very carefully, beside the thirteenth line, inside its circle, she made a small tick.

And beside the fourteenth.

Then she sat and looked at it. Fourteen ticks. A finished column.

She did not draw a line under it. Hills did not draw lines under things.

She turned to a clean page.

* * *

The world came apart that week.

Not loudly. Jo had thought it would be loud. She had thought there would be fires, and shouting, and men on the steps of buildings in handcuffs. Some of that happened. Most of it did not. Most of it happened the way the threads had broken in Station Square: quietly, one at a time, a person looking down at a string coming out of their own head and following it with their eyes to where it went, and seeing, and stepping back.

And the string going.

It happened everywhere. Clifford rang every day from the dish, where he had not gone home from, and told her. The boys in Florida had the whole planet up on the screens. The knots were going dark. Cities. Companies. A bank in Zurich, on the Wednesday, all its strings going out of its windows in the morning to a building in another country, and by the evening, none. A ministry in a capital Jo had never been to. A football club. A church. A family in Hamburg, very old, with a trust and a white house on the Elbchaussee with a round window at the top, whose strings had gone out across the world for a hundred and sixty years, to ships and banks and ministries and a solicitor's office in Lincoln's Inn and a firm of solicitors in Great Smith Street.

Dark.

On the Thursday, Hannah Price stood up in the House of Commons.

The House was full. Every Member could see every other Member's string.

Hannah did not talk for long. She said that she had been handed certain material. She said that it had been handed to her by a serving officer of the intelligence services at a quarter to seven on Monday evening, at Two Marsham Street, in front of thirty-four witnesses. She said that the material concerned an organisation that had operated in this country and others for at least a hundred and sixty years, without a name and without a register and without a single line written about it in any official file. She said that the material named names.

She did not read them.

She said that she did not need to. She said that, as of Monday evening, everybody in the country could see for themselves who

answered to whom. She looked round the House. At six hundred and fifty strings going up.

"Some of them," said Hannah Price, "used to go somewhere else."

* * *

Edward Hollis was stopped at City Airport on the Wednesday morning, with a ticket to Hamburg in his pocket and a pale linen suit in his case.

The officers looked at the air over his head, and his string went up a few feet and stopped, frayed, like a rope that has been cut. He had been answering to somebody for thirty years. And the somebody was gone.

William White was at home in Surrey. He had not gone out. The press were at his gate, Hannah said; a dozen of them, with cameras, in the rain, among the roses. Nobody had arrested him. There was nothing to arrest him for. He had simply been seen.

"He rang me," said Hannah. "On Tuesday. At midnight. He said: *I've been looking at it for two days. Where mine goes.*" She paused. "I said: *where does it go?* He said: *I don't know any more. It used to go somewhere. Now it just goes up.*" She was quiet for a long time. "He said: *I don't know what to do with my hands.*"

* * *

Tarquin Talland resigned on the Friday.

On the Saturday, Jo took the train to London.

At Talland's the sign said *CLOSED*, and there was a light at the back. Tarquin came down the shop between the rows of little wooden drawers in a grey cardigan, with a cup in his hand, and looked at her through the glass, and unbolted the door.

"Miss Hills," he said. "We're closed."

"A quarter of Darjeeling," said Jo. "Too dear."

He stood aside.

He weighed out a quarter at the counter. "Seven pounds," said Tarquin. "Too dear."

"I sat in her chair," he said. "On Tuesday night. When I got home." He did not look at Jo. "For the first time. I don't know why." He was quiet. "It's very uncomfortable. The springs have gone." Something moved at the corner of his mouth. Not a smile. The place where a smile had been, a long time ago, and was being taken out, very carefully, and looked at. "I'm going to have it re-covered."

"Good," said Jo.

"Thank you for the tea," said Tarquin Talland.

She went out. The bell rang.

* * *

The white house on Roundham was empty.

Jo went up on the Wednesday afternoon with Rani and two of Hannah's people. It was very clean.

Every room. Very clean and very square. The chairs pushed in. The books on the shelves in lines, their spines flush with the edge. The beds made, with the corners turned in like a hospital. No papers. Not one. No letters. No bills. No photographs. Nothing with a name on it anywhere in the house. Hannah's people went through it for six hours and found a great many things and not one word in any hand.

At the top of the house, on the left, under the eaves, there was a small room with a round window.

A bed, made square. A chair. A table. And on the wall, facing the bed, where you could see it from the pillow, a painting.

Two eyes. Very still. Crying. Tears coming down from both. Clear. The way she looks at you across a desk.

And under the left eye, one more. That big. Amber.

Rani came up the stairs behind her, out of breath, and stood beside her, and looked too.

"Well?" said Jo.

"It's paint," said Rani at last. "That's all. Amber paint. On canvas. Very good paint." She swallowed. "There's nothing in it now. No lamp. No cord. It's just a picture of a woman crying, by a man who couldn't sleep, in a room in Singapore in 1994." She looked at it a moment longer. "It went back where it came out."

* * *

They took it down to the cellar that afternoon.

Eric's way. In an army blanket, folded round it corner by corner, like a flag. Jo carried it down the stone stairs herself, into the cellar under Studio Ania, and along the long desk, past the cold stone in its cradle under its glass, to the shelves along the back wall.

She put it in the gap.

It fitted.

"Rani," said Jo.

"Mm."

"The cords. On the others. The one from the tunnel, going east. To Singapore."

Rani looked at the third painting. The orange and black one. For a long time.

"Gone," she said, very quietly. "All of them. There's no cords on any of them now. They're pictures." She looked along the row to

the end. To the man's face. "Just pictures, Jo. Of the women he loved. And a man who got old."

* * *

Chris did not ask about any of it.

He knew her. He knew Karen, and Jono, and Rani, and the house, and the bay. He knew he was ninety-five. He knew he had had a stroke in 2022, and that his left hand had been no good since.

He did not know about the white room.

He did not know about a desk, or a fibre, or a stone. He did not know about 1895, or 1915, or 1943, or a beach in 1978, or a window at Bailey's in 2028. When Jo said *the Exchange* he said *oh, the new building on the corner, where the old GPO was*, and nodded, the way you nod about a building you have walked past. When she said *Keith*, very carefully, on the Thursday, he looked at her kindly and a little puzzled, and said, *who's that, love?*

She did not say it again.

His left hand lay open in his lap. Not curled. Open. And on the Saturday, in the kitchen, Karen put a cup of tea down beside him on the oilcloth, on the left, without thinking, and he picked it up.

With the left hand.

Karen stood at the sink with her back to him and did not turn round for a long time.

* * *

"He's stopped counting," said Karen.

"In the mornings. When I do his collar. Twenty years he's counted, every morning. Under his breath. With his eyes shut." She did not look up. "He told me what. The night before. In the kitchen. *Ten things.*" She was quiet. "I asked him was I one. He said yes."

Jo waited.

"He doesn't count any more," said Karen. "I did his collar this morning, and he stood there and let me, and looked at me, and didn't shut his eyes, and didn't count." She turned the stick a little on her knees. "He just looked at me."

"Do you mind?"

"No," said Karen. "I don't mind." She looked down at the stick. "I always wanted to know what he was counting. And now I know. And he's stopped." She almost smiled. "I'd rather have him looking."

* * *

On the Sunday after, the eleventh of November, Jo stood at the war memorial on the Strand at a minute to eleven.

Her hand went to her pocket.

There was nothing there.

She stood with her hand in the empty pocket.

And Jo took her hand out of her pocket, empty, and held it open in front of her, palm up, in the cold, the way you hold a watch so that a boy can see it. With nothing in it.

And counted.

Not the seconds. She did not need a watch for that. She counted the way Chris used to count the lighthouse: under her breath, because she did not want it to stop, because if she counted it, it was real.

The gun went at eleven, from the harbour. The two minutes started.

She held her empty hand open, and counted, and did not stop until it was over.

* * *

Clifford rang on the Thursday after that, from Florida.

"The boxes are talking," he said.

Jo waited.

"Not to us. To each other." He was quiet. "Since Monday the twenty-ninth. Ten thousand of them, going round, every ninety-six minutes. They've been listening for nineteen years. To the lens. To the lamps. To every head on Earth." He breathed. "And since the twenty-ninth they've stopped just listening. They're... the boys don't have a word for it. Working something out. Together. Faster every day."

"Working out what?"

"We don't know," said Clifford. "That's the thing, Jo. We don't know." He laughed, a dry old cough of a laugh. "There's a lab in California that says it's the biggest thing since fire. There's a lab in Shenzhen that's building something it won't talk about. There's a factory outside Bristol that's started making a thing with hands that can pick up an egg." He was quiet. "And the campus. Your campus. Rani's. They're growing glass again. Not lenses. Something else. Something the boxes told them how to make."

"Is it good?" she said.

"I don't know," said Clifford. "Nobody knows." He was quiet for a long time. "It's the first time in a hundred and sixty years that nobody's written down what happens next. Not her. Not anybody." He breathed. "It's just going to happen. And we'll have to find out. Like everybody else always has."

* * *

She read the sixtieth book to Chris on the last Sunday of November.

She sat in Room One, in the chair by the bed, with Chris in the chair by the window and the bay going grey outside, and Karen in the doorway with her hand on the frame, and read.

All of it. From the morning after Eric, in 2051, a line a week, some weeks not that. To a Monday in October 2057. A woman coming into Station Square at twenty to six with a carpet bag. A net of light. Eleven strings breaking. A man standing up. *HE STOOD UP.* A whistle with no sound. Grey, coming up from the sea. A woman in the middle of the square with her hand raised. A young man crossing to her. A light, going from one to the other. *I SAW IT GO.* A young man, not there.

And a train, going round a curve.

Chris listened. He sat by the window with his hands in his lap, both of them, open, and looked at the bay, and listened to all of it, every line, in Jo's voice, in her father's words.

When she had finished, he did not say anything for a long time.

"He sounds like a good man," he said at last. "The young one. In the window."

Jo closed the book.

"He was," she said.

Chris nodded, slowly. He looked out at the bay.

"I'd have liked to have met him," he said.

In the doorway, Karen turned round, and went down the passage to the kitchen, and Jo heard the tap running for a long time.

* * *

That night, at her kitchen table, with four boxes on the floor and a sixtieth book on the table and nothing in her pocket, Jo wrote it down.

The date. The time. The place.

What had happened. Who had been there. What was said.

And then, because her father had taught her that you write down what you know and say what you don't, and because it was the only thing she knew for certain now, and because nobody, for the first time in a hundred and sixty-two years, had written it down before her:

Nobody knows what comes next.

She looked at it for a long time.

Then she turned the page, and left it clean.

Chapter 30 – *Reserved*

Fri. 18 Oct. 2058. Widecombe Cot, the hall, 4.10 p.m. No line in the register. C.H. at the desk anyway. Karen beside him. The gate did not go. Bailey's, the back room, 7.40 p.m. The window. The chair.

The register was open at the page for October, and there was nothing at the bottom of it.

Jo saw it when she came in. At half past two, out of the wind, with her coat still on. Karen said *wipe your feet* from the bench under the barometer without looking up, and Jo wiped them, and turned, and there was the desk by the foot of the stairs, with the lamp on, though it was the middle of the afternoon, and the register open.

A family from Bristol, in the second week. A man on his own from Leeds. Two women from Exeter, sisters, who had come every October for nine years and always asked for the room at the back with the view of the garden.

And under them, white paper. Ruled lines. Nothing.

A year ago there had been a line there. In black ink, very upright, every letter the same height, like print. *Friday, 19th October. Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.* Nobody had written it. It had come in the night. It had come in the night every October for as long as anybody could remember, and before that, Karen said, for as long as anybody's mother could.

Not this year.

Jo had known it would not. She had known since a train went round a curve on platform one with a light in its rear door. She had

known since Ai Li's screen went black under the fourteenth line and stayed black. She had known for a year.

Then she took her coat off.

* * *

Chris was in the chair behind the desk.

He had been there since two. Karen said he had come down from his room at a quarter to, in his good jacket, and stood in the hall looking at the clock until she made him sit, and he had sat in the old chair with the arms, behind the desk, with his stick against the wall and his good hand flat on the open register. Not touching the empty lines. Beside them.

His other hand was in his lap. Open.

He was ninety-six. He had got thinner over the year, the way Jo's father had got thinner the year before, like water off a beach when the tide turns. His hair had gone to silk. His face was all bone and soft skin. But his eyes were the same. Pale, and steady, and very old, and kind.

He looked up when Jo came in.

"Hello, Jo," he said.

"Hello, Chris."

"Are you staying?"

"For a bit."

"Good." He looked back at the glass panel in the front door, at the path beyond it going down under the monkey puzzle to the gate. "It's the third Friday," he said.

"I always sit here," said Chris. "On the third Friday in October. In the afternoon." He looked at the register under his hand, at the empty lines. "I don't know why. I've always done it." He was quiet. "Somebody comes. I think. Usually."

* * *

Karen had brought a kitchen chair through.

She had put it beside his, at the end of the desk, the way she had a year ago, and when Jo came in she got up off the bench, slowly, with her stick, and went and sat in it, and put her stick across her knees, and did not say anything.

Ninety-seven. Her hair down. She wore it down all the time now. Jo had asked her once, in the spring, and Karen had said *he likes it*, gruffly, to the floor, and that was all.

Jo stood against the wall by the door to the back passage.

Where her father had stood in 2031. Where she had stood a year ago. It was where you stood.

* * *

At five past four, the light changed.

It always did. Karen said it did every year; she had never once known it not. The sun came round the end of the house and down through the monkey puzzle and lay along the path, low and gold, and came in through the glass panel in the front door, and across the floor of the hall, and up the side of the desk, and across Chris's hand on the register.

And across the empty lines beside it.

Jo watched him. She watched his face. Ninety-six, and pale, and very still, looking at the glass. She had sat beside that face every working day for eleven years, and visited it every day for one more, and she had seen it like this exactly once before. A year ago. At this desk. At this minute.

Not frightened. Not waiting, exactly. The way a man looks at the sea when he has been away from it a long time and is coming round the last bend in the road.

She could see him not know. She could see it in the way his good hand lay on the register: flat, and very still, the fingers a little spread, the way a hand lies on a thing it has lain on before. As if the hand remembered something the man had been told he had forgotten.

At ten past four, the gate did not go.

* * *

Jo listened for it.

The latch.

And then the hinge.

Nothing.

The light lay along the path, gold, down under the monkey puzzle, to the gate. The gate was shut. The path was empty. A blackbird came down onto it from the hedge and went along it a little way, hopping, and stopped, and put its head on one side, and went back.

The clock ticked.

Ten past four. Eleven minutes past. Twelve.

Nobody came up the path.

* * *

Chris sat with his hand on the register and looked through the glass for a long time.

At a quarter past, he moved. His good hand, on the book. It went, very slowly, across the page, from where it had lain beside the empty lines, onto them. Flat. Over the white paper and the blue ruled lines, at the bottom of the column, where a line would have been.

He held it there.

"Karen," he said.

"Mm."

"Is anybody booked? Today?"

Karen did not answer straight away. She looked at his hand on the empty lines.

"No," she said. "Nobody's booked."

Chris nodded, slowly.

"I'll wait a bit," he said. "Anyway."

"I know you will," said Karen.

* * *

They waited until half past.

The light went off the path. It always did, at about half past; the sun went down behind the hill at the back of the town, and the gold went out of the monkey puzzle, and the hall went grey, and the lamp on the desk was the only light.

The gate had not gone.

At half past four Chris took his hand off the register.

He looked at the glass panel in the front door for a long moment more. At the path, grey now. At the gate.

"She's not coming," he said.

Jo looked at him.

He did not seem to know he had said *she*. He did not look as if he knew who. He sat in the old chair with his hand in his lap and looked at the door, and his face was the face of a man who has been waiting at a station for somebody whose name he cannot remember, and has just understood that the train has been and gone.

"Somebody usually comes," said Chris. Quietly. To the door. "On the third Friday. I don't know who." He was quiet. "I'll know them when I see them."

Karen put out her hand.

She put it on his. On his good hand, on the arm of the old chair. And held it there. She did not say anything.

After a while, Chris turned his hand over under hers, and held it.

* * *

Jo made the tea.

She would not let Karen. She went along the passage to the kitchen and filled the kettle and found the big brown pot, the one that had poured the October tea in this house since 1942, and the tray, and two cups, and then, after standing in the kitchen with her hand on the cupboard door for a while, a third.

She brought it back along the passage, slowly, with the cups rattling on the saucers.

She did not take it to the hall. She went into the dining room.

The little table in the bay window. With its one chair. With its back to the room and its face to the bay.

She put the tray down on it. She poured. Three cups. From the big brown pot. Very carefully, the spout shaking a little. She took two of them back to the hall, to the desk, and gave one to Chris and one to Karen.

The third she left on the little table in the bay window. In front of the empty chair. With the steam going up from it in the last of the light, and the bay going grey outside, and Berry Head going out into the sea at the far end, long and flat, like the bow of a ship.

She did not know why. She thought her father would have known. She thought he would have written it down, and not written why.

* * *

Chris drank his tea in the hall, in the old chair, with Karen's hand in his and his other hand round the cup.

His left hand. Round the cup. Not well. Shaking. The fingers going round it a little at a time, the way they had learned to, over a year, without anybody teaching them. But round it.

He held the cup in both hands.

Thumbs hooked over the rim.

Jo, against the wall, with her own cup, watched him do it. She had seen it done every morning for eleven years in a window at Bailey's. She had seen it done every October for twenty-six at a little table in a bay window. She had never once seen Chris do it. Not in eleven years at the next desk. He held a cup the way most people did: one hand, by the handle.

He did not know he was doing it.

* * *

She left at six.

Karen saw her to the door. She came across the hall with her stick, one step and then the stick, slowly, and stood in the open front door in the cold with her grey hair down, and looked at Jo on the step.

"He'll sit there next year," said Karen. "And the year after." She did not look back at the desk. "Every third Friday. In October. As long as he's got." She was quiet. "And I'll sit with him."

"I know."

"I won't tell him why," said Karen. "I don't know why. Nobody's ever told me." She almost smiled. "I'm the one who never knew. Did you know that? I heard him say it once. On the stairs. To himself. *The one who never knew.*" She looked at Jo. "I never asked what."

"Do you want to?"

Karen looked at her for a long time.

"No," she said. "I'd rather have him looking."

She put her hand up. Not to Jo. To the frame of the door. And held it there, the way a woman had held the frame of a dining-room door once, in 2031, with her hand flat on it, watching a cup of tea.

"Go on, then," said Karen. "Go and do whatever it is you do."

* * *

Jo walked down to Paignton.

The net was still there. A year on. Nobody had turned it off. Nobody knew how, Clifford said, and nobody wanted to. You could see it at night best, over the bay. Very fine. Very bright. Every string from every head going up and crossing and going on, over the water, over the hills, over the curve of the world, so that the stars were lost in it most nights, and people had stopped minding.

She thought about it as she walked. The campus, with its new buildings going up on Torbay Road faster than anybody had ever seen buildings go up, built by things with hands that could pick up an egg. The forge, where Fred, at sixty-two, had taken on an apprentice that was not a person and did not need to be paid and stood at the anvil all night drawing out bars while Fred slept, and Fred had called it *Boy* and pretended he did not like it. The letter that had come through every door in the country in March, from Hannah Price's office, explaining in plain words that the electricity

bill would not be coming any more, and nobody quite yet being able to say why.

The boxes, going round. Talking to each other. Working something out.

Nobody knew what.

Nobody had written it down first.

* * *

Station Square at night. The plane trees, very big, with their leaves coming down. The forge, doors open, the fire going, red, and something at the anvil in the glow that moved like a man and was not, and Fred in the doorway with his arms folded, watching it. The station, cream and maroon, with its green canopy, and a train under it, silent, waiting.

The bench under the big plane tree at the station end, by the cab rank. Empty. With a chalk circle on the paving beside it that somebody renewed every few weeks. Nobody knew who. Jo had never asked.

And Bailey's, on the corner. Four storeys, lit gold.

She went in.

* * *

Through the public bar, with the people and the noise and the Friday evening, and the fire lit in the corner under the framed photograph of the square in 1900 with a tram in it. Through the door into the back room.

It was empty.

The table, in the window. Small. Round. With the brass plate on it, square to the edge.

RESERVED.

And the chair, pushed in. Empty.

* * *

Nobody had moved it.

A year. Nobody at Bailey's had been told to move it, and nobody ever had, and nobody ever would. The brass plate had been polished. Jo could see that; somebody on the staff polished it every week, the way you polish a plate on a door, without thinking about who put it there or why. The table had been wiped. The chair had been pushed in.

She thought about a young man who looked about thirty, who had sat in that chair for twenty-nine years with a cup in both hands and his thumbs hooked over the rim, looking out at the square. Who had said *five*, every morning, before good morning, before anything. Who had turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer, by the handle, the way you turn a dial to find a station.

Who had come out of a side door on a Monday evening in October and crossed the square and held his hand up in front of a woman's face, and given her back what he had carried for twenty-nine years. And looked at Jo. And said *five*. And not been there.

She thought about an old man in a chair in a hall, three miles away, holding a cup in both hands with his thumbs over the rim, and not knowing why.

She thought: *nobody's going to sit in it.*

She thought: *except me.*

* * *

She crossed the room.

She put her hand on the back of the chair.

It was cold. It had not been sat in for a year.

She pulled it out.

And sat down in it.

* * *

The square, through the window.

She looked at the people crossing, and at the air above their heads.

Out of habit. The way her father had, for twenty-seven years. The way Keith had, for twenty-nine, from this chair. At every one of them. The lamps. Amber, and steady, and some flickering, the young ones. Going about the square in the dark like a field of something blowing.

The barman came through from the public bar. A young lad, twenty perhaps, from the campus, doing Fridays. He stopped in the doorway when he saw her in the window chair. He looked at the brass plate. He looked at her.

"Tea?" he said.

"Please," said Jo.

He brought it. A cup, on a saucer. He put it down on the table in front of her, beside the brass plate, and went away.

* * *

She put both hands round it.

She did not decide to do that either. Her hands did it. Round the cup. Both of them. Warm. And her thumbs went over the rim, the way they had never once gone in forty-eight years, because she had always held a cup the way her father did, one hand, by the handle, quick, and put it down.

She held it in both hands with her thumbs over the rim and looked out at Station Square.

A train came in.

Under the canopy, cream and maroon, the little electric one from Newton Abbot, with its lights on, humming. It stopped at the platform. The doors opened. People got off. Not many. A man with a briefcase. Two students. A woman with a sleeping child. They came out through the booking hall and across the square, under the plane trees, with their lamps over their heads, going home.

Not the train. Everybody looks at the train.

The platform.

Right, Chris. What's on the platform?

An old policeman had said that to a boy, once, by the level crossing gates, with his big hand on the boy's shoulder. Jo had read it. In a book that boy had written, a long time ago, at the long table at Widecombe Cot, with the range ticking as it cooled.

She looked at the platform.

And the platform. Empty. Under the canopy. In the light from the booking hall. With nobody on it.

Nobody coming through the gate who had not been on the platform and then was.

Not tonight.

* * *

She took out her pocketbook.

She opened it on the table beside the cup.

The date. The time. The place.

Fri. 18 Oct. 2058. Bailey's, the back room, the window. 7.40 p.m.

She held the pencil over the page.

She thought about what to write. She thought about all of it. A list in a hand like print with nothing after the last line. A stone that

had been glass. A watch with no first owner. A ticket in a cloth bag, two of them, one soft and one new. A woman on a platform saying *I found the train*. A man who let her look. An old man in a hall, waiting for somebody whose name he could not remember, with his thumbs over the rim of a cup.

She did not write any of it.

She wrote what was there.

K.'s chair. Sat in it.

And then, after a long time, because it was the only thing she knew for certain, and because her father had taught her that you write down what you know and say what you don't, and because for the first time in a hundred and sixty-three years nobody had written it down before her:

Nobody came.

Then she closed the book, and put it in the inside pocket of her coat, over her heart, and picked up the cup again, in both hands, with her thumbs over the rim.

And turned it, a quarter turn, on its saucer, by the handle.

The way you turn a dial to find a station.

* * *

Outside, in Station Square, under the net of light, the people went on crossing. Going home. With their lamps over their heads. In the cold, on a Friday night in October, with the leaves coming down off the plane trees and the forge red in the corner and a train under the canopy, silent, waiting to go back up the line.

She did not know what came next. Nobody did.

She found that she did not mind.

She sat in the chair with the brass plate in front of her and the tea going warm in her hands, and looked out at the square, and waited.

For whatever it was.

For whoever came.