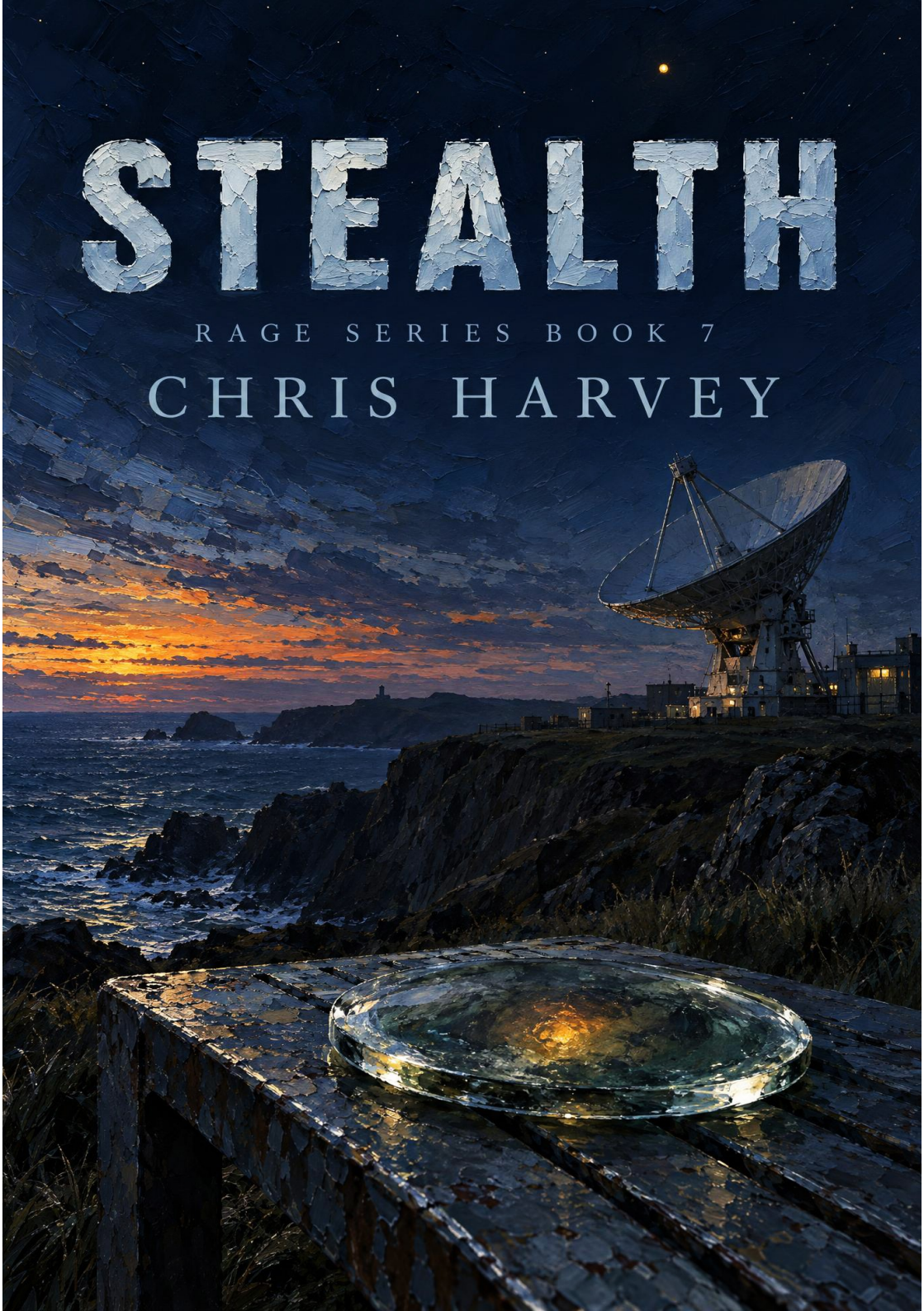
STEALTH

RAGE SERIES BOOK 7

CHRIS HARVEY



Stealth

Book Seven of Rage

Chris Harvey



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Chapter 1 – *The Committee*

Tues. 2 Mar. 2038. Whitehall, the Committee's room, 10.00 a.m. Closed session. Witness: T.T. Forty-first book, first page. Rain.

The room had no windows, and Jono had stopped minding.

He had minded at first. Two years ago, the first morning he took the chair, he had sat at the head of the long table under the strip lights and looked at the walls, panelled in pale wood to the height of a man's shoulder and then plain cream to the ceiling, and felt the lack of a window like a stone in his shoe. Nine Members of the Commons and the Lords round a table in a room built so that nothing said in it could get out. No glass. No light from the street. A hum in the walls that a man from the Cabinet Office had explained to him once, very patiently, was there so that nobody with a microphone on the roof of the building across the road could hear anything but the hum.

Now he did not notice it. He came in at ten to ten, the way he always did, past the two doors and the man with the list, and hung his coat on the third hook, and sat down at the head of the table, and took out his pocketbook.

A new one. The forty-first. He had bought it on Saturday from the stationer's on Fleet Street in Torquay, where he had bought every one since 1997, and it still had the shop's price sticker on the back, which he would pick off tonight on the train with his thumbnail.

He opened it to the first page and wrote the date.

Tues. 2 Mar. 2038.

Then the place. Then the time. He looked up at the clock over the door, which was the only thing on the walls.

Then, because it was true, and because he wrote down what was true:

Rain.

He could not see it. He could hear it. Very faintly, through the hum, through whatever they had built the walls of. Rain on a roof somewhere above, four floors up, steady, the way it had been coming down on Whitehall since six o'clock that morning.

He had grown up listening to rain on a roof. It was one of the things he knew how to do.

* * *

He was sixty-five.

He did not feel it, most days. He felt it on the stairs at Westminster tube, and in the mornings in the flat in Kennington, getting out of bed with the left knee that Eric said was the knee of a man who had stood on doorsteps for twenty-five years. He felt it when young Members called him *sir* in the tea room without thinking about it. But on Thursday nights in the club in Ellacombe, at ten o'clock, with the bags still swinging and the strip light buzzing and Eric, at seventy-six, holding the pads with his head on one side, he did not feel it at all.

Nine years in the House. He had won Torbay in 2029 standing in the rain in Station Square for eleven hours, and held it in 2034 by a margin that had made the returning officer smile. He sat on the cross benches, with the independents and the odd ones, and he belonged to nobody, and nobody had ever quite known what to do with him.

Two years ago they had found something. The chairmanship of the Intelligence and Security Committee had fallen vacant in the spring of 2036, when the old chairman died in his sleep in his flat in Dolphin Square with a book about Wellington open on his chest. The committee elected its own chair. The Government had a man in mind. The Opposition had a woman in mind. And the nine Members of the committee, in this room without windows, by secret ballot, had elected the Member for Torbay, five votes to four, because, one of them told him afterwards in the corridor, *you're the only one of us both sides are frightened of, and that's what the job's for*.

So now he read things that were marked SECRET in red at the top and bottom of every page, and could not tell anybody what was in them, not even Chris, not even the pocketbook. He sat at the head of this table on Tuesday mornings and asked the people who ran the country's secrets what they had been doing with them. He was good at it. He had spent twenty-five years asking people what they had been doing, on doorsteps, in kitchens, in the back of a car at two in the morning. He listened. He did not interrupt. He wrote down the answers. And then, when they thought he had finished, he asked the one question he had come in to ask.

It was the same job. The room was smaller, and the people lied better.

And there were no lamps.

* * *

That was the thing he had never got used to.

Seven years since the vote. Seven years since two hundred and eighty-seven to two hundred and eighty-six, and the Order annulled, and the stone kept in its foam cradle in the cellar under Studio Ania on Union Street, and the box on the monastery roof in Paignton left where it was. Seven years in which, every time he went home, every time the train

came round the curve past Dawlish and along the sea wall and into the bay, he felt it come back: the lamps over people's heads, the grain in them, the light. A whole carriage of strangers going from nothing to amber, one by one, as the train crossed the line between Hope's Nose and Berry Head.

And every Monday, going back up, it went. Somewhere past Newton Abbot. Like going deaf in one ear.

In here, there was nothing at all. Nine Members of Parliament round a table, and over their heads, clear air.

He knew some of them would have been bright. He could tell. The woman from the Lords at the far end, eighty-one, a former judge, who said almost nothing and never missed anything. The young Member from Bristol on his left, the one who had gone on the coach to Torbay in 2031 and been so good at the forge that Fred had offered her a job, who had come back and stood up in the chamber and said what she saw. Her lamp would be very bright, he thought. He had seen it once, in the back room at Bailey's, nearly white.

Here, nothing.

He had learned to do without it. He looked at faces now the way he had looked at them before 2028: at the mouth, at the hands, at what people did when they thought nobody was watching. It was harder. It was slower. It was, he sometimes thought, more honest. But he never stopped feeling the lack of it, the way you feel a step that isn't there in the dark.

At two minutes to ten the man with the list opened the inner door, and said, "The witness, Chair," and Tarquin Talland came in.

* * *

He had changed.

Jono had seen him perhaps a dozen times in seven years. In the Members' Lobby. Once at a reception at the American Embassy, where Clifford had stood in a corner and pretended not to know either of them. Twice in this room, giving evidence, in the last two years. And once, the first time after, in the September of 2032, on the anniversary, at a church in Cheltenham, where Jono had stood at the back and Tarquin had stood at the front, and they had not spoken.

Each time he had changed a little. Today it was all there at once.

Forty-four. Tall, still. Fair, still, but the fair had gone flat and dry, the colour of old straw, and receding at the temples. A navy suit that was very good and did not fit as well as it had: he was thinner. The face that in 2031 had been polished, easy, the face of a man who knew which fork to use and had never once had to think about it, had gone tight across the cheekbones. The mouth held a line it had not held before.

He sat down in the witness chair at the far end of the table, opposite Jono, eight yards away. He put a thin folder on the table in front of him and squared it with two fingers. He looked at the judge from the Lords, and at the young woman from Bristol, and at each of the other Members in turn, politely, the way he had been trained to look at a room.

He did not look at Jono.

"Good morning, Mr Talland," said Jono. "Thank you for coming. This is a closed session. Nothing you say here leaves this room except in the form the committee agrees. You know the procedure."

"I do, Chair." The voice was the same. Clipped. Correct. Very slightly amused at the edges, out of habit, though there was nothing amused about the rest of him. "Thank you."

He still did not look at Jono. He looked at a point on the table about a yard in front of Jono's hands.

* * *

They took him through it for an hour.

The paper in front of them was marked SECRET at the top and bottom of every page, and it was called *Foreign Interest in Novel Technologies: South West England*, and it was about Torbay. Everything in this room, in the end, was about Torbay. Jono had learned that in his first month in the chair. Whatever the agenda said, whatever the title of the paper, somewhere on page six or page eleven there would be a paragraph about *the anomaly* or *the apparatus* or *the Torbay phenomenon*, and every Member round the table would go quiet when they reached it, and look, without meaning to, at the head of the table.

Tarquin took them through it. He was very good. Jono had forgotten how good. A Chinese delegation at the photonics campus in January, very polite, asking the wrong questions. Two Americans who were not, it turned out, from the university they said they were from. A Russian trawler that had spent four days in October anchored off Berry Head for engine repairs and had not, so far as anybody could tell, repaired anything. Money from a fund in Liechtenstein trying, through three companies, to buy a building on Union Street.

"Which building?" said the young woman from Bristol.

Tarquin looked at his folder.

"The one above the basement," he said. "Studio Ania."

Nobody said anything.

"The owners declined to sell," said Tarquin. "The fund withdrew. We expect it to try again." He turned a page. "The service's assessment," he said, and his voice did not change at all, "is that the present arrangements for the apparatus in Torbay are not adequate to the threat."

Jono looked up from his pocketbook.

"The apparatus," Tarquin went on, "is held in a private basement, by a private organisation, under no statutory framework, protected by nothing but the goodwill of the people who hold it. The service's view is that this was tolerable in 2031. It is not tolerable now." He laid his hand flat on the folder. "We recommend that the committee support measures to bring it under the control of the Crown."

* * *

Jono put his pencil down.

Seven years ago, in the Members' Gallery, in the second row on the right, in a navy suit very like this one, this man had sat with his hands in his lap and watched the Order annulled by one vote. He had not clapped. You did not clap in the gallery. He had looked down across the chamber at Jono, and nodded. Once.

Seven years ago, in a tea shop in Warwick Way, in a cardigan, at twenty past eight in the morning, this man had told him that Carole Bayliss had said: *If they ever try to take it out of the bay, you tell the Hills boy first.*

"Mr Talland," said Jono.

Tarquin looked at the point on the table a yard in front of Jono's hands.

"In 2031," said Jono, "you opposed the Designated Sites Order. You told the Home Office it was a mistake. You were overruled. You told me about it before it was public, because Carole had asked you to." He kept his voice very level. "Is the service's view now different from your own view then?"

"The service's view is the service's view, Chair."

"I'm asking about yours."

Tarquin was quiet for a moment.

Then, for the first time that morning, he lifted his eyes from the table and looked down the length of it, eight yards, at Jono. Grey eyes. Very tired. And something in them that Jono had seen before, in other faces, in other rooms. In a kitchen in Foxhole at four in the morning. In the hall at Widecombe Cot, by the barometer, on the morning of the seventeenth of September, 2031.

"My view," said Tarquin, "is that people have died because of what's in that basement. And I'd like it to stop."

He held Jono's eyes for perhaps two seconds.

Then he looked down at his folder again, and squared it with two fingers, and said, in exactly the same voice as before, "The service's assessment is at paragraph forty-one, Chair, if the committee would like to turn to it."

* * *

They let him go at five past eleven.

Jono went out after him. He did not decide to. He told the clerk he would be two minutes and went out through the inner door and the

outer door and past the man with the list, into the corridor, where the windows were, and the rain was running down them in sheets, and the grey Whitehall light came in flat across the floor.

Tarquin was at the end of the corridor, by the lift, with his coat over his arm, pressing the button.

"Tarquin."

He turned round.

In the light from the windows he looked older still. Jono walked down the corridor towards him and stopped a couple of yards away. The lift was coming. They could both hear it, groaning up through the building.

"How are you?" said Jono.

"Busy."

"How's the shop?"

"Closed on Mondays." Something moved at the corner of his mouth, not a smile. "My grandmother's voice is still on the machine. I can't bring myself to change it."

Jono nodded. He knew about that.

"She used to ask after him," said Jono. "Every time. You told me so. *How is he.*"

Tarquin looked at him.

"Carole asked after him," he said. "I passed it on. That was all I ever was. A man in a cardigan passing things on." He looked at the lift doors. "She's not asking now."

"No."

"Do you know what he asked her about?" said Tarquin. His voice was very quiet. "That night. The man nobody can describe. The man who sat at her kitchen table and pushed the chair in square when he left. I've read the file. Every line. I wrote half of it." He did not look at Jono. "He asked her about eight faces."

Jono did not say anything.

"Eight paintings," said Tarquin. "That a man painted in a room in Singapore in 1994 because he couldn't sleep. That's what she died for. Seventy-one years old. Paintings." The lift arrived. The doors opened with a soft chime. He stepped in and turned round and stood with his coat over his arm, facing out. "Give him my regards, Chair."

The doors began to close.

"Tarquin," said Jono. "It wasn't his fault."

Tarquin looked at him through the closing gap.

"No," he said. "It never is."

The doors shut.

* * *

Jono stood in the corridor by the lift for a long time, with the rain coming down the windows.

He thought about a kitchen in Cheltenham with a high window onto the pavement. A crossword finished in ink. A pencil laid square. He thought about a list sent up into the sky, with a line in it in a hand that was not Carole's, saying *10.47 p.m.*, written before there was a minute to write.

He thought: *He's half right.*

He did not know where the thought came from. He did not like it. He put it away.

On his way back along the corridor to the room without windows he passed the door of the Home Secretary's private office, which was on this floor for reasons nobody had ever explained to him, and it opened, and a man came out with a red folder under his arm and two young people behind him, talking.

Pleasant face. Grey at the sides now. A good suit, worn easily. A man who had stood at a dispatch box in 2031 and talked about national security and partners and facilities of the highest standard, and looked across the floor at Jono once, pleasantly, and had known.

"Mr Hills," said William White. He smiled. It was a very good smile. It went nowhere near his eyes, and he did not seem to mind that Jono could see that. "I hear we'll be seeing a lot of each other this spring."

"Home Secretary."

"Second reading on the seventeenth. I'm told you've already read the schedule." The smile again. "You always did read the last page."

He went on down the corridor with his red folder and his two young people, and turned the corner, and was gone.

Jono stood outside the door of the room without windows with his hand on the handle.

In Torbay, he thought, I'd know. I'd look up, and there'd be a lamp over that man's head, or there wouldn't, and I'd know.

Here, nothing. Clear air.

* * *

He sat down at the head of the table. The committee was waiting. The judge from the Lords looked at him over her glasses and did not say anything, and he was grateful.

He picked up his pencil. He looked at the first page of the forty-first book: the date, the time, the place, the rain.

He thought about what to write. Not what he felt. What he saw. What he was told, and who told him.

He wrote:

Witness: T.T.

Then, after a moment, because it was what he had seen, and because it was the only thing that morning that had frightened him:

T.T. did not ask after C.H.

Chapter 2 – *Ten Thousand*

> *Fri. 5 Mar. 2038. Studio Ania, the cellar, 7.40 p.m. C.D. in from Washington via Bristol. Ten thousand. "It's a ride, buddy. Not a gift." R. said: "Then we grow it again." Did not write what she meant. Did not know.*

The lamps came back at Dawlish.

They always did. Jono had stopped trying to say exactly where. Somewhere along the sea wall, after the tunnels, with the red cliffs going by on the right and the sea close enough on the left to throw spray against the windows on a rough day, he would look up from his book, and the woman across the aisle would have a lamp over her head. Amber, steady, a little dim. And the boy beside her, with his headphones in. And the guard coming through with his machine.

Not all at once. One, and then another, and then the whole carriage, the way the lights come on along a street at dusk.

He had been coming home on the 6.03 from Paddington on Thursday nights for nine years, and it still went through him every time, the way it had gone through him the first night in September 2028, sitting on a bench in Goodrington with Biscuit asleep on his feet.

Last night he had sat with his forehead against the cold glass from Dawlish to Torquay and watched them come on, and thought about a man in a navy suit who would not look at him, and a man in a good grey one who would.

* * *

Torbay in March, seven years on.

He walked down from Preston on the Friday morning along the front, the way he did most Fridays when the House was not sitting, with the wind coming off the bay hard enough to lean on. Past the beach huts. Past the pier, painted again last summer, white and blue. Past the new Pavilion, which was not new any more, where he had launched a campaign in 2028 that had come to nothing and then to everything.

Paignton had grown up around the things that had been planted in it ten years ago, the way a town grows round a church. The station, cream and maroon, with its green iron canopy, at Richard's insistence. Station Square, with the forge on the corner, its big doors open even in March and the fire going, and three apprentices in leather aprons drawing out a bar between them while Fred watched with his arms folded. Fred was forty-two now, with grey in his beard and a voice that carried across the square, and he had nine apprentices and a waiting list.

And along Torbay Road, past the bakery and the hawker hall, where there had been a car park and an empty shop and a bingo hall with its windows whitewashed, the photonics campus. Three buildings of glass and pale stone, low, set back from the road behind a row of young plane trees. People went in and out of it all day. Some of them were from Exeter, and some from Bristol, and some, these days, from Singapore and Seoul and California. Over every one of their heads, as they went in through the glass doors, a lamp.

Jono stood on the pavement opposite the campus with his hands in his coat pockets, and looked.

He liked to do this. He did not tell anybody. He liked to stand on Torbay Road on a Friday morning and watch the people going in to work, with their lamps on, and know that ten years ago this had been a car park.

Then he went to Bailey's, because it was nine o'clock, and Keith would be in the window.

* * *

He was.

The table in the window of the back room, with the brass plate on it that said RESERVED and nobody else ever sat at. A young man of about thirty, in a white shirt and a dark jacket, with a cup in both hands, his thumbs hooked over the rim. Looking out at Station Square. At the forge. At the station. At the people.

Ten years he had sat there. Jono had done the sum once, on a train. Most mornings, between eight and eleven. Three thousand mornings, near enough, in the same chair, with the same cup, and his face had not changed in any of them. Not one line. Not one grey hair. People who came into Bailey's for the first time looked at him the way they would look at a statue in a square, and the people who had been coming for years did not look at him at all.

Jono sat down opposite him.

"Five," said Keith, without looking round.

Jono nodded. He knew what that meant. Every morning, before anything else, Keith counted the list. The things he would not let the line have. Ten, once, a long time ago, in a little room at the top of a house that did not exist yet. Five now, since a Sunday in November 2031, when Chris had painted Carole on a fire escape with a palette knife taped to his bad hand.

"Still five," said Jono.

"Still five." Keith turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer, by the handle. "Clifford's coming."

"I know. Tonight."

"No." Keith looked out at the square. At a man walking from the station with a bag over his shoulder, a big man, broad, bald, in a coat too thin for March. "Now."

* * *

Clifford had flown into Bristol at six and come down in a hire car and not slept, and he looked it. He came into the back room at Bailey's at ten past nine with his bag still over his shoulder and stood in the doorway looking at the two of them in the window, and grinned, and the grin was the same as it had been in 2028, wide and crooked and very tired.

"Look at you," he said to Keith. "Ten years. You haven't aged a day. I hate you."

"Sit down, Clifford."

Clifford sat down. He put his bag on the floor. He looked at Jono.

"Mr Chairman," he said.

"Don't."

"I read about it. Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee. Highest clearance in the Commons." He shook his head. "The man who climbed a monastery roof in the rain with a box in a rucksack. They made you the chairman."

"They didn't know about the roof."

"Nobody knows about the roof, buddy," said Clifford. "That's the point of the roof." He looked round the back room. At the long table. At the fireplace. At the photograph over it with the crack across the glass. At the old woman in the corner with her paper and her lamp, nearly white,

who had been coming to Bailey's every morning for ten years and looked at Clifford over her glasses and went back to her crossword. "God, I've missed this place."

He was quiet for a moment.

Then he said, "I've got something. I'm not going to say it here. Where's Chris?"

* * *

They went to the cellar that evening, once Rani and Vicky could get away from the campus.

Chris was there already. He was there most days now. He sat on the old swivel chair from the shop at the end of the long desk, near the stone, with his bad hand in his lap and a cup of tea going cold on the desk beside him, and he did crosswords. Easy ones, out of the paper. He said it kept his head in order. He was seventy-six, and his hair had gone completely white in the last two years, and he had a stick now that he would not use in front of anybody.

Karen was with him. She was nearly always with him. She had sold the house in Brixham in 2034 and moved into Widecombe Cot, into the big room at the front on the first floor, and Chris had moved in with her, and his mother, who was ninety-eight at the time and still did the register, had looked at them both across the desk in the hall and said, *about time*, and gone back to the register.

Wendy was a hundred and two now, a hundred and three in October. She did not come downstairs any more. She had a room on the first floor at the back, with a window onto the garden and the monkey puzzle, and she kept her door open so that she could hear the house.

The cellar had not changed. Jono came down the stairs behind Clifford and Keith and stopped, as he always did, on the third step from the bottom, and looked at it. The long desk. The screens. The shelves along the back wall with the archive on them, the eleven boxes from Avonmouth. Six pine crates in a row underneath, with the fronts off, and a gap in the row, near the end, where one had stood once and was gone.

And at the end of the desk, in its cradle of grey foam, under a cover of thick glass, the stone.

It did not look like anything. It never had. A dark, smooth, heavy thing about the size of a loaf, the colour of slate after rain. If you did not know, you would have thought it was a stone somebody had brought back from a beach. Jono had looked at it a thousand times and never once seen it do anything.

Keith went to it, and sat down in his chair at the end of the desk, and put his hand flat on the glass over it, and closed his eyes.

* * *

Rani came at half past seven, and Vicky with her, from the campus, both of them still in the dark fleeces with the campus logo on them, Rani with her hair cut short now and grey coming in at the front, at forty-one, and Vicky at fifty-two, very straight, very neat, the managing director of something that had a turnover nobody in Torbay had ever expected to see. They came down the stairs and stopped when they saw Clifford, and Vicky smiled, and Rani did not.

Rani looked at the air over Clifford's head for a long time. She did that with everybody she had not seen for a while. She always had. She said it was like checking the weather.

"You're tired," she said.

"I flew."

"You're frightened," said Rani.

Clifford looked at her.

"Yes," he said. "A little."

He sat down on the end of the long table and put his hands on his knees.

"I've got a friend," he said. "A guy I was at school with in Dayton. He's very senior now in a company that you've all heard of and I'm not going to name. They put things in orbit. A lot of things. They have a little under nine thousand satellites up right now, and by the end of next year they'll have ten. A constellation. The whole planet, covered, every square mile, all the time." He looked round the cellar. "Every one of those satellites has a bit of room on it that they rent out. Hosted payloads, they call it. Science packages. Weather sensors. A university wants to measure something, they pay, they ride along. You build a box to their spec, they bolt it on, it goes up with the next batch. Hundreds of launches a year."

Nobody said anything.

"I asked him," said Clifford, "what it would cost to put one box on every satellite they've got."

Chris put his pencil down.

"And?" said Jono.

"He laughed at me. Then he asked me what was in the box." Clifford looked at the stone, at the end of the desk, under Keith's hand. "I said, a photonics experiment from a little campus in England that he's never

heard of. Something to do with light. And he stopped laughing, because he's heard of it. Everybody in that business has heard of Paignton now." He rubbed his face. "And he said, *Clifford. For you. For what your grandfather did on Utah Beach for my grandfather. One box. Every bird. The next eighteen months. And I never knew what was in it.*"

He looked round at all of them.

"Ten thousand satellites," said Clifford. "It's a ride, buddy. Not a gift. He wants an answer by June."

* * *

The cellar was very quiet.

Jono looked at the stone.

He thought about Torbay. About the woman across the aisle on the train last night. About a car park on Torbay Road, and three glass buildings, and nine apprentices, and an old woman in the corner at Bailey's with a lamp nearly white. About a coach full of Members of Parliament sitting in the back room in 2031, one by one, in silence, looking at each other's heads.

He thought about the whole world doing that.

Then he thought about a man in a navy suit saying, *under the control of the Crown*. And a man in a grey one saying, *you always did read the last page*. And a fund in Liechtenstein that wanted to buy the building they were sitting under.

He could not say any of that. He had sat in a room without windows on Tuesday and signed a piece of paper. He sat on the bottom step in the cellar under Studio Ania with it all in his head and his mouth shut.

"Somebody wants this building," he said at last. "That's all I can tell you. I can't tell you who, or how I know. Somebody's trying to buy it. And there's a bill coming. Second reading on the seventeenth." He looked at Chris. "They want it out of the bay again."

Chris looked at him for a long time.

"Then it's now," said Chris. "Isn't it."

Nobody answered him.

* * *

It was Vicky who said the thing they were all thinking. She said it the way she said everything, very precisely, as if she were reading it off a drawing.

"It can't go," she said. "That's the problem. We all know it. If the stone leaves the bay, the lamps go out. All of them. The relay on the monastery roof is a relay, not a source. It only carries what the stone gives it, and it only carries it from Hope's Nose to Berry Head. Take the stone out of that, and Torbay goes dark." She did not look at Keith. "And so does he."

Keith did not open his eyes.

Jono had heard it said before. In 2031, with the Order on the table and the forty days counting down, in this cellar, at one in the morning. *If it leaves the bay, Keith goes with it.* Nobody had ever quite known what *goes* meant. Nobody had wanted to find out.

"So we can't put it on a satellite," said Clifford.

"We can't put it in a car to Exeter," said Vicky.

"Then the whole thing's off."

"I didn't say that."

Clifford looked at her.

Vicky did not answer him. She looked at Rani.

* * *

Rani had not said anything for a long time. She was standing at the end of the desk, next to Keith, looking at the stone under the glass. Not at it. Through it. The way she looked at everything.

She had worked on it for ten years. All of them had, one way and another, but Rani most. In the lab at the campus, with the readings that came off the cellar every night down a fibre under Union Street, and the models on the screens, and the cold clean rooms where they grew glass. She knew more about what the stone did than anybody alive except, perhaps, the man with his hand on it. And she had never once, in ten years, told anybody what she thought it was.

"It runs on light," she said.

Everybody looked at her.

"That's all it does," said Rani. "That's all it's ever done. It isn't a machine. It hasn't got parts. It's a pattern. In something like glass. Something we can't make yet, but like it. Light goes in, and comes out different, and the difference is the lamps." She put her hand on the glass cover, next to Keith's. Not touching his. "We've been reading it every night for ten years. We know the pattern. Not all of it. Enough of it."

She looked up at Clifford.

"We don't send the stone," she said. "We grow it again."

Clifford stared at her.

"In glass," said Rani. "At the campus. We've been growing glass for ten years. We're better at it than anybody in the world. We grow a copy. Not the stone. A lens. Something that does what the stone does, from a long way off, for a short time, because it's been taught by the stone." She took her hand off the glass. "The stone stays here. The lamps stay on. He stays." She looked at Keith. "And the copy goes."

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time.

Jono looked at Keith.

Keith had opened his eyes. He was looking at Rani. Not at the air over her head, where her lamp would be. At her face. And there was something in his own face that Jono had seen only twice before in ten years. On a Sunday in November 2031, at the end of a long table, when Chris put the knife down. And on the platform at Torquay, the same autumn, when a woman in a train window put her hand flat against the glass.

It was not surprise. Keith was never surprised.

It was recognition.

"Can you do it?" said Chris.

"I don't know," said Rani. "Nobody's ever done it." She looked at Vicky. "A year. If it works at all. Less, if we're lucky. Most of it'll crack."

"June," said Clifford. "He wants an answer by June."

"Then tell him yes," said Keith.

They all turned and looked at him.

He had taken his hand off the stone. He was sitting at the end of the desk with both hands round a cup that was not there, the way he sat at Bailey's, and he was looking at nothing, at the wall, at a long way away.

"Tell him yes," said Keith again. "Tell him June. Tell him one box, every bird." He was quiet for a moment. "She can do it. It'll crack. The first one. And then it won't."

Rani looked at him for a long time.

"How do you know?" she said.

Keith did not answer.

* * *

Jono went up the stairs at ten, into Union Street, into the wind.

He stood on the pavement outside the street door of Studio Ania and looked up and down the street. At the closed shops. At the old exchange on the corner, Fleet House, five storeys of grey, with the FOR SALE board still on the corner, so old now that the agent had gone out of business. At the street lamps. At a man going past with a dog, and a lamp over his head, dim, and the dog's breath going up white.

He thought about ten thousand satellites going round the Earth, every ninety-six minutes, with a box on every one.

He thought about Keith's face when Rani said *in glass*.

He thought: *He's seen this before.*

He took out the forty-first book and wrote the date, the time, the place. *C.D. in from Washington via Bristol. Ten thousand.* And what Clifford said. And what Rani said. And then he stood there in the wind with the pencil on the page for a long time, trying to write what Keith's face had looked like, and could not.

He wrote instead:

Did not write what she meant. Did not know.

And closed the book, and walked home along the front, with the bay black on his right and the lamps going past him in the dark, one by one, all the way to Preston.

Chapter 3 – *Strategic Technologies*

Wed. 17 Mar. 2038. House of Commons, 7.04 p.m. Second reading, Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill. Ayes 341. Noes 214. Sch. 3, para. 1: "the basement beneath the premises known as Studio Ania, Union Street, Torquay." W.W. read it out himself. Looked at me while he did.

He read the last page first.

He always had. Since a Tuesday morning in September 2031, in the Library, at a table by the window over the river, with a cup of tea from the machine and a document laid before the House at five to five the previous afternoon that nobody else had read. He had read it to the end because that was what he did, and on the last page, in a schedule, in nine-point type, he had found the name of a basement on Union Street.

Since then he read the last page of everything first. Bills, orders, regulations, reports. It saved time. It was where they put the things they did not want you to read.

The Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill had been presented to the House for its first reading on Thursday the fourth of March, at twenty past three in the afternoon, by the Home Secretary, standing at the dispatch box for perhaps eleven seconds to say its title, and sitting down. That was all a first reading was: a title read out, a nod from the Clerk, and the bill printed. Nobody debated anything.

It had been printed at nine the next morning. Jono had been in Torbay, in the window at Bailey's with Keith and Clifford. He had read it on Saturday night at the kitchen table in Preston, on his tablet, with the

rain on the window and a pot of tea and Biscuit's lead still hanging on the back of the door though Biscuit had been dead two years.

Forty-one pages. Twenty-six clauses. Three schedules.

He went to the end.

* * *

Schedule 3 was headed *Designated Strategic Technology Sites*. It was one page. It had one paragraph.

1. The basement beneath the premises known as Studio Ania, Union Street, Torquay, Devon, together with any apparatus situated therein; and any relay, repeater or associated apparatus situated elsewhere within the area of Torbay Council.

That was all.

He sat at the kitchen table and read it three times. Then he went back to the beginning and read the rest. All forty-one pages. It took him until half past two in the morning, and he made notes in the margin of the tablet with his finger and then, because he did not trust the tablet, in pencil, in the forty-first book.

It was very good. It was much better than the Order of 2031. Whoever had drafted it had read the Hansard of the fifteenth of October 2031 very carefully, and had learned.

The Order had been a statutory instrument, a page of secondary legislation slipped through on the negative procedure, that a single prayer in the Commons could kill. This was a bill. Primary legislation. It would go through every stage in both Houses, committee and report and third reading, and when it was done it would be an Act of Parliament, and nothing short of another Act would undo it.

The Order had given a Secretary of State the power to *enter, secure and remove* on twenty-four hours' notice. The bill did not use the word *remove* anywhere. Jono looked for it. It said *secure*. It said *place under the protection of the Crown*. It created a new body, the Strategic Technologies Authority, with a board appointed by the Home Secretary, which would *assume responsibility for the safe custody and operation* of any apparatus on a designated site, *at that site or at such other site as the Authority may determine*.

At such other site.

Clause 17. Page twenty-three. Halfway down. In ordinary type, in the middle of a paragraph about insurance.

He put his pencil on it, and wrote in the margin of the forty-first book: *Wiltshire. Or Nevada.*

* * *

On the Wednesday he went in early.

He walked over Lambeth Bridge from Kennington at seven, with the river running high and brown under him and the wind coming down it from the west, and went into the Palace by the Members' entrance and up to the Library, and sat at the table by the window over the river that had been his since 2029. A cup of tea from the machine. The bill. The forty-first book.

At eight o'clock the young Member from Bristol came in and sat down opposite him without asking. She did that sometimes. Her name was Hannah Price, and she was thirty-four, and she had been on the coach to Torbay in 2031 and stood up in the chamber afterwards and told six hundred people what she had seen. She sat on the committee now. She had read the bill too. She had it on her own tablet, with notes in four colours.

"Clause seventeen," she said.

"Yes."

"*At such other site*."

"Yes."

"They're going to move it." She looked at him. "They're not even pretending. They've just put it in the middle of a paragraph about insurance so the papers won't see it."

"The papers won't read it," said Jono.

"You did."

"I always read the last page."

She looked at him for a moment longer. Then she said, very quietly, "He sat in this room seven years ago, you know. White. At that table over there, by the door. The morning after your vote. With the Hansard. I came in for a book and he was reading your speech. He'd underlined bits."

"Which bits?"

"I don't know. I didn't look." She turned her tablet face down on the table. "He looked up and smiled at me. That smile. And said, *Good morning. Isn't it a lovely day*."

* * *

The chamber at half past twelve, for the start of the debate, was half full, which on a Wednesday in March for the second reading of a Home

Office bill was more than anybody had expected. Word had gone round. The Torbay thing again. The Member for Torbay again.

Jono sat on the cross benches below the gangway, on the Opposition side, where he had sat for nine years, among the independents and the odd ones. He had his pocketbook on his knee. He did not open it.

He looked round the House the way he looked round any room. Sideways. Out of the corner of his eye. The Government benches, full, with the whips sitting in a row at the end like crows on a fence. The Opposition front bench, the Chief Whip from Lancashire gone grey all the way through now, who caught his eye and nodded very slightly. The galleries. The Members' Gallery, high up on the right.

The second row on the right was empty.

He did not know why he looked there. He knew exactly why he looked there.

And then, out of habit, the thing he could not stop doing, nine years in this building and he still could not stop it: his eyes went to the air above the heads. Six hundred heads. Looking for the lamps.

Nothing. Clear air. The light from the high windows coming down on the green leather and the old oak, and nothing over anybody.

He looked anyway. He always would.

* * *

William White rose at twenty-nine minutes to one.

He was very good. Jono had known he would be. He had watched him at the dispatch box for seven years, rising, first as a junior minister and then as Minister of State and then, two years ago, when the old Home

Secretary had gone to the Lords with a bad heart, as Home Secretary himself. He had never once seen him lose his temper, or lose his place, or lose the House.

He stood at the dispatch box with one hand resting on it and the other in his pocket, and talked to the House the way a man talks to friends at dinner. Pleasantly. Reasonably. A little amused. He did not use notes.

"Seven years ago," said William White, "this House did a thing it had not done since 1979. It annulled an Order of the Crown. I was at this dispatch box that night. I lost." He smiled. There was a ripple of laughter from his own benches, and a little from the Opposition. "I lost to the Honourable Member for Torbay, who is in his place, and who I am sure will be on his feet again this afternoon, and who I say now, before anything else, did this House a service that night."

Jono did not move.

"He asked us to look," said White. "Before we voted. He brought thirty-eight of us to Torbay on a coach, on a wet Friday in October, and he did not tell us anything, and he let us look. And we saw." He turned, a little, to his own benches. "Some of us saw. I did not go on the coach. I regret it." The smile again. "I am told that the Honourable Member for Bristol North saw a great deal."

Hannah Price, three seats along from Jono, went red to the collar.

"So let me say this clearly," said White. "This bill is not the Order. This bill does not take anything away from Torbay. It does not remove anything. It does not switch anything off. What it does, very simply, is this. It recognises that there is, in a basement in a town in Devon, something that nobody in this House understands, that the Honourable Member for Torbay has told us himself he does not understand, and that a great many people in a great many other countries would very much like to understand, and own, and take." He let that sit. "And it

asks whether, seven years on, that thing should still be guarded by a padlock and the goodwill of a rock band."

The laughter this time was louder. Jono let it go over him.

* * *

White went on for twenty-two minutes. Jono did not write any of it down. He listened.

A delegation at the photonics campus in January, very polite. A Russian trawler off Berry Head. A fund in Liechtenstein, through three companies, trying to buy a building on Union Street. White did not say how he knew. He did not need to. Every Member who sat on a committee that met in a room without windows knew exactly how he knew, and Jono sat on the cross benches with his hands on his knees and felt the paper he had signed on Tuesday the second of March in his chest like a stone.

Tarquin's paper. Paragraph forty-one. Read out at the dispatch box, without its classification, in a pleasant voice, to six hundred people.

Under the control of the Crown.

And then, at the end, White did a thing Jono had not expected.

"The Honourable Member for Torbay," he said, "is famous in this House for reading the last page of everything first."

Laughter. Warm, rolling, the sea coming in over shingle.

"So let me save him the trouble." White picked up the bill from the dispatch box. He opened it at the back. He did not look for the page: he went to it directly, the way a man goes to a page he has read a great

many times. "Schedule three. Designated strategic technology sites. Paragraph one."

He read it aloud.

"*The basement beneath the premises known as Studio Ania, Union Street, Torquay, Devon, together with any apparatus situated therein*."

He looked up from the page. Not at the House. Across the floor, over the table, past the Mace, to the cross benches below the gangway on the Opposition side.

At Jono.

Pleasant. Grey at the sides. A good face. A man who had stood at that same box seven years ago, and lost, and smiled.

"There," said William White, still looking at him. "Now we've all read it."

He sat down.

* * *

Jono spoke at ten past five.

He had thought about what to say for twelve days. He had written three speeches in the forty-first book and crossed out all of them. In the end he stood up with nothing in his hand.

He could not say what he knew. He could not say *the service's view*. He could not say *paragraph forty-one*. He could not say *a man in a navy suit sat eight yards from me in a room without windows two weeks ago and could not look at me*. He had signed a piece of paper.

He could not say *ten thousand satellites*. He could not say *a lens*. He could not say *Rani thinks she can grow it again in glass*. He could not say *if that stone leaves the bay, a man I have sat across a table from every Friday morning for ten years will disappear, and none of us knows what that means.*

He could say one thing.

"The Home Secretary," said Jono, "has read the House the last page of his bill. I'd like to read it the middle."

He did not have the bill. He did not need it.

"Clause seventeen," he said. "Page twenty-three. Halfway down. In a paragraph about insurance. The new Authority will assume responsibility for the safe custody and operation of any apparatus on a designated site, *at that site or at such other site as the Authority may determine*." He let that sit, the way White had let his sit. "*At such other site*."

The House was quiet.

"The Home Secretary says this bill takes nothing away from Torbay," said Jono. "He's right. It doesn't. Not on the day it passes. It just gives the right to do it to a board that he appoints, and that this House will never see, and that will never have to come back here and ask." He looked across the floor at White. "Seven years ago he wanted it moved in twenty-four hours. Now he's prepared to wait. That's all that's changed."

White looked back at him. Pleasantly.

"I asked this House to look, seven years ago," said Jono. "The Home Secretary has been kind enough to remind us that he didn't go on the coach." He paused. "I'd like to suggest that he goes now. Before

committee. I'll buy the tickets. I'll meet him at the station." He sat down. "He'll find it's a lot further from Wiltshire than it looks on the map."

* * *

They divided at seven.

Jono knew how it would go. Everybody knew. A second reading was a vote on the principle of a bill, and a Government with a majority of ninety did not lose second readings of Home Office bills about national security. He went through the No lobby with Hannah Price and the Chief Whip's people and the independents and the odd ones, and gave his name to the clerk, and came back and sat down and waited for the numbers.

Ayes, three hundred and forty-one. Noes, two hundred and fourteen.

It was more Noes than he had expected. Forty more than the Opposition alone. He looked along the cross benches and saw some of them. Members who had been on the coach. Members who had sat in the back room at Bailey's and seen.

It was not enough. It had never been going to be enough, at second reading. Committee, then report, then third reading. Then the Lords. Months.

He took out the forty-first book and wrote the numbers.

Then, under them, the line from the last page, the way the Home Secretary had read it out. Word for word. In his square capitals. Because it was the first time in his life that anybody had read it to him, instead of the other way round.

And then, because it was what he had seen, and nothing else:

Looked at me while he did.

* * *

He walked back over Lambeth Bridge at nine, in the dark, with the river under him and the lights of the Embankment going away on both sides.

Halfway across he stopped and leaned on the parapet.

He thought about White's face. About the way he had gone straight to the page, without looking for it, the way you go to a page you have read a great many times. About the smile, and the eyes, and the fact that White did not care whether Jono saw the gap between them.

He thought: *In Torbay, I'd know.*

He thought: *He knows I'd know. That's why he's never once come.*

He stood on the bridge for a long time. Then he took out his phone and rang the only number he had ever rung at nine o'clock at night from a bridge in London when he did not know what to do.

It rang twice.

"Dad," said Jo.

He had still not got used to that. Six and a half years. He did not think he ever would.

"How's the case?" he said.

"Which one?"

"The one you're not telling me about."

There was a pause on the line. He could hear the CID room at Paignton behind her: a phone ringing, somebody laughing, a kettle.

"How did you know?" said Jo.

"You've wound the watch twice this week," said Jono. "You only wind it twice when you can't sleep."

Another pause.

"That's not possible," said Jo. "You can't know that. You're in London."

"No," said Jono. "I can't." He looked down at the river, black and fast under the bridge. "Tell me about it on Friday."

He rang off before she could ask him again, and stood on the bridge with the phone in his hand, and wondered, for the first time, how he had known.

Chapter 4 – *Callum*

> *Mon. 8 Mar. 2038. Paignton police station, front counter, 9.10 a.m. Mrs Sandra Rowe, Foxhole. Son Callum, 24, not seen since Thurs. 4th, 9.30 p.m., leaving for night shift at the campus. "He's never not come home. Not once. Not even when he was sixteen and an idiot."*

Jo Hills wound the watch at ten o'clock every night, and on Sunday night she had wound it at ten, and then lain awake until one, and got up, and wound it again.

It did not need it. It never needed it. It was a plain gold hunter, worn smooth, with a crack across the glass that had been there when a man laid it on a table in Bailey's in 1896, and it had never lost more than a minute in a week in a hundred and forty-two years. Jack Hills had wound it every night of his life, and Johnny after him, and Douglas, and then her father for forty years, and then her. Ten o'clock. The little key in her fingers. Carefully. Not too far.

She had wound it twice on Sunday because she could not sleep, and she could not sleep because she had a feeling, and she did not like feelings. She liked things she could write down.

She sat on the edge of the bed in the flat on Abbey Road at one in the morning with the watch open on her palm and listened to it tick, and told herself it was nothing. Then she got up at six, and went for a run along the front in the dark, and went to work.

At ten past nine the front counter rang up to CID and said there was a woman downstairs about her son.

* * *

The woman was about fifty. She was standing at the front counter when Jo came down, in a fleece with the name of a care home on it, still in her work trousers, with her car keys in her hand. Small, with dyed red hair and dark roots and a face that had been crying in the car and had stopped, by an act of will, in the car park.

Over her head, a lamp.

Jo still saw them. She had seen them since the August she was twenty-one, since about six hours after she first came to Torbay to look at a man she had never met. She had stopped noticing them the way you stop noticing a clock in a room, and then every so often she noticed again. This one was a good steady amber. Not bright. Not dim. The lamp of a woman who had worked nights for thirty years and got her son through school and kept a roof on and did not think of herself as anything in particular.

"Mrs Rowe? I'm DC Hills. Jo. Do you want to come through?"

"I don't want to waste anybody's time," said the woman.

"You won't be."

They went into the little interview room off the front desk, the soft one, with the sofa and the box of tissues and the picture of Brixham harbour on the wall that somebody had bought from a charity shop in about 2015. Jo sat in the chair and let Mrs Rowe have the sofa. She took out her pocketbook. Not the force notebook, which she would fill in later, properly. Her own. Black, with an elastic band. The fourth.

She wrote the date at the top. The time. The place.

"Tell me about Callum," she said.

* * *

Callum Rowe was twenty-four. He had been born at Torbay Hospital and grown up on the Foxhole estate, in the house his mother still lived in, and been, his mother said, *bright, but not at school*. He had left at sixteen. He had stacked shelves at the big Tesco on the ring road, and worked in a bike shop in Paignton, and done eighteen months at the college in Torquay on an access course that he had not finished. And then, in the spring of 2036, he had got a job on nights at the photonics campus on Torbay Road.

"A technician," said Mrs Rowe. She said it carefully, the way people say a word they are proud of and are not sure they are allowed to be. "In the clean rooms. Where they grow the glass. He wears a suit, a white one, over everything, and a hood, and you can only see his eyes. He showed me a photo. He looked like a spaceman." She stopped. "He loves it. He actually loves it. He comes home at seven in the morning and tells me about it over his cornflakes and I don't understand a word."

"What does he do there? Exactly?"

"He watches." Mrs Rowe made a small helpless movement with her hand. "That's what he says. He watches the furnaces. All night. They grow these things, these big lumps of glass, and it takes days, and somebody has to sit with them and watch the numbers and make sure nothing goes wrong. That's him. Him and two others. Ten till six." She looked at Jo. "He says it's like being a lighthouse keeper."

Jo wrote that down.

"When did you last see him?"

"Thursday. Half past nine at night. He went out the door with his bag and his bike, like always, and said *see you for cornflakes*, like always." The voice held. "And he didn't come home Friday morning. And I

thought, he's gone to a mate's. He's twenty-four. And he didn't come home Friday night. And he didn't answer his phone. And Saturday. And yesterday. And his phone goes straight to the message now, it doesn't even ring." She looked down at her hands, at the car keys. "He's never not come home. Not once. Not even when he was sixteen and an idiot."

* * *

Jo did the questions. She had done them so many times now she could have done them in her sleep, and she made herself not, because the day you did them in your sleep was the day you missed something.

Girlfriend? Not at the moment. There had been a girl from Brixham; it had ended at Christmas; it had ended nicely. Mates? Three or four, from school, from the bike shop. Mrs Rowe had rung them all. None of them had seen him since the weekend before. Drink? A bit. Not much. Drugs? Mrs Rowe looked at her. *He wears a white suit and watches glass grow, love. They test him.* Money worries?

Mrs Rowe stopped.

Jo waited.

"No," said Mrs Rowe. "That's the thing." She turned the car keys over in her hand. "That's what I wanted to tell somebody. I didn't want to tell the man on the desk. I didn't know if I should tell anybody." She looked up. "He's had money. Since about October. He's had more money than he should have."

Jo did not write anything. She sat very still and let the woman talk.

"New trainers. Fine, they're always new trainers. But then a car. In November. He came home with a car. A BMW. Two years old, black. He said he'd saved. He's never saved a penny in his life." Mrs Rowe's voice had gone flat. "And in January he paid off my credit card. The whole

thing. Two thousand four hundred pounds. I came home and the letter was on the mat and it said zero. And I said, Callum, where's that come from, and he said, *Mum, I've got a bit of extra work. On the side. It's fine. Don't worry about it.*" She looked at Jo. "And I didn't. God forgive me, I was so pleased I didn't ask."

"Did he say what the extra work was?"

"No. Just that it was for the campus. Something on the side, for the campus. Extra hours." She shook her head. "But he never did extra hours. He was there ten till six, four nights a week, same as always. I'd know. I hear him come in."

* * *

The campus said he had come in on Thursday night.

Jo rang from the interview room, with Mrs Rowe sitting on the sofa holding a cup of tea from the machine that she had not drunk. The head of security at the campus was a big quiet man from Plymouth called Dennis, who had been a sergeant in the Royal Military Police and still stood like one, and he knew who Jo was, because everybody at the campus knew who Jo was, and he did not mention it.

"Swiped in at nine fifty-two," he said. "Thursday the fourth. Main door, then the clean-room airlock at ten oh four. He was on Furnace Six with two others." A pause; keys. "Swiped out of the airlock at five fifty-eight. Main door at six oh two. Friday morning." Another pause. "On his bike. I've got him on the camera at the gate. Turning left. Towards Preston."

"Not towards Foxhole."

"No," said Dennis. "Foxhole's right."

Jo wrote it down.

"Anything else?"

Dennis was quiet for a moment.

"He asked for Thursdays," he said. "In October. Swapped his rota so he was always on Thursdays. Nobody wants Thursdays, so nobody minded." Another pause. "I only know because I sign the rotas."

"Why Thursdays?"

"Don't know," said Dennis. "Thursday nights, the clean rooms are quietest. Only Six and Seven running. Day staff all gone by four. Professor Rani and Mrs Ooi usually in till late Monday to Wednesday, never Thursday." He did not say anything else for a while. Then he said, carefully, the way a man says a thing he has been trained not to say on a phone, "DC Hills. Is this going to be a police matter? Or something else?"

Jo looked at the picture of Brixham harbour on the wall.

"It's a missing person, Dennis," she said. "That's all it is. So far."

* * *

She drove Mrs Rowe home to Foxhole at half past eleven.

It was a small house in a long terrace, pebble-dashed, with a square of grass at the front and a bin with the number painted on it in white, and a black BMW, two years old, parked at the kerb, very clean, with a parking ticket under the wiper from Saturday that nobody had taken off.

Callum's room was at the back, upstairs. It was a young man's room. Bed not made. A games console. A poster of a band Jo had never heard of. A shelf with books on it that surprised her: optics, glass, a fat

textbook on crystal growth with yellow sticky notes coming out of the top like feathers. On the wall over the bed a photograph, printed out and stuck with tape: a figure in a white suit with a hood and a mask, with only the eyes showing, standing in front of something that glowed orange behind a thick window, giving a thumbs-up.

Mrs Rowe stood in the doorway and did not come in.

Jo did not touch anything. Not yet. She stood in the middle of the room and looked. The way her father looked. The way she had learned to look from him, in the six and a half years since a night in a ring in Ellacombe when she had held out his pocketbook and a pencil and he had said *not my hand, yours*.

Not at what was there. At what was not.

No laptop. Mrs Rowe said he had one; it went with him, in his bag. No phone, obviously. No passport in the drawer where Mrs Rowe said he kept it, with his birth certificate and his swimming badges. The birth certificate was there. The swimming badges were there.

"Has he got a passport, Mrs Rowe?"

"Yes. Since last year. He went to Spain with the lads."

"It's not here."

Mrs Rowe looked at the drawer. Then at Jo. And her face did a thing that Jo would remember for a long time.

* * *

Under the bed there was a shoebox.

Mrs Rowe had found it on Saturday and put it back. She said so, from the doorway. She had not opened it again.

Jo put on gloves, and knelt, and pulled it out, and opened it on the carpet.

Money. Twenties and fifties, in bundles, with elastic bands round them. She did not count it. She did not need to: three thousand, perhaps four. And under the money, at the bottom of the box, flat, a small cardboard box, empty, the kind a very expensive thing comes in. Black, with silver writing on it in a language she did not read, and a picture on the side.

A button. A jacket button. Dark grey, plastic, ordinary. With a hole in the middle of it the size of a pinhead.

Jo knelt on the carpet in Callum Rowe's room and looked at the picture for a long time.

She knew what it was. Every police officer in the country knew what it was. You could buy them on the internet for two hundred pounds. You took a button off your jacket and sewed that one on in its place, and it had a lens behind the pinhole and a chip and a battery that lasted fourteen hours, and it watched everything you looked at, all night.

She thought about a young man in a white suit and a hood, with only his eyes showing, sitting all night on a Thursday in front of a furnace with something growing in it.

She thought: *He's been taking pictures*.

She did not say it. She put the empty box in an evidence bag, and the money in another, and wrote on both, and stood up.

"Mrs Rowe," she said. "I'm going to treat this as high risk. That means a lot of people looking for him, today, now. Is that all right?"

Mrs Rowe looked at her from the doorway, with her car keys still in her hand, three hours after she had walked into the police station with them.

"Is he in trouble?" she said.

Jo did not answer at once. She looked at the air over the woman's head. At the steady amber lamp. At a woman who had worked nights for thirty years and had been so pleased about a letter that said zero that she had not asked.

"I don't know yet," said Jo. "But I'm going to find out where he is. And then I'll know."

* * *

She drove back along the front at half past twelve, with the bags on the seat beside her.

At Station Square the lights were red. She sat in the car with the engine running and looked across the square at Bailey's. At the window of the back room. At the young man in it, with a cup in both hands.

He was looking at her.

He always was, when she went past. She did not know how he knew she was going past. She had stopped asking herself, the way she had stopped noticing the lamps. A young man of about thirty, with old eyes, in a white shirt, who had stood in the doorway of a launderette at half past six in the morning six and a half years ago and cried at the sight of her, and who had said, on the steps by the war memorial, *one day*.

He lifted his cup. A little. An inch off the saucer. The way you lift a glass to somebody across a room.

The lights changed.

Jo drove on, and did not look back, and at the next red light, on Torbay Road, opposite the three glass buildings of the campus with their young plane trees in a row along the front, she took out her pocketbook and wrote, at the bottom of the page, under everything else:

First thing that doesn't fit: the money.

Second: he turned left.

Third: Thursdays.

Then she looked up at the campus, at the glass, at the people going in and out with their lamps on, and thought about a button with a hole in it the size of a pinhead.

And then, because it was what her father would have done, and because she was his daughter whether she liked it or not:

Fourth: who was he taking them for?

Chapter 5 – *The First Room*

Sat. 13 Mar. 2038. Studio Ania, the cellar, 11.20 a.m. C.H. asked K.T. a name. She told him. He did not know it. K. at the end of the desk. Did not look up.

Chris Harvey did the crossword in pencil, because his mother did it in pen, and somebody in the family had to be allowed to be wrong.

He did it in the cellar most mornings now, at the long desk, on the old swivel chair from the shop, with the paper folded into quarters and held flat with his bad hand, which was good for that if for nothing else. The easy one. The quick one, at the back, with the clues that told you what they meant. He had done the cryptic once, for fifty years, every day, on trains and in airports and on ships in the Malacca Strait at three in the morning. He had given it up in 2034, the winter after his seventy-second birthday, when he had sat with it for an hour one morning and not been able to see a single answer, and had felt the floor go out from under him in a way he had not felt since the stroke.

The quick one was fine. The quick one he could still do in twenty minutes. He did it every morning, at the end of the desk, near the stone, with Karen beside him doing the one in the other paper, and Keith at the far end with his hand on the glass, and the hum of the cooling in the corner.

He said it kept his head in order.

He did not say what he meant by that. Karen knew. She had known since the winter of 2034, when she found him in the kitchen at Widecombe Cot at six in the morning with the paper on the table in front of him and his face grey. She had not said anything. She had put the kettle on, and the next morning she had bought the other paper, and sat down beside him with a pen.

* * *

It was a Saturday. The thirteenth of March. Grey and soft outside, the kind of day when the cloud sat on the bay like a lid and the light came down through the pavement lights in the cellar ceiling the colour of dishwater.

Jono was there. He came down most Saturdays when he was home, and sat on the bottom step of the stairs with his coat on and his pocketbook on his knee, and did not say much. He had come down this morning with a face Chris had not seen on him since 2031, and sat on the step, and when Karen asked him what was the matter he had said *a bill*, and nothing else, and Chris had not pushed. A man who sat in a room without windows on Tuesday mornings could not always say things on a Saturday.

Rani had been in at nine and gone again, up the stairs two at a time, with a box of something from the cellar under her arm and a look on her face that Chris had not seen since 2028. She had not said anything either. She had looked at Keith, at the end of the desk, and Keith had looked back, and she had gone.

They were growing it. Chris knew that much. In the clean rooms at the campus on Torbay Road, in a furnace, behind thick glass, something was growing that had never been grown before, and it would take months, and most of it would crack.

He had said *yes*. Or Keith had. He was not always sure, these days, which of them had said a thing.

* * *

Seven across. *Mended, as a broken line (8).*

He looked at it for a while. He counted the squares with the end of his pencil. He thought about a broken line. A telephone line. A cable, in the ground, under a street, with water got into a joint somewhere, frying.

Repaired. No. Eight letters. *Repaired* was eight. He pencilled it in. Then looked at it, and it did not fit with the four down, and he rubbed it out.

Restored. No.

Rejoined.

That was it. *Rejoined.* A broken line, rejoined. He wrote it in, very carefully, in the small square capitals he had learned to make at sixteen, filling in forms in a cable book.

And as he wrote it, he thought of a man.

An old man. Sitting on an upturned bucket in the dark, under a street, with a handset clipped onto a pair of wires and his head on one side, listening. A face like a walnut. A flask on the floor beside him. *Mind your head, boy, and don't touch the spares.*

Chris put the pencil down.

He knew this man. He had known him for sixty years. He had told the story of him in this cellar seven years ago, to a room full of people, on the night they worked out where Eric was. The old jointer on his bucket. *You can hear a fault in a line before you can find it.* He had told it a dozen times since. To Jo. To Hannah Price, the young Member from Bristol, when she came down again one summer. To Fred's apprentices, once, at the forge, about patience.

He knew the man's face. He knew his voice. He knew the smell of his flask, which was tea with sugar and something stronger in it.

He did not know his name.

* * *

He sat very still at the end of the desk with the pencil on the paper.

It was nothing. It was a name. He was seventy-six years old and he had had a stroke in 2022 and names went. Everybody's names went. He forgot the names of people he had met last week. He forgot the name of the woman at the bakery on Torbay Road whom he had seen every morning for six years. He forgot the name of the actor in the thing on television that Karen liked, every single time, and she told him, and he forgot it again.

This was different. He knew it was different.

When a name went, the way names went at seventy-six, it went *somewhere*. You could feel the shape of it. The space where it had been. You knew it began with a P, or that it had two syllables, or that it was a bit like a place in Cornwall. You knew it was there, behind a door, and if you stopped looking for it, it would come back in an hour, while you were doing something else.

This was not like that.

He went looking for the old man's name, and there was no space. No door. No shape. No first letter. There was a face, and a voice, and a bucket, and a flask, and where the name should have been there was nothing at all. Smooth. Like a wall that had been plastered over so well you could not see where the door had been.

Chris sat at the end of the desk and felt something go cold in him that he had not felt for twelve years.

* * *

"Karen," he said.

She looked up from her crossword. She had her glasses on the end of her nose and her pen in her mouth. She took the pen out.

"What, love?"

"The old jointer," said Chris. "At Fleet House. In the cable chamber. When I was sixteen." He made his voice very ordinary. "The one on the bucket. You knew him. You used to take him his tea down when I wasn't there. What was his name?"

Karen looked at him over her glasses.

"Pengelly," she said. "Mr Pengelly. Arthur. Everybody called him Mr Pengelly, even the manager." She smiled a little. "He used to call me *maid*. He called all the girls on the board *maid*. He gave me a humbug once out of his pocket with fluff on it."

She went back to her crossword.

Chris looked at her.

Pengelly.

He said it in his head. He said it again. He waited for it to go *click*, the way a name goes click when somebody gives it back to you. That small hard feeling of a key turning in a lock. *Of course. Pengelly.*

Nothing.

It was a word. A Cornish word, a surname, the kind you saw on fishing boats in Newlyn and over shop doors in Penzance. He had never heard it in his life.

He sat with it in his head like a stone in his hand and turned it over, and it was nobody's name. It did not belong to the face on the bucket. It did not belong to anything. It was a word Karen had said, and he could have written it down, and read it back, and it would have meant exactly as much as a word in a language he did not speak.

* * *

Karen had stopped writing.

He did not notice at first. He was looking at the stone, at the end of the desk, under the glass, under Keith's hand. Then he realised the pen was not moving beside him, and he turned his head, and she was looking at him.

She had taken her glasses off. She did that when she wanted to see something properly, which was the wrong way round, and she knew it, and she did it anyway.

"Chris," she said.

"I'm fine."

"You're not."

"I'm fine, Karen. I forgot a name."

"You didn't forget it," said Karen. "I told you it. And you looked at me like I'd said something in Welsh." She put her glasses down on the paper. "You've told that story a hundred times. On his bucket. With his flask. You've told it to the bloody apprentices at the forge. You always say his name. *Old Pengelly*. You say it like you're fond of him." She looked at him, very steadily, the way she had looked at him from the end of a platform at Torquay station in 1980, with the train already moving. "You didn't know it. Did you. Just now. When I said it."

Chris did not answer.

On the bottom step of the stairs, Jono had looked up from his pocketbook.

At the far end of the desk, Keith had not moved. He sat with his hand flat on the glass over the stone and his eyes open, looking at nothing, at the wall, the way he always did. But he had stopped breathing. Chris saw it. A young man's chest, under a white shirt, and it was not going up and down. Two seconds. Three.

Then it went on again.

Keith did not look up. He did not say anything. He did not take his hand off the stone.

* * *

He dreamed that night.

He had not dreamed, not like that, for twelve years. Not since a summer in 2026 when the Albion burned and he had woken every night at three with the sheets wet through and the taste of smoke in his mouth. Not since the flies.

He had told nobody about the flies, then. Not properly. He had told his doctor he was having bad dreams, and the doctor had looked at his notes, at the stroke, and said *it happens*, and given him something to help him sleep that he had not taken. He had not told his mother. He had not told Jono. He had sat up in the kitchen at Widecombe Cot at four in the morning with the light on and watched the dark go grey in the window and not told anybody.

A film. That was how it had always come. An old film, black and white, scratched, the kind they showed on Sunday afternoons when he was a

boy, with music that was too loud. Made of his own photographs. Every photograph he had ever taken, sixty years of them, flickering past, one after another, too fast. And on every one of them, the flies. Settling. On the faces. On the hands. On the edges, where the names were written. Crawling across them, slowly, the way flies crawl across a window in August. And where they had been, the faces went. Not burned. Not torn. Just gone, smooth, like a thing rubbed out with a thumb.

He had lost a boy's name that way. A boy on a beach in 1978. Phil. He had lost it for months, and then one night in the autumn, when it was all over, it had come back.

The film came back that night. In the big front room at Widecombe Cot, at ten past three in the morning, with Karen asleep beside him and the cloud sitting on the bay outside.

It was not the beach this time. It was not a photograph.

It was a cellar. Under a street. Cream paint on the walls, 1934. Lead cables on iron bearers, in rows, grey, like pipes. And in the corner, by the third bearer, on the east wall, an old man sitting on an upturned bucket in the dark, with a handset clipped onto a pair of wires and his head on one side, listening.

And the flies came.

They came out of the dark at the end of the chamber, slowly, the way they always did, as if they had all the time in the world. They settled on the old man's hands, on the handset, on the flask on the floor beside him. On his face. And Chris stood in the doorway of the chamber at sixteen with a can of tea in his hand and watched them crawl across the walnut face, slowly, all over it, and lift, and go.

And where the face had been there was nothing. Smooth. The cream paint of the wall behind, showing through.

The man on the bucket did not move. He sat with the handset at his ear and his head on one side, listening, with no face, to a fault on a line that nobody else could hear.

Mind your head, boy.

The voice was still there. Chris heard it. He would always hear it.

He just would never know, now, whose it was.

* * *

He woke at twenty past three, and lay in the dark with Karen breathing beside him, and did not move.

He knew what it was. He had always known, he thought. Since 2026. Since the flies the first time. He had lain in bed then and told himself it was the stroke, and the grief, and the fire, and getting old. And then in 2028 a young man had walked into Bailey's on a wet night in April with his own face and old eyes, and turned a cup a quarter turn on its saucer, and Chris had understood a great many things all at once, and the flies had been one of them.

Every change costs. Keith had told him that, on a boat in Liverpool Bay, with the spray coming over. *Every time you move a thing, it takes a thing. You don't get to choose.*

Keith had been paying for ten years. A list on the inside of his head, ten things, and now five.

And on Friday the fifth of March, in the cellar, Keith had looked at Rani and said *tell him yes*.

Chris lay in the dark and thought about that. About a young man at the end of a desk who had stopped breathing for three seconds when Karen said *Pengelly*.

Five, Keith had said, every morning, for six and a half years. *Still five.*

He had said it again this morning. Chris had heard him. At eight o'clock, before anything else, in the window at Bailey's, with his cup.

Still five.

So it had not come off the list.

It had come off Chris.

* * *

He got up at half past three and went downstairs, slowly, in the dark, with one hand on the rail and the stick he would not use in front of anybody in the other.

On the landing he passed his mother's door. It was open, the way she liked it. He could hear her breathing. Steady. Slow. A hundred and two years old, asleep in the room at the back with the window onto the monkey puzzle.

He stood at the open door for a moment and listened to her breathe.

Then he went down to the kitchen and switched on the light, and sat at the table where he had sat in 2026, at four in the morning, watching the dark go grey. He did not put the kettle on.

He took a pencil out of the jar on the dresser and an envelope out of the drawer, and turned it over, and wrote on the back of it, in the small square capitals he had learned to make at sixteen:

PENGELLY. ARTHUR. FLEET HOUSE. THE CABLE CHAMBER. THE BUCKET. THE FLASK.

He looked at it.

It was a list of words. He could read them. He knew what each one meant.

He did not know what any of them had to do with him.

He sat at the kitchen table at Widecombe Cot with the envelope in front of him, and the light on, and waited for the window to go grey. And somewhere a long way off, on the other side of the bay, in a clean room on Torbay Road, behind thick glass, something that had never been grown before was growing.

He thought: *It's started.*

He thought: *Good.*

He folded the envelope in half, and then in half again, small, the way a girl on a fire escape had once folded a banner, and put it in the inside pocket of his dressing gown, over his heart.

Chapter 6 – *The First Time*

Sun. 14 Mar. 2038. Berry Head, the car park by the old fort, 6.20 p.m. K., C.H., me. K. said: "The first time, it went wrong this year." Asked him what happened after. He said: "2057." Nothing else.

Keith asked for a lift.

That was the first thing that was wrong. In ten years Jono had never once known Keith ask anybody for anything. He did not drive. He did not take buses. He walked, or he sat. He sat in the window at Bailey's from eight until eleven, and he sat at the end of the desk in the cellar under Studio Ania from eleven until whenever he stopped, and in between he walked along the front, or up through the old town, or out along the harbour wall at Brixham, always inside the line between Hope's Nose and Berry Head, never once outside it. Jono had seen him stop at the edge of the bay, on the coast path past Sharkham, with the sea on his left and the fields of the South Hams going away in front of him, and stand there for a long time, and turn round, and walk back.

On Sunday afternoon Keith came to the door of the flat in Preston at four o'clock and knocked, which he had never done either, and when Jono opened it he said:

"Would you drive us to Berry Head? Chris and me. Before it gets dark."

Jono looked at him.

"Chris?"

"He's at the gate," said Keith. "He's waiting."

* * *

Chris was at the gate of Widecombe Cot under the monkey puzzle, in his good coat, with the stick. He was using it. He was leaning on it with both hands, his bad one over his good one, and he did not take them off it when he saw Jono's car come up the hill.

He got in the front without a word. Keith got in the back.

Nobody said anything all the way round the bay. Through Paignton, along the front, the tide out at Goodrington and the sand very flat and wet and silver in the last of the light. Through Brixham, the harbour full of boats, the fish quay shut. Up the hill out of the town, past the last houses, past the holiday park, to where the road ran out at the gate onto the head.

The car park was empty. It always was, on a Sunday in March at six o'clock. The gravel, and the old stone wall, and the grass going away on the other side of it, short and grey-green, to the old fort with its walls and its gun platforms, and beyond the fort the end of the head, and the coastguard station, and the lighthouse.

Jono parked where you parked. In the corner, facing the sea. With the lighthouse straight ahead, low and white on the very end of the cliff, the shortest lighthouse in England, and the bay going away on the left and the open sea on the right, grey, with the light going out of it.

He switched the engine off.

Chris did not move. He sat in the front seat with his hands on the stick between his knees and looked at the lighthouse.

"She used to sit here," he said. "Karen. In my Mini. In 1979. With her feet on the dashboard." He was quiet. "Counting it."

The lighthouse came on.

It did it the way it always did. There was nothing, and then there was a flash, white, small and very bright, from the top of it. Then another, close behind. Then nothing. Dark. A long dark.

Round, and light, and dark.

In the back seat, under his breath, Keith counted.

* * *

Jono heard him. He could not help it. A low voice, very steady, in the back of the car, saying numbers. Not loudly. Not to anybody. *One. Two.* And then, through the dark, slowly: *three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen.* And the light again. *One. Two.*

Two flashes every fifteen seconds. Jono had known it all his life. He had never once heard anybody count it.

He looked in the mirror. Keith was sitting very straight in the back seat with his hands on his knees and his eyes on the lighthouse, and his lips moving.

The lighthouse, and the counting.

Jono knew that. He had been told it, once, in the cellar, by Chris, at two in the morning in 2031. The list on the inside of Keith's head. Ten things. *The song. The waybill. The lighthouse, and the counting.*

It was still there. Of the five, it was still there.

Keith counted it round four times. A minute. Then he stopped, and looked away from the lighthouse, out of the side window, at the sea going dark on the right, and said:

"I'm sorry, Chris."

* * *

Chris did not turn round.

"Pengelly," he said.

"Yes."

"I don't know who that is." Chris's voice was quite level. He was still looking at the lighthouse. "Karen told me yesterday. It's a man I worked with when I was sixteen. I've told the story of him a hundred times. I've got his voice in my head. *Mind your head, boy*. And I've no idea whose voice it is." He breathed. "It's gone. Not lost. Gone. Like it was never there."

"Yes," said Keith.

"It came off me."

"Yes."

"Not you. Not the list." Chris turned his head at last, and looked over his shoulder, into the back of the car, at the young man sitting there with his own face. "You're still five."

"I'm still five," said Keith.

Chris looked at him for a long time.

"Why?" he said.

* * *

Keith did not answer at once.

The lighthouse went round. Round, and light, and dark. Jono sat with his hands on the wheel and did not move. He had the forty-first book in his inside pocket. He did not take it out. He thought he would, later. Not now.

"Because it has to reach 2057 at five," said Keith. "The list. I can't tell you why five. I can tell you it has to be five, and not four, and not three. If it's four when I get there, I won't be able to do what I have to do." He looked at his hands on his knees. "So it can't come off the list any more. Not this year. Not this time." He was quiet. "And every change costs. You know that. It takes something. It doesn't care where from. It takes it from the nearest place it can reach."

"Me," said Chris.

"You," said Keith. "There's nobody nearer to me than you."

Chris did not say anything.

"I'm sorry," said Keith again. "I knew it would. I told Rani yes on the fifth, and I knew it would, and I said yes anyway." He looked up. "I'd do it again."

"I know," said Chris. "I would too."

* * *

The light was nearly gone now. The sea on the right was black, and the bay on the left was black with lights round the edge of it, Paignton and Torquay and the long string of the front, and Hope's Nose a dark shape at the far end with nothing on it. The lighthouse went round over it all. White, and white, and dark.

"What happens this year?" said Jono.

He had not meant to ask. It was the policeman. It was thirty-nine years of asking the one question you came in to ask.

Keith looked at him in the mirror.

He did not answer for so long that Jono thought he would not. The lighthouse went round twice. Three times.

Then Keith said, very quietly:

"The first time, it went wrong this year."

* * *

Nobody moved.

"The first time," said Keith. "The way it went before. Before I came." He was looking at the lighthouse, not at either of them. "There was an Order, in 2031. You prayed against it. You brought a coach to Torbay. And the House divided, and it was close." He paused. "It was two hundred and eighty-six to two hundred and eighty-seven."

Jono's hands had gone tight on the wheel.

"The other way round," said Keith. "You lost by one."

Jono did not breathe.

"And the stone went to Wiltshire," said Keith. "In a crate. In November 2031. And the lamps went out in Torbay, all at once, at four in the afternoon on a Tuesday, the way they would have. Like a switchboard when somebody pulls the plug. And everybody in the bay looked up,

and there was nothing over anybody's head. And they cried in the street." He was quiet for a moment. "And I wasn't here. There was no me. Not yet. There was just Chris, at sixty-nine, standing in Station Square looking at the air."

Chris had shut his eyes.

"And for seven years," said Keith, "the people who had it worked on it. In Wiltshire. In Nevada. Wherever they took it. They had the stone, and they had people who could read it, and they had a great deal of money. And this year, in 2038, they did what we're going to do." He looked at Jono in the mirror. "They put it up."

"On satellites," said Jono.

"On ten thousand of them," said Keith. "The same ones. The same company. A different friend."

The lighthouse went round.

"But not the way we're going to," said Keith. "They didn't switch it on for everyone. They didn't switch it on for anyone. They switched it on for themselves." He looked out of the side window at the black sea. "So they could see every lamp on Earth. Every grade. Every cord. Who answered to whom. Every person in the world, lit up like a switchboard, from the sky. And nobody could see them."

He was quiet for a long time.

"That's what the first time was," he said. "That's this year. That's what happened in 2038. They could see everybody, and nobody could see them." He breathed. "And then it went on from there."

* * *

"What happened after?" said Jono.

His voice did not sound like his own.

Keith looked at him in the mirror. The old eyes in the young face. The face that Chris had painted in a room above an incense shop in 1994, without knowing whose it was. A Harvey face. Tired, and patient, and waiting for it to get light.

"2057," said Keith.

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I've got," said Keith. "Not here. Not now. If I tell you what happened after, you'll know it. And you'll carry it. And you'll write it down, Jono, because you can't not, and then it'll be written, and if it's written it can be reached." He shook his head, slowly. "I came back so it wouldn't happen. I'm not going to make it happen again by telling you."

Jono did not say anything.

"2057," said Keith again, more gently. "I'll tell you then. If you're there." He looked at Chris. "He'll be there. He'll know it all by then. He'll be the one who tells me."

Chris opened his eyes.

* * *

He looked at Keith for a long time over the back of the seat. The lighthouse went round over both their faces. White, and white, and dark.

"Fleet House," said Chris.

Keith did not say anything.

"You didn't remember it," said Chris. "In 2031. When we found Eric. You sat at the end of the desk and said there was a door on the landing you'd never opened. You didn't know the building. You didn't know the chamber. You knew Pengelly's words and not his name." He breathed. "I thought it was the line. I thought you'd lost it on the way down, like the other things. The way you lose a coat."

"I never had it," said Keith. "Not since I got here."

"Because I'm about to lose it."

"Yes."

"All of it."

Keith looked at him. Then he looked away, out of the window, at the dark.

"All of it," he said.

Chris sat with his hands on the stick between his knees. Jono watched him in the last of the light. He watched him take it in, all of it, slowly, the way you take in a thing you already knew and had not let yourself know. A building on Union Street with a FOR SALE board on the corner. A switchboard on the fifth floor. A girl on a stool. A riser with iron rungs. A chamber under the street, painted cream in 1934. An old man on a bucket.

All of it. A room at a time. This year.

"Good," said Chris.

Keith turned his head.

"Good," said Chris again. He was looking at the lighthouse. "It's a building. I worked there for two years when I was a boy. It's a building, and a man on a bucket, and a girl on a stool." His voice went strange on the last word. "I've still got the girl. I've got her downstairs doing the crossword. I don't need the stool."

He was quiet.

"If it's the price," said Chris, "I'll pay it. You knew I would. You'd have paid it yourself if it was yours to pay." He looked over the back of the seat at Keith, at his own face, young, in the dark. "It was yours to pay. It just hasn't come round to you yet."

Keith did not say anything for a long time.

Then he said, very quietly, "Thank you."

* * *

They drove back round the bay in the dark.

Nobody spoke. Jono dropped Chris at the gate of Widecombe Cot under the monkey puzzle, and watched him go up the path with the stick, slowly, and the front door open and Karen standing in it in the light, and close.

Then he drove Keith to Union Street. To the street door of Studio Ania. Keith got out, and stood on the pavement for a moment with the car door open, looking up the street, at the old exchange on the corner with its FOR SALE board, grey in the street lamps, five storeys of it.

"You won't write it down," said Keith. "What I said."

It was not a question.

Jono looked at him.

"The numbers," said Keith. "Two eighty-six, two eighty-seven. The other way round. Wiltshire. A Tuesday in November. Don't write that." He paused. "Write that I said it went wrong this year. Write that I wouldn't say what happened after. Write *2057*." He almost smiled. "That's enough. That's all anybody needs to find, if they come looking."

He closed the car door. He went in at the street door of Studio Ania, and down the stairs, to the stone.

* * *

Jono sat in the car on Union Street with the engine running for a long time.

Then he took out the forty-first book, and switched on the light over the mirror, and wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Berry Head, the car park by the old fort, 6.20 p.m.* And who was there.

He wrote what Keith had said. Only the part he was allowed. *The first time, it went wrong this year.*

He wrote what he had asked.

He wrote what Keith had answered. One word. A year.

And then he sat with the pencil on the page and thought about a division in the House of Commons, on the fifteenth of October 2031, at twelve minutes past seven in the evening, and an old man from the Black Country coming through the door of the Aye lobby last, very slowly, with his stick, before the doors were locked.

One vote.

The other way round.

He did not write it. He sat in the car on Union Street with his hand flat on the page, and the light over the mirror on, and the old exchange grey and silent on the corner, and did not write it.

It was not the first thing in his life he had not written down. It was the first he would have to carry on his own.

Chapter 7 – *Where They Point*

Sat. 24 Apr. 2038. Widecombe Cot, the back room, 8.00 p.m. Everybody. Agreed: nothing about this to be written. So: nothing.

They met in the back room at Widecombe Cot because it was the only room in Torbay that nobody had ever thought to listen to.

That was Clifford's view, and Clifford had spent thirty years listening to rooms for a living. The cellar under Studio Ania was watched; he was sure of it. Not by people in a van. By a building across the street with a window that never had its blind up, by a lamp-post on the corner of Union Street that had been replaced in January for no reason anybody at the council could give him, by a fund in Liechtenstein that wanted to buy the street door. The campus on Torbay Road was watched by everybody in the world who could afford a satellite. Bailey's was a public house.

But a small hotel on a hill above Torquay, with a monkey puzzle in the front garden and a hinge on the gate that nobody had oiled since 2018, run for ninety-six years by the same family, where a woman of a hundred and two lay upstairs with her door open listening to the house: nobody had ever thought to put anything in that.

"They think it's a guest house," said Clifford, at the long table, with a cup of tea in his big hands. "With an old lady in it. They've done the research. I've seen it. *Residence of the Harvey family, Edwardian, eleven bedrooms, low risk.*" He grinned. "Low risk. I'd like to see them tell her that."

Above their heads, very faintly, through the ceiling, a radio was playing. Something with an orchestra. Wendy liked the orchestra in the evenings.

Chris looked up at the ceiling and did not say anything.

* * *

They were all there.

Jono, at the end of the table by the fire, with his back to the wall the way he always sat. Chris at the head, where his mother had sat for seventy years doing the accounts on Sunday nights, with Karen on his left. Clifford. Vicky and Rani, side by side, still in their campus fleeces. Annie Hall, who had come down from Exeter that afternoon, fifty-four now, with the same short dark hair she had had in 2028 and the same way of sitting at a table as if she was ready to leave it at any moment. Fred, from the forge, in a clean shirt, his big hands flat on the wood, who did not say much at these things and was always there.

And on the screen at the far end of the room, propped on the sideboard, Singapore. Basil, forty-three, in the office in Joo Chiat, at four in the morning his time, with a cup of coffee and a face like his father's at that age. And beside him, just in the frame, Ai Li, with her glasses on her head.

And Keith.

He was not at the table. He was in the window. The bay window at the end of the room, with its little table and its one chair, that nobody sat in. He had not sat in it. He was standing beside it, with his back to the room, looking out at the dark garden and the monkey puzzle and the lights of the town going down the hill to the bay.

On the wall above the fireplace, in a plain wooden frame, a painting. Grey sky, and frost, and pylons, and the black iron edge of a fire escape, and a tall dark shape sitting on the step with the sun in her glasses.

Nobody looked at it. Everybody knew it was there.

* * *

"Right," said Vicky.

She had a tablet in front of her, face down. She did not turn it over. She had told them at the start: nothing on screens, nothing on paper, nothing written. Not because of the people who listened to rooms. Because of the other thing.

Only what was written can be reached.

Keith had told them that, a long time ago. Eden had a key. Eden had a whistle, and painting seven, and a man nobody could describe. If Eden ever learned to use the key the way Rage used the stone, then anything written down about tonight, in any hand, in any book, would be a door.

So nothing. Jono had his pocketbook in his inside pocket. He had written the date at the top of a page before he came in, and the place, and the time. And then *Everybody*. And then nothing. He would write the rest later, and what he would write was *nothing*, and that would have to do.

"Rani," said Vicky. "Where are we?"

Rani did not look up.

"Furnace Six," she said. "Started on the second of April. The first growth. It's eleven inches down now, in the crucible, and it's doing what the models say, and it's going to crack." She said it quite calmly. "I'd put money on it. The stress is wrong in the top third. I can see it on the readings. It'll go in May. We'll start again." She looked at the table. "The second one won't crack."

"How do you know?"

Rani glanced at the window. At Keith's back.

"I've been told," she said.

Nobody said anything to that.

"So," said Vicky. "Assume a lens. Assume a lens by September. That's the thing. Everything else is how we get it out of the bay without anybody noticing, and how we get it up." She looked at Clifford.

"December," said Clifford. "There's a batch going up in December. Eighty birds. My friend's put a box on every one of them, and on every batch after, through to the end of next year. The box is empty. It's waiting. All it needs is what goes in it." He put his cup down. "The lens goes to the States. I can get it there. Don't ask how. The software goes up the day the lens arrives. It's in the box on ten thousand birds by the end of '39. But the first eighty, in December, that's enough to switch on. That's enough for the first night."

"And before December?"

"Before December," said Keith, without turning round, "it has to be tried. Here. Close. Where we can see if it works."

Everybody looked at his back.

"Cornwall," said Keith. "Newquay. The spaceport. There's a ground station there that can talk to anything in the sky, and a hangar nobody uses in the winter, and it's eighty miles from the bay. Far enough to know it's the lens and not the stone." He was quiet. "One night. Before it goes up. So we know."

* * *

"And Eden," said Jono.

He had not said anything yet. He said it now, from the end of the table, by the fire.

"Eden's watching the cellar," he said. "Eden's got a bill in the House with a schedule in it that names the basement. Eden's got a man in Liechtenstein trying to buy the door. Eden's got the Home Secretary. Eden is looking at that stone every minute of every day, and at every one of us." He looked round the table. "How do we get anything out of this bay, a lens, a teacup, without them seeing it go?"

Nobody answered.

Then Chris said, from the head of the table, very quietly:

"You don't hide it. You show them something else."

* * *

It took them three hours.

Jono would remember it afterwards as one of the best three hours of his life, and he did not write any of it down. It was like watching a team that had played together for ten years work a ball up a pitch. Nobody had the whole of it. Everybody had a piece.

It was Vicky who said the first thing that mattered.

"They've got to find something," she said. "That's the problem with hiding. If they don't find anything, they keep looking. If they find something, they stop." She turned her face-down tablet round on the table with one finger. "So we give them something to find."

"A move," said Clifford.

"A fake one. The stone. Going abroad." Vicky looked at the screen at the end of the room. "Singapore."

On the screen, Basil sat up.

"Through you," said Vicky. "Through Ong's. Where the paintings were for thirteen years. Eden already watches that road. They know the print works. They know the paper store behind the newsprint. If they hear the stone's going there, they'll believe it, because it's where they'd go."

"And they'll stop it," said Basil. His voice came out of the little speaker thin and very clear. "They'll intercept it."

"Yes."

"And they'll find..."

"A stone," said Rani. Everybody looked at her. "We can make one that looks like it in a week. Same size. Same weight. Same colour, near enough. Dark glass, in foam, in a crate. It's growing the real thing that's hard. A thing that only looks like it is easy."

"And when they open it," said Vicky, "they'll know it's fake."

There was a silence.

"That's the point," said Vicky. She did not smile. Vicky never smiled at these things. "We don't want them to believe we've moved it. We want them to catch us pretending." She looked round the table. "Think about it from their side. Rage tries to ship the stone out of the country, quietly, in a container. They catch it. It's a fake. What do they think?"

Jono saw it. He saw it all at once, the way you see a punch coming a half second before it lands.

"They think we can't move it," he said.

"They think we can't move it," said Vicky. "They think we tried to make them believe we had, because we were frightened of the bill, and we were bluffing. And they think: it doesn't move. It can't. It only works in Torbay. The only way to get it is the law." She sat back. "And they stop looking at anything else. And they put everything they've got into Westminster."

She looked down the table at Jono.

"Into you," she said.

* * *

"So I fight the bill," said Jono.

"You fight the bill," said Vicky. "Loud. Every stage. Every clause. You keep them up all night if you have to. You make it the only thing anybody in that building is talking about. You make them look at you." She paused. "And you lose, probably. In the Commons. They've got ninety."

"I know."

"And then the Lords."

"I know."

"And all the time they're watching you," said Vicky, "nobody's watching the road west."

Jono looked at the fire for a long time.

He thought about a café on the waterfront in Valletta, in October 2031, in the heat, with a coffee he had not ordered. A woman in white linen across the table, saying *you go where they point. You always have.*

He had gone where they pointed. To Malta. While the man he was looking for was four hundred yards from the cellar, under the street.

"You go where they point," he said slowly. "And you look at who's standing next to the finger."

Nobody said anything.

"That was hers," said Jono. "Karina's. In Valletta. She said it to me." He looked up. "We're pointing. Singapore. Westminster. That's the finger. And while they're looking at it..."

"The lens goes west," said Keith, at the window.

* * *

"Who sells it?" said Annie.

It was the first thing she had said all evening. She said it the way she said everything, short, as if it cost money.

"The Singapore story," she said. "Somebody has to put it in Eden's ear. And they have to believe it. They're not going to believe it off a phone we leave in a café." She looked round the table. "It has to come from somebody they trust. Somebody inside."

Nobody answered.

Then Chris put his good hand flat on the table.

"I'll ask her," he said.

They all looked at him.

He did not say who. He did not need to. On the screen at the end of the room Basil had gone very still, with his coffee halfway to his mouth, at four in the morning in Joo Chiat, and beside him Ai Li had taken her glasses off her head and was holding them in her lap.

"She's still in," said Chris. "Half in. They still half trust her. She's never told them she saved Mei Ling. They think she was passing." He looked at the screen. At his son. "Basil. Can you get a letter to her? A real one. On paper. In my hand."

Basil did not answer for a long time.

"Yes," he said.

"Then I'll write it. And I'll ask her." Chris looked at the painting over the fireplace. At the fire escape, and the frost, and the sun in a pair of glasses. "And she'll do it. She'll do it for him." He nodded at the screen. "For Mei Ling. Not for me." He was quiet. "And they'll kill her for it. One day. Won't they."

Nobody answered.

At the window, Keith had not turned round. But Jono saw his hand, on the back of the chair nobody sat in. It had closed, very slowly, until the knuckles were white.

* * *

"There's one more," said Vicky, at a quarter to eleven, when the fire had burned down and Fred had got up twice to put a log on it and Karen had made two pots of tea.

She looked down the table at Jono.

"Tarquin," she said.

Jono did not say anything.

"He's in the bill," said Vicky. "Up to his neck. You can't tell us what he said in your committee, and we're not asking. But we can read. White stood up on the seventeenth of March and quoted a paper that only your committee and the services had seen. Somebody gave it to him." She turned the tablet round on the table again. "And Tarquin's been coming down to Torbay. Salcombe, mostly. Weekends. He's been seen in Bailey's twice since Christmas. He didn't come over. He sat in the corner and looked at Keith."

Jono had not known that. He looked at the window. Keith did not turn round.

"So we tell him," said Vicky.

"Tell him what?"

"Singapore." Vicky's voice was very level. "As a friend. The way we'd have told him anything, five years ago. Somebody goes to Talland's in Warwick Way and buys a quarter of Darjeeling and says, *we're worried about the bill, we're thinking of moving it, Basil's got a place.*" She paused. "If he's still ours, he'll keep it to himself, and it doesn't matter. And if he isn't..."

"Then he passes on a lie," said Jono.

"Then Eden hears it twice," said Vicky. "From Karina, and from him. From two people who don't know each other and have no reason to agree. And two sources is what makes a thing true."

Jono looked at the table for a long time.

He thought about a man in a navy suit, thin, with his hair gone flat, who could not look at him. A man in a lift with the doors closing, saying *it never is*.

"I don't want to test him," said Jono.

"We're not testing him," said Chris quietly, from the head of the table. "We're telling him the story we're telling everybody. If it hurts him to hear it, that's not because we told him." He looked at Jono. "It's because of what he is now."

Jono did not answer. After a while he nodded.

* * *

They broke up at half past eleven.

Basil and Ai Li went off the screen with a soft chime, into the Singapore dawn. Annie went back to Exeter in the dark. Fred walked down the hill to Paignton with his hands in his pockets. Clifford went up to Room 5, which was always his. Vicky and Rani went out to Vicky's car, talking about stress in the top third of a crystal.

Chris and Karen went up. Jono heard them on the stairs, slowly, one step and then the other foot, and the stick, and Karen's voice, low. And on the landing, a door left open, and an orchestra on a radio, very quietly, and then not.

Jono stayed by the fire.

Keith was still at the window.

"She'll carry it," said Keith.

Jono looked up.

"In October," said Keith. He did not turn round. "She'll come on the four o'clock, the third Friday, the way she always does. And on the last Monday she'll go up on the train with her bag, the way she always does." He was quiet. "Nobody follows her. Nobody can. She hasn't got a lamp. She isn't written. There's nothing to look at."

"Does she know?"

"She knows everything," said Keith. "She always has." He put his hand flat on the glass of the window, the way she had put hers on the window of a train, at the end of a platform, seven years ago. "Until this year."

He took his hand off the glass. It left a print, faintly, in the cold, that faded as Jono watched.

"This year," said Keith, "she doesn't know what happens. Not after Monday. Not after the bag." He turned round at last, and looked at Jono across the dark room, with the fire behind Jono and the town behind him. "Nobody does. Not her. Not me." He almost smiled. "You'll have to write it down, Jono. As it happens. For once there's nobody who already knows."

He went out. Jono heard the front door, and the gate, the latch and the hinge.

Then he took out the forty-first book, by the light of the fire, and looked at the page he had started before he came in. The date. The place. The time. *Everybody*.

He thought about Singapore, and a container, and a crate with a fake stone in it. He thought about a letter in Chris's hand to a woman in Hamburg. He thought about a quarter of Darjeeling in Warwick Way. He thought about a carpet bag.

He wrote:

Agreed: nothing about this to be written.

And then, under it, because it was true, and the only thing he could write that was:

So: nothing.

Chapter 8 – *Glass*

Fri. 14 May 2038. The campus, Furnace Six, 3.12 a.m. It cracked. R. said: "Good. Now I know where." Fri. 16 July, the cellar, 4.40 p.m.: it didn't.

Rani rang him on the Thursday night at a quarter to eleven, when he had been home from the station for an hour and was sitting at the kitchen table in Preston with a plate of beans on toast going cold.

"It's going to go tonight," she said. "Do you want to see?"

He did not ask how she knew. He put his coat on.

* * *

The campus at night was a different place.

In the day it was glass and people and plane trees and the hum of a hundred conversations in a dozen languages. At eleven o'clock on a Thursday in May it was three dark buildings set back from Torbay Road, with one window lit on the ground floor of the furthest one, and a security man in the glass box at the gate who looked at Jono's face and then at a screen and then at Jono's face again, and lifted the barrier without a word.

Dennis was waiting for him inside the door. Big, quiet, in a dark jumper, with his hands behind his back.

"Professor's in the gallery," he said. "I'll take you up."

They went along a corridor that smelled of nothing at all. That was the first thing Jono noticed. Every building he had ever been in had smelled

of something: polish, coffee, damp, people. This one smelled of air that had been cleaned until there was nothing left in it. Their feet made no sound on the floor. The lights came on in front of them as they walked and went off behind.

"You've had a lad go missing," said Jono. "From here."

Dennis did not break step.

"Callum," he said. "Callum Rowe. Night tech. On Six." A pause. "Your daughter's got it."

Jono had not known that. He walked on beside Dennis down the clean white corridor and did not say anything, and felt something go tight under his ribs.

Tell me about it on Friday, he had said, on a bridge in March. She had not. Not on that Friday, or any Friday since.

"She's good," said Dennis. "Your girl. She asks the right questions." He stopped at a door with a small window in it and a keypad, and put his hand on the pad. "She asked me why he wanted Thursdays."

The door opened.

* * *

The gallery was a long narrow room above the clean room, with a window all along one side, and chairs in front of the window, and screens on the desks under it. It was dark except for the screens. Rani was in the middle chair with her feet up on the desk and a cup of something cold beside her, and Vicky was in the chair next to her with a tablet on her knee, and at the far end, in a white suit with the hood down round her neck, a young woman with a ring through her nose was eating a sandwich.

"Steph," said Rani, without looking round. "Night tech. Steph, this is the Member for Torbay."

"All right," said Steph, through the sandwich.

Jono sat down in the empty chair at the end of the row. Next to Steph. It was a chair like the others, black, with arms, on wheels. Somebody had put a sticker on the back of it, a cartoon of a lighthouse.

"That was his," said Steph, seeing him look. "Callum's. He put the sticker on. He said this job was like being a lighthouse keeper." She put the sandwich down. "Nobody's sat in it since March."

Jono did not move.

"Sit there," said Steph. "It's all right. He'd want somebody to."

* * *

He looked down through the window.

He had expected a laboratory. Benches, and glass, and people in white coats. It was not like that. It was a white room, very large and very bright, with nothing in it but machines. Eight of them, in two rows of four, each one the size of a wardrobe, steel and white, with pipes going into the top of it and cables going out of the bottom. Each one with a small thick window in the side, at about the height of a man's chest, and a number painted on the steel beside the window, black, a foot high.

Six was lit.

Through its little window, from up here, Jono could see a glow. Orange. Deep orange, like the inside of the forge in Station Square when Fred had the fire up to welding heat. Not flickering. Steady.

"It's in there," said Rani. "In a crucible. Eleven inches of it. Growing down." She took her feet off the desk. "You pull it. Very slowly. A seed on the end of a rod, touching the top of the melt, and you turn it, and you lift it, a few millimetres an hour, and the glass grows on the bottom of the seed as you lift. Like a stalactite going the wrong way." She pointed at a screen. "That's it. That shape. Six weeks, nearly."

On the screen was a picture of something like a long bulb, or a bell, hanging from a rod. Lines across it, in colours. Blue at the top. Green in the middle. And in the top third, a band of yellow, going orange at one edge.

"That's the stress," said Rani. "The orange. The bit I told you about at Widecombe Cot. It's been getting worse for a fortnight." She sat back. "It's going to go tonight."

"How do you know?"

"The numbers," said Rani. "And because I was told it would." She looked at him. "He said *in May*. It's the thirteenth. He's never wrong about the month."

* * *

They waited.

It was a strange kind of waiting. Nothing happened. The glow in the window of Number Six stayed exactly the same. The lines on the screen moved a little, very slowly, the way the hands of a clock move when you are watching them. Steph finished her sandwich and went down through an airlock in her suit and walked once round the machines in the white room, slowly, like a nurse doing a ward round at night, and came back up. Vicky worked on her tablet. Rani sat with her eyes on the screen and did not move for an hour at a time.

Jono sat in Callum Rowe's chair and thought about a young man from Foxhole who had sat in it on Thursday nights, four nights a week, ten till six, and called it being a lighthouse keeper. Who had swapped onto Thursdays when nobody else wanted them. Who had walked out of this building at two minutes past six on a Friday morning in March and turned left.

He thought about Jo, asking Dennis why.

At one o'clock Vicky went to sleep in her chair with the tablet on her chest.

At half past two Steph went down again and came back and said, "It's ticking," and nobody asked her what she meant.

At twelve minutes past three, it went.

* * *

He heard it.

He would not have believed you could hear it. Through the glass of the gallery window, through the steel of the machine, through whatever was inside the steel. A sound like ice going on a pond in January. A crack, very clean and very small, and then a sort of long whisper after it, like something settling.

On the screen, the orange in the top third of the bell went white. All at once. A line of white, jagged, right across it.

Then the whole picture went red, and a lot of numbers changed at once, and a soft tone started somewhere in the room under the desk, over and over, polite, like a lift arriving.

Vicky woke up.

Steph was already on her feet, pulling her hood up, going for the airlock.

Rani had not moved. She sat in her chair with her eyes on the screen, on the white line, on the red. She watched it for a long time. Then she put her hand out and touched the screen, very gently, with one finger, on the place where the white line began. The way you touch a bruise on somebody's arm to see where it hurts.

"Good," she said.

Jono looked at her.

"Now I know where," said Rani.

She turned round in her chair and looked at him. In the light from the screens, at three in the morning, her face was very tired and very calm, and for the first time since he had known her, which was ten years, he saw her smile.

"Six weeks," she said. "And it told me exactly where it would break. Look." She touched the screen again. "There. Eleven point four centimetres from the seed. In the top third. Where the stress was. Not anywhere else. Not at random." She took her hand away. "That means the models are right. It means it's not the glass. It's us. It's how we pulled it. Too fast at the shoulder." She stood up. "We'll start again on Monday. Slower at the shoulder."

"And the second one?"

"The second one won't crack," said Rani.

"Because you've been told."

"Because I've been told," said Rani. "And because now I know where."

* * *

Jono walked home along the front at four in the morning, with the sky going grey over Berry Head and the tide out, and the gulls standing in rows on the wet sand, facing the wind.

At the bottom of Preston, at the corner where the road went up from the front, he stopped and took out his phone and looked at it for a long time.

Then he put it away again. It was four in the morning. She would be asleep. She would have wound the watch at ten and gone to sleep, or not, and either way it was not his to ask.

Your daughter's got it.

He walked up the hill.

* * *

The second one took nine weeks.

They started it on Monday the seventeenth of May, slower at the shoulder, and it grew all through the end of May and all through June, while Jono was in London fighting the bill line by line in a committee room on the first floor with a view of the river and a Government majority of nine to six. He came home every Thursday night on the 6.03 and went to the campus on Friday morning and stood in the gallery with Rani and looked at the screen. Blue at the top. Green in the middle. And in the top third, where the orange had been, green too.

No orange. Week after week.

On Thursday the fifteenth of July, at eleven at night, with Steph and Rani and Vicky in the gallery and Jono in Callum's chair, they lifted it

clear of the melt. It came up out of the crucible slowly, on its rod, glowing, a long bell of something that was not quite glass and not quite anything else, and hung there in the window of Number Six, cooling, from orange to red to a deep dark colour that Jono did not have a name for.

It did not crack.

Rani watched it for an hour without speaking. Then she went home and slept for fourteen hours.

* * *

They cut it on the Friday.

Not all of it. A slice. From the middle, where Rani said the pattern was cleanest. A machine in another white room took it, with a wire as thin as a hair and water running over it, very slowly, for six hours, and at the end of the six hours there was a disc.

Rani brought it to the cellar at twenty to five in the afternoon in a steel case the size of a lunchbox, lined with grey foam, and put the case down on the long desk next to the stone, and opened it.

Jono had come down the stairs behind her. Chris was in his chair at the end of the desk, with Karen. Keith was in his place, with his hand flat on the glass over the stone.

Everybody looked into the case.

It was a disc of glass about the size of a saucer, and about as thick as a man's thumb. It was not polished yet. The edges were rough from the wire. And it was, Jono thought, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and he could not have told you why.

It was not one colour. That was the first thing. It was clear, like water, and then you moved your head an inch and it was grey, like the stone. Then green, faintly, like the sea off Berry Head in the morning. Then something warmer, almost amber, at the very centre, where the light from the pavement lights overhead came down through it. It was never the same colour twice. He moved his head back to where it had been, and it was not the colour it had been a moment before.

"That's the pattern," said Rani quietly. "The stone's pattern. Or near enough. It's taught. It's been in the furnace for nine weeks with the readings from this cellar going into the controller every night, and it's grown the way the stone grew." She looked at Keith. "I think. I don't know. Nobody's ever done it."

Keith was looking at it.

He had not taken his hand off the stone. He sat at the end of the desk with his right hand flat on the glass cover, the way he had sat for ten years, and he looked into the steel case at the disc in its foam, and his face did nothing at all for a long time.

Then he put out his left hand, and laid it flat on the disc.

* * *

Nobody breathed.

Jono watched him. He did not know what he was watching for. A light, perhaps. A sound. Something.

There was nothing. A young man at the end of a desk in a cellar with one hand on a stone and the other on a piece of glass. The hum of the cooling in the corner. The light coming down through the pavement lights from Union Street.

Then Keith shut his eyes.

He sat like that for a long time. A minute. Two. His hands flat. His face very still.

"It knows me," he said.

Very quietly. Not to anybody.

Chris had put his crossword down.

"The stone," said Keith, with his eyes shut, "knows me. It always has. Since the boat. Since I put my hand on it in Liverpool Bay with Jono swearing at the throttles. It knew me the way a dog knows you after years away." He breathed. "This is the same. It's not the same thing. But it knows me." He was quiet. "It's like hearing somebody say your name in a voice you've never heard. And knowing it's your name."

He opened his eyes. He took his left hand off the disc, slowly. He looked at Rani.

"That's it," he said. "That's the one."

Rani did not say anything. She was standing by the desk with her hands in the pockets of her fleece, and she was crying, very quietly, the way she did everything, with her face not moving at all.

Keith looked down at the disc in its case. Clear, and grey, and green, and amber at the centre, and none of them for more than a moment.

"It's the colour of the bay," he said. "From Berry Head. At six in the morning. Before anybody's up." He almost smiled. "She'll like that."

* * *

At the end of the desk, Chris had picked up his crossword again.

Jono saw him do it. Saw him look at the paper, and the pencil in his good hand, and the half-done grid. Saw him look at it for a long time, very still.

Then Chris put the pencil down, and folded the paper in half, and put it in his pocket, and sat looking at the stone, with his bad hand in his lap.

Karen looked at him. She did not say anything. She put her hand on his knee.

Later, on the stairs, Jono asked him.

"Nothing," said Chris. "Nothing, really. Seven down. *Vertical shaft in a building (5)*." He looked up the stairs, at the street door, at the light of Union Street coming down. "I couldn't think of it. And then I could. And then I couldn't think why I knew it." He was quiet. "*Riser*."

He went on up the stairs. One step, and the other foot up to meet it, and the stick.

Jono stood on the stairs behind him and did not say anything.

The riser. Six minutes up with a can of tea. Four down.

The second room.

Chapter 9 – *Lessons*

Sat. 7 Aug. 2038. The old monastery, Paignton, the bell tower, 11.40 p.m. K., R., V.O., A.H., me. Clear. No wind. They watched the cords go out of the bay. I watched their faces.

"Don't look for the lamp," said Keith. "Look for the grain."

They were on Hope's Nose at half past nine on a Saturday night at the end of July, on the grass above the old quarry, with the bay in front of them going dark and the lights coming on all round the edge of it. Rani and Vicky and Annie in a row on the grass, sitting, the way you sit on a beach to watch fireworks. Keith standing behind them. Jono a little way off, on a rock, with his coat round him, because Keith had asked him to come and had not said why.

Five miles across the water, low and long and black against the last of the sky, Berry Head. And at the near end of it, where the land came down to the sea, the lights of Brixham, going up the hill in rows.

"I can't see them," said Rani.

She had her hands round her knees. She was looking across the bay at Brixham the way she looked at a screen in the gallery: hard, without blinking.

"I can see the lights," she said. "The houses. The street lamps. I can't see the lamps. Not from here. It's five miles." She did not look round. "Up close, in a room, they're the size of a fist. From here they'd be smaller than a pinhead. I can't see a pinhead at five miles."

"No," said Keith. "Nobody can. Stop trying."

Rani looked round at him.

"You're looking for a light," said Keith. "A little amber light, over a head, in a window, five miles off. You'll never see it. Not from here, and not from the top of Kit Hill in November, with the towns miles off in the dark." He crouched down behind her, so that his face was level with hers. "Don't look for the lamp. Look for the grain. You can't see one lamp at five miles. You can see a thousand. Look at Brixham. Not at the windows. At the whole of it. The way you'd look at a field of wheat to see which way the wind was going."

Rani turned back and looked across the bay.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

Jono, on his rock, could see the lamps of the three women in front of him. He could see Keith's, and its other one, the far one, faint and steady behind it, the one he had seen every day for ten years and never understood. He could see nothing at all across the water but the lights of Brixham, the ordinary ones, yellow and white, going up the hill in rows.

He had never seen a cord. He had never seen grain at a distance. He saw lamps, close, the way anybody in the bay did after six hours. That was all.

He watched their faces instead.

* * *

Annie got it first.

He saw it happen. She was sitting at the end of the row with her arms folded, looking at Brixham with the same face she had at every meeting,

ready to leave. And then the face changed. Not much. Her mouth opened a little. Her arms came unfolded.

"Oh," said Annie.

Keith did not say anything. He waited.

"It's like..." Annie stopped. She was looking at the whole of the far shore now, Jono could see, not at any one place. Her eyes were moving, slowly, along the line of the hill. "It's like a field. You're right. It's not lights. It's a field of something. A sort of..." She lifted her hand and moved it in the air, slowly, flat, as if she were smoothing a sheet. "It's brighter there. By the harbour. And down there it's dim. And there's a bit, up the hill, going towards the top, that's..." She stopped. "That's very bright. One bit. Like a hot spot."

"The school," said Keith. "Furzeham. There's a summer club on. A hundred children in a hall, with a teacher who's very good." He did not look at Brixham. He was looking at Annie. "That's grain at five miles. That's what you'll see in November. Not lamps. Fields. Towns. The whole of Plymouth, like a field of wheat, with the wind going through it."

Vicky got it ten minutes later. She said nothing at all. She sat very straight and took her glasses off and put them on the grass beside her, which Jono had never seen her do, and looked across the bay without them, and her face did not change, and a tear ran down it.

Rani did not get it.

She sat with her hands round her knees till eleven o'clock, looking, and the light went out of the sky and the bay went black and the lights of Brixham shone across the water yellow and white, and she did not get it.

"I'm too close to it," she said at last, quietly, not looking round. "I spend all day looking at the numbers. I look at the lamps the way I look at a reading. One at a time." She put her forehead on her knees. "I can't stop looking at the one."

Keith put his hand on her shoulder.

"Next time," he said.

* * *

Next time was the monastery, a fortnight later.

Jono had not been up it since 2028. Since a night at the beginning of September, ten years ago, with a half moon and no wind, and Fred on the rope, and Chris on the torch, and a box in a rucksack on his back that had changed everything.

It had not changed. The old building on the hill above Paignton, grey limestone, pointed windows, three storeys and the bell tower at the end. Somebody had bought it in 2033 and was going to make it into flats, and then had not, and then had sold it to a trust that was going to make it into a museum, and had not either. The back wall was the same. The boarded window was the same, with the boards prised off and nailed back and prised off again.

Fred had a key now. Rage had bought a key, quietly, from the trust, in 2034. Fred let them in at eleven on the Saturday night and stood in the dark corridor at the bottom of the stairs with a torch and said, "I'll be here," the way he had said it ten years ago, and Jono went up first, because he knew the way.

Three flights. Then the narrow one, wooden, steep as a ladder. Then the trapdoor, which opened now on a hinge that somebody oiled, and the sky.

The platform at the top of the bell tower was the size of a small kitchen, with a low parapet round it, and in the middle, bolted to the stone, a grey box the size of a suitcase with a little window in the front and a light behind the window, green. The relay. Jono had carried it up on his back. He put his hand on it as he came up through the trapdoor. It was warm.

Then he stood up and looked, and the bay was all round him.

* * *

It was a clear night. No wind. No moon. The whole of Torbay below them, all the way round, from Hope's Nose on the left to Berry Head on the right, a great curve of lights round the black water, Torquay and Paignton and Brixham joined up into one long necklace. And inland, behind them, going away, the dark of the country. Fields and lanes and farms and the odd light of a car on the road to Totnes. And far away to the north-east, a faint orange glow on the cloud that was Exeter.

The women came up through the trapdoor one by one and stood at the parapet. Keith came last.

"From here you can see the edge," said Keith.

He stood at the parapet on the inland side, the side away from the sea, looking north.

"The bay ends," he said. "You know that. Hope's Nose to Berry Head. Inside the line, the lamps. Outside it, nothing. Not dark. Nothing. The relay only carries so far." He put his hand on the parapet. "But the cords don't stop at the line. The cords go where the people go. Somebody in Paignton answers to somebody in Exeter, the cord goes to Exeter. Somebody in Torquay answers to somebody in London..." He paused. "Look north. Inland. At the edge."

They looked.

Jono looked with them. He could see the lights of Paignton below, and the dark country going away, and the glow of Exeter on the cloud. He could see the lamps of the three women at the parapet, and Keith's two.

He could not see anything else.

He watched their faces.

* * *

It was Rani, this time.

She stood at the parapet with her hands flat on the cold stone, looking north, and he saw her see it. He saw her whole body change. She went very still, the way she had gone still in the cellar in 2031 in front of a row of paintings.

"There," she said.

Nobody asked her where.

"They go out," said Rani. Her voice was very quiet. "Out of the town. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Going up out of Paignton like..." She stopped. "Like the threads on a loom. Going inland. Most of them stop. Not far. A farm. A village. Totnes. Newton Abbot. They go out a few miles and they come down, into somebody, and stop." She was quiet. "And some of them don't stop."

"Which?" said Keith.

"Thin ones," said Rani. "Very thin. Not many. Going north-east. Up past Newton. Past Exeter. Not coming down. Going on, and on, getting thinner and thinner, till I can't..." She shook her head. "They go up into

the dark. Like the string of a kite, when the kite's so high you can't see it any more."

"Where do they go?" said Vicky.

"London," said Keith.

Nobody said anything.

"That's what you'll follow in November," said Keith. "Not here. From the hills, with the lens. When the whole of Devon and Cornwall is lit, you'll see thousands of those. Kite strings. Going up out of every town." He looked north, at the glow of Exeter on the cloud. "Most of them will be nothing. A son in London. A mother. A man who works for a bank. You let them go." He was quiet. "And some of them will all be going to the same place."

Annie said, very quietly, "How will we know which?"

"You'll know," said Keith. "You'll see them come together. Like streams. Like the threads on a loom, going into one knot." He took his hand off the parapet. "And when you see the knot, you write down where it is. You don't follow it. You write down where it is, and you come home."

* * *

They stayed up there till one.

At half past twelve, Annie, at the seaward side of the parapet, said, in a strange voice, "Keith."

He went to her.

She was looking down. Not out at the bay. Down, into the town, into the streets of Paignton directly below the monastery, the old streets going down the hill to the station.

"There's a hole," she said.

Keith did not say anything.

"In the field," said Annie. "In the grain. Down there. By the station. Everything's lit, all the way round, all the houses, the people in the pubs, and there's one place where there's..." She put her hand flat in the air, the way she had on Hope's Nose. "Nothing. Not dark. Not dim. A hole. The size of a person. And it's moving." She swallowed. "It's moving along the street towards the square. Very slowly. Like a person walking."

Rani and Vicky had come to the parapet.

"I see it," said Rani.

"Visitors," said Vicky. "Off a train. They haven't been here six hours."

"No," said Keith.

They all looked at him.

"Visitors aren't holes," said Keith. "Visitors are blank. Like a page nobody's written on yet. You can see the page. This is..." He was looking down into the town, at the street by the station, and Jono could not see anything there at all but street lamps and a man walking, very small, with his hands in his pockets, towards Station Square.

"It's a gap," said Keith. "Like a socket with the plate unscrewed." He was very quiet. "You've seen one before. Every October. At the little table in the bay window at Widecombe Cot."

Nobody moved.

"In November," said Keith, "you may see one of these. Somewhere. In Plymouth, or Exeter, or a lay-by on the A30. If you do, you don't follow it. You don't go near it. You don't look at it for longer than you have to." He looked at the three of them. "You write down where it is, and the time, and which way it was walking. And you come home."

Down in the street, the man with his hands in his pockets turned the corner into Station Square and was gone behind the roof of the forge.

"Who is it?" said Annie.

Keith did not answer.

* * *

Jono went down first, at one, the way he had come up. Fred was waiting at the bottom of the stairs with the torch, exactly where he had said he would be.

"All right?" said Fred.

"I don't know," said Jono.

He walked home along the front, the long way, with the tide coming in.

At the bottom of Station Square he stopped, and stood on the pavement opposite Bailey's, in the dark, and looked at the square. At the forge with its doors shut and its fire banked. At the station. At the benches under the plane trees.

Nobody. An empty square at half past one on a Sunday morning, with the street lamps on.

He did not know what he was looking for. He looked anyway.

* * *

Chris lost the cable book on the twenty-first.

Jono was there. It was a Saturday, a fortnight later, at Widecombe Cot, in the kitchen, at four in the afternoon, with the back door open onto the garden and the monkey puzzle and the heat of the end of August coming in. Karen was making scones. Chris was at the kitchen table with his tea.

On the cork board by the dresser, among the bills and the postcards and a photograph of Mei Ling on a beach in Singapore with a bucket, there was an envelope. An old one, brown, a gas bill, with a drawing pin through the corner. Karen had pinned it there in November 2031 and nobody had ever taken it down. On the back of it, in black biro, in small square capitals, very neat, a line of letters and numbers.

TQ 7/418.

Chris was looking at it. He had been looking at it for some time, Jono realised. With his tea going cold in his hand.

"Karen," said Chris. "Whose writing's that?"

Karen stopped, with her hands in the flour.

She did not look round at once. Jono saw her shoulders. Then she wiped her hands on her apron, slowly, and turned round, and looked at the envelope on the board, and at Chris.

"Yours, love," she said.

Chris looked at the envelope.

"It's very neat," he said. "I don't write like that." He put his tea down. "That's the way you'd write if somebody had taught you. If somebody had made you. Every letter the same. Like filling in a form." He was quiet. "Like a book you had to keep. For somebody."

"You did keep one," said Karen. "When you were sixteen."

Chris looked at her.

"A book," said Karen. Her voice was very steady. "A big green one. In the chamber at Fleet House. With the cable numbers in. Every tag. Every pair. In pencil. In your best writing. Because he made you." She stopped. She did not say who. "That's how we found Eric. Seven years ago. You'd written that number in that book when you were sixteen, and you knew it when you heard it. You wrote it on the back of the gas bill at midnight in the cellar."

Chris sat at the kitchen table and looked at the envelope on the cork board for a long time.

"Did I," he said.

It was not a question.

He picked up his tea again. It was cold. He drank it anyway.

Karen turned back to the scones. Jono saw her hands in the flour. They had stopped moving. She stood there at the counter with her back to the room and her hands in the bowl, quite still, for a long time.

Then they started again.

Upstairs, very faintly, a radio was playing. An orchestra. At the back of the house, a woman of a hundred and two lay with her door open, listening.

Chapter 10 – *The Tunnel*

> *Karina. 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. I didn't know it was you till this year. I am asking you for something I have no right to ask. C.*

Karina Petrick read the letter on a bench in the gardens above the Landungsbrücken at seven in the morning, in the sun, with the river below her full of ships, and when she had finished it she folded it once along the crease it already had, and put it in the inside pocket of her jacket, and did not take it out again for a month.

She did not need to. She had read it once. She did not forget things.

It had come in the ordinary way. That was the first thing she had admired about it. Not through Eden's channels, which she still had, which were watched. Not through her own, which were not, which she had kept clean for thirty years so that she would have one door in the world nobody else knew about. It had come by post. In an envelope with a Singapore stamp on it and her name and an address in Altona written in her son's hand, which she had last seen on a birthday card he had made her when he was twelve and had never given her, because she had left on the morning of his thirteenth birthday. She had found the card, years later, in a drawer in the flat in Tiong Bahru, the week before she left that too.

Inside the envelope from Basil there was nothing from Basil. Only another envelope, sealed, cream, heavy, with one word on the front in a hand she had not seen for forty-four years and would have known in the dark.

Karina.

* * *

Chris wrote the way he had always written. Small and fast and leaning forward, as if the words were trying to get to the end of the line before he changed his mind. A little shakier now. The letters on the right of the page bigger than the ones on the left, where the hand had got tired.

It was not long. One side of a sheet.

He told her what they needed. He did not tell her why. He told her that in September a crate would leave Torbay for Southampton, and go into a container on a ship called the *Kota Bharu*, bound for Singapore, and that in the crate there would be a thing in grey foam that looked like a stone. He told her that it would be addressed to Ong's print works in Jalan Besar, care of Basil Tay.

He asked her to tell Eden.

He told her it was not the stone.

He did not tell her what was.

At the bottom, after the part about the painting, after *I am asking you for something I have no right to ask*, he had written one more line, and then crossed it out. Very thoroughly. With the pen going back and forth until the paper was nearly through. She had held it up to the light at the window of the flat in Altona at five in the morning and read it anyway, through the back, in the shape the pressure of the pen had left.

You'd know what it costs better than anybody.

And under that, not crossed out, just the initial.

C.

* * *

She thought about it for three weeks.

She did not need three weeks. She had known on the bench in the gardens above the river, with the ships going by, what she would do. She had known, she thought, since a park in Tiong Bahru in October 2031, with a child on her hip and a man with a newspaper standing on the path six feet behind the pushchair, not moving.

But she took three weeks, because three weeks was how long she would have taken if she were deciding. And Eden watched how long things took.

On the twenty-first of June she rang a number in London that she had rung four times in her life, and said her name, and said she had heard something about Torbay that the people in London would want to hear, and that she would only say it in person, and only in Hamburg.

They sent a man.

* * *

The old tunnel under the Elbe was a hundred and twenty-seven years old, and Karina had loved it since she was six.

Her grandmother had taken her through it. Once. In the winter of 1968, in a fur hat, holding her hand very tightly, from St. Pauli to the docks on the other side and back, without a word, for no reason Karina ever learned. She remembered the lifts. The great iron cages at each end, big enough for a horse and cart, that took you down twenty-four metres under the river and up again. She remembered the round white hall at the top on the St. Pauli side, under the green copper dome, with the lift

shafts going down in a ring. And she remembered the tunnel itself. Two tubes, side by side, going away under the water. Tiled. White and cream tiles, glazed, with reliefs on them, here and there, of the things that lived in the river: a crab, a fish, an eel, a rat with a boot in its mouth. And lamps on the walls, going away in a line, each one a little warm orange glow, getting smaller and smaller until they met at the far end in a point.

Four hundred and twenty-six metres. She had counted her steps that day, at six, holding her grandmother's hand, and made it seven hundred and twelve.

She did not know, then, why her grandmother had taken her. She had thought about it for seventy years. She thought now that it was the same reason anybody takes a child anywhere once and never again. To show them the shape of a thing. A long way to go, under heavy water, in a straight line, with the lights going on ahead of you, and nowhere to turn off.

She waited for the man from London at the St. Pauli end, at ten in the morning on Thursday the twenty-fourth of June, under the copper dome, in a pale grey linen suit, with no bag.

* * *

He came up in the lift from the far side.

She had known he would. You did not meet in Hamburg in the place you had suggested; you came from the other way, so that the person waiting had to watch you come. She stood by the iron gate of the lift and watched the cage come up out of the dark shaft, slowly, with the cables groaning, and stop, and the gate slide open.

Young. Thirty-five, perhaps. A good haircut and a good dark suit and a face that had been to a good school and a better university and had

never once in its life been hit. He looked at her, and smiled, and she knew at once who had sent him, because it was a copy of another smile. Very pleasant. Going nowhere near the eyes.

White's.

Not the other one. Not the man nobody could describe. That man would not have taken the lift. That man would not have smiled.

"Mrs Petrick," said the young man. "Shall we walk?"

He said it in German, very good German, with an accent from the north. She answered him in English.

"We shall walk," she said.

* * *

They walked down the east tube, towards the docks, at the pace of two people with nowhere to be.

It was quiet at ten on a Thursday. A man on a bicycle, ringing his bell, with a dog in a basket on the back. Two schoolgirls with their phones. A dock worker in an orange jacket coming the other way with his lunch in a plastic bag. Their footsteps on the old stone floor went away down the tube in front of them and came back.

The lamps went away ahead. Orange and black. Tile, and lamp, and tile, and lamp.

"You said you had something," said the young man.

"In September," said Karina, "Rage is going to move it."

He did not stop walking. He did not look at her. But she felt it go through him, the way you feel a train go through the floor of a station.

"Move what?"

"You know what."

They walked on. A fish in relief on the tiles, going past at the height of her shoulder. A crab.

"They are frightened of the bill," said Karina. "They have read clause seventeen. They think that when it passes, your Authority will take it out of the bay within the year, and they are right." She kept her voice level and quiet and slightly bored, the voice she had used for fifty years to tell people things they would pay for. "So they are going to take it first. Quietly. Out of the country. To somewhere the bill cannot reach."

"Where?"

"Singapore."

Now he looked at her.

"To my son," said Karina.

* * *

They had reached the middle of the tunnel. She knew it without looking. There was a place, halfway, where the floor stopped going down and started going up, so slightly you only felt it in your calves, and where the sound changed, because the tube was the same length both ways and your footsteps came back to you from both ends at once. She had felt it at six. She felt it now.

She stopped.

"There is an office in Joo Chiat," she said. "My son runs it. And a print works in Jalan Besar, owned by an old man called Ong, who kept eight paintings for them for thirteen years behind the newsprint in his paper store, and never once looked at them. You know about the print works. You have watched it since 2031." She looked at him. "In September, a crate leaves Torbay. A van to Southampton. A container. A ship called the *Kota Bharu*, sailing on the eighteenth. Forty days to Singapore. Addressed to Ong's, care of Basil Tay."

The young man looked at her for a long time.

"How do you know this?"

"Because he is my son," said Karina. "And I have watched him for forty-two years, and he has never once in his life known I was watching." She did not look away. "He talks on the telephone in the office at night, to his father, when he thinks the building is empty. In English. In a voice he uses for nobody but his father. He thinks I am in Hamburg."

"You are in Hamburg."

"I am in Hamburg now."

* * *

He did not believe her. Not yet. She watched him not believe her. It was a very good face, but it was young, and it had never been hit.

"Why tell us?" he said.

It was the right question. She had been waiting for it since the bench above the river.

"Because if it goes to Singapore," said Karina, "it goes to my son. And you will come for him. You came for his daughter in a park in 2031."

She let that sit. "Not you. The other one. The one who does not take the lift." She watched his face, and saw, very faintly, under the good haircut, something move: a man hearing the name of a rival he did not like. "You know about the park. You know about the pushchair. You know a woman got there first."

"A woman who was passing."

"A woman who was passing," agreed Karina. "Who nobody could describe." She looked down the tunnel, towards the far end, where the lamps met. "I am seventy-six years old, Mr..."

"Hollis."

"Mr Hollis. I have one son, and he has one daughter. If that thing goes to Singapore, they will both be dead within the year, one way or another. By you, or by the man who does not take the lift, or by somebody I have never met who wants it more than either of you." She turned and looked at him. "I would rather you took it at Southampton. Before it leaves England. In a container yard, in the rain, with nobody's child anywhere near it."

* * *

Hollis did not say anything for a long time.

The man on the bicycle went past again, the other way, ringing his bell. The dog in the basket looked at them.

Then Hollis smiled. The copied smile. But there was something under it now that had not been there before. She knew what it was. She had seen it on a great many faces, in a great many rooms. It was the look of a young man who has just been given something he will be able to take home, and put on a desk, and be thanked for.

"The eighteenth of September," he said.

"The *Kota Bharu*. From Southampton. Container yard four."

"And you'd like nothing for this."

"I would like my son left alone," said Karina. "That is not nothing. It is the most expensive thing I have ever asked for." She turned towards the far end of the tunnel. "You can go back up in the lift, Mr Hollis. I will walk on. I would rather not be seen coming out with you."

He hesitated. Then he nodded, very politely, and turned, and walked away from her back up the tube towards St. Pauli, past the fish and the crab and the rat with the boot, his footsteps going away in front of him and coming back.

She did not watch him go.

* * *

She walked on to the far end.

It was further than she remembered. It was always further. At six it had been seven hundred and twelve steps. At seventy-six it was five hundred and ninety. She counted them, the way she had counted them then, and the way a woman on a beach in Devon had counted a lighthouse, to know where she was.

At the far end, at the foot of the lift shafts on the Steinwerder side, by the iron gates, she stopped, and turned round, and looked back the way she had come.

The tube went away from her. Straight. Tile and lamp, tile and lamp. Orange and black. The lamps getting smaller and smaller until they met

in a point, four hundred and twenty-six metres away, under the copper dome on the other side of the river.

And she thought about a man of thirty-two in a room above a shop that sold paper houses for the dead, in Joo Chiat, in 1994, with a fan going round, at three in the morning. Putting paint on a canvas with a knife. Orange and black. A tunnel going away. And at the far end of it, very small, a face.

Listening.

She had been listening. Every night. On the other side of a door that did not lock, in the room next to his, lying awake, because she did not need to sleep, and he did not know it. Listening to him breathe. Listening to him get up at three and go down the stairs and stand on the five-foot way and come back up. Listening to the knife.

She had heard him paint it. She had lain in the dark and heard the knife on the canvas, eight nights, not in a row, and never once got up and opened the door and looked.

She had never seen it.

She stood at the far end of the old tunnel under the Elbe, at seventy-six, and looked back down the line of orange lamps to the far end, where there was nobody, and thought: *that is what he saw. That is where he put me. At the end of a long way, under heavy water, with nowhere to turn off.*

He was right.

She took the letter out of her inside pocket for the first time in a month, and did not open it. She held it in her hand, the cream envelope, with the one word on the front in a hand she would have known in the dark.

Then she put it back, and pressed the button for the lift, and went up into the light on the wrong side of the river.

They would kill her for this. She knew that. Not this year. Not soon. But Eden did not forget, any more than she did, and one day somebody would put the eighteenth of September next to something else, and look at it for a long time, and understand.

She found that she did not mind.

You'd know what it costs better than anybody.

She did.

Chapter 11 – *The Paper Trail*

Mon. 12 July 2038. Paignton CID, 11.40 p.m. Mrs R.'s tablet. 1,904 photographs. Every Thursday from 15 Oct. 2037 to 4 Mar. 2038. Screens. Numbers. Last one 5.59 a.m., Fri. 5 Mar.: the gate.

It was Mrs Rowe who found them, in the end, and she found them by accident, and she rang Jo at ten past nine on a Monday night in July and said, in a voice Jo had not heard her use before, "I think I've done something wrong."

Four months.

That was how long it had been. Callum Rowe had walked out of the photonics campus on Torbay Road at two minutes past six on the morning of Friday the fifth of March, on his bike, and turned left, and not come home, and in four months nobody had seen him. His phone had not been switched on. His bank card had not been used. His passport had not gone through a border anywhere in the world, so far as anybody could tell, and Jo had asked everybody who could tell. His black BMW stood outside his mother's house in Foxhole with a cover over it now, because the gulls had started to use it.

Jo had done everything. She had done it properly, the way her father would have, and the way the Super had taught her, and the way she had taught herself, in a pocketbook with an elastic band round it, at the kitchen table on Abbey Road at one in the morning. She had found the girl from Brixham, who had cried and known nothing. She had found the three lads from school and the two from the bike shop. She had found the man at the car dealer's in Newton Abbot who had sold Callum the BMW in November for nineteen thousand pounds in cash, in a carrier bag, and had thought nothing of it, he said, because people did.

She had found the cash. That was the thing. Everything Callum Rowe had bought since October he had bought in cash. The car. The trainers. A watch. And the credit card he had paid off for his mother, two thousand four hundred pounds, he had paid off at the counter of a bank in Paignton, in twenties.

Cash did not leave a trail. Somebody had known that.

And then on a Monday night in July his mother had sat on her sofa in Foxhole and tried to look at a photograph of her sister's new baby on her tablet, and pressed the wrong thing.

* * *

"It's the family account," said Mrs Rowe. "For the photos. Callum set it up for me. Years ago. When he got me the tablet for Christmas. He said, *Mum, it all goes in one place, so you never lose anything*." She was sitting on the sofa with the tablet on her knees and her reading glasses on, and she did not look up when Jo came in. "I never look at it. I don't know how. I just take a picture of the baby and send it to our Tracey. And tonight I pressed the wrong button and it went to this." She turned the tablet round. "All these. I didn't know they were there. I didn't know they were his."

Jo sat down on the sofa beside her and took the tablet, and looked.

Photographs. Rows and rows of them, tiny, going down the screen as she scrolled. Hundreds. She kept scrolling. Thousands.

She tapped one.

A screen. A computer screen, in a dim room, photographed slightly from below and slightly from the side, at an angle, the way you would photograph something if the camera were at the height of a man's chest and the man were sitting in a chair, not looking at it. On the screen, a

picture of a long shape like a bell hanging from a rod, with coloured lines across it. Blue, and green, and in one part, yellow. And down the side of the screen, columns of numbers.

She tapped the next. The same screen. Different numbers.

The next. A different screen. A graph. A line going up and down like a heartbeat, with a date along the bottom and a word at the top she did not know.

The next.

She looked at the little line of text under the photograph. The date. The time.

Thursday 15 October 2037. 23.14.

She scrolled. The next one was 23.29. Then 23.44. Every fifteen minutes. All night. 02.14. 02.29. Until 05.44. And then nothing until the next Thursday.

Thursday 22 October. 22.14.

* * *

She sat on Mrs Rowe's sofa for an hour and a half and went through them.

She did not look at every one. There were one thousand nine hundred and four. She looked at the first and last of every night, and one in the middle, and wrote them down in her pocketbook, date and time, in her round upright hand, in a column down the page, while Mrs Rowe made tea and did not drink it and sat in the armchair across the room with her hands in her lap, watching her.

Every Thursday. From the fifteenth of October 2037. Every fifteen minutes, from a little after ten at night until a quarter to six in the morning. The same angle. The same height. Low, and a little to the side.

The height of a button on a jacket. Sitting in a chair.

A chair with a sticker of a lighthouse on the back.

"He was taking them," said Mrs Rowe, from the armchair. It was not a question. "At work. Wasn't he. Of the screens. That's what the money was."

Jo did not answer at once.

"I think so," she said.

"For who?"

"I don't know yet."

Mrs Rowe looked at the tablet in Jo's hands.

"I've done something wrong," she said again. "Haven't I. By finding them. I've got him into trouble."

Jo put the tablet down on her knee.

"No," she said. "You've done the first thing anybody's done in four months that might find him." She looked at the woman in the armchair. At the lamp over her head. Steady amber. Not bright, not dim. A woman who had worked nights for thirty years. "He set it up so you'd never lose anything, Mrs Rowe. And you didn't."

* * *

The last photograph was not of a screen.

She found it at a quarter to eleven, at the very bottom of the list, on its own. *Friday 5 March 2038. 05.59.*

The gate. The barrier across the drive at the front of the campus, in the grey before dawn, with the security man's glass box beside it, lit. Taken from the height of a man's chest. A man on a bicycle, about to ride out.

Beyond the barrier, the road. Torbay Road, empty, wet, with the street lamps still on.

And on the other side of the road, parked at the kerb under the plane trees, a car. Grey. A hatchback. Ordinary. With its lights off.

Jo looked at it for a long time.

She enlarged it. It went soft. She could not read the plate. She could not see if there was anybody in it. A grey hatchback under a plane tree on Torbay Road at one minute to six in the morning, with its lights off.

Then the man on the bicycle had ridden out through the gate, and turned left, and the button on his jacket had taken no more photographs, ever.

* * *

She did the money on the Tuesday.

She had done it before, in April, and found nothing. Callum's bank account was the bank account of a young man on a technician's wage, with his pay going in on the twenty-eighth and going out again on rent to his mother and a phone and a gym and takeaways. No big payments in. Nothing. The cash had come from nowhere.

But now she had dates. Fifteen October. She went back to the account with the dates in front of her, and the Super's signature on a production order, and the fraud team in Exeter on the phone, and she looked not at what had come in but at what had gone out.

And on Friday the sixteenth of October 2037, at eleven in the morning, the morning after the first Thursday, Callum Rowe had paid four pounds ninety-nine by card to a company called Corran Data Services Limited.

Four ninety-nine. Once a month. Every month since. For *cloud storage*, the description said.

Jo looked at that for a long time.

The family account. His mother's photos. *Mum, it all goes in one place.* He had not set it up for his mother. He had set it up for himself. A cheap little storage company that nobody had heard of, that the button camera could talk to, from a chair in a clean room at three in the morning, with no cable. And then he had shared it with his mother's tablet, so that if anybody ever looked at his account, they would find a family photo album with a baby in it.

And somebody else, somewhere, had been reading it every Friday morning.

* * *

Corran Data Services Limited was registered in Cardiff. It had two directors, neither of whom, when the fraud team in Exeter rang them, had ever heard of Callum Rowe, and one of whom turned out to be a retired schoolteacher in Pontypridd who had signed a form for a nephew in 2034 and never thought about it again.

It had one customer. Itself. It stored nothing for anybody but Callum Rowe.

It was owned, the fraud team said, on the Thursday, by another company. Westway Holdings. Registered in Guernsey.

And Westway Holdings, they said, on the following Monday, after a weekend of emails, was owned by a partnership. In London. A firm of consultants. Strategic advice. Public affairs. Government relations. With an office on the third floor of a building in Great Smith Street, two minutes' walk from the Houses of Parliament, and a brass plate by the door with its name on it, and a list of partners on its website with their photographs.

Hollis Grey LLP.

Jo looked at the website on her screen in the CID room at Paignton at seven o'clock on a Monday evening with everybody else gone home.

Six partners. Six photographs. Good haircuts. Good suits. Good smiles.

The senior partner was a man of about thirty-five, called Edward Hollis. Before he set up the firm, the website said, he had worked for four years as a special adviser at the Home Office.

To the Minister of State. William White.

* * *

The Super came out of his office at half past seven and stood behind her chair and looked at the screen over her shoulder.

He was sixty-one now. He had been a detective sergeant in 2026, and a detective inspector in 2031, standing in the cable chamber under Fleet House in the light of a lamp on a stand while her father read a wall. He

had been her guvnor for three years. He did not say much. He had a way of standing behind your chair and reading your screen, and saying nothing for long enough that you started to explain yourself.

Jo did not explain herself.

He read the website. The partners. The line about the Home Office. He read it twice. Then he pulled a chair from the next desk, and sat down beside her, quite close, and looked at the screen, and not at her.

"Your father know about this?"

"No, sir."

"You going to tell him?"

Jo did not answer.

The Super nodded slowly, as if that were an answer.

"He sits in a room on Tuesday mornings," he said, "where they tell him things he can't tell anybody. You know that." He was still looking at the screen. "And one of the things they tell him, I'd bet my pension, is about this firm. And about the man it worked for. And he can't tell you. And you can't tell him." He was quiet for a moment. "That's a hard place for a father and a daughter to be. Both of you knowing a half. Neither of you allowed to put it together."

"Yes, sir."

"So don't put him in it," said the Super. "Not yet. Not till you've got something he can stand up and say in the chamber without breaking his oath. Because if you tell him this now, he'll want to. And he won't be able to. And it'll eat him."

Jo looked at him.

"You've known him a long time," she said.

"Since 2026," said the Super. "A carer with a lanyard, in a car park in Paignton, with a book full of things nobody wanted to hear." He almost smiled. "I told him to write everything down. And keep it somewhere safe." He stood up and put the chair back at the next desk, very precisely. "I'll tell you the same."

He went to the door. Then he stopped, with his hand on the frame.

"Jo."

"Sir."

"Be careful," said the Super. "That man in the grey suit on the website. And the man he works for. And whoever was sitting in a grey hatchback on Torbay Road at one minute to six in the morning." He looked at her. "They're not frightened of a DC from Paignton. That's what makes them dangerous. And that's what makes you useful." He paused. "Don't make them frightened of you till you're ready."

He went out.

* * *

Her father rang on the Friday, at nine, the way he always did when he was home.

"How's the case?" he said.

"Which one?"

"You know which one."

She was sitting on the floor of the flat on Abbey Road with her back against the sofa and the watch open on her palm. It was not ten yet. She would wind it at ten.

"It's going," she said.

"Dennis said you asked him about Thursdays."

"Dennis talks too much."

There was a silence on the line. She could hear him breathing. She could hear, behind him, the sea, faintly, through an open window in Preston.

"Jo," he said. "If you need me to know something..."

"I'll tell you," said Jo. "When I can. When you can hear it." She looked at the watch. "Not yet."

Another silence. Longer.

"All right," said her father.

He did not ask again. She had known he would not. He was a Hills. He knew what it was to have a thing you could not say.

She rang off. She sat on the floor with her back against the sofa until ten o'clock, and then she wound the watch, the little key in her fingers, carefully, not too far. And then she took out her pocketbook, the fourth, and opened it on her knee, and wrote it all down. Every name. Corran. Westway. Hollis Grey. Great Smith Street. Edward Hollis. Special adviser. The Home Office. The Minister of State.

And a grey hatchback under a plane tree on Torbay Road, at one minute to six, with its lights off.

She wrote it all, in her round upright hand, in pencil, the way she had been taught, and closed the book, and put the elastic band round it.

Then she got up, and took the book into the bedroom, and lifted the corner of the carpet in the cupboard where the floorboard was loose, and put it underneath, and put the carpet back.

Somewhere safe.

She went to bed. She did not sleep until two. At two she got up, and wound the watch again.

Chapter 12 – *All Night*

Tues. 20 July 2038. House of Commons, 5.52 a.m.
Report stage, Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill.
Sat 15 hrs 22 min. 23 divisions. Lost 23. R., by text, 3.10 a.m.: "Done."

The programme motion fell at twenty-five to three on Monday afternoon, by three votes, and Jono heard the House go quiet behind him like a pub when the door opens and the wrong man walks in.

He had not expected it to fall. Nobody had. A programme motion was a small dull thing that the Government moved at the start of every stage of every bill, setting out how long the House could spend on it. Report stage, one day; third reading, one hour; the question put at such and such a time, and everybody home by ten. It went through on the nod. It always had. Members voted for it without reading it, the way you sign for a parcel.

On Monday the nineteenth of July it fell. Two hundred and ninety-eight to three hundred and one.

He knew who had done it. He sat on the cross benches below the gangway with his hands on his knees and did not look round, and he did not need to. Twenty-two Members on the Government side had gone into the No lobby, and another nineteen had sat in their places and not gone through either door. He could have named every one of them. Most of them had been on a coach to Torbay on a wet Friday in October 2031, or had a friend who had, or had sat at the end of the table in the back room at Bailey's at seven in the evening and seen the air over a stranger's head go amber. They would not vote against the bill. Not yet. Not against their whips, on a Home Office bill, on national security. But they would not let it go through on the nod either.

So the programme motion fell, and there was no time limit, and the House would sit on the report stage of the Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill until it had finished.

And Jono had tabled two hundred and forty amendments.

* * *

He had done it on the Thursday before, at the Table Office, at ten past four in the afternoon, five minutes before it closed. A clerk with half-moon glasses had looked at the pile of paper he put down on the counter, and then at him, and then at the pile again.

"All of these, Mr Hills?"

"All of them."

"There are..." The clerk turned the pile over and looked at the last page. "Two hundred and forty."

"Yes."

The clerk had looked at him over the half-moon glasses for a long time.

"The Speaker won't select them all," he had said at last, kindly. "You know that. He'll group them. He'll pick perhaps twenty."

"I know."

"And the Government will move a programme motion, and the whole thing will be over by ten o'clock on Monday night."

"Probably," said Jono.

The clerk had sighed, and taken the pile, and stamped it.

Jono had not told him about the twenty-two, or the nineteen. He had not known about them himself, for certain, until a quarter to three on Monday. He had known about Hannah Price, who had spent a fortnight going quietly up and down the Government benches in the tea room with a cup of coffee in her hand, and he had known what Vicky had said, at the long table in the back room at Widecombe Cot in April, with her tablet face down.

Make them look at you.

* * *

They looked at him.

The Speaker selected twenty-three groups of amendments. Jono had expected twenty. Twenty-three was the Speaker's way, Jono thought, of saying something he could not say from the Chair.

Each group was debated. Each group was divided on. Each division took fifteen minutes: the bells ringing all over the Palace, in the corridors and the bars and the tea room and the offices on the other side of the road, and the Members coming in from wherever they were, and filing through the lobbies, and the tellers counting, and coming back to the Table.

Fifteen minutes. And between each division, an hour, two hours, of debate.

The Government could not leave. That was the thing. A Government with a majority of ninety, on a normal day, could let half its Members go home, because the Opposition would not be there either. But the Opposition was there. The Chief Whip from Lancashire, grey all the way through now, had sent a three-line whip at noon, the moment the

programme motion fell. Every Opposition Member in the building, in their place, all night. And the twenty-two and the nineteen were there, and nobody on the Government side knew which way they would go on which amendment.

So the Government whips kept everybody. Three hundred and forty Members on the Government side, in the building, all night, because if a dozen of them went home and the twenty-two went the wrong way on the wrong group of amendments, the Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill would come out of report stage with a hole in it.

Jono stood up at ten past four, on the first group, and spoke for forty minutes about clause seventeen.

He did not say anything he was not allowed to say. He had read the bill a hundred times. He knew it better than anyone in the building, better, he suspected, than the man who had drafted it. He knew every sub-clause, every schedule, every *at such other site*. He talked about each one, slowly, carefully, in the voice he had used on doorsteps for twenty-five years, and the House listened, because it was a voice that did not sound as if it was going to stop.

At five to five they divided. Two hundred and eighty-seven to three hundred and thirty-nine. He had lost.

At six he stood up on the second group.

* * *

He did not remember all of it afterwards. Nobody did. Nights like that went into your head in pieces.

He remembered the light going. The high windows of the chamber going from gold to grey to black, and the lights coming up, and the green leather going darker. He remembered the smell of the place at

midnight: old wood and warm dust and people who had been in the same room too long.

He remembered Hannah Price speaking at eleven, on the ninth group, for twenty minutes, about a forge in Paignton and a bar of steel going from black to red to yellow-white, and the House laughing, and then not laughing.

He remembered the Government whips. In a row on their bench at the end, like crows on a fence, and then, as the night went on, not in a row, because they were out in the lobbies and the corridors, ringing round, finding Members asleep in their offices and on the green benches in the library corridors and in the tea room with their heads on the tables, and bringing them back, every fifteen minutes, for every division.

He remembered White.

White did not leave either. He could not. It was his bill. He sat on the front bench at the dispatch box all night with his hand resting on the box and his good suit getting less good, and at every division he got up and went through the Aye lobby with his Members, and came back, and sat down. He did not look tired. He did not look anything. Every now and then, across the floor, through the night, he looked at Jono, pleasantly.

At two in the morning he caught Jono's eye and lifted one hand, very slightly, an inch off the dispatch box. The way a man lifts a glass to somebody across a room.

Jono did not lift anything back.

* * *

And he remembered the young man in the gallery.

He saw him first at about half past one. Up in the gallery on the right, the side gallery, the one where the officials and the guests sat, among the people who had come in at seven to watch the Torbay thing and had mostly gone home. A young man of about thirty-five. A very good haircut. A very good suit. Sitting alone at the end of a row, with a tablet on his knee, writing.

He was writing every time Jono spoke. Not when anybody else did. When Jono stood up, the young man's head went down, and his finger moved on the tablet. When Jono sat down, he stopped, and looked at the chamber, and waited.

He looked, Jono thought, like a man who had been sent.

At ten past three Jono stood up on the eighteenth group and saw him write the first sentence, and then stop, and take his phone out of his pocket, and read something on it, and smile. A very particular smile. Pleasant. Going nowhere near the eyes. Jono had seen it before. He had seen it every day since the second of March across the floor of this chamber.

A copy.

The young man put his phone away, and went on writing.

Jono did not know who he was. He did not know his name, or what firm he worked for, or what building he would go back to in the morning, or whose smile he had learned. He wrote in the forty-first book, on his knee, under the bench, without looking down: *Gallery, R. side, end of row. M., c.35, tablet. Writes when I speak.*

He did not know that his daughter, in a flat on Abbey Road in Torquay, two hundred miles away, had a pocketbook under her bedroom floor with that young man's name in it, and the name of the firm, and the building, and the smile.

* * *

At ten past three his phone moved in his pocket.

He was on his feet. He was speaking. He was in the middle of a sentence about sub-clause four of clause twenty-one, and the House was half asleep, and the Speaker had his eyes shut and was listening the way Speakers listened at three in the morning, which was very carefully, with his eyes shut.

Jono finished the sentence. He finished the paragraph. He sat down.

He took the phone out under the bench.

A text. From a number with no name, that he knew. One word.

Done.

He sat on the green bench at ten past three in the morning in the House of Commons and looked at the word for a long time.

He knew what it meant. He had not been told. He did not need to be. In a clean room on Torbay Road, behind thick glass, Rani and Vicky had spent the night with a disc of glass the size of a saucer, the colour of the bay at six in the morning, polishing it. Not with a machine. By hand. With a cloth and a paste and the flat of a thumb, for nine hours, the way you would polish a lens for a lighthouse, because Rani said no machine in the world could feel what she needed to feel.

And nobody had been watching them do it.

Every eye in Westminster was on the Member for Torbay. Every whip, every adviser, every young man with a good haircut and a tablet in the gallery. Every one of them in this room, all night, watching him talk about sub-clause four of clause twenty-one.

Make them look at you.

He put the phone back in his pocket.

Across the floor, White was looking at him. Pleasantly. Jono looked back.

Then he stood up on the nineteenth group, and talked for fifty minutes about insurance.

* * *

At twenty past five the Government moved the closure.

It was the only way out, and everybody had known since midnight that it was coming. A Member stood up on the Government side, a big tired man from the Midlands who had not been on the coach, and said, *I beg to move that the question be now put*, and the Speaker opened his eyes and looked at the clock and looked at the House, and accepted it.

They divided on the closure. They divided on the last four groups, one after another, fifteen minutes each, with the light coming grey into the high windows. Jono lost all of them.

At eight minutes to six the Speaker put the question that the bill, as amended, be read the third time on a future day, and the Ayes had it.

Twenty-three divisions. Twenty-three defeats.

Fifteen hours and twenty-two minutes.

The House got up. Six hundred people, grey-faced, in creased suits, with their ties undone, shuffling out of the chamber into the lobbies like the crowd coming out of a cinema in the morning. Somebody laughed.

Somebody was asleep on the back bench and had to be woken. The young man in the gallery had gone. Jono had not seen him go.

White stood up from the front bench, slowly, and stretched, and put his hand on the dispatch box for a moment, the way you put your hand on a thing you have just won.

Then he looked across the floor at Jono, and smiled, and said something. Jono could not hear it across the floor, in the noise. He could read it.

Well played.

* * *

He walked home over Lambeth Bridge at half past six in the morning, with the sun coming up behind him over the City and the river going gold under him and the gulls coming in off the water.

He was sixty-five years old and he had been awake for twenty-five hours and he had lost twenty-three times in a row.

Halfway across the bridge he stopped and leaned on the parapet, the way he had in March.

He thought about White's hand on the dispatch box. *Well played*. He thought White had meant it. That was the thing about White. He enjoyed it. He had sat there all night watching the Member for Torbay throw everything he had at a bill that was always going to pass, and he had enjoyed every minute, because it was a good fight, and he was going to win it.

He thought: *He thinks this is the fight*.

He took out his phone and looked at the word again.

Done.

He did not write it in the forty-first book. Not then. He would write it later, on the train, with the numbers. *R., by text, 3.10 a.m.* Nothing else. Not what was done. Not where.

He stood on Lambeth Bridge in the morning sun with the river under him, and for the first time in twenty-five hours, he smiled.

Then he went home to Kennington and slept until three in the afternoon, and dreamed of nothing at all.

Chapter 13 – *Southampton*

Sat. 18 Sept. 2038. Southampton, Western Docks, outside the fence, 1.40 a.m. Container yard four. Torches. They opened it. C.D. said: "Hook, line." Tues. 21st, the Committee's room: sinker.

They carried it up the cellar stairs at five to eleven on a Thursday night, under the street lamps, and made sure everybody saw.

That was the part Jono found hardest. Everything in him that had been a policeman for twenty-five years said: *at night, quiet, round the back, no lights.* And Vicky had looked at him across the long table in April and said, *no. The front. The street lamps. Two men and a crate and a van with its back doors open, on Union Street, at eleven o'clock on a Thursday, when the pubs are turning out. Make it look like people trying not to be seen, and failing.*

So they did.

Fred and one of his apprentices, a tall quiet lad called Dylan with forearms like hams, came up the stairs from the cellar under Studio Ania with the crate between them. Raw pine, the same as the crates the paintings had come in from Singapore seven years before. Two feet by eighteen inches by eighteen inches, with rope handles, and stencilled on the side in black: *FRAGILE. THIS WAY UP. ONG & SONS, JALAN BESAR, SINGAPORE.* It was heavy. Jono could see it in the way they carried it, Fred walking backwards up the steps with his face red and Dylan underneath, grunting. Rani had made it heavy. The thing inside weighed exactly what the stone weighed, to the gram.

They brought it out through the street door into Union Street, into the orange light, and across the pavement, and up into the back of a white

van with no name on the side, and Fred stood back and wiped his face and looked up and down the street, quickly, the way a man looks when he is trying not to look.

He was very good at it. Jono had not known Fred could act.

Across the road, in the building with the window that never had its blind up, the blind did not move.

Up the street, at the corner, by the lamp-post the council had replaced in January for no reason anybody could give, a man was standing with a dog. The dog was sniffing the lamp-post. The man was looking at his phone. He had been standing there, with the dog, since twenty to eleven.

Fred shut the back doors of the van. Jono heard the bolt go home.

* * *

Jono went in the van. That was Vicky's idea too.

"They're watching you," she had said. "That's the point of you. If you're in the van, the van matters." She had looked at him across the table. "If you're not, it's a crate."

So he sat in the cab beside Fred, with his coat on and his pocketbook in his pocket, and Dylan in the back with the crate, on a folding chair, with a flask. Clifford followed in a hire car, two hundred yards back, with his lights dipped, because Clifford said a crate like that would have an escort, and an escort followed.

They went out of Torquay at ten past eleven, up the Newton road, the A380, through the dark, with the bay going away behind them in the mirror. At the top of the hill past Kingskerswell, where the road came over the ridge and Torbay dropped out of sight, Jono felt it go.

He always did. Like going deaf in one ear. Fred, beside him, at the wheel, had a lamp over his head, and then he did not. Clear air.

Fred felt it too. Jono saw his hands move on the wheel.

"Never get used to that," said Fred.

"No."

"Like somebody switching the telly off in the next room." Fred drove on, down the hill towards Newton Abbot, into the dark. "You don't notice it's on till it goes."

* * *

The A38, then. Up past Exeter, round the end of the M5, onto the A30, and then the long dark road east through Honiton and over the hills, with the lorries going the other way with their lights on full and the van shaking in their wind.

At Honiton Clifford rang.

"There's a car," he said. "Picked you up at the Exeter services. Grey. Hatchback. Four hundred yards behind you, between you and me. Lights dipped. Doesn't overtake." A pause. "It's been there forty minutes."

Jono looked in the wing mirror. Headlights. A long way back. Steady.

"Can you see who's in it?"

"No," said Clifford. "I can see there's somebody in it." Another pause. "I can see that. I just can't..." He stopped. "Never mind. It's there. Keep going."

Jono put the phone down on his knee.

A grey hatchback. He thought about a bus stop opposite Widecombe Cot, and a man with a scar under his left eye who nobody but a woman of ninety-six could see. He thought about a car park above Daddyhole Plain, at half past one in the morning, in an hour that happened twice, and a grey hatchback under the trees with its lights off.

He did not say anything to Fred.

They drove on. Through Dorset, in the dark. Past Dorchester, past the turning for Bere Regis. The headlights stayed four hundred yards behind them all the way, never closer, never further. At Ringwood they came onto the dual carriageway, and the headlights stayed. At the edge of the New Forest, at half past two in the morning, with the trees black on both sides of the road and the ponies standing on the verge with their eyes shining green in the van's lights, they went.

Jono looked in the mirror, and the headlights were not there.

Clifford rang again.

"Turned off," he said. "Lyndhurst. No hurry about it." A pause. "Doesn't need to follow you any more. Knows where you're going."

* * *

The haulage depot was on the edge of the docks, in a grey business park full of grey sheds, behind a fence with razor wire on it. Fred drove in through the gate at ten past three in the morning and a man in a high-visibility jacket who had been paid a great deal of money not to remember them waved them to a loading bay, and two men with a forklift took the crate out of the back of the van without a word and put it on a pallet and drove it away into the dark of a shed.

That was all. It took four minutes.

"In a container by lunchtime," said Fred, in the van, watching the shed. "On the ship by tonight. Sails six tomorrow morning." He started the engine. "If they let it."

They did not go home. They went to a Premier Inn on the ring road, and slept in their clothes till noon, and at half past midnight on the Friday night they drove back to the docks in Clifford's hire car, the three of them, Jono and Clifford and Fred, and parked in a lay-by on a road that ran along the outside of the port fence, in the dark, under a broken street lamp, with a view through the wire, across a quarter of a mile of concrete and floodlights and stacked containers, to the place where the containers for the *Kota Bharu* stood waiting to be loaded.

Container yard four.

Clifford had binoculars. Very good ones. He had brought them from Washington.

"Ours is the blue one," he said. "Third from the end, bottom row. Maersk-blue, but it isn't Maersk." He handed the binoculars to Jono. "They'll come between one and two. That's when the shift changes on the cranes."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's when I'd come," said Clifford.

* * *

They came at twenty to two.

Jono saw the lights first. Two vehicles, coming slowly along the lane between the stacks from the direction of the port gate. A white van with

a blue stripe and a word on the side Jono could not read at that distance and did not need to: *BORDER FORCE*. And behind it, a grey hatchback.

They stopped by the blue container. Third from the end. Bottom row.

Four men got out of the van. Uniforms. Hi-vis. One of them had a pair of long bolt cutters. Another had a clipboard. They went to the container doors, and the man with the bolt cutters cut the seal, very neatly, and the doors swung open.

Torches. Going in.

Nobody got out of the grey hatchback.

Jono watched it through Clifford's binoculars. Parked a little way back, behind the van. Engine running; he could see the exhaust, white, in the floodlights. Lights off. And in the driver's seat, somebody.

He could see the shape. A man, sitting very still, with his hands on the wheel. He could see that the man was there. He held the binoculars on the windscreen of the grey hatchback for a long time, and he could not, by any effort, make himself see the face.

He gave the binoculars back to Clifford.

* * *

They brought the crate out at five to two.

Two of the men in hi-vis carried it out between them, by the rope handles, the way Fred and Dylan had carried it up the cellar stairs, and put it down on the concrete in the floodlights, and the man with the clipboard knelt beside it with a crowbar.

The lid came off. Straw first; Rani had put straw over the foam, because Ong would have. Then the foam. Grey. And in the foam, a dark, smooth, heavy thing about the size of a loaf, the colour of slate after rain.

The man with the crowbar sat back on his heels and looked at it.

For a long moment nobody moved.

Then the driver's door of the grey hatchback opened.

Jono had the binoculars again. He did not remember taking them from Clifford. He watched a man get out of the car. Ordinary height. A dark jacket. He walked from the car to the crate, across the concrete, in the floodlights, without hurrying, and the four men in hi-vis stepped back from the crate as he came, the way men step back from something they do not want to touch.

He crouched down by the crate.

He put out his hand and laid it flat on the dark thing in the foam. The way Keith laid his hand on the stone. The way Eric had laid his hand on a wall.

He held it there for perhaps five seconds.

Then he took his hand away, and stood up, and said something to the man with the clipboard. Jono could not hear it, a quarter of a mile away, through the wire. He saw the man with the clipboard nod.

And then the man from the grey hatchback did a thing Jono would remember for a long time. He put his foot against the side of the crate, quite gently, the way you would push a dog off a sofa, and pushed. And the crate went over on the concrete, and the dark thing rolled out of the foam and lay on the ground in the floodlights, and the man looked down at it for a moment.

Then he went back to his car, and got in, and drove away along the lane between the stacks, towards the gate, with his lights still off. They came on at the corner. Then he was gone.

* * *

In the lay-by, nobody said anything for a long time.

The men in hi-vis put the dark thing back in the foam, and the lid back on the crate, and the crate back in the container, and shut the doors, and put a new seal on them, and got into their van, and drove away. The *Kota Bharu* would sail at six with a blue container in its stack that held a crate with a piece of glass in it, which would arrive in Singapore in forty days at Ong's print works, care of Basil Tay, and sit in the paper store behind the newsprint, and never be looked at again.

"Hook," said Clifford quietly, in the dark of the car. "Line."

Fred was looking at the place where the grey hatchback had been.

"He knew," said Fred. "Didn't he. The moment he touched it. He didn't need anybody to tell him."

"Yes," said Jono.

"How?"

Jono did not answer. He was thinking about a hand laid flat on a stone, and held there, the way you hold your hand on a thing to see if it knows you.

And knowing, in five seconds, that it did not.

* * *

He was in the room without windows on the Tuesday, at ten o'clock, at the head of the table, with the forty-first book open on the first page of the day and the date written at the top.

The witness was Tarquin.

He had come to brief the committee on *developments*. The paper in front of them was two pages long, which was short, and it was marked SECRET at the top and bottom of both of them. Tarquin sat at the far end of the table, eight yards away, and did not look at Jono, and read it out in his clipped correct voice.

"On the night of Thursday the sixteenth to Friday the seventeenth," said Tarquin, "persons associated with the Rage organisation in Torbay removed a crate from the premises known as Studio Ania and transported it by road to Southampton, for export to Singapore. The service had received information from two independent sources that this would occur." He turned the page. "The crate was examined under existing powers by officers of the Border Force at Southampton docks in the early hours of Saturday the eighteenth. It was found to contain an object resembling the apparatus. On examination, the object was found to be inert. Glass."

Nobody round the table said anything. The judge from the Lords had stopped writing.

"The service's assessment," said Tarquin, "is that the attempted export was a deception. That the Rage organisation, alarmed by the progress of the bill, sought to create the impression that the apparatus had been removed from the jurisdiction, in order to undermine the case for legislation." He did not look up. "The service further assesses, with high confidence, that the apparatus cannot in fact be relocated by its holders. That its function is tied to its present site. And that the only practicable means of securing it is the legislative route now before the House."

He laid his hand flat on the paper.

"In short, Chair," said Tarquin, "they tried to fake a move because they cannot move it."

* * *

Jono sat at the head of the table with his pencil in his hand and his face very still.

He did not look at Tarquin. He did not look at Hannah Price, three seats down on his left, who had turned her head very slightly towards him and then away. He looked at the forty-first book, at the date at the top of the page, and the place, and the time.

Two independent sources.

He thought about a woman in a white linen suit in a tunnel under the Elbe. He thought about a quarter of Darjeeling, bought in June across the counter of a tea shop in Warwick Way, by a big bald American with a crooked grin who had said, in passing, as he paid, *we're worried about the bill, old buddy, Basil's got a place, don't tell anybody*.

Two sources. Two people who did not know each other and had no reason to agree.

And one of them was sitting eight yards away, at the end of the table, with his hand flat on a piece of paper, not looking at him.

"Thank you, Mr Talland," said Jono. His voice was perfectly level. "The committee notes the assessment."

He wrote the date, and the time, and the place, and the witness.

And then, under it, one word, because it was the only word he could write in that room that was true and that nobody else at the table would understand.

Sinker.

Chapter 14 – *The Window*

Sun. 19 Sept. 2038. Bailey's, the back room, 8.20 a.m. K. in the window. Man at the next table. Lime and soda. No lamp. 1 hr 4 min. Pushed his chair in.

He came in at twenty past eight on the Sunday morning, a day and a bit after the docks, and Jono, at the long table with his back to the wall and a coffee he had not drunk, knew him before he knew anything else about him.

He did not know how. He had never seen the man's face. Nobody had, except a woman of ninety-six through the glass of a front door in 2031, and she was a hundred and two now and did not come downstairs. He had seen a shape at a bus stop, and a shape on the grass of Daddyhole Plain in the last of the moon, and a shape at the wheel of a grey hatchback through Clifford's binoculars, a quarter of a mile away, under the floodlights, at twenty to two the morning before.

He had never seen him walk into a room.

He walked in the way anybody walks into a pub on a Sunday morning. Through the door from the public bar. Not hurrying. Hands in the pockets of a dark jacket. Ordinary height. Ordinary build. He went to the bar, where Tan's girl was wiping the pumps, and said something, and she poured him something from the gun into a tall glass with ice and put a slice of lime on the rim, and he paid in cash, and picked it up, and turned round.

Lime and soda.

Jono had read that in a file. In 2026. In a car park in Paignton, in the pocketbook of a carer with a lanyard, a long time before any of this. A

man nobody could describe, with a grey hatchback, who drank lime and soda.

The man looked round the back room. At the long table. At Jono, for perhaps half a second, the way you look at a chair. At the old woman in the corner with her crossword. At the window.

Then he walked across the room and sat down at the table next to the window table. The one nobody sat at either, because it was next to Keith's. Two feet from Keith's chair. Facing the same way. Out at Station Square.

He put his glass down on the table, on a beer mat, square.

* * *

Keith did not move.

He sat where he always sat, in the window, at the table with the brass plate that said RESERVED, with his cup in both hands and his thumbs over the rim, looking out at the square. At the forge, with its doors shut, because it was Sunday. At the station, cream and maroon, with the first train of the morning standing at the platform with its engine running. At the plane trees, going yellow at the edges, the first of the autumn.

He did not turn his head.

The man at the next table did not turn his either.

They sat side by side, two feet apart, in the window at Bailey's, a young man with a cup of tea and an ordinary man with a lime and soda, looking out at the same square.

Jono sat at the long table with his back to the wall and did not breathe.

* * *

He looked at the air above the man's head.

He did it without meaning to. He had been doing it for ten years. He did it to everybody who came into a room in the bay, the way you look at a person's shoes when they come in out of the rain.

Over the old woman in the corner, her lamp. Nearly white, the way it had been every morning for ten years. Over Tan's girl at the bar, a good bright amber. Over Keith, his lamp, steady, and behind it the other one, the far one, faint, the one Jono had never understood.

Over the man at the next table, nothing.

Not a dim lamp. Not a lamp going out. Nothing. Clear air.

Jono had seen that before. On the visitors off the train, in their first hours, before the bay got into them. He had stood on Station Square on a Saturday morning and watched a family come off the 10.40 from Paddington with their cases and their pushchair and nothing over their heads at all, and watched them walk across the square towards the front, and thought, *give it till teatime*.

This was not that.

He could not have said how. He did not have whatever Rani had, behind her eyes, that let her tell a page nobody had written on from a page that had been torn out. He saw lamps, close, the way anybody in the bay did. That was all.

But he looked at the air above the head of the man at the next table, and something in the back of his neck went cold, and stayed cold. Because it was not empty. It was the opposite of empty. It was like looking at a place on a wall where a picture had hung for a long time and been taken

down, and seeing the pale rectangle where it had been, and knowing that whatever had been there had been taken away very carefully, by somebody who did not want you ever to know what it was.

He had seen that once before. Every October. At the little table in the bay window at Widecombe Cot.

* * *

He tried to look at the face.

He made himself do it. He looked at the man's profile, against the light from the window, two feet from Keith. The line of the jaw. The ear. The hair, grey at the temples. The side of the nose. He looked at each one, slowly, the way he had been trained to look at faces in identity parades in 1993, one feature at a time, and fix it.

He fixed nothing. Every feature he looked at went as soon as he looked away from it, like a word written on water. He could see that there was a face. He could see that it was a man's, and that it was not young, and that it was looking out at Station Square. That was all.

Scar, left cheek, under the eye. Wendy's words. In his own capitals, in a book in a drawer in Preston. He looked for it. The man was sitting with his left side to the room.

He could not see it. He could not see anything.

He took out the forty-first book under the table and opened it on his knee and wrote the date, and the time, and the place, and *K. in the window. Man at the next table.* And then he tried to write what the man looked like. He held the pencil on the page. He looked up at the man. He looked down at the page.

Lime and soda.

That was what he had written.

He tried again. *No lamp.*

He looked at the two lines for a long time. They were true. They were the only true things he could write.

* * *

They sat for an hour.

Nothing happened. That was the thing Jono would remember. Nothing at all. The first train of the morning went out of the station, slowly, from under the green canopy, going up the line towards Torquay and Newton Abbot and London. Two men came into the square with a dog and stood talking. A gull landed on the roof of the forge and stood there with its feathers blowing.

Keith drank his tea. Slowly. One sip, and then the cup back on the saucer, square, and a quarter turn by the handle. And then his hands round it again, thumbs over the rim. The way he had done it every morning for ten years.

The man at the next table did not touch his lime and soda. It sat on its beer mat, square, with the ice melting and the slice of lime going pale on the rim.

Neither of them looked at the other. Neither of them spoke.

The old woman in the corner finished her crossword, and folded the paper, and looked at the window over her glasses for a long time. Then she put her pen in her bag, and got up, very slowly, with her stick, and went out through the public bar, and Jono heard the street door go behind her.

Tan's girl came through with a cloth and started to wipe the long table at the other end, and looked at the window, and stopped wiping, and went back through to the bar without finishing.

Two men in a window. Looking at a square.

Jono understood, after about forty minutes, what he was watching.

He was watching two men who could not touch each other.

Keith could not reach him. Jono knew that. Keith had told him, at the end of the long desk in the cellar, years ago: *only what was written can be reached. Nobody has ever written him down. Not his face. Not his name. Not where he was born or what he had for breakfast. There's nothing. If I put my hand on that stone and went looking for him for a hundred years, I'd never find a door.*

And the man could not touch Keith. Not here. Not in a public bar on a Sunday morning, in a window, in the bay, with every person who walked past in the square able to see the light over a young man's head. Not with Jono sitting at the long table with his back to the wall.

So they sat. Side by side. Two men waiting for the other one to move.

Neither of them did.

* * *

At twenty-four minutes past nine, the man stood up.

He did it without any warning. One moment he was sitting, and the next he was on his feet, beside the window table, two feet from Keith, with his hands in the pockets of his dark jacket.

He looked down at Keith. For the first time. A long look.

Keith did not look up. He sat with his cup in both hands, looking out at the square.

"It was glass," said the man.

His voice was pleasant. Level. No accent. Jono heard every word of it, from the long table, very clearly. And as each word ended, it went, like a wave going back down the shingle, and he could not have said a moment later what the voice had been like.

"Yes," said Keith.

"Good glass."

"Yes."

The man stood there a moment longer. Then he looked out of the window, at the square, at the station, at the train coming in now from the other direction, the Paignton train, slowly, under the canopy.

"It can't move," said the man. Not a question. "Can it."

Keith turned his cup a quarter turn on its saucer, by the handle.

"No," he said.

The man looked down at him for a moment longer. Then he nodded, very slightly, as if something had been settled. He took his hands out of his pockets, and put one of them on the back of the chair he had been sitting in, and pushed it in. Square. Under the table. Exactly level with the edge.

Then he turned and walked across the back room and out through the door to the public bar, and Jono heard the street door, and then nothing.

* * *

Jono went to the window.

He did not decide to. He got up from the long table and crossed the room and stood beside Keith's table and looked out at the square, and the man was not in it. Not walking away across it. Not getting into a car. Not anywhere. Two men with a dog, and a gull, and a train.

He looked down at the next table. At the glass on its beer mat. Full. The ice melted. The lime gone pale.

At the chair, pushed in square.

A woman sitting at her kitchen table in Cheltenham, with the crossword finished in ink, and across from her a chair nobody ever sat in, pushed in square, exactly level with the edge.

"He was in Carole's kitchen," said Jono.

Keith did not look up.

"He pushed the chair in. Like that. They found it like that. Mrs Okafor said." Jono heard his own voice. "He did that on purpose. Just now. So I'd see."

"Yes," said Keith.

"Why?"

Keith was quiet for a long time.

"Because he wanted you to know he knew you were watching," he said. "And he wanted me to know he'd come. And he wanted us both to know

he wasn't in any hurry." He looked out at the square. "He's been told it can't move. Twice. Now he's seen it can't. With his own hand, at the docks, and with his own eyes, here." He turned the cup. "He believes it. That's what he came to find out. Whether I'd still be here the morning after the crate."

"And you were."

"I'm always here," said Keith.

* * *

Chris lost the switchboard that afternoon.

Jono did not see it. Karen told him. She rang at six, from the kitchen at Widecombe Cot, and her voice was very steady, the way it had been steady on the floor of the cellar in 2031 holding the corners of a banner.

They had been sitting in the back room, she said, after lunch, the two of them, with the paper. And she had been telling him about a programme she had seen on the television, about the old telephone exchanges, the manual ones, with the girls on the boards with their headsets and their cords. And she had laughed and said, *that was me, that was, at Fleet House, on the fifth floor, at seventeen, in a headset that made my ears hurt, putting people through to their mothers.*

And Chris had looked at her and said:

You were on the switchboard?

"Like he'd never known," said Karen, on the phone. "Like it was news. Like I'd told him I used to play the trombone." She was quiet. "He knew. He's always known. He stood behind my stool on his first week with a can of tea and asked me what all the little lights were. That's how we..." She stopped. "No. That's not how we met. We met in the canteen.

That was after. He came up for the teas and I was in the queue." She stopped again. "He still remembers that. I asked him. The canteen. The queue. The teas. He remembers that."

"Karen."

"He doesn't remember the board, Jono. He doesn't remember me on the board. Eleventh position. The stool. My headset. He doesn't know I was ever there." Her voice did not break. It went very quiet. "He sat in the back room this afternoon and held my hand and said *I'm sorry, love, I'm sorry, I don't know*, and I said *it doesn't matter*, and it doesn't. It doesn't. He's got the canteen."

She was quiet for a long time.

"How many more?" she said.

Jono did not answer. He did not know. Keith knew. *All of it,* Keith had said, in the back of a car on Berry Head, with the lighthouse going round. *All of it*.

"I don't know," said Jono.

"Yes you do," said Karen. "You always know. You just don't say."

She rang off.

Jono sat at the kitchen table in Preston in the dusk with the phone in his hand, and the forty-first book open in front of him at the page for that morning. *K. in the window. Man at the next table. Lime and soda. No lamp.*

He picked up the pencil and wrote, at the bottom, the last thing.

1 hr 4 min. Pushed his chair in.

And then, under it, after a long time, in smaller letters than he usually used:

C.H. – the board.

Chapter 15 – *Third Reading*

Wed. 22 Sept. 2038. House of Commons, 7.10 p.m. Third reading, Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill. Ayes 316. Noes 311. Five. W.W. in the Lobby: "Kinder in the Lords." V.O., by text, 7.14: "Holding." 23 days to the third Friday.

On the morning of the third reading Jono went to the Library at seven, the way he always did, and sat at the table by the window over the river, and read the last page of the bill.

It had not changed. Schedule three, paragraph one. *The basement beneath the premises known as Studio Ania, Union Street, Torquay, Devon, together with any apparatus situated therein.* He had read it so many times now he could have recited it, and sometimes, on the train, without meaning to, he did.

He read it anyway. Then he read the rest. Forty-four pages now, after committee and report. Twenty-nine clauses. Three schedules. Two hundred and forty amendments tabled at report, by him, and twenty-three groups selected and twenty-three divided on and twenty-three lost, and not one word of the bill changed by any of them.

At such other site as the Authority may determine.

Page twenty-four now. Still halfway down. Still in a paragraph about insurance.

At eight Hannah Price came in and sat down opposite him without asking, and put her tablet face down on the table, and looked at him.

"Five," she said.

"Who told you?"

"Nobody told me. I counted." She leaned forward. "The twenty-two from the programme motion. They held in July on the closure. Half of them went home before the end; they'd made their point. But they've had the summer. They've been home. They've talked to people." She turned her tablet over and slid it across the table. "I've been round the tea room every day this week. These are the ones who'll go into the No lobby tonight. Not abstain. Vote against. On a Home Office bill. Against their own whips."

Jono looked down the list.

Thirty-one names.

"It's not enough," he said.

"No," said Hannah Price. "It's five short. I've counted it four times. If every one of them comes through, and every one of ours, and every independent, and the Liberals, and the Scots, we lose by five." She took the tablet back. "I wanted you to know before. So you don't stand up thinking there's a chance."

Jono looked at her.

She was thirty-four. She had been twenty-seven on a coach to Torbay in the rain, the youngest Member on it, and she had stood at Fred's anvil and drawn out a bar of steel so well that he offered her a job. She had sat in the back room at Bailey's at half past eight that evening and been the first one to see.

"Thank you," said Jono.

"Don't thank me," said Hannah Price. "I wanted it to be four."

* * *

He did not stand up thinking there was a chance.

He stood up at a quarter to six, for the last speech from the back benches before the Front Benches wound up, with nothing in his hand. The House was full. Fuller than it had been for the second reading, fuller than it had been at any point during the long night in July. The galleries were full. The Members' Gallery, high on the right. The side gallery, where a young man with a good haircut had sat with a tablet at half past one in the morning. The Strangers' Gallery, at the end, under the clock, where the public sat behind the glass.

He looked at the second row on the right.

Somebody was sitting in it. A tall man, thin, fair hair gone flat and dry, in a navy suit that did not fit as well as it should have. Sitting very still, with his hands in his lap, looking down at the floor of the House.

Not at Jono.

Jono looked at him for a moment longer than he should have. Then he looked away, at the Speaker, and began.

* * *

He spoke for nine minutes. Afterwards he could not remember most of it.

He remembered that he did not talk about the bill. He had talked about the bill for six months, in committee and on report and in the long night, every clause, every sub-clause, every *at such other site*. There was nothing left to say about the bill that he had not said.

He talked about Hansard.

"Every word that's said in this chamber," said Jono, "is written down. Every word. By people sitting up there in the gallery behind the Speaker's chair, who never speak, whose names nobody in this House could tell you, who've been doing it since 1909. And then it's printed. And then it's kept. For ever." He looked up at the gallery behind the Chair, where the reporters sat. "I was a policeman for twenty-five years before I came here. And the first thing they taught me, the very first morning, was to write everything down. The date, and the time, and the weather. What you saw, and what you were told, and who told you. Because one day, somebody will need to know. And you won't be there to tell them. And the book will."

The House was quiet.

"So I'd like it written down," said Jono, "in the book, for whoever needs to know, one day, that on the twenty-second of September 2038, at about six in the evening, the Member for Torbay stood up in this House and said that this bill will take a thing out of a town in Devon that the town has done nothing to deserve losing. And that the Home Secretary sat there and smiled." He did not look at White. "And that it passed."

He sat down.

He had not said *if it passes*. He had said *that it passed*. Somebody on the Government benches noticed, and laughed, and then stopped laughing.

* * *

White wound up for the Government at twenty to seven. He was gracious. He was always gracious. He thanked the Member for Torbay for his diligence, for his passion, for his remarkable stamina in the small hours of the twentieth of July, which the House would not soon forget, and the House laughed. He thanked the Honourable Member for Bristol North for her contribution on the subject of blacksmithing. He

thanked the Opposition for their scrutiny. He said that the Government had listened, and that the bill was the better for it, which was not true, because not one word of it had changed, and everybody in the chamber knew that, and nobody said so.

And at the end, he said:

"The Member for Torbay asks for it to be written down. I agree. Let it be written down." He looked across the floor. "Let it be written that this House, after six months of the most careful scrutiny any bill has received in this Parliament, decided that a thing which nobody here understands, which a great many foreign powers would like to own, should be protected by the Crown, and not by a padlock." He paused. "And let it be written that the Member for Torbay lost. Graciously. As he always does."

He sat down to a roar from his own benches.

Jono did not move.

* * *

They divided at seven.

He went through the No lobby with the rest of them. He did not count heads. Hannah Price had counted them for him. He went through slowly, with his hands in his pockets, and gave his name to the clerk at the desk, and came out of the far end into the chamber, and sat down on the cross benches below the gangway, and waited.

He looked up at the second row on the right.

Tarquin was still there. He had not moved. He was looking down at the floor of the House, at the Table, at the tellers coming back, and his face was very still.

The tellers came back to the Table. Four of them, in a row, in front of the Speaker. They bowed. The one on the left read out the numbers.

"The Ayes to the right, three hundred and sixteen. The Noes to the left, three hundred and eleven."

Five.

The roar from the Government benches went up and over him like a wave.

He sat on the green bench with his hands on his knees and let it.

Five. He thought about a night in October 2031, in this chamber, and two hundred and eighty-seven to two hundred and eighty-six, and an old man with a stick, last through the door of the Aye lobby. And about a car park on Berry Head, at dusk, with a lighthouse going round, and a young man in the back seat saying *the other way round*.

You lost by one.

He had lost by five. It was nothing. It was a second reading of the Lords, and a committee stage of the Lords, and a report stage of the Lords, and months. It was nothing at all.

And every man and woman on the benches opposite was cheering as if it was everything.

* * *

His phone moved in his pocket at fourteen minutes past seven.

He took it out under the bench. A text. A number with no name.

Holding.

He looked at it for a long time.

Vicky. In the cellar under Studio Ania, probably, or in the gallery at the campus, or at the long table in the back room at Widecombe Cot with her tablet face down. Watching the numbers come up on the Parliament channel. Watching the Government benches cheer.

Holding.

The decoy was holding. They were looking at him. They had looked at him for six months, every one of them, every whip and every adviser and every young man with a good haircut in the gallery, and they were still looking, and they would go on looking, now, at the Lords. At a bill going up to the other place, and a second reading there, and a committee there, and the Member for Torbay fighting it every inch of the way.

And in twenty-three days, on the third Friday in October, a woman would come up a path under a monkey puzzle with a carpet bag.

He put the phone away.

* * *

He met White in the Members' Lobby at twenty past seven.

He had not meant to. He came out of the chamber through the door behind the Speaker's chair with the crowd, into the lobby, under the great dim lantern, with the statues of the old Prime Ministers standing round the walls looking down, and the noise of six hundred people who had been in the same room for too long all talking at once. And White was there, by the statue of Churchill, with his red folder under his arm and a crowd round him, shaking hands, being clapped on the back.

A young man with a good haircut was clapping him on the back. Jono saw him. The young man from the side gallery. Very close to White, the way a man stands who has stood close to another man for a long time. Saying something into White's ear, and White laughing.

Then White saw Jono.

He said something to the people round him, and they parted, and he came across the lobby. He did not hurry. He held out his hand.

Jono looked at it. Then he shook it. You did. In this building, you did.

"Mr Hills," said White. "Well fought."

"Home Secretary."

"Five." White smiled. "Closer than I thought. I had it at twelve." He did not let go of Jono's hand. "You'll take it to the Lords, of course."

"Of course."

"They'll be kinder to you there," said White. "They're kinder to everybody. Old men with long memories and nothing to lose." He let go. "But it'll pass. You know that. Not this year, perhaps. In the spring." He looked at Jono, pleasantly. "And then I'll come to Torbay, as you asked. I'll take the train. You can meet me at the station."

"I'll be there."

"I know you will," said White. "That's what I like about you, Mr Hills. You're always exactly where I expect you to be."

He went back across the lobby to his crowd, and the young man with the good haircut, and Churchill.

* * *

Jono stood under the lantern for a long time.

He thought about a man at the next table in the window at Bailey's on Sunday morning, two feet from Keith, with a lime and soda he never touched, saying *it can't move, can it*.

He thought about a disc of glass the size of a saucer, the colour of the bay at six in the morning, in a steel case lined with grey foam, in a cupboard in a clean room on Torbay Road, behind three locked doors and Dennis.

You're always exactly where I expect you to be.

He thought: *Yes. That's the point.*

Somebody touched his sleeve. He turned.

An usher in a black tailcoat with a gold badge, very old, very upright, holding out an envelope. Small, cream, the kind they used in the other place.

"From the Lords, Mr Hills," said the usher. "A noble Lord asked me to bring it across. He said you'd know who."

Jono took it. He opened it under the lantern.

A single sheet of House of Lords notepaper. Four words, in an old man's hand, very shaky, in blue ink.

Send it up to us.

And under it, one letter.

B.

Jono looked at it for a long time.

He knew who. He had sat beside him on a coach in the rain, in October 2031, the only seat left. An old man in a tweed coat with a stick between his knees, from the Black Country, who had been in the House since 1997 and never said anything in the chamber but *aye* and *no*, and who had stood in front of a mirror in the back room at Bailey's and looked at the air over his own white head, and wept. Who had come through the door of the Aye lobby last, very slowly, before the doors were locked.

They had sent him up to the Lords in 2034. Jono had read it in the paper. Ninety-one now. Ninety-two.

He put the note in the forty-first book, between the pages, and closed it, and put it in his inside pocket.

Then he went out through Carriage Gates into the dark, and looked, out of habit, at the air above the policeman's head, and there was nothing there.

Twenty-three days.

Chapter 16 – *4.10*

Fri. 15 Oct. 2038. Widecombe Cot, the hall, 4.10 p.m. A. at the gate with the carpet bag. C.H. at the desk. First time. Register already written; not his hand. W.H. upstairs, door open: "Good afternoon, Miss Ania."

Chris sat down at the desk at three o'clock, because that was when you sat down.

Nobody had told him. Nobody had needed to. He had been watching his mother do it since before he could talk. The third Friday in October, three o'clock, the desk in the hall, the register open, the pen laid square beside it, and you sat, and you waited, and you did not get up again until the gate went.

She had done it for eighty-seven years. Since October 1950, when she was fifteen and her mother, Nance, had said *you're old enough now, you can sit at the desk*. Every year. Through her marriage, and Chris being born in the room at the top of the house, and his father dying, and the hotel half empty in the seventies and full again in the nineties, and Chris going away to Singapore for twenty-five years and coming home with a carton under his arm. Every third Friday in October, at three, at the desk.

Last year she had come down for the last time.

Karen had brought her, on her arm, a step at a time, with the stick, at a quarter to three, and sat her in the chair, and put the register in front of her. She had sat there an hour and twenty minutes with her hands in her lap, a hundred and two years old, as straight as she could make herself. And when the gate went at ten past four, she had looked up, and said the words, and her voice had been very small and very clear. And

afterwards Karen had taken her back up the stairs, and she had not come down again.

This year she had not asked to.

In the morning, when Karen took her breakfast up, she had said, *Chris will sit*, and that was all. And Karen had come down the stairs and found Chris in the kitchen and told him, and Chris had stood at the kitchen table for a long time with a cup of tea in his good hand, and then gone and put on a clean shirt.

* * *

The hall was very quiet. The long-case clock at the foot of the stairs. The barometer on the wall over the bench, set fair. The light coming in through the glass panel in the front door, low and gold, the October light, across the floor and up the side of the desk.

He opened the register.

It was the same register. It had been the same register since 1971, when the old one was full. Brown leather, gone soft and dark at the corners where seventy years of hands had held it. Every guest who had stayed at Widecombe Cot in sixty-seven years. Names and dates and room numbers and addresses, in a hundred different hands, in ink and biro and pencil.

He turned to the page.

He knew what he would find. He had seen it in 2031, over his mother's shoulder, the morning of the Friday, at eight o'clock. He had seen it every year since. He had never once seen it written.

Friday, 15th October. Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.

Already there. At the bottom of the column. In black ink, dry, as if it had been dry for a long time.

Not his mother's hand. His mother's hand was small and round and leaned to the right, and had got shakier every year, and in the last ten years had gone very large and very slow, the way old people's writing does. This was nothing like it.

This was very upright. Very regular. Every letter the same height. Like print. Like a hand that had been taught to write a long time ago, in another country, and had never let it slip.

Chris sat at the desk and looked at it for a long time.

He had never thought about it. Not once, in seventy years. It was simply there, every October, the way the monkey puzzle was there. You did not ask who had planted the monkey puzzle.

He thought about it now. He thought about a cellar, in 2031, and a phone on speaker, and Ai Li's voice, from Singapore, reading out a line from a list that had been sent up into the sky before it happened. *It's not her hand. It's the same hand as the last line. Very upright. Every letter the same height.*

And Keith, at the end of the desk, with his hand on the stone, saying *yes. I know whose it is.*

He put his good hand flat on the page, over the line, the way Keith put his hand on the stone. The paper was cool. The ink was dry.

He took his hand away.

He picked up the pen, and laid it square beside the register, the way his mother had, and sat.

* * *

Jono was on the bench under the barometer, where guests sat to take their boots off. He had come up from Preston at half past two, without being asked, the way he had come up every third Friday in October since 2028. He had his coat on, and his pocketbook on his knee, and he did not say anything. He knew better.

Karen was in the kitchen. Chris could hear her: the kettle filling, the big brown pot coming down off the shelf, the cups. The good cups. The ones with the gold rim, that his grandmother had bought in Torquay in 1946.

Upstairs, at the back of the house, a door was open. He could not hear anything from it. He knew she was listening.

At twenty to four a car went past on the road, slowly, and did not stop.

At five to four the bus went past the stop opposite, the 3.57, and nobody got off, and nobody had been waiting.

Chris sat at the desk with his hands in his lap and looked through the glass panel in the front door, down the path, under the monkey puzzle, to the gate. He thought about his mother sitting here, in this chair, in October 1950, at fifteen, with her grandmother standing behind her. Looking through this glass at this gate, for the first time. Not knowing what she was waiting for.

She would have been frightened, he thought. She had never once said so.

* * *

At ten past four the gate went.

He heard it before he saw it. The latch, and then the hinge, the long creak that nobody had oiled since 2018 because his mother would not let them. *It's how you know.*

He looked up through the glass.

She came up the path under the monkey puzzle with her carpet bag, the way she always had. A young woman in a grey costume, very straight, with her dark hair up, and 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 her breath showed. Faintly. White on the cold air, in front of her, as she came.

He watched her come 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. She looked at the desk. At the register, open. At the pen, square. At Chris, in his mother's chair.

She looked at him for a long time.

He had known that face since before he could talk. Neither pretty nor plain. A young woman of about twenty-five. Dark hair. Clear steady eyes.

Not one line on it.

And in the dark hair, put up, above the left temple, and in front of the right ear, and in a thin line along the parting where the hair was drawn back, grey. Not one hair now. Not one fine silver thread catching the light from the door, the way his mother had seen it in 2031. Seven years of them. A dozen. More. Very fine, scattered, like the first frost on a

lawn. You would not have noticed them on anybody else. On her, they were the only thing you could see.

Chris opened his mouth. For a moment nothing came out. He was seventy-six years old and he had a stroke behind him and a stick he would not use in front of anybody, and he sat in his mother's chair at his mother's desk with the words she had said for eighty-seven years in his mouth, and could not say them.

Then he did.

"Good afternoon, Miss Ania," said Chris. "Room 3. It's ready for you."

* * *

Ania looked at him.

She did not say anything at once. She stood at the desk in her grey costume with her hands at her sides and her breath going up, faintly, in the cold of the hall, and looked at him. At his face. At his white hair. At his bad hand in his lap, and his good one on the edge of the desk beside the register.

Then she said:

"Good afternoon, Chris."

Not *Wendy*. She had said *Wendy* across that desk every October for eighty-seven years.

Chris.

He found he could not see properly. He looked down at the register. At the line in the upright hand. *Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.* He looked at it until it was clear again.

Ania picked up her carpet bag.

On the bench under the barometer, Jono had stood up. Ania looked at him. She did not say anything to him. She nodded, once, very slightly, the way you nod to somebody you will talk to later.

Then she went to the foot of the stairs, past the long-case clock, and put her hand on the rail, and went up.

* * *

She stopped on the landing.

Chris could see her from the desk, if he leaned. He leaned. She had stopped at the top of the first flight, where the landing turned, by the window with the stained glass in it, and she was standing very still, with her carpet bag in her hand, looking along the landing towards the back of the house.

Towards an open door.

She stood there for a long time. Long enough that Chris heard Karen stop in the kitchen, with the pot in her hands. Long enough that Jono, by the bench, sat down again, very slowly, without making a sound.

Then Ania said, not loudly, every word the same length, towards the open door at the back of the house:

"Good afternoon, Wendy."

And from inside the room, very faint, very small, very clear, the voice of a woman of a hundred and three, who had sat at the desk in the hall on the third Friday in October since she was fifteen, and had not come down the stairs this year, and had known exactly what time it was:

"Good afternoon, Miss Ania."

Nobody in the house moved.

Then Ania went along the landing, and up the second flight, to Room 3, and Chris heard the door open, and close.

* * *

He took her tea up himself.

Karen tried to stop him. *Let me, love. The stairs.* He did not answer her. He took the tray in his good hand, the big brown pot and the gold-rimmed cup and the milk in the little jug, and went up the stairs with it one at a time, with the tray tilting and the cup rattling on the saucer, and Karen behind him on every step with her hand an inch from his elbow, not touching.

At the top of the first flight he stopped, and got his breath.

He looked along the landing at the open door at the back of the house. He could see the end of a bed. A window. The monkey puzzle, dark against the evening, outside it.

He did not go in. He went on up.

Room 3 was at the front, on the second floor, looking out over the town to the bay. He knocked. He had never knocked on this door in his life. In seventy years he had never once taken the tray up; it had always been his mother, and before her his grandmother Nance.

"Come in," said Ania.

She was sitting at the little table by the window, with her back to the room and her face to the bay. The way she always sat, downstairs, at the

little table in the bay window in the dining room. The light was going over the water. The lights of Paignton were coming on along the front. Berry Head was a long dark shape at the far end, going out into the sea like the bow of a ship, and the lighthouse on the end of it had just come on.

Round, and light, and dark.

He put the tray down on the table beside her. He poured, from the big brown pot, the way his mother had, the way she had every October since 1950. Into the gold-rimmed cup. A little milk.

He stood back.

Ania picked up the cup in both hands, with her thumbs hooked over the rim.

And drank.

Not a mouthful. Not a taste, the way she had tasted it in the dining room in 2031, with his mother in the doorway and her hand on the frame. She drank it the way you drink a cup of tea at the end of a long day, when you have come a long way and are glad to be sitting down. Slowly. All of it.

She put the cup down on the saucer. Empty. Square.

She looked out at the bay. At the lighthouse on Berry Head, going round.

"Thank you, Chris," she said.

He did not say anything. He could not.

"On Monday," said Ania, still looking at the lighthouse, "I will go on the train. With my bag. As I always do." She was quiet. "It will be heavier."

"I know," said Chris.

"You do not know what will be in it."

"No."

"Neither do I," said Ania. She turned her head, and looked up at him, standing by the table with the empty tray. And for the first time in seventy-six years Chris saw something in her face that he did not have a word for. Not fear. He had never seen her afraid. Something like it. Something that had been standing on the edge of a thing for a very long time and was about to step off. "After Monday," said Ania, "I do not know what happens. Nobody does." She looked back at the bay. "That is new."

The lighthouse went round.

Chris picked up the tray. He went to the door. He stopped there, with his hand on the frame, the way his mother had stopped in the dining-room door every October for eighty-seven years to watch the steam go up from a cup that nobody drank.

"Miss Ania," he said.

She did not turn round.

"Whose hand is it?" said Chris. "In the register. The line. It's always there before you come."

Ania was quiet for a long time. She sat with her hands in her lap and her face to the bay, and the grey in her hair catching the last of the light from the window.

"Mine," she said.

He waited. She did not say anything else.

He went down the stairs, slowly, with the tray, and Karen on every step behind him with her hand an inch from his elbow.

* * *

In the hall, Jono was still on the bench.

He looked up when Chris came down. He did not ask anything. He had his pocketbook open on his knee. Chris saw what was written on it: the date, and the time, and the place, and a few lines under them, and then nothing.

Chris put the tray down on the desk, beside the register. He looked at the line at the bottom of the column. *Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.*

Very upright. Every letter the same height.

He thought about a list sent up into the sky, with four thousand one hundred and eight lines in it. And a line in Cheltenham, at thirteen minutes to eleven, in a hand that was not Carole's. And a last line, damaged, with only a year and a place left in it.

Mine.

He closed the register, very gently, the way you close a door on a room with somebody asleep in it.

"Jono," he said. "Don't write that down."

Jono looked at him for a long moment.

Then he closed the pocketbook, and put the elastic round it.

Chapter 17 – *After Monday*

> *Sun. 17 Oct. 2038. Studio Ania, the cellar, 7.15 p.m. R. brought the case. K. gave it to A. She held it like a cup. The bag nearly empty. Did not write what they said to each other. Wrote what I saw.*

She came down the cellar stairs at a quarter past seven on the Sunday evening, and Jono, on the third step from the bottom, stood up to let her past, and she did not go past.

She stopped on the step above him.

He had never been this close to her on a stair. He had been closer, at a little round table in a bay window, with a white cloth between them and an empty cup. He had stood beside her at a stone wall above Daddyhole Plain with her hand shaking on the stone next to his. But he had never stood on a stair below her and looked up, the way you look up at somebody coming down to you.

Her breath showed. Even here, in the cellar, out of the wind, in the warm. Faint. White.

"Good evening, Jono," said Ania.

"Good evening."

She looked at him for a moment longer. Then she looked past him, down the last three steps, into the cellar. At the long desk. At the stone under its glass cover. At the young man at the end of the desk with his hand flat on the glass.

Keith had not looked up.

Ania came down the last three steps, past Jono, and stood on the cellar floor, in her grey costume, with her hands at her sides. She did not have her carpet bag. Jono had never seen her without it, in the open, away from Room 3. She looked, without it, like somebody who has put down a thing they have carried for so long they have forgotten their hands were ever empty.

Keith took his hand off the stone.

He turned in his chair. And for the first time Jono had ever seen, in a room, close, with nothing between them, they looked at each other.

* * *

Jono had seen them look at each other twice.

Once on the down platform at Torquay station, in 2031, with the 10.15 to Paddington standing at the platform with its engines running, and the length of the platform between them. She in the middle of it, very straight, with her breath going up. He at the far end, by the footbridge, with his hands in his pockets and his two lamps burning in the grey morning. They had looked at each other for a long time, and neither of them had moved.

Once through the window of a train. Her palm flat on the glass. His hand held open at his side.

He had not understood either time what he was watching. He did not understand now. But he was a Hills, and he wrote down what he saw, and what he saw was this.

A young woman of about twenty-five, with grey in her hair like the first frost on a lawn, standing on a cellar floor.

A young man of about thirty, with old eyes, sitting at the end of a desk.

Neither of them said anything for a long time.

The hum of the cooling in the corner. The light from the pavement lights overhead, dim, the last of the evening coming down through the thick glass from Union Street. Rani, at the far end of the long desk, with a steel case in front of her, very still.

Then Keith said, very quietly:

"You came down."

"Yes," said Ania.

"You've never come down."

"No," said Ania. "I have never needed to."

* * *

Rani brought the case.

She did not wait to be asked. She picked it up from the desk in both hands and carried it along the length of the cellar and put it down on the end of the desk in front of Keith, beside the stone, and stepped back. Then she stepped back again, further, to the shelves, to the archive and the six crates and the gap where the seventh had been. And stood there with her back against the boxes and her hands in her pockets, the way she had stood in this cellar in 2031 in front of a row of paintings.

Keith opened the case.

The lens lay in its grey foam. A disc of glass the size of a saucer, as thick as a man's thumb. Polished now. The rough edges from the wire gone. And in the dim light of the cellar it was doing what Jono had watched it do in July, on this desk, for the first time: being clear, and then grey,

and then green, faintly, and then something warm at the centre, almost amber, and none of them for longer than a breath.

Ania looked at it.

She did not come any closer. She stood on the cellar floor where she had stopped, two yards from the desk, with her hands at her sides, and looked into the case.

Jono watched her face. He could not help it. It was the face he had looked at across a white cloth in a bay window in 2031, when he had said *you knew*, and she had looked down. He had thought then that he had seen everything that face could do.

He had not.

Her eyes went wide. Very slightly. The way a person's eyes go when they see a thing they have heard described for a long time, and it is not like the description. It is more.

"The bay," she said.

"Yes," said Keith.

"From Berry Head."

"At six in the morning," said Keith. "Before anybody's up." He was looking at her, not at the lens. "I told Rani you'd like it."

Ania did not answer.

She came forward. Two steps, to the end of the desk. She stood beside Keith's chair, and looked down into the case, at the glass in its foam. And then she put out her hands. Both of them. And lifted it out.

* * *

She held it the way she held a cup.

In both hands. With her thumbs hooked over the rim. Close in front of her, at the height of her chest. The way she had held a cup of tea at a little round table in a bay window every October for a hundred and forty years and never drunk from it, until 2031.

The lens lay in her hands and was the colour of the bay.

Keith looked up at her from his chair.

Jono, on the step, could see both their faces. He could see Keith's lamp, and behind it the far one, the faint one. He could see over Ania's head the place where a lamp should be, and nothing, the gap, the socket with the plate unscrewed.

And he could see, though he did not know how, and would never be able to write it, that something was passing between them. Not a word. Not a look. Something in the air between the young woman holding the glass and the young man in the chair, the way the air goes thick before a storm. Rani, by the shelves, had gone very white. She could see it, Jono thought. Whatever it was. She could see it the way she saw cords, and he could not, and she was standing with her back pressed into the archive boxes as if she needed something solid behind her.

She answers to him.

He had read that once. In the paint. On a canvas that was gone now, in the boot of a grey hatchback.

"How many?" said Ania. Very quietly. To Keith.

"Five," said Keith.

"Still."

"Still five."

Ania looked down at the lens in her hands.

"Keep them," she said.

Keith did not answer. Jono saw his hand, on the edge of the desk, close slowly into a fist.

"Chris is paying," said Keith at last. Low. "This year. Not me. Room by room. Fleet House. He's lost the board. He'll lose the canteen. He'll lose the building." He did not look away from her face. "You know."

"I know," said Ania.

"You knew it would come off him."

"I knew it would come off one of you," said Ania. "I did not know which. Not this time." She turned the lens, very slightly, in her hands. It went from grey to green. "The first time, it did not come to this. The first time, there was no glass." She looked at Keith. "I do not know this year, Keith. I have never not known."

Keith looked up at her.

"Neither do I," he said.

* * *

She put it in the bag at half past seven.

She did not have the bag with her. Jono did not understand that until she turned round and looked at him, on the step, and said, "Jono. It is in the hall at Widecombe Cot. By the desk. Would you fetch it?"

He went. He did not ask why. He went up the cellar stairs and out of the street door into Union Street and up the hill in the dark, past the old exchange on the corner with its FOR SALE board, and in through the gate at Widecombe Cot with the hinge going, and Chris at the desk in the hall looked up and saw his face and did not say anything, and nodded at the bench.

The carpet bag was on the bench under the barometer. Where guests sat to take their boots off.

Jono picked it up.

It was light. Very light. He remembered carrying it to the station in 2031, on the last Monday, and how it had been heavier than Chris had said: the ordinary weight of the things a person takes away with them for a year. It was lighter now than that. It was almost nothing.

He carried it back down the hill in the dark, holding it in front of him in both arms like something that might break.

* * *

She opened it on the end of the long desk.

Jono had never seen inside it. Nobody had. Not his grandfather, not Wendy, not Chris in seventy-six years of watching it go up the stairs to Room 3. It was a thing you did not look in, the way you did not look in a stranger's handbag.

She opened it in front of all of them, and Jono looked, because she had let him carry it, and he thought she meant him to.

A cardigan. Grey, wool, folded very small. A hairbrush, plain, wooden, old, with a few hairs in it: dark, and among them two or three that were fine and grey. A small cloth bag with a drawstring, closed. And nothing else.

That was all. A hundred and forty-three years of a carpet bag, up a path under a monkey puzzle every October, and in it, a cardigan and a hairbrush and a little cloth bag.

Ania took the cardigan out and unfolded it, and laid it flat on the desk, and put the lens in the middle of it, and folded the cardigan round the lens, corner by corner, the way Eric had once folded an army blanket round a painting, the way you fold a flag. Then she put it in the bottom of the carpet bag, and put the hairbrush on top of it, and the little cloth bag on top of that, and closed the bag.

She picked it up by its handles. Testing it.

It went down on her arm. Not much. The weight of a saucer of glass and a cardigan.

"It is heavier," said Ania.

She said it the way you say a thing you have been waiting a long time to be able to say.

* * *

She went up the stairs at a quarter to eight, with the bag.

On the third step from the bottom, where Jono had been sitting, she stopped, and turned round, and looked back down into the cellar. At the long desk. At the stone under its glass. At the young man at the end of the desk, who had turned his chair and was looking up at her.

"Monday," she said.

"Monday," said Keith.

"The up train," said Ania. "A quarter past ten. As always." She was quiet for a moment. "Then the down. From Newton Abbot. Then Par." She said the names as if she were reading them off a timetable she had never seen before. "Then the branch, to Newquay."

"I know," said Keith.

"I have never been to Newquay."

"No."

Ania looked at him for a long time from the third step.

"After Monday," she said, "I do not know what happens."

"No," said Keith. "Nor me."

"That is new," said Ania.

And then she did a thing Jono had seen her do only once before, on a road going down a hill to Torquay station in 2028, when Chris had told her he was choosing again. Something happened at the corner of her mouth. Small. From a long way off.

She smiled.

At Keith. Down the length of a cellar. With a carpet bag in her hand that was heavier than it had ever been, and grey in her hair like frost.

Then she went up the stairs and out of the street door into Union Street, and the door closed behind her, and the cellar was very quiet.

* * *

Rani came away from the shelves.

She came along the cellar slowly and stood at the end of the desk by the empty steel case, with its grey foam, and the hollow in the foam the shape of a saucer. She looked down at it for a long time.

"I saw it," she said. Not to anybody. "The cord. When she held it." She put her hand flat on the empty foam. "Between them. I've seen it in the paint, in seven, a hundred times. A thin line, amber, from her to him." She looked up at Keith. "It's not thin. Not in the room. Not when she's close." She swallowed. "I've never seen anything like it. It's like standing next to a pylon."

Keith did not answer. He had turned his chair back to the desk, and put his hand flat on the glass over the stone again, and shut his eyes.

Jono sat down on the third step from the bottom.

He took out the forty-first book. He wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *R. brought the case. K. gave it to A.*

He thought about what they had said. *Five. Keep them. I have never not known. Neither do I. After Monday.*

He did not write any of it.

He wrote what he saw. *She held it like a cup.*

He thought about a cardigan and a hairbrush and a little cloth bag with a drawstring, in a carpet bag nobody had ever looked in.

The bag nearly empty.

And then he thought about the corner of her mouth, on the third step, looking down the length of the cellar at a young man in a chair. And he sat on the stairs with the pencil on the page for a long time, and did not write that either.

Some things, he was learning, you did not write down because they could be reached.

And some things you did not write down because they were nobody's but theirs.

Chapter 18 – *Newton Abbot*

Mon. 25 Oct. 2038. Newton Abbot, up platform 1, 10.31 a.m. A. off the train with the bag. Across the footbridge. Down platform 3. Did not stay on. First time in 143 years. Stayed on myself, as told.

Jono going back to London on a Monday was the most ordinary thing in Torbay.

He had done it every Monday the House was sitting for nine years. Everybody knew. The woman in the ticket office at Torquay knew. The guard on the 10.15 knew, the one with the grey moustache, who said *morning, Mr Hills* and did not look at his ticket. The man who stood on the corner of Union Street with a dog by a lamp-post that had been replaced in January for no reason anybody could give, and who had stood on that corner on a great many mornings since: he knew. He would have it written down somewhere, on a phone, in a file. *Monday. Hills. Up train. As usual.*

So Jono carried the bag.

* * *

They walked down the hill from Widecombe Cot at a quarter to ten, the three of them, the way they had in 2031 and 2028 and, with other people, every year before that. Ania in the middle, very straight, in her grey costume, no coat. Chris on her left, with his stick, using it, because the hill was steep and wet and he was seventy-six and had stopped caring this year who saw. Jono on her right, with the bag.

It was heavier.

He had known it would be. He had felt it go down on her arm in the cellar on Sunday night, the weight of a saucer of glass and a cardigan. But it was different carrying it. It pulled on the handles. Not much. The way a bag pulls when there is something in it that matters.

At the gate, Wendy had not come down. Nobody had expected her to. But as they went out under the monkey puzzle, with the hinge going, Chris had stopped, and turned, and looked up at the house. At the window at the back on the first floor, where the curtains were open.

There was nobody at it. He looked anyway.

Then they went down the hill.

It was a grey morning. Low cloud on the bay, flat and soft, the way it had been in 2031. Leaves down on the pavement, wet, stuck to the stones. A man sweeping them up outside the doctor's at the corner, with a wide broom and a barrow, and he looked up as they went past, the way a man had looked up in 2031, at the woman in grey with no coat in October, and stopped sweeping.

Ania's breath showed.

Nobody said anything until the bus stop where the hill turns. Then Chris said, without looking at her:

"You'll be cold. In Cornwall."

"Yes," said Ania.

"You've never been cold."

"No," said Ania. "I have the cardigan." She was quiet. "It is wrapped round something. I will take it off when I get there."

Chris did not say anything else.

* * *

Torquay station. The old building, cream and maroon. The canopy over the down platform on its iron columns. The footbridge. The 10.15 to Paddington at the platform with its engines running. Six carriages.

And at the far end of the platform, by the footbridge, where the steps came down, a young man in a white shirt and a dark jacket, with his hands in his pockets.

Keith had not said he was coming. He never did. He stood where he had stood in 2031, where he had stood in 2028. Looking down the length of the platform at the three of them coming through the barrier.

Ania stopped.

Jono stood beside her with the bag and watched her look at him. A second. Two. In the middle of the platform at Torquay, with her breath going up and the grey in her hair catching the flat light from under the canopy.

Then she did not turn away.

She had always turned away. Jono had seen it in 2031, and Chris had seen it in 2028. She looked, and Keith looked, and then she turned away and went to the train, and neither of them moved.

This year she walked down the platform.

Past the ticket office. Past the bench. Past the third carriage, where Jono had put her bag on the rack in 2031, and the fourth, and the fifth. To the end. To the foot of the footbridge steps.

To Keith.

She stopped a yard from him.

Jono did not follow. Chris did not. They stood by the third carriage, with the engines running, and watched a young woman with grey in her hair and a young man with old eyes stand a yard apart at the end of a platform, and look at each other, and not touch.

Jono could not hear what they said. If they said anything. The engines were too loud. He saw Ania's lips move, once, very little. He saw Keith's not move at all. And then he saw Keith take his right hand out of his pocket, and hold it out, open, palm up, the way you hold out your hand to show somebody there is nothing in it.

Ania looked at it.

She did not take it. She looked at it for a long time. Then she put her own hand out, the right, and laid it flat above his. Not touching. An inch above. The way Chris, in a hospital room in 2031, had held his hand an inch above a painting and moved it slowly across the paint without touching.

They stood like that for perhaps three seconds.

Then Ania took her hand back, and turned, and walked back up the platform to the train.

* * *

Jono put the bag up into the carriage. The third. A window seat facing the way the train would go.

He did not put it on the rack. She took it from him, at the door, and carried it to her seat herself, and sat down with it on her knee. Both arms round it.

Chris stood on the platform by the open door, with his stick.

"October," said Chris.

"Yes," said Ania. "I always do."

"I'll have the tea ready."

"Yes."

She looked at him through the open door. At his white hair. At his bad hand on the head of his stick, with his good one over it.

"Chris," she said.

He waited.

"The canteen," said Ania. "At Fleet House. The queue. For the teas." Every word the same length. "You were sixteen. She was seventeen. She was in front of you. She turned round." She paused. "Write it down. Today. Before tonight."

Chris looked at her.

"Why tonight?"

Ania did not answer that. She looked at him for a moment longer. Then she looked at Jono.

"You may come," she said, "as far as Newton Abbot." She looked down at the bag on her knee. "You will stay on the train."

* * *

The guard blew his whistle.

Jono flinched. He always would now. He stood in the doorway of the third carriage with one foot on the step and waited, in the half second after, for the dogs. And somewhere up the hill behind the station, a dog barked, and went on barking.

He got on. The doors closed.

He did not sit next to her. He sat across the aisle, on the other side, facing her, the way you sit with somebody you are escorting and do not want to crowd.

The train went.

Slowly, the way they do at Torquay, out from under the canopy. Chris walked beside the window for a few yards, with his stick, the way his mother had walked for seventy-eight years. Ania looked at him through the glass.

She did not wave. She never had.

Past the ticket office. Past the bench. Towards the footbridge, where the young man stood at the foot of the steps with his hands back in his pockets.

As the third carriage came level with him, Ania did not put her hand on the glass.

She looked at him. That was all. She looked at him through the window from a yard away as the train went past at walking pace, and he looked back, and then the train was past the footbridge and past the end of the platform and he was behind them.

Jono looked back. He could not help it. He twisted round in his seat and looked out of the window behind him, down the line, at the end of the platform, getting smaller.

Keith had not moved. He was standing exactly where she had left him, at the foot of the steps, with his hands in his pockets.

He was watching the train go. He watched it all the way to the bend.

* * *

It was sixteen minutes to Newton Abbot. Torre, and the cutting, and the line going up the valley past Kingskerswell, with the river on one side and the road on the other. Jono had done it a thousand times. He knew every bridge.

At the top of the hill past Kingskerswell, where the land rose and the bay dropped out of sight behind them, he felt it go.

Like going deaf in one ear. The woman two seats in front of him had a lamp, and then she did not. The boy with his headphones. The guard coming through with his machine. Clear air.

He looked across the aisle at Ania.

She had felt him feel it. He knew she had. She was looking at him, with the bag on her knee and her arms round it.

"Now you are like me," she said.

He did not know what to say to that. He thought about the air over her head, every October for as long as he could remember. The gap. The socket with the plate unscrewed. He had never once thought of what it was like to be on the other side of it. To walk into a room in the bay, where every person had a light over their head, and to have none.

"Is it like this?" he said. "For you? All the time?"

Ania looked out of the window. At the fields going by, wet and green under the cloud. At a heron standing in the river, very still.

"No," she said. "For you it is a thing that has gone." She was quiet. "For me it was never there."

* * *

Newton Abbot.

The train came in under the long canopy and slowed, and stopped, at platform one. The up platform. The doors opened. People got off, a few. People got on.

Ania stood up with the bag.

Jono stood up too. He did not decide to. He stood in the aisle, beside her, and did not move towards the door.

She looked at him.

"Stay on the train," she said.

"I know."

She went to the door. She stepped down onto the platform with the carpet bag in her hand. Very straight, in her grey costume, with no coat. She did not look back. She walked along the platform to the foot of the footbridge, and went up the steps, one at a time, not hurrying, with the bag.

Jono went to the window.

He watched her cross the footbridge. Through the glass of the footbridge, through the rain on it, a small grey figure going across, very straight, with a bag in her hand. He watched her come down the steps on the other side. Onto platform three. The down platform. Where the trains went west, to Plymouth, and Cornwall, and Penzance.

She stood on it.

She stood very still in the middle of the down platform at Newton Abbot with her carpet bag in her hand and her breath going up white, and looked along the line. West. Towards Totnes, and the moor, and the Tamar, and everything beyond it she had never seen.

For a hundred and forty-three years she had got on the up train at Torquay on the last Monday in October, and stayed on it. Through Newton Abbot. Through Exeter. To London. To wherever she went.

This year she had got off.

Jono stood at the window of the third carriage of the 10.15 to Paddington with his hand flat on the glass and watched her stand there.

The doors closed. The guard's whistle went. He did not flinch. He did not hear it.

The train began to move.

She did not look round. She stood on the down platform, small and grey and straight, looking west, and the up train went out of Newton Abbot towards Exeter and London, slowly, and then less slowly, and Jono pressed his face to the glass and watched her get smaller.

At the very end of the platform, as the train went under the road bridge, he saw a train come in on the other side. From the east. Going west. A long one, with the green livery, slowing.

The bridge took her.

* * *

He got off at Exeter St Davids at ten to eleven.

He had his bag. He had his ticket to Paddington. He had a committee at four.

He stood on the platform at Exeter in the drizzle and took out the forty-first book and wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Newton Abbot, up platform 1, 10.31 a.m. A. off the train with the bag. Across the footbridge. Down platform 3.*

And then:

Did not stay on.

He looked at it for a long time.

First time in 143 years.

He thought about what she had said. *You will stay on the train.* He had stayed on. As far as she had told him to stay.

Stayed on myself, as told.

He closed the book.

At the end of the platform, in the car park beyond the barrier, a big bald man in a coat too thin for October was leaning on the bonnet of a hire car with his arms folded, and the engine running, watching the station doors.

Jono went out through the barrier. He did not go back to London. He did not go to his committee at four.

"She get off?" said Clifford.

"She got off."

Clifford looked at him for a long moment. Then he grinned, wide and crooked and very tired, and opened the passenger door.

"Then let's beat her there," he said. "A30. Two hours. She's got a change at Par and a branch line." He got in. "I've never once in my life been early for that woman. I'd like to be. Just this once."

Chapter 19 – *Par*

Mon. 25 Oct. 2038. Spaceport Cornwall, Hangar 3, 6.12 p.m. A. walked in from the road. Bag on the bench: "It is heavier than it was." Put on the cardigan. K.T., by phone, 9.40 p.m.: the canteen.

They were early. Clifford had wanted to be early, and they were, by four hours.

The A30 went west out of Exeter in the drizzle, over the top of Dartmoor with the tors grey and flat in the cloud on the right and the road very straight and very wet, and down off the moor at Okehampton, and on, through Launceston, over the Tamar. Jono felt nothing at the Tamar. There was nothing to feel. The lamps had gone at Kingskerswell, three hours ago, and outside the bay one county was the same as another: clear air over every head, in every car, in every service station, all the way to the sea.

"Cornwall," said Clifford, as they went over the bridge. "Never been."

"No?"

"Thirty years I've been coming to Devon." Clifford drove with one hand, the way Americans did. "Never once crossed the river. Chris told me not to bother. He said the Cornish would know I was from Ohio before I opened my mouth."

"They would."

"They'd be right." Clifford looked out at the fields going by, small and steep and green, with stone walls round them and the wind bending the hedges. "She's never been either."

"No."

"A hundred and forty-three years," said Clifford, "and she's never once been across this bridge." He was quiet for a mile. "Kind of makes you wonder what else she's never done."

Jono did not answer. He was thinking about a bay window, and a white cloth, and a cup pushed across it with two fingers.

* * *

Spaceport Cornwall was not what Jono had expected. He had expected a gantry, a tower, a rocket standing on its end in a cloud of steam.

It was an airfield. A long one, on the top of the cliffs above the sea north of Newquay, flat and wide and empty under the cloud, with the wind coming in off the Atlantic across it so hard the windsock at the far end stood out like a board. A runway, very long. Some low buildings. A control tower. And at the far end, away from the airport terminal and the holiday flights, a row of hangars, grey, big as cathedrals, with their doors shut.

Hangar Three was at the end of the row.

Clifford had a pass. He had a pass for everything. He showed it to a man in a hut at a gate in a fence, and the man looked at it and at Clifford and at Jono, and lifted the barrier, and they drove across a quarter of a mile of wet concrete to the hangar and parked beside a small door in the side of it with a keypad.

Inside, it was very big, and very cold, and almost empty.

A concrete floor the size of three football pitches. Lights hung from the roof on chains, high up, most of them off. At the far end, under the only lights that were on, a cluster of things on trolleys and benches, with

cables running between them across the floor. Screens. Racks of equipment, grey, humming. And beyond them, through the open back of the hangar where a second set of doors stood half open to the airfield, a dish.

White. Big as a house. On a steel mount, pointed at the sky.

"Ground station," said Clifford. "The old Goonhilly people put it in, ten years ago, when the spaceport was going to be something. Then the spaceport wasn't something, and nobody used it." He looked at it with something like love. "It can talk to anything up there. Anything at all. One bird, ten thousand birds. You point it, and it talks."

A woman came out from among the racks. Fifty-odd. Short and broad, in a fleece and a woolly hat, with a mug of tea in one hand and a tablet in the other.

"You're early," she said. Cornish. Very Cornish. "Clifford said you'd be early. I said nobody's ever early for anything down here." She looked at Jono. "Tamsin. I run the dish." She did not offer to shake hands. Her hands were full. "Where's the thing?"

"On its way," said Jono.

"Who's bringing it?"

Jono looked at Clifford. Clifford looked at the dish.

"A woman," said Jono. "On the train."

* * *

They waited.

Tamsin made more tea, in a kettle on a bench among the racks, in mugs that said things about rugby. Clifford walked round the dish twice, with his hands in his pockets, looking up at it. Jono sat on a steel bench by the small side door, with his coat on, and the forty-first book on his knee, and did not write anything.

He thought about the route. He had looked it up on the train to Exeter, without meaning to, on his phone. *Newton Abbot, dep. 10.43. Plymouth. Liskeard. Bodmin Parkway. Par, arr. 12.18.* Then the branch. A little two-carriage train that went up from Par through the woods and the clay country, past the white tips of the china-clay pits, to Newquay. *Par, dep. 13.05. Newquay, arr. 13.52.*

And then nothing. No bus to the spaceport. No taxi. He knew she would not take a taxi.

Five miles. From Newquay station, along the road above the beaches, out past the edge of the town, up onto the cliffs, to the airfield. In the wind. In a grey costume, with no coat, with a carpet bag.

He looked at his watch. Twenty past four.

He thought about her walking.

He had never thought of her walking anywhere she had not walked before. Up a path under a monkey puzzle. Across Station Square. Down a hill to Torquay station. Along the edge of Daddyhole Plain in the last of the moon. Every path she had ever walked, as far as he knew, she had walked a hundred times. She knew every stone of them.

This one she had never walked. She did not know where it went.

* * *

At five the light began to go.

The cloud lifted a little at the western edge, over the sea, and a long strip of yellow came in under it, low and cold, and lay across the wet airfield and lit the dish from the side, so that it shone. Tamsin switched more lights on in the hangar. Clifford stopped walking round the dish and came and sat on the bench beside Jono.

At half past five it was nearly dark.

At ten to six Jono got up and went to the small side door and opened it, and stood in it, and looked out across the airfield at the fence and the gate and the hut and, beyond them, the road.

There was a road along the outside of the fence. It came up from the direction of the town, from the south, over a rise, and went on past the airfield to the north. It had street lamps on it, a long way apart, orange. There was nobody on it. A car went past, fast, with its lights on, and was gone.

He stood in the door in the wind and watched the road.

At four minutes past six, on the rise to the south, under the second street lamp, a figure came over the top.

Small. Grey. Very straight. Walking. Not hurrying. Not slow. With something in its hand.

Jono did not move.

He watched her come along the road under the street lamps, one after another, in and out of the orange light, in the wind, with her bag. She did not look at the airfield. She did not look at the fence or the hangars or the dish. She walked along the road the way she had walked up the path at Widecombe Cot for a hundred and forty-three years, looking straight ahead, as if there were a line along it that nobody else could see.

At the gate she stopped.

The man in the hut came out. Jono saw him come out, and stand at the barrier, and look at her. A young woman in a grey suit with no coat, at six o'clock on a wet October evening, on the top of a cliff in Cornwall, with a carpet bag. He saw the man say something. He saw Ania say something back.

The man lifted the barrier.

He did not look at a pass. He did not ring anybody. He lifted the barrier and stood back, and she walked through, and across the wet concrete in the last of the light, towards the hangar, and the man stood at the barrier with his hand still on it and watched her go, the way a man had stood in 2031 with a broom outside the doctor's at the corner of the hill and stopped sweeping.

* * *

She came in through the small side door past Jono, into the hangar, into the light.

She did not look at him. Not yet. She looked at the hangar. At the size of it. At the lights on their chains going up into the dark of the roof. At the racks and the screens and the cables across the floor. At the dish, through the open doors at the back, white, enormous, pointed at a sky with no stars in it.

Tamsin had stood up from her bench with her mug in her hand and stopped.

Clifford had stood up.

Ania walked across the concrete floor to the steel bench by the racks, where Jono had been sitting, and put the carpet bag down on it.

It made a sound. Jono heard it across the hangar. A small solid sound, the sound a bag makes when there is something in it.

She looked down at it.

"It is heavier than it was," she said.

Then she straightened up, and turned round, and looked at Jono in the doorway. Her face was white with cold. Her hands, at her sides, were red with it. Her breath was going up in the cold of the hangar in long white clouds, faster than he had ever seen it, the way a person breathes who has walked five miles in the wind.

She was shivering.

Jono had never seen her cold. Not once. Not in a hundred winters of stories. Not on Daddyhole Plain at two in the morning. Not on the steps of the Town Hall in 2028.

He stood in the door and looked at her shivering in the light of the hangar, and something in his chest turned over, and he did not know what it was.

* * *

She opened the bag on the steel bench.

The little cloth bag with the drawstring. The hairbrush. And underneath, the grey cardigan, folded round something, corner by corner, like a flag.

She unfolded it. Slowly. With her red hands that would not quite do what she told them. One corner. Another.

The lens lay in the middle of the grey wool. The colour of the bay at six in the morning. Clear, and grey, and green, and warm at the centre, in the light of the hangar. Never the same twice.

Tamsin put her mug down on the bench very carefully, without looking at it, and it went over, and tea went across the bench and onto the floor, and nobody noticed.

Ania picked the lens up in both hands. She held it a moment, the way she held a cup. Then she held it out.

Not to Jono. Not to Clifford. To Tamsin.

"You run the dish," said Ania.

Tamsin looked at her. At the lens in her hands. At her face.

"Yes," said Tamsin.

"Then this is yours now," said Ania. "For a while."

Tamsin took it. Jono saw her hands shake. She held it against her fleece, in both arms, the way you hold a baby somebody has handed you that you were not expecting.

Ania looked down at the cardigan on the bench. Grey wool. Empty now.

She picked it up. She shook it out. And she put it on.

Over the grey costume. Her arms into the sleeves, one and then the other. She pulled it round her and folded her arms across it, the way a woman does at a bus stop in the rain, and stood there in the middle of the hangar in a cardigan that was too big for her, holding it shut, with her breath going up.

Jono had never seen her wear anything but the grey costume. Nobody had. Not in a hundred and forty-three years. Not in a single photograph in the Goldmine.

She stood in it and shivered, and slowly, as he watched, the shivering stopped.

"Better," said Ania.

* * *

His phone went at twenty to ten.

He was in Clifford's hire car outside the hangar, on his own, in the dark, with the engine off. Ania had gone. She had stayed an hour, in the cardigan, on the steel bench, with a mug of tea that Tamsin had made her in a mug that said *I'D RATHER BE IN THE SCRUM*, and drunk it, all of it, with both hands round the mug, looking at the dish. She had not said anything. At seven she had stood up, and closed the carpet bag, and picked it up, and it had been light again.

Where will you go? Jono had said, at the side door.

She had looked out at the dark airfield, and the fence, and the road with its orange lamps going away north along the cliffs.

I do not know, she had said.

And she had walked out across the wet concrete in her cardigan, to the gate, and the man in the hut had lifted the barrier without being asked, and she had turned north on the road, away from the town, into the dark, under the lamps, and Jono had watched her until the road went over a rise and took her.

Now his phone went, in the dark, and it was Karen.

"He wrote it down," said Karen. Her voice was very quiet. "This afternoon. When he got home from the station. He sat at the kitchen table and wrote it down on the back of an envelope, because she told him to. *The canteen. Fleet House. The queue for the teas. Karen in front. She turned round.*" She stopped. "He showed me. At four o'clock. He was pleased with it. He said, *I've got it, love, I've written it down, it's safe.*"

Jono did not say anything.

"At ten past six," said Karen, "we were in the back room. He was reading. And he put the book down and looked at me. And he said, *Karen. How did we meet?*"

The wind came across the airfield and rocked the car.

"Ten past six," said Jono.

"About that. I looked at the clock." Karen was quiet for a long time. "I showed him the envelope. In his own writing. He read it. He read it three times. And he looked at me and said, *that's a nice story.*" Her voice did not break. "*That's a nice story, love. Is it ours?*"

Jono shut his eyes.

At four minutes past six, on the rise to the south, under the second street lamp, a figure had come over the top of the road. Small. Grey. With something in its hand.

"I said yes," said Karen. "I said, *yes, love, it's ours.* And he held my hand and said, *then I'm glad you turned round.*" She breathed. "He doesn't know he's lost it. Jono. He thinks it's a story somebody told him. A nice one. About two people in a queue." She stopped. "He's still got me. He just hasn't got how."

"Karen."

"I'm all right. I'm all right. I'm making his cocoa." The sound of a pan. "Is she there? Did she get there?"

Jono looked out of the windscreen at the hangar, at the light in the small side door, and at the dish beyond it, white, enormous, pointing at the sky.

"She got here," he said. "At ten past six."

The line went very quiet.

"Then that's what it cost," said Karen. "Isn't it."

She rang off.

Jono sat in the car in the dark with the phone in his hand, and the forty-first book on his knee, and wrote the date and the time and the place and what he had seen. *A. walked in from the road. Bag on the bench. "It is heavier than it was." Put on the cardigan.*

And then, under it, because it was what he had been told, and who had told him:

K.T., by phone, 9.40 p.m.: the canteen.

Chapter 20 – *Bonfire Night*

Fri. 5 Nov. 2038. Kit Hill, by the stack, 9.00 p.m. Clear. Cold. Wind N.W. Fireworks everywhere. R. beside me. 9.00, T. at the dish: "Now." R. saw. 10.00: dark. It works.

Keith chose the night.

He had chosen it in April, at the long table in the back room at Widecombe Cot, without explaining, the way he chose everything. *The fifth of November. In the evening. Nine o'clock.* And Vicky had looked at him and said *Bonfire Night?* and Keith had said *yes*, and Clifford, after a moment, had laughed out loud.

Jono understood it on the top of Kit Hill at a quarter to nine, with the wind coming at him from the north-west hard enough to lean on, and the whole of the South West spread out below him in the dark, going off.

Fireworks. Everywhere. Every town and every village in two counties, at once. Rockets going up from Plymouth, away to the south-east, in clusters, gold and green and red, bursting over the Sound and coming down slowly in long trails. Rockets from Callington below the hill, close enough to hear, a thud and then a crackle. From Tavistock, across the Tamar, on the edge of the moor. From Liskeard, from Launceston, from villages Jono did not know the names of, little flowers of light opening and closing in the dark, all over the land, as far as he could see, in every direction. And bonfires. Dozens of them. Orange points on hillsides and in fields and on the edges of towns, with the smoke going up from them and leaning over in the wind.

A whole country, on one night, looking up at the sky.

And nobody, not one person in two counties, looking at anything else.

* * *

Kit Hill was the highest thing for miles. A long round hump of moorland, heather and gorse and granite, on the Cornish side of the Tamar, with an old mine chimney on the very top of it, tall and square and black against the sky, that you could see from Plymouth on a clear day. There was a car park below the summit, empty tonight, and a track up through the gorse to the stack, and a low stone wall round the stack that you could sit on, out of the worst of the wind.

Rani was sitting on it.

She had been sitting on it since eight. She had a thermos and a blanket and a phone in her lap, on speaker, with the volume turned down, and she had not touched any of them for half an hour. She sat on the wall in her big Rage coat with the hood up and her hands in her lap, looking out at the dark, at the fireworks, and did not say anything.

Jono sat beside her. He had driven her up from Torbay at six, in his own car, over the Tamar at Gunnislake, up the lanes. He had not been asked to come. He had come anyway. Somebody had to drive. Somebody had to sit beside her on a wall on a hill in the dark and not say anything.

He looked at the air above her head.

Nothing. Of course nothing. They were thirty miles outside the bay. There was nothing over anybody's head on Kit Hill tonight, his or hers.

"Ten minutes," said the phone in Rani's lap.

Clifford. At Newquay. Fifty miles west, in Hangar Three, with Tamsin and the dish.

Rani did not answer.

* * *

At five to nine the other two came on.

"Haldon," said Vicky's voice from the phone. Very precise. Very calm. "In position. By the Belvedere. Clear. I can see Exeter. I can see the estuary. I can see..." She paused. "I can see the bay. From here. Torbay. Just. The glow of it. Over the hill."

"Carn Brea," said Annie. Shorter. Blown about by the wind; she was on the top of a hill above Redruth, by the monument, with nothing between her and the Atlantic. "Here. Freezing. I can see Camborne, Redruth, Truro, Falmouth. Fireworks everywhere. Can't hear myself think."

"Kit Hill," said Rani.

Her voice was quite steady. Jono looked at her. Her face, in the hood, in the light of a rocket going up from Callington, was very white and very still.

"I can't see anything," she said. "Yet."

"No," said Clifford. "Nobody can. Yet." A pause. The sound of the hangar behind him: a hum, and Tamsin's voice, saying something about a number. "Two minutes."

Jono looked at his watch. He did not know why. He took out the forty-first book and opened it on his knee in the dark, and wrote the date, and the place, and the weather, by the light of the fireworks. *Clear. Cold. Wind N.W. Fireworks everywhere.*

And then he put the pencil down on the page and waited.

* * *

He thought about Keith.

Keith was in the cellar. Jono knew that without being told. In the cellar under Studio Ania, at the end of the long desk, with his hand flat on the glass over the stone. Where he had been when they found Eric, in 2031. Where he had been every night for a week, Chris said, since Ania went up the line.

Jono had asked him, on the Thursday, at Bailey's, in the window: *will you be on the hill?*

Keith had looked out at Station Square for a long time.

I can't leave the bay, he had said. *You know that.*

I know. I meant: will you be watching?

Keith had turned his cup a quarter turn on its saucer.

I'll be where I always am, he had said. *With my hand on it.* He had looked at Jono. *If the glass is right, I'll feel it. The way you feel a fault on a line, before you can find it. A long way off. Like somebody saying your name in the next room.*

And if it's wrong?

Keith had not answered that.

* * *

"One minute," said Clifford.

The fireworks went on. A huge one over Plymouth, gold, that opened slowly into a great weeping willow of light and hung there over the Sound and came down. Somebody cheered, far off, below the hill, in Callington. A dog barked.

Rani had stopped breathing.

Jono heard her stop. He did not look at her. He looked out at the dark, at the fireworks, at the bonfires on the hillsides, at the orange glow on the cloud to the east that was Plymouth, and the long black line of Dartmoor beyond it.

"Tamsin," said Clifford's voice. Very quietly. Not to them.

And then, in the background, a woman's voice, Cornish, not loud, the way you say a thing you have been waiting to say for a very long time:

"Now."

* * *

Nothing happened.

That was the first thing. Nothing at all. The fireworks went on going up. The bonfires went on burning. The wind came across the top of Kit Hill from the north-west, the same as before, cold. Jono sat on the wall by the stack and looked out at the dark and saw exactly what he had seen a second before.

Clear air. Over everything.

He did not see anything. He would write that down, later, honestly, because it was true. *Saw nothing*. He sat on the wall at the top of Kit Hill at nine o'clock on Bonfire Night with the whole of the South West below him and saw exactly what any man would have seen.

He looked at Rani.

She was standing up.

He had not seen her stand. She was on her feet in front of the wall, with the blanket fallen off her knees onto the heather, and the phone fallen with it, still on speaker, face down, and her hood had blown back, and she was looking out at the dark with her hands at her sides and her mouth open.

She did not say anything.

She looked south-east. Towards Plymouth. She looked for a long time. Then she turned her head, slowly, the way you turn your head to follow something enormous going past, and looked east. At Tavistock. At the edge of the moor. At the dark of Dartmoor beyond it. Then north. Launceston. Then west, behind her, over her shoulder. Liskeard. Bodmin. The long dark of Cornwall going away to the sea.

Then south-east again. To Plymouth.

And she began to cry.

Not the way she had cried in the cellar in July, with her face not moving. Out loud. Like a child. Standing on the top of a hill in the wind with her hands at her sides and her face wet and her mouth open, making a sound Jono had never heard her make.

* * *

From the phone, face down in the heather, very small, Annie's voice:

"Oh my God."

And then Vicky's, very quiet:

"Oh."

And then nothing from either of them for a long time.

Jono bent down and picked up the phone and the blanket, and put the blanket round Rani's shoulders, and she did not notice. He held the phone. He did not say anything into it.

Rani was saying something now. Under her breath. He had to lean close to hear it.

"Look at it," she was saying. "Look at it. Look at it."

"I can't," said Jono.

She did not hear him.

"Plymouth," said Rani. "It's Plymouth. It's the whole of Plymouth. It's like..." She lifted her hand and moved it in the air in front of her, flat, slowly, the way Annie had on Hope's Nose in July. "It's a field. A field of wheat. With the wind going through it. Every house. Every street. A hundred thousand lamps, two hundred thousand, I can't, I'm not seeing them, I'm seeing all of them, like a..." She stopped. "Like the sea. Like the bay at night from Berry Head with every light on. The whole city, going and going, brighter and dimmer and brighter, like breathing."

She turned her head.

"And Tavistock. And the villages. Little ones. Little fields. Every one. All over. In the dark between them, the farms, one by one, like..." She put her hand over her mouth. "Like stars. On the ground. Like somebody's tipped the sky out onto the ground."

* * *

"Vicky," said Jono, into the phone.

A long silence. Then Vicky's voice, from Haldon, forty miles away. Not precise now. Not calm.

"Exeter," she said. "All of it. And the estuary. Exmouth, Dawlish, Teignmouth, all along the coast, like a string of..." She stopped. "And the bay. Jono. The bay." He heard her breathe. "From here. It's the brightest thing in the county. It's like a lighthouse. It's like somebody's left a door open and all the light in the world is coming out of it. You can see it from forty miles." She was quiet. "I never knew. Living in it. I never knew it looked like that from outside."

"Annie."

"Truro," said Annie's voice. Shaking. "The cathedral. There's a service on. Evensong, or something, I don't know, there's a lot of people in it and they're..." She stopped. "And the fishing boats. Out from Newlyn. On the sea. Little lights, all on their own, on the black, going out. One man on each. You can see them. You can see every one." A breath. "I can see the dish. At Newquay. From here. It's not a lamp. It's like a star sitting on the ground. White. With everything going out from it."

Jono stood on the top of Kit Hill by the stack, holding the phone, with Rani beside him in a blanket with her hand over her mouth.

He saw nothing. Clear air. Fireworks.

He watched the faces of the women he could not see, in their voices, in the dark.

* * *

At twenty to ten Rani stopped crying.

She stood very still. She took her hand down from her mouth. She was looking north-east now. Not at Plymouth. At something further. Past Tavistock. Past the edge of the moor. Up, into the dark, towards the faint orange glow on the cloud a long way off that was Exeter, and past that.

"There," she said.

Her voice had changed. It was the voice from the lab. The voice that read out a measurement three times.

"What?"

"The strings," said Rani. "He said. The kite strings. Going out of every town. Thousands of them." She was following something with her eyes, very slowly, up and to the right, into the dark. "Most of them go a little way and come down. Like he said. And some of them don't." She swallowed. "And they're coming together. Up there. Past Exeter. Lots of them. From Plymouth, and Truro, and Exeter, and Torquay. Going up. Going together. Like streams. Like..." She stopped.

"Like threads on a loom," said Jono. "Going into one knot."

She looked at him.

"You can see it?"

"No," said Jono. "He told you. On the monastery. I was there."

Rani looked back at the dark.

"There's a knot," she said very quietly. "A long way off. North-east. Past where I can see." She was quiet for a long time. "And there's something else. Closer. In Plymouth. By the water." She shook her head. "I'll tell

you tomorrow. I need to write it down first. I need to write it all down first, before I say it, or I'll..." She stopped. "I need to write it down."

"Then write it down," said Jono.

He gave her his pencil.

* * *

At ten o'clock Clifford said, "Tamsin," and Tamsin said, "Off," and it went.

Jono knew it had gone because Rani made a sound like somebody who has been holding a door open in a gale and has let go of it. She sat down on the wall, suddenly, with the blanket round her and his pencil in her hand and a page torn out of the back of the forty-first book on her knee, covered in writing he could not read in the dark.

From the phone, Annie, very quietly: "It's gone."

And Vicky: "Yes."

And then nothing. Three women on three hills, forty miles apart, in the dark, with fireworks going up all round them, saying nothing at all.

"Clifford," said Jono.

"Here."

"Anybody?"

A long pause. The sound of keys.

"Nobody," said Clifford. "I've had three people listening to everything I know how to listen to since eight. Nothing. Not a whisper. Not a ping. Nobody pointed anything at Newquay. Nobody asked a question about a dish." He laughed, very softly, a tired, crooked sound. "Every ear Eden's got in this country is in London tonight, buddy. Second reading in the Lords on Monday. They're all at dinner, counting peers."

"And Torbay?"

"Keith rang Tamsin," said Clifford. "At nine-oh-one. From the cellar. First time anybody's known him use a phone." A pause. "He said one word and put it down."

"What word?"

"*Yes,*" said Clifford.

* * *

He drove Rani home over the Tamar at Gunnislake at eleven, with the last of the fireworks going up behind them and the bonfires burning down to orange in the fields.

She sat in the passenger seat with the page from the back of his book folded in her lap and her hand flat on it, and did not say anything for the whole of the way. Over the river. Through Tavistock. Over the edge of the moor in the dark, with the cattle grids going under the wheels. Down off the moor at Ashburton. Onto the dual carriageway. Off at Newton. Up the hill towards the bay.

At the top of the hill above Kingskerswell, where the land dropped down to Torbay and the lights of the town came up in front of them round the black water, the lamps came back.

He felt them. Like hearing come back in one ear. He looked across at Rani, and there was a lamp over her head, bright, nearly white, the way it always was.

She was looking out of the window at the lights of Torquay going past.

"It's small," she said quietly.

Jono looked at her.

"The bay," said Rani. "From inside. It's small." She was quiet. "I didn't know. I didn't know until tonight how small it was."

He dropped her at her flat on Torbay Road at a quarter to one. She got out, and stood on the pavement with the page in her hand, and looked at him through the window.

"It works," she said.

He nodded.

She went in.

Jono sat in the car on Torbay Road with the engine running, opposite the three glass buildings of the campus with their plane trees in a row along the front, and opened the forty-first book on the steering wheel, and wrote the rest of it.

R. beside me. 9.00, T. at the dish: "Now." R. saw.

He looked at it.

He had not seen. He wrote what was true.

10.00: dark.

And then the only thing he knew for certain, the thing three women had seen and he had not, the thing that a young man in a cellar had said one word about, down a phone, at one minute past nine:

It works.

Chapter 21 – *The Gap*

Sat. 6 Nov. 2038. Widecombe Cot, the back room, 11.00 a.m. R.'s page. V.O.'s bearings: three lines, one point. A.H.: Salcombe. R.: Plymouth, Devonport, by the dockyard wall, 9.14 p.m., a gap. Walking west.

Rani had not slept. None of them had. They came into the back room at Widecombe Cot at eleven on the Saturday morning one after another, grey-faced, with their coats still on, and sat down at the long table without taking them off, as if they might have to leave again at any moment.

Vicky first, from Haldon, by way of her flat in Paignton, where she had not gone to bed. Annie, who had driven back from Carn Brea through the night and stopped at Bodmin services at three in the morning and sat in the car park for an hour with her head on the steering wheel, she said, because she could not stop seeing it. Clifford, from Newquay, with a carrier bag of pasties from a bakery in Wadebridge that nobody touched.

Rani last. With the page.

It was the page from the back of the forty-first book. She had torn it out on Kit Hill at twenty to ten with Jono's pencil in her hand, and filled it, both sides, in writing so small and so fast that Jono, looking at it upside down across the table, could not read a word. She had folded it in four. She had held it in her lap all the way home in the car with her hand flat on it, and she had not let go of it since, Jono thought. She put it on the table now, in front of her, and unfolded it, and put her hand flat on it again.

Chris was at the head of the table, with Karen beside him. Keith was at the window, at the end of the room. Not standing, this time. Sitting. In the chair at the little round table in the bay window, the one nobody sat in, with his back to the room and his face to the garden.

Nobody said anything about it.

Upstairs, very faintly, through the ceiling, an orchestra.

* * *

"Bearings first," said Vicky.

She had a sheet of paper. Not a tablet. A sheet of paper, A3, folded, and she unfolded it on the long table, and it was a map. The South West, and the South of England, and the Midlands, and London, printed out at the photonics campus at four in the morning on a printer nobody else used, with three lines drawn on it in pencil with a ruler.

One from Kit Hill. One from Haldon. One from Carn Brea.

"Rani saw the knot from Kit Hill," said Vicky. "North-east. Past Exeter. Past where she could see. I saw it from Haldon. North-east, but not the same north-east; I'm forty miles further east than her, so it's a different angle." She put her finger on the map at Haldon. "Annie saw it from Carn Brea. Seventy miles further west. Different angle again." She looked up. "Three people. Three hills. Each of us looking at the same thing from a different place." She ran her finger along the pencil lines. "I took a compass bearing from each of us. Annie and I did it on the phone, at a quarter to ten, while Rani was writing. We each pointed at the place where the strings came together, and took the bearing. Then I drew them."

Jono looked at the map.

Three pencil lines, very thin, going up across the South of England from three hills in the South West. Going north-east. Getting closer together as they went.

Meeting.

Not at a point exactly. Three pencil lines never meet at a point. A tiny triangle where they crossed, the size of a fingernail on the map.

Over London.

"Closer," said Chris quietly, from the head of the table.

Vicky had another sheet. A street map. Central London. With the same three lines, continued, and the tiny triangle much bigger now, much less tiny. The size of a few streets.

Jono knew the streets. He walked through them every morning from Kennington to the Library.

The triangle sat over a block south of Westminster Abbey, between Horseferry Road and Great Peter Street. A big modern building that filled the block. Glass and pale stone. He went past it every day.

"Two Marsham Street," said Vicky.

Nobody said anything.

"The Home Office," said Vicky.

* * *

Jono did not say anything.

He sat at the long table with his hands flat on the wood and his face very still, the way he had sat at the head of another table, in a room without windows, on a Tuesday in September, while a man in a navy suit said *two independent sources*.

He could not say anything. He had signed a piece of paper. He had sat in that room and heard the security service's assessment, and the name of a firm in Great Smith Street, and the name of the man who had once worked for White and now ran it. He could not say any of it. Not here. Not to these people. Not even now.

He did not need to.

Three women had stood on three hills in the dark and looked at the sky, and drawn three lines with a ruler on a map, and the lines had met over the Home Secretary's office.

"It's not the Commons," said Annie. "It's not Parliament. It's his department."

"It's where he sits," said Vicky. "Every day. When he's not at the dispatch box."

"And everybody's strings go there?" said Clifford. "Every Eden thread in two counties?"

"Not everybody's," said Rani.

They all looked at her.

She had not lifted her hand off the page. She was looking at it, at the tiny writing, and not at any of them.

"Most of the strings out of Plymouth," she said, "and Exeter, and Truro, and Torquay, go a little way and come down. Like he said." She did not

look at the window. "A mother. A son. A firm in Bristol. A man in Cardiff. Ordinary. Thousands of them. You let them go." She turned the page over. "And some of them go to London. Hundreds. Some of them to the City. Some to Whitehall. Some to places I couldn't see." She put her finger on a line of the tiny writing. "And forty-one of them went to the knot."

"Forty-one," said Chris.

"I counted," said Rani. "Twice. Forty-one strings, out of two counties, that didn't come down anywhere. That went up past Exeter and came together and went on. Thin. Very thin. Like..." She stopped. "Like the strings on the paintings. To eight. They all go to one place." She looked up, for the first time, at Chris. "The way every cord in your paintings goes to him."

At the window, Keith did not move.

* * *

"Forty-one people in Devon and Cornwall," said Clifford slowly, "who answer to the Home Secretary."

"Not to him," said Rani. "To the knot. To where the knot is." She shook her head. "I can't see the end of them. I could only see them come together. Where they go after that, in that building, I don't know. To him. To somebody in his office. To a room." She looked at the map. "But they go there."

"Who are they?" said Annie. "The forty-one?"

"I don't know," said Rani. "I couldn't see faces. Not from a hill. I could see lamps. Grain. Strings." She looked down at the page. "I wrote down where they came from. Roughly. Fourteen from Plymouth. Nine from Exeter. Six from Torbay." She paused. "Six from Torbay."

Nobody said anything.

"The council," said Vicky at last. "Still. After ten years. After the Clearout."

"Some of it," said Rani. "And three in Truro. And two at the hospital in Plymouth. And one at the dockyard." She stopped. "And one in Salcombe."

* * *

"Salcombe," said Annie.

They all looked at her.

"I saw it," said Annie. "From Carn Brea. I thought it was nothing. I didn't say." She had gone pale. "A string going up out of Salcombe. On its own. From a house on the hill above the harbour. Not thin. Not like the others." She looked at Rani. "Thick. Bright. Like it was pulling."

"Yes," said Rani.

"Going to the knot."

"Yes."

Rani was looking at the page. She put her finger on a place near the bottom, where the writing went smaller still.

"I know that lamp," she said.

Nobody breathed.

"I've seen it," said Rani. "Close. In a room. In Bailey's. In the corner, by the fireplace, in March. And again in July. A man on his own with a coffee, looking at Keith in the window." She did not look at the window. "I didn't know him. I looked at his lamp because I look at everybody's. It was bright. Very bright. And sad. The grain was..." She stopped. "Like a field after a hailstorm. Everything flattened in one direction." She looked up. "I'd know it again anywhere. I'd know it from a hill in Cornwall forty miles away. Lamps are like voices. You don't forget one."

"Tarquin," said Chris.

It was not a question.

Rani did not answer. She did not need to.

* * *

Jono looked at the table.

He had known since a Tuesday morning in September. He had sat at the head of a table in a room without windows and listened to a man say *two independent sources*, and known, and not been able to say. He had carried it for seven weeks. He had carried it on a train to Newton Abbot and a road to Newquay and a hill in Cornwall.

Now he did not have to carry it on his own.

Rani had seen it. Annie had seen it. From hills. With nothing but their eyes and whatever was behind them. Not from a piece of paper marked SECRET at the top and bottom of every page. From a lamp, in the dark, forty miles away, that one of them had seen once by a fireplace in Bailey's and would know anywhere.

He felt something in his chest go loose that he had not known was tight.

He looked up and found Chris looking at him across the table. A long look. The look of a man who had known Jono for sixty-four years and had just watched something go out of his face.

Chris did not say anything. He nodded, very slightly. As if he knew. As if he had always known there was something Jono could not say, and had just watched it stop needing to be said.

* * *

"There's one more," said Rani.

Her voice had changed. She had folded the page again, in four, and was holding it in both hands, in her lap, under the table.

"Plymouth," she said. "By the water. I said, on the hill. I said there was something else."

"Yes."

"Devonport," said Rani. "The dockyard. There's a long wall. Along the road, outside the dockyard. Miles of it. Grey stone." She did not look at anybody. "At fourteen minutes past nine, I was looking at Plymouth. The whole of it. The field. And there was a place in the field where there was nothing."

Nobody moved.

"Not dark," said Rani. "Not dim. Not a visitor; visitors are blank, like a page nobody's written on. This wasn't blank." She swallowed. "It was a hole. The size of a person. A gap. In the middle of all those lamps. Like a socket with the plate unscrewed." She looked at the window, for the first time. At the back of the young man sitting in the chair nobody sat in. "Like Annie saw from the monastery. In August. By the station."

"Moving?" said Annie. Very quietly.

"Moving," said Rani. "Along the dockyard wall. West. Slowly. Like a man walking." She looked down at her hands. "I watched it for twenty minutes. I couldn't stop. He said don't. He said write down where, and when, and which way, and come home. I couldn't stop." She swallowed. "It went along the wall to the end, to the ferry. The Torpoint ferry. And onto it. And across the river. Into Cornwall." She stopped. "And then I lost it. In the dark on the other side. There was nothing there to lose it against. You can't see a hole in the dark."

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time.

Then Keith stood up.

He stood up from the chair in the bay window, the chair nobody sat in, and turned round, and looked at the long table. At all of them. At Rani, with the page in her hands.

"You did right," he said. "Writing it down."

"I didn't come home."

"You came home," said Keith. "You're here." He looked at her for a moment longer. "Next time, don't watch for twenty minutes."

Rani looked at him.

"Who is he?" she said.

Keith did not answer at once. He stood by the window with the garden behind him and the monkey puzzle dark against the grey sky.

"I don't know," he said.

They all looked at him.

"I didn't know the first time," said Keith. "I don't know now. Nobody's ever written him down. Not his face. Not his name. Not where he was born. Not one line, in any book, in any hand, anywhere." He was quiet. "Every lamp in two counties lit up last night. Every one. Two million people. Every one of them has a light, because every one of them has been written down by somebody, somewhere, once. Born. Named. Counted." He looked at Rani. "He hasn't. That's what the gap is. That's why you can't see his face. There's nothing there for the light to come back off."

"Like her," said Annie. "Like Ania."

Keith looked at her.

"No," he said. "Not like her."

"Why not?"

Keith did not answer that. He looked at the window. At the little round table, with its white cloth, and its one chair, which he had been sitting in.

"She has a lamp," he said quietly. "She had one. In 1994. In a painting. Somebody took it away from her, very carefully, a long time ago." He paused. "His was never there."

* * *

Jono wrote it down that night, at the kitchen table in Preston, in the forty-first book.

Not all of it. He wrote what he had been allowed to know, and nothing that he had not. The date. The place. *R.'s page. V.O.'s bearings: three lines, one point.* He did not write where the point was. He did not need to. Anybody who ever needed to know could draw three lines with a ruler.

A.H.: Salcombe.

He did not write the name.

R.: Plymouth, Devonport, by the dockyard wall, 9.14 p.m., a gap.

He sat with the pencil on the page for a long time.

He thought about the Torpoint ferry. About a hole the size of a man, going across the river in the dark, into Cornwall. West. Towards Saltash, and Liskeard, and the coast. Towards a lot of small places in the dark where a young man who did not want to be found might go to ground.

He did not know why he thought that. He thought it anyway.

Walking west.

He closed the book.

Then he picked up his phone, and looked at it for a long time, and did not ring her.

Chapter 22 – *Two Sources*

> *Wed. 10 Nov. 2038. Talland's, Warwick Way, 8.20 a.m. T.T. behind the counter, in a cardigan. A quarter of Darjeeling. Her chair. Did not tell him. He did not tell me.*

They decided on the Sunday, in the back room at Widecombe Cot, and it took four minutes.

Jono had expected it to take all night. He had sat at the long table at three in the afternoon with his back to the wall and the forty-first book shut in his inside pocket, and waited for the argument, and there was not one.

"We leave him," said Vicky.

She said it first, because she always said the hard things first, the way she drew the first line on a drawing.

"We leave him where he is. We don't let him know we know. We don't change anything we say to him, or anything we don't." She had her tablet face down on the table in front of her. "He's a door. We know which room it opens into. That makes him the most useful man in London."

"He's a man," said Jono.

Vicky looked at him.

"I know," she said. "That's why it's useful."

Nobody said anything.

"We told him," said Jono. "In June. Clifford went into his shop and bought a quarter of tea and told him about Singapore. As a friend. Because Carole would have." He heard his own voice and did not like it. "We made him a source. We took a man who'd lost the only person who ever asked after any of us, and we put a lie in his hand, and we let him carry it up the road to the Home Office, because we knew he would. And it worked. And Eden believed it because they heard it twice." He looked round the table. "We did that. Not him."

"Yes," said Chris.

Jono looked at him.

"Yes," said Chris again, from the head of the table, with his bad hand in his lap and his good one flat on the wood. "We did. You did. I did. I sat here in April and said *if it hurts him to hear it, that's not because we told him*." He was quiet for a moment. "I was wrong. It is because we told him. And we'd do it again."

At the window, in the chair nobody sat in, Keith had not turned round.

"Keith," said Vicky.

"Leave him," said Keith, to the glass. "He's not ours to save. Not this year." He was quiet. "Maybe not ever."

That was the four minutes.

* * *

Jono went to Talland's on the Wednesday.

He did not tell anybody he was going. He did not decide to go. He came out of the flat in Kennington at a quarter to eight to walk to the Library, the way he did every morning the House was sitting, over Lambeth

Bridge with the river going under him. And at the far end of the bridge, where he should have turned left along Millbank, he did not. He went straight on. Up Horseferry Road. Past Two Marsham Street, glass and pale stone, filling its block, with the people going in through the doors with their lanyards and their coffees, and not one light over any of their heads. Past it. Across Vincent Square, with the playing fields wet and green behind their railings. Into the quiet white streets behind Victoria Station, where the houses were tall and the street lamps were still on.

Warwick Way. Twenty past eight.

The shop was not open. The sign on the door said *CLOSED*. Dark green paint, very old, very glossy. The gold letters on the glass, with their old-fashioned shadows. *H. TALLAND & CO. TEA AND COFFEE. EST. 1947.*

He had stood here in September 2031, at twenty past eight on a Tuesday, and knocked on the glass. He had stood here in 2028, before that, at ten past ten, waiting for the quarter.

He stood here now, and did not knock.

After a while a light came on at the back of the shop, behind the long counter, between the rows of little wooden drawers with their brass labels. A figure came down the shop between them. Tall. Thin. Fair hair gone flat. A grey cardigan, not a suit. A cup of coffee in one hand.

Tarquin Talland looked at Jono through the glass for a long time.

Then he unbolted the door.

"Mr Hills," he said. "It isn't Tuesday afternoon."

"A quarter of Darjeeling," said Jono. "Too dear."

Tarquin looked at him. Then something moved at the corner of his mouth that was very nearly the old smile, the easy one, from 2028, before any of it.

"You'd better come through," he said.

* * *

The back room had not changed. The coal fire, unlit. The round table with the green baize. The window onto the yard with the fig tree in it, bare now, November. The shelves of old ledgers with the shop's accounts in them going back to 1947, in a hand that changed every twenty years or so.

The armchair in the corner by the grate. High-backed. Green velvet, worn pale on the arms. Empty.

Jono looked at it.

Tarquin saw him look. He did not say anything. He put his coffee down on the round table and went to the shelves behind the counter and took down a drawer, a little wooden one with a brass label that said *DARJEELING, FIRST FLUSH*, and a brass scoop, and a square of brown paper, and began to weigh out a quarter on an old set of scales with brass weights.

Jono stood by the round table.

"She sat there," said Tarquin, without looking round. "Every Tuesday afternoon, for forty years, when she was in London. Before my grandmother died, and after. With her crossword. In ink." The scale went down. He took a little tea off with the scoop. "Nobody sits in it now. I keep meaning to have it re-covered. I don't."

"No," said Jono.

"You've got one too," said Tarquin. "Haven't you. In Torquay. In a bay window. A chair nobody sits in."

Jono did not answer.

Tarquin folded the brown paper round the tea, very neatly, the way his grandmother would have taught him, and twisted the ends, and put it on the counter.

"Four pounds twenty," he said. "Too dear."

* * *

Jono paid. In coins. Tarquin put them in the old till, which rang.

Then neither of them moved.

The clock on the wall behind the counter ticked. A bus went past in Warwick Way, and the windows rattled, very slightly, in their old frames.

"The Lords," said Tarquin at last. "Monday was the second reading. You'll have heard."

"I heard."

"It went through. Without a division." He picked up his coffee. "They'll fight it in committee. Your friend from the Black Country. And half the bench of bishops. And three former Cabinet Secretaries who all hate White for reasons that have nothing to do with Torbay." He drank. "It'll be close. Closer than the Commons. Old men with long memories."

"And nothing to lose," said Jono.

Tarquin looked at him sharply.

"That's what White said," said Tarquin. "In the Lobby. In September. I was told." He put the cup down. "*Kinder in the Lords. Old men with long memories and nothing to lose.*" He looked at Jono for a long time. "You were there."

"I was there."

"And you didn't say anything back."

"No."

"You never do," said Tarquin. "That's what she liked about you. She said a Hills who knows when not to write something down is worth ten who don't." His voice did not change. "I passed that on too. In 2031. I was a man in a cardigan passing things on."

* * *

Jono sat down.

Not in the armchair. At the round table, with the green baize, where he had sat in 2031 with Tarquin across from him explaining a statutory instrument, and in 2028 with Clifford beside him and a woman in the armchair saying *tell him it's not nothing*.

Tarquin did not sit down. He stood by the grate, by the empty armchair, with his hand on the back of it.

"You know," said Tarquin.

Jono looked at him.

"You've known since September," said Tarquin. "Since I sat in your room and said *two independent sources* and you didn't move a muscle. I watched you not move. I've watched a lot of people not move, in a lot of rooms. You were very good." He took his hand off the chair. "And on Saturday something happened. I don't know what. Something in the South West that nobody I work with knows anything about, and that I would very much like to. And on Sunday you all sat in that back room at the top of the hill in Torquay, and I don't know what you said." He looked at Jono. "And this morning you're here. Buying tea. At twenty past eight. When you should be in the Library reading the last page of something."

Jono did not say anything.

"So," said Tarquin. "You know. And now you're going to tell me I'm wrong."

* * *

Jono looked at the armchair.

He thought about a list, sent up into the sky in February 2028. Four thousand one hundred and eight lines in it. And one of them, in a very upright hand, every letter the same height: *Tues. 16 Sept. 2031. Cheltenham, the kitchen. 10.47 p.m.* Written before there was a minute to write.

He thought about a woman at the window of Room 3 at Widecombe Cot on a Friday in October, with grey in her hair like frost, saying *mine*.

He thought about Chris, in the back room on Sunday, saying *we'd do it again*.

He could tell Tarquin. Here. Now. In this room, with her chair. He could say: *you're right. It was us. It was written before it happened.*

Somebody in our house wrote down the minute her heart would stop, years before, and it stopped. And the man by the grate would believe him, because it was true, and it would not help. It would not bring anybody back. It would only make the hailstorm in him worse, and flatten everything that was left.

And it would be written. In Tarquin's head, if nowhere else. And Tarquin wrote everything down, in files, for the Home Office.

Only what was written can be reached.

"I'm not going to tell you you're wrong," said Jono.

Tarquin looked at him.

"You think people have died because of what's in that basement," said Jono. "You said so. In my committee. In March." He kept his voice very level. "You're right. They have. I don't know all of it. Nobody does. But you're right." He looked at the armchair. "And every one of us pays. Not just the ones who die. Every time anybody touches that thing, somebody somewhere loses something. You don't see the bill. I see some of it. There's a man in Torquay who's paying it right now, this year, a room at a time, and he's seventy-six, and he can't remember how he met his wife."

Tarquin had gone very still.

"So I'm not going to tell you you're wrong," said Jono. "I'm going to tell you I know. That's all. I know what it costs. I'm not going to pretend it doesn't." He stood up. "And I'm not going to tell you anything else."

* * *

Tarquin did not say anything for a long time.

He stood by the grate with his hand back on the arm of the chair. His face did a thing Jono had seen it do once before, in a lift in Whitehall in March, with the doors closing. The tight line at the mouth went. For a second. Two. And under it there was a man of forty-four who had stood at the front of a church in Cheltenham in September 2032 while a Hills stood at the back, and had not been able to turn round.

Then it came back.

"Thank you for the tea," said Tarquin.

It was the old Rage line. *Too dear. Thank you for the tea.* The shop's way of saying the meeting was over, since 1947.

Jono picked up the paper packet of Darjeeling from the counter. It was very light.

At the door, with his hand on the brass handle and the bell over it about to ring, he stopped.

"Tarquin."

"Mr Hills."

"Tuesday. My committee. The Lords amendments."

"I'll be giving evidence," said Tarquin. "Yes."

"I'll be there," said Jono.

Tarquin looked at him across the shop, between the rows of little wooden drawers with their brass labels.

"I know you will," he said.

Jono opened the door. The bell rang. He went out into Warwick Way, into the grey November morning, with the street lamps going off one by one down the street, and walked to Westminster the long way, by the river.

* * *

He did not go back past Marsham Street.

He went down to the Embankment and along it, with the river high and brown beside him and the gulls standing on the wall facing the wind. He walked slowly. He had a packet of tea in his coat pocket that weighed a quarter of a pound and felt like more.

Two independent sources.

He thought about the morning in June when Clifford had gone into that shop, and bought a quarter of Darjeeling, and said, in passing, as he paid, *we're worried about the bill, old buddy, Basil's got a place, don't tell anybody*. And Tarquin had wrapped the tea in brown paper and twisted the ends and said *four pounds twenty, too dear*, and smiled.

And then he had walked up the road to the Home Office, and told them.

And then, in a room without windows in September, he had sat eight yards from Jono and said *two independent sources*, and not looked at him. Because he knew. He must have known. That the second source, the one who was not him, was somebody Rage had sent. That he was being used. That both of them were.

And he had said it anyway. And not looked up.

I passed that on too. I was a man in a cardigan passing things on.

Jono stopped on the Embankment, by the wall, with the river going past.

He took out the forty-first book. He wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *T.T. behind the counter, in a cardigan. A quarter of Darjeeling. Her chair.*

He thought about what he had not said. About a minute written in advance. About a word that a woman with grey in her hair had said at a window: *mine.*

Did not tell him.

And then, because it was true, and because he had watched a man by an empty armchair not say a great many things, the way he himself had sat at the head of a table and not said them:

He did not tell me.

He closed the book, and put it in his pocket, with the tea.

Chapter 23 – *Callum*

Mon. 8 Nov. 2038. Talland Bay, the holiday park, van 14, 7.40 a.m. Callum Rowe. Alive. Card in his sock. "He stood outside. All night. He didn't knock."

The photograph came in at four minutes past nine on Bonfire Night, and Mrs Rowe did not see it until the Sunday morning, because she did not know how to look.

She rang Jo at ten past eight. She did not say hello.

"There's a new one," she said. "On the tablet. In his album. On Friday night." Her voice was very high and very fast. "It's fireworks. Over a harbour. It's not here. It's not Paignton. It's somewhere else." She stopped. "He took it. Jo. It's his. Nobody else puts things in there. It's him."

Jo was at the kitchen table on Abbey Road in her dressing gown with a cup of coffee. She put the coffee down.

"Don't touch it," she said. "Don't touch anything. I'm coming."

* * *

It was a good photograph. That was the first thing she noticed, sitting on Mrs Rowe's sofa in Foxhole at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning with the tablet on her knee and Mrs Rowe in the armchair across the room with her hands over her mouth.

Callum had an eye. She had seen it in the photographs of the screens: even at button height, even at an angle, even at three in the morning, they had been framed. This one was framed. A harbour at night, from

above, from a hillside. A river running down into it between steep banks of houses with their lights on. A long stone pier going out into black water, curved at the end like a fishhook. Boats in the harbour, small, with their masts. And over it all, three rockets bursting at once, gold and green and white, lighting up the whole of the little town below them, and reflected in the water.

Friday 5 November 2038. 21.04.

She knew the pier. Everybody in Devon knew the pier, or one like it. But that curve at the end, like a hook, or the neck of a banjo...

"Looe," she said.

Mrs Rowe took her hands away from her mouth.

"We used to go there," she said. "When he was little. On the bus. For the day. He loved the boats." She stared at the tablet. "Why would he send me that? Why would he, after eight months, when he hasn't..."

Jo looked at the photograph. At the rockets, and the harbour, and the lights of the town in the water.

"Because it was beautiful," she said, "and he wanted you to see it."

Mrs Rowe began to cry.

* * *

She did not tell the Super. Not yet. She would, later, and he would look at her for a long time over his glasses and say *you went on your own*, and she would say *yes, sir*, and he would say nothing else, which was worse.

She drove to Looe on the Sunday afternoon, along the A38, over the Tamar on the big bridge at Saltash, with the river grey and wide below her and Brunel's railway bridge beside her with a train going over it. She thought about her father's people, on three hills in the dark on Friday night, seeing the whole of this country lit up. He had not told her. She knew there was something. She had seen it in his face on the Saturday, on the phone, when she rang and he did not ring back.

She did not know what they had seen. She did not need to. She had a photograph of a harbour.

* * *

Looe in November was shut.

The cafés had their shutters down and the gift shops had their blinds drawn and the car park by the river was empty except for three cars and a lot of gulls. The fishing boats were in. The tide was out, and the river ran thin and grey between the mud banks, and the long pier with its hook at the end stood up out of the mud like a bone.

She found where he had stood to take the photograph in an hour. It was not hard. The angle, and the height, and the way the river came down into the harbour. A lane going up the hill on the western side of the town, above the harbour, steep, with a bench at a bend in it and a view down over everything. She stood by the bench in the wind at four o'clock and held up the tablet and the photograph was the view, exactly, except there were no rockets.

She looked at where the lane went.

Up. West. Out of the town, along the cliffs.

She walked it. Two miles, in the wind, along a lane with high hedges and the sea on the left, grey, with the light going. Past a farm. Past a

church on its own in a field. Down a long hill to a little bay, a cove, with a beach of grey sand and rocks and the sea coming in white, and a café shut for the winter, and, up the valley behind the beach, a holiday park.

There was a sign at the gate, painted, peeling. A name she knew.

TALLAND BAY HOLIDAY PARK. CLOSED FOR THE SEASON.

She stood at the gate in the dusk for a long time, looking at the name.

* * *

Fifty caravans, in rows, on terraces going up the side of the valley, under a hill of gorse. White and cream and pale green, with their curtains drawn and their gas bottles disconnected and their steps taken away for the winter. Dark. All of them.

Except one.

Number fourteen. On the top row, at the end, under the gorse. With its curtains drawn, and its steps taken away like the others. But a thread of light at the edge of one curtain, at the end, where the curtain did not quite meet the frame. And a bicycle, under the van, between the wheels, hidden, with a black tarpaulin over it that had blown half off in the wind.

Jo stood at the bottom of the terraces in the dusk and looked at the bicycle.

She did not go up.

She went back to the car, which she had left at the church, two miles back, and sat in it in the dark with the engine off, and rang the Super, and told him. All of it. The photograph. Looe. The bench. The lane. The gate. The name on it. The light at the edge of the curtain.

The Super did not say anything for a long time.

"You went on your own," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Another silence.

"In the morning," he said. "First light. Not tonight. Two uniforms from Liskeard at the gate, out of sight. You go up on your own, because he knows your face from the papers, and he'll open the door to a woman before he'll open it to a man." A pause. "And Jo."

"Sir."

"If there's anybody else there," said the Super, "anybody, a car, a man walking a dog, anybody at all who isn't him, you turn round and you walk back down that hill and you don't look at them. Understand?"

Jo looked out of the car window at the church in its field in the dark.

"Yes, sir," she said.

* * *

She slept in the car. She did not sleep.

At half past six she drove back to the gate of the holiday park and parked by the café, and a police car from Liskeard came down the lane behind her with its lights off and parked in the lay-by at the bottom of the valley, where it could not be seen from the vans. Two constables, young, sleepy, with coffees. She went over and spoke to them through the window. Then she walked up through the terraces, in the grey light, between the rows of dark caravans, to the top row, at the end, under the gorse.

Number fourteen.

The thread of light at the edge of the curtain was still there. The bicycle was still under the van.

There was nobody else. She had looked. Down the valley, up the hill, along the lane. Nobody walking a dog. No car. A gull on the roof of the café. The sea coming in white on the beach.

She stood at the door of the caravan. The steps were gone, so the door was at the height of her chest. She knocked on it, quietly, three times.

Nothing.

"Callum," she said. Not loudly. "It's Jo Hills. Devon and Cornwall Police. I'm on my own." She waited. "Your mum's all right. She got your fireworks."

A long silence.

Then a sound inside. Feet. Somebody coming down the length of the van, slowly, the floor creaking. The curtain at the end window moving, a crack. An eye.

Then the door opened.

* * *

He was thinner than his photographs. That was the first thing. A tall young man with his hair grown long and a beard he had not meant to grow, in a fleece with a hole in the sleeve, very pale. Twenty-four, and looking older, and younger, both at once, the way people look who have not slept properly for a long time.

He looked down at her from the doorway, at the height of his knees.

"How did you find me?" he said.

"You sent your mum a photograph."

He shut his eyes.

"I know," he said. "I know. I'm an idiot. I know." He opened them. "It was Bonfire Night. We always used to... and I was sitting on that bench above the harbour, and they all went up at once, and it was so..." He stopped. "I just wanted her to see it. I didn't think. I thought, nobody looks at that album. Nobody knows it's there."

"I know it's there," said Jo.

"Yes," said Callum. "And so does he."

Jo did not move.

"He came," said Callum. "That night. Friday. After." His voice had gone very quiet and very flat. "About two in the morning. I heard a car, down by the café. And then nothing. And then footsteps. Coming up through the vans. Slowly. Not looking for which one. Like he knew." He swallowed. "And they stopped. Outside. There." He pointed at the grass at the foot of the door, a yard from where Jo was standing. "And he stood there."

"Did he knock?"

"No," said Callum. "He stood there. All night. Till it got light. I sat on the floor in there with my back against the door and I could hear him breathing." He was shaking. "He didn't knock. He didn't say anything. He didn't try the door. He just stood there, so I'd know he was there. And at six, when it got light, he went. I heard the car." He looked down at Jo. "He wanted me to know he could. That's all. That he'd found me. That he could, any time he liked."

Jo stood on the wet grass at the foot of the caravan door, a yard from where a man had stood all night, and felt the back of her neck go cold.

"Did you see him?" she said.

"I looked," said Callum. "Through the crack. In the curtain. At four. There was a moon." He shook his head. "I could see there was a man. Standing. I could see his jacket. I could see his hands, in his pockets." He stopped. "I couldn't see his face. I looked straight at it. I couldn't see it."

* * *

She took him down to the café, where the two constables from Liskeard had found the key under a pot and put the kettle on.

He sat at a table by the window with a blanket round him and a mug of tea in both hands, and looked at the sea, and talked. For two hours. Jo wrote it down. All of it. In the fourth book, in her round upright hand, as fast as she could go.

A man in a pub in Paignton in September 2037. Not Bailey's; one of the others, by the harbour. Pleasant. Ordinary. *You work nights at the glass place, don't you.* A drink. Then another, a week later. Then an envelope. Then the button, in a box, and the instructions for the app, and the storage company in Cardiff, and *Thursdays, Callum, only Thursdays*.

Three thousand a month. In cash. In an envelope, left in the glovebox of the BMW in the car park at the station, once a month, after he bought the BMW. He never saw who left it.

"I didn't think it was wrong," said Callum. "Not at first. It was screens. Numbers. I thought it was a rival company. Industrial stuff. I thought, everybody does it." He looked at his tea. "And then in February the

numbers changed. On the screens. Something new. And the man in the pub said *keep going, keep going, this is the important bit*, and he was excited. He was never excited. And I thought..." He stopped. "I thought, *this isn't a company*."

"And then the gate," said Jo.

Callum looked at her.

"You saw the car," said Jo. "At the gate. At one minute to six on the fifth of March. Under the plane tree. It's in your last photograph."

He did not say anything for a long time.

"It was waiting for me," he said. "I knew. The moment I saw it. I'd seen it before, outside the pub, the first night. I don't know how I knew. I knew it was waiting for me. That I'd done what they wanted, and they'd got the important bit, and now I was just..." He stopped. "Somebody who knew."

"So you turned left."

"I turned left," said Callum. "Towards Preston." He looked at her. "I was going to the MP. Your dad. I'd seen him on the front, walking, Fridays. I knew he lived up the hill in Preston. I thought, he was a copper, he'll know what to do, I'll knock on his door at six in the morning and tell him everything." He looked down at the table. "And at the bottom of the hill, by the beach huts, I looked back. And the car was behind me. Not close. Just there. With its lights off."

"And you kept going."

"I kept going. Past Preston. Past Paignton. I didn't stop. I rode to Totnes and got on a train with my bike, and I got off at Liskeard, and I rode down here, and the vans were empty, and I broke in." He breathed.

"And I've been here eight months, living on tins from the shop in Looe, and I've never once been on that album till Friday." He put his hand down, under the table, to his ankle. "And I've had this."

He took off his sock, at the café table, with the two constables from Liskeard pretending not to watch. Inside it, against his ankle, in a little plastic bag, was a memory card the size of a fingernail.

"Everything," he said. "Every photo. Every envelope; I photographed every one before I opened it. The man in the pub, from across the bar, from my phone, in the dark." He put it on the table in front of her. "You can't see his face in that one either. I've looked at it a thousand times."

* * *

The case went to London on the Tuesday, and stopped there on the Friday.

Jo watched it stop. She sat in the Super's office in Paignton with the door shut while he rang people. People in Exeter. People in London. People whose names he did not say. And every one of them said the same thing, in different words, the way water finds the same level whatever shape of glass you pour it into.

A young man had photographed his employer's screens and sold the photographs. That was a matter for his employer, and a civil court. The photographs had gone to a storage company in Cardiff, which had stored them, which was its business. The storage company was owned by a holding company in Guernsey, which was its business. The holding company was owned by a partnership of consultants in Great Smith Street, which advised a great many clients on a great many things, and was not obliged to say which, and had not been asked by anybody with the power to ask.

The man in the pub could not be identified. The man at the caravan door could not be identified. The car under the plane tree could not be identified.

There was nothing she could prove.

There was everything she could write down.

"It stops at Great Smith Street," said the Super, on the Friday, at six o'clock, putting the phone down for the last time. "It was always going to." He looked at her across his desk. "You know that."

"Yes, sir."

"Callum goes home to his mother. He keeps his head down. We put a car past the house twice a night for a month." He took his glasses off. "And you write it all down. And you keep it somewhere safe." He looked at her. "And now, I think, you tell your father."

* * *

She did it on the Friday night.

He was home. She drove up the hill to Preston at nine, and parked outside the flat, and sat in the car for a long time. Then she went up the steps and rang the bell, and he opened the door in his shirtsleeves with a pair of reading glasses on his forehead, and looked at her face, and stood back to let her in.

She did not sit down. She stood in the middle of his kitchen with her coat on and took the fourth book out of her inside pocket, black, with the elastic round it, and held it out to him.

He looked at it.

"Not my hand," said Jo. "Mine." She held it out. "You can hear it now. You said, when I could. When you could hear it." She did not look away from him. "Read it."

He took it.

He did not open it at once. He stood in his kitchen holding his daughter's pocketbook in both hands, the way you hold a thing somebody has made for you, and looked at it for a long time.

Jo thought: *Nobody's ever done this. In a hundred and forty years. Not Jack to Johnny. Not Johnny to Douglas. Not Douglas to him. Nobody has ever handed another Hills their book and said read it.*

Then he took his glasses off his forehead, and put them on, and sat down at the kitchen table, and opened it, and read.

She watched him. She watched him read *Corran*, and *Westway*, and *Hollis Grey*. She watched him read *Edward Hollis, c.35, special adviser to W.W.* She watched his face, which did not change at all, the way it never did.

And then she watched it change.

He was looking at a line near the bottom of a page. He put his finger on it. He looked up at her.

"I've seen him," he said. "In the gallery. In July. At half past one in the morning. Writing every time I spoke." He looked back at the page. "And in the Lobby. In September. With his hand on White's back." He was quiet. "I didn't know his name."

"Now you do," said Jo.

He looked at her for a long time across the kitchen table.

Then he reached into his own inside pocket, and took out the forty-first book, and opened it at a page in July, and turned it round, and pushed it across the table to her.

Gallery, R. side, end of row. M., c.35, tablet. Writes when I speak.

Jo looked at it.

Two books, open, side by side, on a kitchen table in Preston. One in square capitals. One in a round upright hand. Two halves of the same man, written down four months apart, by two people who could not tell each other.

"Well," said her father quietly. "Now we've both read it."

Chapter 24 – *Payload*

Fri. 24 Dec. 2038. Preston, the kitchen, 9.02 p.m. J. here. C.D. rang from Florida. One word: "Lit." J. wound the watch at ten.

The plane was grey, and it had no name on it, and it came in over the sea from the west at half past seven on a Saturday morning at the end of November, very low, with its lights on, and landed on the long runway at Newquay as if it did it every day.

Jono watched it from the door of Hangar Three.

It was the kind of plane he had seen on the news and never in his life up close. Big. High-winged. Four propellers. A ramp at the back that came down onto the concrete like a drawbridge. On the tail, very small, a flag he knew, and a number, and nothing else.

"Air Force," said Clifford, beside him, with his hands in his coat pockets. "Out of Mildenhall. On a training flight." He did not smile. "It's training. It's training for a lot of things."

"Does anybody know what's on it?"

"The pilot knows there's a box," said Clifford. "The loadmaster knows the box is heavy for its size. Some colonel in Suffolk knows a man in Washington asked him for a favour." He watched the ramp come down. "Nobody knows what's in it. Nobody's going to ask. That's what favours are."

* * *

Tamsin carried it out herself.

She had not let anybody else touch it for three weeks. She had kept it in its steel case in a safe in the corner of the hangar that she had brought down from Goonhilly in the back of her own car, and she had sat with it every night, she told Jono, on the steel bench by the racks, with a flask, the way a man sits with a sick animal.

"It sang," she said.

They were standing at the door of the hangar with the case between them, in the cold, waiting for the airmen to come across the concrete. Tamsin had her woolly hat on and a scarf round her face, and her eyes, over the scarf, were red.

"On the night," she said. "When it was on. I didn't tell anybody. I didn't know how. The dish. When I pointed it up and put that thing in the path, the dish..." She stopped. "Hummed. Not the motors. The dish. The whole thing. Like a wineglass when you run your finger round the rim. For an hour. Very quiet. You'd only hear it if you put your hand on the mount." She looked at Jono. "I put my hand on the mount. For an hour. I couldn't take it off."

Jono did not say anything.

"And when I turned it off," said Tamsin, "it stopped. And I've been sitting with it every night since. In the safe. And it doesn't hum in the safe." She looked down at the case. "It's waiting. That's what it feels like. Like a dog by a door."

Two airmen came across the concrete from the plane. Young, in green, with a trolley. They stopped in front of the hangar door and looked at the woman in the woolly hat and the steel case at her feet, and one of them said, very politely, "Ma'am."

Tamsin picked the case up.

She did not put it on the trolley. She carried it. Across the concrete, in both arms, against her chest, the way Rani had carried it the length of the cellar, the way Ania had carried a bag up a road above the cliffs in the dark. The two airmen walked on either side of her with the empty trolley, not quite knowing what to do. Up the ramp, into the plane.

She came out again a minute later without it.

She stood at the bottom of the ramp for a moment with her arms empty. Then she walked back across the concrete to the hangar, and past Jono, and in, and he heard her sit down on the steel bench by the racks, and did not go in after her.

* * *

The ramp came up. The engines started, one, and then the next, and the next, a roar that came across the airfield and went through Jono's chest and made the hangar doors shake. The plane turned, slowly, at the end of the runway, and stood there with its engines going, and then it went.

Along the runway. Faster. Off the ground. Up, over the cliff at the end of the airfield, over the sea, banking, very slowly, out to the west, into the grey, getting smaller.

Clifford watched it until it was gone.

"Delaware," he said. "Then a truck. Then Florida." He took his hands out of his pockets. "There's a building near the Cape. My friend's company. A room in the building with a lot of glass in it. They put the lens in the room, and they read it." He looked at Jono. "Not copy it. You can't copy it. Rani's right; it took nine weeks and a cellar and a thing out of the sky to grow that one. You read it. Every way the light goes through it. Every change. And you write that into the boxes."

"The boxes on the satellites."

"Eighty of them on the eighteenth," said Clifford. "Off the Cape. Then a hundred and twenty in January, and on, and on, every batch, till there's one on every bird." He was quiet. "The lens stays in the room. Teaching. The boxes go up, and listen, and learn. And on Christmas Eve, at nine o'clock our time, my friend's going to send the boxes on the first eighty one word."

"What word?"

Clifford almost smiled.

"*Now*," he said. "Same as Tamsin."

* * *

December went the way Decembers went in Westminster.

The Lords had given the bill a second reading on the eighth of November, without a division, and sent it to a committee of the whole House, which would begin in January. Old men and old women in red benches, going through it clause by clause. White was relaxed about it. He said so, in the tea room, to anybody who would listen. *They'll fiddle with it. They always do. Then it'll come back to us, and we'll put it right, and it'll pass.* He said it pleasantly, and he believed it, and so did everybody who heard him.

Jono sat at the head of the table in the room without windows on Tuesday mornings and asked his questions. Tarquin came on the fourteenth, to give evidence on the Lords amendments, and sat at the far end of the table, eight yards away, and read his paper, and did not look at Jono. Once, at the end, gathering his folder, he did. A look. Two seconds. Then he squared the folder with two fingers and went out.

Jono did not write anything about it.

On the eighteenth, a Saturday, he was at the kitchen table in Preston at seven, reading the last page of a statutory instrument about fishing quotas, when his phone moved in his pocket. A text. A number with no name.

Up. All 80. Clean.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then he went back to the fishing quotas.

* * *

Jo came on Christmas Eve.

It was the first time. Seven Christmases since a night in a ring in Ellacombe, and she had spent every one of them in Exeter, with her mother and her aunt on Pennsylvania Road, because that was where she had always spent Christmas, and because neither of them had quite known how to ask. And then in the first week of December, on the phone, on a Friday, she had said, quite suddenly, in the middle of telling him about something else:

Mum says I should come to you for Christmas Eve. She says it's time.

He had not said anything for a long moment.

She says you'll do a terrible dinner, said Jo. *And that I'm to eat it anyway.*

So she came. At six o'clock, up the hill to Preston, in the dark, in her black coat, with a bag of presents and a bottle of wine and a box of mince pies from the bakery on Torbay Road. She stood on the step when he opened the door and looked at him, and at the flat behind him, and at the little artificial tree on the kitchen table with its lights on, that

he had bought in Argos on Wednesday because he had not had a tree since 2009.

"Oh, Dad," she said.

"It's terrible," said Jono.

"It's terrible," agreed Jo, and came in.

* * *

He did a terrible dinner. She ate it. They sat at the kitchen table with the little tree between them, and the window looking out over the dark bay with the lights of Paignton going round it, and drank the wine, and did not talk about anything that mattered for two hours. Football. Her mother. The old man in Preston that he still went to see on Sunday afternoons, who was ninety-six now and had asked after her by name. Shannon, who had won a national title in October and been on the front of the *Herald Express* with Eric, at seventy-six, standing behind her in the photograph, very straight.

At ten to nine she said, "You keep looking at your phone."

"Do I?"

"You've looked at it eleven times since eight." She did not look away from him. "I counted. That's what you taught me."

He put the phone face down on the table.

"Something's happening," said Jo. "Tonight. Isn't it."

He did not answer.

"You can't tell me."

"No," said Jono. "Not this one. Not yet." He looked at her. "I'm sorry."

She looked at him for a long time across the little tree.

"That's all right," she said. "I've got things I can't tell you." She picked up a mince pie, and looked at it, and put it down. "We'll swap. One day. When we can both hear it."

He did not trust himself to say anything to that.

* * *

At two minutes past nine, the phone rang.

It was face down on the table, and it went round in a little circle on the wood with the vibration, the way phones do, and Jo watched it go round and did not reach for it.

Jono picked it up.

"Clifford."

He could hear Florida. He did not know how he knew it was Florida. Something in the line, warm, a long way off. A room with a lot of glass in it. Voices behind Clifford, a lot of them, low, the way people talk in a room when something has happened that they are not sure they are allowed to be pleased about yet.

Clifford did not say anything for a moment. Jono could hear him breathing.

Then he said one word.

"*Lit*."

And put the phone down.

* * *

Jono sat at the kitchen table with the phone in his hand.

He looked at Jo, across the little tree, with its lights going on and off, red and green and gold.

There was a lamp over her head. There always was. Steady. Bright. The lamp of a young woman who had been in the bay since the August she was twenty-one and had never once, so far as he knew, asked to see it. It had been there at eight o'clock. It was there at two minutes past nine. It looked exactly the same.

Of course it did. They were in Preston. In the bay. Between Hope's Nose and Berry Head. The lamps had been on here for ten years. Nothing that happened in a room near the Cape in Florida could make a light in a kitchen in Preston any brighter than it already was.

He looked out of the window at the bay. At the lights of Paignton and Torquay and Brixham going round the black water. At the long dark shape of Berry Head going out into the sea, and the lighthouse on the end of it.

Round, and light, and dark.

Somewhere above it, very high, beyond the cloud, eighty small boxes on eighty satellites were going round the Earth every ninety-six minutes, listening to a word.

And somewhere, far outside the bay, in London, in Exeter, in a flat in Kennington with nobody in it, in a city in Singapore where it was five in

the morning, every head had a light over it now, and nobody could see it.

Almost nobody.

"What's lit?" said Jo.

Jono put the phone down on the table, face down.

"Something nobody can see," he said.

Jo looked at him for a long time.

Then she nodded, slowly, the way you nod at a thing you have decided to put somewhere safe and take out later. And she picked up her glass, and held it up, across the little tree, the way you lift a glass to somebody across a room.

"Happy Christmas, Dad," she said.

* * *

At ten o'clock she wound the watch.

She did it at the kitchen table, with the little tree between them. She took it out of the pocket of her jeans, the plain gold hunter with the crack across the glass, and opened it on her palm, and took the little key out of the back, and wound it. Carefully. Not too far. The way Jack had, and Johnny, and Douglas, and him, every night for a hundred and forty-two years.

He watched her do it. He had not seen her do it before. He had imagined it, every night at ten o'clock, for seven years, with his own hand going to his pocket out of habit and finding nothing.

She closed the watch, and put it back in her pocket, and looked up, and saw him watching.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing," said Jono.

He took out the forty-first book, and wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *J. here.* What he had been told, and who told him. *C.D. rang from Florida. One word: "Lit."*

He did not write what it meant. He did not write what he had felt, at two minutes past nine, sitting at a kitchen table in the bay, looking at a light over his daughter's head that had not changed at all.

He wrote the last thing he had seen.

J. wound the watch at ten.

Chapter 25 – *Underground*

> *Mon. 10 Jan. 2039. Bayswater, the platform for Victoria, 8.41 a.m. R. on the bench. "Everybody." Members' Lobby, 2.30 p.m. Looked round. Wrote nothing.*

Vicky rang at six on Christmas morning, and it was two in the afternoon where she was, and she was crying.

Jono had not been asleep. He had been lying in the dark in the flat in Preston with the curtains open and the bay outside going from black to grey, thinking about eighty small boxes going round the Earth. Jo was asleep in the other room. He had made up the bed for her on Christmas Eve with sheets he had bought on Wednesday at the same time as the tree.

He took the phone into the kitchen and shut the door.

"I'm in Joo Chiat," said Vicky. Her voice was not precise. Not anything like precise. "At Basil's. On the balcony. I came out here on the twentieth for Christmas, and I didn't sleep last night, and at five this morning, our time, I came out onto the balcony to watch the sun come up over the shophouses, and it was eleven o'clock last night your time, and..." She stopped. "They're all lit, Jono."

He did not say anything.

"Everybody," said Vicky. "The aunties going to the market. The man at the coffee shop on the corner pulling his shutter up. The kids. The old men in their singlets on the five-foot way with their newspapers. Every head on Joo Chiat Road. Seven thousand miles from the bay." She breathed. "I've been in Singapore a hundred times since 2028. I grew

up here. I've never once seen a lamp here. I'd stopped thinking about it. You get off the plane at Changi and it's just people again." She stopped. "And this morning I stood on Basil's balcony and the whole street came on. Like the bay. Like Goodrington in 2028. Every one."

"Can anybody else see it?"

"No," said Vicky. "I asked Grace. I asked her if she could see anything strange about the man at the coffee shop. She looked at me as if I'd gone mad." A pause. "It's only me. I'm the only person in Singapore who can see it." She was quiet. "It's the loneliest thing I've ever done."

* * *

She told him about Mei Ling at a quarter past six.

She had not meant to, Jono thought. She had rung to tell him the street, and the aunties, and the coffee shop. But she kept coming back, and at a quarter past six she stopped talking about the street and was quiet for a long time, and then she said:

"Mei Ling came out. Onto the balcony. In her pyjamas. At half past six. To see if it was Christmas yet." Another pause. "She's nine. She's got a lamp like her father's. Very bright. Nearly white. Very steady. And her grandmother's eyes."

Jono waited.

"And a cord," said Vicky. "Going out of the top of it. Thin. Like the ones Rani saw on Kit Hill. The kite strings. Going up out of the balcony, over the shophouses, away." She swallowed. "Not to Basil. Not to Grace. Not to anybody in Singapore. North-west. Very long. Very thin. Further than I could follow. Further than anything I've ever seen."

"North-west."

"Over the sea," said Vicky. "Over India. Towards Europe." She was quiet. "I stood on the balcony with my coffee and followed it with my eyes as far as it went, and it went to the edge of the sky, and over it." She breathed. "She's nine years old, Jono. And she answers to somebody on the other side of the world."

Jono stood in his kitchen in Preston with the phone at his ear and looked out at the grey bay.

He thought about a park in Tiong Bahru in 2031, and a woman in a straw hat lifting a child out of a pushchair three strides ahead of a man with a newspaper.

He thought about a tunnel under the Elbe.

"Don't tell Basil," he said.

"I wasn't going to."

"Don't tell Grace."

"No."

"Don't tell anybody, Vicky." He looked at the bay. "Not yet. Write it down. Where it goes. Which way. And then put it somewhere safe."

* * *

Annie rang on Boxing Day, from Plymouth.

She had gone up on the Hoe at four in the afternoon, she said, in the last of the light, on purpose, by herself, the way you go to a grave. She had stood by the lighthouse, the old red-and-white one they had moved up from the Eddystone a hundred and fifty years ago, with the Sound below her and the breakwater and the sea going out grey to the horizon.

"And I looked at the city," said Annie. "Close. Not from a hill forty miles away, the way we did in November, with the glass. From the Hoe. With people walking past me. Families. Dogs. A man with a pram. Every one of them with a light over their head, a yard from me." She stopped. "In Plymouth. On Boxing Day. Where nobody's ever had a light."

"How did it feel?"

Annie did not answer for a long time.

"Like walking into a room where everybody's undressed," she said at last. "And they don't know. And you can't tell them." She breathed. "I could see everything. Who was kind. Who was tired. Who was lying to the woman he was with. A boy with a bright lamp, very bright, walking behind his father with a dim one and looking at the back of his head as if he hated him." She was quiet. "In the bay you get used to it. Everybody can see. It's fair. Out here, it's only me. It's not fair. It's like reading somebody's post."

"Yes," said Jono.

"Rani's going to London," said Annie. "In the new year. Did she tell you?"

"She told me."

"Tell her," said Annie, "to sit down first."

* * *

Rani came up on the Monday the House came back. The tenth of January.

She came on the early train from Paignton, the 5.48, and Jono met her at Paddington at a quarter past eight, under the clock, because she had asked him to. She did not say why. She did not need to.

She came off the train in her big Rage coat with the hood up, with a small bag, and stood on the concourse under the great iron roof among a thousand people going to work, and looked at the floor.

She had not looked up since the train left the bay. He could tell.

"Come on," said Jono.

He did not take her up into the street. He took her down. Into the Underground, by the Praed Street entrance, down the stairs, through the barriers, onto the platform for the Circle and the District. Towards Victoria, and Westminster.

She walked beside him with her eyes on the tiles.

The platform was crowded. Monday morning, the second week of January, everybody back at work, everybody grey, everybody looking at their phones. A train came in, and the doors opened, and they got on, and it was full, and they stood, in the middle of the carriage, holding the rail, pressed in among people, with the doors closing behind them and the train pulling out into the dark of the tunnel.

Rani held the rail and looked at her feet.

"Rani," said Jono.

She lifted her head.

* * *

He watched her.

He watched her face do what it had done on Kit Hill in November, in the dark, with the fireworks going up. Only closer. Only faster. Only in a carriage on the Circle line with fifty people pressed round her in their coats, a yard away, six inches, near enough to touch.

Her eyes went wide. Her mouth opened. She looked at the woman in front of her, who was reading a book. At the air above the woman's head. Then at the man beside the woman, in a suit, with a phone. Then at the boy beyond him, in a school blazer, with headphones. Then along the whole length of the carriage, slowly, the way you look along a row of paintings on a wall, at every head.

She did not breathe.

The woman with the book looked up, and saw Rani staring at the air over her head, and frowned, and looked away.

Rani's hand on the rail had gone white at the knuckles.

The train came out of the tunnel into the grey light of Bayswater, and slowed, and stopped, and the doors opened.

Rani let go of the rail and got off.

Jono went after her.

* * *

She sat down on the first bench on the platform.

She sat with her bag on her knees and her hands round it, and she was shaking. Not crying. Not yet. Shaking, the way Ania had shaken on the steel bench in the hangar at Newquay after five miles of wind.

The train went. The platform emptied. A few people, waiting for the next one, looked at her and away.

Jono sat down beside her.

He did not say anything. He sat beside her on a bench on the platform at Bayswater at twenty to nine on a Monday morning in January, and waited.

"Everybody," said Rani.

He waited.

"Everybody," she said again. "Every single one. In that carriage. On that platform. On the stairs. In the street up there." She looked up, at the roof of the station, at the grey sky through the open cutting. "Eight million people. In this city. And every one of them..." She stopped. "And none of them know. None of them. They're all walking round with their lights on, and nobody's ever told them, and nobody can see." She put her hand over her mouth. "That woman with the book. Her lamp was nearly white. Nearly as bright as the old woman's in Bailey's. And she was reading a terrible book, and she was sad, I could see she was sad, it was in the grain, and nobody on that whole train could see that she was..." She stopped.

"Rani."

"I know." She took her hand away. "I know. I'm all right." She was quiet. "Annie said sit down first. She was right."

* * *

They sat on the bench for twenty minutes. Three trains came in and went out. Rani did not get on any of them. She sat with her bag on her knees and looked at the people getting on and off, at the air over their

heads, and every so often her lips moved, as if she were counting, or reading.

On the fourth train she stood up.

"There's something else," she said. "In the carriage. I saw it before I got off." She did not look at him. "The cords."

"Kite strings?"

"Thousands of them," said Rani. "Going out of every head in the carriage. Up through the roof. Through the ground. Into the city. Most of them going a little way, and coming down. Like he said. Like in Devon." She stopped. "And some of them not."

"Going to Marsham Street."

"Some of them," said Rani. "Some of them to Marsham Street. I could feel it. Off to the south-east, like a weight." She looked at him. "But not all of them, Jono. That's what I saw, before I got off. In one carriage. On one train." She swallowed. "Some of them to Marsham Street. And some to the City. Some to the river, down past the Tower, a big one, like a knot of rope. And some north. And some up. Out. Over the sea. East." She looked down the line, into the dark of the next tunnel. "It's not one knot. In London. It's lots. All tied together. Like a net."

Jono did not say anything for a long time.

"In Devon there was one," said Rani quietly. "One knot. Forty-one strings. I thought that was it. I thought that was Eden." She shook her head. "That was the corner of it. That was one square of the net."

The fifth train came in.

She got on.

* * *

He left her at Westminster, at the top of the stairs by the river, at half past nine. She was going to walk. She said she wanted to walk across the bridge and along the South Bank by herself, in the open, with the people, and look. She said she would ring him.

She did not look back.

Jono went into the Palace by the Members' entrance, and up to the Library, and sat at the table by the window over the river, and read the last page of the Order Paper. He did not take anything in. At half past eleven he went down for the start of business. At half past two he came out of the chamber, at the end of questions, into the Members' Lobby, with the crowd.

He stopped under the lantern.

The lobby was full. The way it always was on the first Monday back. Six hundred Members, and the officials, and the doorkeepers in their tailcoats, and the journalists at the edges by the Whips' offices, all talking at once. Under the dim lantern. With the statues of the old Prime Ministers standing round the walls, looking down.

He stood in the middle of it, with his hands in his pockets.

He looked round the lobby.

At the faces. At the hands. At the people by the doors, and the people by the statues, and the knot of Government Members by the door to the Aye lobby, laughing about something. At a young man with a very good haircut talking to a Minister of State by the statue of Lloyd George.

And at the air above their heads.

He stood there for a long time.

Nobody noticed. Nobody ever noticed the Member for Torbay standing still in the middle of a room. He had stood still in the middle of rooms for twenty-five years on doorsteps, and ten in Parliament, and nobody had ever once asked him what he was looking at.

Hannah Price came past, and stopped, and looked at him.

"You all right?"

"Yes," said Jono.

She looked at him a moment longer. Then she looked where he was looking. Round the lobby. Over the heads.

"What are you looking at?" she said.

Jono did not answer.

He took out the forty-first book, and his pencil, and opened it to a clean page, and wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Members' Lobby, 2.30 p.m.*

Then he looked round the lobby once more. Slowly. All the way round. At every head.

He held the pencil on the page.

He wrote nothing.

He closed the book, and put it in his inside pocket, and went to his committee.

Chapter 26 – *Does He Have an Implant?*

> *Hansard, House of Commons, Wednesday 16 February 2039, Home Office questions. Mr Jonathan Hills (Torbay) (Ind): Will the Home Secretary tell the House why, on the third of this month, at a quarter past four in the afternoon, a contract for "strategic communications support" was awarded by his Department, without competition, to a firm in Great Smith Street whose senior partner was until recently his own special adviser? [Interruption.]*

The house in Chester Square had belonged to Eden for a hundred and ten years, and Karina Petrick had been in it four times, and every time it had been raining.

It was raining now. A thin February rain, coming down through the plane trees in the square and running off the black railings and the white stucco and the steps that went up to the black front door with its brass knocker in the shape of a hand. She stood on the bottom step at five to nine on a Wednesday night in a grey wool coat, with no umbrella, and looked up at the windows. Tall windows, three floors of them, all dark except one, on the first floor, at the front, where the curtains were drawn and a line of light came out at the edge.

The drawing room. Where they always met.

She had been summoned by a man she did not know, on a telephone she had kept clean for thirty years, which meant somebody had found it. She had thought about that all the way from Hamburg. She had thought about it on the plane and in the taxi from City Airport and on the walk across Belgravia in the rain.

Then she went up the steps, and knocked, with the brass hand.

* * *

There were three of them in the drawing room. She had known there would be.

Hollis stood by the door. The young man from the tunnel, with the good haircut and the copied smile. He opened the door to her himself and took her coat and said *Mrs Petrick* in his good German and she answered him in English, the way she had under the Elbe, and he smiled the smile.

William White sat in an armchair by the fire. She had never been in a room with him before. She had seen him on television. He was larger in a room, the way some men are. Pleasant. Grey at the sides. A whisky in his hand and his legs crossed and his tie loosened, at the end of a long day, at home among friends. He stood up when she came in. He did not have to. He did it beautifully.

"Mrs Petrick," he said. "Thank you for coming so far. On such a night."

And in the corner, by the tall window with the curtains drawn, in a straight-backed chair, with the lamp on the table beside him switched off so that his face was in the shadow, a man.

He did not stand up.

Karina did not look at him. She knew better. You did not look at that man. You let him be a shape in the corner of your eye, the way you let a step be a step in the dark. You did not try to see his face.

She had met him four times in her life. This was five.

* * *

White gave her a whisky. She held it and did not drink it. She sat where he showed her, on a sofa across the fire from him, very straight, with her hands round the glass, and waited.

"You'll have heard," said White, "about the Member for Torbay."

"I have heard a little."

"You've heard a little." White smiled. "Then let me tell you a little more. Since you know him. Since you know all of them, better than any of us." He swirled his whisky. "For nine years Jonathan Hills has been a good, honest, tiresome back-bench Member of Parliament who reads the last page of everything and loses every vote he cares about. I have enjoyed him enormously. He's the best opposition I've ever had. He fights fair and he fights hard and he always, always loses, and he knows it, and he does it anyway." He took a drink. "I like him. I wish I had a dozen like him on my side."

He put the glass down.

"And since Christmas," said White, "he has started to know things."

Karina did not move.

"Small things, at first," said White. "In January. He stood up at business questions and asked the Leader of the House about a meeting that had taken place at nine o'clock the night before, in my office, which was not in anybody's diary. He was told it had not happened. He sat down and said nothing. The next morning the minutes of it were on the front of the *Guardian*." He smiled, not pleasantly. "We have not found out how."

"And then?"

"And then the Lords," said White. "Committee stage. Clause by clause. And he has not been there; he can't be, he's not a peer. And yet three times now, the night before a vote in the other place, he has walked into the tea room in the Commons and told somebody, quite casually, over a cup of tea, how many peers would go into each lobby the next day." White looked at the fire. "Exactly. To the vote. Three times. My own whips can't do that. My own whips get it wrong by eight."

He picked up a sheet of paper from the table beside him and held it out.

"And then this," he said. "On Wednesday. At Home Office questions. To my face."

Karina took the paper. Hansard. A printed page. One question, near the bottom, marked in yellow.

...on the third of this month, at a quarter past four in the afternoon...

She read it twice.

"The time," said White softly. "He gave the House the time. A quarter past four. I signed that contract myself, at my desk, at a quarter past four on the third of February, with nobody in the room but Edward." He looked at Hollis, by the door, and Hollis did not look back. "And thirteen days later a back-bench independent stands up in the chamber and tells six hundred people what time I picked up my pen."

* * *

The room was very quiet.

The fire. The rain on the tall windows behind the curtains. The man in the corner, in the dark, not moving.

"I'll ask you what I've asked everybody," said White. "Since you know them." He leaned forward. "Does he have an implant?"

Karina looked at him.

"The Black Team," said White. "In Torbay. The three women. We know about them. We've known for years. They had something put into their heads in 2028 that lets them see more than anybody else can. We assume it's the same thing. The lights. The grades. Whatever it is." He spread his hands. "So. Has the Member for Torbay had one put into his? Is he walking about my department, my Lobby, my tea room, looking at the air over our heads and reading us like a book?"

From the door, very quietly, Hollis said: "It would explain everything, Home Secretary."

"It would," said White. "It would explain everything." He did not look at Hollis. He looked at Karina. "Mrs Petrick?"

* * *

Karina held the glass of whisky in both hands, with her thumbs over the rim, and looked at it.

She thought about a woman on a hill in Cornwall in November, in the dark, with fireworks going up all round her, that she had never seen and never would, and did not know existed. She thought about a letter in a cream envelope in the inside pocket of a jacket in a flat in Altona. She thought about a tunnel under the Elbe, and orange lamps going away into a point, and a face at the far end.

She thought about a girl of nine on a balcony in Joo Chiat.

She kept her face still. She had been keeping her face still since she was thirteen, on a station platform in Hamburg in January, in a thin coat, waiting for her grandmother's car. She was very good at it.

"No," she said.

White waited.

"It only works in Torbay," said Karina.

She said it quietly, in her even voice, an English with nothing in it, the voice she had used for fifty years to tell people things they would pay for.

"You know that," she said. "You proved it yourselves." She looked at Hollis, by the door. "At Southampton. In September. They tried to move it, and they couldn't, and they had to fake it. You opened the crate. You found glass." She looked back at White. "Whatever they have, it stays in the bay. Hope's Nose to Berry Head. It doesn't go anywhere. It can't." She put the glass down on the table beside her, untouched. "If the Member for Torbay had an implant, Home Secretary, it would be no use to him in Westminster. He'd be as blind as you are."

White looked at her for a long time.

Then he sat back in his chair. And laughed, quietly, the way a man laughs when he has been told what he already believed.

"That's what Edward said," said White. "That's what the service said. That's what I said." He picked up his whisky. "So he's just very, very good."

"He is a Hills," said Karina. "They write everything down. And then they listen. They have been doing it for a hundred and forty years." She folded her hands in her lap. "He has a great many friends, Home

Secretary. In your tea room. In the Lords. In your own department. People who were on a coach to Torbay in 2031 and came back different." She looked at the fire. "He does not need an implant. He only needs people to tell him things. And people tell him things. That is what he is for."

* * *

It was the man in the corner who spoke next.

Karina had known he would. She had felt him, the whole time, the way you feel a draught from a door you cannot see.

"Glass," he said.

His voice was pleasant. Level. No accent. Karina heard every word of it. And as each word ended, it went, like a wave going back down the shingle, and she could not have said, a moment later, what the voice had been like.

White turned his head. "What?"

"At Southampton," said the man in the corner. "I put my hand on it. In the foam. It was glass." He was quiet for a moment. "Good glass."

"Of course it was good glass," said White. "They grow glass at that campus. It's what they do. It's all they do."

"Yes," said the man in the corner. "That is what they do."

Nobody said anything.

Karina did not look at the corner. She looked at the fire, and kept her face still, and felt her heart go once, hard, under her ribs, like a fist on a door.

"It was very good glass," said the man in the corner. "Better than it needed to be. To fool a customs officer." He paused. "Somebody grew it. Very carefully. For a long time." Another pause. "I have been wondering why."

White waved his glass. "To fool us. Obviously. And it did, for about four minutes, until you put your hand on it."

"Yes," said the man in the corner. "Four minutes."

He did not say anything else.

But Karina felt him turn his head. In the dark, in the corner, by the curtained window. She did not look. She did not need to. She felt it, the way you feel a lamp swing round in a lighthouse and go across your face in the dark.

He was looking at her.

She sat on the sofa with her hands in her lap and her face still and let him look. For a long time. Longer than anybody had looked at her since a café on the Grand Harbour in Valletta in 2031, with a man in a funeral suit holding a cup he had not ordered.

Then the lamp swung away.

* * *

They talked about other things after that. The Lords. A clause that the bishops wanted to change. A peer from the Black Country, ninety-two, who had stood up in committee the week before and spoken for eleven minutes without notes about a coach trip, and been listened to in silence by the whole House. White was relaxed about it. *They'll fiddle with it. It'll come back to us. It'll pass.*

And the title. Not in so many words. Nobody in that room would ever say it in so many words. But Karina heard it under everything White said, the way you hear the sea under a town. The empty chair at the head of a table that nobody had sat in since October 2028, when the last person to hold it had stood up and walked away. Karina knew. She had been that person. White wanted it. He did not say so. He talked about *leadership*, and *the future*, and *who will be in a position to make the decisions that need to be made*, and looked at the corner, where the man in the dark sat with his hands on his knees and said nothing at all.

They did not like each other. Karina had known that since the tunnel. She had not known how much.

At a quarter to eleven Hollis brought her coat.

* * *

On the steps outside, in the rain, under the black front door with the brass hand, she stopped to button her coat.

The door opened behind her.

She did not turn round. She knew who it was. The draught from the door you could not see.

He came down the steps past her. Ordinary height. A dark jacket. Hands in his pockets. He stopped on the pavement, at the bottom, under a street lamp, in the rain, with his back to her, and looked across the square at the plane trees.

"Mrs Petrick," he said.

She buttoned the last button.

"Your granddaughter," he said, "is nine now."

Karina stood on the step and did not move.

"She was two," said the man, "in a park, in Tiong Bahru. I sent a man. A woman who was passing got there first." He did not turn round. "I have always wondered who."

The rain came down through the plane trees.

"I have never had a granddaughter," said the man, very pleasantly. "Or a daughter. Or a mother that I remember. Nobody ever wrote any of it down." He was quiet. "I find it interesting. What people will do. For blood."

Then he walked away across the square, under the plane trees, in the rain, and was gone.

* * *

Karina did not move from the step for a long time.

Then she went down it, and across the square the other way, and out into the lights of Ebury Street, and walked. She did not take a taxi. She walked to Victoria, and past it, and on, in the rain, with her coat buttoned to the throat and her hands in her pockets, the way she had walked away from a flower stall in a market in Tiong Bahru in 2031, unhurried, into the crowd.

She had lied to them. To all three of them. She had sat in their drawing room with their whisky in her hands and told them the one thing they most wanted to hear, in their own words, and they had believed it.

Two of them had.

I have been wondering why.

She walked on, through the wet streets, towards the river.

They would kill her for it. She had known that in the tunnel. She had thought it would be a long time. Ten years. Twenty.

She thought now that it might not be so long.

She found that she still did not mind.

Your granddaughter is nine now.

She minded that.

Chapter 27 – *Westminster*

> *Tues. 8 Mar. 2039. Whitehall, the Committee's room, 11.40 a.m. Witness: T.T. Asked him one question. He did not answer it. He went white. Nobody else at the table knew why.*

The phone went every night at ten past nine.

It had started in the second week of January, the week after Bayswater, and it had not stopped. Jono would be in the flat in Kennington with the radio on and the forty-first book open on the kitchen table, or in the Library, late, with the last page of something, or once, in February, in the back of a taxi in the rain on the Embankment. And at ten past nine his phone would move in his pocket, and it would be one of three numbers with no names.

Rani, on Mondays and Thursdays, from a room she had taken in a hotel in Pimlico, because she came up twice a week now on the 5.48 and went home on the last train, and in between she walked. Annie on Tuesdays, from Exeter, from Plymouth, from wherever she had been that day. Vicky on Wednesdays and Fridays, from Singapore, at five in the morning her time, before Basil was up.

They never said much. They did not need to. They called it the weather.

Fine in the City, Rani would say. *A front coming in off Marsham Street. A lot of wind round the Treasury.* Or: *The Lord from Shropshire. The one who sits by the door. His cord moved on Tuesday. It used to go to the Chief Whip in the Lords. It goes to Marsham Street now. Since about four o'clock on Tuesday afternoon.* Or, once, very quietly, at ten past nine on a Thursday in February: *Hannah Price is the brightest lamp in your whole building, Jono. Did you know?*

Brighter than anybody. I sat in the gallery this afternoon and watched her and I couldn't look at anybody else.

He wrote it down. Not what they said. The date, and the time, and *R. rang*, or *A.H.*, or *V.O.*, and *weather*. Nothing else. If anybody ever read the forty-first book, they would find a Member of Parliament who got a lot of phone calls about the weather.

* * *

On the first of March he walked into the tea room at a quarter to four and sat down opposite Hannah Price with a cup of tea from the urn, and said:

"Tomorrow. In the Lords. Amendment forty-one. Contents two hundred and three. Not Contents one hundred and ninety-nine."

Hannah put her cup down.

She did not say anything. She had stopped saying anything, in January, after the first time. She took out her tablet and wrote the numbers down, and the date, and turned the tablet face down on the table, and looked at him.

"Forty-one's the big one," she said. "The one that takes the schedule out."

"Yes."

"If it goes through, the bill goes back to the Commons without Studio Ania in it."

"Yes."

"And White puts it back in," said Hannah, "with his majority of ninety, and sends it up again, and the Lords have to decide whether to dig in." She looked at him. "Two hundred and three to a hundred and ninety-nine. Four."

"Four," said Jono.

"White's whips have it the other way. By six. I heard them in the corridor." She did not look away. "How?"

"I listen," said Jono.

Hannah looked at him for a long time across the table.

"I've sat next to you in this room for nine years," she said. "I've never once seen you listen to anybody in the House of Lords. You can't stand them."

"I listen to people who listen to them."

"Who?"

Jono drank his tea.

The next afternoon, at twenty past five, the Lords divided on amendment forty-one. Contents two hundred and three. Not Contents one hundred and ninety-nine.

Hannah found him in the Library at six. She did not sit down. She stood at the end of his table by the window over the river with her tablet in her hand, turned towards him, with the numbers on it from the day before, and the numbers from the Lords from twenty minutes ago, side by side.

She did not say anything at all.

Then she turned and went out.

* * *

He did not know, himself, some days, how he knew things.

That was the truth, and he never wrote it down, and he never said it. Most days he knew because the phone went at ten past nine and a woman's voice said *weather*. But not every day.

On the Thursday, the third of March, he was in the Members' Lobby at half past two, at the end of questions, under the lantern, with the crowd. And a Minister of State came past him, a young man from the Home Office, on his way to the chamber with a folder under his arm. Pleasant. Good suit. On White's side, in every sense, for three years.

He stopped to speak to somebody by the door. Jono did not hear what he said. He was ten feet away. He was looking at the statues.

And then Jono went into the chamber, and sat down on the cross benches below the gangway, and when the Minister stood up at the dispatch box twenty minutes later to make a statement about police numbers in the South West, Jono stood up after him and asked him, very politely, whether he had had a conversation the previous evening with the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall about the policing of a building on Union Street in Torquay.

The Minister looked at him.

He said he had not.

Jono sat down.

His phone had been on silent all day. He had not looked at it. He did not look at it then.

The Minister went on with his statement. But his hand, on the edge of the dispatch box, had closed, and Jono saw it, and so did half the House.

The next morning the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall issued a short statement, through her press office, confirming that she had spoken to the Minister of State by telephone at a quarter to eight on the evening of the second, at his request.

Jono read it in the Library at seven. He read it twice. He did not write anything about it.

He did not know how he had known. He sat at the table by the window over the river with the statement in front of him and tried to remember. A face, going past, under the lantern. A man stopping to speak to somebody by the door. Ten feet away.

That was all.

He sat there for a long time, looking at the river.

* * *

Tarquin came on the Tuesday.

The eighth of March. Ten o'clock. The room without windows, with the hum in the walls. Nine Members round the long table. The judge from the Lords at the far end, eighty-two now, with her glasses on a chain. Hannah Price on Jono's left, with her tablet face down.

The man with the list opened the inner door at two minutes to ten and said, "The witness, Chair," and Tarquin Talland came in.

He was thinner again. He had been thin in March; he was thinner now. The navy suit hung off him at the shoulders. He sat down in the witness

chair at the far end of the table, eight yards from Jono, and put a thin folder on the table in front of him, and squared it with two fingers, and looked at the judge, and at Hannah, and at each of the other Members in turn.

He did not look at Jono.

The paper was about the Lords amendments. What the service assessed would happen to the security of *the apparatus* if amendment forty-one survived. Tarquin took them through it. He was very good. He was always very good. An hour and a half of it, clause by clause, in his clipped correct voice, and the Members asked their questions, and he answered them, and nobody learned anything they did not already know.

At twenty to twelve the judge from the Lords looked at the clock and then at Jono, and Jono said, "Thank you, Mr Talland. Before you go. One question."

Tarquin looked at the point on the table a yard in front of Jono's hands.

"Chair."

"On the twenty-first of September last year," said Jono, "you gave this committee an assessment. About a crate. At Southampton. You told us the service had received information about it from two independent sources."

Tarquin did not move.

"I'd like to ask," said Jono, "whether one of those two sources was you."

* * *

Nobody round the table breathed.

Jono watched him. He watched the way he had watched faces on doorsteps for twenty-five years, and in this room for three: the mouth, the hands, the eyes. Not the air above the head. He did not look at the air above anybody's head in this room. He never had. He did not now.

Tarquin's face did not change.

His hands did not move on the folder.

And then, very slowly, from the collar of his shirt upwards, the colour went out of him. Out of his neck. Out of his jaw. Out of his cheeks, and his mouth, and last of all the skin round his eyes, until he sat at the far end of the long table in the room without windows, under the strip lights, white. Not pale. White. Like a man who has stood up too fast.

He lifted his eyes from the table and looked down its length, eight yards, at Jono.

Grey eyes. Very tired.

For perhaps three seconds.

"The service does not identify its sources, Chair," said Tarquin. His voice was exactly the same as it always was. Clipped. Correct. "To this committee or to anybody."

"No," said Jono quietly. "I didn't think it would."

He did not say anything else. He did not need to. He looked down at the forty-first book and wrote the date, and the time, and the witness.

At the far end of the table Tarquin picked up his folder. He squared it with two fingers. He stood up. He said, "Thank you, Chair," and went out through the inner door, and the man with the list closed it behind him.

* * *

Nobody at the table said anything for a long time.

Then the judge from the Lords, at the far end, took her glasses off and let them hang on their chain, and looked at Jono over the length of the table.

"I've sat on a great many committees, Chair," she said. "In a great many rooms." She folded her hands. "I've never once seen a witness do that."

"No."

"May I ask how you knew to ask it?"

Jono looked at her.

He thought about a quarter of Darjeeling, bought across a counter in Warwick Way in June, by a big bald American who said, in passing, *don't tell anybody*. He thought about a man by an empty armchair, in a cardigan, saying *I passed that on too*.

He thought about a face going past him under a lantern on Thursday, ten feet away, and a question he had asked twenty minutes later that he could not, now, remember deciding to ask.

"I've known him a long time," he said.

The judge looked at him for a moment longer. Then she put her glasses back on.

"So have I," she said. "I taught him, you know. At law school. Before he went into the service." She looked down at her papers. "He was the best student I ever had. He always knew exactly what not to say." She was quiet. "I'm sorry for him."

"So am I," said Jono.

* * *

White passed him in the corridor at half past twelve.

Outside the door of the Home Secretary's private office, on the same floor as the room without windows, the way he had passed him a year ago, on the second of March, with a red folder under his arm and two young people behind him.

He had a red folder now. He had nobody behind him.

He stopped.

He looked at Jono. Pleasant face. Grey at the sides. A good suit, worn easily.

He did not smile.

Jono had never seen him not smile. In a year. At the dispatch box, in the Lobby, across the floor at two in the morning in July with his hand on the box. Always. The very good smile that went nowhere near his eyes, and did not mind that you could see it.

Not now.

"Mr Hills," said William White.

"Home Secretary."

White looked at him for a long time. In the corridor. With the grey March light coming in through the windows at the end of it, and the rain on the glass.

He did not say anything else.

Then he went on down the corridor, with his red folder, and turned the corner, and was gone.

* * *

Jono stood outside the door of the room without windows for a long time.

Then he took out the forty-first book, and leaned it against the wall, and wrote.

The date. The time. The place.

Witness: T.T. Asked him one question. He did not answer it. He went white.

He looked at it. Then he added the last thing, because it was true, and because it was the thing that, a year ago, standing in this same corridor, he could never have written:

Nobody else at the table knew why.

He closed the book.

At ten past nine that night, in the flat in Kennington, the phone went. Annie, from Exeter. Tuesday.

"Weather," she said.

"Go on."

"Nothing much," said Annie. "Quiet. A front over Whitehall." She paused. "One cord. Your witness. He came and sat in the Members' Gallery at three; I was across from him in the Strangers'." She was quiet. "It's still there. Still going to Marsham Street. Still pulling." Another pause. "But it's thinner, Jono. Since this morning. Like a rope with a strand gone."

Jono did not say anything.

"I thought you'd want to know," said Annie.

"Yes," said Jono. "Thank you."

He put the phone down. He opened the forty-first book on the kitchen table, and wrote *A.H. rang. Weather.*

Nothing else.

Chapter 28 – *The Last Room*

PENGELLY. ARTHUR. FLEET HOUSE. THE CABLE CHAMBER. THE BUCKET. THE FLASK.

On the back of an envelope, in C.H.'s hand, 14 March 2038. Found in the pocket of his dressing gown, 12 March 2039.

Chris found the envelope on the Saturday morning, in the pocket of his dressing gown, where it had been for a year.

He did not remember putting it there. That was nothing; he did not remember a great many things now, and most of them did not matter. He was seventy-seven. He had had his birthday in January, at the long table in the back room, with Karen and Jono and Jo and a cake from the bakery on Torbay Road that said *77* in blue icing, and Keith standing in the bay window with his back to the room. He had blown the candles out in two goes. He remembered that.

He did not remember the envelope.

He sat on the edge of the bed in the big front room at Widecombe Cot at seven in the morning, with the curtains open and the bay outside going from grey to silver, and unfolded it. It had been folded small, in half and in half again, the way you fold a thing you mean to keep over your heart. It was soft at the creases.

On the back, in black pencil, in small square capitals, very neat. The writing of a boy who had been taught to fill in forms.

PENGELLY. ARTHUR. FLEET HOUSE. THE CABLE CHAMBER. THE BUCKET. THE FLASK.

He read it.

He knew what every word meant. A surname, a Christian name, a building, a room, a thing you carried water in, a thing you carried tea in.

He did not know what any of them had to do with him.

Except one.

* * *

FLEET HOUSE.

He knew that one. He looked at it for a long time, sitting on the edge of the bed, and it was still there, under the pencil. Not a picture. Not a memory, exactly. A fact. The way you know your own date of birth, or the name of the street you grew up in. *Fleet House. The telephone exchange. On Union Street. I worked there. When I was a boy.*

He knew that. He knew it the way he knew he was a Harvey.

He did not know anything else about it. He tried. He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to remember the inside of it. A door. A staircase. A room. A face. Anything.

Nothing. Smooth. Like a wall that had been plastered over so well you could not see where the door had been.

He knew he had worked there. He did not know what that had been like.

He sat with the envelope in his hand and thought: *that's the last of it, then. That's all that's left. A name and a fact.*

And he thought: *I'd like to see it. Before that goes too.*

* * *

Karen came with him. She did not ask why. She looked at his face at breakfast, across the kitchen table, with the envelope beside his plate, and put her coat on.

They walked down the hill. Slowly. He used the stick. It was a bright cold morning in March, the first really bright one of the year, with the sky very high and very blue and the wind coming off the bay sharp enough to make his eyes run, and the gulls going over, and the first daffodils out along the edge of the park at the bottom of the hill, yellow and shaking.

They went down Union Street. Past the shops. Past the café where the girl who served them was Rani's cousin. Past the street door of Studio Ania, with its brass plate.

He stopped there for a moment. He put his good hand on the door. He did not go in.

Then they went on, up the street, to the corner.

* * *

It was very big.

That was the first thing he thought, standing on the pavement on the other side of the road with Karen's arm through his. He had walked past it, he supposed, a thousand times. Ten thousand. He had been walking up and down Union Street for seventy years. He had never once looked at it.

Five storeys. Grey stone, gone darker with a hundred years of rain, with streaks down it under the windowsills where the water had run. Tall windows, in rows, five rows of them, the ones on the ground floor boarded up with grey wood that had been painted once and was peeling, the ones above blind with dirt so thick you could not see if there was anything behind them. A wide door in the middle, big double doors, painted green once, with a fanlight over them, and a step. Letters carved into the stone over the door, very deep, very square, with moss in them.

G P O.

And on the corner, high up on the wall, on two brackets, a board. *FOR SALE*. White once. Grey now. The agent's name gone off it so long ago that only the shadow of the letters was left.

Chris stood on the pavement and looked at it.

* * *

He waited.

He did not know what for. For something to happen. For it to come back, the way Phil's name had come back in 2026, the night the nest burned: suddenly, whole, like a light going on in a room you had forgotten was there.

Nothing came.

He looked at the green doors. At the boarded windows. At the dirty glass on the fifth floor, right at the top, where the light from the sky was catching it now, so that it shone.

The fifth floor.

He looked at that for a long time. He did not know why. Something about the light on those windows. Something about the height. As if there had been something up there, once, that mattered.

He tried. He stood on the pavement with his good hand on the head of his stick and his bad one in Karen's, and tried, the way you try to lift a thing that is too heavy, with everything you have.

He saw dirty glass with the sky in it.

That was all.

* * *

"Karen," he said.

She was watching him. She had been watching him the whole time. She had taken her glasses off, the way she did when she wanted to see something properly, which was the wrong way round.

"What did I do there?" said Chris. "In there. When I was a boy."

Karen did not answer at once.

She looked at the building. At the green doors and the boarded windows and the fifth floor with the sky in it. He saw her look at it. He saw her face, which had been a girl's face once, at seventeen, in a headset that hurt her ears, and was an old woman's face now, with the wind making her eyes run.

"You worked on the telephones," she said. "On the cables. Under the street. You were an apprentice." She was quiet. "You were very good at it."

He nodded.

"Did I like it?"

"Yes," said Karen. "Very much."

"Were you there?"

Karen looked at him for a long time.

"Yes," she said. "I was there."

He waited for it to mean something. It did not. It was a nice thing to know. It was like being told by somebody who loved you that you had been happy once, in a place you did not remember, and believing them, because you trusted them, and because it was the kind of thing that would have been true.

* * *

He knew the moment it went.

He would not have been able to say how. There was nothing to see. A bright cold morning in March, on Union Street, with a gull on the roof of the old exchange and a bus going past and a woman with a pushchair crossing the road behind them.

He was looking at the building. At the carved letters over the door. *GPO*. And he was thinking: *I worked there. When I was a boy. On the telephones.*

And then he was not.

Then he was an old man standing on a pavement in Torquay on a Saturday morning looking at a big grey building with a FOR SALE board on it, and he did not know what it was.

He knew he had known. That was the strange thing. He knew, the way you know that you have just forgotten what you came into a room for. There had been something there, a second ago. A word. A fact. And now there was a building, and a step, and some letters carved over a door, and he did not know why he was standing here looking at them, and his wife was holding his hand very hard.

He looked down at the envelope. He had it in his hand. He did not remember taking it out.

FLEET HOUSE.

A name. Two words. He did not know what they meant.

* * *

"Karen," he said.

"Yes, love."

"What is that?" He nodded across the road. "That building. I've walked past it all my life. What is it?"

Karen did not answer for a long time.

He turned and looked at her. She was crying. Not much. The wind was making her eyes run anyway. But he had known her for sixty years, near enough, and he knew the difference.

"Love," he said. "What is it?"

She took her hand out of his arm. She put it up, and laid it flat on his collar. On the collar of his good coat. The way, he thought, without knowing why he thought it, somebody had once put her hand on his collar on a platform, a long time ago, with a train already moving.

"It was a building, love," said Karen. "You worked there."

He looked at her. He looked back at the building.

"Did I?"

"When you were a boy," said Karen. "Before Stafford. Before all of it. You worked there for two years, and you were very happy, and you met..." She stopped. "You were very happy."

He looked at the building for a long time. At the green doors. At the fifth floor, with the sky in the windows.

He waited to feel something. Grief. Fear. The cold that had gone through him in the cellar a year ago, when he went looking for a name and found a wall.

He did not feel any of it.

He felt the wind on his face, and his wife's hand on his collar, and the sun.

"Well," said Chris. "That's all right, then."

* * *

Across the road, at the street door of Studio Ania, a young man was standing.

Chris had not seen him come out. He was standing in the doorway with his hands in the pockets of his dark jacket, looking up the street. At the corner. At the old exchange. At an old man and an old woman on the pavement opposite it, with her hand on his collar.

Chris looked at him.

The young man looked back. Thirty, about. A long jaw. Deep eyes, a little too far apart. Old eyes. A face that Chris had painted once, in a room above a shop that sold paper houses, in 1994, in the dark, without knowing whose it was. A face he saw in the mirror every morning, fifty years too young.

Keith did not come across the road. He did not lift his hand.

Chris watched his lips move. Very slightly. Under his breath. Counting.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Keith stopped.

He stood in the doorway for a moment longer, looking across the street at himself. Then he nodded, once. The way you nod to somebody across a room when a thing has been settled between you that does not need saying.

Then he turned, and went in, and down the stairs, to the stone.

* * *

They walked back up the hill slowly, with the wind behind them now, and the daffodils shaking along the edge of the park.

Halfway up, at the bus stop where the hill turns, Chris stopped to get his breath. He leaned on his stick and looked back down the hill at the town. At the roofs going down to the harbour. At Union Street, going away down to the sea, with the shops and the café and the street door with the brass plate on it, and at the far end, on the corner, a big grey building that he had walked past all his life.

"It's a nice building," he said.

"Yes," said Karen.

"Somebody should do something with it."

Karen did not say anything. She put her arm back through his.

He took the envelope out of his pocket. He unfolded it, there, on the pavement, at the bus stop, in the wind. Six words in pencil in small square capitals, very neat. He read them.

A surname. A Christian name. Two words he did not know the meaning of. A room. A bucket. A flask.

He looked at them for a long time.

Then he folded the envelope back up, small, in half and in half again, and put it in his inside pocket. Over his heart.

He did not know what it was for any more.

He kept it anyway.

* * *

That night, in the cellar, Jono asked Keith.

He had come down at nine, after Karen rang. He had sat on the third step from the bottom, and Keith had been at the end of the desk with his hand on the glass over the stone, the way he always was.

"It's gone," said Jono. "All of it. Karen said."

"Yes," said Keith.

"Fleet House."

"Yes."

"And you're still five."

"Still five," said Keith.

He did not look up. He sat with his hand on the stone, and his eyes shut, and after a while he said, very quietly, not to Jono, not to anybody:

"I never had it. Not since I got here. Now I know why." He was quiet. "He gave it away so I could keep the lighthouse."

Jono did not say anything.

"He'll never know," said Keith. "Not for eighteen years. Not till he's sitting where I sat. In a little room at the top of a house that isn't built yet, with a list in front of him, deciding what he can't bear to lose." He opened his eyes. "And he won't put Fleet House on it. Because he won't remember there was ever a Fleet House to put."

He took his hand off the stone. He looked at it.

"That's how it works," said Keith. "That's how it always worked. I just didn't know it was him who paid."

Chapter 29 – *The Lords*

Wed. 23 Mar. 2039. House of Lords, the gallery, 6.48 p.m. Motion to insist on Lords Amendment 41. Contents 211. Not Contents 207. Bill lost. Lord B. last through the doors. W.W. at the steps of the throne. T.T. on the stairs. Neither of us spoke.

It came down to ping-pong, in the end, the way these things did.

That was what they called it, in the building, and Jono had always hated the word, because it made it sound like a game. A bill went from one House to the other and back. The Lords changed it; the Commons changed it back; the Lords changed it again. Back and forth, across the Central Lobby, under the great lantern, carried by a clerk in a wig with a sheaf of paper in a ribbon. Until one House gave way. Or until neither did, and the bill died.

It nearly always ended with the Lords giving way. They were not elected. They knew it. They would change a thing once, to make the Commons think again, and perhaps twice, if they felt very strongly. But the third time, when a Government with a majority of ninety sent it back to them a third time and said *no*, they bowed, and let it go.

Nearly always.

On the second of March the Lords had passed amendment forty-one, two hundred and three to one hundred and ninety-nine, and taken Schedule Three out of the Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill. Studio Ania was gone from it. The basement, and the apparatus, and any relay, repeater or associated apparatus situated elsewhere within the area of Torbay Council.

On the ninth, White had put it back. In the Commons, at half past six in the evening, with his majority, three hundred and twenty to two hundred and ninety, and a short pleasant speech about the will of the elected House.

On the sixteenth, the Lords had taken it out again. Two hundred and nine to two hundred and five.

On the twenty-first, White had put it back again. Three hundred and eighteen to two hundred and ninety-four. A shorter speech. Less pleasant.

And on Wednesday the twenty-third of March, the Lords would decide whether to insist.

If they gave way, the bill went for Royal Assent the next morning, and the basement under Studio Ania became a designated strategic technology site, and the Authority would assume responsibility for its safe custody and operation *at that site or at such other site as it may determine*.

If they insisted, a second time, on an amendment the Commons had twice refused, the bill was lost. Not delayed. Lost. It fell, and could not come back in that session, and White would have to start again.

Nobody insisted twice. Not on a Home Office bill. Not on national security.

"Four," said Jono to Hannah Price in the tea room, at a quarter to four on the Tuesday.

Hannah did not take her tablet out. She looked at him for a long time across the table.

"Which way?" she said.

* * *

He watched it from the gallery.

Members of the Commons could sit below the bar of the House of Lords, at the far end, by the doors, standing room behind a brass rail. Or they could go up into the gallery, the narrow one high on the side of the chamber, and sit on a hard bench and look down. He went up. He did not want to stand at the bar with the others. He wanted to be where he could see all of it.

He had never liked the Lords. He had said so to Hannah for nine years. Too much gold. Too much red. Too many old men talking for too long about things they had heard about at dinner. A chamber like the inside of a jewel box, all gilt and carving and stained glass, with the throne at the far end under its canopy, gold, very bright, and the red leather benches going down either side, and the Woolsack in the middle, a great square red cushion where the Lord Speaker sat in a black gown, with the Mace behind him.

He looked down at it now from the gallery, at a quarter past five on a Wednesday in March, and it was full.

Every bench. Every seat. Peers standing at the bar, and on the steps, and in the gangways, because there was nowhere left to sit. Bishops in their white sleeves on their bench on the right. The former judges, the former generals, the former Cabinet Secretaries. Old men and old women in their best suits and their reading glasses, some of them with sticks, some of them in wheelchairs at the end of the rows. More than four hundred of them, near enough every one who could still walk, in a room built for far fewer.

He had never seen it like that.

And on the steps of the throne, at the far end, where Privy Counsellors from the Commons were allowed to stand and watch, a man in a good suit with grey at the sides. Standing very straight, with his hands behind his back.

White.

He had come to watch. A Home Secretary did not need to. A Home Secretary could sit in his office in Marsham Street and have the result brought to him on a piece of paper. White had come. He stood on the steps of the throne with the gold of it behind him, and looked down the chamber at the benches, and did not look up at the gallery.

Jono looked at him for a long time.

* * *

The debate was an hour.

The Minister in the Lords moved that the House should not insist. He was an old friend of White's, a former banker, with a soft voice, and he made the case well. The will of the elected House. The national interest. The need for certainty. The great respect in which the Government held the views of noble Lords, which had been heard, and considered, and could not be accepted.

Then the others. The bishop of somewhere in the North, who spoke about stewardship. A former Cabinet Secretary, who spoke about the dangers of handing an unaccountable authority powers to move things *to such other site*, and who said, very drily, that in forty years in Whitehall he had never once seen a power used less than it was given. A former general, who said he had served with a man from Torbay in Helmand.

And at six o'clock, when the Lord Speaker looked round the chamber for the last speaker, an old man stood up on the cross benches, below the gangway, at the end of the second row, very slowly, with his stick.

Jono sat forward on the hard bench in the gallery.

* * *

He was ninety-two. Frank Brindley. Lord Brindley of Darlaston. He had been the Member for a constituency in the Black Country from 1997 to 2034, and in all those years he had been heard to say nothing in the Commons chamber except *aye* and *no*. Then they had sent him up here, at eighty-seven, because his party wanted the seat for somebody younger, and he had sat on the cross benches in the Lords for five years and said nothing at all.

He stood with both hands on the head of his stick and looked round the chamber. At the gold. At the throne. At the man standing on the steps of it.

The chamber had gone very quiet.

"I've not spoken in this House before," said Lord Brindley. His voice was very thin, and very clear, and it carried. "Nor in the other one, much. Thirty-seven years. My wife used to say I was the most expensive silence in England."

A ripple of laughter. Kind. He let it go.

"I went on a coach," he said. "In 2031. To Torbay. On a wet Friday in October. A man I'd never spoken to sat down next to me because it was the only seat left." He looked up. Not at the gallery. At the ceiling. At the gold. "And at half past eight that evening I stood in front of a mirror in a public house in Paignton and looked at the air over my own head. For the first time in eighty-four years."

Nobody in the chamber moved.

"I'll not tell you what I saw," said Lord Brindley. "You'd not believe me. You didn't go." He looked down the chamber at the steps of the throne. At White. "Some of you didn't go."

White did not move.

"I've been told," said Lord Brindley, "that this House never insists twice. That it's not our place. That we're old, and we're not elected, and we should know when to give way." He was quiet for a moment, leaning on his stick. "I'm ninety-two. I know when to give way. I've given way all my life. I gave way for thirty-seven years in the other place and never said a word."

He straightened up. As far as he could.

"Not this time," he said.

He sat down.

* * *

The Lord Speaker put the question.

That this House do not insist on its amendment forty-one.

"Contents," said the voices on the Government benches.

"Not content," said the voices from everywhere else.

"Clear the bar," said the Lord Speaker.

And the bells rang. All over the Palace, in every corridor, every bar, every office, every tea room, the division bells, for the last time on the Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill.

Jono sat in the gallery with his hands on the rail and watched them go.

In the Lords it was the other way round from the Commons. *Content* meant yes to the motion: give way. *Not content* meant no: insist. He had to keep telling himself that. The peers getting up off the red benches, slowly, the old ones very slowly, with their sticks and their reading glasses, and going out through the doors at either end, into the lobbies. The Contents to the right of the throne. The Not Contents to the left.

He watched White, on the steps.

White did not move. He stood with his hands behind his back and watched the chamber empty, row by row, peer by peer, into the two lobbies. His face did not change. Jono could see it, from the gallery, very clearly. Pleasant. Still.

Eight minutes.

The chamber was nearly empty. The tellers at the doors. The last few, the slow ones, in the gangways.

And at the end of the second row on the cross benches, below the gangway, an old man getting up. Very slowly. Both hands on his stick. One foot, and then the other. Along the empty row. Down the gangway. Towards the doors on the left of the throne. The Not Contents.

He was the last.

Jono watched him all the way. A small old man in a tweed suit with white hair, walking down the length of the House of Lords on his own,

with his stick, under the gold, while four hundred people waited for him in the lobbies on the other side of a door.

He reached the door. The doorkeeper held it for him. He went through.

The doors were locked behind him.

* * *

The tellers came back at twelve minutes to seven.

Four of them, in a row, at the Table, in front of the Woolsack. They bowed. The one on the left handed a slip of paper to the clerk, and the clerk handed it to the Lord Speaker, and the Lord Speaker stood up in his black gown and read it.

"Contents, two hundred and seven. Not Contents, two hundred and eleven."

He paused. He looked at the paper again.

"So the Not Contents have it."

Four.

Jono sat in the gallery with his hands on the rail.

The sound the chamber made was not the sound the Commons made. It was not a roar. It was not the long breath out that he had heard in October 2031. It was a sort of murmur. Very low. Going round the red benches like a wind going through a field of wheat. Four hundred old people who had done a thing they never did, and were not quite sure, yet, what they had done.

The Lord Speaker sat down.

"The House insists on its amendment," said the Clerk, quietly, to nobody in particular.

The Strategic Technologies (Security) Bill was lost.

* * *

White came down the steps of the throne.

He did not hurry. He came down the three steps one at a time, very straight, with his hands behind his back, and walked along the floor of the chamber, past the Table, past the Woolsack, towards the bar, with the peers coming back in from the lobbies on either side of him and parting to let him through. He did not look at any of them.

At the bar he stopped.

He turned round and looked up. For the first time that day. At the gallery. At the hard bench. At Jono.

Jono looked back.

White's face did a thing Jono had not seen it do in a year. It smiled. The very good smile, that went nowhere near the eyes. But slower than it used to. As if it had to remember how.

He lifted one hand. An inch. The way a man lifts a glass to somebody across a room.

Next session.

Jono read it on his lips. He did not lift anything back.

White turned and went out through the doors at the bar, into the Peers' Lobby, and was gone.

* * *

Jono went down the gallery stairs at ten past seven.

They were narrow. Stone. A spiral, with a brass rail and a window at the turn that looked out over Old Palace Yard. People were coming up and going down, the way they did after a division, Members of the Commons who had been watching, clerks, a journalist with a notebook.

At the turn of the stair, by the window, coming up, a tall man.

Thin. Fair hair gone flat. A navy suit that hung off his shoulders.

Tarquin stopped on the step below.

Jono stopped on the step above.

They looked at each other. A yard apart. On a stone stair in the House of Lords with the light from Old Palace Yard coming in through the window at the turn, grey, and the murmur of the chamber coming up the stairwell from below.

Neither of them said anything.

Jono looked at his face. Grey eyes. Very tired. The tight line at the mouth. And something else, under it, that Jono had seen once by an empty armchair in a tea shop in Warwick Way: a man who had been told he was right, and had not been helped by it.

Tarquin looked back.

Then he moved. Not past. To the side. Against the wall, by the window, so that there was room on the narrow stair for Jono to come down.

Jono came down. One step. Past him. Close enough to touch.

He did not touch him.

He went on down the stairs, round the turn, and did not look back.

* * *

At ten past nine that night, in the flat in Kennington, the phone went.

Rani. Wednesday was not her night. She rang anyway.

"Weather," she said.

"Go on."

"I was at the bar," said Rani. "Below the bar. At the end. Standing. I watched him go through the doors last." She was quiet. "Lord Brindley. His lamp. Jono. It was the brightest thing in that building. Brighter than the throne." She breathed. "It's been bright since 2031. Since a mirror at Bailey's. It was white tonight."

Jono did not say anything.

"And the other one," said Rani. "On the stairs. I came down after you."

"Yes."

"Still there," said Rani. "His cord. Still going to Marsham Street." A pause. "But thin. Thinner than Annie said. Like a thread." She was quiet for a long time. "It'd break, Jono. If anybody pulled."

"Nobody's going to pull," said Jono.

"No," said Rani. "I know."

He put the phone down.

He took out the forty-first book and wrote it all. The date, the time, the place. The numbers. *Bill lost*. An old man last through the doors. A man at the steps of the throne. A man on a stair.

Neither of us spoke.

Then he sat at the kitchen table in Kennington for a long time, with the book open in front of him, and the river going past in the dark at the end of the street, and thought about a coach on a wet Friday in October, eight years ago, and an old man with a stick between his knees, looking out at the rain, who had said nothing all the way to Paignton.

The only seat left.

Chapter 30 – *Stealth*

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

The lamps came back at Dawlish.

They always did. Jono had stopped trying to say exactly where. Somewhere along the sea wall, after the tunnels, with the red cliffs going by on the right and the sea close on the left, flat and bright under an April sky, he looked up from his book, and the woman across the aisle had a lamp over her head. And the boy beside her. And 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.

He had been coming home on the train for ten years, and it still went through him every time.

He looked at the woman across the aisle for a long time. She was reading. A paperback, with a cracked spine. Her lamp was steady, and quite bright, and the grain of it was a thing he had no words for and never would, a sort of patience, like a field that has been ploughed and left.

He thought: *two hundred miles back up the line, in London, she had that too. And nobody could see it.*

He thought: *almost nobody.*

He went back to his book.

* * *

Torbay in April, a year on.

He walked down from Preston on the Friday morning along the front, the way he had a year ago, with the wind coming off the bay and the tide coming in. Past the beach huts, freshly painted for the season. Past the pier. Past the Pavilion. Into Station Square.

The forge had its doors open. Fred was at the anvil with two apprentices and a third holding the tongs, a girl of sixteen with her hair tied back and her face red from the fire, drawing out a bar. Fred looked up when Jono went past, and lifted a hand, and went back to the bar.

The station, cream and maroon, with its green canopy and a train standing under it.

The plane trees in the square, just coming into leaf. A green so new it was nearly yellow.

And in the window of the back room at Bailey's, at the table with the brass plate on it that said RESERVED, a young man with a cup in both hands, looking out.

* * *

Jono sat down opposite him.

"Five," said Keith, without looking round.

"Still five."

"Still five." Keith turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer. "Clifford rang. Last night."

"What did he say?"

"Twelve hundred," said Keith. "Birds with boxes on. Since December. Another batch of a hundred and twenty next Thursday, off the Cape. And on, and on." He looked out at the square. "Every one of them by Christmas. Ten thousand. The whole planet, every square mile, all the time." He was quiet. "And nobody can see it."

"Almost nobody."

Keith did not answer that. He drank his tea.

They sat in the window together for a while and watched the square. A family coming off the train from Paddington with their cases and their pushchair and nothing over their heads, for now. Give it till teatime. Two old men on the bench under the plane tree with a dog. A boy on a bicycle. A gull on the roof of the forge.

"What happens now?" said Jono.

Keith did not answer for a long time.

"Now we wait," he said.

"For what?"

Keith turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer, by the handle.

"2057," he said.

He did not say anything else. He did not need to. Jono looked at him across the table, at the young face and the old eyes and the long Harvey jaw, the face in a painting on a wall in a flat over a garage in Ellacombe, and thought about eighteen years.

Eighteen years of this. Of the window, and the cup, and the square. Of a woman coming up a path under a monkey puzzle every October with

grey in her hair, a little more each year. Of ten thousand small boxes going round the Earth every ninety-six minutes, lit, waiting, with nobody able to see them but three women who rang him at ten past nine to tell him the weather.

He would be eighty-four.

He thought he would like to be there.

* * *

At Widecombe Cot, Chris was at the desk.

He was not supposed to be. It was April. The desk was for October, for the third Friday, at three o'clock. But he had taken to sitting at it in the afternoons, since the winter. Karen said he liked the light. It came in through the glass panel in the front door, low and gold in the afternoon, across the floor and up the side of the desk, and he sat in it with his hands in his lap and the register open in front of him, and did not do anything.

Jono came in at the gate at four, with the hinge going. *How you knew.*

Chris looked up through the glass and smiled.

"Jono."

"Chris."

He came in and sat on the bench under the barometer, where guests sat to take their boots off. Chris did not get up. He sat at the desk with his hands in his lap and looked at Jono, and he was seventy-seven, and his hair was white, and his bad hand was in his lap, and he looked, Jono thought, happier than he had looked in a long time.

"Look," said Chris.

He turned the register round on the desk, very carefully, with his good hand, so that Jono could see it. It was open at a page near the back. October 2038. A column of names and rooms and dates, in a dozen hands. And at the bottom, in black ink, very upright, every letter the same height, like print:

Friday, 15th October. Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.

"She wrote that," said Chris.

Jono looked at him.

"Herself. Before she came. It's always here, before she comes." Chris looked down at the line. "I asked her. In October. In Room 3. I took the tea up myself; I knocked; I've never knocked on that door in my life. And I asked her whose hand it was." He smiled. "*Mine*, she said."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I've never told anybody but you," said Chris. "You didn't write it down."

"No," said Jono.

"Good," said Chris.

He turned the register back round, very carefully, and laid his good hand flat on the page.

Upstairs, at the back of the house, very faintly, a radio was playing. An orchestra.

"She's a hundred and three," said Chris. "Did you know? Mum. A hundred and three. She'll be a hundred and four in October." He looked up at the ceiling. "She keeps her door open. So she can hear the house."

"I know," said Jono.

Chris sat with his hand on the register in the low gold light and looked at the front door. At the glass panel. Down the path, under the monkey puzzle, to the gate.

"Six months," he said. "Till October."

"Yes."

"I'll have the tea ready," said Chris.

* * *

He walked down to Ellacombe at nine, in the dark, to the club.

The lamp was in the window over the street, the brass one with the green shade, on. It always was. He stood at the bottom of the iron stairs and looked up at it the way he had looked up at it for ten years, and then he went up, twenty-two steps, and opened the door.

The strip light. The bags on their chains. The ring.

Eric was in the corner by the door, on the bench, with his stick across his knees. Seventy-seven. He came up most nights now, and sat, and watched, and said the thing he had always said, when somebody went down. *Better*. He did not hold the pads any more. Somebody else did.

Jo was in the ring.

She had the pads on. The old red ones, gone grey at the knuckles, with JO on the back of each in black marker. And in front of her, swinging at them, a boy of about fourteen, skinny, with his eyes screwed shut.

"Open your eyes," said Jo.

The boy opened his eyes.

"Don't look at the glove," said Jo. "Look at the man."

The boy looked at her. Jo moved the pad about four inches and touched him on the side of the head with it, quite gently, and he was on his back on the canvas looking at the strip light.

"Hands first," said Jo, from above him. "Then knees. Take your time. The count's not on you."

The boy got up.

From the bench by the door, Eric said: "Better."

Jono stood in the doorway and watched.

* * *

At ten o'clock, Jo wound the watch.

She did it in the ring. She had sent the boy home at a quarter to, and taken the pads off, and sat down on the canvas in the corner with her back against the post, the way Jono had sat in the first winter, getting his breath. And at ten she took the watch out of the pocket of her tracksuit, the plain gold hunter with the crack across the glass, and opened it on her palm, and took the little key out of the back, and wound it.

Carefully. Not too far.

Then she closed it, and held it in her hand for a moment, and looked up, and saw her father in the doorway.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing," said Jono.

She looked at him a moment longer. Then she took out her pocketbook. The fifth. Black, with the elastic round it. And opened it on her knee, there, in the ring, and wrote the date, and the time, and the place, in her round upright hand.

He did not ask what else she wrote.

She did not tell him.

* * *

The House came back on the Tuesday.

He went up on the Monday, on the train, and the lamps went past Newton Abbot, the way they always did, like going deaf in one ear. And on the Tuesday morning he walked over Lambeth Bridge from Kennington at seven with the river under him and went to the Library and sat at the table by the window over the river and read the last page of the Order Paper.

There was nothing on it. Nothing that mattered. A statutory instrument about the labelling of honey. He read it anyway, to the end.

At half past eleven Hannah Price came in and sat down opposite him without asking, and put her tablet face down on the table, and looked at him.

"The King's Speech," she said. "Next month. I've heard." She did not look away. "It's in. Strategic technologies. A new bill. Different name. Same schedule." She paused. "He's going to use the Parliament Act. If the Lords throw it out again, he'll force it through next year anyway."

"I know," said Jono.

"Of course you know," said Hannah Price.

She looked at him for a long time across the table.

"One day," she said, "you're going to tell me how."

"One day," said Jono.

* * *

At half past two he came out of the chamber at the end of questions, into the Members' Lobby, with the crowd.

Under the great dim lantern. With the statues of the old Prime Ministers standing round the walls, looking down. Six hundred people talking at once, the way they always did on the first afternoon back, in the noise and the warmth and the smell of the old stone.

He stopped in the middle of it, with his hands in his pockets.

White was by the statue of Churchill, with a red folder under his arm and a crowd round him, and Hollis at his shoulder. He saw Jono. He did not smile. He nodded, once, very slightly, the way you nod to a man you will see again across a table you have not finished with.

Jono nodded back.

A young man came past him, then. Somebody new. Elected at a by-election in February, for a seat in the Midlands; Jono had seen him take the oath. Thirty, perhaps. A good suit. An eager face. He was talking to an older Member as he went past, very fast, about something on the Order Paper, and laughing.

Jono looked at him.

At his face. At his hands. At the way he walked.

And then, out of habit, the thing he had never been able to stop doing, ten years in this building and he still could not stop it, his eyes went to the air above the young man's head.

He stood very still in the middle of the Members' Lobby.

He looked for a long time.

Nobody noticed. Nobody ever noticed the Member for Torbay standing still in the middle of a room.

Then the young man was past him, and gone, through the doors into the chamber, still laughing.

* * *

Jono took out the forty-second book.

He had started it in March, the way he always did. He opened it to a clean page, there, in the middle of the Lobby, with the crowd going round him.

He wrote the date. The place. The time.

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

He held the pencil on the page.

He thought about a woman on a hill in Cornwall in the dark, crying out loud like a child. About a young man in a window with a cup, counting to five. About an old man at a desk in the low gold light, saying *I'll have the tea ready*. About a girl in a ring at ten o'clock at night, winding a watch.

He thought about ten thousand small boxes, going round.

He thought about what he had just seen, or not seen, over a young man's head, in a building where nobody had ever had a light.

He did not write it.

He closed the book, and put it in his inside pocket, over his heart, and went back into the chamber, and sat down on the green bench below the gangway, where he had sat for ten years, among the independents and the odd ones, and looked round the House.

At the faces. At the hands.

And at the air above their heads.

The Rage Series

Book 1 – The Hound Legacy
Book 2 – Widecombe Cot
Book 3 – Eighteen Months
Book 4 – Torbay Rage
Book 5 – Clearout
Book 6 – The Dark
Book 7 – Stealth
Book 8 – 2057