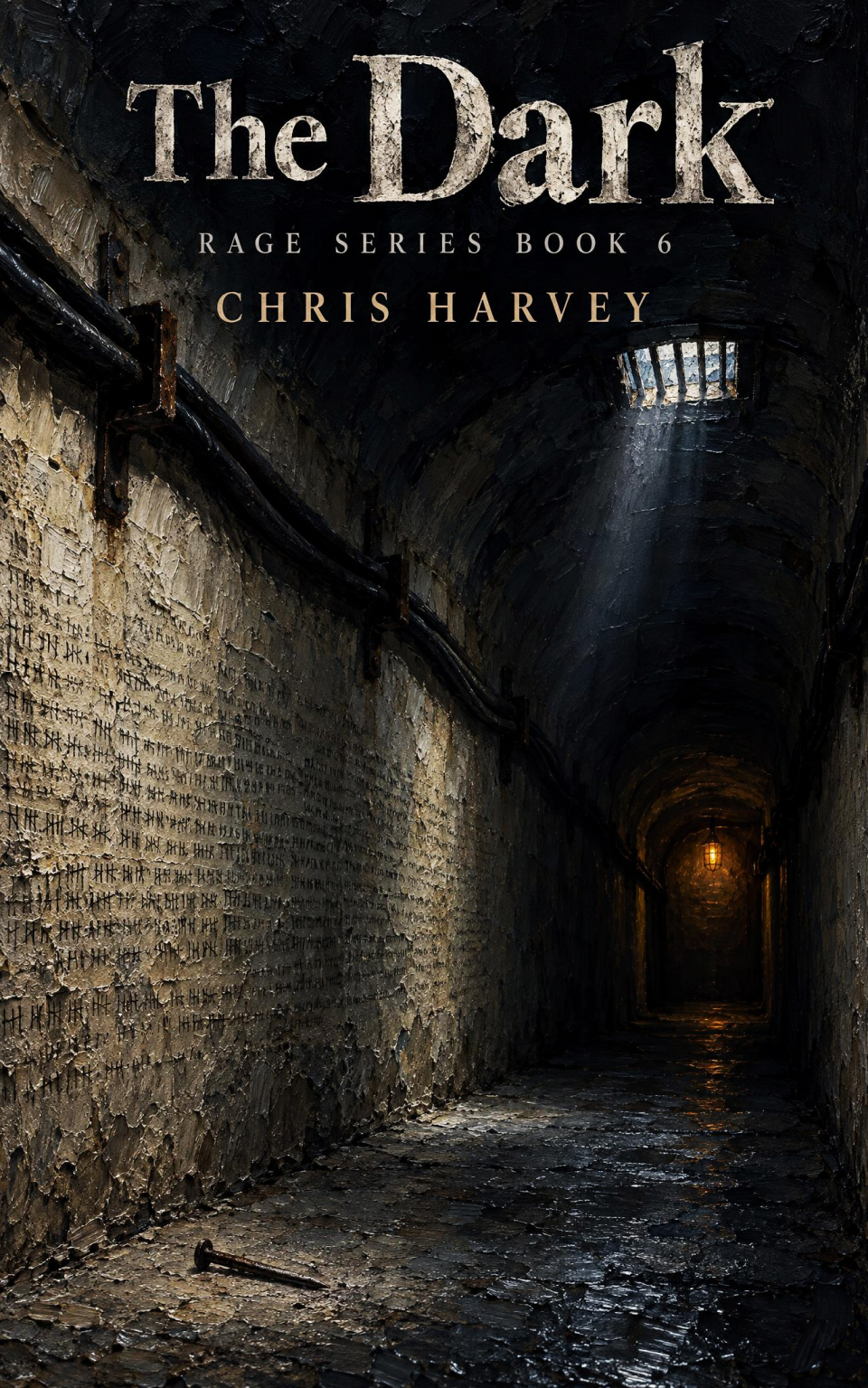

The Dark
RAGE SERIES BOOK 6
CHRIS HARVEY

The Dark

Chris Harvey



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Chapter 1 – The Ring

Thurs. 4 Sept. 2031. Ellacombe, the club, 10.10 p.m. Down twice. Up twice. E. said: "Better." First time in two years he's said it.

The first time Eric put him on the canvas, Jono lay there looking at the strip light and thought: *well, that's honest, anyway.*

That was November 2028. A fortnight after the Clearout. A Tuesday night, raining, the kind of rain Torquay does in November that does not so much fall as hang in the streets and wait for you. He had been walking a great deal that month, at night, after his calls, because he could not sleep and could not sit still and could not write anything in the pocketbook that he wanted to read back. He had walked up from the harbour through Ellacombe, and at the top of a side street he had seen a light on above a garage, and a sign on the garage door, hand-painted, the white gone grey:

ELLACOMBE BOXING CLUB. EST. 1998. ALL WELCOME. NO MESSING.

He had gone up the iron stairs at the side and opened the door at the top.

A long low room under a pitched roof, with the rafters showing and a skylight full of rain. Heavy bags hanging from the beams on chains, patched with tape. A rack of gloves gone soft and grey at the knuckles. Mirrors along one wall with the silver going. A smell of sweat and leather and liniment and paraffin. And in the middle, a ring. A small one, not regulation, ropes wrapped in faded blue tape, canvas patched with gaffer.

Three boys hitting bags, and a man in a tracksuit standing by the ring with his arms folded, who turned round when the door

opened and looked at Jono. Fifty-five, in a wet coat with a lanyard still round his neck and rain in his hair.

"You're the copper," the man had said. "The carer. From the internet."

"Yes."

"You want to hit something."

It was not a question. Jono had not said anything.

"Forty quid a month," said the man. "Eight till ten. You do what I tell you. You don't swear at the boys. You don't bring it in here, whatever it is." He nodded at Jono's face. "You can leave it on the stairs. It'll be there when you go."

That was Eric.

Ten minutes later Jono was in the ring in borrowed gloves, swinging at a pair of pads, and Eric moved the left pad about four inches and touched him on the side of the head with it, quite gently, and Jono was on his back looking at the strip light.

"You look at the glove," said Eric, standing over him. "Everybody looks at the glove. Don't look at the glove. Look at the man." He held out a hand. "Up."

Jono had got up. He had come back on the Thursday.

* * *

That was nearly three years ago. He had been coming back ever since.

He had missed a fortnight in May 2029 for the election. When it was over, and he had stood on the stage at the count in the Riviera Centre at four in the morning and been declared the Member of Parliament for Torbay, he had come back the week after, at eight, with his tie in his pocket, and Eric had looked at him from the ring and said, "Pads," and that was all.

He arranged his life round it now. Westminster from Monday afternoon to Thursday; the 6.03 from Paddington on a Thursday, home by half past nine, straight up the hill to Ellacombe in his suit, change in the little toilet at the back with the broken lock, and into the ring by ten for the last half hour. Tuesdays he missed, so Eric had started a Friday-night session after the surgeries, without saying it was for him. Sundays Jono still did two calls in the morning, Mrs Hellier in Goodrington and an old man in Preston who could not get his socks on, because he had promised them, and you did not stop being a carer because you had been elected, any more than you stopped being a copper because you had handed in your warrant card.

Thursday nights he got hit.

* * *

Tonight he got hit twice.

The first was in the second round, a left hook that came over his right glove while he was thinking about a meeting he had had that afternoon in a corridor in Portcullis House with a man from the Home Office who had smiled a great deal and said nothing at all. He did not see it. Then he was sitting on the canvas with his back against the bottom rope and Eric standing over him.

"Where were you?"

"London."

"Well, come back," said Eric. "London's not in the ring. Up."

The second was in the fourth round, and it was a better one. He saw it coming. He saw Eric's shoulder drop, a fraction, the way it always dropped before the right, and he moved, the way he had been taught for three years, and the right went past his ear. And then Eric's left, which he had not seen, because he had been looking at the right, came in under his elbow and found his ribs, and he sat down again, hard, with the breath gone out of him.

He sat on the canvas and laughed. He could not help it.

Eric looked down at him. Sixty-nine years old, five foot eight, not much more than eleven stone, with a nose that had been broken three times and a scar through his left eyebrow and hands like knots in a rope. He was not even breathing hard.

"You saw the right," said Eric.

"I saw the right."

"You moved for it. That's the first time." He held out his glove. "Then you stopped looking at me and looked at the right. You see the one thing coming and forget there's a man behind it with two hands." He pulled Jono up. "Better."

Jono stood in the middle of the canvas with his ribs aching.

"What did you say?"

"I said better," said Eric. "Don't make a thing of it."

* * *

The boys went at half past nine. Eric stood at the top of the iron stairs and watched every one of them down the street until they turned the corner. Then it was the two of them. Every Thursday. The last half hour.

Jono had asked once, in the first winter, why Eric did it, and Eric had looked at him over the pads and said, "Because you came in out of the rain with a face like a slapped arse and a lanyard round your neck, and I've seen that face before." That was all.

Jono had not asked where. He knew what anybody in Ellacombe knew. That Eric had been a Royal Marine, and had gone to the Falklands in 1982 at nineteen. That he had come back, and stayed in, and come out, and done something abroad for years that he called *security* and did not describe. That he had come home to

Torquay in 1998 and bought the garage and the flat above it and put up a sign and opened the door.

He did not drink. He did not talk about the war. He did not march on Remembrance Sunday, though he went every year and stood at the back of the crowd on the Strand in a dark coat, alone, with his medals in his pocket and not on his chest. Jono had seen him there for twenty years before he ever knew his name. A small straight man at the back who did not sing the hymns.

And he slept with the light on. The flat was over the gym, and its window was over the street, and in three years of walking down the iron stairs at half past ten Jono had never once seen that window dark.

* * *

"Tea," said Eric, at twenty-five to eleven, unlacing his gloves with his teeth. "Upstairs. You look like you need it."

Jono had never been upstairs. The door at the back of the gym, behind the rack of gloves, had always been shut.

Tonight Eric opened it and went up, and left it open behind him, and Jono followed.

One room under the roof, and a kitchen and a bathroom. Very clean. A bed made with hospital corners. A table and two chairs. A kettle, a teapot, two mugs on hooks. A shelf of books, military history and three or four about birds. In the window over the street, a small brass lamp with a green shade, on: the light Jono had seen from the stairs for three years.

And on the wall opposite the bed, where you would see it last thing at night and first thing in the morning, a painting.

* * *

Jono stood in the doorway with his kit bag in his hand.

About two feet by three. Oil on canvas, unframed, the edges wrapped round the stretcher and tacked. A man's face. Laid on thick with a knife in ridges, ochre and brown and a grey-blue in the shadows, so that the lamplight caught the edges of the paint and made them shine. Close. Filling the canvas, the way a face fills your sight when it is leaning over you.

Not a portrait. Rough, the knife marks showing, the colours not the colours a face is. But a face, plainly. A young man. A long jaw. Deep eyes, set a little too far apart. And something in the eyes that was very tired and very patient, like a man who has been waiting a long time for it to get light, and is still waiting, and is looking at you.

Jono knew it. He did not know how. He knew it the way you know a voice on the radio before the presenter says the name.

"Bought that in Singapore," said Eric, behind him, filling the kettle. "1994. I was out there for a firm. Shipping. Minding boats in the Strait, and the godowns on the river." The tap went off. "There was a bloke used to come to the football at the Kallang with a press pass. English. Took pictures of the crowd, never the match. Westcountry voice. We got talking in a bar on Boat Quay. He'd been painting. Said it was the only year he'd ever done it. Eight of them. Faces." The kettle went on. "He showed me this one in a room over a shop in Joo Chiat that smelled of incense. I said, *How much?* He said, *It's not for sale. I don't know who it is.* I said, *I do.*"

"Who?"

Eric came and stood beside him in the doorway, arms folded, looking at it.

"Me," he said. "On Mount Harriet. June 1982. In a hole in the rock, waiting for it to get light. That's what it looked like from the inside. I'd never seen anybody get it before. I've never seen anybody get it since." He shrugged. "He gave it me. Wouldn't take money. Said if it was me I'd better have it." He went back to the kettle. "It's

been on that wall since 1998. It's the only thing in here I'd go back in for."

* * *

Jono put his kit bag down on the floor very carefully.

"The bloke with the press pass. What was his name?"

Eric looked round from the kettle. Something in Jono's voice.

"Harvey," he said. "Chris Harvey. Paignton boy. We were at school together, near enough. Same year, different classes. He was the clever one who went to the telephones." He poured the water into the pot. "He didn't remember me. I didn't tell him. You don't, out there. You don't know who's listening." He put the lid on. "Why?"

Jono did not answer.

He knew whose face it was. Not Eric's, or not only Eric's. He had sat across a table from it in the back room at Bailey's on a wet night in April three years ago and watched it turn a cup a quarter turn on its saucer. He had sat beside it in a fast boat in Liverpool Bay at two in the morning with its hand on a stone. He had stood in the cellar under Studio Ania on the morning after the Clearout and heard it tell him, quite gently, that six names in his own handwriting would never mean anything to him again.

A young man's face, with old eyes. A Harvey face.

And Chris had painted it in 1994, in a room above an incense shop. Thirty-four years before it walked into Bailey's.

"Jono? You've gone white."

"I'm fine." He made himself look away. "It's a good painting."

"It's the best painting in the world," said Eric, quite simply, the way he said the time. He put two mugs on the table. "Sit down. Drink your tea. Then go home. You've got a train in the morning."

* * *

Jono drank his tea at Eric's table and did not look at the wall again, and felt it there behind him the whole time, like somebody standing in a doorway.

At five past eleven he stood up. At the door of the flat he looked back once, past Eric, at the wall.

"Does Chris know you've still got it?"

"Doubt it. It was a long time ago."

"He'd want to know."

Eric looked at him over his mug for a long moment.

"Then you tell him," he said. "You're the one with the notebook."

* * *

Jono went down through the dark gym, past the bags hanging still on their chains, past the ring, and out at the top of the iron stairs into the street.

A clear night, warm for September. The lamps were on in Ellacombe, the street lamps and the other ones, the faint amber lamps over the heads of the few people still out: a man walking a dog at the bottom of the hill, two girls coming out of the chip shop. The dog stopped at a lamp post and barked once at nothing, the way dogs in Torbay had barked at nothing after dark ever since the Clearout, as if they were making up for lost time.

He looked back up at the window over the garage. The brass lamp. The green shade. Lit.

He thought about a man in a hole in the rock on Mount Harriet in June 1982, waiting for it to get light.

He thought about a stone in a foam cradle in a cellar under Studio Ania, with a young man's hand on it.

He took out his pocketbook. The thirty-fourth. He had started it in March, and it was half full. He wrote the date, and the time, and the place. *Down twice. Up twice. E. said: "Better."*

Then, underneath, after a while:

Upstairs for the first time. A painting on the wall facing the bed. A man's face. Bought from C.H. in Singapore, 1994. E. says it is him on Mount Harriet.

He looked at that for a long time under the street lamp. Then he wrote one more line. Not what he felt. What he saw.

It is K.

He put the elastic round the book and walked down the hill towards the harbour, and the window over the garage stayed lit behind him all the way to the corner, the way it had every night for thirty-three years.

Chapter 2 – *The Member for Torbay*

Tues. 9 Sept. 2031. Commons Library, 7.40 a.m. Order Paper, last page, small print. SI 2031/1147. Laid yesterday, 4.55 p.m. Nobody reads the last page. Read it three times.

The thing Jono had not been ready for, about Westminster, was that nobody had a lamp.

He had known it would be like that. Everybody knew. The lamps only showed inside the bay, Hope's Nose to Berry Head, as far as the relay on the monastery roof could reach. Get on a train at Paignton and somewhere past Newton Abbot they faded, and by Exeter they were gone, and by Paddington you were back in the world everybody else lived in, where you could not tell by looking whether the person across the table could finish a sentence, let alone a job.

He had known that. He had not known what it would feel like.

It felt like going deaf in one ear. That was the nearest he could get to it, in the pocketbook, the first week, in May 2029. As if he had lived for eight months with a sense he had not had before, and had stopped noticing it, the way you stop noticing your own hearing, and then had stepped off a train at Paddington and lost it. He walked through the Palace of Westminster in his first fortnight looking at the air over people's heads, out of habit, sideways, the way you looked at the lamps at home, and there was nothing there. Clear air. Six hundred and fifty Members and three thousand staff and a building full of the most powerful people in the country, and not one of them with a light over their head to tell him which of them he could trust.

He had had to learn to read them again the old way, the way he had on doorsteps for twenty-five years: hands, eyes, shoes, who stopped talking when a particular person came into the room. It took him about six weeks.

But he still looked. Every morning, coming in through Carriage Gates, he still looked at the air over the policeman's head on the gate, and every morning it was empty, and every morning it gave him a small cold turn, like a step that is not there in the dark.

* * *

He was in the Library at twenty to eight on Tuesday because he was always in the Library at twenty to eight.

The other new Members laughed at him for it. Not unkindly. *Jono reads the Order Paper*, they said, the way you might say *Jono irons his socks*. The Order Paper was the day's business: the debates, the questions, the votes, the notices. Most Members read the first page, to see what they were voting on, and their staff read the rest, and nobody read the last page, which was small print about statutory instruments laid before the House. Delegated legislation. Orders and regulations that ministers could make under powers Parliament had given them years ago, and that became law after forty days unless somebody in the House objected, which nobody ever did, because nobody ever read them.

Jono read them. All of them. Every morning. In the Library, at a table by the window over the river, with a cup of tea from the machine and his pocketbook open beside him.

He had told nobody why. If anybody had asked, he would have said it was what he had done as a constable: read the whole of the incident log every morning, not just the top of it, because the thing that mattered was always at the bottom, in somebody else's handwriting, where nobody had looked.

That was true. It was not the whole of it.

The whole of it was a pleasant young man across a green baize table in a tea shop in Pimlico, three years ago, saying *the device known to the parties will remain where it is*. And Jono understanding, as he said it, that a promise made across a table in a back room was only as good as the next person who had a reason to break it.

So he read the last page. Every morning. For two years and four months. Waiting.

On Tuesday the ninth of September he found it.

* * *

It was eleven lines long. Between an order about the boundaries of a fishing district in the Solway Firth and a regulation about the labelling of agricultural seed.

The Designated Sites (Research Materials) (Specified Premises) Order 2031. SI 2031/1147. Laid before Parliament on 8 September 2031 under section 14 of the National Security and Investment (Amendment) Act 2027. Negative procedure.

That was all it said on the Order Paper. Eleven lines of nothing. Jono read it twice and nearly turned the page.

He did not turn the page. He did not know why. The word *premises*, perhaps. The date. Something in the back of his neck, the way he had felt it on Union Street on Saturday nights for twenty-five years, a second before the first bottle went.

He went to the desk and asked for the Order. The full text. The young woman behind the desk looked at him the way they always did, and went and got it, and gave it to him: four pages, stapled, with the crest at the top.

He took it back to his table by the window and read it.

It took him ten minutes. It was written the way these things were always written, so that nobody would read past the first

paragraph. He read every paragraph. And on the third page, in a schedule, under the heading *Specified Premises*, there was a list. Three places. A laboratory in Oxfordshire. A warehouse in Cumbria. And:

Premises at basement level beneath the building known as Studio Ania, Torquay, Devon, together with any materials, devices, apparatus or equipment situated therein or connected therewith, including any such apparatus situated on other premises within the Borough of Torbay.

And on the fourth page, a power. For a person authorised by the Secretary of State to *enter, secure and remove* any materials from the specified premises to *a designated government research facility*, on twenty-four hours' notice, without the consent of the owner, *in the interests of national security*.

Forty days, the Order said. Then it would be law.

Unless somebody in the House objected.

Jono sat by the window over the river for a long time, with the Order in front of him and his tea going cold.

Any such apparatus situated on other premises within the Borough of Torbay. That was the box on the monastery roof. *Materials, devices, apparatus.* That was the stone.

He looked out at the river. At the grey water going down to the sea, the way it had gone past this building for a thousand years while people inside it made laws that nobody read.

Then he took out his pocketbook, and wrote down the number, and the date it was laid, and the date forty days from then, and underlined nothing, and went to find a telephone that nobody could listen to.

* * *

There were no telephones in Westminster that nobody could listen to. He knew that. So he did not telephone. He walked.

Out through the Members' entrance into Parliament Square in the grey September morning, up Victoria Street past the Abbey, into the quiet streets behind the station where the houses were white and tall.

Warwick Way. Twenty past eight. The shop was not open. The sign on the door said *CLOSED*. The gold letters on the glass, with their old-fashioned shadows: *H. TALLAND & CO. TEA AND COFFEE. EST. 1947*.

It was not Tuesday afternoon at a quarter past three. Jono did not care. He knocked on the glass.

Nothing. He knocked again.

After a minute a light came on at the back of the shop, behind the long counter, and a figure came down between the drawers with their brass labels. Tall. Fair. A cardigan, not a suit. A cup of coffee in one hand.

Tarquin Talland looked at Jono through the glass for a long moment. He did not look surprised. He looked like a man who has been expecting a knock for some time and had hoped it would not come before breakfast.

He unbolted the door.

"Mr Hills," he said. "It isn't Tuesday afternoon."

"It's Tuesday," said Jono. "A quarter of Darjeeling. Too dear."

Tarquin almost smiled.

"You'd better come through," he said.

* * *

The back room was the same. The coal fire, unlit. The round table with the green baize. The window onto the yard with the fig tree. The armchair in the corner by the grate, high-backed, empty.

Jono looked at the armchair.

"She's not here," said Tarquin, following his look. "She doesn't come up much now. Cheltenham's a long way, and she's not as..." He stopped. "She asked after him again. Last month. On the phone. She always does." He put his coffee down on the baize. "Sit down, Mr Hills. You've read it, then."

"SI 2031/1147."

"Nobody reads the last page of the Order Paper."

"I do," said Jono.

Tarquin sat down across from him. He looked older than three years ago. Not much. A little greyer at the temples, a little more careful round the eyes. Thirty-seven now, Jono thought. He turned his cup a quarter turn on the baize, by the handle, the way he had in 2028, and Jono watched him do it and wondered again where he had learned it.

"It isn't me," said Tarquin.

"I didn't think it was."

"I want you to know that. Before anything else. I signed my name on a sheet of paper in Bailey's in 2028 that said the device would remain where it was, and I meant it, and I still mean it." He looked at the cold grate. "But I'm not the only one at the table any more. I never was. And the people at the other end of it have been watching your bay for three years, Mr Hills, and they don't like what they see."

"What do they see?"

"A town of a hundred and forty thousand people," said Tarquin, "who can look at anybody in authority and know, within about four seconds, whether that person is any good." He spread his hands. "Your council has had more resignations in three years than in the previous thirty. Your Mayor's office was abolished. Your schools have changed their heads, your hospital its management. Your police..." He paused. "Well. You'd know about your police."

Jono did. Two superintendents and a chief inspector had taken early retirement in 2029. The DS was a detective inspector now, and the best one in Devon, and everybody knew it, because they could see it.

"And it stops at Newton Abbot," said Tarquin. "That's what frightens them. Not that it works. That it's local. That there's one corner of England where people can see, and everywhere else, they can't. And that sooner or later somebody in Exeter, or Bristol, or Birmingham, is going to ask why not here." He looked at Jono. "And sooner or later, somebody's going to answer them. Probably somebody who stood up in a pavilion in 2028 and said every candidate should stand in a square for a day and be looked at."

"I did stand in the square."

"I know. I watched it on the news. Eleven hours in the rain." Tarquin almost smiled again. "So did the Cabinet Office. They watched it four times."

* * *

"Who wants it?" said Jono.

Tarquin did not answer directly.

"There's a facility," he said. "In Wiltshire. Very secure. Very good. They've been asking for the device since about a fortnight after it came down in Liverpool Bay. Our friends across the Atlantic want it there too; they'd rather it were in Nevada, but they'll settle for Wiltshire, because Wiltshire will let them in." He turned the cup

again. "The order was drafted in July. I saw it in August. I said it was a breach of an agreement signed by the Crown's representative, namely me. I was told the agreement was with Rage, not with the Crown, and that Rage isn't a legal person, and that the Secretary of State has the power under the 2027 Act, and that I'd done very well and they were very grateful." He looked down. "And then it was laid. Yesterday. At five to five. On a Monday. In the hope that nobody would notice for forty days."

"And if nobody does?"

"Then on the eighteenth of October," said Tarquin, "somebody will knock on the door of Studio Ania with a piece of paper and a lorry. And the box on the monastery roof will come down. And the lamps will go out over Torbay, all of them, for the first time in three years. And the stone will go to Wiltshire in a crate." He was quiet. "And whatever it is that's in that cellar with its hand on it will have to decide what to do."

Jono sat very still.

Whatever it is. Not *whoever*. Tarquin had never asked. Not once, in three years. He had seen the gap in the conversation where a young man with Chris's face should have been, and he had never once put anything in it. Jono had thought, on the train in 2028, that it was the most intelligent thing anybody had done all afternoon. He thought now that it was something else as well. Something like loyalty.

"How do I stop it?"

Tarquin looked at him across the baize.

"You're a Member of Parliament," he said. "It's negative procedure. You object. You table a motion to annul it. A prayer, they call it, God knows why. You pray against it. And then you get the Government to give you time to debate it, which they won't, and you get enough Members to vote with you to annul it, which they

won't either, because half of them have never been to Torbay and the other half think the lamps are a stunt." He spread his hands. "It hasn't been done successfully since 1979."

"But it can be done."

"It can be done," said Tarquin. "Once. If you're very lucky. And very good at procedure. And you can find a reason for three hundred people who can't see the lamps to care about a cellar in Torquay." He paused. "You've got thirty-nine days."

* * *

Jono stood up.

At the door of the back room he stopped, and turned round.

"Why are you telling me?"

Tarquin was looking at the empty armchair by the cold grate.

"Because my great-grandfather sat in a back room in Paignton in 1915 and asked which of you was Rage," he said. "And my family has been on the same side as your family for a hundred and sixteen years, and I'd like to be the one who doesn't break it." He looked up. "And because she asked me to. On the phone. Last month. She said, *If they ever try to take it out of the bay, Tarquin, you tell the Hills boy first. Before anybody.*"

Jono looked at the armchair.

"How is she?"

Tarquin was quiet for a moment.

"Tired," he said. "She's seventy-one. She's been listening to things nobody else can hear for forty-nine years. She does the crossword. She asks after him." He picked up his coffee. "She asked me to tell you something too, actually, if you came. I nearly forgot."

"What?"

"She said to tell you that you were right not to read the book out in the pavilion. In 2028. She said she'd watched it four times too." Tarquin almost smiled. "She said, *Tell him a Hills who knows when not to write something down is worth ten who don't.*"

* * *

Jono walked back to Westminster the long way, by the river.

He had a select committee at ten and questions at half past two. He walked along the Embankment with his hands in his pockets, past the plane trees and the river going grey towards the sea, and none of the people he passed had lamps, and for once he did not look.

He thought about forty days. About the eighteenth of October. About a lorry in Union Street, and a crate, and the box on the monastery roof coming down, and every lamp in Torbay going out at once, like a switchboard when somebody pulls the plug.

He thought about the stone in its foam cradle in the cellar, and the hand on it, and the old eyes in the young face.

And about a painting on a wall in a flat over a garage in Ellacombe, of a young man's face with old eyes.

He had not told Chris yet. About the painting. He had meant to on Friday, after the surgeries. Now he had two things to tell him, and he did not know which was worse.

At Westminster Bridge he stopped, and leaned on the parapet, and took out his pocketbook. He wrote the date. *Talland's, 8.20 a.m. T.T. in a cardigan. The SI. Wiltshire. The Americans. 18 Oct. Pray against it. Hasn't worked since 1979.*

Then, underneath:

C.B. asked after him. Says I was right not to read it out.

He looked at that for a while, with the river going under the bridge below him.

Then he put the book away, and walked into the Palace of Westminster through Carriage Gates, and looked, out of habit, at the air above the policeman's head, and there was nothing there, and he went in anyway.

Chapter 3 – *Cheltenham*

Wed. 17 Sept. 2031. Portcullis House, 11.20 a.m. T.T. rang. C.B. dead. Found at 8 this morning by her cleaner, at the kitchen table. Crossword finished. T.T. has already rung C.H. Said C.H. didn't say anything. Not one word. Then put the phone down.

Carole Bayliss finished the crossword at a quarter to eleven on Tuesday night, and it was the last thing she ever did, and she did it in ink.

She always did it in ink. She had done it in ink since 1979, when she was nineteen and a second-year student at the Polytechnic in Stafford, sitting in the machine room on the night shift with a flask of black coffee and the tape decks spinning and the air conditioning roaring, because the machine room was the only warm place on the site after ten and the *Times* crossword was the only thing in the world, apart from the machine, that was harder than she was. Ink, because pencil was for people who thought they might be wrong.

She was seventy-one. She lived on her own in a narrow white house in a terrace in Cheltenham, three storeys and a basement, with railings at the front and a small walled garden at the back with a fig tree in it that never fruited. She had lived there since 1982. She had bought it in the spring, with her first salary and a mortgage the bank had not wanted to give a woman on her own, and she had never thought about living anywhere else, the way she had never thought about doing the crossword in pencil.

She did it at the kitchen table, in the basement, every night, at ten. The kitchen was the warmest room. It had an Aga she had put in in 1991 and a window at the top of the wall that looked out at the

pavement, at the railings, at the legs of people going past. She liked that window. She had sat under it for fifty years watching people's feet go by and knowing, from the feet, a great deal more about them than they would have liked.

It was a habit. Everybody in her trade had one. Hers was feet.

* * *

The man came at half past nine.

She saw his feet first. Through the window at the top of the wall, at the railings. Brown shoes, polished, ordinary, a man's, not new and not old. They stopped at her gate. They stood there for a moment. Then they came down the steps to the basement door, which nobody used except the cleaner on a Wednesday, and stopped outside it.

He knocked.

She did not get up at once. She sat at the table with the crossword in front of her, half done, and the pen in her hand, and thought about the feet.

They had not hesitated. That was the first thing. A man who did not know the house would have gone up the front steps to the front door, the way everybody did. This man had stopped at the gate and looked, and then come straight down to the basement, as if he had been told which door to use. As if he knew she would be in the kitchen at half past nine on a Tuesday doing the crossword, because somebody had watched her do it.

And the shoes. Polished, ordinary, brown. She had looked at a great many shoes in her life. She tried, sitting at the table, to remember anything about these. The make. The laces. The way the heels were worn.

She could not.

She had seen them three seconds ago through the window, in the light from the street lamp, and she could not remember one thing about them except that they were brown.

Carole Bayliss put down her pen, square to the edge of the newspaper.

She had been at Cheltenham for forty-nine years. She had sat in rooms with machines in them and listened to things that nobody else could hear, and she had been very good at it, because she had always been able to remember exactly what she had heard. Every tone. Every pause. Every fault in every line.

She sat in her kitchen and could not remember a pair of shoes.

She knew, then, who it was.

* * *

She opened the door. There was no point in not opening it. A man who could come down to her basement door without hesitating could come through it without being asked.

He was standing on the step in the dark, under the overhang of the front steps. A man in his fifties, perhaps. Grey jacket. White shirt. An ordinary face.

That was all. She looked straight at it, in the light from the kitchen behind her, and that was all she could see. An ordinary face. She looked at the eyes and could not have said what colour they were. She looked at the mouth and could not have said if it was thin or full. It was like trying to read a word on a page that somebody has written in water. You could see it was there. It would not stay.

"Miss Bayliss," said the man. His voice was pleasant and level and had no accent at all. "I'm sorry to call so late. I'm from the office."

"No, you're not," said Carole.

He smiled. Or she thought he did. She could not keep hold of it.

"No," he agreed. "May I come in?"

She stood aside.

* * *

He sat at her kitchen table, across from her, in the chair nobody sat in. She did not offer him tea. He did not ask for any. He sat with his hands folded on the table, beside the crossword, and looked at her, and she looked at him, and tried to see his face, and could not.

"You know who I am," he said.

"I know what you are." She folded her own hands. "You're the one in the Torbay files that nobody can describe. The grey hatchback. The lime and soda at Bailey's. The man in the photograph from the fire with no face." She looked at him through her glasses. "I've read every report on you since 2026. There are forty-one of them. Not one of them agrees on the colour of your hair."

"That's very flattering."

"It's not meant to be." She did not look away. "What do you want?"

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, quite pleasantly, as if he were asking her the way to the station:

"Eight faces."

Carole did not move.

"Painted in 1994," said the man. "In Singapore. In oil. By a telephone engineer with a press pass who had never painted anything before and never painted anything after." He tilted his head. "There's a file on him at your office too, of course. There's a file on everybody. His says that in the autumn of 1994 he bought

canvases and oil paints from a shop in Bras Basah Road, eight canvases, and a palette knife, and turpentine. That's all it says. A receipt, photographed by somebody who was watching the shop for other reasons." He paused. "Nobody ever wrote down what he painted. Not him. Not the woman he lived with. Not your people. Nobody." He looked at her. "Do you know how rare that is, Miss Bayliss? For something to happen to that family and nobody write it down?"

Carole said nothing.

"I'd like to know where they are," said the man.

"I don't know."

"I think you know a great deal."

"I know a great deal," said Carole. "I don't know that."

That was true. She did not know. She had never known. She had read the receipt, in 2028, in the file, when she was asked to look at the burst that came down out of the sky and said *Zider at Grans*, and had sat in her office for an hour looking at a photograph of a receipt for eight canvases from a shop in Singapore, and wondered what a man who talked about the sea in his sleep would paint, if he ever painted.

She had not asked. She had wanted to. She had not asked, because she had been taught the hardest lesson anybody in her trade ever learns, which is that there are some things you protect by not knowing them.

* * *

The man looked at her for a long time across the kitchen table.

Then he said, "Thank you, Miss Bayliss," and stood up.

That was all. He did not threaten her. He did not touch her. He did not touch anything. He stood up from the chair nobody sat in,

and pushed it back in under the table, square, and went to the basement door, and opened it, and turned on the step.

"You do the crossword in ink," he said.

"Yes."

"So did my mother," said the man, and went up the steps into the street, and his brown shoes went past the window at the top of the wall, along the railings, and were gone.

She sat at the table and tried to remember his face.

Nothing.

She tried to remember his voice. She had been listening to voices for forty-nine years. She could tell you, from three seconds of a man on a bad line in a language she did not speak, where he had been born and what he had had for breakfast. She sat in her kitchen and tried to remember the voice of a man who had been sitting across the table from her ninety seconds ago, and she could remember the words, every one, and not one single thing about how they had sounded.

So did my mother. She could not hear it.

* * *

She rang the shop at twenty to ten.

Not Tarquin's mobile. The shop. The old number, the one on the card in the window in Warwick Way, that went to a telephone on the wall behind the counter between the drawers with the brass labels, with an answering machine under it that was older than Tarquin. Nobody would be there. That was the point. Nobody listened to the shop.

It rang four times. Then the machine. Tarquin's grandmother's voice, recorded in 1987, very clipped: *Talland's. We are closed. Please leave your order after the tone.*

The tone.

"It's me," said Carole. "Ten to ten, Tuesday. He was here. The one in the files. Basement door, half past nine. He asked about the eight faces." She paused. "I didn't know. I told him I didn't know. That was true." She looked at the chair, pushed in square under the table. "Tarquin. I can't remember his face. I can't remember his voice. I've never not been able to remember a voice in my life." She was quiet for a moment. "Tell the Hills boy. Tonight, if you get this. Tomorrow, if you don't. Tell him nobody's going to be able to write this one down."

She put the phone back on the wall.

Then she sat down at the table and picked up her pen and finished the crossword.

* * *

It took her an hour. It was a hard one. Seventeen across held her up for twenty minutes, an anagram she should have seen at once, and she sat with the pen above it and looked at the window at the top of the wall, at the empty pavement, at the railings in the lamplight.

She thought about Stafford.

She did not often let herself. She had made a rule, in January 1982, on a train out of Stafford in the snow, with her hand flat against the window and a boy on the platform with his hands in his pockets not waving, that she would not think about Stafford. She had kept the rule for forty-nine years, mostly.

She broke it now. She did not know why. The man, perhaps. Eight faces.

She thought about a fire escape at dawn, in March 1981, with the frost on the field and the motorway going north and south and the light coming up very large over the Midlands, and a boy beside

her who talked about the sea in his sleep, and her own voice saying, *It's not the sea. But it's not nothing, either.*

She thought about the machine room, and the line printer clearing its throat, and the banner coming out over the back of it in foot-high letters made of hundreds of small ones.

She had printed two. He did not know that. She had printed two, and given him one on the floor of the machine room, and folded the other one very small, and put it in the inside pocket of her coat, and it had been in the kitchen drawer of this house since the spring of 1982. Third drawer down. Under the tea towels. She had not taken it out since she put it there. She knew exactly where it was.

Seventeen across.

She saw it. She wrote it in. Ink.

She finished the rest in ten minutes. She always did, once the hard one was out. She filled in the last square at a quarter to eleven and sat back.

Done.

She put the pen down on the table beside the newspaper, square to the edge, the way she always did. She took off her glasses and folded them and put them down beside the pen.

She thought: *I'll make a cup of tea. And then I'll go to bed. And in the morning I'll ring Tarquin on his mobile and ask him whether he got the message.*

She thought: *I should have asked. About the faces. Just once. I should have asked what he painted.*

She thought: *I wonder if one of them was me.*

At thirteen minutes to eleven her heart stopped.

It did not hurt. She would have been glad to know that. It simply stopped, between one beat and the next, the way a line goes dead when somebody somewhere a long way off pulls a plug out of a board. She was sitting at her kitchen table in Cheltenham with the crossword finished in front of her and her glasses folded beside the pen, looking up at the window at the top of the wall, at the empty pavement and the railings in the lamplight.

And then she was not looking at anything.

* * *

Her cleaner found her at eight the next morning. Mrs Okafor, who had cleaned for her on Wednesdays for nineteen years and had a key to the basement door. She found her sitting at the table, very straight, with her hands in her lap, and her eyes open, and the crossword finished.

The doctor came at nine. Her own doctor, who had looked after her for twenty years. He looked at her for a long time. He wrote *cardiac arrest* on the form, because that was what it was, and then he stood in the kitchen with the pen in his hand and said, to Mrs Okafor, who was crying by the Aga, "I saw her in June. She had the heart of a woman of fifty. It should have run another twenty years."

He did not write that on the form. There was not a box for it.

* * *

Tarquin Talland let himself into the shop in Warwick Way at seven that morning, before anybody, the way he always did, and saw the light flashing on the old machine on the wall behind the counter.

He played it standing in his coat between the drawers with their brass labels, with the shop still dark and the sign on the door still turned to *CLOSED*.

It's me. Ten to ten, Tuesday. He was here.

He played it three times.

Then he rang Cheltenham. Her landline. It rang and rang. Then her mobile, which she never answered. Then a number at the office that he was not supposed to have.

At ten past nine the office rang him back.

He stood in the back room of the shop for a long time afterwards, by the cold grate, looking at the empty armchair in the corner where she had sat three years ago with her crossword, and said nothing for an hour, and then said, to the armchair, "I'm sorry."

Then he took out his phone and rang Torquay.

Not the Hills boy. Not first. She had said *tell the Hills boy*, and he would. But there was somebody he had to ring before that. Somebody she had asked after every time, for three years, in this room and on the telephone. *How is he?*

The phone at the other end rang four times. Then a man's voice, a little hoarse, a little careful, the voice of a man of sixty-nine with a stroke behind him, standing in a hall with a barometer on the wall and a monkey puzzle outside the front door.

"Widecombe Cot."

"Mr Harvey," said Tarquin Talland. "It's Tarquin. From Talland's." He closed his eyes. "I'm so sorry. I have to tell you something about Carole."

Chapter 4 – *Not Nothing*

Wed. 17 Sept. 2031. Studio Ania, the cellar, 9.40 p.m. Came down on the 6.03. Missed two votes. C.H. on the floor with a banner. K.T. on the floor beside him. K. at the desk, hand on the stone. K. looked at me coming down the stairs as if he had never seen it before.

Chris put the phone down in the hall at Widecombe Cot at ten past ten on Wednesday morning, and stood there.

He did not know for how long. His mother told him afterwards that it was twenty minutes. She had been in the back room with the radio and had heard the phone, and his voice saying *Widecombe Cot*, and then nothing. And after a while she had come along the passage with her stick and found him standing by the desk with his good hand flat on the register and his bad hand against his chest, looking at the barometer on the wall as if it might tell him something.

"Chris?"

He did not answer.

"Chris. Who was it?"

He opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He shut it again.

His mother was ninety-five. She had seen him like this once before. In the garden at Paignton in April 1992, with a screwdriver on the gatepost and a young constable on the path and a bootlace in his hand. She had come out of the kitchen and sat with him on the step and not said anything, and he had not said anything, and they had sat there until it was dark.

She did not say anything now. She put her hand on his arm, very lightly, the way she put her hand on things she was not sure of, and left it there. And after a while he put his good hand over hers.

They stood in the hall like that until the clock in the back room struck the half hour.

Then he took his coat off the hook and went out.

* * *

He did not know where he was going. His feet went. Down the hill, past the bus stop where the road turns, past the trees going gold, down into Torquay. Along the Strand. Past the harbour, where the boats were in and the gulls were standing on the railings in a row looking at the water. He did not see any of it.

He was in Stafford.

He was nineteen and it was March and he was standing on an iron fire escape on the side of a concrete building at dawn, with frost on the field below and the pylons going away into the grey and the motorway full of headlights going north and south, and the light coming up over the Midlands, very slow, very large. And a girl beside him, tall and thin, in a black jumper, with very short dark hair and enormous round glasses, with her arms folded, not looking at him.

You talk about it in your sleep, you know. It's not the sea. But it's not nothing, either. Is it?

He had never told anybody what that had felt like. Not Karen. Not Jono. Not the page. He had written about it, in *Eighteen Months*, in 2018, at a table in an empty flat in Tiong Bahru, and he had written what she said and what he said and the frost and the pylons, and he had not written what it had felt like, because he could not, because there were no words for being nineteen and lonely and a long way from the sea and having somebody see

straight into the middle of you and say, quite calmly, that what she saw there was not nothing.

He had not seen her since January 1982. A platform in the snow. Her hand flat on the window of the train. He had stood with his hands in his pockets and not waved.

Forty-nine years.

She had asked after him. In a tea shop in Pimlico. *How is he?* And he had driven to Brixham in the dark and stood on a quay for an hour and not been able to say anything to Karen except *it's not nothing*. And he had thought, that night, and every night since, that one day he would go to Cheltenham. He would find the house. He would knock on the door. He would stand on the step like a fool at seventy and say *I heard you asked after me*.

He had thought there was time.

He stopped on the Strand by the clock tower, with the traffic going round, and put his good hand flat on the cold stone of the base of it, and leaned there, and could not breathe.

* * *

Karen found him at the cellar.

He did not remember getting there. He remembered the clock tower, and then he remembered the street door of Studio Ania, and his key not going into the lock because his hand would not stop, and then the stairs. And the cellar. And the shelves along the back wall where the tapes had been, where the archive was now, the eleven boxes that had come off a ship at Avonmouth in 2018. And box seven.

He had it open on the floor. He did not remember opening it. He was sitting on the cold concrete floor of the cellar with his back against the shelves and the box open beside him and the shoeboxes

out of it on the floor, three of them, and the lid off the third, and in his lap a thing he had not taken out since 1982.

Green-and-white fanfold paper. Folded small, very small, in a square the size of his hand, gone soft and furry at the edges and brown along the folds.

Karen came down the stairs at twelve. Jono had rung her from Westminster. He had rung her before he rang anybody else, because he knew where Chris would go and he knew he could not get there before half past nine. She came down the cellar stairs in her big jumper with the sleeves rolled up four times, quickly, the way she went down the harbour steps at Brixham, and stopped at the bottom.

Clifford was at the long desk, standing, with his phone in his hand, very pale. He had been there since half past ten. He had heard the street door and come out of the back room and seen Chris go past him and sit down on the floor, and he had not known what to do, and he had done the right thing, which was nothing.

Keith was at the end of the desk with his hand on the stone. He had not moved.

Karen looked at Chris on the floor. She looked at the thing in his lap.

She did not ask what it was. She had never in fifty years asked him a question she thought he did not want to answer. She came across the cellar and sat down on the cold concrete beside him, close, with her shoulder against his, the way she had sat in a Mini on Berry Head in 1979 with her feet on the dashboard.

She did not say anything.

After a long time, he unfolded it.

* * *

It took him a while. The folds had set. The paper was soft and it did not want to come apart. His bad hand would not do what he

told it, and his good hand was shaking, and Karen, after watching for a minute, put her own hands on the corners and held them, without a word, while he opened it out. One fold. Another. Another. Across his knees. Across hers. Out onto the floor of the cellar, the green-and-white stripes, the sprocket holes down both edges, the paper going on and on, longer than he remembered, until it lay across the concrete from the shelves to the leg of the long desk.

Three words. Each letter as tall as his forearm. Each one made of hundreds of small ones.

IT'S NOT NOTHING

He looked at it.

And it went.

Not quickly. Not like a dam. More like a cliff, a long way off, that you have been watching for years, that finally lets go. He had not cried for Angie, on the step in Paignton in 1992. He had sat there. He had not cried for Karina, at the Jalan Besar stadium in 2008, when the floodlights went out one by one. He had sat there. He had not cried when his father died. He had stood in the loft at his mother's with four hundred videotapes and not cried.

He sat on the floor of a cellar in Torquay at the age of sixty-nine with a line-printer banner across his knees and cried for a woman he had not seen for forty-nine years, and could not stop, and did not try.

Karen held the corners of the paper and did not let go.

* * *

Keith did not move from the desk.

He sat at the end of it with his hand flat on the stone in its foam cradle and watched the old man on the floor, and the woman beside him, and the long green-and-white paper going across the concrete, and the three words on it.

He looked at the words for a long time.

He did not know them.

That was the thing he would remember. Not the grief. He knew the grief. He had stood in that hall by the barometer himself, by his own reckoning twenty-nine years ago, and felt it, and he had felt it again at ninety-five, every day, in a way the man on the floor would not understand for twenty-six years. He knew the grief. He knew her name. He knew a fire escape and frost on a field and pylons going away into the grey.

He did not know the banner.

He looked at it, lying across the floor of his own cellar, three words in foot-high letters made of hundreds of small ones, and there was nothing in him where it should have been. No machine room. No line printer clearing its throat. No girl tearing off the paper and spreading it out between the cabinets. He knew it had happened. He had read it, in the book he had written in Tiong Bahru. He knew the words were hers.

He did not remember them.

He sat very still with his hand on the stone. Then, slowly, the way an old man checks his pockets for his keys, he checked the list.

The song. The waybill. The lighthouse, and the counting. Mum's book. Basil's left foot, which Basil had given back to him in a hospital in Singapore. The bootlace. Karen's hand on his collar on the platform at Torquay.

Seven.

He went through it again. Seven.

There had been eight. He knew there had been eight. He had counted them in the arrivals hall at Changi in 2028, and on the morning after the gall bladder, and every morning since. Eight. And now seven, and he did not know what the eighth had been, and he

sat at the end of the desk in the cellar with an old man crying on the floor in front of him, and could not remember what he had lost.

He did not know that it had gone at thirteen minutes to eleven the night before.

He would not know that for twenty-six years.

* * *

Jono came at twenty to ten that night.

He had caught the 6.03 from Paddington. He had missed two votes and a meeting with a minister's office about the order on the last page, and he did not care. He came straight from the station in the dark, in his suit, with his bag, and let himself in at the street door with the key Chris had given him in 2028, and came down the cellar stairs.

Heavy. Careful. The way he went down any stairs now, as if there were somebody frail on his arm.

At the bottom he stopped.

Chris was still on the floor. Karen beside him. They had not moved, Clifford said afterwards, in nine hours, except for Karen to go up once and come back with tea that neither of them drank. The banner was still across the floor. Chris was not crying any more. He was sitting with his back against the shelves and his good hand flat on the paper, the way you put a hand on a dog to keep it still, looking at nothing.

Jono stood at the bottom of the stairs.

And at the end of the desk, Keith looked up.

He looked at Jono standing at the bottom of the cellar stairs in his suit, with his bag in his hand, with the light from the desk lamp on his face. He looked at him the way you look at something you are seeing for the first time. Interested. A little puzzled. As if he

knew there was something about a man standing at the bottom of those stairs that he ought to know, and could not find it.

Jono saw the look. He did not know what it meant. He would not know for a long time.

He put his bag down. He went across the cellar, round the end of the banner, not stepping on it, and sat down on the floor on Chris's other side, in his suit, with his back against the shelves. Three of them in a row on the cold concrete. Karen, Chris, Jono.

"She was in the kitchen," said Jono quietly. "At the table. She'd done the crossword. In ink."

Chris did not say anything.

"There's something else," said Jono. "I'll tell you tomorrow. Not now."

Chris turned his head and looked at him. The first time he had looked at anybody since ten past ten that morning.

"Tell me now," he said.

His voice was hoarse and very quiet. It was the first thing he had said all day.

Jono looked at him for a long moment. Then he told him. About a message on an old answerphone in a tea shop in Pimlico. About a man at a basement door at half past nine. About eight faces.

About a face that nobody could remember.

Chris listened. He did not say anything. When Jono had finished, he looked down at the banner across his knees, at the three words, for a long time.

Then he began, very slowly, with Karen's help, to fold it up again. Corner to corner. Fold by fold. Along the old creases, which had set fifty years ago and still knew their way. Until it was a square the size of his hand, soft and furry at the edges.

He did not put it back in the shoebox. He put it in the inside pocket of his coat, over his heart, where he had once carried a blue velvet box.

"Eight faces," he said.

"Yes."

Chris looked across the cellar at Keith, at the end of the desk, with his hand on the stone, who was looking at the floor.

"Then I'd better get them home," said Chris.

Chapter 5 – *Eight Faces*

Sat. 27 Sept. 2031. Studio Ania, the cellar, 3 p.m. Seven crates from Singapore, air freight, Ong's labels. E. brought the eighth down the stairs himself, wrapped in a blanket. Would not let anybody help. Wrote nothing else today. Not this.

Raymond Ong had kept them for thirteen years, and in all that time he had never once opened the crates.

"You said not to," he said, on the phone from Singapore, on the Thursday after Carole. He was seventy-two now, and slower. "In 2018. You brought them to the works in a taxi, seven of them, wrapped in brown paper, and said, *Raymond, keep these somewhere dry and don't look at them.* So I put them in the paper store, behind the newsprint. I never looked. I am a printer. I want to look at everything. But you said."

"Thank you, Raymond."

"Do you want me to look now?"

Chris stood in the hall at Widecombe Cot with the phone in his good hand and the banner in the inside pocket of his coat.

"No," he said. "Just send them. Air freight. Today if you can."

"Today," said Ong. "Of course." And then, after a pause, carefully, the way he said things he did not want to say: "Chris. Grace says you've lost somebody."

"Yes."

"Somebody from before."

"Yes."

Ong did not say anything for a while. The line hummed, seven thousand miles of it.

"My grandfather lost his press," he said at last. "In 1942. He spent the rest of his life trying to find out who took it. He never did." He paused. "I'll send them today."

* * *

They came on Saturday.

Seven crates, raw pine, stencilled with the name of Ong's firm, on a van from Bristol Airport. Fred and two of the apprentices from the forge carried them down the cellar stairs one at a time, the way you carry something you have been told is precious and have not been told why. They leaned them against the long wall where the tapes had been, under the shelves, in a row. Seven.

Then they went back up the stairs. Fred looked back once from the top, at Chris standing in the middle of the cellar with a claw hammer in his good hand, and did not say anything, and went.

Chris did not open them.

He stood in the middle of the cellar with the hammer and looked at the seven crates against the wall, and did not open them, because there were supposed to be eight.

* * *

Eric came at three.

Jono brought him. Jono had told Chris on the Thursday night, at the long table in the back room at Widecombe Cot, after Carole, after the banner, when Chris had said *eight faces* and *I'd better get them home* and Jono had said, very quietly, *one of them's already home. It's in Ellacombe. Over a garage. It's been there since 1998.*

Chris had looked at him for a long time.

The bloke in the bar on Boat Quay, he had said at last. *The Marine. Who said he knew who it was.*

Eric. He says you were at school together.

Chris had not remembered. He had sat at the long table and tried, and could not, and that had frightened him more than anything since the hall on Wednesday morning, because he had always been able to remember faces. It was the one thing he had never lost. Not even after the stroke.

Now he heard feet on the cellar stairs. Jono's, heavy and careful. And another pair. Lighter. Steady. A man coming down stairs with something in his arms that he will not drop.

Eric came round the turn of the stairs into the light.

He had the painting in his arms, wrapped in an old grey army blanket and tied with string, held flat against his chest the way you would carry a sleeping child down a stair. He did not look at Chris. He looked at the stairs, at each step, until he was at the bottom. Then he stood there, on the concrete, with the blanket in his arms, and looked up.

Chris looked at him.

A small man, straight, sixty-nine, with a broken nose and a scar through one eyebrow and grey hair cut very short. In a dark coat. With eyes that went round the cellar in one movement, the screens and the desk and the shelves and the crates and the stairs and the door at the back, the way Chris's own eyes went round a room. The way Sue had taught him.

And Chris saw him.

Not in Singapore. Not in a bar on Boat Quay in 1994. Further back. A boy of fourteen in a grey school blazer too big for him, standing at the back of the crowd at the edge of a playing field in Paignton, watching a fight between two bigger boys, not cheering,

not joining in. Just watching. With his hands in his pockets. Until one of the bigger boys went down and did not get up, and then the small boy at the back had walked through the crowd and knelt down beside him and put him in the recovery position, because nobody else knew how, and had looked up at the teachers running across the field and said, quite calmly, *His tongue was in the way. He's all right now.*

"Prowse," said Chris.

The small man at the bottom of the stairs went very still.

"Eric Prowse," said Chris. "1976. The playing field. Martin Lacey. You put him in the recovery position." He heard his own voice. "You were the only one who knew how. You'd learned it from a book."

Eric Prowse looked at him across the cellar for a long time.

"St John Ambulance," he said at last. "Library book. I'd had it out for six weeks. I was going to be a doctor." He shifted the blanket in his arms. "Then I wasn't."

"I didn't know you. In Singapore."

"No. I didn't think you would." Eric looked down at the blanket. "You were looking at other things."

* * *

They unwrapped it on the long desk.

Eric did it. He untied the string and folded the blanket back, corner by corner, the way you would fold a flag, and there it was. The young man's face, in ochre and brown and a grey-blue in the shadows, laid on with a knife in ridges. The long jaw. The tired, patient eyes.

Chris looked at it.

He remembered painting it. He remembered the room above the incense shop, and the smell of turpentine and joss sticks, and the fan going round, and the rain on the roof at four in the morning. He remembered the knife in his hand. He did not remember why. He had never known why. He had not let himself know.

He had never told anybody how he painted them. He was not going to tell anybody now.

He took the claw hammer, and opened the crates.

* * *

Seven canvases, unframed, in brown paper with the dust of Ong's paper store on the string. Six of them two feet by three. One smaller, and the other way round. He cut the string and took the paper off. He stood them up along the long wall, under the shelves, in a row, and put the eighth at the end, where Eric had laid it on the desk.

Eight faces.

Eric and Jono and Clifford and Chris stood in the middle of the cellar and looked at them.

They were faces. Every one. Not portraits; rough, laid on thick with a knife, in ridges, in colours no face is. But faces. And one of them a whole woman.

The first was the smallest, and the only one the other way round, long rather than tall, like a photograph: a woman's face, smiling. The second, a woman standing in a dress with every colour on the palette in it, reds and oranges and greens and a lemon yellow, all shouting at once. The third, orange and black, a tunnel going away, with lamps on its walls getting smaller, and right at the far end, very small, a face. The fourth, a plain cream jug, and on its side a face drawn the way a child draws on a jug, with two great round eyes like the lenses of a pair of glasses, and a single tear. The fifth, a face with two eyes in a sea of red and green, with white streaks

blowing across all of it from one side to the other, like wind. The sixth, yellow and orange, the inside of a fire, and in the middle of it a face with green eyes and yellow ones. The seventh, no face at all. Two eyes. Very still. Crying.

And the eighth. The young man.

Chris stood in front of them with his hand on the banner in his pocket.

He knew them. Every one. He had always known. He had stood in a room above an incense shop in 1994 and painted six women and a woman in grey and a young man, and told himself he did not know who they were, and put a tile over it, and stood on the tile for thirty-seven years.

The tile was gone. It had gone on Wednesday morning, in the hall, with the phone in his hand.

The fourth one. A face on a jug, with two great round eyes like the lenses of a pair of glasses. And a tear.

He did not look at that one for long.

* * *

"I've asked Rani to come," said Clifford quietly.

Chris nodded.

She came at four. Down the cellar stairs, light and quick, in a dark jacket, with her hands in her pockets. She was thirty-four now. She had not been in the cellar since a wet Thursday afternoon in October 2028, Chris knew. She had not been anywhere much, for a long time. She had answered Clifford's message the same day, with one word, *yes*.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

Keith was at the end of the desk with his hand on the stone. She looked at him. He looked at her. Neither of them said anything.

Then she looked away, at the long wall, at the eight canvases leaning there in a row, and went still.

Chris watched her look. He could not see what she saw. None of them could. Only three people in the world could, and two of them were not there.

Rani walked along the row. Slowly. The way she walked along a corridor in the Town Hall in 2028, reading cords through the walls. She stopped in front of each canvas. Looked at it sideways. Moved on.

At the end of the row she turned round.

"They've got lamps," she said.

Nobody said anything.

"All of them. In the paint. Not like a picture of a lamp. A real one. The way people have." She looked at Chris. "You painted the lamps. In 1994. Thirty-four years before anybody could see them." She looked back at the row. "And grain. Every one. I could tell you about every one of them. What they were like. Whether they could finish things." She looked at the jug with the round eyes and the tear for a moment longer than the others, and then away. "And cords."

"Where do they go?" said Jono.

Rani walked back along the row. She pointed. Not touching. A finger a few inches from the paint.

"The small one. The smiling one. Cord goes there." She pointed at the man's face at the end. The eighth. "The dress. There. The tunnel. There. The jug. There. The sea, with the wind in it. There." She hesitated at the yellow and orange one, the fire. "There." She stopped at the seventh. The two eyes, crying, with one tear under the left eye that was not the colour of the others. "And this one. There too."

Every cord in the row went to the man's face at the end.

Rani stood in front of the seventh canvas and looked at it for a long time.

"This one's her," she said quietly. "Isn't it."

Chris did not answer.

"She's got a lamp," said Rani. "Here. In the paint. That tear. The amber one, under the left eye. It's not a tear. It's a lamp." She looked at Chris. "I've looked at her a hundred times since 2028. At Bailey's. In the square. There's never anything there. A gap. Like a socket with the plate unscrewed." She turned back to the canvas. "In 1994 she had one. And it had a cord. And the cord went to him." She looked along the wall at the man's face at the end. "She answers to him."

Nobody in the cellar said anything for a long time.

Then Rani said, "And this one." She had stopped in front of the third. The orange and black one. The tunnel, with the small face a long way down it. "This one's got two cords. One to him." She pointed at the man's face. "And one going out of the canvas. Out of the side of it. Through the wall." She followed it with her eyes, the way she had followed a cord out over the sea from the Mayor's office in 2028. "A long way. East." She looked at Chris. "That's not one of the ones you lost, is it. That one's still alive. And it's still tied to somebody."

Chris looked at the canvas. The orange lamps on the tunnel walls, getting smaller, and the small face at the far end, listening. The old tunnel under the Elbe, in Hamburg, in January.

"Singapore," he said. "Basil."

* * *

Keith had not moved.

He sat at the end of the long desk with his hand flat on the stone in its foam cradle, and he had not looked at the paintings, not

once, since the crates were opened. He had looked at the floor. At his hand. At the stone. At the screens. Chris had watched him not look.

Now Rani turned round and looked at him, and then at the eighth canvas, the man's face, beside him on the desk, and then back at him.

"It's you," she said.

Keith did not answer.

"The eighth. The man. Every cord goes to it, and it's you." She was very still. "He painted you. In 1994. Before you—" She stopped.

Keith lifted his head. Slowly. And looked, for the first time, at the canvas on the desk beside him.

A young man's face. Ochre and brown and grey-blue. The long jaw. The deep eyes, set a little too far apart, tired and patient. His own.

He looked at it for a long time.

Chris watched him. He watched his own young face, in the light from the desk lamp, looking at a painting of itself made by an older version of itself thirty-seven years ago, and he waited for it to change. For recognition. For the look of a man finding something he has been looking for.

It did not come.

Keith looked at the face on the canvas, and his own face did not change at all, except that his eyes, those old eyes, went very slightly wider. The way Richard's had, on the kerb in Station Square, in the glasses. The way you look at something you did not know existed.

"I don't remember this," said Keith.

Nobody said anything.

"I painted it," said Keith. "I must have. I was there. In that room. With the knife." He did not take his eyes off it. "I don't remember it at all." He was quiet. "Nobody wrote it down. Not even me. So it's not there." He touched his own temple, very lightly, with two fingers. "It was never there to lose."

He sat with his hand on the stone and looked at the painting of his own face, and Chris saw, for the only time in three years, that he was surprised.

* * *

Eric stood at the foot of the stairs. He had not come any further into the cellar since the blanket. He was looking at the face on the desk, and at the young man beside it, and back.

He did not say anything. He had been a Royal Marine, and a man who minded boats in the Strait for people he did not ask questions about, and a man who taught boys from Ellacombe to stand up. He had learned a long time ago that there were things you saw and did not say.

But Chris saw him look. At the face in the paint. At the face at the desk. And he saw Eric understand, the way you understand a thing all at once in the dark, that the painting on his wall for thirty-three years had not been a picture of himself on Mount Harriet at all.

Or not only.

Eric looked at Chris across the cellar.

"I'll want it back," he said quietly. "When you're done with it. On my wall."

"Yes," said Chris.

"I don't care who it is," said Eric. "It's still how it looked from the inside."

Jono, by the desk, had his pocketbook out. He had the pencil above the page. Chris watched him write the date and the time and the place, and then stop, and look along the row of eight canvases against the wall, and look for a long time.

Then he closed the book without writing anything else, and put the elastic round it, and put it away.

Chapter 6 – *Bailey's*

Fri. 3 Oct. 2031. Bailey's, public bar, 10.25 p.m. E. came. Orange juice. Stood at the back by the fire door. When A. began the third song he put the glass down and went out. Did not say goodbye. 11.58 p.m., text: "Fine. Tomorrow." That was the last thing.

Eric Prowse did not go to pubs.

He had told Jono so in the first winter, when Jono had asked him, after a Thursday session, whether he fancied a pint. *I don't drink. I don't go in pubs. I stand at the back of things. That's where I'm useful.* And Jono had nodded and not asked again, for three years.

He asked again on the Wednesday after the paintings.

"Chris is playing on Friday," he said, in the ring, between rounds, with his gloves on the top rope. "At Bailey's. First time since Carole. He says he's going to play one he's never played to anybody."

Eric looked at him over the pads.

"There's a Friday session," he said.

"I know. I'm asking you to cancel it."

Eric was quiet for a long time.

"Why?"

"Because he remembered you," said Jono. "On Saturday. In the cellar. The playing field. Martin Lacey. He's been ringing me every day since asking about you. He wants you there." He paused. "And

because I think you should hear him. Just once. The man who painted that."

Eric looked at the canvas floor of the ring. Then he looked up.

"I'll stand at the back," he said.

* * *

Bailey's on a Friday night in October was full by nine.

It had been full on Friday nights since it opened. Three and a half years now, and the public bar still did not look new. Richard had seen to that. *Brick weathers*, he said. *Glass just gets dirty.* The panelling had gone a little darker. The photograph of the square in 1900 over the fireplace had a crack across one corner from the night of the fire in 2028 that Tan had refused to have repaired. The window table at the front, where a young man had sat on the opening night and turned his cup a quarter turn, had a small brass plate screwed to it now, very discreet, that said nothing but *RESERVED*, and nobody ever sat at it except one person.

He was sitting at it tonight. With his back to the corner and a cup of tea in front of him, untouched. Looking out of the window at the square.

Jono saw him when he came in and nodded, and Keith nodded back, and Jono went to the bar.

The band was in the corner by the fireplace. The drummer from Brixham, greyer now, still mending nets in the daytime. The maths teacher in his cardigan, retired in the summer, who said playing bass was the only exam he had never had to set. And Chris, on his stool, with his guitar across his knee and his bad hand resting on the strings, tuning very slowly, with his head down.

And Ania.

She stood a little apart from them, by the fireplace, very straight, in her grey costume, with her hands at her sides, waiting.

The way she always waited before they began. Looking at nothing. And over her head, in the warm light of the public bar, among two hundred amber lamps, a gap. You stopped seeing it, after three years. You did not stop seeing it.

Eric came at a quarter past nine.

Jono saw him in the door to the hall. A small straight man in a dark coat, with a broken nose, looking round the room in one movement the way he looked round every room. Exits. Bar. Corner. Crowd. Then he came in, sideways, through the crowd, the way you go down a ward at night, and went to the back wall by the fire door, the one into the yard, and stood there with his back to the panelling.

Jono took him an orange juice. Eric took it and said thank you and did not drink it.

"He's going to play it now," said Jono. "The one."

Eric nodded. He did not take his eyes off the corner.

* * *

Chris played it third.

He did not introduce it. He never introduced anything. The drummer and the maths teacher had put their instruments down and gone to the bar, the way they had been told to, and the corner by the fireplace was just Chris on his stool with his guitar, in the light, with his head down, and the public bar went quiet, not all at once, in waves, from the front to the back, the way rooms did when he was going to play something on his own.

He played it slowly. In E minor. A thing he had written in a flat in Highbury in the winter of 1990, on the end of a bed, after Sue went, one of five songs for five women, and recorded once in a basement studio in Camden in front of a girl with red hair and a bacon sandwich, and never played again. Not on a stage. Not to Karen. Not to anybody.

It was about snow.

Snow on a screen, in a machine room, at two in the morning, little white dots falling down a black screen from the top, at different speeds, drifting, settling at the bottom and piling up until the bottom was white and the white began to climb. And snow on a field. And snow on a platform. And a girl at a train window with her hand flat on the glass.

His voice was hoarse. It had been hoarse since Wednesday. His bad hand did the work anyway, slowly, on the frets. He did not look up once.

Jono stood at the back by the fire door beside Eric and listened, and did not write anything down.

At the end Chris sat with his hand flat on the body of the guitar, the way you put your hand on something to stop it humming. The bar did not clap at first. Then it did. Not loudly. The way people clap at a funeral, when somebody has sung something they did not know they needed to hear.

In the window at the front, Keith had put both his hands round his cup.

Eric, beside Jono, let out a breath. Long. Slow.

"Snow," he said quietly. "I didn't know he could do that."

"Neither did he," said Jono. "Till he did."

* * *

Then Ania sang.

The drummer and the maths teacher came back from the bar. Chris put the guitar back on his knee. And Ania stepped forward into the light by the fireplace, very straight, with her hands at her sides, and began, the way she always began, without counting in,

without looking at anybody. Setting the first word down in the air. Then the next.

Every word the same length.

The public bar went quiet again. The other way. Leaning forward.

Jono heard Eric stop breathing.

He did not see it at first. He was watching Ania, the way everybody was. He felt it. Beside him, against the panelling, the small straight man went still in a way Jono had only felt once before in his life: in a car park behind a burning station, in the smoke, with his hand on a woman's wrist, when a voice behind him said *not her*.

He turned his head.

Eric was looking at Ania.

Not the way the bar was looking at her. Not leaning forward, not lost in it. He was looking at her the way a man looks at a face he has seen once, a very long time ago, in the worst place he has ever been, and has looked for in every crowd since, and has never once let himself believe he would see again.

His face had gone white. Not pale. White. The colour Jono had seen on Chris's face on the path in the garden at Paignton in 1992, and on his own face in a mirror, once, in 2008. The colour of the sky, with the blue showing through.

The orange juice in his hand was shaking.

"Eric?"

Eric did not hear him.

* * *

Ania, in the light by the fireplace, setting the words down one after another, turned her head.

Not much. A few degrees. The way she had turned her head in Bailey's on the opening night in 2028 to look at a young man at a window table. She did not stop singing. Her voice did not change. Every word the same length.

She looked down the length of the public bar, over two hundred heads and two hundred amber lamps, to the back wall, by the fire door.

At Eric.

And held it.

Jono saw it. He would write it down later, at four in the morning, at his kitchen table in Preston: *she looked at him the whole of the second verse*. He would not be able to say what was in her face. He had known that face all his life, since a knitted hat in a pew in Preston, and he had seen it kind and still and far away and once, on the steps of the Town Hall at midnight, smiling. He had never seen it look like this. Like somebody looking at a thing they had made a long time ago and had hoped never to see again, because seeing it meant it was nearly time.

At the window table, Keith had turned round in his chair.

He was not looking at Ania. He was looking at Eric. With his old eyes. With an expression on his young face that Jono had seen on it once, in Joo Chiat, in a photograph Clifford had sent, of a young man on a pavement looking at a woman in a straw hat across the road. The look of a man who knows exactly what happens next, and cannot stop it, and has to watch.

The second verse ended.

Eric put the orange juice down on the ledge of the panelling. Very carefully. Square. The way you put a thing down when you will need both hands.

He did not look at Jono. He did not say anything.

He put his hand on the bar of the fire door, and pushed it, and went out into the yard, into the dark, and the door swung shut behind him on its spring with a soft heavy click.

* * *

Jono went after him.

He did not decide to. His body did it. Through the fire door, into the yard behind Bailey's, the wheelie bins and the kitchen light and the smell of the bins. The way he had gone through this same door in April 2028 after a man with a gun.

The yard was empty.

He went through the gap at the side into Station Square. It was a cold clear night, the first cold one. The square was full of people. Going into Bailey's, coming out of the forge, where the doors were open and the fire was going and somebody was hammering late. Waiting at the bus stop. The barriers up at the level crossing. The new station on the other side, finished in the spring, cream and maroon again, with a green iron canopy that Richard had made them put back. Lamps, over every head, going to and fro.

No Eric.

Jono stood in the middle of Station Square and turned round, slowly, the way Chris turned with a camera. The platform game. Who was there. Who was not.

He was not there.

Jono rang him. It rang and rang. He rang again. Voicemail. He walked up to Ellacombe, fast, through the streets, and up the side street, and stood at the bottom of the iron stairs and looked up at the window over the garage.

The brass lamp was on. The green shade. Lit.

He went up the iron stairs and knocked on the door of the gym. Nothing. He knocked again. He stood there in the cold for a long time.

Then he went down again, and stood in the street, and wrote it down under a street lamp. The time. *Lamp on. No answer.*

* * *

At two minutes to midnight, at his kitchen table in Preston, his phone buzzed.

A text. From Eric. Two words.

Fine. Tomorrow.

Jono looked at it for a long time.

He wrote back: *Saw your face. Who is she?*

He watched the little word under it change from *delivered* to *read*. He watched the three dots come up that meant somebody was typing.

He watched them go away again.

Nothing came.

He sat at the table until two, with the phone face up beside the pocketbook, and nothing came.

At two he wrote it down. All of it. The song about snow. The orange juice put down square on the ledge. The second verse. Keith turning round in his chair. *Fine. Tomorrow.* The three dots, and the nothing.

Then he went to bed, and did not sleep, and at seven in the morning he got up and drove to Ellacombe, because it was Saturday and Eric opened the club at nine on a Saturday for the boys, and had done every Saturday since 1998.

The brass lamp in the window over the garage was still on.

The garage door was shut. The iron stairs were empty. The sign said *ALL WELCOME. NO MESSING.*

At nine o'clock nobody opened the door.

Chapter 7 – *Jo*

Sat. 4 Oct. 2031. Ellacombe, the club, 9.20 a.m. Locked. Lamp still on. Young woman came up the street with a kit bag and a key. "He gave me it last Saturday. Said if he was ever late, open up for the kids." Did not give her name till 9.40. K. was across the street. Had been there since before I came.

There were six of them at the bottom of the iron stairs at nine o'clock, and none of them knew what to do, because in thirty-three years Eric had never once not opened the door.

The three lads from Ellacombe, fourteen and fifteen, in tracksuits, with their gloves round their necks on the laces. The big quiet girl from the Hele estate, Shannon, sitting on the bottom step with her chin on her knees. Two little ones, nine or ten, brothers, with their mum, who was looking at her watch. And the boy from Paignton with the probation officer, Kai, sixteen, standing a little apart from the others with his hood up and his hands in his pockets, looking up at the lit window over the garage the way you look at a light in a house you think might be on fire.

Jono had been there since seven. He had knocked again at eight, and again at half past. He had rung four times. He had walked round the back of the garage and looked at the yard, the bins, the back door to the flat, shut, the curtains drawn across the back window. He had stood in the street and looked up at the brass lamp with the green shade, and thought about a man who had slept with the light on for thirty-three years.

He had not rung the police. He was not the police. He was a Member of Parliament and a carer and an ex-copper with a man who had not answered his phone for nine hours, and he knew

exactly what the desk at Torquay would say, because he had said it himself a thousand times. *He's a grown man, sir. He's probably gone away for the weekend.*

Eric did not go away for the weekend. Eric had not been away for a weekend since 1998.

"Is he dead?" said one of the little brothers.

His mother hissed at him.

"No," said Jono. He did not know if it was true. He said it anyway, the way you said it on doorsteps, because a child had asked.

* * *

She came up the street at twenty past nine.

Jono saw her from the bottom of the iron stairs. A young woman, walking fast, up the hill from the harbour, with a kit bag over her shoulder and her hands in the pockets of a black hooded top. Short, solid, quick. Dark hair scraped back. She came up the side street without looking at any of them and stopped at the bottom of the stairs, and looked up at the window, at the lamp, and then at the shut door at the top.

Then she looked at Jono.

It was a short look. Two seconds. Up, down, across. Face, hands, shoes, the way he was standing. He had seen people look at him like that before. Sergeants at training school. Old women on doorsteps who had been robbed once and were not going to be robbed again. Ania.

He had never seen anybody of twenty do it.

"You're the MP," she said.

"Yes."

"He's not opened up."

"No."

She looked at the window again. Then she put her hand in the pocket of her hooded top and took out a key on a piece of green string.

"He gave me this last Saturday," she said. "After the session. He said, *if I'm ever late, open up for the kids*. I said, *you're never late*. He said, *no*." She looked at the key in her palm. "I thought it was a joke."

Jono looked at the key.

Last Saturday. The day the crates came from Singapore. The day Eric carried a painting down the cellar stairs in an army blanket and stood at the bottom and looked at a young man at a desk and understood something.

"He gave you a key," said Jono.

"He gives everybody something," said the young woman. "He gave Shannon his old gloves. He gave Kai his phone number." She went past him up the iron stairs, two at a time. "He gave me a key."

She unlocked the door at the top and pushed it open, and stood back to let the little ones go in first.

* * *

The gym was exactly as it always was. The bags hanging still on their chains. The rack of gloves. The mirrors with the silver going. The ring in the middle, with its patched canvas. The smell of leather and liniment and cold paraffin. It had not been touched. Nobody had been in it since Thursday night.

The door at the back, behind the glove rack, to the narrow stair up to the flat, was shut.

Jono looked at it.

The young woman had already dropped her kit bag on the floor by the ring and was taking off her hooded top. Under it, a grey vest. Arms like a rower's. She looked round at the boys, standing in a huddle by the door, not knowing what to do, and she clapped her hands, once, hard, so that the sound went up into the rafters.

"Right," she said. "He's not here. That doesn't mean we're not. Shannon, bags. Kai, skipping, three minutes, and I'll time you, so don't lie. You two," the brothers, "with me, on the pads, and if you hit me in the face I'll tell your mum." She looked at the three lads from Ellacombe. "Warm up. Properly. Not like last week."

They went. All of them. At once. The way boys go when somebody tells them, in the right voice, what to do.

The mother of the brothers looked at Jono. Jono looked back. Neither of them said anything.

The young woman was pulling on a pair of pads. Old ones, red, gone grey at the knuckles. On the back of each, in black marker pen, in capitals, two letters.

JO.

Jono looked at the door at the back, behind the glove rack. Then at the young woman with the pads.

He went to the door.

* * *

He did not open it. Not yet. He stood with his hand on the handle and thought about a man who slept with the light on, and what he might find at the top of a narrow stair in a flat that had been silent for nine hours.

He had found things at the top of stairs before. Twenty-five years. He knew what it smelled like, when it was that. He put his face close to the gap at the edge of the door and breathed in.

Nothing. Dust. Leather. Cold.

Not that.

He let out a breath he had not known he was holding, and opened the door, and went up.

* * *

Keith had been standing across the street since half past six.

In the doorway of the closed launderette opposite the garage, in a dark coat, with his hands in his pockets, watching the window with the brass lamp in it. He had watched Jono arrive at seven, and knock, and wait. He had watched the boys come, one by one, and stand at the bottom of the iron stairs. He had not crossed the street.

He knew what was in the flat. Or what was not. He had known since Thursday night, since he turned round in his chair at the window table in Bailey's and saw a small straight man go white at the back of the room. He had known, if he was honest, for thirty years before that, the way he knew most things: as a page in a book he had read once, a long time ago, with most of the words gone.

He had not crossed the street, because there was nothing in the flat that he could change, and because crossing the street would cost something, and he did not know what.

He had watched a young woman come up the hill at twenty past nine with a kit bag over her shoulder.

And he had stopped breathing.

* * *

He knew the walk.

He did not know how. It was not on the list. It had never been on the list; there had been no need to put it there, because in 2057 she was there every morning, in the white room, at the desk beside his, and you do not write down the things that are there every

morning. A short, solid, quick walk. The weight a little forward. The hands in the pockets. The way she stopped at the bottom of the iron stairs and looked up at the window and then at the door and then at Jono, two seconds, up, down, across.

He knew that look. He had been looked at like that every day for eleven years. Across a desk. Across the interface. Across a white room at four in the morning, when he came back from somewhere in 1943 with his hands shaking and his memory full of holes, and she would look at him like that, two seconds, up, down, across, and say *Right. What did it cost?* and write it down.

Twenty-one. She was twenty-one. Her hair was dark, not grey. Her face was young. But it was her.

Jo.

He stood in the doorway of the closed launderette and could not move.

* * *

Through the window of the gym, across the street, above the garage, he could see her. In a grey vest, with a pair of red pads on her hands, holding them up for two small boys. Then turning, and saying something to a big girl at a bag, and the girl laughing. Then going to the bag herself, when the boys had gone to skip, and putting the pads down, and putting her hands up, and hitting it.

He watched her hit the bag.

Left. Left. Right. The bag swinging on its chain. Left, right, left, hook. Not pretty. Hard. Every punch exactly where she meant it. The way she would hit a problem at the interface at four in the morning in 2057: not elegantly, not quickly, just over and over in the same place until it gave.

He had stood behind her in the white room a thousand times and watched her do that to a problem.

She did not know him. She had looked straight past the launderette when she came up the street. She would look straight at him one day, in a room he could not describe to anybody living, and say *Right. What did it cost?*, and she would not remember that the first time she ever saw him was across a street in Ellacombe on a Saturday morning in October, through a window, hitting a bag.

She had not seen him at all. For her, he would not exist for years yet.

For him, she had been there every morning of the life he could still remember.

Keith stood in the doorway of the launderette, a young man in a dark coat, with old eyes, and watched a girl of twenty-one hit a punch bag through a window across a street, and the tears ran down his face, and he did not wipe them, and did not move, and did not make a sound.

* * *

Jono came down the narrow stair at a quarter to ten.

He came back through the door behind the glove rack into the gym and stood there for a moment, very still, with his hand on the frame.

The young woman stopped hitting the bag. She looked at his face. Two seconds. Up, down, across.

"He's not there," she said. It was not a question.

"No."

"Is it bad?"

Jono looked at the boys. At Shannon, at the bag, watching him. At Kai, by the skipping rope, with his hood up, very still. At the two little brothers on the pads with their mum.

"Keep them going," he said to the young woman quietly. "Till eleven. Like he would. Don't tell them anything. I'm going to make some calls."

She looked at him a moment longer.

"All right," she said.

He turned to go back up. Then he stopped.

"I don't know your name."

She picked up the pads again. Red, gone grey at the knuckles, with two letters on the back of each in black marker pen.

"Jo," she said.

"Jo what?"

"Just Jo," she said. "For now." And she held up the pads for the two little brothers, and said, "Come on, then. Show me what you've got," and did not look at him again.

* * *

Jono went back up the narrow stair.

At the top, before he went into the flat, he looked out of the small window on the landing, down into the street.

There was a man standing in the doorway of the launderette across the road. A young man, in a dark coat, with his hands in his pockets, looking up at the window of the gym. Not moving.

Jono knew him. He did not need the lamps. He did not need anything.

It was Keith. And his face was wet.

Jono stood at the landing window for a long moment, looking down at him.

Keith looked up. Saw him. Did not look away. Did not wipe his face.

Then he turned and walked off down the hill towards the harbour, with his hands in his pockets, and did not look back.

Jono took out his pocketbook. He wrote the time. *Young woman. Key on green string. Gloves marked JO. "Just Jo. For now."* And then, underneath:

K. across the street since before I came. Crying. Watching her.

He looked at that for a long time.

Then he put the book away, and went into the flat, and stood in the middle of Eric Prowse's very clean room, by the bed with the hospital corners, and looked at the wall facing it.

At the four tacks in the plaster, and the pale rectangle, two feet by three, where a painting had hung for thirty-three years.

It was in the cellar under Studio Ania. Eric had left it there a week ago, and said he would want it back.

He had not come back for it.

Chapter 8 – *Gone*

Sat. 4 Oct. 2031. Ellacombe, 11.20 a.m. Rang the DI. Not the desk. He came himself, in his own car, in jeans. Stood in the middle of E.'s flat and said: "This man didn't leave. This man was taken." Then: "Don't write anything you wouldn't say in court." Wrote it anyway.

The thing that told Jono was the bed.

He had stood in the middle of the flat at a quarter to ten that morning for a long time, the way he had stood in a great many rooms, not touching anything, just looking. The way you were taught. Let the room tell you. Rooms always tell you, if you give them long enough and do not start moving things.

The kitchen: two mugs on their hooks, washed. The teapot upside down on the drainer. The kettle cold. The table, wiped. The two chairs pushed in, square.

The shelf of books. Military history. Birds. A gap at the end where one had been taken out and not put back. Jono looked at the spine of the book beside the gap. *The Birds of Dartmoor*. He did not know what had been next to it.

The window over the street, with the brass lamp in it and the green shade. On.

The wall opposite the bed. Four tacks. A pale rectangle where the painting had been. That was not new. That had been since last Saturday.

And the bed.

Made. Hospital corners. Tight. The pillow square at the top. The blanket folded at the foot in a neat oblong, the way they teach you at Lympstone and you never stop doing.

Not slept in.

Eric had come home from Bailey's on Friday night. He must have. The lamp was on, and he had not left it on when he went out. Kai had told Jono at nine that morning, at the bottom of the iron stairs, that he had walked past at nine on Friday night and the window had been dark. The first time Kai had ever seen it dark. So Eric had come home, sometime after half past ten, and climbed the stairs, and switched on the lamp.

And then not gone to bed.

A man who has slept with the light on for thirty-three years does not switch on the light and then not go to bed. Not unless something stops him.

Jono had stood there and looked at the hospital corners. Then he had gone to the window and looked out at the street, at the launderette across the road, at a young man in a dark coat in its doorway with his face wet, looking up.

Then he had gone down and kept the kids going, and at eleven, when the last mother had come up the iron stairs and taken the last child away, he had rung the DI.

* * *

The DI came at twenty past.

Not in a police car. In his own, an old estate with a child seat in the back, in jeans and a fleece, because it was Saturday and he had been at his daughter's swimming lesson in Brixham when Jono rang. He was forty-nine now. Jono had worked with him for six years, a long time ago, when he was a sergeant and Jono was something else, and the two of them had sat in a car on a cold night in 2026

outside a funeral director's in Torquay and talked about feelings not being evidence.

He was the best copper in Devon. Everybody knew it now. You could see it.

He stood in the middle of Eric's flat with his hands in the pockets of his fleece for a long time, the way Jono had, not touching anything. He looked at the kitchen. The books. The lamp. The four tacks in the wall. The bed.

"He made his bed on Friday morning," said the DI.

"Yes."

"And didn't get into it on Friday night."

"No."

"And left the lamp on."

"He always leaves the lamp on," said Jono. "He's slept with it on since 1998. But it was off when he came out to Bailey's. I saw it."

The DI looked at the lamp. Then at the bed. Then at Jono.

"This man didn't leave," he said quietly. "This man was taken."

* * *

They went through it. Properly. The way they used to.

Eric's phone was not in the flat. His wallet was not in the flat. His keys were in the bowl by the door, the big bunch with the garage key and the gym key and a small brass one Jono did not know. His coat, the dark one he had worn to Bailey's, was on the hook behind the door.

"He came in," said the DI. "Hung his coat up. Put his keys in the bowl. Switched on the lamp." He looked at the coat. "Then somebody knocked."

"He wouldn't open the door at midnight."

"He'd open it to somebody he knew. Or somebody who said they had news of somebody he knew." The DI looked at Jono. "Or somebody who said they had news of a woman he'd seen at Bailey's."

Jono did not say anything.

"I've read your book, Jono," said the DI. "The one you let me see in 2028. And your new one, a bit, last week, when you rang me about Cheltenham." He looked at the pale rectangle on the wall. "I'm not going to ask you about the woman. I don't want to know. I've got a daughter who swims on Saturdays." He looked away. "But somebody who knew that this man went white at Bailey's last night, and walked out, and came home, and couldn't sleep, would know exactly what to say at his door at midnight to make him open it."

* * *

The text came up at half past twelve.

The DI had asked to see it. Jono took out his phone and showed him. *Fine. Tomorrow.* At two minutes to midnight. And under it, Jono's reply. *Saw your face. Who is she?* Read. And the three dots, and nothing.

The DI looked at it for a long time.

"How does he usually text?"

Jono opened his mouth to say *like that* and stopped.

He scrolled up. Three years of messages. Not many. Eric did not text much. *Thursday, 10. Moved to Friday. Kai's in trouble, ring me. Bring gloves, yours are knackered. Shannon's in the regional final, 14th.*

Every one ended the same way. With a full stop, and then a space, and then a capital E.

Bring gloves, yours are knackered. E.

Moved to Friday. E.

Every one. For three years. He had stopped seeing it, the way you stop seeing anything that is always there.

Fine. Tomorrow.

No E.

Jono stood in Eric Prowse's very clean flat with the phone in his hand and felt the floor move under him, the way it had moved in Bailey's in April 2028 when a man at the bar put down a glass of lime and soda.

"That's not him," he said.

"No," said the DI. "I didn't think it was."

"The three dots. When I asked who she was. Somebody was typing. Then they stopped."

"Somebody who didn't know the answer," said the DI. "And didn't want to guess."

* * *

The old lady above the launderette had seen it.

The DI found her at one o'clock, by knocking on the door beside the launderette and going up, while Jono stood in the street. She was eighty-four and she did not sleep, she said, not since her husband, and she sat in her front window most of the night with the radio and watched the street, because there was nothing else to watch.

At ten past one, she said, a car had come up the side street. Grey. Ordinary. She could not say what make. It had stopped at the bottom of the iron stairs with its lights off. Two men had got out. Then, after a while, they had come down the iron stairs with a third

man between them, one at each arm, the way you help a man who's had a few. He was walking. Sort of. His head was down.

"I thought he'd had a few," she said. "You see it on a Friday. I thought, that's the boxing man. I've never seen him the worse for drink in twenty years." She looked at the DI. "He wasn't singing. They sing, when they've had a few. He wasn't making any sound at all."

"The two men. What did they look like?"

She frowned. She thought about it for a long time.

"Ordinary," she said at last. "That's the funny thing. I was looking straight at them, under the street lamp. I can see the boxing man now, his head down, his feet going. But the other two..." She shook her head. "I can't see them. I've tried, since you knocked. I can't see their faces at all. Just *ordinary*. Like when you try to remember a dream."

The DI wrote it down. Then he came down the stairs and stood in the street beside Jono and did not say anything for a long time.

"Grey car," he said at last.

"Yes."

"Nobody can describe them."

"No."

"There was a man in your 2028 book," said the DI. "And in 2026, before that. At the fire at the Albion. And in a care home in Paignton. And outside your house, in a grey hatchback." He looked at the iron stairs. "A man nobody can describe."

"Yes," said Jono.

* * *

Chris came at two. Karen drove him. He got out of the little blue car at the bottom of the side street and came up the hill slowly,

with his bad hand against his chest, and stood at the bottom of the iron stairs and looked up at the window with the brass lamp in it.

He did not ask anything. Jono told him. The bed. The coat on the hook. The text with no E. The old lady. The two men nobody could describe.

Chris listened. When Jono had finished he stood for a long time looking up at the lamp.

"Carole," he said quietly. "Then Eric."

"Yes."

"Both of them had seen the paintings. Or were near them." He looked at Jono. "Carole didn't know where they were. She told him that. So he went to somebody who did."

Jono did not say anything. He had thought the same thing at ten o'clock that morning, standing in the flat, looking at a pale rectangle on a wall.

"It's in the cellar," said Chris. "Eight. With the others. Eric left it with me." He looked down the street, towards the harbour, towards Union Street, towards the cellar under Studio Ania. "If they'd come to the cellar, they'd have found it."

"They didn't want the painting," said Jono. "Not yet. They wanted something to trade for it."

Chris looked at him.

"Him," said Jono.

* * *

Keith was in the cellar when Jono went down at four.

At the end of the long desk, with his hand on the stone. He had not been to the club since the morning. He had not answered his phone. Clifford said he had come in at eleven, wet-eyed, and sat down, and not moved.

Jono stood at the bottom of the cellar stairs. Heavy. Careful.

Keith looked up at him. The same look as on Wednesday. As if a man at the bottom of those stairs were something he had once known and could not find.

"You were across the street," said Jono. "From half past six. Before me."

"Yes."

"You knew he was gone."

"Yes."

"Did you know where?"

Keith was quiet for a long time. His hand did not move on the stone.

"No," he said.

Jono looked at him.

"I knew he'd go," said Keith. "I knew it was this week. I knew the club wouldn't open on Saturday." He looked at the stone. "I didn't know where he'd be. I never did. Not then, and not..." He stopped. "Nobody wrote it down, Jono. Where he was. Not while he was in it. So I never knew. I only knew afterwards. And afterwards is..." He touched his temple with two fingers, very lightly. "Afterwards is mostly gone."

"How long?"

Keith looked up at him.

"How long will he be gone?"

Keith did not answer that.

He looked at Jono for a long time with his old eyes, in the light from the desk lamp. Then he looked at the long wall, at the eight canvases leaning there under the shelves in a row. At the last one.

The dark. The pale smear a little to the left of the middle, that was a face if you looked at it sideways.

"Long enough," said Keith quietly, "that he'll know why he bought it."

* * *

Jono went up the cellar stairs and out into Union Street.

It was nearly dark. October. The lamps coming on, the street lamps and the other ones, over the heads of the people going home with their shopping. A Saturday evening in Torquay. Normal. Everybody going somewhere.

He stood on the pavement outside Studio Ania with his hands in his pockets and looked up Union Street, towards Castle Circus, towards the Town Hall with its clock tower against the sky. And down Union Street, the other way, towards the harbour, past the shops and the empty units and the old buildings with their upper windows dark.

Somewhere in this town, or near it, a man who slept with the light on was in the dark.

Jono took out his pocketbook. He wrote the date. The time. The bed. *Coat on hook. Keys in bowl. Lamp on. Bed made, not slept in. Text at 23.58 has no E. Woman over launderette: grey car, 01.10, two men, nobody can describe.*

He looked at it.

Then he wrote one more line.

He is somewhere. Find where.

He underlined nothing. He never did.

But he pressed so hard on the last word that the pencil went through the page.

Chapter 9 – *Day One*

SAT 4 OCT? TIME — ? WEATHER — DARK.
SAW — NOTHING. HEARD — BUS.

The first thing is the cold.

Not the cold of outside. Not wind, not rain, not the cold of a hillside at night with the stars out. A cold that comes up out of the floor and into the bones of the hip and stays there. Concrete cold. Cellar cold. The cold of a place that has never once in its life been warm.

He knows it before he knows anything else. Before his name. Before where. Before what day. He lies on his side with his cheek on something hard and gritty and the cold coming up into him, and he thinks, quite clearly, the way you think things in the half second before waking: *I know this. I've been here before.*

Then he opens his eyes, and there is nothing.

Not dark. He knows dark. He has slept with a lamp on for thirty-three years because he knows dark. This is not dark. Dark has shapes in it. Dark has the grey of a window, the line of light under a door, the red standby light on a radio. This has nothing. He opens his eyes and shuts them and opens them again and there is no difference. None. He holds his hand up in front of his face, so close he can feel the warmth of it on his nose, and he cannot see it.

His heart goes. Hard. Once. Like a bag on a chain when somebody hits it.

Breathe, he thinks. *In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. Hold for four.*

He breathes.

* * *

His head hurts. Behind the eyes, and at the back, low down, where the skull meets the neck. A thick, stupid ache, like the morning after something he has not done since 1983. His mouth is dry. His tongue feels too big. There is a sore place on the side of his neck, under the left ear, small, the size of a fingertip, and when he touches it, it stings.

A needle.

He remembers.

Not much. The flat. The lamp. He had come home from Bailey's and climbed the stairs and switched on the lamp and hung his coat on the hook and put his keys in the bowl, and then he had stood in the middle of the room and not been able to go to bed. He had stood there looking at the four tacks in the wall where the painting had been, and at the bed with its hospital corners, and he had not been able to lie down in it. Because of a face. A woman in grey, in the light by the fireplace, singing. Looking at him down the length of the bar, over two hundred heads, for the whole of the second verse.

He had stood in his flat for an hour and a half, he thinks. Maybe more. He had taken his phone out to answer Jono, *who is she*, and put it away again, because he did not know how to say it.

Then a knock. At the door at the top of the iron stairs. At, he thinks, about half past twelve.

A man's voice through the door. Pleasant. Level. No accent.

Mr Prowse? I'm sorry it's so late. It's about the lady at Bailey's. The singer. She's asked for you.

And he had opened the door.

He had opened the door. That is the thing. He lies on the concrete in the nothing and makes himself look at it. Thirteen years in the Marines and five more minding boats in places where the

people who knocked on doors at half past twelve did not have your interests at heart, and he had opened the door at the top of the iron stairs to a man he could not see properly, because the man had said *she's asked for you*.

And then the sting under the ear. And the man's face, close, in the light from the lamp behind him. Ordinary. That was all. He had looked straight at it, and he could not, now, lying here, see it. Not the eyes. Not the mouth. Nothing.

Then nothing.

* * *

He sits up. Slowly. The way he teaches the boys to get up off the canvas: hands first, then knees, take your time, the count's not on you yet.

Something pulls at his left ankle.

He reaches down in the nothing and feels it. A metal ring round the ankle, over the sock, close-fitting, cold, with a hinge on one side and a lock on the other. A chain on it. Heavy links, the kind you would use for a gate. He follows the chain with his hands across the gritty floor, link by link, about six feet of it, to where it is fastened. Round something. Iron. Bolted to the wall at the height of his knee. A bracket. And above it another. And another. A row of them, going along the wall, each one about the length of his forearm, sticking out. And lying across them, heavy and cold and smooth, something thick and round, like a hose. Lots of them. Laid side by side along the brackets like pipes on a rack.

He runs his hand along one. Smooth. Cold. A dull, soft metal under the fingers that dents a little if you press. Lead.

He does not know what it is. He files it.

He gets up. On his feet, in the nothing, with his hand on the wall. He stands still and listens.

* * *

He has been taught to listen. On Mount Harriet in June 1982, at night, in a hole in the rock, he had learned to listen the way a deer listens. Not for sounds. For the shape the sounds make. Where they are. How far. What is between you and them.

He stands still and lets it come.

His own breath. His heart, still going too fast. The chain moving, a small cold sound, when he shifts his foot.

Water. Somewhere. Not running. Dripping. Slowly. A drop, and a long gap, and another drop. Into something. A puddle, or a bucket. To his right, and behind him, about ten feet.

And above.

Above, a long way above, through a great thickness of something, a low rumble. Coming and going. Getting louder and then softer. He knows that. He has heard it every day of his life.

A bus.

It goes over. Over him. Not directly. A little to the left. He feels it more than hears it, in the soles of his feet, in the wall under his hand: a long, slow shudder, coming, and going, and gone.

Then, after a while, another.

And between them, if he holds his breath and listens with the whole of himself, other things. Very faint. Footsteps, he thinks. Lots of them, going over, the way the light goes over a field when the clouds move. A car. Something that might be voices, or might be the blood in his own ears.

He is under a street.

He stands in the nothing with his hand on the cold wall and the lead pipes and understands it all at once. He is under a street, in a town, with buses going over and people walking about above his

head, with their shopping, with their kids, with their dogs. A few feet away. Through concrete.

And not one of them knows he is here.

* * *

He finds the water at what he thinks is midday, though he does not know.

Two bottles, plastic, the big ones, on the floor about four feet from the bracket, at the end of the chain, so that he has to lie down flat and stretch to reach them. Full. Sealed. And beside them, in a plastic bag, bread. A loaf, sliced, the cheap white kind. And a bucket. Plastic. Empty. Further away, at the very end of the chain.

He sits with his back against the wall, under the lead pipes, and drinks. Not much. A few mouthfuls. He makes himself stop. He does not know how long it has to last.

He thinks about that. The water. The bread. The bucket.

They do not want him dead.

Not yet. Somebody has thought about this. Somebody has stood in this place, wherever it is, with a torch, and measured the chain, and put the water at the end of it so that he has to lie flat to reach it, and the bucket further, so that he has to stretch. Somebody has thought about how long a man can go on two bottles and a loaf.

He has been in places like that before. Not as the one on the chain. As the one with the torch, sometimes, outside the door, minding. In the Strait, in 1996, there had been a ship's officer locked in a hold for six days while a firm in Hamburg argued with a firm in Jakarta about who owned the cargo, and Eric had been on the deck above with a radio and a flask, minding, and every morning at nine a man had gone down with water and bread.

He had never once thought about what it was like to be in the hold.

He thinks about it now.

* * *

He counts.

It is the first thing he decides to do and he does not know why. He sits with his back to the wall and counts. Seconds. One, and two, and three. Up to sixty. Then one minute. Then again. He counts the buses. He counts the drips. It is something to hold on to, in the nothing, like the top rope.

He loses count at somewhere around four hundred minutes. He does not know if he fell asleep or if he just stopped. He wakes, or comes to, or comes back, and the nothing is exactly the same, and he does not know how long it has been.

That frightens him more than the chain.

* * *

And then he remembers Jono.

Not a picture. He cannot have pictures. A voice. In the ring, in the first winter, after a session. Jono sitting on the canvas with his back against the bottom rope, getting his breath, with the lanyard still round his neck because he had come straight from a call. And Eric had asked him, for something to say, what he always wrote in that little black book, every night, at the top of the iron stairs, under the street lamp.

The date, Jono had said. *The time. The weather. What you saw, and what you were told, and who told you.* He had looked up at Eric. *Not what you felt.*

Why?

Because one day somebody'll need to know, Jono had said. *And you won't be there to tell them. And the book will.*

Eric sits in the nothing with his back to the wall and thinks about that.

The date. The time. The weather.

He does not have a book. He does not have a pencil. He does not have a light.

He has a wall.

* * *

He finds the nail by feel, on his hands and knees, along the length of the chain.

It takes him a long time. The floor is gritty, concrete, with a fine layer of something on it like ash. Old dust. He sweeps it with his palms, in strips, the way you search a field, overlapping, not missing any. His knees hurt. The chain drags. He finds a bottle cap, and a cigarette end, very old, gone hard, and a small screw.

Then, near the bracket, at the foot of the wall, where it meets the floor, a nail.

Long. Four inches. Square, old, the kind they made before the war, rusty, bent a little at the tip. It has fallen out of something. He holds it in his fingers in the nothing and it is the best thing he has ever held.

He feels the wall. Above the lead pipes. It is not concrete. It is brick, under a skin of something smooth and hard and a little cold, like old gloss paint. He presses the point of the nail into it.

It scratches. He can feel it go in. A little.

He sits with his back to the bracket and the chain across his knees and the nail in his right hand and puts his left hand flat on the wall to find the place, the way you put your hand on a page in the dark.

The date, Jono had said.

He does not know the date. He thinks it is Saturday. It might be Sunday. He writes it with a question mark.

The time.

He does not know the time. He writes a dash. And a question mark.

The weather.

He thinks about that for a long time.

Then he writes, in capitals, slowly, each letter as big as his palm, so that he will be able to find it again with his fingers in the nothing, and so that whoever comes with a torch, one day, will be able to read it:

DARK.

* * *

He writes two more lines. *Saw.* Nothing. *Heard.* Bus.

Then he stops, because his hand is shaking and the nail is slipping and he does not want to waste it.

He puts the nail inside his sock, under the metal ring on his ankle, where they will not find it if they come with the torch.

He sits with his back to the wall under the lead pipes, in the nothing, with his hand flat on the four lines he cannot see.

Above him, a long way up, a bus goes over. He feels it in the wall under his palm. Coming, and going, and gone.

One day somebody'll need to know.

He keeps his hand on the wall. He does not take it away. It is the only thing in the world that he has made in the dark, and as long as his hand is on it, he knows where he is.

He does not know where he is.

But he knows where the wall is. And he knows what is written on it.

He starts counting again.

Chapter 10 – *The Price*

Mon. 6 Oct. 2031. Widecombe Cot, 9.50 a.m. Postcard to C.H. Grand Harbour, Valletta. Maltese stamp. Postmarked 1 Oct: three days BEFORE he was taken. 10.14 a.m.: photo to C.H.'s phone from a +356 number. E. in the dark, eyes shut against a flash. Holding a newspaper.

The postcard came with the second post, and Chris's mother brought it to him herself.

She did not do that any more. She was ninety-six as of last Thursday, and the stairs were hard, and Chris had told her a hundred times to leave the post on the desk in the hall and he would get it. But on Monday morning at ten to ten she came along the passage from the hall to the back room with her stick in one hand and a postcard in the other, holding it a little away from her, by the corner, the way you hold something you have found in a drawer and do not like the feel of.

"This is for you," she said.

Chris was at the long table with a cup of tea he had not drunk and his phone face up beside it, as it had been face up beside him every minute since Saturday. He looked up.

"Who from?"

"It doesn't say." She put it down on the table in front of him, picture side up, and stood back. "It's from abroad."

He looked at it.

A harbour. Very blue. A great curve of honey-coloured stone going down into the water, walls and towers and domes and a long line of fortifications at the bottom, with yachts moored below them

and a big white cruise ship coming in through the mouth of the harbour between two forts. Sunshine. The kind of postcard you buy for forty cents from a rack outside a tobacconist and send to your aunt.

GRAND HARBOUR, VALLETTA, it said, in yellow letters along the bottom.

He turned it over.

A Maltese stamp. A red-and-white flag and a cross. A postmark, very clear, black: *VALLETTA*, and a date.

1 OCT 2031.

His name and the address of Widecombe Cot, in block capitals, in a black felt pen. Neat. Regular. Nothing in the hand at all. Like a form filled in by a machine.

And in the space for the message, in the same capitals, three lines.

THE EIGHT AND THE WHISTLE.

OR HE STAYS IN THE DARK.

WAIT.

* * *

Chris sat at the long table and read it four times.

His mother had not gone. She was standing at the end of the table by the range with both hands on the top of her stick, looking at him. She had read it. Of course she had read it. She had been reading the post at that desk in the hall for eighty years.

"Eric," she said.

"Yes."

"The boxing man. Jono's friend. The one who was at school with you."

"Yes."

His mother was quiet for a long time.

"I don't know what the eight is," she said. "I don't want to know." She looked at the postcard on the table. "But I know what the whistle is. I saw it on the table in the bay window three years ago, the morning after that woman died above Daddyhole. Before dawn." She looked at him. "It's not yours to give, Chris."

"I know."

"It's not anybody's to give. Except hers."

He looked at the postmark.

1 OCT.

Wednesday. Wednesday last week. Three days before a man had knocked on a door at the top of some iron stairs in Ellacombe at half past twelve on Saturday morning and said *she's asked for you*.

"They posted it before they took him," said Chris.

His mother did not say anything.

"They had it all ready. Before Bailey's. Before he walked out." He put his good hand flat on the card, on the blue harbour. "They knew he'd go white when he saw her. They knew he'd walk out. They knew he'd go home and not be able to sleep. They knew exactly what to say at his door." He looked up at her. "They had this in a postbox in Malta on Wednesday."

"Then they've been planning it," said his mother quietly, "for longer than you've been looking."

* * *

The phone went at fourteen minutes past ten.

Not a ring. A buzz. A message. Chris had it in his hand before it had finished buzzing. A number he did not know. A long one, starting with a plus. *+356*.

No text. Just a photograph.

He opened it.

The dark.

Almost all dark. Black. The kind of black a camera flash makes of everything behind the thing it hits. And in the middle of the dark, lit flat and white by the flash, so that every line on it stood out like a drawing, a face.

Eric.

His eyes were shut. Screwed shut against the light, the way you shut them when somebody shines a torch at you after hours in the dark. His face was grey. There was a mark on his cheek, red, like he had been lying on something rough. His hair was flattened on one side. He was sitting with his back against something, a wall, and the flash had caught, behind his head, a bit of it. Grey. Smooth. Painted, maybe. Nothing on it.

And in his hands, held up in front of his chest, as if somebody had put it there and told him to hold it, a newspaper.

Chris made it bigger with his fingers. His good hand was shaking. He made it bigger until the newspaper filled the screen.

The *Times of Malta*. The masthead, very clear. A photograph on the front of some politician at a podium. And the date, along the top, under the masthead.

Sunday, 5 October 2031.

Yesterday.

* * *

His mother was beside him. He had not heard her come round the table. She was looking at the screen over his shoulder, with her glasses on, very still.

She had seen photographs like that before. She had told him once, in 2008, in this room, after Room 3. In the war, when she was eight, a man in a uniform had shown her mother a photograph like that, of a man in a hut somewhere, and her mother had sent Wendy out of the room and Wendy had listened at the door.

"Is he alive?" she said.

"Yes." Chris looked at Eric's face. Grey, flat, screwed up against the flash. "He's alive. He's holding the paper. They want us to see he's alive."

"Where is he?"

Chris looked at the newspaper. At the date. At the masthead.

Times of Malta.

"Malta," he said.

His mother looked at the photograph for a long time.

"Is he?" she said.

* * *

Jono came at eleven. He had been at a surgery in Paignton, in a church hall, with a queue of constituents out of the door, and he had left the queue to his caseworker and driven straight up the hill. The DI came at twenty past. Clifford at half past. They sat at the long table in the back room with the postcard and the phone in the middle of it, and Wendy brought tea that nobody drank, and went out, and shut the door.

The DI looked at the photograph for a long time.

"The number's Maltese," he said. "Prepay. I'll have it traced by tonight, but I'll tell you now what they'll find. A SIM bought for

cash in a shop in Valletta last week by somebody nobody remembers. Pinged off a tower in Valletta at ten past ten this morning. Switched off at eleven minutes past. Never switched on again." He put the phone down. "That's what I'd do."

"So he's in Malta," said Clifford.

"Somebody with a phone is in Malta," said the DI. "That's all that tells us."

"And the newspaper?"

The DI picked up the phone again. He made the picture bigger, the way Chris had. He looked at the paper in Eric's hands for a long time.

Then he said, "Jono. Look at this."

Jono leaned over. The DI's finger was on the screen, not on the masthead or the date or the politician, but on the edge of the newspaper, where Eric's left hand was holding it. Down near the thumb.

"What's that?"

Jono looked.

The edge of the paper. Clean. Straight. White. Very straight.

Too straight.

A newspaper's edge is rough. Cut on a press, at speed, by a blade that is a little blunt by the end of the run. It is fibrous. It furs. It is never quite straight. Jono had picked up ten thousand newspapers off ten thousand doormats in twenty-five years of police work and ten years of care work, and every one of them had an edge like that.

This one was clean as a blade.

"It's not a newspaper," said Jono slowly. "It's a printout."

The DI nodded.

"Front page off the website," he said. "Printed out on a home printer. A4, folded once to make it look like a broadsheet." He touched the corner. "You can see the fold. And there, look. The margin. A newspaper doesn't have a white margin like that. A printer does."

Clifford was staring at the screen.

"So they could be anywhere," he said. "With a printer. And a picture of yesterday's front page."

"Anywhere," said the DI. "Malta. Or Manchester. Or the back of a lock-up in Paignton." He looked at the postcard. "But they went to a lot of trouble to post that card from Valletta on Wednesday. And to buy a SIM in Valletta. And to send the photo from a tower in Valletta this morning." He tapped the card. "Somebody wants us looking at Malta very badly."

Nobody said anything.

"Which is usually," said the DI, "a good reason not to."

* * *

They talked until one. About the eight. About the whistle. About what could be given and what could not.

The paintings could not be given. Chris said it, and Jono said it, and Clifford said it, and none of them said why, because the DI was at the table, and the DI had a daughter who swam on Saturdays and did not want to know. But they all knew. Eight canvases leaning against a wall in a cellar under Union Street, with every cord running to the one at the end. The only copy of a list that nobody had ever written down. If they went to Eden, Eden would have the one thing in the world that could never be changed, and would know exactly what it meant.

And the whistle could not be given, because it was not theirs.

"Where is it?" said the DI.

Chris and Jono looked at each other.

"With somebody who's away," said Chris. "Till the seventeenth."

The DI looked at him for a long moment. Then he looked at his notebook, and did not write it down.

"Eleven days," he said.

"Eleven days," said Chris.

"And this thing in Parliament. The order. On the eighteenth." The DI looked at Jono. "The day after."

"Yes."

The DI put his pen down.

"So in eleven days," he said quietly, "somebody's coming home who's got a thing they want. And the day after that, the Government's going to come and take away whatever's in your cellar that makes the lights go on. And in between, a man's sitting in the dark somewhere holding a printout of a Maltese newspaper." He looked round the table. "And the only clue we've got is a postcard that's designed to send us to the wrong country."

"Yes," said Jono.

"Right," said the DI, and stood up, and put his notebook in his pocket. "I'll get the number traced. And I'll get every printer cartridge sold in Torbay in the last month looked at, which will be no use at all, and I'll do it anyway." He went to the door. Then he turned. "Jono. Whatever you're going to do about Malta. Don't tell me until you've done it."

He went.

* * *

Chris sat at the long table after they had all gone, with the postcard and the phone in front of him.

He looked at the photograph again. He made it as big as it would go. Not the newspaper. Eric's face. Grey and flat and screwed up against the light. The red mark on the cheek. The hair flattened on one side.

And behind his head, in the flash, a little of the wall.

Grey. Smooth. Painted. A dull, old, cream-grey gloss, the colour of a corridor in a hospital, or a school, or a building put up in the thirties by people who painted everything that colour because it was what you painted things.

And along the bottom of the frame, at the very edge, where the flash was falling off into the dark, at the height of Eric's shoulder, something. Dark. Round. Thick. Lying horizontal. Like a pipe. Like several pipes, side by side, on something that held them up.

Chris looked at it for a long time.

He did not know what it was. He thought he should. There was something about it, in the back of his head, that he could not get at, like a word on the tip of the tongue. Like a fault on a line that you can hear and cannot find.

He sat there until the light went off the window.

Then he put the phone in his pocket, next to the banner, and went down to the cellar, and sat with the eight faces until it was dark.

Chapter 11 – *Mount Harriet*

WED 8 OCT? DAY 5. WEATHER — DARK.
DOOR. TORCH. WATER. BREAD. NOBODY
SPOKE. SUN — FLASH. PAPER IN MY
HANDS. COULDN'T READ IT.

The door opens on what he thinks is the fifth day.

He hears it before anything. A long way off, to his left, behind the wall at the end of the chain. A lock. A heavy one, old, turning with a sound like a cough. Then a door, iron or steel, very heavy, scraping on concrete. Then feet. One pair. Coming down something. Steps. Six, seven. Then concrete, flat, coming towards him.

And light.

It comes round a corner he did not know was there. A torch. White. It hits the wall first, far off, and slides along it, and he sees, for the first time in five days, that there is a wall, and that it is cream, a dirty old cream, and that it is a long way away. Then the torch finds him, and he shuts his eyes, because it is like being hit.

He hears the feet stop. He hears something put down on the concrete. Two things. Plastic. Bottles. And a rustle. Bread.

He keeps his eyes shut. He has learned. On the second day, he opened them, and he could not see anything for an hour afterwards but a white hole with purple edges.

He listens instead.

The feet. Ordinary shoes. A man's, not heavy. The breathing. Calm. The man does not say anything. He has never said anything. Five times now, Eric thinks, he has come, and put down water and bread, and taken away the bucket, and brought it back empty, and gone, and not once said one word.

Except Sunday.

On Sunday there was a flash.

He remembers it. A click, and then a white so total that it went through his eyelids and into the back of his skull, and somebody had put something in his hands, paper, folded, and said, in a voice he could not keep hold of, pleasant, level, no accent, *Hold that. Up. By your chest. Good.* And then the flash. And then the paper taken away. And the feet going. And the door.

He had sat in the dark afterwards with the white hole burning in his eyes for an hour, and thought: *a photograph. They've taken a photograph of me. To send to somebody. To show I'm alive.*

He had thought: *Jono.*

He had thought: *Then I'm worth something to somebody.*

It had been, he thought, the best hour of the five days.

* * *

The feet go. The door scrapes. The lock coughs.

The dark comes back.

He opens his eyes into it and waits for the white hole to fade. It takes a long time. Longer each day. He does not know if that is his eyes or his head.

He crawls to the water at the end of the chain, flat on his belly, and drinks, and finds the bread, and eats two slices, slowly, and makes himself stop. He crawls back to the wall under the lead pipes. He takes the nail out of his sock.

He finds the place on the wall with his left hand. His fingers know it now. Five days of lines. Big letters, the size of his palm, going down the wall in rows. He can read them with his fingertips like a blind man reads a page. *DARK. NOTHING. BUS.* And under them, the second day, the third, the fourth.

He writes the fifth.

DOOR. TORCH. WATER. BREAD. NOBODY SPOKE.

And then, because Jono said *what you saw*, and he had seen something on Sunday, even if it was only white:

SUN — FLASH. PAPER IN MY HANDS. COULDN'T READ IT.

He puts the nail back in his sock.

He sits with his back to the wall.

And then, the way it has been coming every day, a little more each day, the way water comes up through a floor, it comes.

* * *

The cold first.

Not this cold. Another one. A cold that comes in off an ocean the colour of iron and goes straight through four layers of clothing and a waterproof and a sleeping bag that is soaked through, and into the bones, and stays. Falklands cold. June cold. The bottom of the world in the middle of winter.

He is nineteen.

He is on his belly in a hole in the rock on the side of a mountain called Mount Harriet, on the night of the eleventh of June, 1982, and he cannot feel his left leg.

He had been running. That was all. Running across a slope of broken rock and frozen peat in the dark, with his section, with the whole of 42 Commando going up the mountain from the south and the east in a long, slow, silent hook that had taken them all night to get into position, and then not silent any more. The flares going up. The tracer. The noise, the noise, which nobody had told him about, which no film had ever got right: not bangs, a roar, the whole mountain roaring at once like the inside of a furnace. And he had

been running, behind his corporal, bent double, across the slope, towards the rocks at the top, and something had happened to his left leg.

Not pain. Not at first. A shove. As if somebody had kicked his leg out from under him from the side. And he had gone down, and rolled, and fallen, and found himself here. In a hole. A shell scrape, a cleft in the rock about four feet deep, full of black water and ice at the bottom, with the edges of it sharp as broken glass.

He had tried to get up. His leg would not. He had looked down at it in the light of a flare and seen that the trouser was black and wet from the hip to the knee, and steaming.

He had shouted. Nobody had heard. The mountain was roaring.

He had lain down in the hole, on his side, with his back against the rock and his rifle across his knees and his good leg in the ice water, and waited.

* * *

The fighting went on above him for hours. He did not know how many. It went up the mountain, away from him, towards the summit, and the roar got further and fainter, and then it stopped, and there was silence, and in the silence the cold came.

He knew about the cold. They had told them about it, on the ship, on the way down. *It's not the enemy that'll kill you down there, it's the cold. You get wet, you get still, you get cold, you go to sleep, you don't wake up.*

He was wet. He was still. He was cold.

He was nineteen and he was going to go to sleep in a hole on the side of a mountain at the bottom of the world, and he was not going to wake up, and nobody was going to find him till it was light, and by then.

He did not finish the thought.

He lay on his side in the hole with the stars out over him, very bright, brighter than he had ever seen them in Torquay, thousands of them, the whole sky full of them like dust, and felt himself start to go. Like a car going down a hill with no brakes. Slowly. Then less slowly. A warmth, coming up from somewhere, which he knew was wrong, which they had told him about, which meant the end was close. A warmth and a heaviness and the stars going soft at the edges.

And somebody sat down beside him.

* * *

He did not hear them come. He would never understand that. The rock was loose, the slope was broken, every step anybody took on that mountain that night sounded like a dropped tray. He heard nothing. He was looking at the stars and going soft, and then somebody was sitting on the rim of the hole beside him, very close, with their knees drawn up, looking down at him.

A woman.

He thought he was dreaming. He thought: *this is it, then. This is what you see.*

A young woman. In grey. Some kind of grey suit, a jacket and a skirt, like a lady in an office. No coat. No hat. On the side of Mount Harriet in June, at three in the morning, with the wind coming off the South Atlantic at thirty knots and the temperature twelve below, and no coat. Dark hair, put up. Her hands folded on her knees. Looking at him with clear steady eyes, very calm, as if they were sitting on a bench in a park.

"You are going to sleep," she said.

Her voice was strange. Every word the same length. Like the speaking clock.

"Yes," said Eric. He did not know why he answered. "I know."

"Do not."

He tried to laugh. It came out as a cough.

"Can't help it."

"You can," said the woman. "Breathe in. Count four."

He looked at her.

"Breathe in," she said again. "Count four. Do it."

He breathed in. He counted. One, two, three, four.

"Hold it. Count four."

He held it.

"Out. Count four. Hold. Count four." She did not take her eyes off his face. "Again."

He did it again.

"Again."

* * *

She sat with him till it was light.

Five hours, he thought afterwards. Maybe six. She sat on the rim of the hole beside him, in the wind, with no coat, with her hands on her knees, and every time he started to go soft at the edges she said *again*, and he breathed in, and counted, and held it, and breathed out. In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. Hold for four.

She did not say much else. She did not tell him her name. She did not tell him where she had come from. Once, at about four, when he asked her, through his teeth, which were going like a machine gun, *who are you*, she looked at him for a long time and said, *Somebody who needs you to be there. Later. A long time later.*

He did not know what that meant. He did not ask again. He breathed.

Once, near the end, when the sky was going grey in the east over the sea and he could see her face properly for the first time, he saw that she was looking past him. Down the slope. At something he could not see. And her face, for a moment, had something on it that he did not have a word for. Not fear. Something like it. Something like a person looking at a thing that has not happened yet and will.

Then she looked back at him.

"Again," she said.

* * *

The medics came at first light. Two of them, scrambling down the slope, shouting to each other, with a stretcher. He heard them before he saw them. He turned his head to tell her, *they're here, you can go*.

The rim of the hole beside him was empty.

There was frost on the rock where she had been sitting. A thin white skin of it, on the stone, unbroken. As if nobody had sat there all night. As if nobody had been there at all.

They got him out. They got him down the mountain and onto a helicopter and onto a ship and, eventually, home. He kept the leg. He kept a limp for a year and a scar like a map of somewhere he did not want to go back to. He stayed in. He was a good Marine. He never told anybody.

Not the medics. Not the doctors on the ship. Not his mother, in Torquay, in the kitchen, when he came home and she cried. Not the psychiatrist they made him see in 1983, who asked him about the night on the mountain and wrote down *some dissociation reported* and did not ask what. Not the woman he nearly married in 1986. Not the boys at the club. Not Jono.

Nobody.

Because nobody would have believed it. And because, somewhere at the back of himself, in the place where he kept the things that did not go anywhere else, he believed that if he ever told it, she would not have been real.

He breathed the way she had taught him every night for forty-nine years. In for four. Hold for four. He taught it to the boys at the club, when they were frightened before a bout. He never told them where it came from.

And he slept with the light on, every night, since 1998, when he came home and bought the garage. Not because of the dark.

Because of the stars. Because in the dark, if he lay still long enough, he could see them, very bright, the whole sky full of them like dust, going soft at the edges.

* * *

In the nothing, under the lead pipes, with the chain on his ankle, Eric Prowse breathes in.

One. Two. Three. Four.

He holds it.

He is sixty-nine. He is in a hole, under a town, under a street, with buses going over, and he does not know where, and he does not know why, and he does not know how long. His left leg aches, the old one, the way it aches in the cold. He cannot feel his feet.

And on Friday night, in the public bar at Bailey's, in the warm light by the fireplace, a young woman in a grey suit with her dark hair up and her hands at her sides had turned her head while she sang, and looked at him down the length of the bar, over two hundred heads.

Every word the same length.

She had not changed. Not one line. Not one hair. Forty-nine years.

He breathes out.

One. Two. Three. Four.

He holds it.

Somebody who needs you to be there. Later. A long time later.

He knows now why he went white. He knows now why he could not go to bed. He knows now why he opened the door at half past twelve, when a man he could not see said *she's asked for you*.

Because she had. Once. On a mountain. And he had been waiting forty-nine years for her to ask again.

He takes the nail out of his sock. He finds the wall with his left hand, under the fifth day's lines. He presses the point into the paint.

He does not write the date. He does not write the weather.

He writes one word, very small, so small he can hardly feel it, at the bottom of the day, in the corner.

HER.

Then he breathes in again, and counts, and keeps going.

Chapter 12 – *The Debate*

Wed. 15 Oct. 2031. House of Commons, 7.12 p.m. Division on the prayer against SI 2031/1147. Ayes 287. Noes 286. Order annulled. First since 1979. T.T. in the gallery. Did not clap. Nodded once. Day 12 for E.

Nobody in the chamber could see the lamps, and that was the whole problem, and Jono had known it from the first morning in the Library.

You could not ask six hundred and fifty people to vote to keep a thing they had never seen in a place most of them had never been, on the word of a man who had been a carer two and a half years ago and still had the lanyard in his jacket pocket. They would laugh. Some of them would laugh kindly. Most of them would laugh the way the House laughed, which was a way Jono had never heard anywhere else in his life, not on Union Street on a Saturday night, not in a police canteen, not in the public gallery at Torquay Town Hall in 2028. A big, warm, rolling laugh, like the sea coming in over shingle, that took you and turned you over and left you on your back on the stones, and was gone, and did not care.

He had heard it go over other Members. He had watched them sit down afterwards with their faces red to the collar, and not stand up again for a month.

So he did not ask them to believe.

He asked them to come.

* * *

He did it with the Early Day Motion first. That was the easy part. A prayer against the Order, tabled on the tenth of September,

the morning after the Library, in his own name: *That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, praying that the Designated Sites (Research Materials) (Specified Premises) Order 2031 be annulled.* It was the old form of words. He liked that it was old. He liked that a Member of Parliament in 2031 still had to *pray*.

He got thirty signatures in a week. Members who owed him a favour. Members who did not like the Home Office. Members who liked a fight. It was not enough. You could pray all you liked; if the Government did not give you time to debate it, the Order became law on the fortieth day anyway, and nobody would remember you had prayed.

The Government did not give him time. He had not expected it to.

So on the Wednesday after Eric went, the eighth, he went to see the Opposition Chief Whip, a woman from Lancashire with grey hair cut very short and a lamp, Jono thought, that would have been very bright if anybody could have seen it, and said, *I need an hour on your Opposition Day next Wednesday. And I need you to whip your side to vote with me.*

She had looked at him across her desk for a long time.

Why would I do that?

Because it'll beat the Government, said Jono. *On a Home Office order. In public. The week before the by-elections.*

It won't beat the Government. Nobody's annulled an SI since 1979. You'll get your hour, you'll lose by forty, and you'll make my people look like they believe in fairy lights.

Then don't believe me, said Jono. *Come and look.*

* * *

The coach left Westminster at seven on the Friday morning.

A big white coach, hired by Vicky out of the Torbay fund, which she said was the best use of the fund since the forge. Fifty-two seats. Jono had sent the invitation to every Member of the House. *Come to Torbay. Friday morning to Saturday afternoon. Stay at Bailey's. Walk round. Don't take my word for anything.*

Thirty-eight came.

Jono had not expected thirty-eight. He had expected eight. He stood on the pavement on Millbank at ten to seven in the morning in the rain with a clipboard, which made him feel like a primary-school teacher, and watched them come. Some from his own side of the House, which was nobody's side, the cross benches, the independents and the odd ones. Some from the Opposition, sent by the Chief Whip, who had looked at him for a long time across her desk and said *I'll give you ten, and if they come back laughing you've lost your hour*. Some from the Government side, who had come, Jono thought, mostly out of curiosity, and a little out of mischief, and in one or two cases, he thought, because they had read about Torbay and wanted very badly for it to be true.

And one old man.

The last one. At five to seven. Walking very slowly along Millbank in the rain with a stick and a canvas bag, in a tweed coat, with white hair. The Member for a constituency in the Black Country, who had been in the House since 1997 and was the oldest man in it, and who had never once in thirty-four years been heard to say anything in the chamber except *aye* and *no*. He got onto the coach without a word, and sat down in the seat at the front by the window, and put his stick between his knees, and looked out at the rain.

Jono sat down beside him because it was the only seat left.

* * *

They got to Paignton at half past twelve. The coach pulled into Station Square, opposite Bailey's, by the new station with its green iron canopy. Thirty-eight Members of Parliament got off in the rain with their bags and stood on the stones of Station Square and looked round, at the forge with its doors open and the fire going, at the people going past, at the bus station.

Nothing. They saw nothing. They had been in the bay twenty minutes.

Jono had told them. *Six hours. Maybe a bit more for some of you. Don't look for it. It'll come.* Some of them were laughing already, quietly, on the pavement, the warm rolling laugh of the House in a smaller size.

He walked them round. All afternoon. He did not tell them anything. He took them to the forge, where Fred showed them how to draw out a bar and three of them had a go and one of them, a young woman from Bristol, was so good at it that Fred offered her a job. He took them along Torbay Road, past the photonics building and the bakery and the place where the hawker hall would be one day. He took them to the Pavilion, and the pier, and up to the Town Hall on Castle Circus, where the new committee met now, and let them sit in the public gallery of the planning committee for an hour, and watch.

He took them to the cellar. Not into it. To the street door of Studio Ania, on Union Street. He stood outside it with them in the rain and said, *That's what the Order's for. What's down there. It came out of the sky in 2028 and Rage pulled it out of the Irish Sea, and since then every person in this bay has been able to see something you can't. I'm not going to tell you what's down there. I'm asking you not to let them take it away until you know.*

Then he took them to Bailey's, and Tan's staff gave them dinner, and at seven o'clock in the evening, six and a half hours after the coach pulled into Station Square, it started.

* * *

The young woman from Bristol saw it first.

She was at the long table in the back room at Bailey's with a glass of wine, telling the Member next to her about the forge, about the bar of steel going from black to red to yellow-white in the fire, laughing, and she stopped in the middle of a sentence and stared at him.

At the air over his head.

The Member next to her said, *What?*

She did not answer. She put her glass down very carefully. She looked round the table. At every head. Slowly. The way children had, on Goodrington sands, on the second of September 2028.

Then she put both hands over her mouth.

It went round the table in twenty minutes. Not all of them. Some took longer; some were still looking at nothing at midnight. But by nine o'clock, thirty of the thirty-eight Members of Parliament sitting in the back room at Bailey's were looking at each other's heads. In silence. A room full of people who had spent their whole lives talking, not saying a word.

Jono sat at the end of the table and watched them, and did not say anything either.

And the old man from the Black Country, at the corner of the table by the fireplace, with his stick between his knees, was not looking at anybody else's head.

He had got up, at about half past eight, very slowly, and gone to the mirror on the wall by the door. The old mirror, with the silver going at the edges, that had been in the Albion before it burned and that Tan had had cleaned and hung there. And he was standing in front of it, with his stick, looking at the air over his own white head.

He stood there for a long time.

Then he went back to his chair, and sat down, and put both hands on the top of his stick, and wept.

Nobody asked him why. Jono did not either. He saw the lamp over the old man's head, in the warm light of the back room at Bailey's. It was very bright. Brighter than anybody's at that table. Nearly white.

Thirty-four years in the House, and nobody had ever once been able to see it.

* * *

The debate was on the Wednesday. The fifteenth. Opposition Day. An hour and a half, from half past five, and then the vote. The Chief Whip had come to see Jono on the Monday, after the coach got back, and stood in the door of his office for a long time and said, *Eight of my ten came back and won't stop talking about it. You've got your hour. I'll whip it.* And then, at the door: *What did you do to them?*

Nothing, said Jono. *They looked.*

It was a full House. Fuller than he had ever seen it on an Opposition Day. Word had gone round. The Government benches were packed. The galleries were full. In the Members' Gallery, high up on the right, in the second row, in a navy suit, Jono saw a tall fair man sitting very still with his hands in his lap, not looking at anybody. Tarquin.

Jono spoke for nineteen minutes.

He did not talk about the lamps. Not much. He talked about the order. About the last page of the Order Paper that nobody read. About a schedule that named a basement under a building in Torquay, and gave a Secretary of State the power to enter it and take what was in it on twenty-four hours' notice, without the owner's

consent, without a court, without a vote. About the forty-day rule, and the fact that it had not been used to stop anything since before he was in secondary school.

Then he said, "I'm not going to ask anybody in this House to believe what I can see in my constituency."

The House laughed. He let it.

"I'm going to ask the thirty-eight Honourable Members who came to Torbay last Friday on a coach to tell you what *they* saw."

The laugh stopped.

He sat down.

* * *

It was the young woman from Bristol who stood first. Then a man from the Government benches, a former soldier, who said in a very level voice that he had sat at a table in Torquay and seen, over the head of a man he had served with in Helmand, a light, and that he had not known until that moment what he had always known about that man, and he was not prepared to vote to switch it off before he understood it. Then four more. Then the Chief Whip, from the front bench, who had not been on the coach, who said she had sent ten of her Members to the West Country and eight of them had come back different, and she would like to know why before the Home Office put it in a crate.

The Minister replied. Pleasantly. National security. Partners. Research. A facility of the highest standard. The Government took these matters very seriously. He looked at Jono once, across the floor, with a pleasant face, and Jono looked back and thought that if this man had been standing in Station Square his lamp would have been very dim indeed, and that the Minister knew it.

Then the Speaker put the question, and the House divided.

* * *

It took fourteen minutes.

Jono stood in the Aye lobby in the crush with his heart going like a bag on a chain and counted heads, the way he counted lamps at home, sideways, out of the corner of his eye, and lost count. The young woman from Bristol was beside him. The former soldier was in front. The Chief Whip's people were coming through in a long line.

And at the very end, the last one through the door of the Aye lobby before the doors were locked, walking very slowly with his stick, in his tweed coat, with his white hair, the old man from the Black Country who had never in thirty-four years said anything in the chamber except *aye* and *no*.

He looked at Jono as he went past. He did not say anything.

He gave his name to the clerk, and went through.

* * *

The tellers came back to the table. They stood in a row in front of the Speaker, four of them, and bowed, and the one on the left read out the numbers.

"The Ayes to the right, two hundred and eighty-seven. The Noes to the left, two hundred and eighty-six."

There was a silence. Then a sound Jono had never heard the House make. Not the laugh. Not the roar. A sort of long exhaled breath, six hundred people letting it go at once, the sound three hundred people had made in the public gallery of the planning committee at Torquay Town Hall in 2028 when they saw the lamps over the chairman's head.

"The Ayes have it," said the Speaker. "The Ayes have it."

The Order was annulled.

Jono sat on the green bench very still with his hands on his knees.

He looked up at the Members' Gallery. At the second row on the right. The tall fair man in the navy suit was still sitting there with his hands in his lap. He did not clap. You did not clap in the gallery. He looked down at Jono across the chamber, and nodded. Once.

Then he stood up and went out.

* * *

Jono did not celebrate. People tried. The young woman from Bristol. The former soldier. A crowd in the Members' Lobby wanting to shake his hand. He shook the hands. He did not stay.

He went out through Carriage Gates into the dark, at half past seven, and looked, out of habit, at the air above the policeman's head, and there was nothing there.

He stood on the pavement in Parliament Square with the traffic going round.

The stone would stay in Torbay. The box would stay on the monastery roof. The lamps would stay on. Keith would stay.

And somewhere, under something, in the dark, a man who had taught him to stand up was on his twelfth day.

Jono took out his pocketbook and wrote the numbers. *287. 286.* And under them, because it was true, and because it was the only thing that mattered:

Day 12 for E.

Then he walked to Paddington and got the last train home, because in the morning he was going to Malta, and he did not want to tell the DI until he had done it.

Chapter 13 – *Valletta*

Thurs. 16 Oct. 2031. Valletta, café on the waterfront below the Barrakka lift, 3.40 p.m. K.P. sat down across from me. White linen. No coat. "He is not here. He was never here." Paid for my coffee. Gone by 3.52. Did not write it down till the plane.

They flew from Bristol at ten past six in the morning, on a plane full of retired couples going somewhere warm, and Jono sat by the window and watched England go away under cloud and thought: *the DI said don't tell me till you've done it. So I haven't done it yet.*

Clifford had driven. He had come to Preston at half past one in the morning, two hours after Jono got off the last train from Paddington, in a hire car with two bags already in the boot, and had not said anything except *you look like hell, buddy*, and driven up the M5 in the dark at exactly the speed limit, and stopped at Gordano services for coffee, and got them to the airport at half past four.

"You know it's a decoy," Clifford said, in the queue for security.

"Yes."

"The DI knows it's a decoy."

"Yes."

"So we're going to Malta because..."

"Because they want us to," said Jono. "And I want to know why."

Clifford looked at him for a long moment.

"That's either very smart," he said, "or the dumbest thing I've heard since Bangkok."

"It's what a Hills does," said Jono. "You go where they point. And you look at who's standing next to the finger."

* * *

Malta came up out of the sea at ten past ten, local time. Jono had never seen it. He had read about it, in Wendy's book and in the history books on Eric's shelf. He had not expected it to be so small, or so pale.

It was the colour of a biscuit. The whole island. Honey-coloured stone, all of it, cliffs and walls and houses and churches and terraces, all the same warm pale gold under a hard blue sky, with the sea round it the most violent blue he had ever seen, darker than the bay at home on the brightest day, as if somebody had poured ink into it. Domes everywhere. Church domes, red and grey, sticking up out of the stone like the backs of turtles. And the harbours, as the plane came round: long fingers of deep blue water going into the land, with walls along them, and forts at their mouths, and boats.

Grand Harbour. He knew it from the postcard. *GRAND HARBOUR, VALLETTA*, in yellow letters along the bottom.

He had the postcard in his inside pocket. Next to the pocketbook.

* * *

It was twenty-six degrees in Valletta at eleven o'clock in the morning in the middle of October. Clifford took his jacket off at the taxi rank. Jono did not. He had come in his good suit, the one from Claire's father's funeral, because he did not have a jacket for twenty-six degrees, and he stood in the sun at the city gate sweating and looked up.

A city on a rock. A grid of narrow straight streets, very steep, going down towards the sea on both sides, with the stone houses close on either side and the balconies sticking out over the street above head height: wooden balconies, enclosed, with glass windows, painted green and red and blue and yellow, one above another, all the way down the street, so that looking down a street in Valletta was like looking down a corridor of painted boxes. Washing between them. Cats on every step. Church bells. Scooters.

And everywhere, the smell of the sea.

They went to the post office first. The main one, on Merchants Street, where a postcard with a Valletta postmark of the first of October would have gone through. A woman behind the counter in a blue uniform looked at the postcard and at Jono's House of Commons card, and at Jono, and said, in very good English, that a thousand postcards went through her office every day, and she did not remember any of them, and she was very sorry.

They went to the shop where the SIM had been bought. The DI had traced it on the Monday: a phone shop on a steep street going down to the harbour on the east side, run by a young man with a beard and a football shirt. He looked at Jono's card. He was very helpful. He looked through his till receipts on a tablet for twenty minutes.

"Cash," he said at last. "The twenty-ninth of September. Ten past five in the afternoon. One SIM, prepay, twenty euros' credit."

"Do you remember the man?"

The young man frowned. He looked at the receipt for a long time.

"I remember there was a man," he said. "I remember I sold him a SIM." He shook his head, slowly. "I can't..." He put the tablet down. "That's strange. I always remember the faces. It's my job. I can tell you every person who came in yesterday." He looked at

Jono, a little frightened. "I can't remember his face. I can't remember anything. Only that he was ordinary."

"Thank you," said Jono.

He went out into the street and stood in the sun with his hands in his pockets and the heat coming up off the stone.

* * *

They spent the afternoon walking.

There was nothing to find. Jono had known there would be nothing. They walked round the bastions, along the top of the great honey-coloured walls, with the sea on one side and the city on the other. They walked down through the steep streets to the waterfront on the Grand Harbour side, where the old warehouses were, the long arcades of stone along the quay where the merchant ships used to unload in the time of the Knights, and where now there were restaurants and bars and a cruise ship tied up, white and enormous, with three thousand people on it looking out of their windows at Valletta.

Jono looked at every face.

He did it the way he did it at home, the way he had done it on doorsteps for twenty-five years and on Station Square for three. Sideways. Out of the corner of his eye. And every time, out of habit, his eyes went to the air above the head, looking for the lamp.

Nothing. Clear air. The hard blue Malta sky.

It was worse than London. In London, he had got used to it. Here, in the sun, in the heat, with the sea the colour of ink and every face strange, it was like being blind in a bright room.

At half past three Clifford said, "I'm going to call the DI. I'll be ten minutes. Get a coffee. Sit in the shade. You look like you're going to fall over."

He went off along the quay with his phone.

Jono sat down at a café table under the arcade.

* * *

It was a small café, with tables out under the stone arches in the shade, looking out across the quay at the harbour. The water very blue. The cruise ship. And across the harbour, a long way across, another town, the same honey colour, going up from the water in terraces, with a great fort at the end of it and a church dome and a bell tower.

A waiter brought him a coffee he had not ordered. Very small, very black, in a thick white cup. Jono said thank you. The waiter went away.

He sat with both hands round the cup, the ordinary way, and looked at the harbour.

And somebody sat down in the chair across from him.

* * *

He knew before he looked. He did not know how. The way you know a car in the dark by the sound of its engine. The way Keith had known Jo by her walk.

He looked up.

She was sitting very straight in the café chair, with her hands folded on the table, in a white linen dress, with no coat, because it was twenty-six degrees. Fair hair, cut to the jaw. Grey eyes. A face that was handsome rather than pretty, strong, with high cheekbones. About forty.

Not one line on it that had not been there in the smoke behind Paignton station in October 2028. Not one line that had not been there in a photograph in Johor in 2008. Not one line that had not

been there in frame twenty-three of a roll of film, by flash, at a fence post on Berry Head, in April 1992.

Karina Petrick.

She was sixty-nine years old.

She looked at him across the small round table. At his face. At the good suit, too hot. At his hands round the cup.

"You came," she said.

Jono did not say anything.

"I knew you would. You go where they point. You always have." She did not smile. "And then you look at who is standing next to the finger."

He sat very still with his hands round the cup.

The last time he had been this close to her, his hand had been on her wrist and his forearm had been across her collarbone and her back had been against a wall. And behind him, in the smoke, a voice had said *not her*.

There was no voice now. There was a café, and a harbour, and a cruise ship, and the sun.

His hands were on a cup of coffee he had not ordered. He thought about taking them off it.

"Don't," said Karina Petrick quietly.

He did not.

* * *

"He is not here," she said.

Jono looked at her.

"Your boxer. Eric Prowse. Royal Marine. Mount Harriet." She said it like a list. "He is not in Malta. He was never in Malta.

Nobody has ever been going to take him to Malta." She looked out at the harbour, at the ink-blue water. "The postcard was posted here. The SIM was bought here. A man flew in on the twenty-ninth of September and did those two things in three days and flew out again, and nobody can remember his face. The photograph only borrowed the number." She looked back at Jono. "That is all Malta is. A postcard. A SIM. A tower. To make you look this way."

"Why?"

She did not answer that.

"Where is he?" said Jono.

Karina looked at him for a long time across the table.

Her face did not change. It was the face he had seen in the smoke, calm and still and about forty, with nothing in it at all that he could read. And then, for a second, something moved behind it. Very deep down. The way something moves under the surface of the harbour when a fish turns.

"I do not know," she said.

"You know."

"I know who," said Karina. "I do not know where. He does not tell anybody where. That is why he is good at it. That is why they let him try." She turned her cup on its saucer, a quarter turn, by the handle, and Jono watched her do it and felt the floor of the café go out from under him. "If I knew where, I would not tell you. And if I told you, you would not believe me. And if you believed me, you would go, and you would be wrong." She looked down at her cup. "Because I would be lying. Because I would have to be. Because I am still..." She stopped.

"Still what?"

She did not answer.

* * *

The bell of a church started somewhere above them in the city. Then another, across the harbour. Then the whole of Valletta, it seemed to Jono, all the bells of all the domes, ringing four o'clock in the hard blue afternoon, so that the air shook with them.

Karina waited until they stopped.

"Go home, Jono Hills," she said.

She had never said his name before. In the smoke she had said *the boy who sat down and wrote it down*. She said it now, quietly, across a café table in Valletta, as if she had been saying it to herself for a long time.

"Tomorrow is the seventeenth," she said. "She comes on the four o'clock. You should be there. Not here." She looked at him. "They wanted you here today, so that you would not be there tomorrow. So that you would be tired, and far away, and looking at the wrong sea."

"Who's *they*?"

"The man nobody can remember. And the people he wants to impress." She stood up. Very straight. Her hand went into the pocket of the linen dress and came out with a coin, a euro, and she put it on the table beside his cup. "For the coffee."

She looked down at him.

"You let me go once," she said. "In the smoke. Because she told you to." She paused. "You are letting me go again. Now. Because she is not here, and you do not know whether she would tell you to, and you are not sure." She almost smiled. It went all the way up to her eyes, and stopped there. "That is the right answer, Jono Hills. Write it down."

And she turned and walked away along the arcade, in the shade, between the stone arches, in her white linen dress, unhurried,

past the tables and the waiters and the people with their cameras, towards the lift that went up the cliff to the gardens, and the lift doors opened, and she got in, and they closed.

* * *

Clifford came back at ten to four with his phone in his hand and his face full of something he wanted to say, and stopped when he saw Jono's.

"What?"

Jono looked at the euro on the table beside his cup.

"She was here," he said.

Clifford did not ask who. He sat down slowly in the chair Karina had sat in, and put his phone on the table.

"The DI," he said. "He wants you to ring him. He says to tell you something." He paused. "He says the paper in the photograph. The Maltese newspaper. His people have been at it all week. Enlarging the picture." He looked at Jono. "He says the printer it was printed on has a fault. A line. Faint. Down the left-hand margin of every page it prints. And he says he's seen that line before." Clifford looked down at the table. "On a council notice. Taped to the window of an empty office on Union Street. In Torquay."

Jono sat very still.

Below them, across the quay, the ink-blue water of the Grand Harbour moved against the stone. The cruise ship's horn went, long and deep, once, so that the cups on the tables rattled.

He is not here. He was never here.

"Book us on the first flight home," said Jono.

He took out his pocketbook. He did not open it. He held it in his hand on the café table, next to the euro, and looked out across

the harbour at the other town, the honey-coloured one, going up from the water in terraces, with its fort and its bell tower.

He would write it down on the plane.

Every word she had said, and the euro, and the quarter turn of the cup.

And the thing he had not been able to make himself do, which was the thing she had told him to write down.

Let her go. Again.

Chapter 14 – *Day Thirteen*

THU 16 OCT? DAY 13. DARK. COLD. LEG
BAD. BREAD 3. BELLS SUN — CHURCH.
TAG ON PIPE — LETTERS? JONO.
SHANNON. KAI. LEE + RYAN. MUM. HER.
STARS. WHY AM I WRITING THIS.

He knows it is the thirteenth day because the wall says so.

He has stopped trusting anything else. Not his body, which has gone wrong in ways he cannot name. Not his head, which has gone wrong in ways he can. Not the dark, which has no days in it, only a long black sameness broken by the torch, and the bread, and the buses.

But the wall says thirteen. He counts them with his fingers every time he wakes, starting at the top left, where the first line is. SAT 4 OCT? Then down. One row for each day, sometimes two. He counts them the way the boys count their skips: out loud, under his breath, so they cannot cheat. Thirteen.

He believes the wall.

* * *

The lines are longer now.

On the first day there were four. DARK. NOTHING. BUS. On the fifth there were a few more, and HER at the bottom in the corner, very small. Now, on the thirteenth, he cannot stop. He sits with his back against the bracket under the lead pipes with the nail in his right hand and his left hand flat on the wall to find the place, and he writes, and writes, and the letters go along under the pipes as far as his arm will reach, and then he starts another row underneath.

The date, the time, the weather. Jono said that. What you saw.

But he has not seen anything for thirteen days, except the torch, and the torch is not seeing; it is being blinded. So he writes the other things. The things he can see in the dark, if he shuts his eyes, which makes no difference, but he does it anyway, because it is what you do when you want to see something that is not there.

He writes the boys.

SHANNON. The big quiet girl from Hele, who hits harder than any of the lads and never says a word, who is going to the regionals on the fourteenth, the fourteenth was two days ago, did she go, did somebody take her. He writes her name in letters as big as his hand and presses so hard the nail goes into the plaster and he feels grit fall on his knee.

KAI. Sixteen. A probation officer and a temper and a window broken at school, and two hours on the bag on a Tuesday without a word, which was the best thing he could have done. Eric gave him his phone number. *Ring me if you're going to do something stupid. Before. Not after.* Has he rung? Is the phone ringing somewhere, in a pocket, in a bag, in the dark, with nobody to answer it?

LEE + RYAN. The little brothers. Nine and ten. Their mum always late. Lee hits with his eyes shut. Eric has been trying to make him open them for six months. *Look at the man. Not the glove.*

JONO.

He writes that one slowly. He does not know why. His hand slows down on it by itself. J, O, N, O. And then he sits with his fingers on the four letters in the dark for a long time and tries to see the face that goes with them, and it comes, a bit. A big man. Grey. Getting up off the canvas. Laughing. *Better.* He had said *better*. On a Thursday. He had never said it before.

He is glad he said it. He thinks he might not get another chance.

* * *

He writes MUM, and then cannot write anything under it for a long time.

She died in 2004. In the hospital in Torquay, with him holding her hand, and it was the only time in his life since the mountain that he had cried. She had never asked him about the Falklands. Not once. When he came home in July 1982 with a limp and a scar and a face she did not recognise, she had stood in the kitchen of the house in Hele and looked at him for a long time and then put the kettle on, and had never asked. He had loved her for that more than for anything.

He writes it. MUM. And then, underneath, because Jono said *what you were told*:

KETTLE.

* * *

He is going wrong. He knows it.

Not all the time. Most of the time he is himself. Sixty-nine, Eric Prowse, Ellacombe, the club, the iron stairs, the lamp in the window. Chained by the left ankle to a bracket under some lead pipes in a cellar under a street with buses going over. He knows all that. He can say it. He says it out loud, sometimes, to hear a voice.

But there are times when he is not.

He is lying on his side with his back to the wall and his cheek on the concrete and the cold coming up into his hip, and the concrete is not concrete. It is rock. Broken rock and frozen peat, on the side of a mountain, with ice water in the bottom of the hole and his left leg not working and the wet going black from the hip to the knee. And it is not dark, it is night, and if he turns his head and looks up there will be stars.

He turns his head. He looks up.

There are stars.

He knows there are not. He knows it is the inside of his own eyes, the nerves firing in the dark, the thing that happens to men in holds and cells and holes when they have not seen light for long enough. He was taught about it. The doctors on the ship told him. *You'll see things. It's normal. It doesn't mean anything.*

He sees them anyway. Very bright. The whole of the dark full of them like dust. Thousands. Brighter than Torquay. Going soft at the edges.

And he waits for somebody to sit down beside him on the rim of the hole.

Nobody does.

He waits a long time. Hours, he thinks. He can feel the warmth starting to come up from somewhere, the wrong warmth, the one they warned him about on the ship going south. *You get wet, you get still, you get cold, you go to sleep, you don't wake up.*

Nobody sits down.

So he says it himself. Out loud. In the dark, under a street, with his cheek on the concrete that is rock.

"Again."

In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. Hold for four.

"Again."

The stars go out, slowly, one by one. The concrete comes back under his cheek. The chain on his ankle. The lead pipes over his head.

He lies there and breathes.

* * *

On what he thinks is the ninth day, a Sunday, he heard bells.

He has written it. BELLS SUN — CHURCH. He did not know at first what it was. A sound so faint he thought it was the blood in his ears again, coming through the wall from somewhere to the right, above, a long way. Then he knew. Bells. A church. Not a big peal, not a cathedral. A few bells, rung by people who were not very good at it, a bit ragged, the way the bells at St Marychurch used to sound on a Sunday morning when he was a boy, walking past with his mum on the way to the beach.

A church. Near. On the right. Above.

He listened to them for twenty minutes, until they stopped. Then he wrote it down, because Jono said *what you heard*, and because it was something, and because somebody one day might need to know that a man in the dark under a street could hear church bells on a Sunday morning, coming from the right.

He does not know what it means. He writes it anyway.

* * *

And on the eleventh day, he found the tag.

He was lying on his back under the lead pipes, which he does sometimes now, because it takes the weight off the leg. And he had reached up, in the dark, the way you reach up in bed at night for no reason, and his fingers had touched the pipes, the cold soft round lead, and moved along them, and found something that was not lead.

Small. Flat. Metal. Harder than the lead, and colder. About the size of a stamp. Fastened round one of the pipes with a twist of wire.

He had felt it with his fingertips for a long time.

There was something on it. Raised. Or pressed in. Marks. In a row. He could feel them under his fingers like the bumps on a step

in the dark, or like his own letters on the wall, only very small, very neat, very regular. Made by a machine.

Letters. Or numbers. Or both.

He had tried to read them. He had lain on his back in the dark with his arm up over his head and his fingertips on a piece of metal the size of a stamp, and tried to read it the way a blind man reads, and he could not. His fingers were too cold. Too numb. Too old. He could feel that there was something there. He could not feel what.

He had written it on the wall. TAG ON PIPE — LETTERS? And a question mark, because he did not know.

He has tried every day since. Twice a day. He lies on his back and reaches up and puts his fingers on the tag and feels. Sometimes he thinks he has the first one. A shape like a T. Or a 7. Then it goes.

He does not know why it matters. He only knows that it is the only thing in the dark that somebody else wrote, and that somebody wrote it so that somebody else, one day, would know which pipe was which.

Like the wall. Like his letters.

He will keep trying.

* * *

He sits up. Hands first, then knees, take your time, the count's not on you.

He takes the nail out of his sock. He finds the place on the wall, under the twelfth day. His fingers know it now. He writes the thirteenth.

The date. With a question mark. DAY 13.

DARK. COLD. LEG BAD.

BREAD 3. Three slices. Because that is what he ate, and he must ration it, and he must know.

BELLS SUN — CHURCH, again, because he does not want to forget it.

TAG ON PIPE — LETTERS?

And then the names. All of them. JONO. SHANNON. KAI. LEE + RYAN. MUM. HER.

And STARS, because he saw them, even if they were not there.

Then he stops, with the nail against the paint.

His hand will not go on. He does not know what comes next. He sits in the dark with the nail in his fingers and his other hand flat on all the letters he cannot see, and he tries to remember why he is doing it. Why the date. Why the weather. Why what you saw.

Because one day somebody'll need to know.

He can remember the words. He cannot remember who said them. A big man. Grey. On the canvas. Laughing.

He cannot remember why it matters.

He sits there for a long time, in the dark, with the nail.

Then he writes the last thing he can think of, which is the only thing he knows for certain, the way you write the last line on the bottom of a page when you have run out of things to say:

WHY AM I WRITING THIS.

He puts the nail back in his sock. He lies down on his side with his back to the wall and his cheek on the cold concrete, and puts his hand up flat on the letters, as high as he can reach, and leaves it there.

He does not know why he is writing it.

But he knows he will do it again tomorrow.

In for four. Hold for four.

Again.

Chapter 15 – *The Park*

Fri. 17 Oct. 2031. Preston, 10.52 a.m. Text from Basil, Singapore: "A man went for Mei Ling's pushchair in the park. A woman got there first. Carried her away, then brought her back to Grace. Gone before I got there. Grace says it was Mama." Then, a minute later: "Grace has never seen Mama. She says she knew anyway."

Karina Petrick had not slept for thirty-one hours, and she did not need to.

That was one of the things. There were others. She did not need to eat much, or often. She did not feel the cold the way other people did, or the heat. She did not get ill. She had stood on a station platform in Hamburg in January 1975 at the age of thirteen, in a thin coat, for four hours, waiting for her grandmother's car, and not shivered once, and the old woman had looked at her when the car finally came and said, *Good. You will do.*

She had not known then what she would do. She knew now.

She came out of the arrivals hall at Changi at ten past four on Friday afternoon into the heat, in the white linen dress she had worn in Valletta, with one bag. She had flown Malta to Istanbul and Istanbul to Singapore. She had sat by the window in the dark over the Indian Ocean and not slept, and watched the sky, and thought about a man in a funeral suit in a café on the Grand Harbour with his hands round a cup he had not ordered, not taking them off it, because she had told him not to.

That is the right answer, Jono Hills.

She had meant it. She did not often mean things.

* * *

She took a taxi to Tiong Bahru.

She knew the way. She had lived there. Eleven years, from 1997 to 2008, in a flat at the top of a block with a spiral staircase at the back and windows that opened outwards on brass stays, with the light coming in sideways through the rain trees in the afternoons and lying on the floor in pieces. She had stood at the kitchen window of that flat and watched her son kick a ball against the wall of the block until an old man came out and shouted. She had stood at the same window on the morning of his thirteenth birthday with a brown teapot from Burslem wrapped in a jumper in her bag, and looked at him asleep through the half-open door of his room, and gone.

He lived there still. With Grace. With their daughter.

Mei Ling. Two years old. Born on the fourth of March 2029, at ten past six in the morning, in the same hospital where her father had been born. Karina knew the time. She had been in the corridor outside the delivery ward that morning, in a grey coat, reading a magazine, and had watched her son come out through the swing doors with his face undone, and had looked at the magazine, and had not looked up until he had gone past.

She had never held her. She had never been closer than the other side of a park.

* * *

The park was at the end of the road. Not a park, really. A patch of grass with rain trees round it and a playground in one corner, swings and a slide and a climbing frame shaped like a ship, between the blocks and the market. Every evening at about half past five, when the heat went off, the aunties came down with their grandchildren, and the domestic helpers with the children of people

who were still at work, and the young mothers, and the playground filled up with noise.

Grace brought Mei Ling there every evening at half past five. Karina had watched her do it, from a bench under the rain trees on the far side, in a straw hat, perhaps thirty times in two years. Never more than once a month. Never two days running. Never the same bench.

She sat down on a bench under the rain trees on the far side at twenty past five on Friday the seventeenth of October, in the straw hat, with the bag at her feet, and waited.

Grace came at twenty-nine minutes past.

* * *

Grace Tay was forty-five. Tall, with her hair in a long plait still, the way it had been on the padang at Tiong Bahru in 2009 when she was twenty-three and played centre midfield in the mud with shopping bags for goalposts. Karina had seen photographs of that. She had seen photographs of everything.

She was pushing a pushchair. A good one, light, with a shade over it. And in it, in a yellow dress, with her hair in two short bunches and her feet in red sandals kicking against the footrest, Mei Ling.

Karina watched her.

She watched the way you watch a pitch from the top of a stand: not where the ball is, where it is going to be. She watched Grace push the pushchair along the path between the rain trees towards the playground. She watched Mei Ling point at the swings and shout something. She watched Grace laugh and say something back.

And she watched the man.

* * *

She had seen him at twenty past. When she sat down. A man on a bench by the market end of the park, in a pale shirt, with a newspaper. Ordinary.

That was how she had seen him. Because he was ordinary. Because she had looked at him and then looked at the next person along, an auntie with a bag of shopping, and then back, and found that she could not remember what he had looked like. Not his hair. Not his face. Only that he was there. Only that he was ordinary.

She knew that. She had sat in a house on the Elbchaussee as a girl and been taught by her grandmother how to make people not remember her. *You stand very still. You become part of the room. You give them nothing to hold.* She was good at it. She had never been as good at it as the man on the bench.

He had not been taught. He had been made that way. Or he had made himself that way so completely that there was nothing left underneath. She did not know which. She had met him four times in her life, and every time she had come away and tried to remember his face, and could not.

He was not the man himself. The man himself was in England. Somewhere near the dark he had put the boxer in. This was one of his. One of the ones he sent, who had learned from him, who were almost as good.

Almost.

Grace stopped the pushchair by the bench nearest the swings, at the edge of the playground, and put the brake on. Mei Ling was shouting and pointing. Grace laughed and bent down to undo the straps.

Her phone went.

She straightened up and took it out of her pocket and looked at it. Her face changed. Work, Karina thought. Something at Ong's, at the print works, something that could not wait. Grace turned half

away from the pushchair, with the phone at her ear, one hand still on the handle, frowning, saying something in Mandarin, quick and short.

Her hand came off the handle.

The man on the bench by the market end stood up, and folded his newspaper, and began to walk towards the playground.

* * *

Not quickly. Not like a man who has decided something. Like a man going home through the park with his newspaper, who happens to be walking along the path that goes past the swings. Ordinary. An auntie with a little boy stepped out of his way without looking at him. A domestic helper on her phone did not see him at all.

Grace had her back to the pushchair. Three feet. Two. On the phone.

Mei Ling in the pushchair, straps half undone, kicking her red sandals, pointing at the swings.

Karina was already moving.

She did not decide. She had sat in a stand in Bedok in 2028 and watched her son's team score in the eighty-eighth minute and not moved. She had stood in the smoke behind Paignton station with a Hills's hand on her wrist and not moved. She had sat on a terrace above Daddyhole Plain with her hand on a woman's back, and whether that hand had moved, she did not know herself. She had been taught all her life to be very still.

She was not still now.

She went across the grass under the rain trees in her white linen dress and her straw hat, fast, the way you go across a station concourse when the train is already pulling out, and she was at the pushchair before the man with the newspaper, three strides before

him, and she bent and lifted the child out of it in one movement, half-undone straps and all, the way you lift a thing that is yours.

Mei Ling stopped kicking.

She looked up into Karina's face from a foot away, under the brim of the straw hat. Big dark eyes. Her father's way of looking. Along, not at. She did not cry. She looked.

"*Hallo, Kleine*," said Karina, very quietly, in German, which she had not spoken aloud for twenty years.

Then she turned with the child on her hip and walked away, fast, across the grass, towards the market, towards the crowd.

* * *

Behind her, the man with the newspaper had stopped on the path.

She did not look back. She did not need to. She knew exactly where he was, the way you know where the edge of a platform is in the dark. Six feet behind the pushchair. Not moving. Looking at a woman in a straw hat walking away with the thing he had been sent for.

He did not follow.

She had known he would not. In a park, at half past five, with forty aunties and a playground full of children, he could take a child from a pushchair while its mother was on the phone, quietly, and be gone with it round the corner of a block before anybody turned. He could not chase a woman across the grass with a child on her hip. Somebody would look. Somebody would scream. Somebody would remember.

And he could not afford, ever, for anybody to remember.

Behind her Grace screamed.

* * *

Karina stopped at the edge of the market. Under the first of the awnings, by a stall selling flowers, in the shade, with the smell of jasmine and durian and frying shallots, and the noise of the market going on round her as if nothing had happened.

She turned round.

Grace was running across the grass towards her, with the phone still in her hand, with her plait flying, with her face white and wild and her mouth open. Behind her, the playground had turned to look. The aunties. The helpers. A man had stood up from a bench.

The man with the newspaper was gone. The path where he had been was empty.

Karina stood very still under the awning with Mei Ling on her hip and waited.

Grace reached her. She stopped a yard away. She did not grab. Karina saw her not grab, saw her stop herself, saw her see that the child was quiet and holding on to the woman's linen collar with one fist and looking at the flowers. Grace stood there with her chest going and her hands out, half reaching, not touching.

Karina held out the child.

Grace took her. Pulled her in. Held her very hard against her chest, with her face in the child's hair, and Mei Ling, squashed, said something cross into her mother's shoulder.

Then Grace lifted her head and looked at the woman in the straw hat.

* * *

Karina let her look.

She did not take off the hat. She did not need to. Grace was a foot away, under the awning, in the shade, and she looked at the face under the brim the way she had once looked at a fifteen-year-

old boy who had gone past three of her team-mates on a school pitch in Queenstown: very calmly, very steadily, taking it in.

Fair. About forty. Grey eyes. A face that was handsome rather than pretty, strong. A smile at the corner of the mouth that went all the way up to the eyes and stopped there.

Grace had never seen her. Not once. Not a photograph; Basil had none. Not on a screen. Nothing.

She knew anyway.

Karina watched her know. Watched it go across the calm steady face, and land, and stay. Watched Grace's arms tighten round the child.

"There was a man," said Karina. Her voice was low and very even. An English with nothing in it. "On the path. With a newspaper. You will not be able to describe him. Do not try. Tell Basil." She paused. "Tell him the park is not safe. Not this park. Not any park. Not until a man in England is found."

Grace did not say anything. She held her daughter and looked at the woman.

"Tell him," said Karina, "that it was a woman. That is all. A woman who was passing."

"You weren't passing," said Grace.

Karina looked at her for a long moment.

"No," she said.

Then she looked at Mei Ling. Once. For a long time. At the big dark eyes looking back at her over her mother's shoulder. At the yellow dress and the red sandals and the fist still closed, as if it were still holding a linen collar.

She did not say anything to her. She had said the only thing she had.

She turned and walked into the market, between the stalls, under the awnings, into the noise and the smell and the crowd, unhurried, in a straw hat and a white linen dress, and was gone.

* * *

Basil got there at eleven minutes to six.

He had been at the club. Grace had rung him from the market, from under the awning by the flower stall, still holding Mei Ling, and he had got into a taxi and told the driver to go through every red light in Singapore, and the driver had very nearly done it.

He found them sitting on the bench by the swings. Grace with Mei Ling on her lap, asleep now, with her fist in her mouth. Two aunties standing over them, one with a bottle of water, one with a fan.

He went down on his knees on the path in front of the bench and put his arms round both of them and did not say anything for a long time.

Then he said, "Who?"

Grace told him. The man. The phone. The woman in the straw hat. The market. The flower stall.

He listened. When she had finished he stayed on his knees on the path, very still.

"What did she look like?"

Grace looked down at Mei Ling asleep on her lap. Then up at her husband. At his face. At his eyes. Along, not at.

"Like you," she said. "Round the eyes."

Basil did not move.

"I've never seen her," said Grace. "Not once. Not even a picture. You never had one." She was quiet. "I knew anyway. The

second she looked at me." She put her hand on his face. "Basil. It was your mother."

Basil knelt on the path by the swings in Tiong Bahru with the rain trees going dark above him and the aunties pretending not to listen, and did not say anything at all.

Then he took out his phone, and texted the only person in England who would write it down.

Chapter 16 – *4.10*

Fri. 17 Oct. 2031. Widecombe Cot, the hall, 4.10 p.m. A. at the gate with the carpet bag. W.H. at the desk. C.H. on the bench. Man at the bus stop opposite since 3.40. Did not get on the 3.42 or the 3.57. Cannot describe him. W.H. says she can.

Wendy Harvey had been at the desk since three, the way she had been at the desk at three o'clock on the Friday every October since 1950, and she was ninety-six, and she was not going to stop now because her son had not slept properly for a fortnight and her son's friend had flown home from Malta at two in the morning looking worse.

They were both in the hall. She had not asked them to be. Chris on the bench under the barometer, where guests sat to take their boots off, with his bad hand in his lap and his good hand in the pocket of his coat, on something he kept there. Jono standing by the front door with his back to the wall, the way policemen stood, in a suit that had been slept in, looking through the glass at the garden and the gate and the road.

Neither of them had said much since half past two.

She knew why. She knew most of it. A man in the dark somewhere, thirteen days. A postcard from Malta. A woman in a café. A text from Singapore at eleven o'clock that morning that Chris had read standing in the kitchen and then sat down on the floor, actually on the floor, by the range, at sixty-nine, and stayed there for ten minutes with the phone in his hand, until Wendy had come in with her stick and seen him and said *what*, and he had said *Mei Ling*, and then *she's all right*, and then, after a long time, *Karina*.

Wendy had not said anything to that. She had put the kettle on.

She had never met Karina. She had never wanted to. She had known the name since 1965, when she wrote it in a green exercise book in a chapter about a woman in a grey coat in Bayswater, and she had known what that name would cost her son long before he ever heard it, and she had not told him. She had never forgiven herself for that, and she had never been sorry, and she had learned a long time ago that those two things could live in the same house.

A woman who had walked across a park in Singapore that morning and picked up Wendy's great-granddaughter out of a pushchair, three strides ahead of a man nobody could describe.

She did not know what to do with that. She put it with the other things.

* * *

At twenty to four she noticed the man at the bus stop.

She noticed him because she was at the desk, and the desk faced the front door, and the front door had a glass panel in it, and through the glass panel she could see down the path, under the monkey puzzle, to the gate, and across the road to the bus stop on the other side, and she had been looking through that glass panel at that bus stop for eighty-nine years.

A man. Standing at the stop. In a grey jacket. Ordinary.

The 3.42 came. He did not get on it.

She watched him. She watched him the way Johnny Hills had taught her to watch, in 1942, when she was seven and he was the policeman who came to the back room on Thursdays: *not what he's doing, Wendy. What he's not doing.* He was not reading the timetable. He was not looking at his phone. He was not looking up the road for the bus. He was standing very still with his hands at his

sides, looking across the road, through the gate, up the path, at the front door of Widecombe Cot.

At her.

She did not look away. She was ninety-six. She had looked at worse.

"Jono," she said.

He was already looking.

* * *

The 3.57 came. The man did not get on it.

Jono stood by the front door with his back to the wall and looked at the man through the glass for a long time. Wendy watched his face. She had watched Hills faces all her life. Johnny's, and Douglas's, and this one, since it was ten months old in a knitted hat. She knew what a Hills face did when it was looking at something it could not make sense of. It went very still and very patient, the way a heron goes still over water.

"I can't see him," said Jono quietly.

"He's at the bus stop."

"I know. I'm looking at him." Jono did not take his eyes off the glass. "I can't see his face. I can see he's there. I can see the jacket. I look at his face and it's..." He stopped. "It's like Carole said. On the answerphone. Like a word written in water."

Wendy looked through the glass at the man at the bus stop.

She could see his face.

Not well. It was a long way, across the garden and the road, and her eyes were ninety-six. But she could see it. Fifty, perhaps. Ordinary, yes. Very ordinary. But a face. Eyes. A mouth. Grey at the temples. A small mark on the left cheek, under the eye, like an old

scar from a cut. She could see it, and she could hold on to it, and when she looked away at the register and back, it was still there.

"I can see him," she said.

Jono turned his head and looked at her.

"He's got a scar," said Wendy. "On his left cheek. Under the eye. Small. Like somebody hit him with a ring, a long time ago." She looked back through the glass. "Grey at the sides. Fifty. A thin mouth. He's not a nice man, Jono. I've seen men stand like that before. In 1943. At the end of this road."

Jono stood very still by the door.

"How can you see him?" he said. "Nobody can see him."

Wendy thought about it.

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps because I'm older than he is. Perhaps because I don't care what he thinks of me." She picked up her pen. "Or perhaps because I've been looking at this road for eighty-nine years, and he's just a thing that's standing on it." She opened the register. "Write it down, love. Scar, left cheek. Before I forget."

Jono wrote it down.

* * *

At ten past four the gate went.

Wendy heard it before she saw it. She always did. The latch, and the creak of the hinge, which Chris had been going to oil since 2018 and which she had told him every year not to, because it was how you knew.

She 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.

Behind her, across the road, the man at the bus stop had not moved.

Wendy saw her not look at him. Saw her not turn her head, not by a degree, not as much as a hair. She came up the path with her eyes on the front door, the way she had come up it in October 1950 when Wendy was fifteen and allowed at the desk for the first time, and in 1965 when Wendy was thirty and writing it all down, and every year since. As if the man at the bus stop were not there at all. As if there were nothing on that road but road.

She came up the steps. She opened the front door. She came in, across the hall, and stopped at the desk, and put the carpet bag down at her feet.

Chris had stood up from the bench. Jono had not moved from the wall.

"Good afternoon, Wendy," said Ania.

"Good afternoon, Miss Ania," said Wendy. "Room 3. It's ready for you."

* * *

Wendy looked at her.

She had looked at her across this desk every October for eighty-one years. She knew that face better than her own. Better than her mother's. Better than Chris's. A young woman of about twenty-five. Dark hair. Clear steady eyes. Neither pretty nor plain. She had tried to describe it in a green exercise book in 1965 and failed, and had never tried again.

It had never changed. Not once. Not one line, not one hair, in eighty-one years. Wendy had grown up with it, and grown old with

it, and it had stayed where it was, the way the monkey puzzle stayed where it was, and the bay, and the light.

She looked at it now. Across the desk. In the light from the glass panel in the front door.

And above the left temple, where the dark hair was put up, a little in front of the ear, there was a single grey hair.

One. Very fine. Silver against the dark. Catching the light from the door.

Wendy did not say anything.

She looked at it for a long time. Long enough that Ania, standing at the desk with the carpet bag at her feet, became aware of it, and looked back at her, and the two of them stood there, on either side of the desk, looking at each other, the way they had on eighty-one Fridays in October.

Then Ania lifted one hand, and touched her own hair. Lightly. Above the left temple. In front of the ear. Exactly where it was.

She knew.

"Yes," said Ania quietly. "Since the summer."

Wendy put her pen down on the register, square.

"I'll bring you your tea," she said.

* * *

Ania sat at the little table in the bay window in the dining room. With her back to the room and her face to the bay. The way she always sat.

Wendy brought the tea herself. She would not let Chris. She came along the passage with her stick in one hand and the tray in the other, very slowly, the cup rattling a little on the saucer, and set it down on the little table, and poured, from the big brown pot, the

way her mother Nance had, the way she had every October since 1950.

Then she stood back, by the dining-room door, with Chris beside her and Jono behind them both in the passage, and watched.

She did not know why she watched. She had poured that cup of tea every October for eighty-one years, and every year she had stood in the dining-room door and watched the steam go up, and get less, and stop. Ania did not drink it. She held it, in both hands, with her thumbs hooked over the rim, the way a tramwayman holds a mug, and looked at the bay, and did not drink. It was the most certain thing in Wendy's life. More certain than the tide. Once, Jono said, at the little table in the window at Bailey's, in April 2028, she had drunk it. Never here. Not once in this house.

Ania picked up the cup.

In both hands. Thumbs over the rim. She held it, and looked out of the bay window at the sea, grey and silver in the October light, with Berry Head going out into it at the far end, long and flat like the bow of a ship.

And then she lifted it, and drank.

Not much. A mouthful. She swallowed it. She held the cup a little away from her face and looked down into it, the way you look at something you are tasting for the first time and are not sure about. Then she drank again.

Wendy stood in the doorway with her hand on the frame.

Behind her, she heard Chris make a sound. Very small. The sound a man makes when the floor moves.

Ania put the cup down on the saucer. Square. Half empty.

She did not turn round. She did not need to. She sat with her hands in her lap, looking at the bay, with the grey hair above her left

temple catching the light, and said, to the window, every word the same length:

"It is very good tea, Wendy. I am sorry I never told you."

* * *

Jono went back to the front door.

He did not know why. He went along the passage and stood at the glass panel and looked out, down the path, under the monkey puzzle, to the gate, and across the road.

The bus stop was empty.

He had not seen the man go. Nobody had. The 4.27 had come and gone and the man had not been on it, and he was not at the stop, and he was not on the road, and the road was empty in both directions, all the way down the hill to the bay.

Jono took out his pocketbook and looked at the line he had written at five to four, in his own square capitals, from Wendy's words.

Scar, left cheek, under the eye. Grey at the sides. Fifty. Thin mouth.

It was the first description of the man anybody had ever been able to give.

He looked at it for a long time. He read it three times. He made himself look away, at the monkey puzzle, at the gate, and then back at the page.

It was still there. The words had not gone. He could read them.

He just could not, when he looked up from the page and tried, see the face they described.

He closed the book, very carefully, the way you close a door on a room with something asleep in it. He put it in his inside pocket, over his heart.

Behind him, along the passage, in the dining room, at the little table in the bay window, a young woman with one grey hair was finishing a cup of tea.

Chapter 17 – *The Address Book*

Sat. 18 Oct. 2031. Studio Ania, the cellar, 4.06 p.m. Call from A.L., Singapore, on speaker. C.H., K., me. She read one line. Then the last. She would not read the ones between. I did not ask her to. Day 15 for E.

Ai Li had been reading other people's dates for three years and seven months, and on the Saturday night she reached the end of them, she was alone.

She had arranged it that way. She always did. Saturday nights in Joo Chiat the office above the shophouse was empty: the two analysts went home at six, the cleaner came on Mondays, and the old man who ran the incense shop two doors along pulled his shutter down at nine and went upstairs to watch Cantonese opera on a television so loud she could hear the gongs through the party wall. She had a booth at the arena on Friday nights and a golf lesson to give on Sunday mornings at seven, and between the two, on Saturday nights, for three years and seven months, she had climbed the narrow stair and gone through the steel door with the three locks and sat at the long table with the copy.

Keith had taken the case home in 2028. The black case the size of a paperback, the drive in its grey foam. He had carried it on his knee on the plane to Heathrow and not let Clifford hold it.

She had kept the copy. Nobody had told her to. Nobody had told her not to.

* * *

It had gone slowly. Then it had gone very slowly. Then, in the spring of this year, it had begun to go fast.

The first line had taken three weekends and a data centre in Jurong. *Thurs. 31 Oct. 1895. Bailey's, public bar. About 5 p.m.* After that, nothing, for a year. A wall of numbers. She had tried everything she knew and several things she had to learn from forums at three in the morning, and nothing, and nothing, and then one night in July 2029, sitting at the long table with a cold kopi and the opera coming through the wall, she had stopped trying to read it as a message and started trying to read it as handwriting.

That was the trick. It was not a cipher. It was a hand. Somebody had taken a great many entries written by a great many people, in pencil and ink and biro, in pocketbooks and registers and the margins of waybills, and had copied them all out in one long list, in order, and the list had kept something of each hand it came from. A slope. A habit. The way Jack Hills wrote his sevens with a bar. The way a woman of thirty in 1965 underlined her dates twice. Once Ai Li saw that, the list began to open, one hand at a time.

There were four thousand, one hundred and eight entries.

She knew most of the early ones by now the way she knew the bones of a foot. Jack's, from the 1890s, square and short. Johnny's. Douglas's, wartime, cramped, written in a hurry by torchlight. A long run in a woman's hand from the 1940s and 50s, a child's at first, growing up across the pages. *Widecombe Cot. Room 3.* Over and over. October after October. Then Chris, from 1995, small and fast and leaning forward. Then Jono, from 1997, block capitals, never a word more than he needed.

Every one a door. Keith had said so, in this room, with his hand on the lid of the case. She had not understood him then. She thought she did now.

She had stopped telling anybody how far she had got. Chris had asked, once, at Christmas, on the phone. She had said, *a long way*, and he had said, *don't read me any of it*, and she had not.

* * *

On Saturday the eighteenth of October she sat down at the long table at twenty past nine with the opera going and a bowl of noodles from the stall on the corner, and she was in the summer of 2031.

She had been past the spring of 2028 since June. She had not told anybody that either.

The burst had come down out of the sky in February 2028. The list had been in it. Everything in the list had been written before the list was sent. That was what a list was. So it should have stopped in February 2028.

It did not stop.

Thurs. 6 April 2028. Bailey's, back room, 6.15 p.m. Jono's block capitals. She had read that one on a Saturday in June and gone for a long walk along East Coast Park in the dark, and come back, and gone on.

Fri. 5 May 2028. The count, Westpoint, Exeter.

Sat. 2 Sept. 2028. Goodrington sands.

She had been in Singapore when that one happened. She had seen it on the news. Children on a beach in Devon pointing at the air over their parents' heads. And three years later she had sat in this room and read it, in Jono's hand, in a list that had been sent up into the sky seven months before it happened, and felt her skin go cold all over in thirty-two degrees.

After that it thinned out. There had been dozens of entries a year in the 1990s, hundreds in the war; now there were ten, eight, five. Jono's hand, mostly. Chris's, once or twice. And another hand that she did not know, that she had met for the first time in the spring of 2028 and could not place: very upright, very regular, every letter the same height, like print, like a register filled in by somebody who had been taught to write a long time ago, in another country.

She did not know whose hand that was. She had a feeling that she should not try.

At ten past ten she was in September.

The opera had stopped. The incense shop was dark. Down in the street a motorbike went along the main road and faded, and after it there was nothing but the air conditioning and the noodles going cold in the bowl at her elbow.

She brought up the next entry. The decoder took it apart, the way it did, slowly, one stroke at a time, and gave it to her.

It was not Jono's hand. It was not Chris's.

It was the other one. Very upright. Every letter the same height.

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

* * *

Ai Li sat back in the chair.

She knew the date. Everybody in Rage knew the date. Tarquin had rung Chris at ten on the Wednesday morning, and Chris had rung nobody, and Jono had rung everybody, and by noon Singapore time the message had come down the line to this office from Clifford in two words. *Carole. Heart.*

Ai Li had never met her. She knew her the way you know a name on a door you have walked past for years. The woman in the grey suit. The one who had taken a girl from a fire escape in Stafford to Cheltenham in the snow in 1982. The one who had kept a piece of paper in a kitchen drawer for forty-nine years.

She looked at the line on the screen.

10.47 p.m.

She did not know what time Carole had died. Nobody had said a time. The doctor had said *heart*, and *should have run another*

twenty years, and Clifford had said both of those things down the phone, and nobody had said a time.

She looked at the line for a long time.

Then she did the thing she had promised herself, in July 2029, that she would never do. She went back to the header. To the timestamp on the burst. The first night it had been pulled down, on a dish on a hill above Cheltenham: a night in February 2028.

Three years and seven months before a woman sat down at her kitchen table with a crossword.

And the list had already known the minute.

* * *

She did not ring anybody for half an hour.

She went downstairs and out into the street and walked. Along Joo Chiat Road, past the shuttered shophouses, past the new coffee places dark behind their glass, past the old cinema that was a gym now. It was nearly eleven and the air was like wet cloth. A man was hosing down the pavement in front of a coffee shop and the water ran in the gutter, warm. She walked to the end of the road and stood at the junction with the traffic lights changing over an empty crossing, red, green, red, for nobody.

She thought: *somebody wrote it down.*

Because that was the first rule. Keith had told her, at the long table, in 2028, with his hand on the case. *Only what was written can be reached.* Every entry was a door, and you could only have a door where somebody had written one.

So somebody had written down 10.47 p.m. on the sixteenth of September, in a kitchen in Cheltenham.

Not Carole. Carole had not written anything after the crossword. Somebody else. Somebody with a very upright hand,

every letter the same height, who had known the minute before there was a minute to know.

She thought about a woman of seventy-one at a kitchen table, with her pen, and the last clue done, and something in her chest. A woman who had spent her whole life writing down the time things happened. And the one time that mattered, somebody had written it for her. Years before. In a hand that was not hers.

Ai Li stood at the empty crossing with the lights changing and found that she was crying. She did not know when she had started.

She thought: *and somebody knew she would. Three years before.*

She went back.

* * *

There were fourteen more entries after Carole's.

She did not read them.

She saw them come up on the screen, the decoder taking them apart one stroke at a time, and she saw the dates go past, and she put her hand over the screen. Flat. Like that. Her palm on the glass, warm from the machine, with the lines going on underneath her fingers where she could not see them.

She sat like that for a long time.

She had read three years and seven months of other people's lives. She had read a girl's hand in 1942 learning to make her capitals, and a policeman's hand in 1944 that shook, and a woman's hand in 1965 writing *I don't know who she is* and underlining it twice. She had read Goodrington, and Carole, after they came. They were doors. They were already open. That was what the past was.

These were not open. These were the next fourteen things that were going to happen to people she loved, and if she read them, she

would know them, and she would carry them, and she would have to decide every morning for the rest of her life whether to say.

Carole had carried a thing like that. In a drawer. For forty-nine years.

Ai Li took her hand off the screen, very carefully, and scrolled with her eyes shut. Fourteen. She counted them by the little tick the decoder made at the end of each one, the way Eric Prowse's boys counted their skips. Thirteen. Fourteen.

Then she opened her eyes.

* * *

The last entry was short.

It was the hand she did not know. The upright one, every letter the same height. Like print. The decoder had taken it apart and given her almost nothing: the line was damaged, as if something had gone through it, the strokes of the day and the month broken up into noise. But two things had come through clean, the way a name comes through on a bad line when everything around it has gone.

2057.

And, after a gap where something had been, and was not:

Station Square.

Nothing after it. The numbers stopped. The screen went on to the blank end of the burst, the carrier, the long flat hiss that everybody at Cheltenham in 2028 had thought was the whole of it.

Ai Li looked at it until it stopped meaning anything.

Then she looked at the time in the corner of the screen. 11.04 p.m. Saturday in Singapore. Four minutes past four in the afternoon in Torquay.

She picked up the phone.

* * *

Jono answered on the second ring.

"Ai Li."

"Where are you?"

"The cellar." A pause. She could hear something behind him: a chair, a cough, an old man's voice saying something low. "Chris is here. And Keith. Do you want me to..."

"Put me on the speaker."

He did. She heard the room change. The particular sound of the cellar under Studio Ania, which she had never been in and knew from a hundred phone calls: a low room, stone, with the hum of the cooling in the corner where the stone sat. Somebody breathing near the phone.

"I've got to the end," said Ai Li.

Nobody said anything.

"Of the list. The address book." She heard her own voice and did not like it. She made it steadier. "I'm not going to read you most of it. I'm going to read you two lines. Then I'm going to put the copy in the cabinet and lock it and take the key to the bank on Monday and I don't want anybody to ask me for it. Not for a long time."

"All right," said Jono.

"Chris?"

A long pause. Then, very quietly, from further away than Jono: "All right."

She read the first one.

"*Tuesday, sixteenth September, 2031. Cheltenham, the kitchen. Ten forty-seven p.m.*"

* * *

She heard it go into the room.

She heard it the way you hear a glass go over on a table in the next room. Nothing, and then a sound that was not a sound, and then nothing again.

Then Chris's voice. Not to her. Not to anybody.

"She did it in ink."

Ai Li did not know what he meant. She found that she did not need to.

"It's not her hand," she said. She took a breath. "Chris. The list came down in February 2028. That line was in it when it came. It was written before it happened."

There was a very long silence on the line from Torquay.

Then Jono's voice, careful, a policeman's voice, the voice she had heard him use on the phone to people whose sons had not come home: "Do you know the time she died, Ai Li? Did anybody tell you?"

"No. Nobody said a time."

"Nobody knew one," said Jono. "The doctor said between half past ten and eleven. She finished the crossword at a quarter to. That's all anybody knows." A pause. "Knew."

He did not say any more. He did not need to.

Ai Li sat at the long table in Joo Chiat with her eyes shut.

And in the cellar under Studio Ania, eleven thousand kilometres away, nobody said anything for a long time. She listened to the hum of the cooling. She listened to an old man breathing. She listened, and did not know she was listening for it, for a third voice: the young one, Keith's, which had always sounded to her like Basil's with sixty years laid on it.

It did not come.

* * *

"And the other line?" said Jono at last.

She read it.

"*Twenty fifty-seven.* Then the day and the month are gone. Damaged. Then something else gone. Then *Station Square*." She opened her eyes. "That's the last entry. There's nothing after it. Nothing at all. The list stops there."

Nobody spoke.

"It's the same hand as Carole's line," said Ai Li. "Not Jono's. Not Chris's. One I've seen since 2028 and I don't know whose it is. Very upright. Every letter the same height. Like somebody who learned to write in a school a long time ago, in another country, and never let it slip."

In the cellar, somebody moved. A chair, scraping back on stone.

And then the young voice. Keith's. Very quiet. Not to her. Not to anybody in the room. As if he were saying it to the stone, with his hand on it.

"Yes," said Keith. "I know whose it is."

He did not say any more. She did not ask him. Jono did not ask him. She heard the chair go back again, and footsteps on the stone floor, and the cellar door.

* * *

Afterwards, Jono said, "Thank you, Ai Li. Lock it up."

"I'm going to."

"How many between?" he said. "Carole and the last one. You don't have to tell me what. Just how many."

She thought about it. About her hand flat on the warm glass.

"Fourteen," she said.

She heard him write it down.

"Day fifteen," said Jono, half to himself, the way you say a number you are carrying. "For Eric."

"I know," said Ai Li. "I looked. I'm sorry. He's not in it. Not in the ones before tonight." She stopped. "I didn't look at the ones after."

"Good," said Jono. "Don't."

He rang off.

* * *

She put the copy in the steel cabinet at half past eleven and locked it with the key on the chain round her neck, and then she took the chain off, and held it, and sat at the long table in the dark with the key in her fist.

Fourteen doors. Between a kitchen in Cheltenham and a square in front of a railway station in Paignton, twenty-six years away, where she would be seventy-two, if she was anything.

Fourteen things that somebody had already written down.

She thought about the hand that wrote the last line. Very upright. Every letter the same height. Like a register at a hotel, filled in for every Friday in October for longer than anybody alive had been alive.

She thought about Keith saying *yes*. Not surprised. The way you say yes to a doctor who has told you what you already knew.

She went home at midnight, along Joo Chiat Road, with the key in her fist and the man still hosing down the pavement in front of the coffee shop, and the warm water running in the gutter, and the lights at the empty crossing going red, and green, and red, for nobody.

Chapter 18 – *Day Sixteen*

SUN 19 OCT? DAY 16. HOT. COLD. ANKLE BAD. BREAD 1. PILLS. BELLS RIGHT — 6. TAG — T 7 41 8? 3? LOW. BEHIND BRACKET. JONO.

He is hot.

That is wrong, and he knows it is wrong, and he lies on the concrete with his cheek in the grit and holds on to it. It is cold down here. It is always cold. It has been cold for sixteen days; the cold is the one thing in the dark that has never once changed. And now he is hot. His face is hot. His chest is hot, under the shirt, and wet. His hands are hot and dry and do not feel like his hands.

And at the same time he is shaking so hard that the chain on his ankle is ringing on the floor. A small fast sound, link on concrete, like somebody tapping a spoon on a cup. He cannot stop it. He has tried.

Hot and cold. Both. At once.

He knows what that is. He was told on the ship. He was told again in a field hospital in Ajax Bay with a drip in his arm and a medic from Hull bending over him with a thermometer. *Fever, love. You've got an infection in that leg. You'll feel hot and cold together and you'll see things. Don't fight it. Drink.*

He drinks.

The bottle is nearly empty. He makes himself stop.

* * *

It is the ankle. Not the old leg. The ankle, under the ring.

The ring has been on it for sixteen days, over the sock, and the sock wore through on the ninth day, or the tenth, and since then it has been metal on skin. It rubbed. Then it bled. He could feel it, wet, when he put his fingers under the edge. Then it stopped bleeding and went hard and hot and tight, and now, when he touches the skin above the ring, it is like touching the side of a kettle. It throbs. It throbs with his heart, so that he can count his pulse in it, lying still, without trying.

A hundred and twelve. He counts it twice. A hundred and twelve, lying down.

He has seen men with ankles like that. In the Strait, in 1997. A Filipino deckhand who cut his foot on a cable and did not tell anybody for a week. They took him off at Batam in a launch with his leg the colour of a plum and Eric never heard what happened to him.

He writes it on the wall, when he can sit up. ANKLE BAD. He writes it small, because his hand will not make it big.

* * *

The door comes on what he thinks is the morning.

The lock coughs. The iron scrapes. Feet. Six, seven. Concrete. The torch round the corner, white, on the far wall first, sliding, cream, then on him.

He shuts his eyes.

He hears the bottles put down. Two. And the rustle of the bread. And then, because he is listening the way he was taught, listening for the shape of it, he hears the feet not go.

They stay. Standing. A yard from his head.

He keeps his eyes shut. The light is on his face, he can feel it through his eyelids, red, hot, and he lies very still with the chain

ringing on the floor because he cannot stop his leg shaking, and he waits.

The feet come closer.

Something touches his forehead. The back of a hand. Dry. Cool. It rests there, on his skin, for a count of four. Then it goes.

Then a sound he has not heard in sixteen days. Foil. A blister pack. A small click, and another, and another, and then something put down on the concrete near his hand. Small. Light. A rattle.

The feet stand there a moment longer.

And then the torch moves. Off his face. He feels it go, the red going black behind his eyelids. And he opens them, just a crack, the way a dog opens one eye by the fire, and sees, with the white hole already burning in the middle of everything, the beam of the torch moving along the wall.

Along his wall. Above the pipes. Across the letters.

It goes slowly. From the left. Across the first day, SAT 4 OCT? and the DARK under it, and the BUS. Along the rows. Day by day. Big letters, the size of his palm, going along under the pipes, going ragged, going small. Across SHANNON and KAI and LEE + RYAN. Across MUM. Across KETTLE. Across HER, very small, in the corner.

It stops on JONO.

It stays there. Eric lies very still with his eye open a crack and the white hole in it, and watches the circle of light sit on those four letters on the cream paint for a long time.

Somebody is reading his wall.

He thinks: *he could scratch it out. He's got a knife. He could take it all off in ten minutes.*

The torch moves on. Across BELLS SUN — CHURCH. Across TAG ON PIPE — LETTERS? It does not stop there. It goes along to WHY AM I WRITING THIS, and stays a moment, and then goes off the end of the wall, into the dark.

The feet turn. Six, seven. The door. The lock.

He lies in the dark and shakes and thinks: *he read it. And he left it.*

He thinks: *because he doesn't think it matters. Because he thinks nobody's ever going to come with a torch except him.*

And then, very slowly, because it is the kind of thought that comes slowly when you are hot and cold at once: *or because he wants it there. For somebody to read. Afterwards.*

He does not like that thought. He puts it with the bad ones.

* * *

The pills are paracetamol. He knows by the shape, flat and round with a line across, and by the taste, bitter, chalky, when he puts one on his tongue to be sure. Eight in the pack. Four gone already: pressed out, waiting, in a little pile on the concrete by his hand.

He takes two, with the new water. He puts the other two back in the foil, in their holes, to save. He puts the pack inside his shirt.

They do not want him dead. Not yet.

He thinks that a man who puts the back of his hand on your forehead to feel your temperature, and counts out pills for you, and reads your wall and leaves it, is the most frightening man he has ever been near. More than the ones on Mount Harriet. They had been trying to kill him, and he had understood that, and so had they.

He does not understand this one at all.

* * *

The bells come later.

He is lying on his back under the pipes when they start, because on his back the ankle hurts least, with his leg up on the bottom bracket. The pills have done something. The shaking has gone to the edges. The heat is a long way off, like a fire in another room.

Bells. Faint. From the right. Above.

The church. Sunday. He knew it was Sunday. He had written SUN on the wall that morning with a question mark, and now he takes the question mark away in his head, because it is Sunday, the bells say so, and he believes the bells the way he believes the wall.

He counts them. He has not done that before. On the ninth day he had only listened. Now he counts, because Jono said *what you heard*, and you cannot write down what you heard properly unless you have counted it.

Six. Six bells. Going down the scale, ragged, the third one always a bit late, the way somebody's always a bit late in a skipping line. Then round again. Then a change, the order mixing, and the third one late again. Six bells, rung by people who are not very good at it, on a Sunday morning, from the right, above, not very far.

He listens for twenty minutes, until they stop.

He thinks: *I know those bells.*

He does not. He cannot have. He is under a street somewhere with buses going over. He is a long way from anywhere he has ever been. But there is something about the third one being late that goes into him, under the fever, somewhere very far back, the way a smell can.

A boy. Walking. With his mother. On a Sunday morning.

It goes.

* * *

He sleeps, or something like it.

When he comes back he does not know how long it has been. The fever is back in the middle again. His mouth is dry. He drinks, a little. He lies on his back with his leg up on the bracket and his arm up over his head, the way he has lain every day since the eleventh, and he reaches up, in the dark, the way you reach up in bed at night for no reason.

His fingers touch the pipes. The cold soft round lead. He moves them along.

The tag.

The size of a stamp. Flat. Harder than the lead. Fastened round the pipe with a twist of wire. He knows it now the way he knows the nail in his sock. He puts his fingertips on it.

And today, for the first time, he can feel it.

He does not know why. It might be the fever. It might be the pills. It might be that his fingers are hot, now, instead of numb, and the blood is in them, pounding. But the marks on the tag are under his fingertips like the letters on his own wall, very small, very neat, pressed in by a machine, and he can feel the shapes of them. Not all of them. Some.

He holds his breath.

The first one. Down, and across the top. He has had that one before, and lost it. A T. It is a T. Not a 7. He feels it three times: down the middle, across the top, square. A T.

Then a gap. Then something round, or nearly round, with a tail. He cannot get it. It slides about under his finger, an O or a Q or a G, he does not know. He leaves it.

Then a 7. This one is a 7: across, and down at a slant. No bar. A 7.

Then a gap, wider.

Then a 4. He is sure. The shape of a sail.

Then a 1. A straight line. Easy.

Then the last one, and his fingers will not do it. Something with curves. Two curves, one on top of the other. An 8. Or the right side of one. A 3. He goes over it and over it, until the tip of his middle finger is raw against the stamped edge, and he cannot tell. Eight. Three. Eight.

He lies there with his arm over his head and his fingers on the tag, and says it out loud in the dark, so that he will remember it.

"T. Something. Seven. Four. One. Eight." A breath. "Or three."

* * *

Then the fever comes back up like the tide and takes it.

He is on the mountain. He is in the hole. He is not, he is on the concrete, he knows he is on the concrete, he can feel the chain. He is on the mountain, and the stars are out, thousands, like dust, and he is waiting for somebody to sit down on the rim of the hole.

And somebody says, close by, very clearly:

TQ.

He does not know who says it. It is not a woman's voice. It is not the speaking clock. It is a boy's voice, a young one, cheerful, impatient, like a boy in a playground showing off something he has just learned. *It's TQ, stupid. Everything in Torquay's TQ. It's on all the cables. I'm going to work there.*

A playing field. Grass. 1976. Somebody on his back in the grass, knocked out, and a boy kneeling beside him with a library book, saying *recovery position*, and another boy, leaning over, a thin

one with his tie undone, who had said something like that, once, about cables, about the exchange on Union Street where the cables all went in, where he was going to work when he left school. Something nobody had asked him.

Eric does not remember the boy's name. He cannot see his face.

He remembers the voice. *It's on all the cables.*

The stars go out.

* * *

He sits up. It takes a long time. Hands first, then knees. The count's not on you.

He takes the nail out of his sock.

He does not write it where the other lines are. He thinks about the torch, sliding along the wall. Stopping on JONO. Reading. He thinks: *he left it because he thinks it doesn't matter. If he sees this, he'll know it does.*

So he goes low. Under the pipes. Down by the floor, behind the bottom bracket, where the chain is fastened, in the angle between the iron and the wall, where the paint has never seen a torch because the bracket is in the way. He has to lie on his side to reach it, with his cheek on the concrete and his arm bent back behind the iron. He cannot see. He has never been able to see. He writes by feel, small, because there is no room, smaller than he has written anything, each letter the size of his thumbnail.

T.

A gap. He thinks about it. Then, because a boy in a playground said so, fifty-five years ago:

Q.

7.

4. 1.

8.

And then, after it, because he does not know, and Jono said write what you know and say what you don't:

3?

He lies there with the nail against the paint, behind the bracket, in the dark, and breathes. In for four. Hold for four. His heart is going a hundred and twelve. His ankle is a kettle. His fingertip is bleeding from the tag.

He does not know what it means. A label on a pipe. A cable. A number somebody stamped in a factory a long time ago so that a man with a torch would know which pipe was which.

One day somebody'll need to know.

He goes back up to the main wall, where the days are, and writes the rest. The date with a question mark. DAY 16. HOT. COLD. ANKLE BAD. BREAD 1. PILLS. BELLS RIGHT — 6. And then, because the man with the torch can read it here and it will tell him nothing: TAG — T 7 41 8? 3? LOW. BEHIND BRACKET.

He stops.

He looks at that last bit in the dark with his fingers. LOW. BEHIND BRACKET. He thinks about scratching it out. He thinks: *the man will read that, and look.*

Then he thinks: *the man doesn't come down on his knees. He stands. He shines the torch along the wall at the height of his own eyes. He's never once bent down.*

He leaves it.

And then, at the end of the line, the way he has every day, the last one, slowly, because his hand slows down on it by itself:

JONO.

He puts the nail back in his sock. He lies down on his side with his back to the wall and his cheek on the concrete that is not rock, and puts his hand down, not up, for the first time: down behind the bracket, flat, on the seven small things written there in the dark.

He leaves it there.

Above him, a bus goes over. Coming, and going, and gone.

Chapter 19 – *The Fault*

Fri. 24 Oct. 2031. Studio Ania, the cellar, 11.52 p.m. K. at the stone since Sun. a.m. Said "there's a fault on the line." C.H. wrote TQ 7/418 on the back of the gas bill. Said "That's mine. 1978." Rang the DI at 11.58. Day 21 for E.

It began on the Sunday morning, a little after eleven, and at first Keith thought it was his own heart.

He was in the cellar under Studio Ania, alone, at the end of the desk, with his hand on the stone. He did that most mornings now. Since Eric. Since the eight faces came out of their crates and every cord in them ran to a canvas he could not remember painting. He came down at eight, before Clifford, before anybody, and sat at the end of the desk with his palm flat on the cold dark surface of the thing that had come down out of the sky in 2028, and listened.

Not with his ears. There was nothing to hear with ears. The hum of the cooling in the corner. The traffic on Union Street through the pavement lights, very faint. His own breath.

He listened the other way. The way he had been taught, in a white room, in a building that did not yet exist, by somebody who had never been born. You put your hand on it, and you were quiet, and after a while the lines came. Not pictures. Not voices. Lines. Every written thing the stone could reach, laid out in the dark like the wires in a frame, humming. Jack's pocketbooks, a long way down, steady as a church organ. Wendy's green exercise books, sweet and thin. Jono's thirty-four, close, loud, square, like a man walking on a wooden floor. Chris's own: the notebooks, the setlists, the letters, the waybill.

Only what was written. Only through blood.

He had been sitting with them every morning for sixteen days, looking for Eric. And Eric was not there. Eric was not blood. Eric had never written anything down in his life except his name on a form and forty pounds a month in a book on a table at the top of the iron stairs. There was no line to Eric. Keith had known that on the first morning and come back every morning anyway, because it was the only thing he had.

And on the Sunday, a little after eleven, something in the frame went wrong.

* * *

A tick. That was all. Very small. In the middle of everything, among the lines, a tick, and then another, irregular, like the noise a radiator makes when it is cooling. Or a heart that has missed.

He took his hand off the stone and put it on his own chest and waited.

His heart was going steady. Sixty. It was a young heart, in a young body; it did not miss.

He put his hand back on the stone.

Tick. And then, after a long time, tick.

It was on one of the lines. He did not know which. He sat very still, the way you sit when you hear something in a house at night and do not know which room it is in, and waited for it again, and when it came he went towards it, along the lines, the way you go along a landing in the dark with one hand on the wall.

He could not find it. It was there and then it was not. It went quiet for an hour. It came back in the afternoon, two ticks close together, and then nothing till evening.

He wrote it down. He had been writing things down himself, lately, on the backs of envelopes, in a hand he had once thought of

as his own and now did not quite recognise. *Sun. 19 Oct. 11.10 a.m. A fault. Somewhere.*

He did not tell anybody. He did not know what to tell them.

* * *

On the Monday it was louder.

He came down at eight and put his hand on the stone and it was there at once, before the other lines had even come up out of the dark. A crackle now. Not a tick. The sound a phone line makes in the rain when water has got into a joint somewhere and nobody has found it yet. A frying sound. Faint, and then not faint, and then faint again.

And under it, through it, very far away, something like a voice.

Not words. The shape of words. The way, on a bad line, you can hear that somebody at the other end is talking, and you can hear that it is a man, and that he is tired, and you cannot hear one thing he says.

Keith sat with his hand on the stone for four hours.

Clifford came down at ten, and looked at him, and went away again, and came back at twelve with a sandwich and put it on the desk by his elbow and did not say anything. Clifford was good at that. He had been good at it in Bangkok.

At half past twelve Keith took his hand off the stone and found that it was shaking, and that he could not, for a while, make it stop.

* * *

He knew what it was by the Tuesday.

He knew the way you know a thing you have been told about and never seen. They had told him, in the white room, about crosstalk. *Two lines in the same cable. Lying next to each other for miles. Most of the time they keep to themselves. But if the insulation*

goes, if water gets in, if somebody puts a nail through the sheath, one line starts to bleed into the other. And you pick up the phone and hear somebody else's call. Faint. Underneath your own.

That was what this was.

Somewhere among the lines he could reach, the blood lines, the ones written in Hills and Harvey and Mallyon hands, there was one that somebody else was bleeding into. Somebody who was not blood. Somebody who had written something, somewhere, that lay so close to a line of Chris's that it had got in under the insulation.

He spent the Tuesday trying to find which.

It was not Jack. It was not Wendy. It was not Jono's, though he went along all thirty-four of Jono's, one by one, the whole of the morning, until his arm ached to the shoulder. It was older than Jono's. It was in Chris's. Somewhere in Chris's. And he went along Chris's lines one at a time, the setlists and the letters and the notebooks from Singapore, and they were all clean.

There was a place he could not go.

He found it on the Tuesday afternoon. A stretch of Chris's lines, early, very early, before the music, before Stafford, that he could feel was there and could not get into. Not locked. Not dark. Just not his. Like a room in your own house that you know is there because there is a door on the landing, and you have never once in your life opened it, and you cannot remember what is in it, and you do not know why.

The crackle was coming from behind that door.

* * *

On the Wednesday he counted the things he had kept.

He did it at the end of the desk, with his hand off the stone, with his eyes shut, the way he did it every morning at Bailey's at the

window table with his cup in both hands. The list on the inside of his head. What he would not let the line have.

The song. The waybill. The lighthouse, and the counting. Mum's book. Basil's left foot. The bootlace. Karen's hand on his collar on the platform at Torquay.

Seven.

He went through them twice. Seven. Nothing more gone. He let his breath out.

And then he thought, with his eyes shut, about the room behind the door on the landing.

He had made the list in 2057, at ninety-five, in the little room at the top of the house with the window over the bay. Ten things. He had chosen them very carefully. He had known that the line would take things, and he had chosen what he could not bear to lose.

He had not chosen whatever was behind that door. He had not even thought of it. Whatever it was, he had been ninety-five and it had been so far back, so small, so ordinary, that it had not seemed worth keeping.

And somewhere on the way down the line, without his noticing, it had gone.

* * *

On the Thursday the voice came through.

Not words, still. But closer. Hot. The line was hot; he could feel it under his hand like a wire with too much current in it. And the voice in it was hot too, and shaking, and very tired. A man, alone. Saying something over and over, under his breath. Not to anybody.

And then, behind the voice, for twenty minutes in the middle of the morning, something else.

Bells.

He sat bolt upright at the desk with his hand on the stone.

Six bells. Faint. Going down the scale and round again. Rung by people who were not very good at it. And the third bell late, every time, a fraction late, like somebody in a skipping line who has never once in their life got the timing right.

Keith knew those bells.

He did not know how. They were not on the list. They were not in any line he could reach. But he knew them in his body, in the young body, in the backs of its knees, the way you know the stairs of a house you grew up in. A Sunday. A road going up a hill. A boy in a blazer, walking. The third bell late.

It was Thursday. There were no Sunday bells on a Thursday.

So it was not now. It was something that had been written down, by somebody, about bells. And it had got into the line.

He sat with his hand on the stone until the bells faded, and then for a long time after.

At four o'clock Chris came down the cellar stairs with two cups of tea, and found him there, and stopped.

"You've been here since Sunday," said Chris.

"Yes."

"Clifford says you won't eat."

"I'm eating."

Chris put a cup down beside him. Keith looked at it. He did not pick it up. Then he did, in both hands, the way he always did now, and held it, and did not drink.

"There's a fault on the line," he said.

* * *

He told them on the Friday night.

All of them. Jono, still in his Westminster suit. Clifford. Rani, who had come down from the photonics building on Torbay Road at nine with her coat still on. Chris, on the old swivel chair from the shop, with his bad hand in his lap. Karen on the step at the bottom of the stairs with her arms round her knees.

He told them about the tick, and the crackle, and the voice. About the room behind the door on the landing. About the bells.

They listened. Nobody laughed. Three years ago somebody would have laughed. Not now.

"Can you get anything off it?" said Jono. "Anything at all. A word."

"Not a word."

"A number?"

Keith put his hand back on the stone.

It was there. Hot. Crackling. The tired voice, under its breath, the same thing, over and over. He had been listening to it for five days and he had never once tried to hear what it was saying, because he had thought it was words, and he could not get words.

It was not words.

He shut his eyes.

It was letters. One at a time. Said slowly, carefully, by a man who was trying to remember them. The way a man says the letters of a number plate he has seen once, in the dark, to fix it.

"T," said Keith.

The cellar went very quiet.

He held on. The line went hot, and frying, and away, and came back.

"T. Then something. Round. I can't get it." The crackle. "Seven." A long gap. "Four. One." The voice in the line, hoarse, tired, sure of itself and then not. "Eight. Or three. He doesn't know. He says *or three*."

He opened his eyes.

Chris had stood up.

He was standing in the middle of the cellar with his bad hand against his chest and his face gone a colour Keith had not seen on it since the morning of the banner. He was looking at nothing. At the wall. At a long way away.

"Say it again," said Chris.

"T. Something round. Seven. Four, one, eight."

"Q," said Chris.

Nobody moved.

"The round one's a Q," said Chris. "TQ. Torquay. It's on every cable in the exchange." His voice did not sound like his own. "TQ seven. Cable seven. Pair four-one-eight." He looked round the cellar, at all of them, and none of them. "It's not a three. It's an eight. It's always been an eight. I wrote it."

* * *

He sat down. Karen got up off the step and went and stood behind his chair and put her hand on his collar, and he put his good hand up and held it there.

"Somebody give me a pen," said Chris.

Jono gave him his. Chris looked round for paper and there was none, and he took an envelope out of his coat pocket, the gas bill, unopened, and turned it over and wrote on the back, quickly, without thinking, in a hand that was not the hand he had now. Older. Rounder. A boy's hand that had been taught to fill in forms.

TQ 7/418.

He looked at it.

"Fleet House," he said. "The exchange on Union Street. I started there in September 1978. I was sixteen." He put the pen down. "They put me in the cable chamber for my first month. Underneath. Under the street. Where the cables come in from the town before they go up to the frames. Lead-covered cables, on iron bearers along the walls, in rows. You'd think they were pipes. Everybody thinks they're pipes."

Keith sat at the end of the desk very still.

He had no Fleet House. He reached for it, sitting there, the way you reach for a word, and there was nothing. A door on a landing. He had worked there. He knew he had worked there; it was a fact, like his date of birth. And there was nothing behind it at all.

But Chris had written it. In pencil, in a cable book, in 1978, in his best writing. A line in a Harvey hand, with a number in it. And five days ago, four hundred yards away, under the street, a man who was not blood had scratched the same number on a wall beside the same cable.

Two lines in the same cable. Lying next to each other for fifty-three years. And the insulation had gone.

"There was an old jointer," said Chris. "Mr Pengelly. He'd been down there since the war. He used to put a tag on every cable he touched. Little brass tags, the size of a stamp, stamped with the number, and a twist of wire. And he made me write every one of them in the cable book. Every tag, every pair. In pencil. In my best writing. *TQ 7 stroke 418, chamber, east wall, third bearer, spare.*" He stopped. "He used to sit on an upturned bucket in the dark with a handset clipped on a pair, listening. And I asked him what he was doing. And he said..."

He did not finish.

Keith finished it for him. He did not know where it came from. It came up out of the young body, out of the backs of the knees, out of the room behind the door.

"*You can hear a fault in a line before you can find it.*"

Chris turned his head and looked at him.

They looked at each other across the cellar for a long time, the man of sixty-nine and the man of ninety-five in a body of thirty, with the same eyes.

"Yes," said Chris. "That's what he said."

* * *

"The bells," said Jono, very quietly. He had his pocketbook open. "Keith. The bells."

"Six," said Keith. "The third one late."

"Upton," said Chris. "St Mary Magdalene. Up the hill from Union Street. The third bell's always been late. It was late in 1976." His voice went strange again. "I used to walk past it with my mother, on the way to..." He stopped. "Somebody else used to walk past it too. With his."

Jono wrote it down.

Then he looked up, at the wall of the cellar, as if he could see through it, up the stairs and out into Union Street, along the pavement, past the empty shops, past the council notice taped in the window of an empty office with a faint grey line down its left-hand margin, to a big grey building on the corner, five storeys, with the windows boarded on the ground floor and a FOR SALE board that had been up so long the agent's name had faded off it.

Four hundred yards. Less.

"Cream gloss paint," said Jono. "On the walls. In the photograph. The DI said 1930s."

"1934," said Chris. "They painted the chamber when they built it. Nobody's painted it since."

Jono was already dialling.

* * *

Keith stayed at the end of the desk.

He put his hand back on the stone. The line was there. Hot. Crackling. The tired voice, under its breath, saying the letters over again: *T. Q. Seven. Four. One. Eight.*

And then, after it, the way a man says the last thing he knows for certain:

Jono.

Keith kept his hand there. He did not try to say anything back. You could not. That was the third rule. A nudge, not a hand. He could hear the man in the dark the way old Pengelly had heard a fault on a bucket in 1978: faint, and certain, and four hundred yards away under the street.

He could not reach him.

But he could stay on the line.

Behind him, Jono was saying into the phone, in his policeman's voice, very level, *Fleet House. Union Street. The cable chamber. Tonight, if you can. Tomorrow if you can't.* And then, after a pause, quieter: *No. I know. I know he watches it. I know.*

And Chris, on the swivel chair, with Karen's hand on his collar, holding the gas bill with the number on the back, saying to nobody, to the wall, to a boy on a playing field fifty-five years ago:

"I told him. I told him it was on all the cables. He never forgot it."

Keith sat at the end of the desk with his hand on the stone, and did not take it away, all night.

Chapter 20 – *The Whistle*

Sun. 26 Oct. 2031. Daddyhole Plain, 1.30 a.m. (the first one). A.

The DI said no.

He said it at ten o'clock on the Saturday morning, in the back room at Widecombe Cot, standing by the fireplace with his coat still on and a plastic cup of station coffee in his hand, and he said it the way Jono had once heard a surgeon say it to a family in a corridor at Torbay Hospital: kindly, and finally, and looking at the floor.

"Not today."

"He's four hundred yards away," said Jono.

"I know where he is." The DI looked up. "I've had two of mine in a flat over the bookie's on the corner of Union Street since half past midnight. Looking at Fleet House through a net curtain. They've seen nothing. Nobody in, nobody out. Not a light. Not a cat." He drank some of the coffee and made a face at it. "And that's what worries me."

"Why?"

"Because he's not stupid. Because he's been taking that man bread and water for three weeks, and he hasn't once been seen doing it, by anybody, and I've got a camera on the end of Union Street that's never caught him." The DI put the cup down on the mantelpiece. "Because he knew Carole Bayliss did the crossword at ten every night at a basement table in Cheltenham. Because he knew a woman in Singapore would take a work call at half past five. He watches, Jono. That's all he does. And I think if he sees one uniform within half a mile of that building, Eric Prowse dies in the dark before we get the door open."

Nobody in the room said anything.

"The warrant's signed," said the DI. "The building's owned by a company in Valletta, which I'm sure will surprise nobody. I've got a locksmith and an ambulance and a firearms team sitting in a car park in Newton Abbot. We go at first light tomorrow. Half past six. Quiet. Plain clothes. Chris shows us the way down." He looked at Chris. "If you still can."

"I can," said Chris.

"Then that's what we do." The DI picked up the cup again, and looked into it, and put it down. "One more night. He's lasted twenty-one. He can last one more."

He did not sound as if he believed it.

* * *

Jono stayed.

He did not go home to Preston. He did not go to the club, where the lamp was still lit in the window over the iron stairs because Jo had been up every night to switch it on. He did not ring Westminster. He sat in the back room at Widecombe Cot all afternoon, and then all evening, with his pocketbook on his knee and nothing written in it, and watched the light go off the bay.

Wendy brought him soup at seven. He ate it. She stood and watched him do it, with her stick, the way she had watched him eat since he was ten months old.

"She's been in her room all day," Wendy said.

He did not need to ask who.

"She came down for breakfast. She drank her tea." Wendy said it as if she were still not quite sure she was allowed to. "Then she went back up. She hasn't come down since." She took the bowl. "The light's been on under the door. All day. I went up at four with a

tray. I didn't knock." She stood a moment. "I could hear her. Walking. Up and down. Room 3's twelve feet across. She's walked it all day."

"Wendy," said Jono, "in eighty-one years, have you ever known her not sit still?"

Wendy thought about it, properly, the way she thought about everything.

"No," she said. And went out with the bowl.

* * *

The clocks went back that night.

Jono had forgotten. He remembered at a quarter to twelve, sitting on the bench in the hall under the barometer with the house asleep around him, when the old long-case clock at the foot of the stairs struck the three-quarters and he looked at his phone and thought: *at two it'll be one again.*

An hour that happened twice. He had always hated it. When he was on the night shift in Torquay in the nineties, the clocks going back meant an hour of paperwork you had to write twice, *01.30 (BST)* and *01.30 (GMT)*, and a sergeant who had once put a man in two places at once by getting it wrong, and lost the case.

An hour nobody could write down cleanly.

He thought about that for a long time on the bench, in the dark hall, with the clock ticking.

At ten past twelve he heard her on the stairs.

* * *

She came down the way she always came down. Light. Even. Not hurried. One hand on the rail. In the grey costume, with her dark hair up, and no coat, and no carpet bag. Nothing in her hands.

She stopped at the foot of the stairs, by the long-case clock, and looked at him on the bench.

He saw her breath. Faint. White, in the cold of the hall. He had seen it first on the night of the Clearout, three years ago, on the steps of the Town Hall, and it still went through him every time.

"Good evening, Jono," said Ania.

"Good evening."

She went past him, to the front door. She opened it. The night came in, cold, smelling of the sea and of leaves, and somewhere far down the hill, towards the harbour, a dog barking.

She stopped on the step with the door open and did not turn round.

"You may come," she said, every word the same length. "You will stay at the wall. You will not come onto the grass."

Then she went down the steps and along the path under the monkey puzzle, and the gate went, the latch and the hinge, and she was on the road.

Jono sat on the bench for perhaps three seconds.

Then he put the pocketbook in his inside pocket and got his coat off the hook and went after her.

* * *

She did not look back. She walked down through Torquay at midnight the way she walked up the path at Widecombe Cot: straight, steady, as if she were walking along a line nobody else could see. Down the hill. Past the dark terraces and the parked cars. Across Babbacombe Road. Down towards the harbour, and then not to the harbour: left, along the Parkhill road, past the big white houses above the Imperial with their curtains drawn, and up.

He kept fifty yards behind her. He did not try to hide. There was no point. She knew he was there; she had told him to come.

The dog had stopped barking somewhere behind them. Another one started, ahead, in a garden above Meadfoot. A big dog, by the sound, on a chain, barking at nothing, the way dogs did at night now, the way they had not for the whole of the autumn of 2028.

He had written that down too, three years ago. *The dogs are barking again.* Like a man writing that the swallows had come back.

The moon was low in the west, two-thirds full, going down behind the town, and the sea below the road was dark with one long silver stripe on it out towards the Ore Stone. The wind had dropped. It was very cold.

At five and twenty past one she went in at the top of Daddyhole Plain.

* * *

Jono stopped at the wall.

The old stone wall at the top of the Plain, by the car park, where the road ran out and the grass began. He stood at it with his hands on the cold stone, the way she had told him, and looked.

The Plain went away from him downhill in the last of the moonlight, rough grass and bracken and gorse, grey and silver, sloping towards the cliff edge and the sea. Far down at the end of it, the coastguard hut, small and square. And off to the left, high on the slope above the Plain, behind its garden wall, a big dark house with every window blind. Sold. Empty for three years. The Eden house.

A car in the car park behind him. One. A grey hatchback, ordinary, parked under the trees with its lights off. He had not heard it come.

And on the grass, halfway down the Plain, a man.

Standing. Hands at his sides. Waiting, the way the man at the bus stop had waited on the Friday, very still, as if he had been put there.

Jono looked at him.

He was a hundred yards away and the moon was going, but there was enough light. A shape on the grass. A dark jacket. Grey at the temples, perhaps. And the face...

It slid. The way it had slid through the glass of the front door at Widecombe Cot. He could see that there was a face. He could not, by any effort, make himself see what it was.

Scar, left cheek, under the eye. He said it to himself, Wendy's words, and looked again, and they did not help.

Ania went down the grass towards him.

* * *

She stopped two yards from him. Jono saw her stop, small and straight and grey on the silver slope, with her breath going up white.

They stood like that for a long time. Neither moving.

Then the man said something.

Jono heard it. The air was very still, and sound went up the Plain the way it goes up the side of an empty stadium. He heard the voice: pleasant, level, no accent, a voice that might have been asking the time. He heard every word of it. And as each word ended, it went, the way a wave goes back down the shingle, and he could not have said, one second later, what it had been.

Then Ania spoke, and he could hear her perfectly. Every word the same length. Like the speaking clock.

"There is no eight."

The man said something.

"There is no eight," said Ania again. "There are eight paintings and a man who painted them, and you will have none of them. You will have this."

She put out her hand.

Jono saw it. In the last of the moonlight, on her open palm, held out towards the man like something offered to a horse. Small. Pale. Curved.

The man did not take it.

He looked at it. Jono could see him look at it: the head bent, very still. A long time. The way, Jono thought, a man looks at a thing he has wanted for so long that he has stopped believing it is in the world.

Then he took it.

* * *

"It is not a whistle for calling them," said Ania.

Her voice came up the Plain, very clear.

"Charles Eden thought it was. His son thought so. His great-granddaughter thought so, on that terrace, until the night she leaned over. It is not." She did not lower her hand. "It is a whistle for telling them who to come for. When they come. And they will come. Not now. Not under this sky. But they will."

The man said something.

"I know what you will do with it," said Ania. "I have known for a very long time."

Then she said a thing that Jono did not understand, then or for many years.

"You will be very old," she said. "And you will still not be written down. And it will not save you."

The man stood with the whistle in his hand.

Then he lifted it to his mouth.

* * *

Jono did not hear it. There was nothing to hear. No note. No sound at all.

But behind him, in the garden above Meadfoot, the big dog on its chain stopped barking.

In the middle of a bark. Cut off.

And then, all across Torquay, one after another, spreading out from the Plain like rings from a stone thrown in a pond, every dog in the town stopped. Jono heard it go. A terrier in Wellswood. Something big and deep in Babbacombe. Two in a yard down by the harbour that had been going all night at the gulls. One by one, nearer and further, all of them, stopping, until there was nothing at all.

Nothing. The whole town. The whole bay. A silence like the one in the ring after a man goes down and before the count starts.

Jono stood at the wall with his hands on the stone and the hair standing up on his arms.

He waited for something to come over the cliff edge. Low and quick, like water going over a weir.

Nothing came.

The man took the whistle from his mouth and stood on the grass with it in his hand, and waited too. A long time. Looking down the Plain towards the cliff and the sea.

Nothing came.

Then, very far off, in Paignton, across the water, one dog started barking again. Then another. Then, slowly, the town came back. The terrier. The big one in Babbacombe. The dog on the chain above Meadfoot, behind Jono, suddenly and furiously, as if it had been insulted.

The man on the grass put the whistle into the inside pocket of his jacket.

* * *

"Now you will go," said Ania. "And you will not go down to him again."

The man said something. A question, by the shape.

"No," said Ania. "Nobody will follow you. Not tonight."

He turned.

He walked up the Plain towards the car park. Towards the wall. Towards Jono. Not hurrying. Ordinary. A man walking back to his car after a late walk with the dog he did not have.

He passed Jono at the wall. Six feet away. In the dark under the trees.

He did not look at him.

Jono looked at him. At the face, six feet away, in the dark. He looked with everything he had, the way he had been trained to look at faces in identity parades in 1993, the way he had looked at faces on doorsteps for twenty-five years. Eyes, nose, mouth, hairline, ears, the shape of the jaw.

He got nothing. Not one thing. It was like trying to hold water in a fist.

The hatchback's door opened and closed. The engine started, quietly, and the car went out of the car park under the trees with its

lights still off, and turned onto the road, and the lights came on at the corner, and it was gone.

Jono took his pocketbook out of his inside pocket and his pencil out of the spine, and turned towards the corner where the car had gone, and wrote.

He looked at what he had written.

It was the date.

He had meant to write the plate. He had seen the plate. He had had it, letters and numbers, white on yellow, for the second it took the car to swing past him. And he had put the pencil on the paper and written the date, and the time, and the place, the way he had written them at the top of every page for thirty-four years, and when he tried to go on, to put down the number, there was nothing there to put.

* * *

Ania came up the grass.

Slowly. Slower than he had ever seen her walk. She came up the slope towards the wall in the very last of the moon, small and grey and straight, and when she reached the wall she stopped, and put one hand on it, beside his.

Her hand was shaking.

He looked at it. A young woman's hand, on the cold stone, in the dark. Shaking. Not a lot. The way a hand shakes when it is very cold, or when somebody has done a thing they have been walking up and down a room twelve feet across all day trying not to do.

He did not say anything.

They stood at the wall together. Below them the Plain went down to the cliff, and the sea, and the long silver stripe on the water

had gone, because the moon had gone down behind the town. The dogs were barking all across Torquay as if nothing had happened.

"You may write the date," said Ania. "And the time. And the place."

"I've written them."

"Then you have written enough." She did not look at him. "Do not write what you saw."

"Why?"

She was quiet for so long that he thought she would not answer.

"Because there is a man in the dark," she said, "and in the morning there will not be. And that is the thing that must be written down. Not this."

Jono looked at the page in the light of his phone. The date, the time, the place. Nothing else.

Then, because he was a Hills, and because it was true, and because it was the only thing he could write that was not what he saw, he added one letter.

A.

He closed the book.

In his pocket his phone gave one small buzz. He took it out. It had said 1.59. It said 1.00. All across Torquay, in every phone and on every screen, it was one o'clock again, and the hour they had just stood through on Daddyhole Plain began again from the beginning, as if it had never happened at all.

Chapter 21 – *Fleet House*

Sun. 26 Oct. 2031. Fleet House, Union St, 6.31 a.m. (GMT). Yard door, locksmith, 4 min. Basement door to chamber: new brick. Mortar still soft. Up to 5. Down the riser. C.H., J., R., me. Day 23 for E.

The mortar was still soft.

Jono put his thumb into it and it gave, like cold butter, and came away grey on the ball of his thumb, and he stood in the basement corridor of Fleet House in the light of six torches and looked at it, and did not say anything for a long time.

A wall. Where the door had been. New brick, red, cheap, the kind you bought by the pallet at the builders' merchant on the Newton road, laid in a hurry, the courses not quite straight, the joints not pointed, the mortar squeezed out between them in grey lips that nobody had bothered to strike off. From the floor to the lintel. The iron door frame still there, painted cream, 1934, with the bricks laid inside it like a picture in a frame.

Behind it, Chris had said, at the top of the stairs, the door. And behind the door, seven steps down. And the chamber.

"Last night," said the DI. He had his own thumb in it, further along. "After midnight. After my two in the flat lost the light." He took his thumb out and looked at it. "Four hours, for one man who knows what he's doing. Less."

You will not go down to him again.

Jono had heard her say it. On the grass, at half past one, in an hour that had happened twice. *And you will not go down to him again.*

And the man had not. He had come here instead, in the second hour, and bricked up the way down, so that he never could, and neither could anybody else.

* * *

"How long to take it out?" said Jono.

The DI looked at the sergeant from the firearms team, a short broad woman with a hammer drill already in her hand, who looked at the wall, and put her palm flat on it, and pressed, and listened, the way Eric listened to a bag.

"Two courses thick," she said. "It's wet, so it'll come. But I don't like it." She took her hand off. "He's had all night. If I were him, and I'd gone to all the trouble of bricking a man in, I'd put something in the wall for whoever came to take it out." She looked at the DI. "I want a dog and a scope through it before I put a drill near it. Forty minutes. An hour."

"He's been down there twenty-three days," said Jono. "Keith says he's got a fever. He says the voice on the line is hot."

"I know, sir."

"And the only man who's been taking him water has just bricked himself out." Jono heard his own voice go up and could not stop it. "Nobody's going down to him now. Not today. Not ever. That's what this wall is."

"I know, sir." She did not move. "And if I go through that wall and there's something in it, he won't have any days at all. And neither will we."

Nobody said anything.

Chris said it.

He was standing at the back, at the foot of the basement stairs, with his bad hand in his coat pocket and his good hand on the rail,

in the cold, at sixty-nine, in a building he had not been inside since 1980. He had not said anything since the yard door. He had walked through the dark ground floor with his torch, past the empty racks where the switching had been, past a fire bucket with sand in it gone hard as concrete, past a notice on a door in GPO green, *NO SMOKING – BATTERY ROOM*, and he had touched the notice with his fingers as he went past, and not stopped.

"There's another way down," said Chris.

* * *

They all looked at him.

"The riser," he said. "The cable riser. It goes up through the middle of the building. Every cable that comes in under the street comes into the chamber and goes up the riser to the frames. And the riser goes all the way up. To the fifth floor. To the switchboard." He took his good hand off the rail. "There's a ladder in it. Iron rungs, set in the wall. And a hatch at the top. In the floor. Behind the last position on the switchboard. Under a mat."

"You're sure," said the DI.

"Mr Pengelly used to send me up it for the teas," said Chris. "The canteen was on the fifth. It was quicker than the stairs. Six minutes up, with a can of tea in one hand. Four down." He looked at the brick wall in its cream frame. "He'd only have known about the door. Anybody would. You'd come in from the yard and go down the stairs and there's the door, *CABLE CHAMBER – AUTHORISED PERSONS ONLY*, and that's the way in. Nobody knows about the riser who didn't work here. It's not on any plan you'd find. It's on the ones in the cupboard in the jointers' room, and the jointers' room burnt out in 1987."

The sergeant was looking at him.

"How wide?"

"Wide enough for a boy of sixteen with a can of tea," said Chris. "Not for you with that on." He nodded at her vest, her belt, the carbine across her chest. "Not for any of yours."

"Then nobody's going down it."

"I am," said Chris.

* * *

In the end it was four of them, because it was always going to be four of them, and the DI knew it, and Jono watched him know it, standing in the basement corridor with the brick wall behind him and his thumb grey with mortar.

Chris, because he knew the way.

Jono, because Eric had written his name on a wall.

Jo, because she said so. She had come in the DI's car at six with Karen, in her grey hoodie with the pads still in the pocket, and nobody had asked her to, and when the DI said *civilians stay in the yard* she had looked at him the way she looked at a man across a ring and said, *He gave me the key. He said open up for the kids if he's ever late. He's late.* And then, when the DI opened his mouth: *I can climb. I row. I'm the lightest person here. If somebody has to carry him up a ladder it's going to be me, isn't it.*

The DI had closed his mouth.

And Rani.

Rani had said nothing at all. She had been standing in the yard with her coat buttoned to the chin, looking up at Fleet House. At the five floors of it, dark, the windows on the ground floor boarded and the ones above blind with dirt, the FOR SALE board on the corner so old the agent's name had gone white. Looking at it the way she looked at things since 2028. Not at it. Above it. Through it.

"I'll know if he's alive," she said, "before you get to the bottom."

* * *

The stairs went up round a well in the middle of the building, stone, with an iron rail, and a window on each landing looking out at the yard, and every landing had a number painted on the wall in black, a foot high, in the same lettering as the notices. 1. 2. 3.

Chris went first. Slowly. Good hand on the rail, bad hand in his pocket, one step and then the next foot up to the same step, the way he had climbed since the stroke. Jono behind him. Jo behind Jono. Rani last.

Nobody spoke.

The building was very cold, and very quiet, and smelled of dust and pigeons and something under that, old, dry, electrical, that Jono did not know and that Chris, ahead of him, breathed in on the second landing and stopped, and stood with his hand on the rail and his eyes shut.

"Bakelite," said Chris. "And dust on the valves when they warmed up." He opened his eyes. "Fifty-three years. You'd think it'd go."

On the third floor they passed the frames. Through a doorway with no door, in the light of Jono's torch: a long room with iron racks in rows, floor to ceiling, like the stacks of a library, empty now, stripped, with wires hanging out of them in bunches, cut off, the ends gone green. A thousand ends. Ten thousand.

"Every phone in Torquay," said Chris, not stopping. "Every one. Came up through those. I used to stand there with a jumper wire and a test set and listen to people's calls. You weren't supposed to." The ghost of something in his voice. "Everybody did."

On the fourth floor, pigeons. A whole floor of them, roosting on the empty racks, and they went up all at once when the torch came round the door, a clatter and a storm of wings, and Jono flattened himself against the wall and heard Jo behind him say a word she had not learned at the club.

And then the fifth.

* * *

The fifth floor was one long room, the whole length of the building, with tall windows down one side, filthy, letting in the very first grey of the morning over the roofs of Union Street. And down the other side, the switchboard.

Jono had never seen one. Not a real one. He had seen pictures. Chris's book; the museum; Mrs Hellier, who had been on the board at the Imperial in 1951, describing it with her eyes shut. He had not understood how big it would be.

It went the length of the room. Twenty positions, thirty, he did not count. Each one a tall wooden panel, dark, polished once, now grey with dust, with rows and rows of small round holes in it, sockets, hundreds to a panel, and under each socket a tiny lamp behind a cap of coloured glass. And in front of each panel a shelf, with rows of cords coming up out of it, brass-tipped, in pairs, each with its little weight to pull it back down. And a high wooden stool in front of each position. Some knocked over. Most still standing, in a row, in the dust, as if the women who sat on them had got up for their tea break in 1984 and never come back.

Chris stood at the top of the stairs and looked at it.

Jono did not say anything. Jo did not. Rani came up the last step behind them and stopped.

Chris walked along the switchboard. Slowly. With his torch. Along the row of stools, past position after position, with his good hand trailing along the edge of the shelves, over the brass tips of the

cords, so that they rattled very faintly in their holes. He did not look at the lamps or the sockets. He was counting the stools.

At the eleventh, he stopped.

He put his good hand on the seat of the stool. Flat. In the dust. The way Keith put his hand on the stone.

"She sat here," he said.

He did not say who. Nobody needed him to. Downstairs in the DI's car in the yard, with Chris's spare torch and a flask of tea she had made at five o'clock in the kitchen at Brixham, Karen Tozer was waiting.

Across a canteen at Fleet House. Since 1978.

Chris took his hand off the stool, and looked at the print it had left in the dust, and went on, to the end of the room, to the last position on the board.

* * *

There was no mat. The mat had gone, long ago, rotted or thrown away. But there was the hatch. Set in the floorboards behind the last stool, square, two feet across, made of iron, with a ring let into it, flush, and the word RISER cast into the metal.

The ring was rusted down. Jo got her fingers under it and pulled, with her rower's back, her teeth together, and it came up, with a crack and a fall of rust, and the hatch came up on its hinge, very heavy, and went over, and hit the floor behind with a noise like a church door.

Under it, the dark.

Jono shone the torch down. A square shaft, brick, going down out of the light. Cables up one side of it, thick as a man's arm, lead-covered, grey, clamped to the wall in iron cleats, dozens of them,

going down side by side into the black. And on the other side, set into the brick, iron rungs. One under the other. Going down.

Cold came up out of it. A different cold. Cellar cold.

"Five floors," said Chris. "And the basement. Ninety feet, near enough." He looked down into it. "Bottom of the ladder, there's a grille. Hinged. Bolted on this side. You open it, and you're in the chamber, on the east wall, by the third bearer." He was quiet for a moment. "By the spares."

TQ 7 stroke 418. Chamber, east wall, third bearer, spare.

* * *

Rani had not come down the room with them. She was still at the far end, at the top of the stairs, standing very still, looking at the floor.

"Rani," said Jono.

She did not answer. She came down the room. Slowly. Not looking at the switchboard, not looking at them. Looking at the floor, at the boards, the way you look at water when you are trying to see a fish. And when she reached the hatch she stopped beside it and looked down into the shaft, and then she looked at Jono.

Not at his face. Above it.

"There's a cord," she said.

Her voice was very steady. It was the voice she used in the photonics lab, reading out a measurement she had taken three times.

"Coming up the shaft. Out of the dark. Up past the cables. Very thin. Thinner than I've ever seen one." She lifted her hand and followed something in the air with one finger, up out of the hatch, slowly, across the space between them. "It's going to you."

Jono stood very still.

"To your lamp," said Rani. "It goes up out of the floor and into yours. It's been going to yours since we came in the yard. I saw it from outside. Coming up out of the ground under the building." She lowered her hand. "Cords run to the person you answer to. Who you'd do anything for. Who you'd get up for."

She looked down the shaft.

"It's very faint," she said. "But it's there. If it's there, he's alive. A dead man doesn't answer to anybody."

* * *

Chris went first.

He had to. He was the only one who knew what was at the bottom. They argued, Jono and Jo, at the top of the shaft, in whispers, as if somebody might hear, and Chris listened to them for a while and then sat down on the edge of the hatch with his legs in the dark, and put his good hand on the first rung, and his bad hand, slowly, on the second, and began.

"Chris," said Jono.

"I did it with a can of tea," said Chris, from the dark, already three rungs down. "I can do it with nothing."

Jo went after him. Right after him. Two rungs above his head, with her torch in her teeth, so that the light went down past his shoulders, and every time his bad hand came off a rung and went for the next one and missed, she put her own hand down and took his wrist, and put it on the rung, and held it there until his fingers closed. Jono could hear her above the scrape of their shoes on the iron. Very quiet. Through the torch in her teeth.

There. Got it. Next one. Take your time. The count's not on you.

Eric's words. Exactly. Jono had heard them a hundred times, on his back on the canvas, looking at the strip light.

He went after them. Rani last.

Ninety feet. In the dark. In the cold coming up. With the cables going down beside him, side by side, lead, grey, cleated to the brick, and on the cables, every few yards, catching the light from Jo's torch below, little brass tags. The size of a stamp. Each with its twist of wire.

He did not stop to read them. He did not need to.

Down. Past the fourth floor, where a crack of grey light came through a gap in the brick and the pigeons were still muttering. Past the third. The second. The first. The ground. He counted the floors by the cold, which got deeper, and by the sound, which went flat and close and dead, the way sound goes in a cellar.

Below him, Chris stopped.

"Bottom," said Chris. His voice came up the shaft very quiet. "The grille."

* * *

Jono came down the last rungs and stood on a narrow ledge of concrete beside Chris and Jo, in a space the size of a telephone box, with the brick on three sides and on the fourth an iron grille, floor to ceiling, painted cream, flaking. Bars, an inch apart. A hinge on one side. On the other, two big iron bolts, shot home, rusted, on this side.

Beyond the grille, the dark.

Not dark. Jono had been in the dark. This was something else. The torchlight went through the bars and into it and did not seem to come back.

And the smell.

Jo took the torch out of her teeth.

Nobody said anything. Chris put his good hand on the top bolt. It would not move. Jo put both hands over his and they pulled together and it went, with a scream of rust that went off into the dark beyond the grille and did not come back. Then the bottom one.

Chris put his hand flat on the grille.

He stood there for a moment, at the bottom of the riser, where he had stood at sixteen with a can of tea in his hand, and a man of sixty with a face like a walnut had said to him, *mind your head, boy, and don't touch the spares.*

Then he pushed.

The grille swung in. Slowly. On its hinge. Into the chamber.

And Jono lifted his torch, and shone it in, past Chris's shoulder, along the east wall.

Cream paint. 1934. Lead cables on iron bearers, in rows, grey, going away into the dark like pipes.

And on the paint, above the cables, as far as the torch would reach, from the corner by the grille all the way along the wall into the black, in letters scratched deep, the size of a man's palm, row under row, going ragged, going small, going on:

SAT 4 OCT? TIME — ? WEATHER — DARK.

Chapter 22 – *Light*

Sun. 26 Oct. 2031. Fleet House, cable chamber, 6.52 a.m. (GMT). E. found. Alive. East wall, by the third bearer. He asked me the date, the time and the weather. I told him. Studio Ania, 9.40 a.m.: painting 7 gone.

He was nine yards from the grille.

Jono counted them afterwards, because he had to count something. Nine of his own paces along the east wall, under the lead cables on their iron bearers, with the torch on the letters going past on his left, row under row, the days, and Chris behind him breathing like a man who has run, and Jo behind Chris saying nothing at all.

The letters went ragged as he went. Big at first, the size of a palm, square, careful. SAT 4 OCT? DARK. NOTHING. BUS. Then less square. Then crowding. Names. SHANNON, in letters so big and deep that the plaster had come away in the hollows. KAI. LEE + RYAN. MUM. KETTLE. HER, very small, in a corner. And then, three times, four times, five, along the rows, wherever the man's hand had stopped at the end of a day:

JONO.

He did not stop to read it. He would read it later. He would read every line of it later, standing in that place for an hour with a borrowed lamp while the scene-of-crime officers waited at the foot of the stairs, and he would copy it out, every word, into the back of his thirty-fourth pocketbook, and it would take eleven pages.

Not now.

The torch came off the wall and down, onto the floor, onto the concrete under the lowest bearer. A chain. Heavy links, lying across the grit. He followed it with the light. Six feet of it. To a bracket at the height of his knee. And at the other end of it, a foot in a grey sock worn through at the heel, and a ring of iron round the ankle above it, and above the ring, skin that was the wrong colour.

And then the rest of him.

* * *

Eric was lying on his side with his back to the wall, the way a man lies in a hole. His knees were drawn up. His cheek was on the concrete. One arm was folded under him. The other was down behind the bottom bracket, bent back, his hand flat on the paint low on the wall, in the angle between the iron and the brick, where no torch could reach.

He did not move when the light found him.

Jono was on his knees. He did not remember getting there. He had his hand on Eric's neck under the ear, two fingers, the way he had been taught at Middlemoor in 1992, the way he had done it on pavements and in stairwells and once on the beach at Preston at four in the morning. Feeling.

Hot. The skin was hot and dry like paper left in the sun.

And under it, very fast, very light, like a moth against a window, there.

"He's alive," said Jono.

He did not know he had said it loudly. It went off down the chamber into the dark and came back off the far wall. *Alive. Alive.*

Behind him, Chris sat down on the concrete. Not carefully. His legs went, and he sat, with his back against the bearers, and put his good hand over his face.

* * *

"Don't shine it in his eyes," said Jo.

She was beside Jono. She had her hoodie off already, over her head in one movement, and she folded it and put it over Eric's face, very gently, over the eyes, the way you would put a cloth over a cage at night. Then she put the torch face down on the concrete so that the light went out sideways along the floor in a low yellow fan and did not touch him.

"Three weeks in the dark," she said. "It'll be like a knife."

Jono looked at her. At her face in the low light. Twenty-one. Calm. Her hands not shaking.

He thought, from nowhere: *I know that face. Where do I know that face from.*

It went.

Under the hoodie, Eric moved.

Not much. His mouth. The cracked lips moving, very slowly, against the grey cloth. Jono bent down until his ear was almost on the hood, the way he had bent down to Mrs Hellier in the night when she wanted to say something and her voice had gone.

It was a whisper. Less than a whisper. Breath with shapes in it.

"Date."

Jono shut his eyes.

"Time," said Eric. "Weather."

Jono put his hand on Eric's shoulder, through the shirt, which was wet, and left it there, and said it the way he had said it at the top of every page for thirty-four years, the way he had said it to Eric on the canvas in the first winter when Eric asked him what he wrote in that little black book:

"Sunday, the twenty-sixth of October. Eight minutes to seven in the morning. Dry. Cold. Getting light."

Under the grey hood, Eric's mouth moved again.

"Getting light," he said.

Then his hand, the one behind the bracket, the one flat on the wall in the place no torch had ever reached, slid off the paint, and lay on the concrete, palm up, open.

Jono took it.

* * *

They brought him up the stairs at twenty past seven.

Not the riser. The sergeant's dog had been through the basement corridor and found nothing in the brick, and the scope had found nothing behind it, and at five past seven the sergeant had put her drill to the soft new mortar and taken the wall out in eleven minutes, two courses, the bricks coming away in her hands like wet cake. And behind the wall, the iron door, cream, with a padlock on it, new, brass, that the locksmith opened in four seconds. And behind the door, seven steps down.

The paramedics came down them. Two, a man and a woman, with a scoop stretcher and a bag. Behind them, a firefighter with bolt cutters as long as his arm, who knelt on the concrete by the bracket and looked at the iron ring and then at the ankle above it and said, quietly, to nobody, *Jesus Christ*, and cut the chain, not the ring. *Leave the ring for the hospital. It's holding that together.*

Jono stayed. He held Eric's hand while they put the line in. He held it while they rolled him onto the stretcher. He held it up the seven steps and along the basement corridor and up the stone stairs to the ground floor and through the dark room with the empty racks, past the fire bucket and the BATTERY ROOM door, with Jo on the other side of the stretcher holding the hoodie over Eric's eyes.

At the yard door they stopped.

It was light outside. Not sun. A flat grey morning, overcast, the light of a Sunday in late October in Torquay, coming in through the yard door off the wet cobbles. Nothing. An ordinary grey light.

Under the hoodie, Eric's whole body went tight on the stretcher, as if somebody had hit him.

"It's all right," said Jo. "It's just morning."

She lifted the edge of the hood. A crack. An inch. So that a strip of grey light fell across his eyelids.

Eric did not open his eyes. Jono watched him not open them. He lay on the stretcher in the yard door of Fleet House with the grey of the morning on his closed eyelids, and tears came out from under them, and ran sideways into his hair.

He did not make a sound.

They carried him out into the yard.

* * *

Jono went back down.

He did not decide to. The ambulance went, with its blue light and no siren, up Union Street towards the hospital, with Jo in the back of it, and Chris standing in the yard with Karen's arms round him from behind and the flask in her hand forgotten, and Jono watched it go, and then turned round and went back in, and down the stairs, and through the door where the wall had been, and down the seven steps.

The scene-of-crime officers were waiting in their white suits. The DI was with them. He looked at Jono's face and said, "Ten minutes," and gave him a lamp, a big one, on a stand, and switched it on.

And Jono stood in the cable chamber under Fleet House in the light, and read the wall.

All of it. From SAT 4 OCT? in the corner by the grille, to the last line, the twenty-third day, which was not finished, which was only a date with a question mark and the first stroke of a letter that might have been a J. He read SHANNON, and the plaster gone in the hollows. He read KETTLE. He read STARS. He read, on the thirteenth day, WHY AM I WRITING THIS, and stood in front of it for a long time with the lamp humming.

Then he got down on the concrete, on his side, the way Eric had been lying, with his cheek in the grit, and put his arm back behind the bottom bracket, and shone his phone into the angle between the iron and the brick.

T Q 7 4 1 8 3?

Small. The size of a thumbnail. Scratched in the dark, by feel, by a man burning with fever, in the one place on the wall that a man standing with a torch at the height of his own eyes would never see.

Jono lay on the concrete with his phone in his hand and looked at it.

Write what you know, he had said, on the canvas, in the first winter. *And say what you don't.*

3?

He took out his pocketbook, and copied it, exactly, question mark and all.

* * *

The DI found him there. Lying on the floor. He did not say anything about it. He crouched down, with his knees cracking, and held something out in a clear plastic bag.

"Paramedic took this out of his shirt," he said. "Thought you'd want to see it before it goes to the lab."

A strip of tablets. Paracetamol. Eight holes in the foil, six of them empty, two still with a white tablet in. And folded round the back of the strip, held on with a bit of tape, the way chemists did when they cut a strip from a bigger pack, a printed label. Small. Typed.

MRS C. BAYLISS. PARACETAMOL 500MG. TWO TO BE TAKEN UP TO FOUR TIMES A DAY.

And under it, the name of a pharmacy on Montpellier Walk, in Cheltenham. And a date. The second of September 2031.

Jono looked at it through the plastic for a long time.

"It's from her kitchen," he said.

"Second drawer down," said the DI. "Left of the cooker. Her cleaner says that's where she kept her pills. Right above the drawer with the banner in it." He turned the bag over in his fingers. "We went through that kitchen on the seventeenth of September. Every drawer. There was a box of paracetamol in it with one strip missing. Nobody thought anything of it. Who counts paracetamol."

"He took it," said Jono. "That night. Off her drawer. While she was sitting at the table."

"Yes."

"And brought it here. And gave it to Eric. A month later."

"Yes."

Jono lay on the concrete with his cheek in the grit.

"That proves he was in her house," he said.

"It does," said the DI. "It puts him in her kitchen, at her drawer, on or after the second of September. With a dead woman's pills in his pocket, in a cellar with a kidnapped man." He stood up, slowly,

and looked down at Jono. "It doesn't prove what stopped her heart. Nothing will. Her doctor's written cardiac arrest, and the post-mortem's written cardiac arrest, and I can't put a man in a dock for standing in a kitchen." He looked at the bag in his hand. "I'll never be able to say what he did to her. I'll never even be able to say what he looks like."

He went back up the steps to the white suits.

Jono lay there a while longer, by the small writing behind the bracket.

Then he got up, and went to find out what Keith had been doing.

* * *

Keith had not moved.

Jono came down the cellar stairs at Studio Ania at twenty to ten, past the street door, which was open, which should not have been open, and he knew before he reached the bottom. He knew the way you know, walking into a room, that somebody has been in it.

Keith was at the end of the desk with his hand on the stone. Where he had been when Jono left at six. Where, Clifford said afterwards, he had been all night, and would not eat, and would not take his hand off, and would not talk.

He looked up when Jono came in. His face was grey. Older than Jono had ever seen it, older than thirty, older than anything.

"Is he out?" said Keith.

"He's out. He's in Torbay. He's alive."

Keith shut his eyes.

Then he took his hand off the stone, for the first time since Friday night, and put it in his lap, and looked at it, and it was shaking.

"It went quiet," he said. "On the line. At eight minutes to seven. It went quiet, and then warm. Not hot. Warm." He did not look up. "I thought he'd died. I didn't take my hand off. I thought if I took my hand off and he'd died, I'd never know where. I sat here." He looked at the shaking hand. "And then he came down the stairs."

Jono turned round.

The shelves along the back wall. The archive. The eleven boxes from Avonmouth, and beside them, leaning against the wall, the eight paintings, in their pine crates with the fronts off, the way Rani had left them a month ago so she could read the cords.

Seven crates.

The gap was at the end. Between Angie's yellow and orange and the man's face at the end of the row. A pale rectangle on the wall behind, where the dust had not settled. Where a crate had stood for a month and now did not.

Seven. Two eyes, crying, with one amber tear under the left.

In painting seven, Ania has a lamp.

* * *

"He came at five to seven," said Keith. "While you were all in there. He knew you would be. He knew everybody would be in there, and nobody would be here, except me." His voice was very level. "And he knew I wouldn't take my hand off."

"You saw him."

"I saw him. He came down the stairs and walked across the cellar and stood there, by the crates, and looked at them. All of them. For a long time. Then he picked up seven. Crate and all. And he looked at me. And he went back up the stairs."

"And you didn't..."

"Eric was on the line," said Keith. "Eric was going quiet. If I'd taken my hand off, I'd have lost him. I'd have lost the line. And I couldn't." He looked up at Jono for the first time. "A nudge. Not a hand. I had my hand on the only thing I could reach. I kept it there. I let him take the painting."

Jono did not say anything for a long time.

Then he took out his pocketbook, and his pencil, and sat down on Chris's old swivel chair, and opened it to a clean page.

"Tell me what he looked like," he said.

Keith told him.

Keith had been closer than anybody. Six feet. In the light of the desk lamp, in a cellar, for two minutes. He had a mind that had been trained in a white room in 2057 to remember everything that was written, and he told Jono everything he had seen: the height, the build, the jacket, the hands, the way the man stood, the way he bent to lift the crate. He told it slowly and carefully, the way Jono would have told it to a sergeant in 1993.

And Jono wrote it down.

He wrote it all. Line after line. He felt the pencil moving. He felt the words come out of Keith's mouth and go down his arm and into the pencil and onto the page. And when Keith stopped, and Jono looked down at the page, it was the date, and the time, and the place. And under them, in his own square capitals:

PAINTING 7 TAKEN. MAN.

That was all.

He read it three times.

Then he turned the page back, to Friday the seventeenth, to the line he had written at five to four in the hall at Widecombe Cot, from Wendy's words. *Scar, left cheek, under the eye. Grey at the*

sides. Fifty. Thin mouth. Still there. He could read it. And he still could not, by any effort, see the face it described.

Jono closed the book.

"I can't write him down," he said.

"No," said Keith. "Nobody can. That's what he's for."

He looked at the gap on the shelf, between the orange and the man's face. The only picture in the world of Ania with a lamp.

"And now he's got her," said Keith, "and the whistle. And twenty-six years."

Chapter 23 – *Nights*

Sun. 26 Oct. 2031. Torbay Hospital, side room 4 off the high-dependency unit, 11.40 p.m. E.'s own lamp, brought from the flat by J. at 10. Light on. He asked me to read him the wall. I read it.

The first thing Jono did was ask them to leave the light on, and the first thing they did was turn it off.

Not unkindly. It was twenty to twelve at night on a high-dependency unit, and the nurse was a young man from Kerala with tired eyes and very gentle hands who had been on since seven and had four other patients, and the rule on the unit was that at eleven the big lights went down so that people could sleep. He came into side room 4 on his round, late, and checked the drip and the monitor and wrote on the chart, and smiled at Jono in the chair, and on his way out he put his hand on the switch by the door, the way he had put his hand on it every night for three years, and the room went dim. Not dark. The monitor glowing green. The light from the corridor through the glass panel in the door. The orange of the car park through the blind.

Jono said, "Could you..."

Then Eric sat up in bed.

* * *

He sat up the way a man sits up when somebody has thrown cold water on him. All at once. The drip line snapped tight against the tape on the back of his hand and the stand rocked and the monitor began to shout. And he did not look at the monitor, or the nurse, or Jono. He turned, on the bed, in the dim, with his hospital gown twisted round him and the dressing on his ankle the size of a boot, and put his hand out flat to the wall behind the bed.

The wall. Feeling for it. Fingers spread. Moving across the smooth hospital paint, left, right, up, down, fast, the way a man feels in the dark for a light switch in a house he does not know.

Looking for the letters.

"Light," said Jono. He was already up. "Please. The light."

The nurse put it back on.

Eric's hand stopped on the wall. He knelt on the bed with his palm flat on the smooth paint and his eyes screwed shut against the light, breathing in short hard pulls, and Jono stood by the bed with one hand on the rail and did not touch him.

He had done this before. Not with Eric. With a man called Sidney in a bungalow in Roundham, who had been at Monte Cassino and woke every night at three thinking he was there. With Mrs Hellier, who woke sometimes thinking it was 1944 and the planes were coming in over Goodrington. You did not grab. You did not say *it's all right*, because it was not all right, not for them, not yet. You stood where they could see you when they opened their eyes, and you waited, and you said who you were.

"Eric," he said. "It's Jono. You're in Torbay Hospital. It's Sunday. Twenty to midnight. The light's on."

Eric's hand stayed on the wall.

"It's on," said Jono. "I'll keep it on."

* * *

The nurse was very good about it. He said, quietly, at the door, that it was against the rules and that his sister was a nurse in Kozhikode and had looked after men who came home from the Gulf in 1991, and that he would see about it. He came back ten minutes later with the night sister, a big Devon woman of about sixty with reading glasses on a chain, who looked at Eric kneeling on the bed

with his hand on the wall and his eyes shut, and then at Jono, and said:

"You're the MP."

"Yes."

"You were a carer. Before."

"Yes."

"Thought so. You stand like one." She looked at Eric again for a long time. "Light stays on in here. I'll put it on the board. Anybody turns it off, they answer to me." She went to the door. "And get him to lie down before he pulls that line out of his hand. Took us three goes to get it in."

Eric lay down.

Not because she said so. Because his arm gave out. He came down off his knees onto his side, slowly, the way he had lain in the chamber, with his back to the wall and his face to the room. His hand stayed up behind him, flat on the paint.

Jono sat down in the chair.

And at ten o'clock, though it seemed now like the night before, Jo had come in with a carrier bag from the club and taken out of it, very carefully, wrapped in a towel, a brass lamp with a green glass shade.

* * *

She had gone to the flat. She had the key on its green string. She had gone up the iron stairs at nine o'clock, after a whole day at the hospital and the club and the hospital again, and let herself in, and stood in the middle of the room the way Jono had stood in it three weeks ago. The four tacks. The pale rectangle on the wall where the painting had been. The bed with its hospital corners.

The lamp in the window. Still on. Twenty-three nights it had been on, with nobody in the room, because she had gone up every night at dusk and checked.

She had switched it off. And unplugged it. And wrapped it in the towel from the hook on the back of the door.

"I didn't know if I should," she said, in the door of side room 4, holding it. "It's the only thing he's got that's... I didn't know if he'd want it moved."

"He'd want it here," said Jono.

She had found the socket by the bed, behind the locker. She had put the lamp on the locker, where Eric would see it if he turned his head. She had switched it on. And the green glass shade had lit up, the colour of the sea off Berry Head on a summer evening, and the light had come down out of it in a warm yellow pool on the locker top, the way it came down every night on the windowsill over the street in Ellacombe.

Then she had sat down in the other chair for an hour and not said anything, and at a quarter past eleven, when the nurse came round, she had stood up and touched Eric's hand on the cover once, very lightly, with two fingers, and gone home.

Now Eric opened his eyes, a crack, against the light, and saw it.

Jono watched him see it.

He did not say anything. He looked at the lamp on the locker, the green shade, the yellow light, for a long time. His hand behind him on the wall did not move.

Then, slowly, it came off the paint, and came round, and down, and lay on the cover, open.

* * *

He did not sleep. Not for a long time. He lay on his side with his eyes half open, looking at the lamp, and every so often his whole body went tight on the bed, the way it had in the yard door, and Jono would say, quietly, "It's on," and it would go loose again.

Jono sat in the chair. It was the kind of chair they had in every hospital in England, high-backed, wipe-clean, vinyl the colour of weak tea, built for sitting in for an hour and not for a night. He had sat in a hundred of them. He knew how to do it. Back straight, feet flat, coat folded on the floor by the leg of the chair where you could find it in the dark. Don't look at your phone, because the light from it is the wrong light and they can see it. Don't sleep, not properly, not before four. Breathe slow, so that they can hear you breathing slow.

You were not there to do anything. That was the thing nobody told you when you started. You were not there to fix it. You were there so that when they woke, the first thing they knew was that somebody was in the room.

He had learned that from Sidney. In 2019. Sidney had woken at three in the morning shouting about the monastery, and Jono, twelve days into the job, had tried to talk him out of it, tried to tell him where he was, tried to make it better. And Sidney had looked at him, a long, clear, ninety-four-year-old look, and said: *Son. Just sit there. That's all I want. Just be sat there.*

So he sat there.

* * *

At half past twelve, Eric said, "Did they find it?"

His voice was a rasp. Three weeks of nothing but bread and his own whispering. Jono had to lean in.

"Find what?"

"The wall."

Jono looked at him. Eric's eyes were open now, a little more, looking not at the lamp but at Jono.

"Yes," said Jono.

"All of it?"

"All of it." He put his hand on his inside pocket, over the pocketbook. "I copied it. Every line. It took eleven pages."

Eric looked at him for a long time.

"Read it me," he said.

* * *

So Jono read it.

He took out the pocketbook and turned to the back, to the eleven pages, in his own square capitals, and held it under the lamp on the locker, in the yellow light, and read it, from the beginning, in the voice he used for reading to Mrs Hellier on Sunday afternoons. Not loud. Not slow. Just steady. One line after another.

"*Saturday, fourth of October, question mark. Time, dash, question mark. Weather, dark. Saw, nothing. Heard, bus.*"

Eric shut his eyes.

Jono went on. The second day. The third. DOOR. TORCH. WATER. BREAD. NOBODY SPOKE. The fifth day, with the flash, and the paper he could not read. He read them all. He read SHANNON and KAI and LEE + RYAN. He read MUM, and then, under it, KETTLE, and Eric's mouth moved at that, very slightly, and he said, with his eyes shut, "She never asked. Not once. Just put it on."

Jono waited. Then he went on.

He read BELLS SUN — CHURCH. He read STARS. He read the tag. He read WHY AM I WRITING THIS, and stopped, because Eric had opened his eyes.

"Why was I?" said Eric.

Jono closed the book on his finger.

"You told me once," he said. "In the first winter. On the canvas. You asked me what I wrote in this, every night, and I said the date and the time and the weather, and what you saw and what you were told. And you asked me why." He looked at the lamp. "I said, because one day somebody'll need to know. And you won't be there to tell them. And the book will."

Eric did not say anything.

"Somebody needed to know," said Jono. "We needed to know. And you weren't there to tell us. And the wall was."

He opened the book again. He turned to the very last page of the eleven, and read what was on it, slowly.

"*T. Q. Seven. Four. One. Eight. Three, question mark.*"

He looked up.

"That's how we found you," he said. "That. Behind the bracket. Keith heard it. Chris knew it. He wrote it himself, in 1978, in a book, when he was sixteen. *TQ 7 stroke 418.* You put a question mark on the three." He shut the book. "It was an eight."

* * *

Eric lay very still on the bed.

Then something happened to his face that Jono had never seen happen to it. Not in three years in the ring, not on the iron stairs, not at Bailey's with the orange juice by the fire door. It came apart. Very slowly. From the mouth outwards. The way the ice comes off the bay at the end of a hard winter, in pieces, and you can see the water under it, moving.

He did not cry. He had cried in the yard door, at the light, and that had been a different thing. This was not crying. This was a man

of sixty-nine lying in a hospital bed in the light of his own lamp, being told that the thing he had done in the dark, the stupid thing, the thing he had done because a boy on the canvas had once told him to, had worked.

"Shannon," he said. "Did she..."

"Jo took her," said Jono. "On the fourteenth. In Kai's mum's car. To the regionals at Plymouth." He paused. "Silver. She lost the final on a split decision. She says the judge was blind. Jo says the judge was right and Shannon dropped her left in the third."

Eric's mouth moved.

"She always drops her left."

"That's what Jo said."

"Kai."

"Kai's been at the club every night. With Jo. He rang your phone eleven times in the first week. It rang out every time. Wherever it was." Jono looked at the lamp. "He's not done anything stupid. He said you told him to ring before, not after. He said he kept ringing so it'd be before."

Eric shut his eyes.

He lay there for a long time. His hand on the cover moved, once, and then lay still.

"Lee and Ryan," he said, very quietly, almost asleep.

"Lee hit the pads with his eyes open on Thursday," said Jono. "Jo says. First time."

But Eric was asleep.

* * *

Jono sat in the chair in the light of the lamp.

He did not sleep. He sat as he had sat with Sidney, and with Mrs Hellier, and with a woman on the Foxhole estate whose name he had written in his book and would never forget, who had died at four in the morning on a Tuesday in 2020 with her hand in his because there was nobody else. Back straight. Feet flat. Breathing slow so that Eric could hear him breathing slow.

The monitor glowed. The drip ticked. Out in the corridor, somebody walked past in soft shoes, and stopped at the glass panel, and looked in at the room with its light on against the rules, and went on.

At ten to one Eric woke again. All at once. Tight on the bed.

"It's on," said Jono.

Eric's eyes found the lamp. He breathed. He went loose.

Then he said, not to Jono, to the lamp, in the rasp that was all he had:

"She was there."

Jono did not move.

"On the wall. HER. I wrote it. You read it." Eric was looking at the green glass. "You never asked who."

"No."

"The woman at Bailey's. The singer. In the grey." His voice was very low. "She's the one. On the mountain. In '82. In the hole. She sat down on the rim of it and told me not to go to sleep. And I didn't." His eyes moved, slowly, to Jono. "Forty-nine years. Same face. Same everything. She looked at me down the bar at Bailey's for the whole of the second verse, and I went home, and I couldn't lie down, and a man knocked on my door at half past twelve and said *she's asked for you*."

Jono sat in the vinyl chair with his hands on his knees.

"Is she real?" said Eric. "I need to know. If I'm going mad, I need to know."

Jono thought about the little table in the bay window at Widecombe Cot. A cup of tea, half drunk. One grey hair, above the left temple. A young woman's hand on a cold wall above Daddyhole Plain, shaking.

"She's real," he said.

Eric looked at him for a long time.

Then he nodded, once, very slightly, against the pillow. As if that was the answer to something he had been asking for forty-nine years. And shut his eyes. And slept.

* * *

Jono took out the pocketbook.

He wrote the date at the top of a clean page. The time. The place. *Sun. 26 Oct. 2031. Torbay Hospital, side room 4. 12.55 a.m.* Then he looked at it, and crossed out *Sun.*, and wrote *Mon. 27 Oct.*, because it was after midnight, and Monday, and in the morning, at a quarter past ten, there was a train.

He wrote what Eric had said. Every word. *She's the one. On the mountain. In '82.*

Then he sat and looked at it under the lamp.

She knew.

He did not write that. He only thought it. He sat in the chair in the light, with the book open on his knee, and thought it, and turned it over, the way she had turned the whistle over on the white cloth at the little table three years ago.

She knew where he was. She knew who he was. She knew in 1982 and she knew on the third of October at Bailey's and she knew for twenty-three days.

Out in the corridor, at the far end, by the lifts, the doors opened with a soft chime.

Footsteps. Uneven. One step, and then the other foot up to meet it, and then the next, the way a man walks who has had a stroke and has learned to walk again and does it carefully, at one in the morning, along a hospital corridor, with something under his arm.

Jono knew the walk. He did not need to look.

He closed the book.

The door of side room 4 opened, and Chris came in out of the corridor, with his bad hand in his pocket and a flat parcel wrapped in brown paper under his good arm, and stood just inside the door in the light of Eric's lamp, and looked at the man asleep in the bed.

"Karen said you'd be here all night," said Chris quietly. "I thought you'd want company." He looked at the parcel under his arm. "And I thought he ought to know. About the faces. Before he wakes up and asks."

Chapter 24 – *1994*

Mon. 27 Oct. 2031. Torbay Hospital, side room 4, 1.05 a.m. C.H. came with painting 8. Talked till 4.10. E. awake for all of it.

Chris unwrapped it on the end of the bed.

He did it with one hand, because the other would not, and it took a long time. The brown paper. The string, which Karen had tied, in a bow, at the kitchen table at Brixham at midnight, while he sat across from her and tried to say why he had to go to the hospital at one in the morning with a painting, and could not, and she had said *I know, love* and tied the string. The grey army blanket under the paper, Eric's own, the one Eric had carried it down the cellar stairs in a month ago.

Then the canvas. Face up. On the white hospital cover. Over Eric's feet.

The face.

Eric was awake. He had woken when the door opened. He lay on his side with his head on the pillow and the green lamp on the locker behind him and looked down the length of the bed at the thing lying across his feet, and did not say anything.

Jono, in the vinyl chair, did not say anything either. He had his pocketbook in his hand. Chris saw him look at it, and look at the painting, and look at Eric. And put the book in his inside pocket, and do up the button.

* * *

"You said you'd want it back," said Chris.

"I did." Eric's voice was a rasp. "Didn't think I'd be in a bed when I got it."

"No."

Chris sat down on the other chair. The one Jo had sat in. He put his bad hand in his lap and his good hand on the edge of the bed, near the canvas, not touching it.

Somebody walked past in the corridor. The drip ticked. The monitor showed its green line going over its small hills, very steadily, a hundred and four times a minute, and then, as Chris watched, a hundred and one.

"I told you in the cellar I wouldn't tell you how," said Chris. "I told everybody."

"You did."

"I've been sitting at Karen's kitchen table since nine o'clock," said Chris. "Looking at it. Thinking about you on that wall for twenty-three days, writing it all down so somebody would know. And me, for thirty-seven years, standing on a tile over the top of this so nobody ever would." He looked at the dark on the white cover. "I'm going to tell you. Now. Out loud. Once." He did not look at Jono. "And nobody's going to write it down."

In the vinyl chair, Jono sat with his hand flat on the button of his inside pocket.

"Nobody," he said.

* * *

"I was thirty-two," said Chris.

He said it to the painting. He found it was easier.

"I'd been out there a year. Engineering. Cables, mostly. Undersea ones. You'd go out on a ship for three weeks and come back and sleep for two days. I had a room in Joo Chiat. Above a shop that sold incense and paper offerings for the dead. Gold paper houses. Paper cars. Paper money for the bank of hell. An old couple

ran it, Mr and Mrs Lim, and he shouted at everybody and she fed everybody. The whole house smelled of joss sticks. Your clothes smelled of it. Your sheets. You'd go out on a ship for three weeks and come back and open your bag and the smell of the room would come out of it, three weeks old.

"One room. A bed. A fan in the ceiling going round. A window onto the five-foot way, with shutters, and the rain coming down on the tin roof over the back at four in the morning like somebody throwing gravel.

"And in September, she came back."

He did not say who. Eric did not ask.

"I hadn't seen her in eight years. Not since..." He stopped. "Not for eight years. And one evening in September I came home off a ship, up the stairs, with my bag, and she was sitting on the end of my bed. In the room above the incense shop. With her hands in her lap. As if she'd been there all along, as if I'd just gone out for cigarettes." He breathed. "And Mrs Lim had given her a bowl of laksa, and called her *anak*. Daughter. Mrs Lim never called anybody anything."

He did not say any more about that. He did not need to.

"She took the room next door. There was a door between. It didn't lock. And she stayed till the spring." He was quiet for a moment. "I used to lie awake and listen to her sleeping. Through the door. I'd lie there with the fan going round and listen. I never heard her once. Not a breath. Not the bed creak. Nothing. I used to think, she sleeps like a cat. Like something that's learned not to make a sound."

He looked at the painting.

"I found out on Friday that she doesn't sleep," he said. "Not really. Not the way we do. Clifford's got a file on her. Twenty years of people watching windows. Nobody's ever once seen her light go

off." He almost laughed. "Thirty-seven years. She was lying on the other side of that door every night, awake. Listening to me."

* * *

"I couldn't sleep either," said Chris. "That's how it started."

He leaned back in the chair.

"October. Three in the morning. Hot. The fan going round and doing nothing. And her on the other side of the door. And I got up and went out, down the stairs, past the shop with all the paper houses in the dark, out onto the five-foot way. I just wanted air. And I stood there. In my shorts. On the tiles. With the rain stopped and the street steaming."

He stopped.

"And there was a woman across the road."

Jono, in the chair, went very still.

"On the other five-foot way. Opposite. Under the arch of a shophouse, in the dark. Standing. Very straight. Looking up at my window." Chris did not look at Jono. "In grey. I could see that. A grey costume. A skirt and a jacket. At three in the morning, in Joo Chiat, in October, in a hundred per cent humidity. Dark hair, up. She didn't look at me. She was looking at the window. My window. Where I'd been lying."

"And then she went," said Chris. "Not walked. I didn't see her walk. I looked at the window, and I looked back, and there was nobody under the arch."

He was quiet.

"I knew her," he said. "I'd known her all my life. I'd seen her every October at the desk at Widecombe Cot since before I could talk. I'd sat on the stairs at six years old and watched her go up to Room 3 with her carpet bag. And I stood on the five-foot way in

Singapore and told myself I didn't. I told myself it was a woman waiting for a taxi." He shook his head, slowly. "That was the first tile."

* * *

"The next day I went to a shop on Bras Basah Road," said Chris. "An art shop. Near the Catholic church. I'd never painted anything. Never. Not at school, not ever. I went in and I bought eight canvases. I don't know why eight. I asked for eight, and the man got them down, and I didn't think about it. Eight canvases, a set of oils, a palette knife and a bottle of turps. I carried them home on the bus."

A photographed receipt, Chris thought, *in a file in Cheltenham*. Carole had never seen it. Somebody else had.

He did not say that.

"I didn't have brushes. I didn't buy brushes. I don't know why. I had the knife. And that night, at three in the morning, with the fan going round and her on the other side of the door, I got up and put a canvas on the chair against the wall and squeezed out the paint onto a plate from the kitchen downstairs. And I didn't know what I was doing. I just put it on. With the knife. Thick. In ridges. Like plastering a wall."

He looked at his good hand on the edge of the bed.

"The first night I took the smallest one," he said. "There was one smaller than the others. The man had put it in with the rest, I don't know why. I put it on the chair sideways, long ways, like a photograph. And I put a face on it. A woman. Smiling." He swallowed. "It was the easiest thing in the world. It just came off the knife. I finished it at half past five, when the light came, and I looked at it and thought, I know her. And I didn't let myself know who."

He stopped.

"Sue," he said. "In London. Who smiled at me every morning for a year across a kitchen table in Highbury, and then took all the colour with her when she went. I painted her small. She always made herself small."

Nobody said anything.

* * *

"Every night after that," said Chris. "Eight nights. Not in a row. When I couldn't sleep. When I'd got up and gone down and stood on the five-foot way and looked across at the arch, and there'd be nobody there, and I'd go back up. One a night.

"A woman in a dress. The whole woman, standing up, in a dress with every colour on the plate in it, reds and oranges and greens and a yellow like a lemon, all shouting at once." He almost smiled. "Debbie. On a stage in Camden with a guitar round her neck. Debbie would have liked that one. She'd have said it wasn't loud enough.

"Orange and black. A tunnel. Going away. Tiles, and lamps on the walls, orange, one after another, getting smaller. And right at the end of it, a long way down, very small, a face." He did not look at the door that did not lock, thirty-seven years and seven thousand miles away. "The old tunnel under the Elbe, in Hamburg. I walked through it with her once, in January. I painted her at the far end of it. Listening. I painted her with her listening."

Eric was watching him now. Not the painting. Chris.

"The fourth." He stopped. "A jug. A plain cream jug, the kind they make in the Potteries, and a face drawn on the side of it, the way a child draws on a jug. With two great round eyes." He held up his good finger and thumb in a circle. "Like a girl who wore glasses. Who sat on a fire escape at dawn in Stafford in 1981 and looked at me and said I wasn't nothing." His voice did a thing. He waited for it to stop. "And a tear. One. Coming down from under the glasses. I

don't know why I put the tear. I'd never once seen her cry. She cried on the train, I think. In the snow. With her hand on the window. I wasn't looking."

* * *

"The fifth one was the sea."

He looked at his good hand on the edge of the bed.

"Red and green. Not the colours the sea is. The colours it is inside you when you've been away from it a year. Green, and red-brown, like hair blowing. And white going across all of it, streaks of it, from one side to the other, with the knife on its edge. Wind. The wind on Berry Head at the top of the lighthouse steps. And in the middle of it all, two eyes, looking at me." He swallowed. "I finished it at half past five, and I looked at it and thought, that's the sea. That's home. I'm homesick."

He stopped.

"It was Karen," he said. "On the platform at Torquay. 1980. With her hand on my collar. The day I went."

Nobody said anything.

"Yellow and orange. All of it. Like the inside of a kiln when they open the door. And a face in the middle of it with green eyes and yellow ones, the yellow of the fire coming through." He breathed. "Angie. In Burslem. Standing in the door of a bottle kiln at sunset. Crying at a churchyard gate before she knew I'd turned round."

* * *

"Then the seventh."

He stopped for a long time.

"I knew what that one was before I started," said Chris. "I'd been down to the five-foot way, and there was nobody under the

arch, and I came up the stairs, and I stood in the door of my room, and I knew. And I didn't want to." He looked at the ceiling. "I didn't paint a face. I couldn't. I painted two eyes. Just the eyes. Very still. The way she looks at you across the desk at Widecombe Cot. Clear. Steady. And under them, coming down, tears. Both eyes. Crying." He shook his head slowly. "She doesn't cry. Nobody has ever seen her cry. Not Wendy. Not Jack. And I sat in that room and painted her crying, and I couldn't stop the knife doing it.

"And then, under the left one, I put one more."

He held up his good thumb and finger, a little apart.

"That big. Amber. Not like the others. Like a light. Like a little lamp on a switchboard, at Fleet House, on the fifth floor, in 1978, lit, waiting for somebody to answer it." He lowered his hand. "I thought it was a tear. I told myself it was a tear. I'd never seen anything over her head. Nobody had. Nobody ever saw anything over anybody's head till 2028. And I put a lamp on her face. In 1994. And then I sat on the bed and looked at it till it got light, and I was more frightened than I've ever been in my life."

"Rani says it's got a cord," said Jono quietly. "Going to eight."

"I know."

"And the Fixer's got it now."

"I know." Chris looked at the canvas across Eric's feet. "That's why I'm telling you. Because he's got her. And he can't write her down any more than he can be written. And it's the only picture in the world of her with a light. And I'm the only man who knows how it got there." He looked at Eric. "So somebody else ought to."

* * *

"And then this one," said Chris.

He put his good hand, at last, on the canvas. On the edge of it.

"November. The last night. She'd gone out. The only night she ever went out. She didn't say where. And I sat in the room on my own with the fan going round and the last canvas on the chair, and I didn't know what to put on it. I'd done six women I'd loved and one I was frightened of. There wasn't anybody else."

He moved his hand across the painting. Slowly. Not touching the paint. An inch above it.

"So I painted a man. I didn't decide to. The knife did it. Ochre and brown and a grey-blue in the shadows. Close. Filling the canvas. A long jaw. Deep eyes, a bit too far apart. All night. I didn't stop. I couldn't. It was the only one I couldn't stop. And somewhere around five, when the rain came on the tin roof, I put the knife down and looked at it."

The monitor ticked. A hundred.

"It was a Harvey," said Chris. "Any fool could see that. My father's jaw. My grandfather's eyes, in the photographs. Young. Looking out. Not frightened. Very tired. Like a man who's come a very long way, and isn't there yet, and knows he isn't."

He took his hand off the canvas.

"I thought it was me," he said. "For thirty-seven years I told myself it was me. A self-portrait. A man of thirty-two in a room above an incense shop, with a woman listening through a door." He looked at Eric. "And then one night on Boat Quay a Marine with a broken nose sat down next to me at the bar, and we got talking, and I said I'd been painting, and I took him back to the room to show him. And he stood in front of this one and said—"

"*I do*," said Eric.

* * *

Chris looked at him.

Eric was lying very still on his side, with the green lamp behind him and the painting across his feet. His eyes were open. He was looking at the face. The young man's face, with the old eyes.

"You said, *It's not for sale. I don't know who it is*," said Eric. "And I said, *I do*."

"Who did you think it was?"

Eric did not answer for a long time.

"Me," he said. "Nineteen. In the hole. On the mountain. With the stars going soft. Waiting for somebody to sit down on the rim." He breathed. "Not the face. I knew it wasn't my face. The eyes. That's how my eyes were. I'd never seen anybody get it before. And it was. It's me. It's always been me. I've looked at it every night for thirty-three years and it's me."

"Rani says it's Keith," said Chris.

"It's him as well," said Eric. "I saw it in the cellar. When I brought it down. I looked at him and I looked at it." He shut his eyes. "It's both. It's anybody. It's what it looks like from the inside. When you're in the dark and you've been there a long time and you don't know if anybody's coming."

Chris did not say anything.

"You painted that," said Eric. "In 1994. A man waiting for it to get light. Thirty-seven years before I was in the dark." He opened his eyes. "You didn't know who for. Did you."

"No," said Chris.

"Now you do."

* * *

Nobody said anything after that, for a long time.

The rain came on, outside. Chris heard it on the glass of the window behind the blind. Not on a tin roof. On a window, in

Torquay, at three in the morning, in the autumn of 2031. Soft. Steady.

At some point, he did not know when, Eric fell asleep. With his eyes half open, the way he slept, facing the painting. His hand had come down off the cover and lay on the edge of the canvas. On the paint. Flat. The way it had lain on the wall.

Chris looked across the bed at Jono.

Jono was sitting in the vinyl chair with his back straight and his feet flat. His hand was still on the button of his inside pocket. It had been there, Chris realised, the whole time. Two hours. Holding it shut.

"Thirty-four years," said Chris quietly. "You've never once not written it down."

"No."

"Will you remember it?"

Jono looked at the painting. At Eric's hand on it. At the green lamp.

"I'll remember it," he said. "I'll remember it the way you remember a thing somebody tells you at three in the morning in a hospital. Wrong. In bits. Different every time." He was quiet. "That's what it's for. Isn't it. That's why. So that nobody can go back to it. Not him. Not anybody. Not from anywhere."

Chris looked at him.

"Only what was written can be reached," said Jono. "Keith told me that. In 2028." He took his hand off his pocket at last, and put it on his knee. "So I didn't write it."

Outside, the rain kept on.

Chris sat in Jo's chair beside the bed in the light of Eric's lamp, with the painting across Eric's feet, and found that for the first time

in thirty-seven years there was nothing under the tile. He had taken it up. It was empty. He had told it, once, out loud, in a room with the light on, to the man it belonged to.

Nobody would ever be able to read it.

At ten past four he got up, and put the grey army blanket over Eric's shoulders, and went home to Brixham in the rain.

Chapter 25 – *You Knew*

Mon. 27 Oct. 2031. Widecombe Cot, the dining room, 7.40 a.m. Sat down at A.'s table. Nobody ever has. Said it. She answered. W.H. in the doorway throughout.

Nobody sat at the little table in the bay window.

It was not a rule. Nobody had ever written it down. There was no card on it saying RESERVED, the way there was a brass plate on the window table at Bailey's now for Keith. It was a small round table with a white cloth and one chair, and the chair faced the bay, and in October a young woman in grey sat in it with her back to the room, and the rest of the year nobody sat in it at all. Guests did not. Wendy did not. Chris, at six, had once climbed onto it to look at the boats, and Wendy had lifted him off it by the back of his jersey without a word, and he had never done it again.

Jono had been coming to Widecombe Cot since he was ten months old. He had never once crossed the dining room to that table.

At twenty to eight on Monday morning, he did.

* * *

He had come straight from the hospital. He had left at seven, when Jo came in with two coffees and a bacon roll and her hair still wet from the shower, and sat down in the chair Chris had sat in, and looked at Eric asleep with his hand on the painting, and looked at Jono, and said, *Go home. You look like death. I've got him.*

He had not gone home. He had walked. Down from the hospital, through Shiphay, through the back of Torre, in the grey early light, with the rain stopped and the gutters running, and up the

hill. He had not slept. He did not feel it. He felt as though something in him had been taken out and cleaned and put back very tight.

She's the one. On the mountain. In '82.

He came in at the front door at half past seven. Wendy was at the desk. She looked up at him over her glasses, and looked at his face, and did not say good morning.

"She's in there," Wendy said. "She's had her tea."

Then, as he went past the desk towards the dining room, she got up. Slowly. With her stick. And followed him down the passage, and stopped in the doorway of the dining room, with her hand on the frame, where she had stood every October morning for eighty-one years to watch the steam go up from a cup that nobody drank.

She did not come in. She did not go away.

* * *

Ania was at the table, with her back to the room and her face to the bay.

The cup in front of her was empty. Not half. Empty. On its saucer, square. The big brown pot beside it with the cosy on.

She did not turn round when he came in. She never did. She sat very straight with her hands in her lap, looking at the sea, which was grey and flat this morning, with a long bar of light lying on it out towards Berry Head where the cloud had come apart. The grey hair above her left temple caught the light from the window.

Jono walked across the dining room.

He did not hurry. He walked the way he had walked up to doors on the Foxhole estate at two in the morning, knowing what was on the other side: steadily, so that whoever was behind the door could hear him coming and know he was not going to stop. Past the

long table where the guests ate. Past the sideboard. Past the barometer through the door to the hall.

He stopped beside the little table.

There was only one chair. He looked at it. She was in it.

He went back to the long table and picked up a chair, an ordinary dining chair, and carried it across the room, and put it down on the other side of the little round table, facing her. Between her and the window. Between her and the bay.

In the doorway, Wendy made a small sound.

Jono sat down.

* * *

Ania looked at him.

He had never sat this close to her. Not in his life. He had stood behind her on the steps of the Town Hall, and beside her at the wall above Daddyhole Plain, and at the back of the bar at Bailey's while she sang. He had never sat across a table from her and had her look at him, at his face, with nothing between them but a white cloth and an empty cup.

A young woman of about twenty-five. Dark hair. Clear steady eyes. Neither pretty nor plain.

Not one line on her face. One grey hair.

He did not take out his pocketbook. He put both hands flat on the table, on the white cloth, either side of the empty cup.

"You knew," he said.

* * *

It was not a question. He had thought, walking up through Torre, about how to say it, and he had known by the time he got to the station that it could not be a question. Hills did not ask her

questions. Jack had never asked her one. Johnny had never asked her one. Douglas in 1943, in the tunnels, with Lieutenant Eden's arm in his hand, had not asked her one. Jono had stood on the steps of the Town Hall in 2028 with three grey shapes going past him into the building and had not asked her one.

They wrote it down. That was what they did. They wrote down what she said and what she did, and they did not ask why.

So he did not ask.

"You knew," said Jono. "On the night of the third. At Bailey's. You looked at him down the bar for the whole of the second verse. Every person in that room saw you do it. I saw you do it." His hands were flat on the cloth. "You knew who he was. You'd known him since he was nineteen. You sat down beside him on the side of a mountain in the dark in 1982 and told him not to go to sleep."

Ania did not move.

"And then a man knocked on his door at half past twelve and said *she's asked for you*." Jono heard his own voice and kept it level. "And he opened it. Because it was you."

Nothing. Not a flicker.

"And then he was in the dark," said Jono. "Four hundred yards from the cellar. Under a building Chris worked in. On a cable Chris wrote down. Twenty-three days. And you were in the bay for ten of them. In this house. In Room 3. Walking up and down." He did not look away from her. "You knew where he was."

The sea moved behind her, grey, very slow.

"You knew the whole time."

* * *

He waited.

He had decided, walking up the hill, that he would wait. However long it took. He had sat with Sidney for four hours once while Sidney decided whether to tell him where he had put his wife's ring. He had sat with a boy of fourteen in an interview room in Paignton in 1998 for five hours, saying nothing, until the boy told him where the knife was. You waited. You did not fill it.

In the doorway, Wendy did not move. He could hear her breathing.

Ania looked at him across the little table for a long time.

Then she said:

"Yes."

* * *

One word. Every letter the same weight. Like the speaking clock telling you the time.

Jono sat with his hands on the cloth and felt it go in.

He had known it. He had known it since a quarter to one that morning, in the vinyl chair, with Eric asleep in the light of his own lamp. He had known it, he thought, since the bus stop. Since the café in Valletta. Since a woman in white linen said *she comes on the four o'clock* and he had thought, *then she's coming too late*.

Knowing it was nothing. Hearing her say it was like being hit by Eric on a Thursday night when you had seen the punch coming and still had not moved.

"Why?" he said.

He had not meant to. It came out. The question no Hills had ever asked her. It came out of him across the white cloth and sat there between them, and he could not take it back.

Ania looked at him.

And then she did a thing he had never seen her do. She looked down. At the table. At her own hands in her lap. The way a person looks down when they are going to tell you something they have spent a long time not saying.

* * *

"On the mountain," she said, "I could sit on the rim."

Her voice was very quiet. Every word the same length. But lower. Not the voice that came up Daddyhole Plain, clear as a bell. A voice for one person, across a small table.

"I could sit beside him and tell him not to sleep. And he did not sleep. That is all I could do. I could not lift him out. I could not carry him down. I could not stop the bleeding in his leg. I could sit, and I could say *do not*, and he could do the rest or not do it." She did not look up. "That is the rule. A nudge. Not a hand."

Jono did not move.

"In the dark," said Ania, "I could not sit beside him. There was no rim. There was no sky. There was a wall, and a chain, and a man who could not be written." She was quiet for a moment. "I could not tell you where he was. If I had said *Fleet House* to you on the fourth of October, that would have been a hand. Not a nudge. And a hand is not mine to give."

"Why not?"

"Because every hand I give," said Ania, "is taken from somewhere else."

She looked up.

"You have seen what it costs. You have seen Keith count his list every morning. You have seen what was taken on the sixteenth of September at thirteen minutes to eleven." Her eyes were very steady. "I do not choose what it takes. If I had given you Fleet House with my hand, something would have gone for it. I did not

know what. Perhaps a thing on Keith's list. Perhaps a woman in Singapore with a child on her hip. Perhaps you." She paused. "I could not know. So I did not give it."

"So you let him sit there."

"I let him write," said Ania. "Somebody had told him to. On the canvas, in the first winter. *The date. The time. The weather. One day somebody will need to know.*" She looked at him. "That was not my hand. That was yours. Three years ago. You did not know you were doing it."

Jono sat very still.

"I could not give you where he was," said Ania. "He gave it to you. With a nail. In the dark. Because a Hills had once told him what writing was for." She was quiet. "And Chris had written the other half in 1978, in pencil, in a book, because an old man told him to. And Keith heard the two halves touch." She looked at the empty cup. "It was all written. Every piece. All I had to do was not take it away from you."

* * *

The sea moved behind her. The bar of light out towards Berry Head had widened, and was coming in across the water, slowly, towards the town.

"And if he'd died," said Jono. "In there. On day ten. On day twenty. If the fever had got him before the wall was finished."

"Then he would have died," said Ania. "And I would have known that also. For as long as I am."

He looked at her. He looked at her for a long time, the way he had looked at faces on doorsteps for twenty-five years.

There was nothing in it. Not cruelty. Not kindness. A young woman's face, very still, very calm, in the grey light from the window, with one grey hair.

And then he saw her hands.

She had taken them out of her lap. They were on the white cloth now, either side of the empty cup, the way his were. Flat. He did not think she knew she had done it.

They were shaking.

The way they had shaken on the stone wall at the top of Daddyhole Plain at two o'clock in the morning, in an hour that happened twice. Not much. The way a hand shakes when it has been holding something very heavy for a very long time and has only just been allowed to put it down.

"Twenty-three days," said Jono quietly. "Up and down. Room 3's twelve feet across."

Ania did not answer.

"Wendy heard you," said Jono. "All day Saturday. Up and down."

"Yes," said Ania.

* * *

"Why him?" said Jono. "On the mountain. There were a lot of men on that mountain. Some of them didn't come down. Why did you sit down beside him?"

Ania looked at him.

"Because in 2028," she said, "a man would stand on the steps of a Town Hall, and be very frightened, and go home, and need to learn how to get up off the floor. And somebody would have to teach him." She did not smile. But something in the face moved, very deep down. "Somebody who had been on the floor."

Jono stopped breathing.

"You saved him for me," he said.

"I saved him," said Ania. "What he did with it was his. He came home. He opened a club above a garage. He put a lamp in the window. He taught a girl from Hele to hit harder than the boys and a boy from Paignton to ring before, not after. And one night in November a man walked up the iron stairs with a lanyard round his neck." She looked at him. "That was not my hand either. That was his."

In the doorway, Wendy had her hand over her mouth.

* * *

Jono looked down at his own hands on the cloth.

He thought about Eric on the canvas, in the first winter. *Better.* He thought about Eric in the dark with a nail in his hand, writing JONO on a wall, five times, at the end of every day. He thought about a woman on the side of a mountain in 1982 with her hands folded on her knees, at three in the morning, in thirty knots of wind, in no coat.

He thought about trusting her. What it meant. Whether it was a thing you did once, at the beginning, like signing your name, or a thing you did every morning, like counting a list.

He thought: *Jack never asked. Johnny never asked. Douglas never asked. And I asked. And she answered.*

He thought: *Nobody has ever sat at this table. Nobody, ever.*

The bar of light had come right in across the bay now. It reached the shore below the town, and the gardens, and the monkey puzzle, and came in through the bay window at Widecombe Cot and lay across the white cloth, across the empty cup, across her hands and his.

Her hands stopped shaking.

He did not know if it was the light.

* * *

At the long-case clock in the hall, it struck eight.

Ania looked at the window.

"It is the last Monday," she said.

"I know."

"The train is at a quarter past ten."

"I know."

She looked at him across the table. And then down, beside her chair, at the floor. At the carpet bag, standing there where it always stood, on the boards by the leg of the table. Packed. Closed. Ready. The same bag he had seen her carry up the path under the monkey puzzle every October since he was ten months old. The same bag Chris had carried to the station, every last Monday, for as long as Jono had known him.

She did not say anything about it.

Jono looked at the bag. Then at her.

He thought about it for a long time. Long enough for the clock in the hall to stop ticking in his ears. Long enough for Wendy, in the doorway, to take her hand down from her mouth.

Then he said:

"I'll carry it."

Ania looked at him.

"This time," said Jono. "I'll carry your bag."

She did not answer for a long moment. The light lay across the table between them.

"Yes," said Ania.

And she picked up the big brown teapot in both hands, and poured, very carefully, into the empty cup, so that it steamed in the bar of light from the bay. And then she pushed the cup and saucer across the white cloth with two fingers, until it stood in front of him.

Jono looked at it.

In the doorway, Wendy Harvey, ninety-six, who had poured that cup every October morning for eighty-one years, turned round very quietly and went back down the passage to the desk, and sat down, and opened the register, and did not write anything in it at all.

Chapter 26 – *The Last Monday*

> *Mon. 27 Oct. 2031. Torquay station, down platform, 10.15 a.m. The up train. C.H., self. K. at the end by the footbridge. Carried the bag. A. at the window, third carriage. Did not wave. Hand on the glass.*

The bag was heavier than Chris had said.

Jono noticed it at the foot of the stairs at Widecombe Cot, at a quarter to ten, when Ania came down from Room 3 and stopped in the hall and held it out to him. Not to Chris. Chris was standing by the front door in his coat, with Karen's car ticking outside on the road where she had dropped him off from Brixham, and he had half put out his good hand, out of thirty-seven years of habit, and then stopped, and put it back in his pocket.

Ania held the bag out to Jono.

He took it.

Very light, Chris had told him, three years ago, walking back up the hill. *There's hardly anything in it at all. I don't know what she carries it for.*

It was not very light. It was not heavy either. It was the weight of a bag that had something in it. A change of clothes, perhaps. A book. The ordinary weight of the things a person takes away with them for a year. Jono stood in the hall at Widecombe Cot with it in his hand and felt the handles, worn smooth, warm from her hand, and the weight pulling down on his arm, and thought: *that's new.*

He looked at Chris.

Chris was looking at the bag. He had felt it too, Jono saw. Just from watching Jono take it. The way a man who has carried a thing

knows how much it weighs by the way somebody else's arm goes down.

Neither of them said anything.

* * *

Wendy did not get up.

She was in her chair by the desk, the one she had sat in to see Ania off since 2028, when the hill had got too much for her. She had her stick across her knees and her good cardigan on, and her glasses on their chain, and she had been sitting there since half past nine with the register open on the desk beside her at the page for Friday the seventeenth of October.

Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.

Ania stopped in front of her.

"Goodbye, Wendy," she said.

"Goodbye, Miss Ania."

That was what they said. That was all they had ever said. Eighty-one years of it, at the carriage door on the down platform, every last Monday in October from 1950, until the hill got too much. On the last Monday in 2028 Wendy had said it from this chair for the first time, and cried afterwards, in the kitchen, with the kettle on.

Wendy looked up at the young woman standing in front of her chair. At the face. At the one grey hair above the left temple.

"It was very good tea," said Wendy.

Ania looked at her.

"You said so," said Wendy. "On the Friday. I've been wanting to say. It was. My mother's pot. She'd have been very pleased."

Ania did not say anything for a moment. Then she bent down, very straight, from the waist, the way she did everything, and put her hand for a moment on Wendy's on top of the stick. Lightly. The way you put your hand on a thing to see that it is still there.

Then she straightened up, and went to the door.

Wendy sat in her chair with her hand on the stick where the other hand had been, and did not look round.

* * *

They walked down the hill. The three of them. Ania in the middle, very straight, in her grey costume, no coat. Chris on her left, with his hands in his pockets. Jono on her right, with the bag.

It was a grey morning. Not the blue of three years ago. Low cloud over the bay, flat and soft, and a smell of rain that had not come yet, and leaves down everywhere on the pavement, wet, gold and brown, stuck to the stones. A man was 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, at the woman in grey with no coat in October, and stopped sweeping, and watched them all the way to the bend.

Ania's breath showed. Faintly. White, on the cold air, in front of her.

Jono walked beside her with the bag and felt the weight of it.

He thought about the empty cup, at the little table, and her pouring into it, and pushing it across the cloth to him with two fingers. He had drunk it. It had been very strong, stewed, from a pot that had stood since seven. He had drunk all of it, with her watching, in the bar of light, and put the cup down square, the way she did, and she had looked at the empty cup for a long time and then stood up and gone upstairs to Room 3 and closed the door.

He had not written that down.

He thought he might be starting to understand what the pocketbook was for. And what it was not for.

* * *

Halfway down, by the bus stop where the hill turns, the bus stop where a man nobody could describe had stood on the seventeenth and not got on the 3.42 or the 3.57, she spoke.

"Chris."

Chris looked at her.

"You have one more," said Ania.

He did not understand. Jono saw him not understand. Chris walked on beside her with his hands in his pockets and his face puzzled, and then, slowly, not.

"One more face," said Ania. She was looking at the sea at the bottom of the hill. "You painted eight. There is a ninth."

"I can't," said Chris. "I've only got one hand."

"You had only a knife," said Ania. "You did not have brushes. You did not know what you were doing." She walked on. "Paint her in the light. On the fire escape. At the time of morning she liked. You know the time."

Chris stopped walking.

He stood on the pavement by the bus stop with his hands in his pockets and the leaves wet on the stones round his feet, and Ania and Jono went on two paces before they stopped too, and turned.

"She'd never be on a list," said Chris. His voice was strange. "Carole. She'd never go on anybody's list. She'd say it was untidy."

"She is not on a list," said Ania. "She is on a page. In a hand that was not hers. In a list that was sent up into the sky." She looked at him, across the two paces. "Take her off it. Put her somewhere that cannot be read."

Chris looked at her for a long time.

Then he came on down the hill, and fell in on her left again, and walked, and did not say anything else. But Jono saw him take his bad hand out of his pocket, halfway to the station, and look at it, and flex the fingers, slowly, one at a time, as if he were counting them.

* * *

Torquay station. The old building, cream and maroon, the one that had not burned. The canopy over the down platform on its iron columns. The footbridge. The 10.15 to Paddington standing at the platform with its engines running.

And at the far end, by the footbridge, where the steps came down, a young man, standing very still, with his hands in his pockets.

Jono saw him first, this time.

Keith was in the same place. The same white shirt, the same dark jacket, the same stillness. He had not said he was coming. He had been in the cellar at Studio Ania at seven, Clifford said, with his hand on the stone. And now he was here, at the end of the platform at Torquay, looking down the length of it at the three of them coming through the barrier.

Ania stopped.

Jono stood beside her with the bag and watched her look at him.

It was the same as three years ago, Chris had said, and not the same. Jono had not been watching three years ago. He had been looking at the train. Now he watched, and what he saw was a young woman with one grey hair standing in the middle of a platform, very straight, with her breath going up white, looking at a young man

with two lamps over his head, the near one and the far one, very bright in the grey morning.

And between them, if you knew how to look, which Jono did not, which Rani did, a cord.

Jono could not see it. He knew it was there. Rani had read it in the paint, on a canvas that was gone now, in the boot of a grey hatchback, going somewhere nobody would ever write down. A thin line of amber from a tear under a crying eye to the man's face at the end of the row.

She answers to him.

Keith did not come down the platform. Ania did not go up it.

She turned, and went to the train.

* * *

Jono put the bag up into the carriage for her. The third carriage. A window seat facing the way the train would go. He lifted it onto the rack over her seat, and it went up with that same weight, the new one, the ordinary one, and settled on the rack, and he took his hands off it.

She sat down. She put her hands in her lap.

He stepped back down onto the platform. Chris was there, by the open door.

"October," said Chris.

"Yes," said Ania. "I always do."

"I'll have the tea ready."

She looked at him through the open door. A long time.

"Yes," she said. "I will drink it."

Chris did not say anything. He could not, Jono saw. He stood on the platform with his good hand on the edge of the open door and his bad hand at his side, flexing.

Then Ania looked past him. At Jono.

"When you go back to the hospital," she said, every word the same length, "look at who is holding the door."

Jono did not understand.

He did not understand at all. He stood on the platform with his empty hands and tried to make it mean something, and it did not, and he thought: *that's a nudge.* He thought: *she's just given me a nudge, and I don't know which way.*

He did not take out his pocketbook. He would remember it. Some things you remember.

The guard blew his whistle.

Jono flinched. He could not help it. A metal whistle, a policeman's sort, shrill, at the far end of the platform. And he waited, in the half-second after it, the way he would wait now for the rest of his life after every whistle, for the dogs.

Somewhere up the hill behind the station, a dog barked. And went on barking.

He let his breath go.

The doors closed.

* * *

The train went.

Slowly, out from under the canopy, along the platform. Chris walked beside the window for a few yards, the way his mother had walked for seventy-eight years and he had walked three years ago, with his good hand in his pocket and his bad hand at his side. Jono

did not. He stood where he was, by the bench, with his hands empty, and watched.

Ania sat very straight in her seat with her hands in her lap and looked out at Chris.

She did not wave. She never had.

The train came along the platform. Past the bench. Past the ticket office. Towards the footbridge, where the young man stood at the foot of the steps with his hands in his pockets.

And as the third carriage came level with him, Ania lifted one hand out of her lap.

Not to wave. She did not wave. She put it flat against the window glass. Palm to the glass. Fingers spread. The way Eric had put his hand on the wall in the dark, on the letters he could not see. The way Keith put his hand on the stone. The way you put your hand on a thing to know where you are.

Keith took his hand out of his pocket.

He did not lift it. He did not wave either. He held it at his side, open, palm out, towards the train, as the third carriage went past him, a yard away, at walking pace, and on.

Then the train was past the footbridge, and past the end of the platform, and going away along the line towards Torre and Newton Abbot and the rest of the world, under the low grey cloud, getting smaller.

* * *

Chris stood at the end of the platform for a long time.

Jono came and stood beside him. Keith came down from the footbridge, slowly, and stood on Chris's other side, and the three of them stood there, the man of sixty-nine and the man of fifty-eight

and the man of ninety-five in a body of thirty, and looked down the empty line.

Nobody said anything.

Then Keith said, very quietly, not to either of them:

"Seven."

Chris turned his head and looked at him.

"I counted," said Keith. "When she put her hand on the glass. I thought it would take one. It usually does, when she..." He stopped. "Seven. Still seven."

He looked at his own hand. The one he had held out, palm open, at his side. He looked at it for a long time, the way Chris had looked at his bad one on the hill.

"She didn't take anything," said Keith. "For once."

He put his hand back in his pocket and walked away, along the platform, towards the barrier, and out.

* * *

Jono and Chris walked back up the hill.

Jono's hands were empty. He kept noticing it. Every few yards his right hand would close on nothing, on the handles of a bag that was not there, and he would open it again and put it in his pocket.

"Heavier," said Chris, at the bus stop where the hill turns. Not a question.

"Yes."

Chris nodded. He did not say anything else for a while.

Then, at the gate of Widecombe Cot, under the monkey puzzle, with the hinge that nobody oiled, he stopped with his good hand on the latch and said:

"She drank it. On the Friday. She drank it this morning. She pushed you a cup." He looked at the house. "She's going to drink it next year. She said so." He was quiet. "Jono. What happens to somebody who's been the same for a hundred and thirty-six years, when they start to drink their tea?"

Jono did not answer.

He did not know. He thought he might, one day. He thought that one day, a long way off, in a square in front of a railway station in Paignton, somebody would, and would write it down.

He looked at his right hand. It had closed again on nothing.

"I'm going to the hospital," he said.

Chris opened the gate. The hinge made its noise. *How you knew.*

"Look at who's holding the door," said Chris.

Jono looked at him.

"I heard her," said Chris. "I don't know what it means either." He went up the path. Then he stopped, under the monkey puzzle, and turned round. "But I'd do it, if I were you. She's not often wrong about doors."

Chapter 27 – *Claire's Daughter*

Mon. 27 Oct. 2031. Ellacombe, the club, in the ring, 9.40 p.m. Jo Hills. Born 3 Jan. 2010, Exeter. Told him.

She was holding the door.

That was all. That was all it was. Jono came along the corridor from the lifts at a quarter past eleven, with the weight of a carpet bag still in his right hand that was not there, and a nurse was coming out of side room 4 with a trolley, and somebody inside was holding the door open for her.

Jo.

She had one hand flat on the door, high up, above the handle, holding it back against its closer. And she was standing in the doorway, half in and half out, with her weight on her back foot, and her shoulders square to the corridor, and her head turned a little, not towards the nurse going out but past her, down the corridor, at whoever was coming. At him. Looking. Before she knew it was him. Checking. The corridor first, then the corners, then the face.

The way a police officer stands in a doorway on a night shift on the Foxhole estate when somebody has called about a noise.

The way he stood in doorways.

He had stood like that for thirty-nine years. Since Middlemoor. Since before Middlemoor: since a boy of seven had stood like that in the kitchen door of a council house in Preston, watching his father come up the path off the late shift. Back foot. Hand high on the door. Head turned. He had never once seen it from the outside. You do not see your own stance. He had seen it, he realised, standing still in the hospital corridor with his empty hand, only in one other person in his life.

Claire.

Claire had stood like that. In doorways. In the door of the flat on Belgrave Road, in 2007, when he came off nights at six in the morning, holding it open with one hand high on the frame, with her weight on her back foot, looking past him down the stairs to see if anybody had followed him home. She had picked it up from him. Two years of watching him do it. She had laughed about it once. *Look at me. I'm turning into a copper.*

The nurse went past him with the trolley. Jo let the door go.

It swung shut on its closer, slowly, and before it closed she saw him, and lifted her chin, a half inch, the way you greet somebody across a gym.

Then the door closed, and he was standing in the corridor by himself.

Look at who is holding the door.

* * *

He did not go in.

He went back down the corridor to the lifts and stood by the window at the end, where you could see out over the car park and the roofs of Shiphay to a grey line of sea, and he stood there for a long time.

He did the arithmetic. He made himself do it the slow way, the way you did a timeline for a file, with the pocketbook shut in his pocket and the numbers in his head.

Claire had gone in the spring of 2009. April. He had come off a double shift on a Sunday morning and the flat on Belgrave Road had been half empty, her half, and there had been a note on the kitchen table, square in the middle, held down with the salt cellar. *I can't do it any more, Jono. I can't be a page in your book. I'm sorry. Don't come after me.* And he had not. He had sat at the table with

the note for four hours, and then he had taken out his pocketbook and written the date and the time and the place, and *C. gone. Note.*, and closed it.

He had not gone after her. She had asked him not to.

His mother had said, when he told her: *The kindest thing you can do for somebody, Jonathan, is know a thing about them they'll never have to know.*

Jo was twenty-one. She had said so to Shannon, in his hearing, the week Eric went. Jono had written it down. *Twenty-one.* Born, then, in 2010. Or the end of 2009.

April 2009. Nine months.

January 2010.

He stood at the window with his hands on the sill. Out over the car park, the cloud was lifting off the sea, and a long strip of light was coming in under it, the same light that had come in across the bay at Widecombe Cot that morning and lain across a white cloth and two pairs of hands.

He thought about a young woman on her knees on the concrete in the cable chamber, folding a hoodie over a man's eyes, and her face in the low light from a torch on the floor. *I know that face. Where do I know that face from.*

From the mirror, he thought. From his own mirror. Thirty years ago.

And from a woman in a doorway on Belgrave Road.

* * *

He went back to side room 4 at twelve.

Eric was awake. Sitting up a little, against the pillows, with the drip in the back of his hand and the green lamp still on, on the locker, though it was day, because nobody had dared turn it off. The

painting was propped against the wall at the end of the bed where he could see it. His face was grey and old and very tired, and his eyes followed Jono into the room and did not leave him.

Jo was in the chair by the window, with her feet up on the radiator, eating an apple.

"Train go?" said Eric.

"It went."

"She get on it?"

"She got on it." Jono sat down in the vinyl chair. "I carried her bag."

Eric looked at him for a moment. Then he nodded, as if that made sense of something.

Jono did not look at Jo. He made himself not. He sat in the vinyl chair with his back straight and his feet flat and talked to Eric about the club, about Shannon's next fight, about what the doctor had said about the ankle, which was that it would be a long time and he would be lucky to box again and he would probably box again. And all the time, out of the corner of his eye, sideways, the way he had looked at faces on Station Square for three years, he watched Jo eat her apple by the window.

The way she held it. The way she turned it in her fingers to find the next place to bite. The way she sat with her feet up, one ankle crossed over the other, and her shoulders down, easy, but her head never quite still. Always turning, a little, towards the door when somebody passed the glass. Checking.

At one o'clock she got up and said she had to go and open up for the kids, because it was Monday, and Monday was Lee and Ryan, and their mum would be late.

"I'll see you there," said Jono. "Tonight."

Jo looked at him. A two-second look.

"Ten o'clock," she said. "After the kids. Bring your gloves."

She went out.

Eric watched the door close behind her. Then he turned his head on the pillow and looked at Jono, a long, clear look, the look of a man who has spent twenty-three days in the dark with nothing to do but think.

"Saw it the first night she came," he said. "Back in August. Walked up the iron stairs and stood in the door of the gym and looked round the room before she looked at me." His voice was still a rasp. "Back foot. Hand up on the frame. I thought, *I know who stands like that.*"

Jono did not say anything.

"Never said," said Eric. "Wasn't mine to say." He shut his eyes. "She trains on your London nights. Monday to Wednesday, and Thursdays till nine. Gone before your train gets in. Has done since August. Never once came on a Friday." He opened them again. "You never asked why."

* * *

The kids had gone by half past nine.

Lee and Ryan, last, with their mum, who was late, who came up the iron stairs at twenty past in her work clothes from the Co-op and stood in the door and watched Lee hit the pads with his eyes open, and put her hand over her mouth. Shannon, with her silver medal in her bag, which she had brought to show the bag, she said, since Eric was not there. Kai, who stayed till the end and swept the floor without being asked and then stood at the top of the iron stairs for a long time looking at the lamp in the window, which Jo had brought back from the hospital at lunchtime and put back on the sill,

and switched on, and then went down the stairs without saying goodbye, the way Kai did everything.

Then it was the two of them.

The strip light. The ring. The smell of the place, leather and sweat and the dust on the radiators. The bags hanging still on their chains. The lamp in the window, green, over the dark street.

Jo was in the ring already, with the pads on. The old red ones, gone grey at the knuckles, with JO on the back of each in black marker.

"Gloves," she said.

He put them on. He climbed in through the ropes, the way Eric had taught him, one leg and then the other, ducking, not like a fat man getting out of a car. He stood in the middle of the canvas.

She held up the pads.

"Jab," she said.

He jabbed. She 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 looking at the strip light.

Exactly the way Eric had done it. On the first night. In November 2028.

He lay there.

"Don't look at the glove," said Jo, from above him. "Look at the man."

* * *

He did not get up.

He lay on his back on the canvas with the strip light over him and the gloves on his chest, and looked up at her. At her face, upside

down, over the top of the pads. Short. Solid. Dark hair scraped back. Twenty-one.

"January," he said.

Jo did not move.

"January 2010," said Jono. "The third? The fourth? Somewhere in the first week." He kept looking at her. "Exeter. She'd have gone to her sister's in Exeter. On Pennsylvania Road. She always said if she ever left she'd go to her sister's."

Jo lowered the pads.

She stood over him in the middle of the ring with her arms at her sides, and the red pads hanging off her hands, and looked down at him for a long time. Her face did a thing he had seen it do once before, in the cable chamber, when the torch found Eric. It went very still. Not blank. Still. The way water goes still before something comes up through it.

"The third," she said.

* * *

She sat down.

On the canvas. Cross-legged. Beside him. She took the pads off and put them down beside her, JO up, and sat with her hands in her lap, the way Ania sat, he thought, and then not like Ania at all, because her hands would not stay still. They kept going to the laces on her boots. Untying. Tying.

"She told me when I was eighteen," Jo said. "Not before. She said she'd decided, when I was born, that I could know when I was old enough to decide what to do about it. She said she wasn't going to decide for me." Her fingers pulled a lace tight. "She said she'd left because she couldn't be a page in your book. That every night you came home and wrote down the date and the time and the weather and what you'd seen, and she'd lie in bed and listen to the

pencil going, and think, *I'm in there. Every day. I'm a line in that.*" She looked at him. "She said if she'd told you about me, you'd have written it down. *J. born. 3 Jan.* In square capitals. And then I'd be in there too. A line. Before I'd even done anything."

Jono lay on his back on the canvas.

"Mum said you'd write it down," said Jo.

He did not answer.

"So she didn't tell you." Jo pulled the lace. Let it go. "And she didn't put you on my birth certificate. She left that bit blank." She was quiet. "But she gave me your name. Hills. She said it was the only thing of yours she'd taken with her and she wasn't giving it back." Something moved at the corner of her mouth. "Joanna Hills. Nobody calls me Joanna."

* * *

"Why the club?" said Jono at last.

He had to say something. He was a man who asked questions for a living, and he lay on his back on a boxing ring at ten at night with his daughter sitting beside him, and it was the only question he could find.

"Because I wanted to see you," said Jo. "And I didn't want you to see me. Not yet." She shrugged. "Mum said you'd been an MP for two years. I looked you up. Every picture. You looked tired in all of them. And then there was a thing in the *Herald Express*, a little thing, at the bottom of a page, about the Member for Torbay boxing late on Thursdays and Fridays at a club above a garage in Ellacombe." She almost laughed. "So I came on the other nights. To see what it was like. What you'd picked. Who you'd picked." She looked round the gym. At the bags. At the lamp in the window. "I thought I'd come for a month and then go back to Exeter and decide."

"And?"

"And Eric gave me a key," said Jo. "And Shannon needed somebody to take her to Plymouth. And Lee wouldn't open his eyes." She pulled the lace tight again. "And then he was gone, and you were standing at the bottom of the iron stairs at nine in the morning looking like the world had ended, and I thought, *oh*. I thought, *that's what he looks like when he's frightened. That's what I look like*." She stopped. "And I couldn't go."

Jono sat up.

He did it the way Eric taught. Hands first. Then knees. Take your time. The count's not on you.

He sat on the canvas beside her, in the gloves, with the strip light over them both, and looked at her. Properly. Not sideways. Not out of the corner of his eye. Straight at her face, the way you look at a thing you have decided to see.

She looked back at him. The two-second look. And then she did not look away.

* * *

"Are you going to write it down?" she said.

He took the gloves off. One, then the other. He put them on the canvas beside her pads.

He took the pocketbook out of his inside pocket. The thirty-fourth. Started in March. Eleven pages at the back of it of a wall in a cellar. A page with the date, the time, the place and *A*. A page with nothing on it but the date, the time, the place and *PAINTING 7 TAKEN. MAN*. A page from the hospital at five to one that morning, with what Eric had said.

He opened it to a clean page.

He took the pencil out of the spine.

Jo watched him. Her hands had stopped on her laces.

He thought about Claire, lying in bed in the flat on Belgrave Road listening to the pencil going. He thought about Ania at the little table that morning: *I let him write. That was not my hand. That was yours.* He thought about Keith counting a list every morning, of things he would not let the line have. He thought about a list sent up into the sky, with four thousand one hundred and eight entries in it, and a girl's name not one of them, because nobody had ever written it. And about a man who could not be written down, in a grey hatchback, with a whistle in his pocket and twenty-six years.

Only what was written can be reached.

He held out the pocketbook to her. Open. At the clean page. And the pencil.

Jo looked at it.

"Not my hand," said Jono. "Yours. If you want. Or nobody's." He held it there. "Your mum was right. It's a line. Once it's in there, it's in there. Anybody who can read it can find you." He paused. "It's yours to decide. Not mine. She was right about that too."

Jo looked at the book for a long time.

Then she took it.

* * *

She held the pencil the wrong way. Too low down, too tight, the way people do who mostly type. She looked at the page. At the lines. At the clean space at the top where the date went.

"How do you start?" she said.

"The date," said Jono. "The time. The place."

She wrote it. Slowly. In letters that were not his square capitals and not anything like them. Round. Upright. A bit too big. She

wrote the date, and looked at it, and wrote the place. *Ellacombe, the club, in the ring.* She looked at the clock over the door. *9.40 p.m.*

Then she stopped.

"What you saw," said Jono quietly. "What you were told. Who told you."

She looked at the page for a long time.

Then she wrote her name. All of it. Not *Just Jo. Jo Hills.* And under it, the date of her birth, and the place, and then, after it, two words, pressing hard, so that the pencil went through to the page behind:

Told him.

She looked at it. She held the book a little away from her, the way Ania had held the cup on the Friday, the way you look at a thing you have tasted for the first time.

Then she closed it, very carefully, and gave it back to him.

Jono put it in his inside pocket. Over his heart. He did not open it again that night. He did not need to. He knew what was on the page, and he knew whose hand it was in, and he knew that for the first time in thirty-four books and thirty-four years there was a line in one of them that he had not written.

* * *

They sat in the ring a while longer.

The strip light hummed. The lamp in the window was green over the dark street. Down in Ellacombe a dog barked, and went on barking.

"Keith knew," said Jo after a while. "Didn't he. The first morning. The man in the launderette doorway. Crying."

"Yes."

"How?"

Jono thought about it. About a white room Keith had once described, in a building that did not exist yet, with desks in it. He did not know who sat at them. Nobody had written it down. Not yet.

"I don't know," he said. "One day you can ask him."

Jo nodded. She picked up the pads. She stood up.

"Get up," she said. "Ten more minutes. You drop your left."

"Everybody drops their left."

"Shannon drops her left. You drop it worse." She held up the pads. "Look at the man."

Jono got up.

He looked at her.

He did not look at the pad.

Chapter 28 – *Standing*

Sat. 8 Nov. 2031. Ellacombe, E.'s flat, 11.04 p.m. Lamp off. Curtains shut. E. stood. Hand on the wall. 4 min 10 sec. Then: "Again."

He could not stand up.

That was the first thing, and nobody had warned them. The ankle, yes. The ankle was in a black boot to the knee, with a dressing under it that a nurse came to change every second day, and the surgeon had said, very clearly, at the end of the bed, *no weight on it for a fortnight, and then we'll see*. They had known about the ankle.

It was the rest of him.

Twenty-three days on a concrete floor on six feet of chain. Twenty-three days lying down, or sitting with his back to a wall, or crawling on his belly to a bottle of water. A man of sixty-nine who had skipped five hundred times every morning since 1998 and run up the iron stairs two at a time, and his legs had gone. Not the ankle. The legs. The big muscles in the thighs, the ones that hold you up. They had gone soft and thin and strange, like a thing left out in the rain, and when the physio stood him up beside the bed on the Thursday, with a frame, his good leg had shaken so hard that the frame rattled on the floor, and he had gone grey, and sat down, and looked at the leg as if it belonged to somebody else.

Deconditioning, the physio said. *It's normal. It comes back. It takes time.*

Eric had looked at her for a long time.

"How much time?"

"Weeks," she said. "Months. At your age..." She stopped. She was young and kind and she had not meant to say *at your age*. "It comes back," she said again.

Eric did not say anything. He looked at the leg.

Then he looked at Jono, in the vinyl chair by the window, and Jono saw something in his face that he had seen on his own face once, in the mirror in the changing room at the club, in November 2028, after the first night. When he had been put on his back eleven times in an hour by a man of sixty-six, and could not lift his arms to take his shirt off.

I can't do this.

"Tuesday week," said Eric.

The physio did not understand. Jono did.

The eleventh. The cenotaph on the Strand. Eleven o'clock in the morning, the two minutes, the old men in a line with their medals on. Eric had gone every year since he came home in 1998. He had stood at the back, behind the crowd, by the railings of the inner harbour, with his medals in his pocket. He had never once stood in the line.

"Tuesday week," said Eric again, to the leg. "I'm going to stand in the line."

* * *

They let him out on the Saturday.

The first of November. Grey, with rain coming. Jo brought the club's minibus, the old white one with ELLACOMBE ABC on the side in red letters that she used for taking the kids to fights, and Jono pushed the wheelchair out through the doors of the hospital and Eric sat in it with his boot up on the footrest and the painting across his knees, wrapped in the army blanket.

He would not go to Widecombe Cot. Wendy had offered. Wendy had rung Jono herself, on the Thursday, at seven in the morning, which she had never done in his life, and said, *there's a room. Room 2. Ground floor. He can't do stairs. I'll not have him on his own.* And Jono had asked Eric, and Eric had thanked him, and thanked her, and said no.

"I'm going home," he said.

"Eric, it's up the iron stairs."

"I know where it is."

"You can't stand."

"Then you'll have to teach me," said Eric.

* * *

They did the ring first.

Not to box. On the Saturday afternoon, with the gym empty, Jo and Jono half-lifted, half-carried him up the iron stairs, one each side, with his arms round their shoulders, and that was the worst of it, that first time. Twenty-two iron steps, and every one of them a fight, and Eric not making a sound, with his face white and his mouth shut and his breath coming through his nose, and the boot banging on every step. They got him to the top and sat him on the bench by the door and he sat there with his eyes shut for ten minutes.

Then he opened them, and looked at the ring.

"In there," he said.

The ring was the only place in the gym with something to hold on to. Ropes on all four sides, at the right height. Jono climbed in. Jo helped Eric to the edge, and he sat on the apron and lifted the boot over the bottom rope with both hands, and then the other leg,

and then he was sitting on the canvas, in the corner, with his back against the post.

Where Jono had sat, three years ago, getting his breath, with the lanyard still round his neck.

"Right," said Eric. "Go on, then."

Jono crouched down in front of him.

He had thought about this. He had sat in the vinyl chair at night for six nights thinking about it. He had thought: *I don't know how to teach anybody anything. I'm a copper. I'm a carer. I lift people. I don't teach them.* And then on the fourth night he had thought: *no. You know exactly how. You've been taught it. Every Thursday and every Friday for three years.*

"Hands first," said Jono.

Eric looked at him.

"Then knees. Take your time." Jono did not smile. "The count's not on you."

* * *

It took forty minutes the first day.

Hands on the bottom rope. Then the middle rope. Pull. The good knee under him. The bad leg out straight, the boot on the canvas, no weight. Then the arms, pulling, shaking, the knuckles white on the rope. And the good leg, pushing.

He got halfway. He hung there on the ropes with his good knee bent and his whole body shaking, and Jono stood in front of him, a yard away, not touching, and said nothing. Then he went down. Back onto the canvas. Hard.

He lay there.

Jono did not help him. That was the hardest thing he had ever done. He crouched down by Eric's head and did not put out his hand.

"Again," said Jono.

Eric looked up at him from the canvas. A long look. The look Jono must have given him, from the same place, in the first winter, with the strip light over his head.

Then Eric put his hands on the bottom rope.

On the fourth go he stood.

On one leg, with both hands locked on the top rope and his arms shaking and his face the colour of the canvas, but up. Standing. In the corner of his own ring, under the sign over the door that he had painted himself in 1998. *ALL WELCOME. NO MESSING.*

Jono counted. Out loud. The way Eric counted the boys' skips. One. Two. Three.

He got to eleven before Eric went down.

"Better," said Jono.

Eric lay on the canvas with his eyes shut.

Then he laughed. It came out of him like something coming loose. Short and cracked and not much of a laugh. But a laugh.

"Cheeky sod," he said.

* * *

Jo did the weeknights.

Jono went back to London on the Monday, on the 7.10 from Torquay, because the House was sitting and he had been away three weeks and there were things on the Order Paper that nobody else would read. He sat in the Library on Tuesday morning and read the

last page, the way he always did, and found nothing, and sat there for a long time afterwards looking at it.

He rang the club at ten every night. Jo answered.

Fourteen seconds on the rope, she said on the Monday. On the Tuesday: *He did the first six stairs. Down. On his backside. Then he made me watch him do them up again. On his hands.* On the Wednesday: *He shouted at Kai for sweeping wrong. That's good, isn't it? That's normal.*

On the Thursday she said: *He won't turn the lamp off.*

Jono was on the 6.03 from Paddington, somewhere past Reading in the dark, with the phone to his ear.

"He never has," he said. "Not since 1998."

"No. I mean he won't let me turn the big light off either," said Jo. "Or the bathroom light. Or the one on the landing. He's got every light in the flat on, all night. I sleep on the sofa. It's like sleeping in a shop window." She was quiet. "I turned the landing one off at two this morning, to go to the loo. Just for a minute. I heard him. Through the door. He'd got up. On the boot. On his own. He was standing by the bedroom wall with his hand on it. In the light from the lamp. Feeling it." She stopped. "He didn't know I saw. He went back to bed when I put the landing light back on."

Jono did not say anything for a long time. The train went on through the dark.

"I'll come straight there," he said.

* * *

He did the stairs on the Friday.

The iron stairs, on the outside of the building, up the side of the garage, twenty-two of them, with a rail on one side and the drop

on the other and the street lamp at the top. Jono had climbed them a thousand times. In the rain, mostly. At ten at night, off the 6.03.

Eric had been up and down them twice a day all week, Jo said, on his backside and on his hands.

"Not like that," said Jono.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs, in the street, in the dark, with the rain coming on. Eric stood at the top. On one leg and the boot, with his good hand on the rail and a stick in the other, under the street lamp, in his old coat. Looking down.

"Like what, then?"

"Like a man," said Jono. "Walking down his own stairs."

Eric looked at him for a long time.

"Your weight on the rail," said Jono. "Stick on the step below. Good foot down to the stick. Then the boot to the good foot. Don't look at the boot." He paused. "Look at me."

Eric looked at him.

He came down. One step. Stick, good foot, boot. Another. The rain on the iron. The street lamp behind him, and his shadow going down the stairs in front of him, long, onto the wet street. Jono stood at the bottom and did not move and did not look away from his face. Six. Seven. Twelve. At fifteen the good leg started to shake. He stopped. He stood there on the fifteenth step with his hand white on the rail and the rain running off his face.

"Look at me," said Jono.

Eric looked at him.

Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two.

He stood on the pavement, at the bottom of his own stairs, in the rain, a foot away from Jono, on one leg and a boot and a stick, breathing like a man who has done ten rounds.

"There," said Jono.

Eric did not say anything. He stood there in the rain with his chest going.

Then he turned round, and looked back up at the stairs, at the street lamp, at the lamp with the green shade in the window over the street.

"Again," he said.

* * *

The dark was the last thing. It was the Saturday. The eighth.

They had not talked about it. Jono had not said, *we're going to do the dark tonight*. Eric had not asked. But they both knew it, all day. Jono knew it at the club in the afternoon, when Eric stood in the ring for two minutes on both feet for the first time, the boot taking a little weight, just a little, the way the surgeon had said he could start. Eric knew it when he stood at the window of the flat at five o'clock and watched the light go off the roofs of Ellacombe, and did not switch on the lamp at once, the way he always did, but stood there with his hand on the switch.

Then switched it on.

At eleven Jo went home. She stood at the top of the iron stairs and looked back into the flat, at every light on, at Eric on the edge of the bed with his boot up on a chair, at Jono in the kitchen doorway, and she did not say anything, and then she said, to Jono, *Ring me*, and went down.

Eric sat on the edge of the bed.

The painting was back on the wall. Facing the bed. On the four tacks, over the pale rectangle. Jo had hung it on the Saturday he came home, standing on a chair, and Eric had sat on the bed and watched her do it, and when she got down he had said nothing for a

long time, and then he had said, *it's a bit to the left*, and it was not, and she had moved it anyway.

The young man's face, on its tacks, facing him. The old eyes. Waiting for it to get light.

"Go on, then," said Eric.

* * *

Jono went round the flat.

The bathroom light. The landing. The light over the cooker in the kitchen. The big light in the middle of the ceiling. He did them one at a time, slowly, so that Eric could hear each switch go, and each time the flat got smaller and the shadows came in from the corners, and the green lamp in the window got brighter by being the only one.

Then he went to the window and drew the curtains across, behind the lamp, so that there was no light from the street at all.

And he put his hand on the switch of the lamp.

Eric sat on the edge of the bed in its green light with his hands on his knees.

"Date," said Eric.

"Saturday, the eighth of November," said Jono. "Four minutes past eleven at night. Raining."

Eric shut his eyes. Opened them.

"Go on."

Jono switched off the lamp.

* * *

It was dark.

Not the dark of the cable chamber. Jono knew that. There was the faint grey line under the bedroom door from nothing, from the ordinary dark of the flat, and the ghost of the street lamp through the curtains, and the red standby light on the old radio on the shelf. It was the dark of a bedroom at night in a town. It was nothing.

He heard Eric's breathing change.

He heard it go short. Then shorter. The way a man breathes at the bottom of a hole in the rock on the side of a mountain, with the wet going black from the hip to the knee. The way a man breathes on a concrete floor with a chain on his ankle, when the torch goes off and the door scrapes and the lock coughs and the dark comes back.

Jono did not move. He did not switch the lamp on. He stood by the window with his hand on the switch and did not say *it's all right*, because it was not all right, not yet.

"Eric," he said. "It's Jono. You're in your flat. Ellacombe. Saturday night. The lamp's off. I'm by the window. I've got my hand on it."

The breathing went on. Short. Short.

"In for four," said Jono.

Silence. Then, in the dark, a long breath in.

"Hold for four."

He counted. Out loud. Quietly. The way Eric had taught the boys, the way Eric had said it to himself on the concrete floor for twenty-three days. *In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. Hold for four.* And the breathing in the dark came down to it, slowly, a breath at a time, until it was going with the count.

Then he heard the bed creak.

He heard the boot go down on the floor. Carefully. And the stick. And the good foot. And a sound he did not know, at first, in the dark: a hand, moving across a wall. Flat. Slow. Feeling.

Eric was standing up.

In the dark. On his own. Beside the bed, with the stick in one hand and the other hand flat on the wall of his own bedroom. Jono could not see him. He could hear him. The breath, going with the count. The hand on the paint, very still now.

Not looking for the letters. There were no letters. Just holding the wall. The way you put your hand on a thing to know where you are.

Jono looked at his watch. The luminous hands. And counted the seconds under his breath with the other count, the breathing one, going on out loud.

A minute.

Two.

He thought of the strip light. Of himself on his back on the canvas, eleven times, in November 2028, and a voice above him saying *again*. He thought about how long it takes to stand up off the floor when the floor has been your whole world. He thought: *it takes as long as it takes. The count's not on you.*

Three.

Four.

At four minutes and ten seconds, in the dark, Eric said:

"Lamp."

Jono switched it on.

* * *

Eric was standing by the wall in the green light. On the good leg and the boot and the stick, with his other hand flat on the paint, and his eyes open, and his face wet. He did not wipe it.

He looked at Jono across the room.

"Four minutes," said Jono.

Eric did not say anything. He looked at the lamp. He looked at the painting on the wall facing the bed. The face, with its old eyes.

Then he took his hand off the wall. He did not need to. He stood, on the leg and the boot and the stick, in the middle of his own bedroom, with nothing, in the light.

"Again," he said.

Jono put his hand on the switch.

* * *

They did it three more times. Six minutes. Nine. The last time, Jono did not count. He stood by the window in the dark with his hand on the switch and listened to Eric breathe, steady, on his own, in for four and out for four, without the count, and did not look at his watch, and did not know how long it was.

At the end, it was Eric who said *lamp*. Not short. Not frightened. The way you ask somebody to pass the salt.

Jono switched it on.

Eric was sitting on the edge of the bed. He had sat down himself, at some point, in the dark. Jono had not heard him.

"Leave it on," said Eric. "Now."

"All right."

"Not for me." Eric looked at the window. At the curtains, drawn behind the lamp. "Open them."

Jono opened them. The lamp in the window, the green shade, the yellow light going out through the glass and down over the iron stairs and the wet street. The way it had shone every night since 1998. The way Jo had kept it shining for twenty-three nights with nobody in the room.

"There's a lad in Paignton," said Eric, "rings before, not after. And a girl from Hele who drops her left. And two little sods who couldn't open their eyes." He lay back on the bed, slowly, with his boot on the chair, and looked up at the ceiling. "Somebody's got to be able to see it from the street. That's all it's for. It's not for me any more."

He shut his eyes.

"Tuesday," he said. "Eleven o'clock. I'm standing in the line."

"I know," said Jono.

"You're standing next to me."

Jono looked at him.

"I'm not a veteran."

"No," said Eric, with his eyes shut. "You're the man who taught me to stand up." He was nearly asleep. "Next to me. And the girl behind."

Jono took out his pocketbook. He wrote the date. The time. The place. *Lamp off. Curtains shut. E. stood. Hand on the wall. 4 min 10 sec.* He looked at it. Then he added the last word, because it was what Eric had said, and because it was true, and because it was the only word that had ever mattered on that canvas:

Again.

Chapter 29 – *The Ninth Face*

Sun. 9 Nov. 2031. Widecombe Cot, the back room, 1.15 p.m. C.H.'s ninth. Have not written what it looks like. Will not. R. says: no cord. K. says: five.

He bought one canvas.

Not eight. One. From the art shop at the top of Fleet Street, on Wednesday the fifth of November, nine days after the train, at ten in the morning, in the rain. A young man with a ring through his eyebrow got it down from a rack at the back, and Chris stood at the counter and looked at it, a square of white linen on a wooden frame, about the size of a window, and felt exactly as he had felt in a shop on Bras Basah Road in 1994, which was sick.

"Oils?" said the young man.

"Yes."

"Which?"

Chris did not know. He had not known then. He pointed. White. A black. A blue. A red. A yellow, the one like the inside of a lemon. A tube of something called Naples yellow that he did not remember buying in 1994 and that he picked up off the rack without thinking and put on the counter, and only knew why on the Saturday, at dawn.

"Brushes?"

"No," said Chris. "A knife."

The young man got him a palette knife. A small one, with a bend in the blade, and a wooden handle.

"And turps."

He paid. The young man put it all in a bag and looked at Chris's bad hand, lying in his coat pocket, and did not say anything, and Chris was grateful.

He carried the canvas home on the bus, the way he had carried eight canvases home on a bus in Singapore, flat against his chest, with his good arm round it. A woman across the aisle looked at it, the white square, and then at him, and smiled, the way you smile at a man carrying a thing he has not decided what to do with yet.

* * *

He set up in the back room at Widecombe Cot.

Not the dining room. Not the little table in the bay window. The back room, where the long table was, and the fireplace, and the window that looked east over the garden wall and the roofs to the sea, where the light came first in the morning. He borrowed an easel from the primary school in Ellacombe, which Jo fetched in the minibus, a child's easel, too low, which he propped up on two telephone directories from 1998 that his mother had kept in the cupboard under the stairs for exactly this sort of thing, she said, though she had not known it was this sort of thing till now.

He put the canvas on it. He put a sheet over the carpet. He set out the paint on a dinner plate, the way he had in Joo Chiat, on a plate from the kitchen, one of his mother's, white with a blue rim.

Then he sat in front of it, on a kitchen chair, for two days, and did not touch it.

* * *

It was the hand.

He had known it would be. He sat in front of the white canvas on the Thursday and the Friday, with the plate of paint going a little dry at the edges and the knife on the chair beside him, and he looked at his bad hand in his lap, and it looked back at him.

The stroke had been in 2022. The left side. It had taken the hand first and given most of it back, slowly, over two years of rubber balls and pegboards and a physio in Paignton who called him *my love*. Most of it. He could hold a cup, if he used both hands. He could do up the top button of a shirt if he had ten minutes. He could hold a pen, badly, and write his name like a boy of seven.

He could not hold a palette knife. Not the way you need to. Not with the wrist loose and the fingers firm and the blade going where you want it, flat, in a long pull, the way it had gone in 1994 every night at three in the morning with the fan going round.

He tried on the Thursday night. He picked up the knife with his bad hand and loaded the blade with white and went at the canvas, and the knife turned in his fingers and dug in at the corner and dragged, and fell, and lay on the sheet with white on it, and he sat looking at the gouge in the corner for an hour.

You have only one hand, he had said to her, on the hill.

You had only a knife, she had said. *You did not have brushes. You did not know what you were doing.*

He could do it with his good hand. Of course he could. His right hand was fine. It was a good hand. It had held a soldering iron for forty years and a guitar for fifty.

He did not want to.

He did not know why. He sat in front of the canvas on the Friday afternoon, with the gouge in the corner, and tried to know why, and the nearest he could get was this: that his good hand was the hand that had done everything. Signed things. Written things. Pressed *send*. It was the hand that had written TQ 7/418 in a cable book in 1978 and on the back of a gas bill in 2031. It was the hand of a man who wrote things down.

The bad hand had never written anything that anybody could read.

Put her somewhere that cannot be read.

* * *

Karen came on the Friday night.

She drove over from Brixham at nine, the way she did now, three nights a week, and came in at the front door without knocking, which his mother had told her to do, in the summer, at the desk, without looking up from the register: *you'll not knock in this house, Karen Tozer, you'll walk in*. She came into the back room with her coat still on and stopped in the doorway and looked at the canvas on its child's easel on its telephone directories, white, with a gouge in the corner, and at the plate of paint, and at Chris.

She did not ask.

She took her coat off. She went to the kitchen. She came back with the roll of black insulating tape out of the drawer by the back door, the drawer with the string and the batteries and the keys to nothing, where it had been since his father put it there in about 1975.

She knelt down in front of his chair.

"Which hand?" she said.

He looked at her.

"Which hand," said Karen, "do you want to do it with?"

He held out the bad one.

She took it in both of hers. She did not say anything. She opened the fingers, one at a time, gently, the way she had opened the folds of the banner on the cellar floor in September, and she put the handle of the palette knife across his palm, and closed his fingers round it, one at a time. Then she took the tape, and tore off a length with her teeth, and wound it round his hand and the handle

together. Over the knuckles. Round the wrist. Three times. Firm. Not tight.

She sat back on her heels and looked at it.

"Can you move it?"

He moved it. Not much. From the shoulder, the elbow, the wrist, the whole arm. The knife went with it. Taped on. Part of the hand. It could not turn in his fingers now. It could not fall.

"Twelve years on the board at Fleet House," said Karen, "you learn to tape things." She got up. She put the tape on the mantelpiece. "I'll be in the kitchen with your mum."

She went out.

He sat with the knife taped to his bad hand and looked at the white canvas.

* * *

He started on the Saturday at a quarter past six. In the dark.

He had set an alarm. He did not need it. He was awake at five, lying in his old room under the eaves, listening to the house. He got up and dressed in the dark and went down and switched on the lamp in the back room, the small one on the sideboard, and sat in front of the canvas, and Karen came down at six in her dressing gown without being asked, and taped his hand, and went back up.

He waited.

He waited for the light. That was the thing. He knew it the way he had known, in 1994, that he could not start until three in the morning. Carole had liked the morning. Not the morning: the edge of it. The quarter of an hour before the sun, when the light comes first, from nowhere, grey, and then not grey. When everything is the same colour and then, very slowly, nothing is.

March 1981. The fire escape on the side of the computer centre at the Polytechnic in Stafford, after the night shift. Iron steps, cold through his jeans. A field white with frost. The pylons going away into the grey. The motorway, a river of headlights, north and south. And the light coming, pale and slow and very large, over the Midlands.

And a girl beside him. Tall. Thin. In a black jumper. Very short dark hair. Enormous round glasses.

It's not the sea. But it's not nothing, either.

At twenty to seven, over the roofs of Torquay, over the bay, through the east window of the back room at Widecombe Cot, the light began to come.

Chris lifted his arm.

* * *

He did not put her face on first. He did not put a face on at all, that morning. He put the light on.

Grey. The Naples yellow, the one he had not known why he bought, mixed into white and a touch of the blue, very little, on the plate with the knife taped to his hand, from the shoulder. Then onto the canvas. Not in ridges. Not plastered on like 1994. Long. Flat. Pulled. The whole arm going, because the hand could not go on its own. Across the top. Across again. The light coming in through the east window onto the canvas, and the canvas going the colour of the light coming in.

He could not do detail. The bad hand would not let him. Everything had to be big, and whole, and from the shoulder. So it was: big, whole. A sky. A field under it, white, frost, the knife dragged sideways so that the paint broke and showed the grain of the linen through like stubble. A line of dark, thin, going away into the distance, that was pylons, if you wanted it to be. Another line,

lower, with little points of yellow and red in it from the tip of the knife, that was a motorway, at dawn, with its lights on.

And near the front, from the edge of the canvas, going up at a slant, black, iron: the edge of a fire escape.

At ten past seven the sun came up over Berry Head and hit the window and the light went gold and he stopped.

He sat back. His arm was shaking from the shoulder to the taped fingers. His shirt was wet.

He had not put her in.

He knew he could not, not yet. He sat and looked at the empty iron of the fire escape on the canvas in the gold light, and waited for the shaking to stop, and it did not, and Karen came in with tea and cut the tape off his hand with the kitchen scissors, carefully, and put the cup in both his hands, and did not look at the canvas at all.

"Tomorrow," she said.

* * *

Sunday was Remembrance Sunday.

He woke at five again and lay there and heard, very early, very far off, the bells of a church starting to ring for an early service. Not six. Eight. A proper peal. Upton was six, with the third bell late. This was St Marychurch, he thought, up the hill, eight bells, ringing down the scale and round.

He got up.

Karen taped his hand at six. She did not go back up this time. She sat on the bottom stair in the hall, in her dressing gown, where she could see him through the door, and did not come in.

And at six o'clock, in the dark, before he lifted his arm, the back-room door opened and Keith came in.

* * *

Keith had not been to Widecombe Cot since the train. He did not come in the mornings. He was at the stone in the mornings, in the cellar, or at the window table at Bailey's with his cup. But he came in now, at six, in his dark jacket, quietly, and stood just inside the door, and looked at the canvas on its easel in the lamplight. At the sky and the frost and the pylons and the iron, and no one on the iron.

He did not say anything. He went to the long table and pulled out a chair, the one at the end, by the fireplace, and sat down in it, facing the canvas, with his hands round nothing on the table in front of him, the way he held a cup.

Chris looked at him.

"You don't have to be here," said Chris.

"I know."

"Will it cost you?"

Keith looked at the canvas.

"Everything costs," he said. "You know that. You'll know it better than anybody, in twenty-six years." He did not look away from the iron on the canvas. "Go on. The light's coming."

* * *

He put her in.

He did it in the quarter of an hour before the sun. The edge of the morning. The light coming grey through the east window and then, slowly, not grey.

He did not do a face. He could not. The hand would not do a face, and he did not want one. He did what the bad hand could do, from the shoulder: a shape. Tall. Thin. Black, the black of a jumper, pulled up the canvas in one long stroke from the iron step to the sky, so that the paint broke at the top and the grey of the light came

through it. Sitting. Her knees up. Her arms round them. Her head turned, a little, away from the field, towards whoever was sitting beside her on the step, out of the edge of the canvas.

Very short dark hair: one twist of the knife, the paint dragged round.

And then the last thing. He loaded the very tip of the blade with white and Naples yellow, pure, no blue in it at all, nothing, the colour of the sun before it comes over the edge of the world. And he put it on, at the head of the dark shape, where the face would have been. Two marks. Round. Side by side. Small.

Not a tear. In 1994 he had painted her as a face on a jug, with two great round eyes and one tear coming down from under them. There was no tear now. These were light. The light coming up over the Midlands, very large, and caught in a pair of enormous round glasses, and thrown back.

He lifted the knife off the canvas.

Outside, over Berry Head, the sun came up and hit the window.

* * *

At the end of the long table, Keith made a sound.

Chris turned round.

Keith was sitting very straight in the chair with his hands flat on the table now, either side of the cup that was not there. His eyes were shut. His lips were moving. Counting. Chris knew what he was counting.

He counted for a long time. He went back to the beginning and counted again.

Then he opened his eyes.

"Five," said Keith.

Chris put his taped hand down on his knee.

"What's gone?"

"I don't know." Keith looked at the canvas. "I never know. That's how it works. There were seven, and now there are five, and the two that went, I'll never know what they were." He was quiet. "I'll know there were seven. I'll know that. I'll count five every morning for twenty-six years and know there should be seven."

"Keith..."

"It's all right."

"It's not all right."

"No," said Keith. "But it's paid." He looked at the canvas for a long time. The grey sky, the frost, the pylons, the iron, and the dark shape sitting on the step with the sun in her glasses, looking at somebody out of the edge of the frame. "She's off it. Isn't she. The list. The one in the sky."

"I don't know," said Chris.

"I do," said Keith.

He got up. He came round the long table and stood beside Chris's chair and looked at the painting from there, from where Chris sat, the way you stand behind somebody to see what they see. He put his hand on Chris's shoulder. Lightly. The way Ania had put her hand on Wendy's on the stick.

"Whatever they were," said Keith, "they were worth her."

He took his hand away. He went out. Chris heard him in the hall say something quiet to Karen on the stair, and the front door, and the gate, the latch and the hinge.

* * *

Rani came at one.

Karen had rung her. Rani came up the path under the monkey puzzle in her coat with a poppy on it, from the service at the

cenotaph on the Strand, where she had stood at the back, she said, and looked for Eric's lamp in the crowd out of habit, though Eric was saving himself for Tuesday. She came into the back room and stood in front of the easel, and looked at the painting the way she looked at everything since 2028. Not at it. Through it.

She looked for a long time.

"There's a lamp," she said. "Over her. In the paint. Like the others. Very bright." She tilted her head. "Brighter than the jug. The one from 1994. Much brighter."

"And the cord?"

Rani looked. She leaned in, close, the way she leaned over a lens in the lab. She looked at the top of the painting, at the bright mark at the head of the dark shape, and then all round the edges of the canvas, slowly, one side after another.

"There isn't one," she said.

Chris sat very still.

"In the others," said Rani, "every cord goes to eight. All seven. Even hers, the crying eyes, the one that's gone. They all answer to him." She straightened up. "This one doesn't go anywhere. There's no cord at all. It's just a lamp. On its own." She looked at Chris. "She doesn't answer to anybody."

Chris looked at the painting. At the dark shape on the iron step, at dawn, in March 1981, with the sun in her glasses, turned towards someone out of the edge of the frame.

Take her off it.

"Good," he said.

* * *

That evening he went to his old room under the eaves and took the banner out of the inside pocket of his coat, where it had been

since the seventeenth of September. He unfolded it on the bed. Three words, in black, on a strip of printout paper gone yellow, from a line printer in a machine room in Stafford in 1981.

IT'S NOT NOTHING.

He looked at it for a long time. Then he folded it up again, small, the way she had folded it, and took it downstairs, and put it behind the painting, between the canvas and the wooden frame, at the back, where nobody would ever see it, and nobody would ever read it.

Then he sat in the back room with the lamp on and his taped hand in his lap, and looked at her, until Karen came and cut the tape off and took him up to bed.

Chapter 30 – *Remembrance*

Tues. 11 Nov. 2031. The Strand, the war memorial, 11.00 a.m. Clear. Cold. Wind off the sea. Two minutes. E. in the line. Did not fall. J. behind, keeping the time.

The watch had been his grandfather's.

Not his grandfather's, really. Nobody's. It had come to Douglas Hills from Johnny, and to Johnny from Jack, and to Jack, late one night in 1896, across a table at Bailey's, from a man who said he would not need it where he was going, because they told the time differently there. A plain gold hunter, worn smooth, with a crack across the glass that had been there when the man laid it on the table, and that no Hills had ever had mended.

Wind it every night, Jack had written that the man had said. Jono had read it in the second of Jack's books, at the kitchen table at Widecombe Cot, the year he was twelve. *It will remind you that most things that happen in the world happen at an ordinary time, on an ordinary day.*

Douglas had taken him to the war memorial on the Strand every year until he died. Every November, in the cold, in his good coat, with the boy beside him. And at a minute to eleven, every year, the old man had taken the watch out of his waistcoat pocket and opened it, and held it in his palm between them so that the boy could see the hand going round, and they had kept the two minutes together, the old man and the boy, by Holmes's watch.

Somebody has to keep the time, Douglas had said. *Even when nobody's talking.*

He had given it to Jono in 1991, in the hospital, the week before the end. Put it in his hand and closed his fingers over it, the way Karen had closed Chris's fingers round a palette knife.

Jono had wound it every night since. Forty years. Every night, in Preston, in the flat on Belgrave Road, in a hotel in London, in a vinyl chair at Torbay Hospital. He had wound it on the night of the third of October with the lamp on in Eric's window, and on the night he lay on the concrete in the cable chamber beside the writing behind the bracket, and on the night of the eighth with the lamp off.

It was in his inside pocket now. Next to the pocketbook. Over his heart.

* * *

It was a clear morning. Cold, blue, with a wind coming off the sea that made the flags on the Strand stand out stiff and crack, and the harbour very bright, and the boats knocking at their moorings. The kind of morning his grandfather had liked for it. *Good. You can see a long way.*

Eric was at the top of the iron stairs at nine o'clock, ready.

Jono came up the hill from Preston on the bus and saw him from the bottom, standing under the street lamp in the morning light with his hand on the rail. In his good coat. The dark one, the one he wore every year to stand at the back by the inner-harbour railings. Shaved. Hair cut: Jo had cut it the night before, in the kitchen, with the clippers from the club, and nicked his ear, and he had not said a word. The black boot on his left foot. The stick in his right hand.

And on the left of his chest, on the dark coat, where they had never once been in forty-nine years, his medals.

Two. The South Atlantic Medal, on its watered ribbon of blue and white and sea-green, with the little silver rosette on it that meant he had been there, in the war zone, in the fighting. And next to it, a

general service medal from somewhere afterwards that Eric had never talked about and Jono had never asked.

Eric saw him looking.

"Jo pinned them," he said. "Said if I was going to stand in the line I'd better look like I meant it."

He came down the stairs. Stick, good foot, boot. Like a man walking down his own stairs. He did not look at the boot. He looked at Jono, all the way, twenty-two steps, and at the bottom he did not stop to get his breath. He stood on the pavement and put his stick under his arm, and straightened his coat, and looked at the street.

"Right," said Eric. "Let's go and stand up."

* * *

The Strand was full.

It was Tuesday, a working day, and the big parade had been on Sunday. Jono had expected the old men and the standards and a few people stopping on their way to work. He had not expected the crowd. It filled the gardens round the memorial and spilled out onto the pavement by the harbour and up the steps to the road, quiet, in coats, with poppies, more people than he had ever seen there on the eleventh itself.

He looked at them, sideways, the way he always did. At the air over their heads.

The lamps were very bright. A whole crowd of them, amber and steady and some nearly white, moving a little as people shifted their feet in the cold. Like a switchboard on the fifth floor with every line lit.

And he understood, slowly, standing at the top of the steps with Eric beside him, why there were so many.

The *Herald Express* had run it on the Friday. Not the cable chamber; the DI had kept that out of the papers, and would keep it out, he said, until somebody could be charged, which would be never. But the club. A paragraph on page five. *Ellacombe boxing coach, Falklands veteran, home after illness. Will stand at cenotaph for first time.* Jo had given it to them. Jono had not asked her how.

They had come to see him stand.

* * *

The veterans were lining up in front of the memorial. Old men, mostly. A few women. A row of them in their berets and blazers and medals, with the standards behind, the Legion and the Navy and a Marines standard held up by a big man of about seventy with a white moustache and a green beret, very straight, with the flag cracking in the wind over his head.

Eric stopped at the edge of the line.

Jono saw him stop. Saw his hand go tight on the stick. Thirty-three years at the back of the crowd, by the railings, alone, with the medals in his pocket. And now ten yards of open stone between him and the end of the line, with three hundred people watching.

The big man with the Marines standard turned his head.

He looked at Eric. At the coat, the boot, the stick, the medals. At the face. For a long time. And then something happened to his own face, under the white moustache.

"Prowse?" he said.

Eric looked at him.

"Forty-two Commando," said the big man. "K Company. Harriet." His voice had gone very strange. "We left you on the side of that hill. We thought... the casevac said you'd gone. They said you'd been brought in dead." He stared. "I've been standing here every year for forty-nine years thinking about you."

Eric did not say anything for a long time.

"I wasn't dead," he said at last. "Somebody sat with me."

The big man looked at him. Then he moved. Shifted the standard to his other hand, and stepped half a pace sideways, so that there was a gap in the line. At the end. Next to him.

"Then get in, you daft sod," he said. "You're late."

* * *

Eric went down the ten yards of stone.

Stick, good foot, boot. In front of three hundred people. Jono walked beside him, not touching, half a pace behind, the way Jo had climbed half a rung above Chris in the riser, ready, not helping.

He got to the gap. He stood in it. Next to the big man with the standard.

Then he took the stick from under his arm and held it out behind him, without looking. And Jo was there. Jono had not seen her come. She was there behind them, in her black coat, with a poppy on it, and her hair scraped back, and her hand came out and took the stick.

Eric stood on his own.

On the good leg and the boot. In the line. With his medals on his chest. His hands at his sides. Straight.

Jono stood beside him. Not in the line. Next to it. A step in front of the crowd, on the stone, where Eric had told him to stand, the night of the eighth, with the lamp off. *You're standing next to me.* Jo behind them both, with the stick.

And somewhere behind her, in the crowd, Jono knew without looking, the others. Chris, with Karen's arm through his good one. Wendy, in a wheelchair from the hospital, with a tartan rug over her knees, ninety-six, who had stood at this memorial in November

1945 at the age of ten with her mother, in the first year after, when all the names were new. Shannon and Kai and Lee and Ryan and their mum, who was not late, for once. Rani, in her coat with the poppy. Clifford.

And at the back, by the railings of the inner harbour, where Eric had stood for thirty-three years, a young man in a dark jacket with his hands in his pockets and two lamps over his head, the near one and the far one, very bright in the clear cold morning.

* * *

At a minute to eleven Jono took the watch out of his inside pocket.

He opened it. The cracked glass. The hand going round. He held it in his palm.

Then he turned round, and held it out to Jo.

She looked at it. At him.

"Somebody has to keep the time," said Jono. "Even when nobody's talking."

Jo looked at the watch for a long moment. Then she put Eric's stick under her arm, and took it. In her palm. Open. The way his grandfather had held it, between them, so that the boy could see.

"It's Holmes's," said Jono quietly. "Jack's. Johnny's. Douglas's. Mine." He looked at her. "You wind it every night. You never miss. And you write down the time." He paused. "And when you're old, you give it to whoever's next. And the pocketbooks with it. All of them. Jack's thirty-one and my thirty-four and whatever you write." He did not look away from her. "You're the Hills now."

Jo did not say anything. She looked down at the watch in her hand, at the hand going round towards the twelve.

Then she nodded. Once.

"Eleven," she said.

* * *

The maroon went up from the harbour wall. A flat hard bang, and the gulls going up off the water all at once, crying.

And then the silence.

Three hundred people on the Strand. The traffic stopped on the road above. The flags cracking in the wind and nothing else. The boats knocking at their moorings. The gulls settling. A bus, a long way off, on the Babbacombe road, that did not know.

Jono stood beside the line with his hands at his sides and looked at Eric.

Eric was standing. On the good leg and the boot. Straight. His eyes open, looking at the memorial, at the names, at the stone. His hands at his sides. Not shaking. His breath going, very steady, in the cold, in front of him, white. In for four. Out for four. Jono watched it. Nobody else would have seen. In for four. Hold for four.

The wind came off the sea and pulled at his coat.

He did not move.

Jono thought about a hole in the rock on the side of a mountain in June 1982, and a woman in grey sitting down on the rim of it, with her hands folded on her knees. He thought about a concrete floor and six feet of chain and a nail in a sock. He thought about a man on the canvas in the first winter, saying *again*, and about a man standing in the dark on Saturday night with his hand flat on the wall of his own bedroom, four minutes and ten seconds, in the dark, on his own.

Somewhere up the hill behind the Strand, in the middle of the silence, a dog barked.

Once. Twice. And went on.

Jono felt something in his chest let go that he had not known was holding. He did not know if anybody else noticed. He did not think so. But he stood beside the line in the silence and listened to an ordinary dog barking at nothing, on an ordinary Tuesday, in Torquay, and thought it was the best sound he had ever heard.

Behind him, he could hear Jo breathing. Steady. Counting. And very faintly, under the wind, from the palm of her hand, a watch ticking.

* * *

"Two minutes," said Jo.

The bugle. The Last Post, thin and high and cracked a little at the top, from a boy of about fifteen in a cadet uniform who had practised it, Jono could tell, for weeks. Then the Reveille. Then the words, from the old man at the front with the wreath, that Jono had heard every year of his life beside his grandfather and had never once been able to say aloud himself.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.

He said them this year. Under his breath. With the crowd.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.

We will remember them, said three hundred people on the Strand.

Eric said it. Jono heard him. In the rasp that was nearly gone now. In the line.

And then it was over, and the line broke up, and the old men turned to each other and shook hands and stamped their feet in the cold, and the big man with the Marines standard put the standard into the hands of a boy and turned round and took hold of Eric by both shoulders and did not say anything at all, for a long time. And Eric stood there and let him.

Eric had not fallen. He had not moved.

Jo came forward and gave him back his stick.

* * *

Afterwards, on the steps up to the road, with the crowd going and the flags still cracking, Jono saw Keith come down from the railings.

He came slowly. Through the people. In his dark jacket, with his hands in his pockets. And he did not come to Jono. He did not come to Chris, who was standing at the top of the steps with Karen, watching him. He came to Jo.

He stopped in front of her. A yard away. On the steps.

Jo looked at him. The two-second look. Then longer.

Jono stood three steps down and did not move, and did not breathe.

"You're the one from the launderette," said Jo. "The first morning. Crying."

"Yes," said Keith.

She looked at him a while longer. At his face. At whatever she could see in it, which Jono could not.

"Dad says one day I can ask you how you knew me."

Dad. Jono heard it go past him in the cold air, and did not move.

"One day," said Keith. "Yes."

"Not today?"

"Not today." Keith looked at the watch in her hand. Holmes's watch. Open, still, on her palm. The hand going round. And something happened to his face that Jono had seen happen to it only once before, in the doorway of a launderette at seven in the morning

on the fourth of October. He did not cry. But it was close. "I lost two things on Sunday," he said. "I don't know what they were. I'll never know."

Jo looked at him.

She did not ask what he meant. She did not ask how a man could lose a thing and not know what it was. She looked at him with her head a little on one side, the way she looked at a boy who had come into the gym with his knuckles skinned and would not say how.

Then she said, quite simply, the way you say a thing you have said a thousand times, though she had never said it before in her life:

"Right. What did it cost?"

Keith stood very still on the steps.

He looked at her for a long time. Jono watched him look. Watched him hear it. Whatever it was. Whatever it meant, in a white room, in a building that did not exist yet, twenty-six years away, where a woman of forty-seven sat at a desk beside his and said it every time he came back.

Then Keith smiled.

Jono had never seen him smile. Not once, in three years. It went all the way up to his eyes, and stayed there.

"Five left," said Keith. "It's enough."

He turned, and went away up the steps, past Chris and Karen, and onto the road, and was gone along the harbour in the bright cold morning, towards Union Street, and the cellar, and the stone.

* * *

Jono went home to Preston at four, on the bus, and sat at the kitchen table in the last of the light, and took out the pocketbook.

The thirty-fourth. Started in March. Eleven pages of a wall at the back. A page in a hand that was not his. A page with only *A.* on it.

He wrote the date. The time. The weather. The place.

Tues. 11 Nov. 2031. The Strand, the war memorial, 11.00 a.m. Clear. Cold. Wind off the sea. Two minutes. E. in the line. Did not fall.

He sat and looked at it. Then he added the last thing. Because it was what he had seen, and because it was true, and because one day, a long way off, somebody would need to know:

J. behind, keeping the time.

He closed the book. He did not put it in his inside pocket. He put it on the table in front of him, square, beside the place where the watch used to lie at night when he wound it.

His hand went to his inside pocket, at ten o'clock, out of forty years of habit, to wind it.

It was not there.

He sat at the kitchen table in Preston and thought of it, ticking, in a flat somewhere in Torquay where his daughter was sitting on the edge of a bed, with the watch open on her palm and the little key in her fingers, turning it, for the first time. Carefully. Not too far.

Keeping the time.