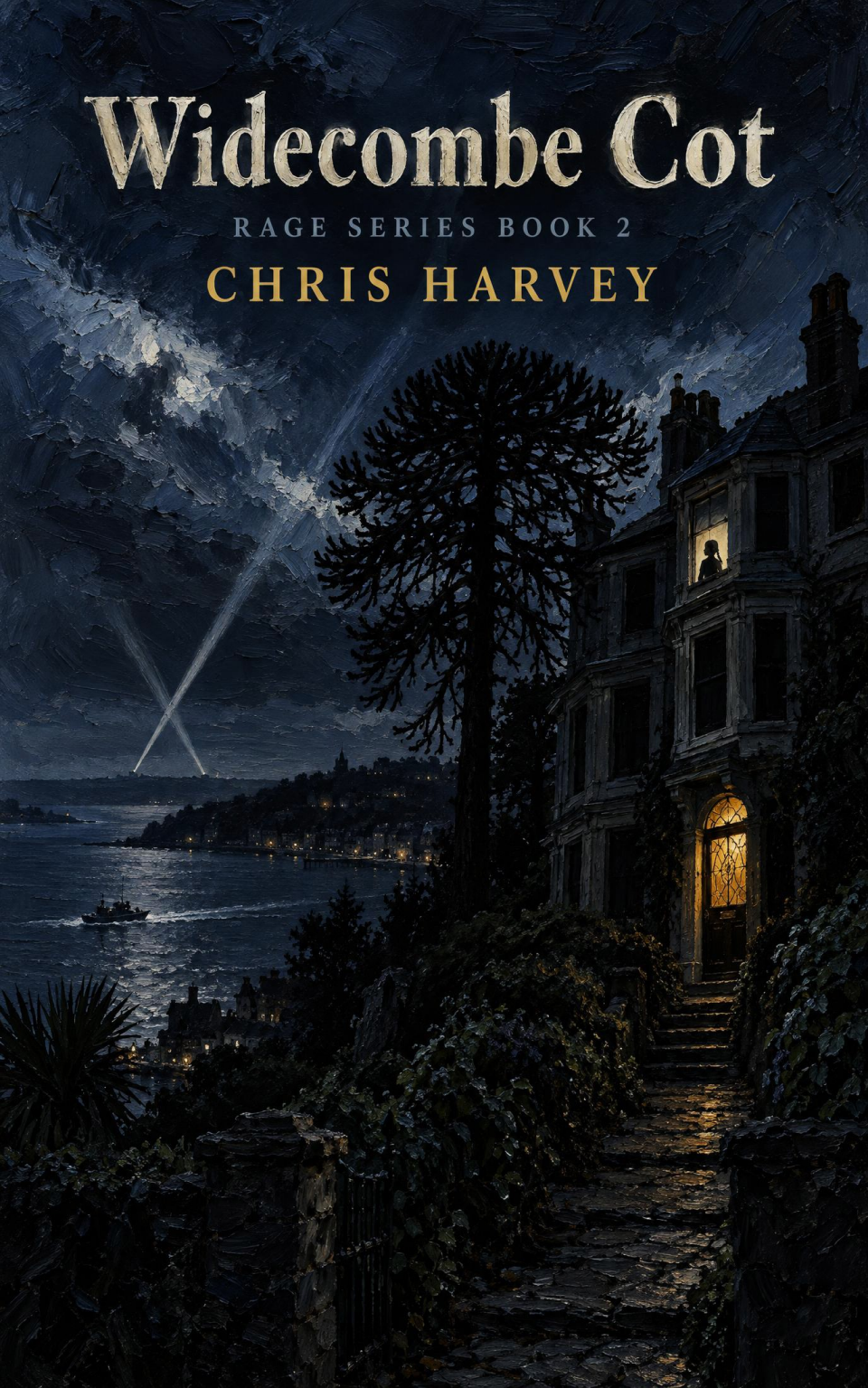
# Widecombe Cot

RAGE SERIES BOOK 2

CHRIS HARVEY



# Widecombe Cot

Chris Harvey



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# Contents

Chapter 1 – *The Envelope*.....1
Chapter 2 – *Johnny*.....15
Chapter 3 – *The Neutral Ship*.....29
Chapter 4 – *Station Square*.....43
Chapter 5 – *The 8.40*.....57
Chapter 6 – *The Telegram*.....67
Chapter 7 – *Write Everything Down*.....77
Chapter 8 – *The College Garden*.....87
Chapter 9 – *Hendon*.....97
Chapter 10 – *Nance*.....107
Chapter 11 – *Born Early*.....117
Chapter 12 – *Widecombe Cot*.....127
Chapter 13 – *The Back Room*.....137
Chapter 14 – *The Cadets*.....147
Chapter 15 – *Sweets*.....157
Chapter 16 – *SB Hall & Co*.....167
Chapter 17 – *Douglas*.....177
Chapter 18 – *The Raid*.....187
Chapter 19 – *The Tunnels*.....197
Chapter 20 – *The Chase*.....209
Chapter 21 – *Two Sides*.....219
Chapter 22 – *The Ledger*.....229
Chapter 23 – *The Americans*.....241
Chapter 24 – *Dawn at Widecombe Cot*.....253
Chapter 25 – *What He Said*.....265
Chapter 26 – *June*.....277
Chapter 27 – *Peace*.....289
Chapter 28 – *The Letter*.....303

# Chapter 1 – *The Envelope*

*Saturday, 9th October 1965. Arrivals: Mr H. Mallyon, Hendon. Room 1. Length of stay: permanent.*

I was seven when my mother bought a hotel in Torquay, and nobody told me why. I am thirty now, and nobody has told me yet.

I want that said first, because everything in this account depends on it. I have run Widecombe Cot with my mother since before I could see over the reception desk. I know every board in it that creaks and every tap that runs hot and cold the wrong way round. I know which guests will steal the towels before they have signed the register, and which will leave a ten-shilling note under the pillow for the girl who does the rooms. But I do not know how my mother paid for it. She has never said, and I stopped asking a long time ago. In this house, the questions that do not get answered are the ones that matter.

I wrote that line in the register myself, the one at the top of this page. My father has never had a room number in his own wife's hotel before. For twenty years, since the war, he came down from London at Christmas and for a fortnight in August, and slept in my mother's room at the top of the house, and went back to Hendon on the Sunday night train. Now he had sold the shop, and he was coming home, if that is the word for a place you have only ever

visited. My mother said he could have Room 1, on the ground floor, because of his knees. She said it the way she says everything: as if she had already thought of the objection, and dismissed it.

So I wrote it in the register in my best hand. *Length of stay: permanent.* And then I sat for a moment and looked at it, because I had never written that word in the register before. Nobody stays permanently in an hotel. That is the point of an hotel.

* * *

I went to meet him at Torquay station with my son.

Chris was three and a half that autumn and in love with trains, the way little boys are, as though trains had been invented for him personally and were slightly late in delivering on the promise. He stood at the end of the down platform holding my hand and watching the line for the Paddington train with such concentration that I could feel it through his glove. When it came round the curve from Torre, a long green diesel with a face like a disappointed bulldog, he said, "Oh," very quietly, and did not say anything else until it had stopped.

My father got down from the third carriage. He was seventy-two. He had been a tall man and was a stooped one now, in a tweed overcoat that was too warm for the day and a hat my mother would make him throw away within the week. He had two suitcases, a leather one I knew and a cardboard one I did not, and he looked along the platform for us with the same mild, patient, slightly puzzled expression he had worn in every photograph of him I have

ever seen, as if the world were a column of figures that did not quite add up and he was too polite to say so.

I have spent my whole life reading guests by their luggage. You cannot help it, in this trade. A man with a new case and old shoes has come into money. A woman with three cases for two nights is leaving somebody. A man who carries his own case and will not let the porter take it has something in it he does not want handled. My father would not let the porter take the cardboard case.

He saw us. His face changed, the way it always did when he saw Chris, as if somebody had turned up a lamp.

"Here he is," he said. "Here's the man."

Chris let go of my hand and walked up the platform to him, very upright, and held out his hand to be shaken, because I had been teaching him. My father put down the leather case, kept hold of the cardboard one, and shook the small hand gravely.

"Mr Harvey," he said. "Good afternoon."

"That was a Western," said Chris. "It's got a name on the side."

"Has it? What was its name?"

Chris did not know. He could not read yet. He looked back down the platform at the engine with a sort of anguish, and my father, who missed nothing, said, "Then we must go and look," and the two of them went, the old man and the little boy, all the way down the platform to the front of the train, my father carrying the cardboard case the whole time, and stood looking up at the nameplate while the driver leaned out of his cab and grinned at them.

I stood by the leather case and watched them, and I thought: he has been carrying that cardboard case like that since Paddington. Four hours. He has not put it down once.

* * *

My mother was waiting on the front step when the taxi came up the hill.

I should say something about my mother, since she will be in a great deal of what follows and will not like any of it. Her name is Nancy Mallyon. Everyone has called her Nance since before I was born, except my father, who calls her Nancy when he is pleased with her and Mrs Mallyon when he is not. She was fifty that year. She is small and very straight, with grey eyes and a way of folding her arms that has stopped coach drivers, commercial travellers, Royal Air Force officers and on one occasion a bishop in their tracks. She has run Widecombe Cot for twenty-three years without a manager, without a husband on the premises, and for most of the war without enough of anything, and in all that time I have never known her to be ill, or late, or wrong about the weather.

She is not a soft woman. I loved her very much and I was afraid of her for most of my childhood, and I think she would say that both were as they should be.

She watched my father pay the taxi and get out his cases. She did not come down the steps to help. When he got to the top she looked at him for a long moment, at the hat and the overcoat and the

cardboard case, and then she put up her hand and straightened his tie, which did not need it.

"You're late," she said.

"The train was late."

"Trains are always late. You should have allowed for it." She kissed his cheek, briefly. "Room One. I've had the girl air it. You'll want your tea."

"I'll want my tea," said my father, and they went in together, and I stood on the step holding Chris's hand and felt, as I always did when I saw them together, that I was watching two people who had agreed something a very long time ago and had never once needed to discuss it since.

* * *

Widecombe Cot is not a cottage, and it has nothing to do with Widecombe, which is a village on Dartmoor with a church tower and a fair and a song about a grey mare that every child in Devon is made to learn. The house is a tall cream Victorian villa with a slate roof and a monkey puzzle in the front garden, eleven letting bedrooms, a dining room that seats twenty-four if nobody minds their elbows, and a sign by the gate that my mother has repainted every spring since 1946. Whoever built it gave it the name, and nobody has ever known why. My mother says that a house which does not explain itself suits her very well.

In the war there were twelve of us living in it, counting the guests, and some nights a good many more than that, counting

people who were not guests and did not sign the register. I will come to that.

There is a room at the back, behind the kitchen, that we call the back room. It has a fireplace and a long deal table and a window onto the yard where the dustbins are. In the season it is where the girls have their dinner. Out of the season my mother does the accounts there. In the war it had another use, which nobody ever told me about and which I worked out for myself by the time I was eight, because children who carry trays in and out of rooms hear everything and are noticed by nobody. I will come to that too.

My father had his tea in the back room that afternoon, at the end of the long table, with Chris on the bench beside him eating a jam tart with the elaborate care of a child who has been told not to get jam on Grandad. My mother sat across from him with her own cup and did not drink it. I washed up at the sink by the window, with my back to them, which is where I have always done my best listening.

They talked about the journey, and about the sale of the shop, and about a man called Mr Prothero who had bought the business and would, my father said, run it into the ground inside two years because he did not understand that people in Hendon bought their bacon from a grocer they trusted and not from a grocer who was cheap. They talked about the Grocers' Association, of which my father had been Secretary for thirty years, and which had given him a carriage clock. The carriage clock was in the leather case. My

father said it lost four minutes a day and he had not the heart to tell them.

They did not talk about the cardboard case. It was on the floor under the table, by my father's feet. Every so often, without looking, he moved his foot so that it touched the side of it.

* * *

He gave it to me that evening, when Chris was asleep.

I had put Chris to bed in the little room at the top of the house, the one with the sloping ceiling. It is the room he was born in. David and I had been married a year when I fell for him, and we had our own house in Paignton by then, but when the time came I wanted my mother, and my mother wanted me where she could see me, and so I came home to Widecombe Cot to have him, in the room I had slept in from the age of seven, with the gulls on the roof and the sound of the sea at the bottom of the hill. David said he did not mind. David has never minded anything my mother wanted, which is one of the reasons I married him, and one of the reasons my mother allowed it.

Chris and I had moved back into the house for the month, to help my mother settle my father in, and David was staying with us that weekend, so that my father would have a full house to come home to. He had taken his own father, Leonard, down to the Yacht Club for a drink, because Leonard and my father have known each other for a long time, longer than I understood until I began to write this, and Leonard said that a man arriving somewhere for good

ought to be left alone with his wife for an evening. So the house was quiet. The season was over. We had two guests, a retired couple from Solihull in Room 7 who had gone to the pictures.

My father came and found me in the back room. My mother was in the office, at the front, doing the week's figures, with the door shut.

He had the cardboard case. He put it on the long table and opened it, and I saw that it was nearly empty. A few ledgers, old ones, with the Grocers' Association crest on them. A bundle of letters tied with string. A Bible I did not recognise. And on top, by itself, a long airmail envelope, pale blue, the kind with the red and blue chevrons round the edge.

He took it out and held it for a moment. Then he put it on the table in front of me.

It was addressed in a hand I did not know, upright and educated and a little shaky, to *Miss Wendy Mallyon, c/o Mallyon's Provisions, Brent Street, Hendon, London NW4, England.* Miss. Not Mrs Harvey. Whoever had written it had not known I was married, or had not cared. The stamps were Canadian. The postmark said Toronto, and a date in February.

Pinned to the back of it with a dressmaker's pin was a second letter, typed, on the notepaper of a firm of solicitors in Toronto. I read that first. It said that the enclosed had been entrusted to the firm by their late client, with instructions that it should be forwarded to the addressee on his death and not before, and that they regretted to inform me that their client had passed away on the

fourteenth of January, after a short illness, and that they had the honour to remain my obedient servants.

The name of the late client was typed at the bottom of the solicitors' letter, and it was written again, by hand, on the back of the airmail envelope, over the flap.

I knew it. I had not seen it written down for twenty-one years. I am not going to write it here. I find, sitting at this table, that I do not want to. I will call him what my mother always called him, when she called him anything at all, which was the Canadian.

"It came to the shop in March," my father said. "I've had it on the mantelpiece since. I didn't know whether to give it to you." He sat down on the bench, slowly, because of his knees. "I thought about burning it, Wendy. More than once. I'm not proud of that. It's addressed to you. It was never mine to burn."

"Does Mum know?"

"She knows now. I told her this afternoon." He looked at the shut door that led through to the front of the house. "She asked me to give it to her. I said no." He paused. "It's the first time in thirty years I've said no to your mother about anything that mattered. I'd be obliged if you didn't mention it."

I sat and looked at the envelope.

I was seven when I met him and eight when I last saw him. I remember him very clearly and I do not trust a single thing I remember. I remember that he was kind. I remember that he always had sweets, in the war, when nobody had sweets. I remember that he wanted to take me to Canada and that my mother would not let him

and that there was a morning, very early, in the summer of 1944, when I was put into the back of a car in my nightdress and taken out of it again, and that a policeman I loved was there, and that nobody would ever explain to me afterwards what had happened. And I remember the thing that was said in this town for years, and is still said, by people who think I cannot hear them: that my mother married my father very quickly in 1935, and that I came a little sooner than a wedding date would explain, and that there had been a Canadian in London the year before.

I am thirty years old and I have never asked my mother if it is true. I am not going to ask her now.

"Aren't you going to open it?" said my father.

"No," I said. "Not yet."

He looked at me with that mild, puzzled face, the column of figures that did not add up.

"I'm going to write it all down first," I said. I had not known I was going to say it until I said it, but as soon as it was out I knew that it was right. "Everything I remember. Everything anyone ever told me. Everything I worked out for myself in that back room with a tray in my hands. All of it, from the beginning, before I read a word of what he says. Because whatever is in there," I put my finger on the envelope, "it's going to change things. It's going to change what I remember. I know it is. And I want to have it written down the way it was, before it changes."

My father did not say anything for a long time. Outside in the yard a gull landed on the dustbin lid and walked about on it with a

noise like somebody tapping a tin plate. Through the wall I could hear the adding machine in my mother's office, chattering and stopping, chattering and stopping.

"Do you know," said my father at last, "there's a man in Torquay who would say that was the most sensible thing he'd heard in thirty years."

"Who?"

"Johnny Hills."

I had not heard that name in my father's mouth for a very long time either. Johnny Hills is seventy-five now. He was a policeman in Torquay for forty years. He was the policeman in the road that morning in 1944, in his uniform, with his hand on the car door. He lives in a bungalow at Preston with a great many books and a very old dog, and I have not been to see him since my wedding, and I could not have told you why.

"His father was the same," my father said. "Old Jack. Wrote everything down, all his life. In little books." He put both his hands flat on the long deal table, the way he puts them on a counter when he is about to tell a customer a price they will not like. "You go and see Johnny, Wendy. Before you start. Ask him about 1915."

"What happened in 1915?"

My father looked at me. Then he looked at the shut door to the front of the house, where the adding machine had stopped.

"Ask Johnny," he said.

* * *

I put the envelope in the drawer of the dressing table in my old room at the top of the house, under my winter jumpers, where Chris could not reach it and where I would not see it every time I went to the wardrobe. Then I sat on the end of the bed in the dark for a while and listened to him breathing in his cot, and to the sea at the bottom of the hill, and to my mother coming up the stairs at eleven o'clock, slowly, and stopping outside my door, and standing there, and then going on.

In the morning I went down early to do the breakfasts for the couple from Solihull, as I always do, and before I laid the table I opened the register on the reception desk to check the week's bookings, as I always do.

There was nothing much. The season was over. The Solihull couple were leaving on the Tuesday. A commercial traveller in ladies' hosiery, who had stayed with us every October for eleven years, was due on the Wednesday for two nights.

And on the Friday, the fifteenth, there was one more line. It had not been there on Saturday afternoon when I wrote my father's name. I would have seen it. It was written in ink, in a hand I knew better than my own: small, very neat, perfectly regular, the letters all the same height, like print.

> *Friday, 15th October. Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.*

Room 3 has the view of the bay. It is the best room in the house. My mother has kept it for her, every October, for as long as I can remember.

She has not changed. That is the first thing I will have to write about her, and I will have to write it plainly, because nobody who reads this will believe it otherwise. I was seven when I first saw her, in this house, in 1942. She was a young woman then, with dark hair and a grey costume and a face that was neither pretty nor plain. I am thirty now, and there is grey coming into my own hair at the temples, and my mother is fifty, and my father is an old man.

She will come up the hill on Friday afternoon with a carpet bag. She will be about twenty-five.

I closed the register and went and laid the table for breakfast. Then I came back here, to the back room, to the long deal table, with a new exercise book from the newsagent's on Union Street and the pen my father gave me for my eleventh birthday, and I began.

# Chapter 2 – *Johnny*

*Tuesday, 12th October 1965. To Preston, by the 2.15 bus. Mr J. Hills. Took a cake.*

I took a cake because my mother told me to. She came into the kitchen while I was putting my coat on, looked at me, looked at the cake tin on the side, and said, "You're going to see Johnny Hills." It was not a question. Nobody had told her. I had not told my father which day I would go, and my father had not been out of Room 1 since breakfast except to walk to the end of the road and back for his paper.

"Take him the Victoria sponge," she said. "He won't have had a proper cake since Edie died." Edie was his wife. She died in 1958. My mother sent a wreath and did not go to the funeral, and I have never known why that was either.

So I went on the 2.15 bus along the front to Preston with a Victoria sponge on my knee in a tin with a picture of the Queen on the lid, and walked up from the sea road to a street of red-brick bungalows built for retired people who liked to see the water, and knocked at the door of the one with the most books in the window.

* * *

He was bigger than I remembered, which I had not expected. You think the people you looked up to as a child will have shrunk when you see them again as a grown woman, and mostly they have. Johnny Hills had not. He was seventy-five and he filled his own

doorway, a broad, heavy, slow man in a cardigan with leather patches on the elbows, with white hair cut very short and a pair of reading glasses pushed up on his forehead and forgotten there. His hands were enormous. I remembered his hands better than his face. I remembered one of them on the handle of a car door.

He looked at me for a long moment without saying anything. Then he looked at the cake tin.

"Nance sent that," he said.

"Yes."

"Then you'd better come in before she finds out I kept you on the step."

The bungalow was all books. I do not mean that there were a great many books in it, though there were. I mean that the books were the bungalow, and the furniture and the man and the dog had been fitted in round them afterwards, wherever there was room. They were on shelves to the ceiling in the front room and stacked on the floor along the walls and piled on the arms of chairs. History, mostly. Naval history and military history and the history of Devon, and a whole long shelf of books about policemen, and another of books about the war, both wars, with their dust jackets gone soft and grey at the edges from being taken down and put back. On the hearthrug lay a very old black Labrador with a white muzzle, who opened one eye at me and thumped his tail twice on the rug and went back to sleep.

"That's Major," said Johnny Hills. "He was a police dog. He's retired. We both are." He took the cake from me and carried it out to the kitchen as if it were evidence, and I heard the kettle go on.

On the mantelpiece, beside a clock, there was a watch lying on its back on a folded handkerchief. An old gold hunter, the lid open, the glass cracked right across. While the kettle was boiling Johnny came back in, picked it up without looking at it, wound it, ten turns exactly, and put it down again on the handkerchief. Then he saw me watching him.

"My father's," he said. "He wound it every night of his life. I've wound it every night of mine since he died. It's never lost more than a minute in a week." He paused. "It wasn't his, originally. He was given it."

"Who by?"

He did not answer that. He went back out to the kitchen and came in with a tray, and two cups, and two slices of my mother's sponge on two plates, and sat down in the armchair opposite me, very slowly, the way my father sits down, and looked at me over the tea things.

"Your father rang me," he said. "On Saturday night. From the telephone in the hall at Widecombe Cot, when your mother was in the bath. He said there'd been a letter. From Canada." He did not take his eyes off my face. "He said you were going to write it all down before you opened it."

"Yes."

"Good," said Johnny Hills. "Good girl."

I am thirty years old, a married woman with a son, and I have been helping to run an hotel since I was twelve, and I felt my face go hot as if I were nine.

* * *

He did not start with 1915. He started with his father.

I am going to set down what he told me as near as I can to the way he told it, because I wrote it in the exercise book on the bus home with the cake tin on my knee, before I could lose any of it. It is not the way I would have told it. Johnny Hills talked like a policeman giving evidence, slowly and in order, with the dates first and the feelings left out, and every so often he would stop and go back and correct himself on some small point that did not seem to matter, a time or the colour of a coat. I have come to think that those were the points that mattered most to him.

His father was John Hills. Everyone called him Jack. He was born at Harberton, out past Totnes, in 1867, the son of a farm labourer, and he joined the County police at twenty-two and was a constable at Paignton for six years and then, after something that happened in the winter of 1895, a sergeant at Brixham, and then an inspector, at Torquay, and he retired in 1920 with thirty-one years' service and a gold watch from the Watch Committee that he never wore, because he already had a watch.

"He married my mother in 1889," Johnny said. "Mary. A Brixham girl. A fisherman's daughter, with four brothers bigger than he was. I was the first. I came along the next year, in the spring.

Then my sister Annie. Then Henry, in 'ninety-six. He was named for a tram driver who was killed." He stopped. "That's another story. It's in the books."

"What books?"

He looked at me for a long time. Then he heaved himself up out of the armchair, and went to a cupboard in the corner of the room, under the bookshelves, and unlocked it with a key from his waistcoat pocket, and took out a japanned tin box, black, with the paint worn through to the metal at the corners, about the size of a shoebox. He brought it back and put it on the low table between us, beside the cake, and opened the lid.

It was full of little notebooks. Pocketbooks, the kind with a band of elastic round them that a man can carry in his breast pocket. Black ones and brown ones and one or two dark red, their covers rubbed and softened, their spines cracked, standing on end in the box in a row like books on a shelf, each one with a date written on a paper label gummed to its spine in faded ink.

"Thirty-one of them," said Johnny Hills. "My father started the first one in November 1895, and he wrote in the last one the week before he died. That was 1947. He was eighty." He put one finger on the first book in the row, very lightly, the way you would touch something in a museum. "They're not his police pocketbooks. Those went back to the County. These were his own. He wrote down everything in them. Everything he saw and everything he was told and everything he did, with the time and the date and the weather. All his life. He used to say that a man who writes things down as

they happen is worth any ten men who explain them afterwards. He had that from somebody else, too."

I did not touch them. I wanted to, very much. I kept my hands in my lap.

"Will you let me read them?"

"No," said Johnny Hills.

He said it quite kindly. He closed the lid of the box, and put his hand flat on it.

"I'll tell you what's in them about 1915," he said. "And I'll read you bits, where it matters. But I'll not let you read them, Wendy. Not because there's anything in them that's secret, though there is. Because there's things in the early ones, from before I was born and just after, that you wouldn't believe. And if you didn't believe those, you wouldn't believe the rest. And the rest is true." He tapped the lid. "It's all true. That's the trouble with it."

I asked him what sort of things.

He looked at the old dog on the hearthrug for a while.

"There was a lady," he said at last. "A foreign lady. She used to come to our house in Princes Street sometimes, when I was a little lad. Polish, my mother said, if anyone asked. She'd sit in the kitchen and drink tea, and hold the cup in both hands like a tram man does, and she never said very much, and she never seemed to feel the cold. My mother liked her. My father thought the world of her. I used to sit under the table and look at her shoes." He stopped. "I was six. I didn't think anything about it."

He took his reading glasses down off his forehead, looked at them, and put them back.

"I'll come to her," he said. "She's in 1915."

* * *

I am going to try to set down what Torbay was like in 1915, because I was not born and Johnny Hills was twenty-five, and the way he described it is the only way I have of seeing it.

It was the second year of the war. Nobody had thought there would be a second year. In August 1914 the young men of Paignton and Torquay and Brixham had joined up in a great rush, in case it was over by Christmas and they missed it, and by the autumn of 1915 the rush was over and the lists had started. They put the lists up outside the newspaper office in Torquay, the names of the local men killed and wounded and missing, and people went every morning to read them, the way you go to the window to look at the weather.

The big houses were hospitals. The great white mansion at Oldway, above Paignton, that the sewing-machine people had built, was full of wounded men in blue hospital suits and red ties, and you would see them in the town in the afternoons, on sticks, or being wheeled along the front in bath chairs by girls in white aprons, looking at the sea. There were Belgian families in the town, refugees, who had come over in the first winter with nothing, and who were looked after by committees of ladies and talked about in the shops. There were soldiers in training on the downs. There were

rules about lights after dark, and about photographs, and about what you could say in a letter. And there was the fever.

"Spy fever," said Johnny Hills. "You've heard of it. Everybody had it. The whole country. In 1914 and 1915 every foreigner was a German spy and every German was a spy twice over. There was a Swiss waiter at one of the big hotels on the front that a crowd tried to throw in the harbour, because he spoke English with an accent. There was a lady at Preston, not two hundred yards from where we're sitting, who reported her own lodger because he went out on the cliffs at night with a lamp. He was looking for moths." He shook his head. "I took that report. I was a constable at Paignton by then. Twenty-five years old. Five years in. I spent half that summer taking reports of spies, and every single one of them was a moth, or a lamp, or a Belgian, or a man with a beard."

He turned his cup round in its saucer.

"That's how he got through, I think," he said. "In the end. Everybody had been crying wolf for a year. Nobody was listening any more. And then a real one came."

I asked him who.

"I'll come to him," he said.

* * *

His father was an inspector at Torquay that year, at the station in Market Street. He was forty-eight. He had been a policeman for twenty-six years and a sergeant and an inspector for nineteen of them, and Johnny said that in all that time he had never once taken a

drink he had not paid for or written a report he did not believe, and that this had made him respected and not much liked, and that it had probably cost him a superintendent's job, which had gone to other men.

"There was a Superintendent at Torquay," Johnny said, "near to retiring by then, that my father had served under as a young man. Handsome old gentleman. Very well liked. A great man for the dinners and the Masonic. My father never once in his life called him by his first name, and never once said a word against him, and never once, that I saw, took a cigarette off him." He paused. "I didn't know why, then. It's in the books."

And Edward Harvey was still on the trams. He was forty-six. He was an inspector too, by then, of a kind, a regulator, the man in the little hut at the bottom of Torwood Street with a watch and a ledger who saw the cars in and out and kept them to time, and Johnny said he hated it, because a regulator does not ride the cars, and a man who does not ride the cars does not talk to the passengers.

"But he still had them," Johnny said. "All of them. Every driver and conductor on the line. And the new girls too, by then, because the men had gone to the war and the Company had started taking on girls as conductors, and Ted Harvey had them in his pocket inside a week. If a stranger got on a car anywhere between Paignton and St Marychurch, Ted Harvey knew about it by the time it got to the depot." He smiled, the first time I had seen him smile. "He'd married late. A widow from Cockington with a little girl.

Then they had boys of their own. Your father-in-law was one of them. Leonard. He'd have been four, that autumn."

I sat very still. I had known, of course, that Leonard's father had been on the trams. David had told me. I had not known that he and Johnny Hills's father had been friends. I had not known that my husband's grandfather and the policeman who stopped the car in 1944 had both been in the same story, forty years before I was born.

"Were they friends?" I said. "Your father and Edward Harvey?"

Johnny Hills looked at me as if I had asked whether the sea was wet.

"They were Rage," he said.

* * *

I did not know the word. I want to put that down honestly, because people have asked me since how much I knew as a child, in the war, in the back room at Widecombe Cot, and the answer is that I knew a great deal and understood almost none of it, and I had never heard the name.

Johnny Hills did not explain it. Not then. He said it was his father's to explain and his father was dead, and that it was in the books, and that it had started in the winter of 1895 with his father and Ted Harvey and the foreign lady, and some others, in a cider house at the top of Winner Street that wasn't there any more, and that it had been a joke, the name, a word Ted Harvey had said in a temper, and that it had stuck.

"And it went on," he said. "After. They kept it going. My father and Ted, and her, and one or two others. Sam Hannaford, that was a newsboy in 'ninety-five and had a printing business in Torquay by the war. Old Amos Pengelly, till he died. They met once a month, wherever they could. They didn't do much, most years. They watched. They wrote things down. My father used to say that was most of it, most years. Watching, and writing it down, and waiting." He looked down at the tin box under his hand. "And in October 1915 he took me to my first meeting. In the back room at Bailey's Hotel. I didn't know where we were going till we got there."

I asked him why his father had taken him then, after twenty years, and not before.

"Because something was coming," said Johnny Hills. "And she'd told him so."

He opened the tin box again, and ran his finger along the row of labelled spines until he found the one he wanted, and took it out, and slipped off the elastic band. It was a dark red book, small, with the corners worn round. He opened it at a page near the middle, held it a long way from his face, gave up, and pulled his reading glasses down off his forehead at last.

He read it aloud. I have it here as he read it, word for word, because I asked him to read it twice.

> *Tues. 28 Sept. 1915. 9 p.m. Bailey's, back room. E.H., S.H., Ania, self. Brought J. for the first time. Ania says a ship from the south is coming into the Channel this week. A neutral. Dutch. A man on her who is not what his papers say. She says he must*

*not be stopped, and he must be watched. Asked her how she knows. Same answer as always.*

He closed the book.

"What was the same answer?" I said.

"She didn't give one," said Johnny Hills. "She never did. Twenty years my father had known her by then, and she never once in all that time told him how she knew a single thing. She'd just say it. And it'd be so." He put the book back in its place in the row. "That was the first time I'd seen her since I was a little lad under the kitchen table. I knew her straight away. I'd have known her anywhere. Same face, same grey costume, near enough, same way of sitting with her hands round her cup. I said good evening, Miss Ania, and she said good evening, Johnny, you have grown. And I sat down at the end of the table and I didn't hear another word anybody said for ten minutes, because I was doing the sum."

"What sum?"

"I was six," said Johnny Hills, "when she used to sit in my mother's kitchen. She looked about twenty-five. I was twenty-five, at that table in Bailey's. And she still did." He took the reading glasses off and folded them and held them in his big hands. "I'm seventy-five now, Wendy. And I'll tell you something your father won't. She was at my Edie's funeral in 1958, standing at the back of the church. Nobody else knew who she was. And she looked about twenty-five."

The old dog on the hearthrug sighed in his sleep and stretched his legs out.

"She's booked in at Widecombe Cot on Friday," I said. "Room 3. She comes every October."

"I know," said Johnny Hills. "She always has." He looked at me. "You've seen her too, then. Since the war."

"Every year."

"And you've done the sum."

I did not answer. I had been doing it for twenty years, every October, and I had never once said it out loud to anyone, and I found that I could not say it now either.

He nodded slowly, as if I had said it.

"Then you'll believe the rest," he said, and opened the tin box again. "Have another slice of your mother's cake. It's a long way to Rotterdam."

# Chapter 3 – *The Neutral Ship*

> *Thurs. 30 Sept. 1915. Wind SW, fresh, falling light. Dutch steamer from Buenos Aires anchored in the bay off Brixham, 4 p.m., under escort. Examination service alongside. J. to Brixham tonight, to Mary's people. Told him: watch, do not touch.*

That is from his father's book. Johnny Hills read it to me in the second hour, when the light had started to go outside his window and the sea at the bottom of the road had turned the colour of pewter, and Major had got up off the hearthrug and gone to lie against the radiator instead.

The rest of this chapter is what Johnny told me himself. He was there. He was twenty-five and he had been a policeman for five years, and he had never in his life, he said, been so frightened of doing the wrong thing, which is not the same as being frightened.

* * *

I should explain about the ships, because I did not understand it either until Johnny explained it to me, and he had it from his father, who had it from a naval officer, later, in a way I will come to.

In 1915 the Navy stopped everything. Every ship coming up the Channel from anywhere in the world, if she was not British, was stopped, and boarded, and searched, to see whether she was carrying anything for Germany. Not only guns. Copper and rubber

and wool and cotton and coffee and fats, anything that an army could use or a country at war could eat. The neutral ships hated it. The Dutch and the Norwegians and the Danes and the Americans hated it most of all, because they were neutral and said so loudly, and because a ship that is held for three days off Falmouth or in the Downs while a lieutenant in a boat cloak counts her bales of wool is a ship that is losing her owners money.

And they searched the passengers. That was the part that mattered to us. A German reservist going home from South America to fight could not sail on a German ship, because there were no German ships any more on the open sea; they were all sunk or interned. So he sailed on a neutral, with neutral papers, as a Dutchman or a Swede or a Swiss or a Chilean, and he trusted to the papers and his face and his nerve to get him past the boarding officer and on to Rotterdam, and from Rotterdam it was a night on the train to Germany.

"Most of them didn't get past," Johnny said. "The boarding officers were good. They'd been doing it a year. They'd look at a man's hands, and his boots, and how he held a knife and fork in the saloon, and they'd ask him the name of the street he lived on in Valparaíso and the name of the man who kept the shop on the corner. And then they'd take him off in the boat, and he'd spend the rest of the war in a camp on the Isle of Man." He paused. "Most of them."

The Dutch steamer came into the bay on the last day of September.

She was not supposed to. She should have been examined off Falmouth and sent on up the Channel. But there had been some difficulty, Johnny said, some question about her cargo or her papers that the Falmouth officers could not settle, and she had been sent on up the coast under the eye of a naval trawler to be looked at again, by somebody senior, and the weather had come up from the south-west in the afternoon, and she had been brought into the shelter of the bay for the night, off Brixham, with her anchor down and the trawler lying off her quarter and an armed boarding steamer alongside with its lamps lit.

"You could see her from the breakwater," Johnny said. "Big black ship with a yellow funnel and DUTCH painted down her side in letters ten foot high, so nobody would mistake her and put a torpedo in her. Lit up like a pier. Every porthole. Neutrals did that, then, to show they had nothing to hide." He shook his head slowly. "Ania said a ship from the south. A neutral. Dutch. Two days before. And there she was."

* * *

His mother's people were the Brixham side of the family.

I had not known this either, and it pleased me, because it made Johnny Hills more of Torbay than I had thought him, and I had always thought him the most Torbay man I knew. His mother Mary was a fisherman's daughter from the quay. She had four brothers, and the eldest of them was Reuben, and by 1915 Reuben was past sixty and had given up the sea, but his sons had not, nor his

nephews, and between them, Johnny said, the Brixham Hills cousins and the Brixham uncles had a share in three trawlers and an opinion about every boat in the harbour.

"My father sent me to Uncle Reuben's," he said. "In my own clothes. With a bottle of rum my mother had been keeping for Christmas. He said to me, Johnny, you'll sit with your uncle on the end of the breakwater, and you'll smoke, and you'll drink a drop of that rum, and you'll watch that Dutchman, and if anything comes off her that isn't the Navy, you'll see where it goes. And you'll not touch it. And you'll not show your warrant card to a living soul. And you'll come back and tell me." He was quiet for a moment. "And he said, she says he must not be stopped. I asked him what she meant. He said he didn't know. He said it was the first time in twenty years she'd said a thing like that, and it frightened him."

"Why?"

"Because she'd always told them to stop things before," said Johnny Hills. "That was what Rage was for."

* * *

So he sat on the end of the breakwater with his Uncle Reuben, in the dark, in the wind, with the bottle between them.

The breakwater at Brixham runs out a long way from the land, a great grey arm of stone with a lighthouse at the end of it, and in the dark, Johnny said, it is like sitting at the end of the world. Behind them was the harbour, and the town going up the hill in its dark stacked rows, with only a few lights showing because of the

regulations. In front of them, a mile off across the black water, was the Dutchman, blazing.

They sat there from nine o'clock until past one. Uncle Reuben talked for the first hour, about fish and the price of coal and the boys at the front, and then he stopped talking and smoked. Johnny watched the ship.

There was a good deal to watch, at first. The boarding steamer's boat went back and forth twice in the first hour, with lanterns, and once there was singing from somewhere on the Dutchman's deck, a man's voice and a guitar, in a language Johnny didn't know, very faint across the water and then gone in the wind. At eleven o'clock the boarding steamer put out most of her lamps. At midnight the singing had stopped and the Dutchman's portholes began to go out, one by one, along her side, until there was nothing left but her riding lights and the lamps on her gangway and a row of three lit windows high up aft, which Uncle Reuben said would be the officers' saloon.

"Nothing'll come off her now," Uncle Reuben said. "Not with the Navy sitting on her."

And at twenty past one, Johnny said, his uncle put a hand on his arm.

He had not heard anything. Uncle Reuben had. A Brixham man who has been at sea for forty years hears an oar in the water the way you or I would hear our own name.

"Off her bow," said Uncle Reuben. "Away from the Navy. Look under the light, not at it."

And Johnny looked under the light, and he saw it.

A small boat. A punt, or a dinghy, low in the water, black against black, coming away from the Dutchman's bow on the side away from the boarding steamer. No lamp. One man rowing, very slowly, very carefully, with muffled oars, so that there was hardly a sound at all, only every so often the faintest drip and catch. And in the stern of the boat, another shape, sitting very upright. A passenger.

It did not come towards the breakwater. It went across the bay, along the line of the dark water, keeping well clear of the boarding steamer and the naval trawler, heading north-west towards the far side of the harbour, where the shipyards were and the slipways and the old quays that nobody used at night.

"That's a Brixham boat," said Uncle Reuben. "That's one of ours. I'd know that stroke anywhere." He took his pipe out of his mouth and spat over the edge of the breakwater into the sea. "That's Jory Tozer. He's been rowing like a lady since he was ten year old. Jory Tozer and his punt." He was quiet for a moment. "Jory Tozer's had money this summer. New boots on his boy. A new suit to chapel. I wondered where from."

* * *

Johnny ran.

He was twenty-five and he could run then, he said, and he went back along the breakwater in the dark and through the harbour streets and round the back of the fish market, keeping off the quay,

to the far side, where the punt was going. He knew where it would come in. There was a set of old stone steps there, slimy and green, going down into the water beside a boatbuilder's yard, where nobody went after dark because there was nothing to go for. He got there first. He got into the shadow of a stack of timber in the boatyard, behind a fence, with the steps below him and a lamp on the far side of the road throwing a little light down onto the top of them, and he lay down flat on his stomach on the wet sawdust and waited.

The punt came in very quietly. He heard it before he saw it: the knock of the gunwale against the bottom step, and a man's breath, and the creak of somebody standing up in a small boat. Then a figure came up the steps into the edge of the lamplight, and stopped at the top, and looked round.

I want to set down exactly what Johnny Hills told me about that man, because he told it twice, in the same words, and the second time I wrote it down while he was speaking.

"Short," he said. "Shorter than me by a head. Slight. Young. Not much older than I was. Dark hair, under a soft hat. Clean-shaven, or near it. A good dark overcoat, too good for a man getting out of Jory Tozer's punt at half past one in the morning. Gloves. A small leather case, a gentleman's case, in his left hand. He came up those steps the way a sailor does, with his weight forward and one hand out for the wall, though he didn't need it. And when he got to the top he didn't look round the way a frightened man looks round. He looked round the way an officer looks round. Left, right, behind,

up. Up at the windows. Then he stood still and listened. Ten seconds. I counted. Then he turned round and said something down the steps to Jory, quiet. Not in English."

"What language?"

"Spanish," said Johnny Hills. "I didn't know that then. I knew it wasn't French, because I had a bit of French from school, and I knew it wasn't German, because I'd have known that, everybody would. I wrote down the sound of it on the back of my hand with a pencil when I got home, the way you do. My father showed it to a man from London, later. *Gracias, hombre. Mañana no me has visto.*" He said it badly, in a Devon voice. "It means thank you, mate. Tomorrow you never saw me."

The man turned away from the steps. He walked up the lane from the boatyard towards the road, quite unhurried, his case in his hand, and at the top of the lane, under the trees, a motor car was waiting. Johnny had not seen it. It had no lamps lit. He heard the door open and shut, very softly, and the engine start, and the car went away up the hill out of Brixham towards the Paignton road without putting its lights on until it was round the first bend.

He lay in the sawdust for a while longer. Then he got up and went down the steps.

Jory Tozer was sitting in his punt at the bottom with his oars shipped, smoking a cigarette with his hand cupped round it. He looked up and saw Johnny's face in the lamplight, and Johnny saw him know it. Everybody in Brixham knew Mary Hills's boy, the policeman.

"Evening, Jory," Johnny said.

Jory Tozer said nothing at all. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and dropped it into the water, where it hissed.

"You've had a good summer," said Johnny. "New boots on your boy, my uncle says. New suit to chapel."

"I've done nothing," said Jory Tozer. "I've been out after mackerel."

"In the middle of the night, without a line, with muffled oars."

"Ent no law against it."

"No," said Johnny Hills. "There isn't." And then, because his father had told him not to touch, and because he wanted very badly to touch, and because he was twenty-five, he said the only thing he could think of that was not touching. "Who paid you, Jory?"

Jory Tozer looked at him for a long time across the dark water at the bottom of the steps. He was a man of fifty or so, Johnny said, with a face like a walnut and a reputation for keeping his mouth shut, which in Brixham is a reputation worth more than money.

"A gentleman," he said at last. "That's all. A gentleman from Paignton. Very respectable. Gave me two sovereigns in June and said there'd be a job one night, and to be ready. Gave me two more tonight." He took up his oars. "And he said to me, Jory, if anybody asks you about tonight, you'll tell them you were out after mackerel. And if a Hills asks you, you'll tell him the gentleman sends his regards to his father."

Johnny stood very still on the bottom step.

"Regards to his father," he said.

"Regards to the constable," said Jory Tozer. "That's what he said. Regards to the constable. I said, which constable? There's dozens. He said, he'll know." He dipped his oars and pushed off from the step. "I've done nothing, Johnny Hills. I've been out after mackerel. Good night."

* * *

He walked back to Paignton. It is five miles. He did not have a bicycle and there were no trams at that hour and he did not want to knock up anybody in Brixham for a lift, because by the morning everybody in Brixham would have known about it.

He got home to Princes Street at a quarter to five. The light was on in the kitchen. His father was sitting at the kitchen table in his shirtsleeves with the pocketbook open in front of him and the gold watch beside it, and a pot of tea gone cold, and he had clearly not been to bed. He did not get up. He looked at Johnny's face, and then at the wet sawdust all down the front of Johnny's coat.

"Something came off her," he said.

"Yes."

"Sit down. From the beginning. Times, if you have them."

Johnny sat down and told him, from the beginning, with the times. The punt off the bow at twenty past one. Jory Tozer's stroke. The steps by the boatyard. The short dark young man with the good coat and the gentleman's case who looked round like an officer. The Spanish. The car with no lights. Jory Tozer's sovereigns, two in June and two tonight, from a gentleman from Paignton, very respectable.

His father wrote it all down. He did not interrupt once.

Then Johnny told him the last thing. *Regards to the constable. He'll know.*

His father's pen stopped.

Johnny said he had never seen his father's face do what it did then. It did not change, exactly. It went still in a way he had never seen, still all the way through, like water when the wind drops off it. His father sat looking at the page for a long time. Then he put the pen down very carefully, beside the watch.

"Nineteen years," he said, to nobody. "Nineteen years he's waited to say that again."

"Who?" said Johnny. "Who has? Dad, who's the gentleman from Paignton?"

His father looked at him. And then, Johnny said, his father did a thing he had never done before in Johnny's whole life. He reached across the kitchen table and put his hand over Johnny's hand, and held it.

"Get some sleep," he said. "You've done well. Better than well. You did exactly as you were told, and that's the hardest thing there is." He let go. "Tomorrow morning I want you on the platform at Paignton station. In uniform. Doing nothing. Just a constable standing on a platform in wartime, the way they do. And I want you to watch the 8.40 tram come in from the depot and stop at the station, the way it's done every morning for twenty years, and I want you to see who gets on it."

"Why?"

"Because if he's still in Paignton," said his father, "he'll be on it. He always is."

* * *

*Fri. 1 Oct. 1915. 5 a.m. J. home from Brixham. Man off the Dutchman's bow at 1.20 a.m. in J. Tozer's punt, landed at the old steps by Upham's yard. Short, dark, young, an officer's way of looking about him. Spoke Spanish. Motor car waiting, no lamps, gone towards Paignton. Tozer paid in gold, June and tonight, by "a gentleman from Paignton". Message for me: "Regards to the constable."*

*He has not said that to me since September 1896.*

*Ania was right. She is always right. She said, he must not be stopped. God help me, I do not know why.*

Johnny closed the book and sat holding it in his lap. It was quite dark in the room by then. Neither of us had thought to put the lamp on.

"Who was the gentleman?" I said. "From Paignton?"

"You've stayed at Widecombe Cot your whole life," said Johnny Hills. "You've seen ten thousand guests come up those front steps. You know a man by his luggage." He reached up and pulled the cord on the standard lamp, and the room jumped into yellow light, and the old dog lifted his head from the radiator and blinked at us. "Tell me what you'd make of an old gentleman, seventy years of

age, very respectable, churchwarden, grey side-whiskers, good dark overcoat, gold-headed stick, who'd ridden the same tram into Torquay every weekday morning for twenty years. Who sent white lilies to the funerals of men he'd never been introduced to. Who knew my father's name before the newspapers did." He looked at me over his reading glasses. "Who always, always had the exact fare."

I did not know what to make of him. I said so.

"No," said Johnny Hills. "Nor did we. Not for twenty years." He put the red pocketbook back in its place in the tin box, between its neighbours, and closed the lid. "But that morning, on Paignton platform, I saw him get on the 8.40 with a young man I'd seen come up the steps in Brixham at half past one. And I knew."

# Chapter 4 – *Station Square*

*Fri. 1 Oct. 1915. 8.20 a.m. J. on Paignton station in uniform. E.H. at the Torwood St. hut, waiting on the conductors. Ania not seen since Tuesday. Fine, wind dropped. The Dutchman still in the bay.*

Johnny Hills had been a policeman for five years and he had stood on Paignton station a hundred times. He had stood there for the troop trains in August 1914, when the whole town came down to cheer the boys off and the band played and the girls threw flowers through the carriage windows. He had stood there in the winter after, when the trains came the other way, at night, with the blinds down, and the stretchers were carried out across the square to the motor ambulances for Oldway. He knew every porter by name and every bench on both platforms, and he knew that a constable in uniform standing at the entrance to the booking hall with his hands behind his back, looking out across Station Square at nothing in particular, was the most invisible thing in Paignton in 1915.

"You stand there long enough," he said to me, "and people stop seeing you. You're part of the building. Like the clock."

He took up his position at a quarter past eight. From the station entrance he could see the whole of the square: the cab rank, with two old horses in their nosebags and a motor taxi that never had any petrol; Bailey's Hotel on the far side, with its blinds still down; the corner of Torbay Road going off towards the sea; and the tram stop, where the Torquay cars came in along the rails from the depot and

stopped to pick up the railway passengers before they went on along the front.

And the people. Paignton in the morning, the second year of the war. Clerks walking to the station for the Newton train. Shop girls. A Belgian woman he knew by sight, with a string bag and two small children. Three wounded soldiers from Oldway in their bright hospital blue, sitting on the low wall outside Bailey's with their sticks between their knees, smoking and watching the girls. An old man with a barrow of rabbits. A girl conductor in her Company coat and cap, waiting by the tram stop for the car to come in so she could take it over from the night girl.

He did the thing his father had taught him. He looked at all of it once, slowly, from left to right, and then he stopped looking at the middle of things and started looking at the edges.

At twenty-five to nine, two men came round the corner from the Roundham road and walked across the square towards the tram stop.

* * *

"I knew him by the walk," Johnny said. "Before I knew him by anything else."

The old man was in front. Seventy years old, very upright, in a dark overcoat and a good hat, with grey side-whiskers and a gold-headed stick. He walked as he had always walked, Johnny said, as if Station Square were a carpet that had been put down for him that morning. Everybody in Paignton knew Mr Petherick. Johnny had

known him all his life, the way you know a church tower. He was a churchwarden at St John's. He gave to the cottage hospital and the lifeboat and the Belgian Relief. He lived in a quiet white house on the hill above Roundham with two servants, and he had taken the 8.40 car into Torquay every weekday morning for as long as anybody could remember, and he always rode on top, at the front, unless it rained, and read his newspaper, and always had the exact fare.

The young man was half a step behind him and to the left. Where a son walks, or a secretary.

He had changed his clothes. He was not in the dark overcoat now but in a quiet grey suit, a little loose on him, as if it had been made for a slightly bigger man and taken in by somebody who knew what they were doing but had not had much time. A grey soft hat. A walking stick he did not lean on. A book under his arm. And he did not walk like a man who had come up the steps from Jory Tozer's punt at half past one in the morning. He walked like an Englishman. Like a young Englishman of good family who had been unwell, and had been sent down to the West Country for his chest, and was being taken into Torquay by an elderly relation to see the doctor.

"It was very good," Johnny said. "I want to be fair to him. If I hadn't lain in that sawdust and watched him look round at the top of those steps, I'd have looked straight through him. I'd have thought, there's old Petherick's nephew down from London, poor chap, looks as if he's had the flu." He paused. "But he looked round. In Station

Square, in the morning, with the sun out and a constable at the station door. He stopped at the edge of the pavement before he crossed, and he looked round, left, right, behind, up at the windows of Bailey's. The same as on the steps. The same order. And I knew him. You can change a man's clothes. You can't change the order he does things in."

* * *

The 8.40 came in along the rails from the depot and stopped at the stop, humming, with its trolley pole sparking on the wire.

Johnny said he watched Mr Petherick put his hand on the rail to go up the stair to the top deck, the way he had done every morning for twenty years. And he watched him stop, with his foot on the first step, and take his hand off the rail, and turn, and go inside instead. Into the lower saloon. And sit down, about halfway along, on the left-hand side. And the young man went in after him and sat down beside him.

"It wasn't raining," Johnny said.

The girl conductor got on after them. She took their fares. Johnny saw her do it through the window: the old man holding up his coin between finger and thumb, the exact fare as always, and the young man feeling in his waistcoat and putting something into her hand, and the girl looking down at it and then up at him, quickly, and then giving him his ticket and his change and going back out to the platform. She pulled the bell cord twice. The car moved off

along Torbay Road towards the sea, and Preston, and Livermead, and Torquay.

And Johnny turned his head, because his father had told him to look at the edges, and saw Ania.

* * *

She was standing by the cab rank.

He did not know how long she had been there. He would have sworn on oath that she had not been there when he did his first look round at a quarter past eight, and that she had not crossed the square since, because he would have seen her. And yet there she was, beside the two old cab horses, in a grey costume and a small grey hat, with her hands at her sides and no bag, looking at the place where the tram had been.

She was not moving. That was what he noticed first. The square was full of movement: people, horses, the wounded soldiers getting up off the wall, a dog, a boy with a hoop, the tram going away down Torbay Road with its bell clanging. And in the middle of all of it, by the cab rank, one person was absolutely still. Not still like somebody waiting. Still like a post. Like a thing that has been set down and left.

"I'd seen her sit still," Johnny said. "As a lad. In my mother's kitchen. She could sit still for an hour. But I'd never seen her like that. I've seen a deer stand like that, on the moor, when it hears something you can't. I've seen a dog stand like that at a door." He looked down at his big hands. "I've seen a man stand like that once,

in France, in 1917, when he'd just been told his son was dead. That was the last time. I never want to see it again."

She stood like that until the tram was out of sight. Then she turned her head, very slowly, and looked straight across the square at him, at the station door, where he was standing with his hands behind his back being part of the building, like the clock.

She had seen him all along.

She did not wave or nod. She looked at him for perhaps three seconds. Then she turned and walked away across the square towards Bailey's, and went in at the side door, the one into the back passage, as though she had a key.

Johnny looked at the station clock. It was eight forty-three. He wrote it on the back of his hand.

* * *

The girl conductor's name was Ivy Mudge.

She was nineteen. She was the granddaughter of the tram driver that Johnny's brother Henry had been named after, the one who was killed, and she had gone on the cars in the summer of 1915 when the Company started taking girls, because her young man was in France and her mother needed the money and because, she said, if her grandad could drive one of the blessed things for thirty years she could at least punch the tickets on one. She was one of Ted Harvey's. They all were. She had been told, like all of them, that if she ever saw anything strange on her car she was to tell Mr Harvey, and nobody else, and he'd see she was all right for it.

She told him at ten past nine, at the regulator's hut at the bottom of Torwood Street in Torquay, when her car came in and stood its five minutes. Ted Harvey wrote it down on the back of a waybill, the way he always had, and sent it by a boy to the police station in Market Street, to Inspector Hills, in an envelope marked *Personal*. Jack Hills copied it into his book. Johnny read it to me from there.

> *Ivy Mudge, cond., 8.40 car from Paignton. Mr P. rode inside for the first time she has known. Young man with him, a stranger, sat on Mr P.'s left. Mr P. paid exact fare for both, but the young man also offered a coin himself, before Mr P. could stop him: a gold half-sovereign. Ivy says nobody in Paignton has paid a fare in gold since the war began. Young man saw his mistake, smiled, took it back, and Mr P. paid. Young man said "Thank you" to her. Ivy says: "He said it very nice. But he said it like he'd learned it."*
>
> *His hands: brown, rough across the palms, a seaman's hands, but clean nails. A ring on the little finger of the left hand, turned round so the stone was inside. Read his book all the way to Torquay and did not turn a page.*
>
> *Got down with Mr P. at the Strand. Walked up towards Union Street together. Ivy lost sight of them.*

"Did not turn a page," Johnny said. He closed the book on his finger. "Ivy Mudge was a sharp girl. Her grandad would have been

proud of her." He smiled a little. "She married a sergeant in the Marines in 1919 and had seven children and ran the fish and chip shop at the top of Fore Street in Brixham for forty years. You'll have bought chips from her, I expect, and never known."

I had. Mrs Penwill's. Everybody in Brixham went to Mrs Penwill's. She had died the year before Chris was born.

* * *

They met at Bailey's at one o'clock, in the back room, with the shutters up and the lamp lit in the middle of the day.

There were five of them, Johnny said. His father, in his own clothes, having told the Market Street station he had a dentist. Ted Harvey, on his dinner hour, with his regulator's watch on its chain and his Company cap on the table in front of him. Sam Hannaford, who had come round from his printing works with ink on his cuffs. Johnny himself, in his uniform still, because there had not been time to go home and change. And Ania.

She was sitting at the end of the table when they came in. She had a cup of tea in front of her, held in both hands, with her thumbs hooked over the rim.

She did not say anything while Johnny told them about the platform and the walk and the tram. She did not say anything while his father read out Ivy Mudge's report. She drank her tea, quite naturally, and listened, and every so often she blinked, the way anybody does.

When it was all told, his father closed the book and put it down on the table and looked at her across the length of it.

"Who is he?" he said.

"A German naval officer," said Ania. "A lieutenant. He was on the cruiser *Dresden*, which was sunk off Chile in March. The crew were interned on an island. He escaped in August, across the mountains on a horse, and came down into Argentina, and bought papers in Buenos Aires that say he is a Chilean gentleman called Rosas, travelling to Holland on family business. He is twenty-eight years old. He speaks Spanish very well and English quite well and he is going home to Germany to ask for a new ship."

Nobody said anything. Sam Hannaford put his cup down very slowly.

"How do you know that?" said Ted Harvey. "Any of that. How can you possibly—"

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

"Then he's an enemy officer," said Johnny. He heard his own voice in that room, he told me, and it sounded very young. "An escaped enemy officer, on false papers, in wartime, in Paignton. We arrest him. Dad, I can have him in the cells at Market Street by three o'clock. He's walking about Torquay with old Petherick in broad daylight. We just go and—"

"No," said Ania.

She did not raise her voice. She never did. She put down her cup and turned her head and looked at him, the way she had looked

at him across Station Square, and Johnny said that he stopped talking as if somebody had put a hand over his mouth.

"He must not be stopped," she said. "I told your father on Tuesday. I am telling you now. He must go home."

"Why?"

She was quiet for a long time. Johnny said he would never forget that silence. Sam Hannaford's breathing, and the gas hissing, and somebody laughing in the public bar on the other side of the wall, and Ted Harvey turning his cap round and round on the table, and his father sitting quite still at the end with his hand flat on the closed book. And Ania looking down at her own hands round the cup as if she were reading something written on them.

"Because he will matter," she said at last. "More than any man in this war. And in the next one, more than any man but one."

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

Ania did not answer him.

"He will be the most dangerous man in Germany," she said, to Jack Hills, as though the others were not there. "And he will be the most useful. Both, at once. For a very long time. And then they will hang him." She looked up. "If he goes to a camp on the Isle of Man now, none of that happens. And some things that must happen, will not."

* * *

Johnny said his father sat with that for a long time.

He knew what it cost him. He said that even at twenty-five, even knowing nothing, he could see it in his father's face. Jack Hills had been a policeman for twenty-six years. He had sworn an oath to keep the King's peace. He had been suspended once, in 1896, for doing what he believed was right instead of what he was told, and he had never been sorry for it. But he had never in his life let a guilty man walk past him because somebody asked him to.

"I swore an oath," his father said at last. Very quietly.

"I know," said Ania.

"Twenty years ago, in this room, I told a man that I swore to keep the Queen's peace and not Inspector Robinson's. I meant it. I've kept it." He looked at the closed book under his hand. "You're asking me to break it."

"No," said Ania. "I am asking you to keep it better."

She leaned forward, across the table. Johnny said it was the only time he ever saw her lean towards anybody.

"Look at what you have," she said. "Not him. Him you cannot keep, and must not. But last night a Brixham man was paid in gold to row him ashore. Paid in June, Mr Hills. In June. Before the ship ever left Buenos Aires. A motor car was waiting for him with no lamps. A suit was made for him in one night by somebody who knew what they were doing. And this morning a churchwarden of St John's, who has ridden on top of that tram every dry morning for twenty years, went inside it, to sit beside him. And he sent you his regards." She sat back. "They knew he was coming before he knew

it himself. They have been waiting for him since the summer. They will help him home. And then they will want something back."

"Who will?" said Johnny. "Who's they?"

Ania looked at him. Then she looked at his father. And something passed between the two of them, Johnny said, that he was not part of, and it was a very old thing, older than he was.

"The arm," said Jack Hills. "H. called it the arm."

It was the first time Johnny had ever heard the name. He said he did not know then who his father meant, and nobody told him, and he did not ask. He wrote it on the back of his hand, under the time, eight forty-three, in pencil. When he got home that night it had smudged so badly that he could only read the H.

He said the name to me, in his front room at Preston, fifty years later. And then, before I could write it down, he put his big hand flat over the page of my exercise book.

"Put H.," he said. "Just the letter. My father stopped writing it out after that night, and so did Ted Harvey. Not once, in all the books, in thirty years." He took his hand away. "Whatever's written down can be found, Wendy. By anybody, if they look long enough. And there's people who've been looking for that name since 1895. Let them look. Put H."

So I have put H. I have put it everywhere it comes, in what he read me and in what I remember, and I am not going to explain it, because I cannot. It is the only thing in this account that I have not written down.

"Let him go home," said Ania. "Watch who helps him. Write down every name, every boat, every pound, every door. That is what you need. Not him. Them." She picked up her cup again in both hands. "For twenty years you have never been able to prove anything about that man on the tram. In the next three days, Mr Hills, you will be able to prove everything. If you let them think they are not being watched."

* * *

*Fri. 1 Oct. 1915. 2.30 p.m. Bailey's, back room. E.H., S.H., J., Ania, self. Ania says the young man is a German naval officer, escaped from Chile, travelling as "Rosas". Says he must not be stopped. Says he will matter in this war and in "the next". E.H. asked, what next war. She did not answer.*

*Decided: we do not touch him. We watch who helps him. Every name, boat, pound, door.*

*I have broken no oath today. I have not yet decided whether I am about to.*

Johnny closed the book and sat for a while with it on his knee. Outside it was quite dark now, and I could hear the buses on the sea road going home.

"Did you believe her?" I said. "About the next war?"

"Not then," said Johnny Hills. "I was twenty-five. Nobody believed in the next war in 1915." He looked at the long shelf of books about the war, both wars, with their soft grey jackets. "I

believed her in 1939. I went down to the station on the third of September and stood at the entrance to the booking hall in my sergeant's stripes with my hands behind my back, and I thought about her standing by the cab rank in 1915 like a post, looking at a tram. And I thought, she knew. Twenty-four years. She knew then."

He put the red book back in the tin box.

"And after the war," he said, "when I read in the newspaper that the Germans had hanged the head of their own intelligence service, in a camp, in April 1945, a month before the end, for plotting against Hitler, I went and got this book out and read that page again." He closed the lid. "Admiral Canaris. That was the name in the paper. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. The most dangerous man in Germany, they said, and the most useful. Both at once."

He looked at me over his glasses.

"In 1915," he said, "he was a lieutenant called Rosas who read a book on a Paignton tram all the way to Torquay and didn't turn a page."

# Chapter 5 – *The 8.40*

*Fri. 1 Oct. 1915. 3 p.m. J. in plain clothes to Torquay, to pick them up. S.H. to watch the white house at Roundham. E.H. to the conductors. I am at my desk, where I can be seen.*

Johnny went back to Torquay on the next car, in his own clothes, with his uniform folded in a brown-paper parcel under his arm so that he could have been a man taking a suit to the cleaner's. He had three hours of daylight left and no idea where to start. Ivy Mudge had lost them at the top of the Strand at a quarter to ten that morning. Torquay is not a big town, he said, but it is a steep one, and two men who do not want to be found can be anywhere on it.

He found them by the tailor.

"It was the suit," he said. "That grey suit. It had been taken in, overnight, by somebody good. You don't do that with a needle and thread in a back kitchen. You do it in a workroom, with a proper iron and a pressing table, and you do it for a customer who can pay you to sit up all night and keep your mouth shut afterwards." He smiled slightly. "There were four tailors in Torquay in 1915 who'd do bespoke work. One of them made all old Petherick's suits. Had done for thirty years. I knew because my mother used to take in his shirts when I was a boy, before Dad made sergeant, and she always said the stitching on his collars was the best in Devon."

The tailor's was in a narrow street off the top of Union Street, above a shop, up a flight of stairs. Johnny did not go up. He went

into a tea room across the road, with a window, and ordered a pot of tea and a scone he did not want, and sat with his parcel on his knee, and watched the door.

They came out at twenty to five. The young man was in a different suit again, dark blue this time, and a dark overcoat over his arm, and he was carrying a long flat cardboard box tied with string. Mr Petherick was beside him, with his stick, talking. The young man was listening, with his head a little on one side.

They walked down Union Street together, slowly, an old gentleman and his nephew, and Johnny left a sixpence on the table and followed them, on the other side of the street, fifty yards back.

* * *

They went to a doctor's.

It was a tall stucco house in the Warberries, the steep wooded hill of villas above the harbour where the Torquay doctors and solicitors lived, with a brass plate on the gatepost and a monkey puzzle on the lawn. Johnny watched them go up the path and ring and be let in by a maid. He did not know the doctor's name then. He found it out later, from the brass plate, and his father found out the rest. It was not a name I am going to write here either. There are people still in Torquay who carry it.

They were inside for twenty-five minutes. When they came out the young man had an envelope, a long one, which he put in his inside pocket, and touched once through his coat as he went down the path, the way a man touches his wallet in a crowd.

"A certificate," Johnny said. "That's what it was. We didn't know till Sunday. Sam found out, through a girl who did the doctor's typing. A medical certificate, on the doctor's notepaper, signed and stamped, dated the twenty-ninth of September, which was two days before. It said that Señor Rosas, a passenger on the Dutch steamer, had been put ashore at Falmouth on that date suffering from a fever, and had been attended by the undersigned, and was now recovered and fit to rejoin his ship." He shook his head. "Do you see? If anybody ever asked why he'd been off the ship, there it was. A sick man, landed and looked after and sent back. All in order. On a Torquay doctor's paper with a Torquay doctor's name."

"But he'd never been to Falmouth," I said.

"No," said Johnny Hills. "But the ship had. And I'd lay money that when the Navy came to muster the passengers on the Saturday morning, there was a purser on that Dutchman with a passenger list that said Rosas, landed sick at Falmouth, and a little more money in his pocket than he'd had in Buenos Aires."

The bed, then, and the suit, and the boat in, and the certificate. That was four things, I said, and the man had only been in England for sixteen hours.

"Five," said Johnny. "You've forgotten the car."

* * *

They took the half past five car back to Paignton, and Johnny took it with them.

He rode on top. They rode inside. He sat at the back of the top deck with his parcel and a newspaper he had bought at the Strand, and looked out at the bay, and did not once look down the stairwell, and listened. You could hear the lower saloon from the top of the stair, he said, if you knew how, in the old open-topped cars, when the wind was the right way. He heard almost nothing. The old man's voice, low and pleasant. Once, the young man laughing. Once, a single word, quite clear, in a foreign language, which he did not know.

At Livermead the car stopped by Corbyn Head, and a woman got on with a basket, and the conductor, who was a girl called Elsie Coysh, came up the stairs to collect the top deck's fares. She took his penny and punched his ticket and gave it him without looking at him at all. And as she turned to go down again she said, very quietly, to her ticket rack, "Mr Harvey says the Dutchman's to be let go tomorrow noon. Navy's done with her. Mr Harvey says to tell your father."

Then she went down the stairs, calling, "Any more fares, please," in the ordinary way.

"Coysh," I said.

"Jim Coysh's daughter," said Johnny Hills. "Jim was a conductor too, in 'ninety-six. His brother was killed on that same road. Under that same cliff." He was quiet for a moment. "There were a lot of families on those cars that owed Ted Harvey something, by 1915. And a lot that owed my father. They didn't forget."

* * *

At Paignton the two men got down at Station Square and walked away up the Roundham road towards the white house on the hill. Johnny did not follow them. Sam Hannaford was already up there, in the garden of an empty house across the lane, with a flask and a coat and a printer's patience, and had been since three o'clock.

Johnny went home to Princes Street and changed back into his uniform, and told his father everything in the kitchen, and his father wrote it down.

Then Sam came at midnight, and told them the rest.

The young man had gone into the white house with Mr Petherick at ten past six and had not come out. At half past seven a motor car had come up the lane without its lamps lit and stood at the gate for ten minutes, and a man had got out of it and gone in, and come out again with a small bag, and the car had gone away towards Brixham. Sam had got its number, in the light from the hall, when the door opened. At eleven the lights downstairs had gone out. At a quarter past eleven, one light had gone on upstairs, at the back, in a small window under the roof, and stayed on.

"A maid's room," said Jack Hills. "He's put him in the maid's room."

"A bed," said Johnny.

"A bed," said his father, and wrote it down. "A suit. A doctor. A car. And the boat tomorrow." He looked up. "Sam, whose car?"

Sam gave him the number. His father did not need to look it up. He had seen it outside a great many houses in twenty years.

"It belongs to a solicitor in Union Street," he said. "Who acts for Mr Petherick. And whose firm, in 1896, handled the Torquay end when fourteen houses along the sea front were bought from a dead man's cousin by a firm in Lincoln's Inn, for clients in London." He closed the book. "It's all the same door, Johnny. It always was. We just never caught anybody walking through it."

* * *

*Sat. 2 Oct. 1915. Noon. The Dutchman released. Weighed anchor 4.10 p.m. and lay off Berry Head with steam up, but did not proceed. The master signalled the shore that he had a fault in his engine and would sail when it was mended. Nobody in Brixham believes it.*

That was the boat.

The Dutchman did not leave the bay. She steamed slowly out from her anchorage off Brixham in the afternoon, past the breakwater, and then she stopped, a mile or so off Berry Head, beyond the limit of the harbour, with her lights burning and a thin plume of smoke going straight up from her yellow funnel into the still evening air, and lay there, waiting.

"She's waiting for him," said Uncle Reuben, on the breakwater, with his telescope. Johnny was beside him again, in his own clothes again. "Engine fault my eye. There's nothing wrong with that engine. Listen to her. Sweet as a sewing machine."

At a quarter past seven, in the last of the light, a Brixham trawler went out of the harbour.

She was a big one, Johnny said, a proper sailing trawler with a red-brown mainsail and a motor in her as well, one of the new ones, and she went out past the breakwater as if she was going fishing, which was what everybody in Brixham did on a Saturday evening in October, war or no war. There were three men on her deck in oilskins and sou'westers, hauling and coiling and doing the things that men on a trawler do. Uncle Reuben put his telescope on her for a long time.

"Three hands," he said. "Skipper's Arthur Lavers. Ought to be four. Lavers always goes out with four. One of them's his boy, that's at the front." He moved the glass a little. "That one forward. By the mast. He's not a fisherman."

"How do you know?"

"He's coiling that rope the wrong way round," said Uncle Reuben, "and he's doing it beautiful."

* * *

They did not see him go aboard the Dutchman. It was too dark by then, and too far. What they saw, from the end of the breakwater, was the trawler's lights going out across the bay towards the steamer's lights, and the two sets of lights coming together, a mile off, past Berry Head, and staying together for perhaps ten minutes. Once a lamp flashed on the steamer's deck, three times. Then the

trawler's lights came away again and turned for home, and the steamer's lights began, very slowly, to move.

They watched her go. She went out round Berry Head towards the open Channel, and up it, towards the east, and Holland, and the light of her stern got smaller and smaller on the black water until Johnny was not sure whether he could see it or only remembered it.

Then Uncle Reuben put his telescope away.

"Engine's mended, then," he said, and spat into the sea.

* * *

Johnny went down to the quay to see the trawler come in. He did not know why. His father had told him not to touch, and he did not mean to touch. He only wanted to see.

She came alongside at half past nine, and her three hands made her fast and began to clear up her deck, as they would have done after any evening's fishing, though there were no fish. And on the quay above them, in the lamplight, quite alone, in a dark overcoat and a good hat, with a gold-headed stick, stood an old gentleman of seventy, watching them, as an owner watches his boat come in.

Johnny stopped where he was, at the end of the fish market, in the shadow.

Mr Petherick did not look round. He watched the trawler until her men had finished. Then he took a small envelope out of his pocket and handed it down to the skipper, Arthur Lavers, who took it without a word and put it inside his oilskin. Then the old man

turned, and began to walk away along the quay, towards the town, slowly, with his stick.

As he passed the end of the fish market, where Johnny stood in the shadow, he stopped.

He did not look at Johnny. He looked out at the harbour, at the trawler, at the dark bay beyond the breakwater where the steamer's lights had gone. He stood there for a moment, Johnny said, like a man taking a breath of sea air on a fine evening before he goes home to bed.

Then he lifted his hat.

Not a nod. Not a touch of the brim. He lifted it clean off his head, and held it, and looked out to sea, and said, quite pleasantly, to nobody at all:

"Good night, young Hills. Give my regards to the Inspector."

And he put his hat back on, and walked away up Fore Street into the dark, swinging his gold-headed stick.

* * *

Johnny Hills put the last of my mother's sponge on my plate without asking and sat back in his armchair.

"I stood there," he said, "with my mouth open, like a fish on a slab. I was twenty-five, and I'd been a policeman five years, and I'd been so careful. In the tea room. On the top of the tram. In the shadow. And he'd known I was there the whole time." He shook his head slowly. "He'd known I was there in the sawdust at Brixham on the Thursday night. That's why he gave Jory Tozer that message.

He'd known all along. And it didn't matter to him. Not one bit. He let me watch, because he wanted my father to know, and there wasn't a thing in the world my father could do about it."

"Why?" I said. "Why would he want your father to know?"

Johnny looked at the tin box on the table between us.

"Because he'd been waiting nineteen years to win," he said. "And there's no fun in winning if the other fellow doesn't know."

He got up and pulled the curtains across against the dark, slowly, one side and then the other.

"But my father wrote it all down," he said, with his back to me. "Every name. Every boat. Every pound. Every door. The tailor, the doctor, the solicitor's car, the purser, Jory Tozer, Arthur Lavers. And the old man, on the quay, with the envelope. And on the Sunday night, when the Dutchman was a day up the Channel and nobody could stop her any more, he did the one thing old Petherick had never once in nineteen years thought he would do."

He turned round.

"He went over everybody's head," said Johnny Hills. "He sent a telegram to London."

# Chapter 6 – *The Telegram*

*Thursday, 14th October 1965. Preston again, by the 2.15. Took a lemon drizzle. Mother did not say anything this time. She cut it herself.*

I went back on the Thursday. I had meant to wait a week, to let it settle, and to write up what I had in the exercise book properly first. I lasted two days. On the Wednesday night I sat in the back room at Widecombe Cot until one in the morning with the book open in front of me and the pen in my hand, and I found that I could not write another line until I knew what had been in that telegram.

My mother came into the kitchen on the Thursday while I was putting my coat on. She did not ask where I was going. She took the lemon drizzle out of the cake tin, cut it into eight, wrapped four slices in greaseproof paper, and put them in my coat pocket. Then she went back to the office and shut the door.

I have thought about that a good deal since. My mother does not cut cake for other people's visitors.

* * *

Johnny Hills had the tin box out on the table before I had my coat off. He had his reading glasses on his nose, for once, and not on his forehead. I think he had been waiting for me too.

"Sunday night," he said. "The third of October. You'll want to know why he waited."

I said I did.

"Because she told him to," said Johnny. "He'd have sent it on the Saturday night, the moment that trawler came back to the quay. He wanted to. He was sitting at the kitchen table at midnight with the form half written out. And she came to the back door." He shook his head. "Princes Street, midnight, and there's a knock at the back door, and it's her. In the grey costume, with no coat, with the cold coming off the sea. She didn't come in. She stood on the step, and she said, *Not tonight, Mr Hills. Tomorrow. After dark. When the ship is past the Hook.* And she went away again."

"The Hook?"

"The Hook of Holland," said Johnny. "Where the Rotterdam ships go in. She meant, when it's too late to catch him. When there's nothing the Navy could do about him even if they wanted to." He took his glasses off and looked at them. "My father understood that. He didn't like it. But he understood it. She'd said, he must go home. And she meant it all the way."

* * *

He sent it from Newton Abbot.

Not from Paignton. Johnny was very particular about this, and so, he said, had his father been. In the winter of 1895, something had happened with the telegrams from Paignton post office that his father would never talk about, except to say that a telegram is a postcard that every clerk between here and London can read, and that the clerks at Paignton had once read every word he sent for five months and passed it on to a man who should not have had it. So in

1915 Jack Hills took the train to Newton Abbot on the Sunday evening, in his own clothes, and walked to the railway telegraph office at the end of the down platform, where the clerk on duty was a man called Percy Coombes, the son of the old stationmaster at Paignton, who had known Ted Harvey since Ted was a porter and who owed Jack Hills a favour from a matter of a missing parcel in 1909.

"It went on a railway form," said Johnny. "On the railway's own wire, to Paddington. And from Paddington by hand. Percy Coombes saw to that. Nobody at the post office ever saw a word of it." He opened the dark red pocketbook. "He wrote it out in his book first. Six times, crossing out, till he had it as short as he could. You paid by the word in those days. And the shorter it is, he used to say, the harder it is to argue with."

He read it to me. I copied it as he read.

*DIRECTOR INTELLIGENCE DIVISION*
*ADMIRALTY WHITEHALL. BY HAND.*

*GERMAN NAVAL OFFICER LATE DRESDEN*
*TRAVELLING CHILEAN PAPERS NAME ROSAS*
*LANDED BRIXHAM THURSDAY NIGHT FROM*
*DUTCH STEAMER UNDER EXAMINATION.*
*REEMBARKED SAME STEAMER OFF BERRY*
*HEAD SATURDAY NIGHT. NOW ROTTERDAM.*

*ASSISTED ASHORE BY ORGANISED PARTY OF*
*LOCAL RESIDENTS. BOATS MONEY CLOTHES*
*PAPERS. ARRANGED SINCE JUNE.*

*NAMES HELD. WILL GIVE TO YOUR OFFICER IN PERSON. NOT TO COUNTY.*

*RAGE. BAILEYS HOTEL PAIGNTON.*

"*Not to County*," I said.

"That was the line that cost him," said Johnny. "Twenty-six years in the Devon Constabulary, an inspector, and he puts his name to a telegram to London that says, in so many words, don't trust my own Chief Constable. He knew what that meant. If it went wrong, if it got back, he'd be finished. They'd have had his warrant card off him by Tuesday." He closed the book on his finger. "He sat on the bench outside that telegraph office for a long time afterwards, he told me. On the down platform, in the dark, with the trains going through. He said he thought about a man he'd known twenty years before, who'd told him, in Paignton station, never to go to his own people, because he couldn't know which of them were honest. And he thought, well, I've gone over their heads now. I've gone to London. And London's my own people too, in the end. And I still don't know which of them are honest." Johnny looked at me. "He said he'd never felt so alone in his life. Not even in 1896."

"Who was the man?" I said. "Who told him not to go to his own people?"

Johnny Hills put the book down on the table and laid his hand flat on it.

"A gentleman from London," he said. "Who was down here for a while. Before I was old enough to remember." He did not take his

hand off the book. "I've told you there's things in the early books you'd not believe, Wendy. That's one of them. I'll leave it there."

* * *

Nothing happened on the Monday.

Johnny went on duty at Paignton at six in the morning and walked his beat along the front and up Torbay Road and back, and took a report from a lady in Polsham Road about a man with a beard who had asked her the way to the station, and listened to everybody in Paignton talking about the Dutch steamer that had sat in the bay for two days with her lights on and then gone off in the night with a bad engine. Nobody had seen anything. Nobody knew anything. At the Paignton station tram stop, at twenty to nine, Mr Petherick got on the 8.40 car and went up the stair to the top deck and sat at the front, as he had done every dry morning for twenty years, and read the *Western Morning News*.

"On top," said Johnny. "With his paper. As if nothing had happened." He shook his head. "I stood at the station door and watched him go up that stair, and I wanted to go over and pull him off it by his good coat. I was very young."

Nothing happened on the Tuesday morning either. And then at four o'clock on the Tuesday afternoon a telegraph boy came to the police station in Market Street with an envelope for Inspector Hills, and the sergeant on the desk, who was a nosy man, held it up to the light before he took it upstairs, and could not make anything of it, because it said only:

*INSPECTOR HILLS MARKET STREET*
*TORQUAY. ARRIVING NEWTON ABBOT 6.40*
*TONIGHT. BAILEYS EIGHT OCLOCK.*
*TALLAND.*

* * *

He came into the back room at Bailey's at five to eight, which Johnny said was the first thing they noticed about him, because nobody from London had ever been early for anything in Devon.

He was young. That was the second thing. Johnny had been expecting an admiral, or at least a grey-haired captain with a telescope under his arm, and what came in out of the rain was a thin, fair, short-sighted young man of thirty or so in a damp civilian overcoat and wire spectacles, who looked like a schoolmaster on a walking holiday, and who turned out to have been a barrister in the Temple until the autumn of 1914 and was now a lieutenant-commander in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve without, as far as Johnny ever discovered, having been to sea in his life.

"Talland," he said. "From the Admiralty. Which of you is RAGE?"

There were four of them in the room. Jack Hills, and Ted Harvey, and Sam Hannaford, and Johnny. Not Ania. She had not come. When Johnny's father had told her, on the Tuesday afternoon, that a man was coming from London, she had said, *Then I will not be there. He does not need to see me. It is better if he does not.* And she had not been there.

"All of us," said Jack Hills. "Sit down, Commander. You'll want your tea."

Lieutenant-Commander Talland sat down, and took his spectacles off and wiped the rain from them, and put them back on, and looked at the four of them round the table: an inspector of police, a tram regulator, a printer and a young constable, in the back room of a railway hotel in Paignton, with the shutters up.

"I was rather expecting," he said slowly, "something larger."

"So was the man who started it," said Jack Hills. "He got used to it."

* * *

Johnny said they talked until after midnight. His father did most of it, from the books, in order, the way he always did: the warning on the Tuesday, the ship in the bay, the punt off the bow, the steps by the boatyard, the Spanish, the car with no lamps. The 8.40, and the old gentleman who rode inside it for the first time in twenty years. The tailor. The doctor and his certificate. The solicitor's motor car. The trawler that went out with a man coiling a rope the wrong way round. The lights coming together off Berry Head. The envelope handed down on the quay. Every name, every boat, every pound, every door.

Talland wrote none of it down. He listened, with his hands folded on the table in front of him, and every so often he asked a question, short and exact, the way, Johnny said, a good barrister asks a witness the one thing the witness has not thought to say.

What time was the lamp on the steamer's deck? Three flashes or four? Which hand did the young man carry his case in? Did the trawler skipper count the money in the envelope, or put it away without looking?

"Without looking," said Johnny.

"Then he's been paid by that hand before," said Talland, "and expects to be again." He turned to Jack Hills. "May I tell you something, Inspector? In confidence?"

His father said he might.

"He reached Rotterdam on Sunday night," said Talland. "We knew on Monday afternoon. I can't tell you how. He's in Germany now. He'll be in Berlin by the end of the week, telling them what a clever fellow he's been, and they'll give him a U-boat, I expect, and we'll have to sink it." He folded his spectacles. "We very nearly had him at Falmouth. The boarding officer didn't like his face. But his papers were perfect and his Spanish was better than the boarding officer's, and he was very charming about the inconvenience, and they let him go up the Channel to be looked at again. And then he wasn't on the ship." He looked round the table. "There was a passenger list that said landed sick at Falmouth. Nobody at Falmouth had landed anyone. It made no sense to us at all, until your telegram came on Sunday night."

"Then you'll want the names," said Jack Hills.

"Yes," said Talland. "I very much want the names."

Johnny's father opened his book, and turned to a page near the back, and turned it round on the table, and pushed it across.

Talland read the page for a long time. Then he took a small notebook of his own out of his inside pocket and a silver pencil, and for the first time that evening he wrote something down. Johnny said he wrote only one name. He did not need to see it. He knew which one it would be.

"Petherick," said Talland softly. He looked up. "Do you know, Inspector, we've had a file on a Mr G. Petherick of Paignton since 1912? Letters. Quite ordinary letters, about shipping and the price of Cornish clay, to a firm of merchants in Hamburg. Rather more of them than the price of Cornish clay seems to call for." He put the silver pencil away. "Nobody could ever make anything of them. A respectable old gentleman with business friends in Germany, before the war. Thousands of them." He closed his notebook. "Until Sunday night."

"Will you take him?" said Ted Harvey.

Talland was quiet for a moment.

"No," he said. "Not yet. Not for this. An old man of seventy, a churchwarden, who gave a bed and a suit of clothes to a foreign visitor who turned out to be a German? He'd say he was deceived. Every jury in Devon would believe him." He looked at Jack Hills. "But we'll watch him. Every letter. Every visitor. Every boat that goes out of Brixham with a man coiling a rope the wrong way. And the next time somebody comes up those steps, we'll be waiting at the top of them. With your permission, Inspector, and your people, and your little books."

* * *

Johnny Hills sat back in his armchair. Outside, the light was going over the sea again.

"That was it," he said. "That was the beginning of it. Twenty years Rage had been on its own, my father and Ted and her and the rest, in back rooms, watching, writing it down, trusting nobody. And that night it stopped. From that night on there was always somebody in London who knew our name. Talland, first. Then the men after him. In the next war it was a good deal more than that." He looked at me. "Your father's one of the men after him, Wendy. I expect you'd worked that out."

I had not. I had worked out a great many things in the back room at Widecombe Cot, with a tray in my hands, but I had never once in my life thought of my father as anything but a grocer who sold bacon to people who trusted him. I sat with that for a long time.

"And Petherick?" I said at last.

"Petherick went up the stair of the 8.40 on the Wednesday morning," said Johnny, "and sat on top, at the front, and read his paper." He put the red book back in the tin box. "And on the Thursday. And on the Friday. All that winter. All the next spring. The exact fare. Every morning."

"And then?"

"And then he died," said Johnny Hills. "In his bed. In July. Very peacefully, the paper said." He closed the lid of the box. "And somebody we had never heard of, in a country we were at war with, inherited the lot."

# Chapter 7 – *Write Everything Down*

> *Tues. 11 July 1916. G. Petherick, of Roundham, died in his bed, Sunday night. Aged 70. Funeral Friday, St John's. The papers full of the Somme. Nothing from Henry since the 28th.*

That is the only entry Jack Hills made about Mr Petherick's death, Johnny said. One line, between a note about a stolen bicycle and a line about his younger son. His father did not write anything else about it for four days.

"He didn't know what to feel," Johnny said. "I don't think he ever did know. Twenty years he'd watched that man. Twenty years he'd known what he was and never once been able to touch him. And then London started watching too, and still nobody could touch him. And then he went and died in his own bed, very peacefully, with the vicar and the doctor and two servants, and a notice in the *Directory* with a black border, and the Bishop sending a letter." He shook his head. "And all my father could think about that week was Henry."

Henry was the youngest. Henry was the one born in August 1896 and named after a tram driver. He had joined up in the spring of 1915, at eighteen, and gone to France with the Devons, and on the first of July 1916 the Devons had gone over the top at Mametz on the first morning of the Somme, and the lists outside the newspaper office in Torquay had been longer that week than

anybody had ever seen them, and Henry's name had not been on them, and nor had a letter.

"He came home," said Johnny, before I could ask. "I'll tell you that now, so you're not waiting for it. He came home in 1919 with a piece of a shell in his hip that the surgeons never got out, and he walked with a stick for the rest of his life, and he kept a public house at Cockington for thirty years and never once talked about France." He looked at the tin box. "But we didn't know that, that week. Nobody knew anything, that week."

So nobody in Rage went to Mr Petherick's funeral. Except Johnny.

* * *

"My father sent me," he said. "He said, I can't go. If I go, in uniform or out of it, he'll have won something. But somebody has to see who comes. And you're a constable. Constables stand outside churches. Nobody looks at them."

So on the Friday afternoon, the fourteenth of July, Johnny Hills stood in his uniform at the lych-gate of St John's in Paignton, with his hands behind his back, being part of the building, and watched them carry George Petherick in.

It was a large funeral. Johnny said he had never seen so many good hats in one place. Most of Paignton and half of Torquay was there: the town council, the magistrates, the Masonic lodge, the governors of the cottage hospital, the lifeboat committee, the Belgian Relief ladies, three clergymen in addition to the vicar, and a

great many old gentlemen with gold watch chains who had ridden the 8.40 with Mr Petherick for twenty years and had never known his Christian name. His two servants came behind the coffin, in new black, the housekeeper weeping and the manservant not. The solicitor from Union Street came, whose motor car had stood at the white house with its lamps out on the first of October. The doctor from the Warberries came. And at the back, in a pew by himself, a thin, fair, short-sighted young man in a dark civilian suit and wire spectacles, who did not sing the hymns and did not take his eyes off the solicitor from Union Street for one minute of the whole service.

"Talland," I said.

"Talland," said Johnny. "He'd come down on the night train. He nodded to me as he came out. That was all. He didn't stop."

And there were the flowers.

The coffin went into the ground in the churchyard by the tower, and the people went away, slowly, the way people do from a big funeral, standing about in groups on the path, talking about the Somme, and the flowers were laid out on the grass beside the grave in long rows for the family to read the cards. There was no family. Nobody read them. Johnny waited until the churchyard was empty, and the sexton had gone for his tea, and then he walked along the rows with his hands behind his back, as a constable might, keeping an eye on things.

Most of them were what you would expect. The lodge. The council. The cottage hospital. *With respectful sympathy.*

At the end of the row, a little apart from the others, there was a wreath of white lilies. A large one, very costly, hothouse flowers, the kind you could not buy in Paignton in the second summer of the war. A card was wired to it, in a small envelope. The envelope had a black border.

Johnny bent down and turned the card over with one finger, as a constable might, to see whose it was.

*With deepest sympathy. G.P.*

* * *

"I didn't understand," said Johnny Hills. He was looking at his own hands. "I stood there in the churchyard and read it three times. G.P. On George Petherick's own grave. As if he'd sent himself flowers." He shook his head. "I thought it was a mistake. I thought the florist had muddled the cards. I very nearly took it, to show my father, and then I thought, no, that's evidence, you leave evidence where it lies and you write it down. So I wrote it down. On the back of my hand, the way you do."

He took that night's pocketbook out of the box and opened it and showed me. Not the words. His father's face, he meant, although I could not see it. The handwriting. It was the same small, square, steady hand as all the other pages, and then, on that page, it was not. It was larger, and it pressed through to the other side of the paper.

*Fri. 14 July. J. at the funeral. Lilies at the grave, white, hothouse, very costly. Card: "With deepest sympathy. G.P."*

*I have seen that card before. I saw it on Harry Mudge's grave in January 1896, when G.P. was a man on the 8.40 who paid for the funeral of the driver he had killed.*

*He is dead. The card is not.*

*H. said there was an arm. He said behind the arm there was a body. I took it for a manner of speaking.*

"I asked him," said Johnny. "That night, in the kitchen. I said, Dad, who sent it? He's dead. Who's G.P. now?"

"What did he say?"

"He said, *I don't know, Johnny.* That was all. And then he sat there for a long time." Johnny closed the book. "And then he said, *I think it isn't a man at all. I think it's a chair. And somebody's just sat down in it.*"

* * *

Talland told them the rest, in August, in a letter that came to Princes Street in a plain envelope with a London postmark and no name on the back.

George Petherick had left everything to his son. Nobody in Paignton had known he had a son. He had married, it turned out, in 1872, a girl from a merchant family in Hamburg whom he had met on business there, and there had been a boy, born in 1875, and the

marriage had not lasted, and the girl had gone home to Hamburg with the child and never come back. The boy had grown up there. He had taken his mother's family's business and, somewhere along the way, a German version of his father's name. He was Klaus Petrick now, of Hamburg, a merchant in shipping and clay. He was forty-one. He was a reserve officer in the Imperial German Navy. And he was the sole heir to a white house on the hill above Roundham, a great deal of money in a bank in Exeter, a share in three Brixham trawlers, and a number of other properties around the bay held through a solicitor in Union Street that Talland's people were, he wrote, still counting.

> *Of course he cannot have any of it,* Talland wrote. *He is an enemy alien. It goes to the Custodian of Enemy Property and sits there until the peace. But there will be a peace, one day, and on that day, Inspector, a gentleman in Hamburg is going to write to a solicitor in Union Street and ask for his inheritance. And I very much doubt whether anybody in Whitehall will remember by then why they ought to refuse.*
>
> *You will remember. You write things down.*

Johnny folded his hands on the tin box.

"He was right," he said. "1922, the letter came. And somehow, through a solicitor in Union Street and a company in London that nobody had ever heard of, he got every penny of it back. The Custodian was supposed to keep it. The Custodian didn't."

* * *

He went to France in the autumn.

I had not known that either. He had been a policeman, and policemen were not called up, but in October 1916 he went down to the recruiting office in Torquay anyway, without telling his father, and joined the Devons, because his brother had been in the line at Mametz and he had stood at a lych-gate in his uniform watching rich old men bury a traitor, and he could not, he said, stand at the station door with his hands behind his back any longer, being part of the building.

His father did not stop him. Johnny said he thought his father had known he would go since the day of the funeral.

On the night before he left, his father came up to his room. Johnny was packing his kit, very badly, on the bed. His father stood in the doorway and watched him do it for a while without saying anything. Then he came in and put something on the bed beside the kit bag.

A pocketbook. A new one. Black, with a band of elastic round it, and nothing written in it at all. And a pencil.

"Every day," his father said. "The date, the time, the weather. What you see. What you're told and who told you. What you do. Not what you feel. You'll think you'll remember. You won't. Nobody does. It goes. It all goes, Johnny, quicker than you'd believe, and then there's only what was written down." He paused. "A man told me that a long time ago. He said a man who writes things down as

they happen is worth any ten men who explain them afterwards. I didn't understand him for twenty years. Write it down anyway."

Johnny said he looked at the empty book on the bed for a long time.

"And when you come back," said his father, "and you will come back, I'll show you mine. All of them. From the beginning. You're old enough now. And one day, when I'm gone, they're yours. And you'll keep them, and you'll keep writing in your own, and when you've a son you'll give him one the night before he goes anywhere." He put his hand on Johnny's shoulder, which he had not done since Johnny was a boy. "That's all it is, Johnny. Rage. That's all it's ever been. A few people who won't forget."

Johnny Hills got up out of his armchair, slowly, and went to a drawer in the sideboard under the books, and took out a small black pocketbook with a band of elastic round it, rubbed grey at the corners, the cover stained with something dark, and put it on the table beside the tin box.

"France," he said. "1916 to 1919. Every day." He did not open it. "I gave my Douglas one, in 1939. And he'll give his boy one, if he has the sense he was born with."

He sat down again.

"That's 1915," he said. "That's all of it. Ask your father about 1935."

* * *

*Friday, 15th October 1965. Arrivals: Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.*

She came up the hill at ten past four, as she always does, from the direction of the station, with a carpet bag. I was at the reception desk. I had been at the reception desk since three o'clock, doing nothing very much with the bookings, and I had heard the gate.

She came up the front steps and in at the door and across the hall and stopped at the desk, and put the carpet bag down at her feet, and looked at me.

She was about twenty-five. Dark-haired. A grey costume and a small grey hat. Neither pretty nor plain. I have thought about how to describe her for twenty-three years, and I cannot do any better than that, and I find, now that I have heard Johnny Hills, that his father could not either.

"Good afternoon, Wendy," she said.

"Good afternoon, Miss Ania. Room 3. It's ready for you."

She did not pick up the pen to sign the register. She never has. Her name is always there already. She looked down at my right hand, lying on the open register beside the bookings, and I looked down too, and saw what she was looking at: the ink on the side of my middle finger, where the pen rests, a blue-black stain that would not scrub off. I had been writing for five days.

"You have started," she said.

I did not ask her how she knew. I had never in my life asked her how she knew anything. I said yes.

She nodded slowly. Then she did a thing she had not done since the summer of 1944. She reached across the desk and put her fingers, very lightly, on the back of my inky hand. They were not cold. They never had been. I had always half expected them to be.

"Good," she said. "Write it all. Your father will tell you about the garden." She took her hand away and picked up her bag. "Do not be angry with him. He was asked to keep it, and he kept it. That is what he is for."

And she went up the stairs to Room 3, the one with the view of the bay, and I heard the door close, and I sat at the desk with my hand on the register for a long time, looking at the ink.

# Chapter 8 – *The College Garden*

*Saturday, 16th October 1965. Breakfasts: Room 1 (Mr H. Mallyon), Room 3 (Miss Ania), Room 7 (Mr and Mrs Dorling, Solihull, departing Tues.). Fine. Wind NE.*

My father came into the dining room at eight o'clock, as he does, in his cardigan, with his newspaper under his arm, and stopped in the doorway.

I was at the sideboard with the toast. I saw his face before I saw what he was looking at, and I have never seen his face do that before or since. He is a mild man. Everything that happens to my father happens slowly, and a long way behind his eyes, and by the time it reaches his face it has been added up and checked and found to be more or less what he expected. That morning it reached his face all at once.

She was at the table in the bay window, the one with the view, where she always sits. She had a cup of tea in front of her, held in both hands. She looked up.

"Good morning, Mr Mallyon," she said. "You have come home."

My father stood in the doorway for what felt like a long time. Then he said, "Good morning, Miss Ania," in a voice I did not recognise, and came in, and sat down at his own table by the door, very carefully, the way he sits down when his knees are bad, and

opened his newspaper, and did not read a word of it. I brought him his toast. His hands were shaking so that the paper rattled.

"Thirty years," he said to me, very low, when I bent to pour his tea. "I haven't seen her since the spring of 1935. Not once. She's never come at Christmas or in August." He did not look up from the paper. "Wendy, she hasn't changed."

"No," I said. "She never does."

He looked up at me then. And I saw him understand that I knew, and had known for twenty-three years, and had never said, and I saw that it hurt him, and I saw him put the hurt away somewhere, the way he puts everything away, to be added up later.

"After breakfast," he said. "Come to my room."

* * *

Room 1 is at the back of the house on the ground floor, looking onto the garden, with the monkey puzzle at one corner of the window and the corner of the yard at the other. My mother had put his armchair in it from London, and his books, and his wireless, and the carriage clock from the Grocers' Association on the mantelpiece, losing four minutes a day. He sat in the armchair. I sat on the end of the bed with the exercise book on my knee.

"She told you to ask me about the garden," he said.

I had not told him that. I said yes.

"She would." He looked out of the window at the monkey puzzle. "Very well. I'll tell you about the garden. Not the rest. The rest isn't all mine to tell. Some of it is your mother's, and your

mother will tell it or she won't, and that's her business. But the garden's mine." He put his hands together on his stomach, over the cardigan, the way he does when he is about to give a long answer to a customer's question about the difference between two kinds of tea. "You'll want to know who I was. Before."

I did. I realised, sitting there, that I knew almost nothing about who my father had been before Hendon. He had come from Cambridge, I knew that. He had been in the first war. He had married my mother in 1935, and I had been born in 1935, and everything before that was a sort of fog, like the backs of old photographs, where somebody has written a date in pencil and nothing else.

* * *

He was born in Cambridge in 1893. His father was a college servant, a butler in one of the old colleges by the river, and his mother was a laundress, and they lived in two rooms over a bootmaker's in a lane off Trumpington Street, and there was never quite enough of anything. He was a clever boy, and he got a scholarship to the grammar school, and was told he might have gone to the university himself if he had been born on the other side of the college gates. He had not been, so he went into the college office at sixteen as a junior clerk instead, adding up the accounts of young men who would never in their lives have to add up anything.

"I liked it," he said. "That's the thing nobody believes. I liked the figures. I liked knowing where everything came from and where

everything went. Two hundred young gentlemen eating three meals a day, and wine in the cellars, and coal for every fireplace, and candles and soap and laundry and paper. Every bit of it had to be ordered and delivered and paid for and accounted for. And if you got it right, nobody noticed. And if you got it wrong, the Master's port ran out at a feast in front of a bishop." He smiled a little. "I never let the Master's port run out."

In 1914 he joined the Army Service Corps, because they were looking for men who could count, and he spent four years in France and Flanders not fighting. He moved things. Bread and bully beef and boots, forage for the horses, petrol for the lorries, blankets and shovels and barbed wire, from the docks at Le Havre to the railheads and from the railheads up the line, in the mud, under the guns, every day.

"Nobody gets a medal for the boots arriving," he said. "But the men who wore them knew. And so did I." He was quiet for a moment. "I learned the most important thing I ever learned in France, Wendy. Not in the line. At the railheads. I learned that if you want to know what an army is going to do, you don't read its orders. You read its grocery bill. Where the bread's going. How much. When. The men who sign the orders can lie. The bread can't."

He came home in 1919 and went back to the college office, and by 1935 he was assistant to the Bursar, at forty-two, with a room of his own and a coal fire and a clerk under him and no prospects of anything more, because the Bursar was always a gentleman and a Fellow, and he was neither. He ran the college.

Everybody knew he ran the college. And on the college lists he was a line of small print at the bottom of a page.

"I was underestimated," he said. "Every day. By everyone. For twenty-six years." He looked at me. "And I'd come to like it. That was the dangerous thing. I'd come to think it was the same as being safe."

* * *

It was a Tuesday in the middle of February, 1935. Cold and bright. He had taken his sandwiches out at one o'clock, as he did every day it was not raining, to eat them on a bench in the Fellows' Garden, which he was not strictly supposed to use, being neither a Fellow nor a gentleman, but which nobody else used in February, and which had a wall that kept the wind off and a bed of snowdrops under the old mulberry tree.

He was halfway through a cheese and pickle sandwich when he realised that somebody was sitting at the other end of the bench.

"I hadn't heard her come," he said. "There was gravel on that path. You could hear a Fellow coming down it from the gate. You could hear a blackbird. I didn't hear her. I looked up, and there was a young woman sitting at the other end of my bench, in a grey costume, with her hands in her lap, looking at the snowdrops."

"Ania."

"I didn't know her name. She didn't tell me, not then." He was looking out at the monkey puzzle as if it were the mulberry tree. "I thought she must be somebody's sister. Visiting. A Fellow's niece,

lost on the way to lunch. I said, I'm afraid this garden's private, miss. Which was rich, coming from me. And she turned and looked at me." He stopped. "I'm a plain man, Wendy. I don't go in for fancy talk. But I'll tell you how it felt, because I've never told anyone, not even your mother. It felt as if I'd been the only person in a room for twenty-six years, and somebody had just opened the door."

She said, "Good afternoon, Mr Mallyon."

He said, "Do I know you, miss?"

And she said, "No. But I know you. You are the assistant to the Bursar. You have been in this college since 1909, except for four years with the Army Service Corps, when you moved the bread for the Fourth Army from the coast to the Somme and never once in two years let a railhead go hungry. You read German, because you taught yourself from the labels on the captured stores. You keep this college's accounts in your head, and the Bursar signs them without reading them. And you have been told for twenty-six years, in a hundred small ways, that you are not quite good enough for the people whose port you keep from running out."

My father said nothing. He said he could not have said anything if he had tried. He had half a cheese and pickle sandwich in his hand.

"And then she asked me," he said. "I'll give it you exactly. I've never forgotten a word. She said, *Mr Mallyon. Do you like being underestimated?*"

* * *

"What did you say?"

"I said yes." My father laughed, quietly, the first time. "God help me. I said, yes, miss, as it happens, I do. I've got rather used to it. And she nodded, as if that was the right answer, and she said, *Good. Then you will be very good at what I am going to ask you to do. Because nobody will ever believe you could do it.*"

She told him three things.

The first was that there was a grocer's shop for sale in Hendon, in Brent Street, a good family business with a good trade, whose owner was a widower with no sons who wanted to retire to the coast, and who would take a fair price in instalments from a steady man with references. She had the references. They were in an envelope in her bag, from people he had never met, and every one of them was genuine.

The second was that the Secretary of the Hendon and District Grocers' Association, a man called Mr Tilley, was going to retire in the autumn, and that nobody else in the Association could add up, and that a steady new man with a Cambridge college's accounts behind him would be voted in without a contest if he put his name forward.

"And the third?" I said.

My father did not answer at once. He looked down at his own hands on his cardigan.

"The third," he said, "was that once I was settled, a gentleman from Whitehall would start dropping in to the shop for a quarter of tea now and then. Quite informally. And that I was to give him a

cup, in the back, and answer his questions, and ask him nothing. And that I would know him because he'd ask for Darjeeling, and complain that it was too dear."

"Who was he?"

"A man from Whitehall," said my father. "I'll come to him."

"But why?" I said. "Why you, why a grocer's shop, why Hendon? What did she want?"

My father looked at me for a long time.

"I asked her that," he said. "I said, miss, I don't understand. What on earth would anybody want with a grocer in Hendon? And she said something I didn't understand for four years." He took a breath. "She said, *Because in four years, Mr Mallyon, there will be another war. And this time everything that matters will travel in a grocer's van. Every sack of flour and every side of bacon and every tin of corned beef in London will have to be counted and rationed and moved, by men like you, who know where things come from and where they go. And everybody who wants to know what this country is going to do will be reading its grocery bill.*"

The carriage clock on the mantelpiece ticked. It was four minutes slow. Out in the garden, a blackbird was going through the flower bed under the monkey puzzle, turning over the dead leaves.

"She'd read my mind," said my father. "That was what I thought. In the garden. With the snowdrops. She'd read the one thing I'd learned in France, that nobody had ever cared to hear, and she'd said it back to me, word for word, as if it were the most important thing in the world." He shook his head slowly. "I've

thought since that she hadn't read my mind at all. I think she just knew. I think she'd always known. I think she'd come to that garden to find a man who already understood it, and I happened to be eating my sandwiches."

"Did you say yes?"

"Not then. I said I'd think about it. She said, of course. She said, I will be here on Friday. And she got up and walked away down the gravel path to the gate, and I listened, and she didn't make a sound on it." He paused. "I went back to the office and sat at my desk and didn't add up a single figure all afternoon. And on Friday I went back to the garden with my sandwiches, and she was there on the bench, and I said yes."

* * *

I wrote all that down in the exercise book on the end of his bed. When I looked up, he was watching me write, the way you watch somebody you love do something you never expected them to be able to do.

"There's one more thing she said," he said. "In the garden, on the Friday. When I'd said yes." He did not look at me. "I'll tell it you now, because I said I'd tell you the garden, and it was in the garden. But I'll not explain it. You'll have to wait for your mother for that, and she may never."

I waited.

"She said, *There will be a young woman in Hendon, Mr Mallyon. You will meet her in the spring. She will be in trouble, and*

*she will be too proud to say so. Marry her. Quickly. Do not ask her anything she does not tell you.*"

My father looked out at the garden.

"And I said, miss, I'm forty-two years old and I've never walked out with a girl in my life. And she said, *I know. That is why it has to be you.*"

He turned his head and looked at me then, my mild, plain, careful father, in his cardigan, with his hands folded on his stomach and his carriage clock four minutes slow.

"I did as I was told, Wendy," he said. "And I've never once in thirty years been sorry. Not for one single day." He paused. "Whatever's in that envelope. You remember I said that."

# Chapter 9 – *Hendon*

*Sunday, 17th October 1965. Room 1, after church. Father in his chair. Mother at the 11 o'clock at St Marychurch, as always. Miss Ania walking on the front.*

He told me the rest of 1935 on the Sunday, while my mother was at church.

I noticed that. My mother goes to the eleven o'clock at St Marychurch every Sunday of her life, and has done since they rebuilt it, and she is gone from twenty to eleven until a quarter past twelve, and in all the years he came down for Christmas and August my father never once went with her. He sat in the front room and read the *Observer*. That Sunday he waited until he heard the front door close behind her, and then he got up and went to his own door and opened it and said, "Wendy," down the passage, and I went.

"She doesn't want me telling you," he said, when I had sat down on the end of the bed. "She hasn't said so. She doesn't need to." He settled into his armchair. "But she said nothing about the shop. So I'll tell you about the shop."

* * *

Mallyon's Provisions had been Gedge's Provisions until the spring of 1935. Mr Gedge was seventy, a widower with no sons and a daughter married in Bournemouth, and he had kept the shop on Brent Street for forty-one years and wanted to go and live by the sea

and watch his grandchildren build sandcastles. He took my father's references and read every one of them twice, slowly, with his glasses on the end of his nose, and then he looked at my father over the top of them and said, "Somebody thinks a great deal of you, Mr Mallyon," and my father said, "So it seems," and Mr Gedge shook his hand.

My father moved in on the first of March. He had his clothes in one suitcase and his books in two tea chests, and he slept that first night on a camp bed in the empty flat over the shop, with the blinds down and the smell of bacon and coffee and soap and paraffin coming up through the floorboards, and he said that he lay awake until three in the morning, not because he was frightened, though he was, but because it was the first night of his life that he had ever slept under a roof that was his own.

"I was forty-two," he said. "And I'd never owned so much as a bicycle."

I remember the shop. I was born over it and lived over it until I was seven, and then I went back every summer for a fortnight until I was married. The long mahogany counter, worn pale down the middle where forty years of elbows had leaned on it. The tall black tea canisters on the shelf behind, with gold letters: ASSAM, CEYLON, DARJEELING, CHINA. The big red bacon slicer, with its wheel, that I was never, ever allowed to touch. The bins of dried fruit with glass lids. The sacks of sugar and flour on the floor. The cheese under its wire. The brass scales. The bell on its spring over

the door that rang every time a customer came in, so that for the first seven years of my life I thought that was what bells were for.

And the order book. A great fat ledger on the end of the counter, with a pencil on a string, in which every customer who had an account wrote down what they wanted for the week, and my father made it up and sent the boy round with it on the bicycle with the basket on the front.

"That book," said my father, "was the most important book in north London. Nobody knew it but me."

* * *

He did not explain that at once. He told me about the trade first, because he said I would not understand the rest if I did not understand the trade.

A grocer in 1935, he said, did not grow anything or make anything. He bought things and sold them. He bought from the wholesalers: big firms with warehouses down by the docks or out at Park Royal, who bought from the importers, who bought from the ships. Tea from India and Ceylon. Bacon from Denmark. Butter from New Zealand. Sugar from the West Indies. Flour from Canada. Tinned meat from Argentina. Nearly everything that a family in Hendon ate came across the sea. And the grocer, at the end of the line, behind his mahogany counter, was the one man in the whole chain who knew exactly how much of it every family actually needed, every week, because they wrote it down for him in his book.

"Multiply my book," said my father, "by every grocer in Hendon. Then by every grocer in London. That's how much food it takes to keep London alive for a week. To the ounce. Nobody in Whitehall knew that figure, Wendy. Nobody in the whole government. They knew how many guns there were and how many ships. They didn't know how many ounces of butter Hendon ate."

"And in a war," I said slowly, "when the ships stop—"

"When the ships stop," said my father, "you'd better know."

* * *

In September 1935 the Hendon and District Grocers' Association met in the upstairs room of the Railway Tavern on a Thursday night to elect a new Secretary, Mr Tilley having retired to Worthing with a clock. There were thirty-one members present. My father had been a member for six months. He put his name forward because he had been asked to, and he said a few words about keeping the accounts in order and the subscriptions up to date, and sat down. Nobody else stood.

"Nobody else could add up," he said. "She was quite right about that."

So he became the Secretary. He kept the minutes in his neat hand and the subscriptions in a cash box, and organised the annual dinner and the summer outing to Southend, and wrote letters to the wholesalers on behalf of the members about late deliveries and short weights. And because he was the Secretary, every grocer in Hendon and Golders Green and Mill Hill and Edgware brought him

their troubles. Which wholesaler was short this month. Whose prices had gone up. Which lines were hard to get. Who was buying what, and how much.

"Every supply chain in north London," said my father, "crossed my desk. On the back of a complaint about short weight in currants."

* * *

The gentleman from Whitehall came in for the first time on a Tuesday afternoon in May, at a quarter past three, when the shop was quiet.

My father described him for me exactly, the way he describes a new customer to my mother: a man of about fifty, thin, grey-haired, a little stooped, in a dark suit and an old Burberry and a bowler hat that had seen better days, with a rolled umbrella, and wire spectacles which he took off when he came in out of the light and wiped on a handkerchief and put back on. He stood at the counter and looked at the tea canisters for a long time, and then he said that he would like a quarter of the Darjeeling, please.

My father weighed it out and wrapped it and told him the price.

"Good heavens," said the gentleman. "That's very dear."

My father said that he had been told it would be.

The gentleman looked at him through his spectacles, and something went over his face, my father said, a sort of dry amusement, as though they were both actors in a play that neither of

them had written, and he had just noticed that the scenery was wobbling.

"Then perhaps," he said, "you would be kind enough to give me a cup of it. In the back. It's been a long day."

My father turned the sign on the door to CLOSED and took him through into the back room behind the shop, where there was a gas ring and a kettle and two kitchen chairs and a table covered in invoices, and made him a pot of Darjeeling, and gave him a cup, and asked him nothing at all.

The gentleman drank half the cup without speaking. Then he took a small notebook out of his inside pocket, and a silver pencil, and said, "Mr Mallyon. How much bacon does Hendon eat in a week?"

* * *

"I told him," said my father. "To the pound. And then I told him how much butter, and how much sugar, and how much tea, and where it came from, and which wholesalers were short, and which were buying up stocks they didn't need, and why I thought they were doing it. He wrote it all down. It took an hour and a half. He drank three cups. And when he'd finished he put his notebook away and said, thank you, Mr Mallyon, that was the most useful hour I've spent this year. And he paid for his quarter of Darjeeling, and went out, and I turned the sign round to OPEN again."

He came back every month, my father said, for four years. Always on a Tuesday, always at a quarter past three, always a

quarter of Darjeeling, always too dear. And then in the war, more often. Much more often.

"Who was he?" I said. "What was his name?"

My father was quiet for a moment.

"He died in 1962," he said. "In his sleep, in a flat in Kensington, with a cat. I went to the funeral. There were eleven of us. Nobody spoke to anybody." He looked at me. "So I suppose there's no harm in telling you now. His name was Talland. Hugh Talland. He'd been a barrister, before the first war, and something at the Admiralty during it. In 1935 he was in a little office in Whitehall that nobody had heard of, that studied other countries' shopping."

I sat very still on the end of the bed with the exercise book open on my knee and my pen in my hand.

"Talland," I said.

"You know the name?"

"Johnny Hills told me about him on Thursday," I said. "He came down to Paignton in 1915. To Bailey's Hotel. After a telegram."

My father looked at me for a long time. Then he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes with his finger and thumb, slowly, the way he does when a column of figures has come out to a total he was not expecting.

"He asked me once," he said, "in 1937 or so, whether I'd ever been to Paignton. I said no. He said, you will, one day. I'd like you to give my regards to an inspector of police there, if he's still alive. A man called Hills. And I said, what shall I tell him? And he said,

tell him I still remember the coil of rope." My father put his glasses back on. "I never knew what he meant. I gave Jack Hills the message in 1946, at the funeral of a man called Edward Harvey, standing by the grave. He was seventy-seven. He laughed out loud. I'd never heard a man laugh at a funeral before."

* * *

There was one more thing about Hendon, my father said, that I ought to know, because it came back later and it would make no sense if he did not tell it now.

It was the thing he had told Talland on that first Tuesday, about the wholesalers who were buying up stocks they did not need.

There was one firm in particular. An importer and wholesaler with a big warehouse in Wapping, called Tremayne and Rook, that supplied a lot of the smaller grocers in north London with dried fruit and tinned goods and coffee. It was an old firm, solid, a bit sleepy. And in the autumn of 1934 it had been bought by a company nobody had heard of, with an office in the City, and from that winter on it had begun to behave very strangely.

"They wrote to every grocer they supplied," said my father. "A very polite letter. They said that in the interests of efficiency, so they could serve us better, they'd be obliged if we'd send them each month a full return of our stock and our weekly sales. Every line. Every ounce. In confidence." He shook his head. "Most of the members did it. Why wouldn't they? It was a reasonable request from a good supplier. It saved them a deal of bother over orders."

"And you?"

"I didn't," said my father. "I'd been at the railheads. I knew what it was. Somebody was reading London's grocery bill. And it wasn't anybody in Whitehall."

"Who owned the company?"

"Talland found out," said my father, "in the end. It took him two years. It went back through the City office to a holding company in London, and through that to a firm of shipping and clay merchants in Hamburg." He looked at me. "I've no notion whether that means anything to you."

It did. I did not say so. I wrote it down. *Hamburg. Shipping and clay.* And I underlined it, because I could feel Johnny Hills's father's hand on my shoulder, telling me to.

* * *

My mother's key turned in the front door at a quarter past twelve.

My father heard it. I watched him hear it. He did not move, but something in his face folded up, neatly, the way he folds a newspaper, and was put away.

"That's Hendon," he said. "The shop and the Association and Mr Talland and his Darjeeling. That's all mine." He looked at the door. "The rest of 1935 is your mother's. You'll have to ask her."

"She won't tell me."

"No," said my father. "Very likely she won't." He reached over and took the exercise book off my knee, gently, and closed it, and gave it back to me. "But I'll tell you one thing, Wendy, and then I'll

not say another word about it. Mr Talland came into the shop that first Tuesday in May. And he drank his three cups. And when he was going, at the door, with his umbrella, he stopped, and looked back down the counter, at the girl behind it at the far end, weighing out sugar into blue paper bags. Twenty years old. Small. Very straight. Not a word to say to anybody."

He looked at the door again. In the passage, we could both hear my mother taking off her hat.

"He said, *And who's the young lady, Mr Mallyon?*" said my father. "And I said, *That's my wife*."

# Chapter 10 – *Nance*

*Sunday, 17th October 1965. 11 p.m. Back room.*
*Mother doing the quarter's figures. Self writing up.*
*Neither of us said we would be here.*

I did not ask her. I want that set down, because if she ever reads this she will say that I did, and I did not.

I went into the back room after the house was quiet, at about half past ten, with the exercise book, because it is where I write. She was there already, at the far end of the long deal table, with the big green accounts ledger open in front of her and the adding machine at her elbow and her reading glasses on, doing the quarter. She did not look up. I sat down at the other end, the end by the window onto the yard, and opened my book, and began to write up what my father had told me that morning about the shop and Mr Talland and his Darjeeling. She went on adding. The machine chattered and stopped, chattered and stopped.

We sat like that for half an hour. Then the machine stopped and did not start again.

"He told you about the shop," she said, without looking up from the ledger.

"Yes."

"And about the man with the tea."

"Yes."

"And he stopped when I came in."

I did not answer. She did not need me to.

She took her reading glasses off and folded them and put them down on the ledger, very precisely, square to the edge of the page. Then she sat back in her chair and looked at the window, at the dark yard, at the dustbins, and not at me.

"I'll say it once," said my mother. "I'll not say it again, and you'll not ask me again, and you'll not ask your father. And there's things I'll not say at all, and you'll know which they are when we get to them, because I'll stop." She paused. "Write it down if you want. You've your father's habit. I can't stop you."

I picked up my pen.

* * *

She was born in Bermondsey in March 1915, in two rooms off Jamaica Road, a stone's throw from the river. Her father was a stevedore on the Surrey Docks. She never knew him. He joined the Navy in 1915 and was lost in the North Sea in 1916, at Jutland, when she was a year old, on a ship whose name she had never been told and had never asked. Her mother went out charring, and took in washing, and had two lodgers, and did the stairs at a solicitor's in Tooley Street at five every morning, and was dead of her chest at forty when my mother was thirteen.

"So I went into service," said my mother. "At fourteen. Same as every girl on our street. There was nothing else. I could read and write and add up, and I was clean, and I could keep my mouth shut. That's all they wanted." She was looking at the dustbins. "I started as tweeny in a house in Bloomsbury. A doctor's. I was there two

years. Then I was second housemaid in a house in Hampstead. On the edge of the Heath. A big house, with a carriage drive and a conservatory and a man to do the boilers. I was there three years."

"Whose house?"

She did not answer at once.

"A family called Rook," she said. "He was in the import trade. Dried fruit and coffee and tinned goods. An old firm. His grandfather's. Down at Wapping."

I did not move. I did not look up. I kept my pen moving on the page in front of me, because I knew that if I stopped, she would see that the name meant something to me, and she would stop too. *Rook. Wapping. Dried fruit.* I wrote it down in the same hand as everything else, and I did not underline it. Not then.

"They were decent enough," said my mother. "To work for. He was a soft old man and she was a cold old woman, and they had no children, and the house was too big for them, and there were too many of us to keep it. Cook, and the housekeeper, and two housemaids and a kitchen maid, and the chauffeur, and the boiler man. I had a room at the top of the house with the other girl, with a skylight. I could see the whole of London from it on a clear night. St Paul's. The river. The lights all the way down to the docks where my father had worked." She stopped. "I used to look at the docks and think, that's where I come from, and this is where I've got to, and this is as far as I'll ever get. Second housemaid. With a skylight."

* * *

"In the autumn of 1934," said my mother, "the old man sold the business."

He had not wanted to, she said. The servants all knew; servants always know. He had been losing money for years, the way old firms do, and he had debts, and he was tired, and then a company in the City had come to him with an offer, a very generous offer, much more than the firm was worth, and he had taken it. And after that, all that autumn and winter, there were men from the new company in the house. Not living there. Coming to dinner. Coming for the weekend. Sitting up late with the old man in the library with the door shut, going through the books.

"Gentlemen," said my mother. "From London and from abroad. Very polite. Good tippers. I didn't take much notice. You didn't, in service. They were just more people whose beds you made and whose boots you put outside the door." She was turning her folded reading glasses over and over on the ledger with one finger. "And one of them was a Canadian."

I wrote it down. My hand was quite steady. I was proud of that afterwards.

"He wasn't with the company," said my mother. "Not exactly. He was a guest. A friend of one of them. He was in the Air Force, the Royal Air Force, on a short commission. A lot of Canadians were, in those years. They came over and joined up for four or five years for the flying, and went home. He was stationed out at Hendon, at the aerodrome. That's how he came to be in north London at all." She paused. "He used to come over to the house at

weekends. All that winter. To play bridge with the old man and go walking on the Heath."

She stopped turning the glasses.

"He was kind," she said.

That was all. She did not say anything else for a long time. The clock on the mantelpiece in the back room, which keeps proper time, ticked, and out in the yard the wind moved the lid of one of the dustbins, very slightly, so that it knocked.

"He was kind," she said again. "To the servants. Which they weren't, mostly, the gentlemen. He'd say thank you. He'd ask your name and remember it. He'd carry his own case up the stairs and not let the boy take it." She looked at the window. "He used to talk to me in the conservatory, when I was doing the plants. About Canada. About the snow, and the lakes, and how big it all was. How there was room for everybody, and nobody cared who your father was. I was nineteen, Wendy. I'd never been further than Southend."

I waited. My pen was not moving any more. I could not make it.

"That's all I'll say about him," said my mother. "That's the place where I stop."

* * *

She started again after a while, on the other side of it, the way you step over something in the road.

"I was turned off in March," she said. "1935. The first week. Without a character."

I knew what that meant, because she had told me, when I was fourteen and taking on our first girl at Widecombe Cot, what it meant. A servant turned off without a character, without a reference, could not get another place. Not a decent one. It meant the street. It meant the workhouse, if you were unlucky. It meant worse, if you were very unlucky. And everybody knew there was only one reason a respectable house turned off a respectable girl of nineteen without a character in the middle of the season, quietly, with a month's wages and no explanation, and it was not that she had broken the good china.

"The housekeeper did it," said my mother. "In her room, with the door shut. She was very sorry. She said so. She gave me my month's money and a bit more out of her own purse, and told me to go to my aunt in Bermondsey and not to come back." She looked down at the ledger. "I hadn't an aunt in Bermondsey. I hadn't anybody anywhere. I went down the carriage drive with my box at eleven o'clock on a Tuesday morning and stood on the Finchley Road with it at my feet, and I didn't know which way to turn. I mean that, Wendy. I didn't know whether to go left or right."

"What did you do?"

My mother turned her head, and looked at me for the first time since she had started, down the whole length of the deal table, with her grey eyes.

"A young lady stopped," she said. "On the pavement. In a grey costume and a little grey hat. And looked at me, and at my box, and said, *Are you looking for a place?* And I said, yes, miss. And she

said, *There is a grocer's in Brent Street, in Hendon, called Gedge's, that wants a girl behind the counter. A steady girl who can add up. Tell them I sent you.* And I said, who shall I say? And she'd gone."

My mother put her reading glasses back on, and looked down at the green ledger, and did not see it.

"She had the name wrong," she said. "It wasn't Gedge's any more. It had been Mallyon's for three days."

* * *

She walked to Hendon. It is four miles from the Finchley Road to Brent Street, and she carried her box the whole way, because she would not spend the money on a bus. She got there at half past two. The shop was quiet. There was a tall, stooped, mild-looking man behind the counter in a brown warehouse coat, with a pencil behind his ear, writing in a big fat order book, who looked up when the bell rang over the door, and saw a small, white-faced, very straight girl of nineteen with a tin box at her feet and her chin up.

"I'd been told you wanted a girl," said my mother. "I said so. Just like that. I didn't say please. I'd no character, and I'd walked four miles, and I wasn't going to beg. He looked at me for a long time. Then he said, *Can you add up?* And I said, *Better than you, I expect.*"

I laughed. I could not help it. It came out of me in that quiet room like a cork out of a bottle.

My mother did not laugh. But something happened at the corner of her mouth.

"He gave me a column of figures off the order book," she said. "Thirty lines. I added it up in my head and gave him the total. He checked it with his pencil. Then he said, *You start tomorrow. Eight o'clock. Twenty-two and six a week, and there's a room over the shop at the back you can have, with a lock on the door.*" She paused. "He never asked me for a character. He never asked me where I'd been or why I'd left. He never asked me one single thing."

I thought of my father in the college garden, with half a cheese and pickle sandwich in his hand. *Do not ask her anything she does not tell you.*

"Three weeks after that," said my mother, "he asked me to marry him."

* * *

"I said no," she said.

She was looking at the ledger again, at the columns of the quarter's figures, as though she were checking them.

"I said, Mr Mallyon, you don't know anything about me. And he said, *I know you can add up better than I can, and I know you're too proud to say when you're in trouble, and I know you're in trouble.* And I said, how do you know that? And he said, *I don't. Not for certain. I haven't asked and I won't. But if you are, Miss Brennan, you'll need a husband by the summer, and I'm forty-two years old and I've never walked out with a girl in my life and I'm not likely to start now, and I'd be very glad of somebody to do the accounts.*" My mother's voice had gone very flat and very quiet.

"He said it like that. Like a man offering you a price for a side of bacon. Fair and square, and no nonsense, and take it or leave it."

"And you took it."

"I went upstairs to my room with the lock on the door," said my mother, "and I sat on the bed for an hour. And then I came down and said yes."

They were married at Hendon Register Office on the twenty-seventh of April, 1935, at eleven o'clock in the morning, with two witnesses off the street. She wore her one good costume. He wore his Sunday suit. They had lunch at a Lyons, and went back and opened the shop at two, because it was a Saturday and Saturday afternoons were the busiest of the week.

"That's all," said my mother.

She closed the green ledger. She had not finished the quarter. I had never in my life seen her close a ledger before it was finished.

"That's all you'll get," she said, "and it's more than I meant to give you. You were born on the second of October." She stood up, and picked up the ledger, and held it against her chest with both arms, the way you would hold a child. "Your father has never once asked me. In thirty years. Not once. Not when you were born, and not when the talk started, and not when that man came to Torquay in the war and wanted to take you away from me. Not once." She looked down at me. "You'll not ask me either, Wendy. Not now and not ever. You'll do me that."

"Yes," I said.

She nodded. She went to the door, with the ledger, and stopped there with her hand on the frame, the way she stops outside my room at night on the stairs.

"He wanted to take me to Canada," she said, to the door. "In the spring of 1935. Before. He'd asked me, in the conservatory. He said there was room for everybody there, and nobody cared who your father was." She was quiet for a moment. "I said no to him too."

Then she went out, and I heard her go along the passage and into the office and shut the door, and after a while I heard the adding machine start again.

I sat at the long table and looked at what I had written. Then I went back to the top of the page, to the place where she had said *a family called Rook*, and I underlined it twice.

# Chapter 11 – *Born Early*

*Monday, 18th October 1965. Mr and Mrs Dorling's bill made up for tomorrow. Miss Ania out all day on the moor. Father asked for me after lunch.*

My father kept his word. He did not say one word about my mother, or about what she had told me in the back room on the Sunday night, though I knew that he knew, because the house knew, the way houses do. My mother was very short with the girl at breakfast and polished the brass on the front door twice. My father came to lunch in a clean collar.

After lunch he asked me to come to Room 1. When I went in he was sitting in his armchair with one of the old ledgers from the cardboard case open on his knee. It was not the Grocers' Association. It was a shop order book, a fat one, with a marbled cover, and *1935* written on the spine in his hand.

"Your mother told you the spring," he said. "I'll tell you the autumn. That's mine. She'll not mind that." He paused. "She'll mind. But she'll not say."

He turned the ledger round on his knee and held it out to me, open, and put his finger on a line.

It was the page for the week ending Saturday the fifth of October, 1935. The orders of the regular customers of Mallyon's Provisions, Brent Street, in a column down the left in their own hands and in his: Mrs Ackroyd, Mrs Benjamin, Mrs Cohen, Mr

Dalby, the Misses Fenn. Bacon and butter and sugar and tea and soap. And between Mrs Cohen and Mr Dalby, in pencil, in my father's small careful hand, squeezed into the margin as if he had not been able to wait to find a proper place for it:

*Wed. 2nd Oct. 4.10 a.m. Wendy Mallyon. 7 lb 2 oz.*
*Both well.*

"I sat up all night in the shop," said my father. "Doing the books. The midwife wouldn't have me upstairs, and I couldn't sit in the kitchen listening, so I sat behind the counter with the lamp on and the blinds down and did the whole quarter's accounts. Every line. Twice." He looked at the page. "And when she came down and told me, I didn't know where to write it. So I wrote it there." He shook his head. "I've had a good many books in my life, Wendy. That's the one I took out of the shop when I sold it. That and the Association minutes. Mr Prothero can have the rest."

I sat on the end of the bed with the order book open on my knee and looked at my own name in the margin between Mrs Cohen's two pounds of granulated and Mr Dalby's quarter of Ceylon, for a long time.

* * *

"The talk started in the shop," said my father. "Where else? It's where all the talk in Hendon started. Women in a queue for bacon have nothing to do but count." He did not say it bitterly. He said it the way he says everything about the trade, as a fact about how

things are. "We'd been married at the end of April. You came at the beginning of October. That's five months and a week. You can't do sums like that in a grocer's queue and not have somebody do them out loud."

"Did it hurt Mum?"

"Your mother," said my father, "served every one of those women across that counter for seven years. She weighed out their sugar and their tea and gave them their change to the farthing, and she never once let a single one of them see a single thing in her face." He paused. "Mrs Ackroyd was the worst. Mrs Ackroyd stood at that counter in November with you in the pram by the door and said, *What a big baby, Mrs Mallyon, for one so early.* In front of the whole queue."

"What did Mum say?"

"She said, *Yes, Mrs Ackroyd. She takes after her father.* And looked at me." My father smiled, very slightly, the way he smiles when he has been given exact change. "And Mrs Ackroyd looked at me too. Forty-two, and six foot one, and built like a hat stand. And she didn't know where to put herself. And the whole queue laughed. And that," said my father, "was the end of the talk in Brent Street."

It was not, of course, the end of the talk. I knew that. I have heard the talk all my life. It followed us to Torquay in 1942 in the luggage, the way talk does, and it was waiting for me in the playground at St Marychurch on my first day, and it is still said in this town, by people who think I cannot hear. But it was never said

again in Brent Street, my father told me, not by anybody, not in seven years.

"She was very fierce, your mother," he said. "She still is."

* * *

He told me about the parcel next. He told it to me, I think, because he had decided on the Saturday night that he would tell it, and had been going over it in his head ever since, and wanted it over with.

It came in the week before Christmas, 1935. On a Thursday afternoon, when the shop was full and the light was going and the windows were steamed up, and my mother was upstairs with me, because I had a cold.

"He came in out of the dark," said my father, "and stood at the back of the queue, like anybody. I didn't know him. I'd never seen him. A young man, thirty or so. Tall. Fair. In a good civilian overcoat, with an Air Force way of standing that you can't get rid of. He waited his turn. When he got to the counter he took his hat off." My father looked out of the window at the monkey puzzle. "And I knew him then. I'd never seen him, and I knew him. You know how you do."

"What did he say?"

"He said, *Good afternoon. Mr Mallyon?* And I said yes. And he said, *I wonder if Mrs Mallyon is well. And the baby.*" My father was quiet for a moment. "He had a voice like a wireless announcer. Very pleasant. Canadian, with the corners knocked off by four years

in the Mess. And he said it very quietly. So the queue wouldn't hear."

"And you said?"

"I said, *Both very well, thank you. Mother and daughter.* He hadn't known it was a daughter, I could see. Something happened in his face." My father took his glasses off and looked at them. "Then he put a parcel on the counter. A little square one, in brown paper and string. And he said, *For the baby. For Christmas.* And then he said, *I'd be grateful if you didn't tell Mrs Mallyon who brought it. I don't think she'd want to know.* And he put his hat on and went out, and the bell rang over the door, and he was gone."

My father put his glasses back on.

"I stood there," he said, "with the parcel on the counter, and Mrs Benjamin waiting for half a pound of currants. And I thought, Harold, you've been told not to ask her anything she doesn't tell you. And this is a thing she hasn't told you." He spread his hands on his knees. "So I didn't ask. I took it upstairs that night, and I gave it to her, and I said, *A customer left this, for the baby.* And she opened it, and looked at it for a long time, and said, *Which customer?* And I said, *I didn't get his name.*"

"Did she believe you?"

"No," said my father. "But she let me say it. That's what we do, your mother and I. We let each other say things."

"What was in it?"

My father looked at me.

"You know what was in it," he said. "You've had it on your dressing table since you were eleven years old."

* * *

I went upstairs. I did not run. I want that put down, because I felt like running, and I did not, because my father was watching me go from his armchair and I did not want him to see.

It was where it has always been. On the dressing table in my old room at the top of the house, at the back, by the mirror, with my hairbrush and my grandmother's hatpins in it. A small silver christening mug. Plain, with a little scrolled handle, and a beaded rim, tarnished in the engraving because I never polish it properly. My mother gave it to me on my eleventh birthday, in 1946, when we were at Widecombe Cot, and said it was mine, it had come when I was a baby, I was to look after it. I had asked her who from. She had said, *A customer.*

There is a single letter engraved on the side of it, in a curly copperplate script. *W.*

And under the base, very small, stamped into the silver, there are marks, which I had never once in nineteen years thought to look at. A tiny lion, walking. The word *STERLING*. And a maker's name, in letters so small I had to take it to the window to read them:

*BIRKS. MONTREAL.*

I stood at the window for a long time with it in my hand. Out in the bay the light was going, the way it does in October, very fast, and the sea had turned the colour of the mug.

Then I went back down to Room 1 and sat on the end of the bed and put it on the bed beside me, and my father looked at it and nodded, and neither of us said anything about it at all.

* * *

"There's one more," said my father, after a while. "And then that's 1935 and 1936, and you'll have to get the war from somebody else. I wasn't there for the war. Not in Torquay. You were." He closed the 1935 order book on his knee. "This one's for Mr Talland's sake. He'd want it written down."

It was March 1936. A Tuesday. Not a quarter past three; a quarter past eleven, in the morning, when the shop was quiet and my father was on his own behind the counter, because my mother had taken me out in the pram.

"An old gentleman came in," said my father. "Sixty, sixty-five. Very upright. A white moustache, waxed. A black Homburg and a black overcoat with a velvet collar and a silver-topped cane. Gloves. A foreigner, I knew before he opened his mouth, from the cut of the coat. He stood at the counter and looked at the tea canisters for a long time, the way Mr Talland always did." My father paused. "And then he said, in very good English, *A quarter of the Darjeeling, if you please*."

I sat very still.

"I weighed it out," said my father. "I wrapped it. I told him the price. And he looked at the little packet in his gloved hand, and then at me, over his moustache. And he said, *That is very dear, Mr Mallyon.*"

The carriage clock on the mantelpiece ticked. Four minutes slow.

"And he smiled," said my father. "Very pleasantly. As if we'd shared a joke. And he said, *You did not send your returns to Tremayne and Rook. Nor, since you became Secretary, have most of your members. Thirty-one grocers in north London who were writing to us very helpfully every month have stopped. I was curious to see the man who could persuade thirty-one grocers to stop writing letters.* And he put a card down on the counter, and took his tea, and went out."

My father reached into the cardboard case at his feet, under the ledgers and the bundle of letters, and took out a small white visiting card, gone yellow at the edges, and put it on the bed beside the silver mug.

*K. PETRICK*
*Hamburg*

"I took it to Mr Talland the next Tuesday," said my father. "With his Darjeeling. And I told him. Every word, the way you do. And I watched his face, and it went the colour of that card." He looked at it, lying on the candlewick bedspread next to my christening mug. "He sat in the back of my shop with his cup going cold and didn't

say anything for a long time. And then he said, *Mr Mallyon, I think you had better start keeping a pocketbook.*"

"Did you?"

My father smiled.

"Since that day," he said. "Every day. The date, the time, the weather. Thirty years. They're in the bottom of the tea chest in the hall. Your mother thinks they're Association minutes." He looked down at the card and the mug, side by side on the bed. "There's a gentleman in Preston who'd laugh out loud if he knew."

I picked up the mug and the card, one in each hand, and held them. Montreal and Hamburg. The kind young man in the queue with an Air Force way of standing, and the old one with a white moustache who knew what Mr Talland drank. In the same shop, in the same winter, at the same counter, a few months apart, while I lay upstairs in my pram with a cold and knew nothing about any of it.

"They both came to see you," said my father quietly. "That's what I think. In the end. I've had thirty years to think it, and that's what I think. They both came to see who you were." He looked at me. "And I don't know, Wendy. I still don't know. Whether it was the same reason."

# Chapter 12 – *Widecombe Cot*

*Tuesday, 19th October 1965. Mr and Mrs Dorling departed, 10.15. Rooms 1 and 3 only. From here I do not need anyone to tell me. I was there.*

I have been writing for ten days now, and everything I have written so far, I was told. I sat on the end of a bed or across a table or in an armchair in Preston with a cake going stale, and wrote down what an old man or an old woman said, and tried to get it right. I have not minded that. I am a hotelier's daughter, and listening is most of the trade.

But from here on, I was there.

I want to say what that means, because it is not as simple as it sounds. I was seven in the winter of 1942 and eight in the summer of 1944. I remember a great deal. I remember it the way a child remembers, which is in pieces, very bright, with no joins: the smell of a room, the colour of a coat, a word somebody said on the stairs, a hand on a door handle. I did not know what most of it meant. I have spent twenty years putting the pieces together, the way you put together a jigsaw from a box with no picture on the lid, and I am not sure I have got all of them the right way up even now.

So where I knew a thing at the time, I will say I knew it. Where I worked it out later, I will say that. And where I am guessing, I will say I am guessing. That is the best I can do. It is what Johnny Hills's father would have done.

* * *

My mother bought Widecombe Cot in November 1942.

I do not know why. I have said that, and I will say it once more and then stop. Nobody told me at the time and nobody has told me since. One week we were living over the shop in Brent Street, as we always had, and the next my mother was packing my clothes into her old tin box from her days in service, the one with her initials painted on the lid, and telling me that we were going to live by the sea.

I remember asking whether Daddy was coming.

"Your father has to stay," said my mother. "For the ration books."

That is what I believed for years. I believed that my father could not come to Torquay because the whole of north London would starve without him, which was nearly true, as it turned out, though not in the way I thought. He was the Secretary of the Grocers' Association. He went to meetings at the Ministry of Food with men in bowler hats. He knew how many ounces of butter Hendon ate. I was very proud of him for it, and I told the girls at school in Torquay that my father kept London fed, and they did not believe me, and I hit one of them.

What I did not know, and did not work out until long after, was that my father had been going to the back room of the shop with a gentleman who drank Darjeeling for seven years by then, and that the war had made it a great deal more than Darjeeling. I did not know about Mr Talland. I did not know that the men in bowler hats

at the Ministry of Food were not the only men my father went to see in Whitehall. I knew that he came home late and went out early and had a telephone put in, which nobody in Brent Street had, and that my mother answered it in a voice she did not use for anything else.

He stayed. We went.

* * *

The money is the thing I have never been able to leave alone.

I have seen the deeds. I am a partner in this business, and I have been since 1956, and I have been through every paper in my mother's office, and the conveyance is in the black deed box in her bottom drawer with the insurance and the rates. Widecombe Cot was bought from the executors of a Miss Dorothy Prowse, spinster, deceased, who had run it as a private hotel since 1919, for the sum of two thousand eight hundred pounds, with the furniture and fittings. It was paid in full on completion. There was no mortgage. There was no loan from a bank.

Two thousand eight hundred pounds was a great deal of money in 1942. It was more than a good grocer's shop in Hendon made in five years, after the rent and the wages and the boy and the bicycle. I know, because I have my father's accounts for those years too, in his neat hand. There was nothing in them that could have bought a hotel in Torquay. There was a small amount saved, a few hundred pounds, in the Post Office. It was still there in 1945.

So somebody else paid. And my mother has never said who.

I asked her once. I was sixteen, and we had had a row about something else, the way you do at sixteen, and I had found the conveyance that week looking for my birth certificate, and I threw it at her in the kitchen. Where did the money come from, Mum? Who paid for all this? She looked at me across the kitchen table for a long time with her grey eyes, and she said, *It was paid for honestly, and it's ours, and that's all you need to know.* And she went out of the room.

I have never asked her since. And I have never stopped wondering.

I will set down my guess, because I said I would say where I was guessing. My guess is the Canadian. I think he paid. I think he had money, or got it, and I think that somewhere in 1942, before we ever came to Torquay, he found my mother and gave it to her, to put a roof over us by the sea, away from the bombs. And I think she took it, because she had a seven-year-old daughter and a husband who could not leave London, and because she was too proud to beg and not too proud to accept.

That is my guess. I have no proof of it at all. If it is wrong, my mother will know, and she will not tell me, and I will go to my grave thinking the wrong thing about the roof I was raised under.

There is a letter in the drawer upstairs, under my jumpers, that may say. I have not opened it yet.

* * *

We came down on the twenty-fourth of November, 1942. I had been seven for seven weeks.

My father saw us off at Paddington. I remember the station very clearly, the great dirty glass roof with half its panes gone and the blackout boards up where they had been, and the steam, and the noise, and the soldiers everywhere with kit bags, sleeping on them on the platform. My father carried the tin box to the carriage and put it on the rack, and then he got down onto the platform again and stood at the window. My mother let the window down on its strap.

He did not say very much. He never did. He said to me, "Be good for your mother, and learn to swim," and he gave me a quarter of humbugs in a paper bag, from the shop, which was the last quarter of humbugs I saw for two years. Then he looked at my mother.

I remember what he said to her because I did not understand it, and it worried me all the way to Exeter.

"Room three," he said. "Remember. Always room three."

My mother said, "I know."

Then the guard blew his whistle and the train moved and my father stood on the platform in his hat and his good overcoat, getting smaller, with his hand up, not waving, just up, the way you hold your hand up to stop the traffic. And then the platform curved and he was gone.

* * *

We got to Torquay in the dark. It was the blackout, of course, and I had never seen a town at night with no lights at all, and I remember being frightened of it: the station, and the taxi, which had masks on its lamps so that they were only slits, and the long dark climb up the hill with the sea somewhere below us, which I could hear and smell and not see. My mother held my hand in the back of the taxi and did not say anything.

And then the taxi stopped and the driver said, "Widecombe Cot, missus," and my mother paid him, and we got out at a gate in a wall with a dark garden behind it and a dark house behind that, and something enormous and black and spiky against the sky beside the path that I thought was a monster, and which turned out in the morning to be the monkey puzzle.

There was a sign on the gate. I could not read it in the dark. In the morning I read it. It was painted in green on cream, very faded, and it said:

*WIDECOMBE COT*
*Private Hotel*
*Miss D. Prowse*

My mother painted out the last line the following spring. She painted the whole sign again in 1946, after the war, and has done every spring since. But she never put her own name on it. I asked her once why not. She said, *People don't need to know whose it is. They need to know it's clean.*

* * *

There was somebody in the house.

I knew it before we were through the front door. You can tell, with a house, even a child can, even in the dark. There was warmth in the hall that had not come from nowhere, and a smell of a coal fire, and a light under a door at the end of the passage, the one that led to the kitchen and the back room. My mother stopped in the hall with her hand on the light switch and did not switch it on, and stood quite still, listening, and I stood still beside her and held on to her coat.

Then the door at the end of the passage opened, and the light came out along the floor, and a woman stood in it.

I have said I would say plainly what I saw. This is what I saw. A young woman, in a grey costume, with dark hair. Not tall. Holding a cup in both hands, the way the tram men hold their tea, with her thumbs over the rim. She stood in the kitchen doorway with the light behind her and looked down the passage at us, at my mother and at me, for perhaps three seconds.

"Mrs Mallyon," she said. "I have lit the fires. The beds are aired. There is soup."

My mother did not move.

I looked up at her, because I could feel through her coat that something was wrong, and I saw her face in the light from the kitchen door. It was white. Not frightened white. I knew my mother's frightened face; I had seen it in the Anderson shelter in our back yard in Hendon with the guns going. This was something else. This was the face of somebody who has been walking down a long

road for a very long time and has just come round a bend and seen, standing in the road ahead, the one person she had never expected to see again.

"You," said my mother.

"Yes," said the young woman.

"On the Finchley Road. In 1935."

"Yes."

My mother stood in the dark hall with her hand on the light switch and her daughter hanging on to her coat. I have never in my life heard her voice do what it did then. It shook.

"You had the name wrong," she said. "The shop. It wasn't Gedge's any more. It was Mallyon's."

"Yes," said the young woman. "I am sorry. I was a little early." She looked down the passage at me, then, for the first time, properly, and I have never forgotten that look. It was not unkind. It was not anything I had a word for at seven. I have one now. It was the way you look at something you have been waiting for, for a long time, to see whether it is the right size. "This is Wendy."

"Yes."

"Then she will be hungry," said the young woman, "after the train." And she turned and went back into the kitchen, and left the door open behind her, so that the light came out along the passage floor all the way to our feet.

My mother switched on the light in the hall.

Then she took off her hat and her gloves and put them on the hall table, very precisely, square to the edge, and took my hand, and

we went down the passage to the kitchen, where there was a fire in the range and a pan of soup on it and a loaf on the table and two places laid. Two. Not three. The young woman was standing by the range with her cup. She did not sit down. She did not eat. She watched me eat my soup, and every so often she blinked.

When I had finished, and my mother had taken me up to bed, to the little room at the top of the house with the sloping ceiling that I would sleep in for the next eighteen years, I lay in the dark under three blankets and a coat listening to the sea, and I heard my mother come down the stairs again, slowly, and go along the passage to the kitchen. And I heard the two of them talking, through the floor, low, for a very long time. I could not hear the words. Only my mother's voice, and the other one, quieter.

I did not know her name. Nobody told me that night. In the morning I came down early, before my mother, because I was seven and in a new house by the sea, and I went into the dining room, which was full of empty tables with chairs upside down on them, and she was sitting at the table in the bay window, the one with the view of the bay, the only table with its chairs the right way up, with a cup of tea in her hands, looking at the sea.

"Good morning, Wendy," she said. "My name is Ania. I am staying in Room 3."

And I said, "Always room three," because it was the only thing I could think of, and it was what my father had said.

She turned her head and looked at me, and something happened at the corner of her mouth that I would come to know

very well over the next three years, and which I can only describe as a smile arriving from a long way off.

"Yes," she said. "Always."

# Chapter 13 – *The Back Room*

*Thursday, 3rd December 1942. Bowls Club committee, back room, 8 p.m. Sandwiches for six.*

That is in my mother's hand, in the kitchen daybook for that winter, which I have in front of me. She kept a daybook as well as the register: what was ordered, what was cooked, who wanted what and when. The Bowls Club committee met in the back room at Widecombe Cot on the first Thursday of every month from December 1942 until the summer of 1945, and on a good many other Thursdays too, and it had sandwiches for six, or eight, or once, in the spring of 1944, for eleven.

There was no Bowls Club. I worked that out for myself when I was eight, because none of them ever had a bowls bag, and Mr Hills, who was a sergeant of police, told me one evening in the hall that he had never bowled a wood in his life and did not intend to start. But I did not work out what the committee was. Not then. I want that clear. I carried the sandwiches in and the cups out for three years, and I heard a great many things through that door, and I understood almost none of them, and I never once heard the word that Johnny Hills said to me in Preston last week as if it were the name of a street everybody knew.

My mother told the guests it was the Bowls Club. The guests did not care. It was the war. Everybody had a committee.

* * *

They came in by the back gate, from the lane behind the house, where the dustbins are, and in at the scullery door, so that they never went through the hall and never passed the dining room and never had to be seen by anybody at the reception desk. My mother left the scullery door on the latch on Thursdays from half past seven. I was not supposed to know that. I knew it because it was my job to bolt it again at night, and on Thursdays it was already open.

The first Thursday, I was in the kitchen, on a stool by the range, cutting the crusts off bread with a knife I was not supposed to use. My mother was making the sandwiches. Fish paste, because that was what there was. She had said to me, at teatime, that some people were coming to a meeting in the back room and that I was to take in the tea when she told me and then come straight out again and not ask questions, and I had said yes, and decided at once that I would ask as many questions as I could think of.

The scullery door opened at a quarter to eight, and a big man came in out of the dark, stamping his boots on the mat and taking off a wet cape.

I knew he was a policeman before I saw his uniform. Even at seven, coming from Hendon, you knew a policeman. It was the size of him and the slowness and the way he looked round the kitchen as he came in, once, all the way round, the stove and the dresser and the back door and the window and me, before he looked at my mother. He had a face like a farm gate, broad and weathered and not easily moved, and very big hands, and when he saw me on my stool

with the bread knife he did not tell me to put it down. He looked at me for a moment, and then he said, quite seriously:

"You'll want to keep your thumb out of the way of that, miss. It'll have it off."

"I know," I said.

"I expect you do," he said, and turned to my mother. "Mrs Mallyon. Sergeant Hills. Johnny." And he held out one of those enormous hands, and my mother wiped hers on her apron and shook it, and something passed between them that I did not understand and still only half understand: a sort of recognition, as if they had each been told a great deal about the other and were checking it against what they saw.

"She said you'd be the first," said my mother.

"She generally knows," said Sergeant Hills.

* * *

I want to set down who they were, all of them, as I saw them that winter, because I knew them all well by the end of the war and I want to remember how they looked to me the first time, before I knew anything.

There was Sergeant Hills, who I have described. He was fifty-two that year. He always sat at the end of the table nearest the scullery door, with his back to the wall and his helmet on the floor by his chair, and he always had a small black notebook in front of him with a pencil, and he wrote in it, steadily, all evening, the way my father wrote in the order book.

There was an old man, who only came three or four times, and who I learned was the sergeant's father. He was very old to me, older than anyone I knew: white-haired, with a face that had been big once and had fallen in round the bones, and a stick, and a gold watch on a chain that he took out and looked at a great deal. He did not say much. He sat by the fire. He had a little notebook too. And he watched the young woman from Room 3, I remember, all evening, every time he came, the way you watch somebody you are fond of and are worried about. I asked my mother once who he was. She said, *That's old Mr Hills. He's seventy-five. You'll be polite to him.* I was. He gave me a threepenny bit once, by the scullery door, and said, *Your father's a good man, Wendy. Don't you let anybody tell you different.* I have no idea how he knew my father. I put the threepenny bit in my money box and I have it still.

There was another old man, once or twice, who was a Harvey. Mr Edward Harvey. He was not as old as Mr Hills's father, but nearly, and he talked a great deal more, in a broad Paignton voice, with his hands, and laughed a lot, and called the young woman from Room 3 *my bird*, which made me stare, because nobody I had ever met called anybody *my bird*. He had a callus on his right thumb, a hard yellow lump, that he rubbed with his other thumb when he was thinking. I asked him what it was. He said it was from punching tickets on the trams for forty years. I did not believe him, and he showed me how you did it, with a sugar lump and a fork, and the sugar lump broke, and my mother was cross.

There was a younger man, in his thirties, who was Mr Harvey's son. Leonard. A carpenter. He came in his working clothes some Thursdays, straight from the boatyard at Galmpton, with sawdust on his shoulders and a smell of tar and new wood about him, and sat quietly at the far end of the table and did not say much at all unless somebody asked him, and when they did, everybody stopped talking to listen. He had hands like his father's, quick and square. He was the one who mended the back gate, the first week, without being asked, because it had dropped on its hinges and would not latch, and my mother, who did not let anybody do anything for her, let him.

And there was a younger man still, who did not come often, because he came from London, and who was the sergeant's son. Douglas. He was very thin and very quiet and wore a dark suit like a bank clerk and spectacles, and he had a London way of talking that I knew from Hendon, and he was the only one of them who ever looked at me as if I might be listening. He looked at me the first time I took the tea in, very quickly, the way you check a door is shut, and then he looked at his father. His father said, "She's all right, Doug. She's Harold's." And Douglas nodded and did not look at me again.

*She's Harold's.* I thought about that for a long time afterwards. I thought it meant I belonged to my father, the way the shop did. I see now that it meant something else.

And there was my mother, at the end of the table by the range, with the accounts book open in front of her, as if she were doing the accounts, which she also was.

And there was Ania.

* * *

She sat in the middle of the long side of the table, facing the fire, with her back to the window onto the yard. Always there. Always the same chair. She had her cup of tea in both hands with her thumbs over the rim, and she said almost nothing, and they all of them, every one, the big sergeant and the old men and the quiet young man from London and my mother, kept looking at her, the whole evening, between everything that was said, the way you keep looking at a clock when you are waiting for a train.

I did not know what she was to them. I did not know what she was at all. I knew she was a lady who stayed in Room 3 and did not pay, because I had seen my mother's book and there was nothing against her name. I knew she went out walking on her own at all hours, in all weathers, without a coat. I knew she was kind to me, in a way I did not have a word for, a careful, attentive, slightly puzzled kindness, as though I were a book in a language she was learning. And I knew, because I was seven, and children know these things the way dogs know them, that she was not like other people. I could not have said how. I did not try.

* * *

I took in the tea at a quarter past eight on that first Thursday, on the big tray, with the fish-paste sandwiches, very carefully, with my tongue between my teeth.

They stopped talking when I opened the door. All of them. Mid-sentence. I remember the silence, and the fire, and the faces all turned towards me in the lamplight, and the steam going up from the teapot. I put the tray down on the end of the table by my mother. Nobody said anything until I had gone out again and shut the door.

But I had heard the last thing that was said before I opened it. I had been standing outside the door with the tray, getting my breath, and I had heard it quite clearly, in the London voice of the thin young man.

*"…the Canadians up at the Grand. Since September. And the yard at Galmpton starts on the boats in the spring. If Petrick's people want both, this is where they'll come."*

I did not know who the Canadians at the Grand were. I did not know who Petrick was. I carried that sentence about with me for twenty-three years without knowing what it meant, and it was only last week, sitting on the end of my father's bed with a yellowed visiting card in my hand that said *K. Petrick, Hamburg*, that I heard the London voice say it again in my head and understood that I had been listening, on my first Thursday in Torquay, to the beginning of everything.

* * *

I was sent to wash up.

My mother came out into the kitchen at half past nine with the tray of dirty cups and the plates with the crusts on, and put it down

by the sink, and said, "Wendy. You'll wash. David'll dry." And went back into the back room and shut the door.

I had not seen David. I turned round, and he was standing in the doorway from the passage, where he must have been sitting all evening on the bottom stair, out of the way: a boy of nine, in short trousers and a grey jersey with the elbows out and a school cap stuffed in his pocket, with sawdust on his jersey like his father's, and a very grave, square face, and his father's hands.

"I'm David Harvey," he said. "My dad's Leonard. He's in there."

"I'm Wendy Mallyon," I said. "My mum owns the hotel."

"I know," he said. "Dad told me." He came over to the sink and took the tea towel off the rail without being asked and stood beside me. "You wash, I'll dry. Mind the cups, they're your mum's best."

I washed. He dried. He did it very carefully, each cup turned round in the cloth twice and held up to the light and put on the dresser in a row with all the handles pointing the same way. The cold tap in the scullery sink dripped, as it always had, and after a while he stopped drying and looked at it, and then he took a penknife out of his pocket and a little screwdriver out of the penknife and turned the water off at the stopcock under the sink and took the top off the tap and looked inside it and said, "It wants a new washer," and put it back together, and turned the water on again, and it did not drip.

"How did you do that?" I said.

"It just wanted tightening," said David Harvey. "It still wants a washer. I'll bring one Thursday." He picked up the tea towel again. "My dad says you should always leave a thing better than you found it. Even if nobody notices."

I asked him what the meeting was.

He thought about it for a long time, drying a saucer.

"It's Grandad's club," he said at last. "Grandad and old Mr Hills started it, before the old Queen died. You don't get to go in till you're grown." He put the saucer on the dresser with the others. "Dad says it's the most important thing in Torbay, and nobody knows it's there. That's how you can tell."

"Tell what?"

"That it's important," said David. "If everybody knew, it wouldn't be."

I have thought about that for twenty-three years. I think it is the truest thing anybody has ever said to me. He was nine.

He brought a washer on the next Thursday, in an envelope, and put it in. The tap in the scullery did not drip again until 1958. When it did, I rang him at his work, and he came round that evening, and fixed it, and stood at the sink drying his hands on the same tea towel, and asked me to marry him.

But that is a long way off.

# Chapter 14 – *The Cadets*

*Monday, 1st February 1943. Arrivals: Flight Lieutenant ———, R.A.F. Room 5. Length of stay: indefinite.*

I have copied that line from the register for 1943, which is on the shelf in the office with all the others, and I have left a gap where his name is, because I said I would not write it, and I am holding to that. In the register itself it is written out in full, in my own handwriting. I was seven. My mother let me sit at the reception desk in the afternoons that winter and write in the arrivals, because I had a good round hand and it kept me out of the kitchen. I wrote his name in my best letters. I remember dotting the i's very carefully.

I did not know who he was. I want that put down too. I wrote his name in the book and gave him the key to Room 5 and he said thank you and smiled at me, and I thought he was the nicest man I had ever seen.

* * *

But first I must tell about the cadets, because without them he would never have been in Torquay at all, and because nobody who was not here in the war can imagine what it was like.

Torquay was full of boys in blue.

That is the only way I can say it. The Air Force had taken over the town. Not all of it, but all the big hotels along the front and up on the hills: the great white ones with the balconies and the palm

trees that had been full of rich old ladies and honeymoon couples before the war. The rich old ladies had gone. In their place were young men. Hundreds of them. Thousands, perhaps, over the years, coming and going in batches every few weeks. They were aircrew cadets. They had joined up to be pilots and navigators and wireless operators and air gunners, and before they were allowed anywhere near an aeroplane they were sent to Torquay to learn to be airmen first: to march, and salute, and keep their buttons bright, and do mathematics and Morse and navigation in the hotel ballrooms, with blackboards set up under the chandeliers.

You could tell them by the white flash in the front of their caps. A little slip of white cloth, tucked into the forage cap, that meant *aircrew under training*. The girls in Torquay knew what it meant better than anybody. So did the boys in the town, who hated them.

They marched everywhere. That is what I remember most. The sound of them. You would wake in the morning at Widecombe Cot to the sound of boots on the road at the bottom of the hill, hundreds of boots, all together, crunch, crunch, crunch, and a sergeant's voice shouting the time, and you would go to the window and see them going along the front, a long blue column of them, four abreast, with the sea behind them, swinging their arms. They marched to their lectures and marched to their meals and marched to the swimming baths and marched to church on Sundays. They did physical training on the beach in their vests and shorts in February,

with the wind coming off the bay like knives, and the old fishermen on the harbour wall watched them and laughed.

And they were so young. That is the other thing. I was seven, so everybody seemed old to me, but even I could see that some of them were hardly more than boys. Eighteen. Nineteen. Faces with spots on them. They whistled at the girls and pinched apples from the greengrocer's and sang in the street on their way back from the pubs at night, and one of them gave me a penny on the Strand once for no reason at all and said I looked like his sister.

Most of them, I found out much later, went on to Bomber Command. I will not write the figures. I have looked them up, and I will not write them.

* * *

Some of them were not British.

They came from all over: from Australia and New Zealand and South Africa and Rhodesia, and from the occupied countries, Poles and Czechs and Norwegians and Free French, and from America, a few, who had joined before America was in the war. And from Canada. There were Canadians all over Torquay that winter. You could tell them by their voices, which were like the Americans in the pictures but softer, and by the way they had money and chocolate and cigarettes when nobody else had any of them, because they got parcels from home.

The Canadians were billeted up at the Grand, among other places, and their officers lived out, some of them, in private hotels

and lodgings round the town, because there were not enough rooms in the big hotels for everybody. The Billeting Office sent them round. You did not have much choice about it, in the war, if you kept an hotel. If an officer needed a room, and you had a room, he had it. That was the rule.

My mother knew the rule. I think she had been waiting for it.

* * *

He came on a Monday afternoon at the beginning of February, at about four o'clock, when the light was going.

I was at the desk. I heard the gate, and footsteps on the path, slow ones, with a little catch in them, and the front door opened and a gust of cold came in, and a man came in after it and shut the door behind him and stood on the mat.

He was tall. He was in Air Force blue, an officer's uniform, the good cloth, with two thin rings of braid on each cuff and wings over the left breast pocket, and a greatcoat over it all, and a cap with a badge, which he took off as soon as he was inside. He had fair hair going grey at the sides and a long, kind, tired face, brown as if he had been somewhere with a great deal more sun than Devon. He carried a leather suitcase in one hand and a stick in the other, and I saw that he leaned on the stick when he walked, though he tried not to, and that there was something wrong with one leg.

He came up to the desk and looked down at me over it, and smiled.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I think you have a room for me. The Billeting Office sent me up." He had the voice my father described to me in Room 1 last week. Like a wireless announcer. Canadian, with the corners knocked off. "Are you in charge here?"

"No," I said. "My mother is. I'm doing the book."

"Then I had better sign the book," he said, very seriously, and I turned the register round and gave him the pen, and he wrote his name, rank and unit in it in a tall upright hand, and gave me the pen back. "And you are?"

"Wendy," I said. "Wendy Mallyon."

He did not say anything for a moment. He stood at the desk with his stick in one hand and his cap in the other and looked at me, and his face did something I did not understand, and I thought perhaps his leg was hurting him.

"How do you do, Wendy," he said at last.

* * *

My mother came out of the office.

She had heard his voice. I know that now. She had heard it through the door, and she had sat at her desk for, I think, nearly a minute, and then she had got up and come out, because she would never in her life have let anybody think she was hiding from them. She stood in the office doorway with a pencil in her hand.

He turned round and saw her.

I was seven, and I did not understand any of it, and I remember every single second. I remember that neither of them said anything

at all for what seemed to me a very long time. I remember the clock in the hall, which my mother had brought from Hendon. I remember that the pencil in my mother's hand snapped, quite quietly, with a little dry click, and that she did not look down at it.

"Hello, Nancy," he said.

Nobody called my mother Nancy. Nobody but my father, when he was pleased with her. I had never heard anybody else say it in my life.

"Mrs Mallyon," said my mother.

He looked at her a moment longer. Then he inclined his head, very slightly, like a man accepting a correction in a court.

"Mrs Mallyon," he said. "I beg your pardon."

"You're billeted," said my mother.

"I'm afraid I am. I'm an instructor up at the Wing. Navigation. They've given up letting me fly." He moved the stick very slightly. "I asked the Billeting Office for somewhere quiet. They gave me a list. I didn't know this was—" He stopped. "I didn't know."

My mother looked at him.

"Yes, you did," she said.

He did not answer that. He did not deny it. He stood on the mat in his greatcoat with his cap in his hand, and he looked, I thought, very sad, and I was angry with my mother for being unkind to him, because I did not understand.

"Room Five," said my mother. "First floor, at the front. Breakfast is at eight. Dinner is at seven. We don't serve after half

past. Wendy will show you up." She turned round and went back into the office and shut the door.

I showed him up. He carried his own case, and would not let me take it, though I offered, because we always offered. At the door of Room 5 he stopped, and felt in the pocket of his greatcoat, and took out a bar of chocolate in a wrapper with red and white writing on it that said *NEILSON'S*, and gave it to me.

"For carrying the key," he said.

I had not seen a whole bar of chocolate since before I could remember. I stood on the landing with it in both hands.

"You'd better ask your mother if you can have it," he said. "And if she says no, you must give it back to me. Promise?"

I promised. I took it down to the office and knocked and went in and held it out. My mother was sitting at her desk with her hands flat on the blotter, looking at nothing. She looked at the chocolate for a long time.

"You can have it," she said. "Half today. Half on Sunday. And you'll say thank you."

I said thank you, at dinner, at his table. He said I was very welcome. He ate alone at the small table by the door, every night, for the next seventeen months, and every night he said good evening to me and thank you to my mother, and she said good evening and served him, and as far as I know they never once spoke another word to each other in public that was not about the weather or the breakfast.

* * *

That Thursday the Bowls Club committee met in the back room, and I took in the sandwiches, and stood outside the door with the tray for a minute first, as I always did, to get my breath.

They were talking about him.

"…posted from Hendon in '34 to '36 on a short commission," said the London voice, Douglas Hills's. "Went home to Canada. Came back with the Canadians in '40. Flying instructor. Pranged a Harvard in Lincolnshire in '41 and broke his leg in three places. Grounded. Posted to the Wing here in January as a navigation instructor." A pause, a rustle of paper. "His file's very clean. Too clean. Like a hotel room after the maid's been in. Somebody has been in it, Dad."

"I'll have him watched," said Sergeant Hills.

"No," said a quiet voice.

It was Ania. I knew her voice by then. I had heard it every morning at breakfast for two months: *Good morning, Wendy.* I had never heard it say no before.

"Let him stay," she said. "Where we can see him. Do not watch him. He will know. He knows how." A pause. "He has been watched before."

"Then what's he here for?" That was my mother. Her voice was very hard. "If it's not the boats. If it's not Galmpton. Tell me what he's here for."

There was a long silence in the back room.

I stood outside the door with the tray, and the tea going cold, and my arms beginning to ache, and I listened to the silence, and I did not understand it, and I have understood it every day since.

Then I opened the door and went in with the tray, the way I always did, and they all stopped talking and turned to look at me, the way they always did.

All except Ania. Ania was already looking at me. She had been looking at the door, I think, before I opened it, as if she had seen through it. She looked at me now, standing there with my tray of fish-paste sandwiches and my tongue between my teeth, for perhaps three seconds.

Then she looked at my mother.

And my mother, who was not afraid of anything, looked down at the green accounts book on the table in front of her, and put her hand flat on it, and did not look up again until I had gone.

# Chapter 15 – *Sweets*

> *Saturday, 6th March 1943. Room 5: one bar Neilson's (half), one packet Life Savers. Mother said yes.*

That is not from the register. It is from a cigar box.

I found it last night, at the back of the cupboard in my old room, behind the box of Christmas decorations, where I had put it in 1944 and not opened it since. It is a Canadian cigar box, flat, made of thin cedar wood, with a paper label on the lid showing an Indian chief in a feathered headdress. He gave it to me empty, in the spring of 1943, to keep my wrappers in, because I had been keeping them in my sock drawer and my mother had complained.

It is full of wrappers. Chocolate wrappers, flattened and folded, from Neilson's and Cadbury's of Canada and a kind called Sweet Marie. Paper from packets of Life Savers, which were like Polo mints but in colours. The little twists of greaseproof from humbugs. And on the inside of the lid, in pencil, in my own seven-year-old writing, very large and not very straight, a list of dates and sweets, going down the lid and round the edges and on to the bottom of the box when the lid was full. I kept a record. I did not know then that I was doing what Johnny Hills's father did, or my father in his tea chest. I thought I was keeping count so that I could be sure he was being fair.

There are sixty-nine entries. The last is the seventeenth of June, 1944.

* * *

He was kind to me. I have to start with that, because it is the truth and because everything else I have to say about him has to stand on it.

He was kind the way some grown-ups are and most are not, which is that he talked to me as if I were a person and not a child. He asked me questions and listened to the answers. He asked me what I was doing at school, and when I told him he asked me what I thought about it, which nobody had ever asked me. He helped me with my sums, at the table in the hall in the evenings when the other guests were in the lounge, and he did not do them for me; he made me do them and then showed me where I had gone wrong, with the end of his pencil, very patiently, the way my father did. He knew a great many things. He knew the names of the stars, and the names of the birds on the harbour wall, and how to tell which way you were facing from the moss on a tree, and how a compass worked, and why ships have a red light on one side and a green on the other.

And he told me about Canada.

He had grown up, he said, in a town on a lake in Ontario, a lake so big you could not see across it, like the sea but fresh water, with ice on it in the winter so thick you could drive a lorry over it. He told me about the snow, which came in November and did not go until April, and was so deep that you could jump off a barn roof into it and disappear. He told me about the forests, which went on for ever, and the bears, and the moose, and the loons on the lake at night, which made a noise like somebody crying. He had

photographs. He showed me them, sitting at the hall table with his bad leg stretched out under it: a wooden house with a long verandah, and a lake behind it, and a girl of about my age standing on the end of a wooden jetty in a bathing costume, squinting at the camera.

"My sister's girl," he said. "Margaret. She's eight. She's got a dog called Skipper and a canoe of her own." He looked at the photograph. "There's room for everybody there, Wendy. Nobody cares who your father was."

I did not know why he said that. I said I would like a canoe.

My mother came into the hall, then, with an armful of sheets for the airing cupboard. She did not say anything. She looked at the photographs on the table and at him and at me, and she said, "Bed, Wendy," and I went.

* * *

The sweets were every Saturday.

He never gave them to me without asking her. That was the rule, from the first bar of Neilson's on the landing outside Room 5. Every Saturday at teatime he would come down to the office door with something in his hand and knock, and my mother would say, "Yes," and he would open the door and stand there and hold it up, and say, "Mrs Mallyon. May Wendy have this?" And my mother would look at it, and at him, for a long moment, and say, "Half today. Half on Sunday." Or sometimes, "She may have it after her dinner." Or once, when I had been rude to a guest and she had sent

me to bed, "No." And he took it away again, and brought it back the next Saturday, and asked again.

I thought it was a game. It was not a game.

I see now that every Saturday for seventeen months a man stood at my mother's office door and asked her permission, and every Saturday she gave it or withheld it, and that each of them knew exactly what they were doing, and that it was the only conversation they ever had. I see now what it must have cost her to say yes. I see what it must have cost him to ask.

At the time I only knew that I had more sweets than any girl at St Marychurch, and that the other girls hated me for it, and that I did not care.

* * *

David did not like him.

He never said so. David has never said a word against anybody in his life, then or since; it is not in him. But he would not take a sweet from me if it was one of the Canadian's, though he took any other kind. I offered him a Life Saver on the back step one Thursday, while we were waiting to be sent to wash up, and he looked at it and said, "No, thank you," and looked at the monkey puzzle.

I asked him why not.

He thought about it for a long time, the way he thought about everything.

"My dad says," he said at last, "that when a man gives you something every week, you want to ask yourself what he wants for it."

"He doesn't want anything."

"Then that's all right," said David, and did not take the Life Saver.

* * *

He asked my mother in May.

I did not see it. I heard it, which is not the same, and I heard only part of it, and I have had to put the rest together since from things my mother has let fall, and from things she has not, and from the shape of the silence afterwards. So this is the part where I am guessing, and I will say so.

It was a Saturday evening, late. The guests had gone up. I was supposed to be in bed, and I was not; I was sitting on the bottom stair in my nightdress with my cigar box on my knee, writing in the day's sweets by the light from under the office door, because I had forgotten to do it at teatime and I could not sleep until it was done. The office door was shut. I could hear them through it. Not the words, at first. Only the voices: his, low and pleasant, going on for a long time, and then hers, very short.

Then he raised his voice. Not much. But he had never raised it before, not once, and I heard the words.

"*Nancy. Please. It's all arranged. My sister will have her. There's a berth on a ship from Liverpool in July, with a convoy, and*

*the papers are drawn, and all you have to do is sign. For the duration. Only for the duration. And after, if you'll let me, I'll—*"

"No," said my mother.

"*She isn't safe here.*"

"There are bombs everywhere. There are bombs in London. My husband—"

"*I don't mean the bombs.*"

There was a silence then. A long one. I sat on the bottom stair with the pencil in my hand and did not breathe.

"*Not in this town,*" he said. Very low. I almost did not hear it. "*Not in this house. Not with— Nancy, you don't know what's in this town. You don't know who's watching her. I do. That's why I came. Let me take her somewhere they can't reach.*"

"Who?" said my mother. "Who's watching her?"

He did not answer.

"You'll tell me who," said my mother, "or you'll get out of my office. And you'll not ask me again."

He did not answer that either. After a while I heard his stick on the floor, and the door handle, and I ran. I was up the first flight before the door opened, and round the turn of the stairs, and I lay flat on the landing with my cheek against the carpet and looked down through the banisters.

He came out into the hall. He stood there for a while in the dim light, quite still, leaning on his stick, with his back to the office door, and his face was not the kind face I knew. It was frightened. I had never seen a grown man frightened before. Then he went up the

stairs, past me, so close I could have touched his shoe, and did not see me, and went into Room 5 and shut the door.

I did not understand any of it. I understood *Canada*, and *ship*, and *her*, and that it was me they were talking about. I lay on the landing and thought about the lake that was like the sea, and the snow you could jump into from a barn roof, and the girl called Margaret with a canoe of her own.

I am ashamed to write it. I wanted to go.

* * *

Ania spoke to him in the garden two nights later.

I saw this. I was at my window, at the top of the house, in the little room under the slope of the roof, which looks out over the back garden and the yard and the lane. It was a clear night, late, with a moon, and I could not sleep, and I was kneeling on the end of my bed with the curtain pulled back, looking at the stars and trying to remember their names.

He was in the garden, under the monkey puzzle, smoking. I could see the end of his cigarette, going bright and dim. He came out there most nights, late, when the house was asleep. My mother knew. She did not say anything about it.

And Ania came out of the back door, from the scullery, and walked across the lawn to him.

She did not hurry. She never did. She walked across the grass in the moonlight in her grey costume with no coat, the way she always walked, as if the ground had been laid out for her that

evening, and stopped in front of him, under the tree, quite close. He dropped his cigarette. I saw it fall, a little red spark, into the grass.

She spoke to him. I could not hear any of it. I could see her face, in the moonlight, turned up to his, and it was perfectly still. I could not see his. He had his back to the house.

She spoke for a long time. He did not interrupt her. And then, at the end, he did a thing I have never forgotten. He took a step backwards, away from her, one step, on his bad leg, so that he stumbled and had to put his hand out to the trunk of the monkey puzzle to steady himself. And he stood there with his hand on that spiky bark, which must have hurt him, and did not take it away.

Then she said one more thing, and turned, and walked back across the lawn to the house, and in at the scullery door. And he stayed under the tree for a long time, with his hand on the bark, and then he lit another cigarette, and his hand was shaking so that it took him three matches.

* * *

At breakfast the next morning she was at her table in the bay window with her cup of tea, as always.

I brought her toast. She did not eat toast. I brought it every morning anyway, and every morning she said thank you, Wendy, and it went back to the kitchen untouched, and my mother gave it to the hens. That morning I put it down and did not go away.

"What did you say to him?" I said. "Last night. In the garden."

She turned her head and looked at me with her clear, steady eyes.

"You were at your window," she said.

"Yes."

She nodded slowly, as if that were the right answer, the way she always nodded.

"I told him," she said, "that he will not take you anywhere, Wendy. Not to Liverpool, and not to Canada, and not to anywhere else. Not while I am here." She looked out of the window, at the bay. "And I told him why."

"Why?"

She did not answer that. She looked at the sea for a while. Then she looked back at me, standing by her table in my school pinafore with the toast rack in my hand.

"You wanted to go," she said. It was not a question.

I felt my face go hot. I nodded. I could not say it.

"Yes," said Ania. "I know. The lake. And the snow." She was quiet for a moment. "There is snow here sometimes, Wendy. Not as much. But it comes." She looked at me, and the thing happened at the corner of her mouth, the smile from a long way off. "You will see a great deal of it, in your life. In this place. I promise you that."

And she turned back to the window and her tea, and I took the toast back to the kitchen, and that Saturday the Canadian came to the office door at teatime with a packet of Life Savers, and knocked, and my mother said yes, and I wrote it on the inside of the lid of my cigar box, the way I always did.

# Chapter 16 – *SB Hall & Co*

*Wednesday, 20th October 1965. To Galmpton, to Leonard's, by the 10.40 bus. David drove me home. Took nothing. Leonard does not eat cake.*

I was not at the yard. I was a girl of seven, and the boatyard at Galmpton in the war was no place for a girl of seven, or anybody else who had not got a pass with a photograph on it and a reason to be there. Everything I know about what happened at SB Hall and Company in the spring of 1943 I had from three people: from David, who was there; from his father, who was there; and from old Edward Harvey, who was there for one afternoon and never went back.

Two of them I could ask. So on the Wednesday I went to see my father-in-law.

Leonard Harvey is fifty-four. He lives where he has lived since he was married, in a stone cottage at the top of the lane above Galmpton creek, with a long garden going down the hill and a shed at the bottom of it where he makes furniture, slowly and very well, for people who can afford to wait for it. His wife died in 1957. He lives alone, and keeps the cottage like a ship, with everything stowed and nothing out of place, and when I came up the path he was in the shed, with the door open, planing the edge of a table top, and he did not stop until he had finished the stroke.

He knew why I had come. I could see it. Everybody in Torbay seemed to have known for a week what I was doing, before I did.

"Harold rang," he said. "And Johnny Hills." He put the plane down on the bench, carefully, on its side, so the blade would not touch the wood. "You'll want the yard."

"Yes."

He looked at me for a long time with his quiet eyes. David has his father's eyes. They are the eyes of a man who measures a thing three times before he cuts it.

"Sit down, then," he said, and pulled out a stool from under the bench with his foot, and I sat down among the shavings.

* * *

The yard was down on the creek, below the village, where the river Dart comes round in a great bend and the water goes up into the land in a long muddy inlet between the hills. There had been boatbuilders there for a hundred years, building fishing boats and yachts and pleasure launches out of good Devon oak and imported mahogany, on slipways going down into the creek, under long sheds with tarred roofs. And in the war the Admiralty had come and looked at the slipways and the sheds and the men, and had given them a contract.

"MTBs," said Leonard. "Motor torpedo boats. And MLs, motor launches, later on, and some other things I'll not talk about even now. But it was the MTBs mostly, in 'forty-three." He picked up a shaving from the bench and turned it in his fingers. "Seventy-odd feet. Double-skinned mahogany, diagonal, with calico between the skins and copper fastenings, thousands of them, every one clenched

by hand. Light as you could make them and strong as you could make them, because they had three great engines in them that'd drive them along at forty knots with their bows out of the water, across the Channel at night, at the German convoys." He put the shaving down. "You'd not believe the speed of them, Wendy. Wooden boats. Like a plank thrown across a pond. And the men who went out in them were boys, mostly. Like the cadets in Torquay. They'd come and stand on the slipway and look up at a hull we'd built and you could see them thinking, I'm going to be in that, at night, off Cherbourg, at forty knots. And you'd want to have done every rivet right."

He had been a shipwright at Hall's since he was fifteen. In 1943 he was thirty-two, and a chargehand, with six men under him and a hull on the slip.

"And David?"

"David came down Saturday mornings," said Leonard. "Ten years old. He'd sweep the shavings and fetch the tea and hold the dolly behind a rivet when one of the men was clenching and couldn't reach. The manager turned a blind eye. Half the men had a boy down there on a Saturday. That's how we all learned." He looked at me. "That's how David found it."

* * *

It was a Saturday in March. The twentieth. Leonard remembered the date because it was the day before the hull was to be launched, and

they had been working on her till all hours to have her ready for the Admiralty overseer to pass in the morning.

She was finished, or nearly. Her hull was planked and caulked and painted, grey on top and dark below, and her deck was laid, and she stood on the slip under the big shed with her bow towards the creek and the launching ways greased under her, waiting for the tide. Inside, she was still a shell, because the engines and the fittings went in afterwards, at another yard. But the shell was done.

"David was down in the bilge," said Leonard. "Right at the bottom. Aft, under where the engine beds would go. Sweeping out. You have to sweep out a hull before she's launched, every shaving and every bit of dirt, because when the water gets in it all goes down to the bottom and blocks the pumps. So David was down there, on his knees, with a hand brush and a torch, in the dark, between the frames. Where nobody goes. Where nobody looks, once she's built, ever again, unless something's gone wrong."

He was quiet for a moment.

"And he came up the ladder," said Leonard, "and found me on the staging, and said, *Dad, somebody's drawn a pig on one of the frames.*"

* * *

Leonard went down.

It took him a long time to find it, he said, even with David pointing, because it was very small and very neat and it was in the darkest place in the boat, low down on the inside face of one of the

big oak frames aft, just above where the bilge water would lie. Cut into the wood with the point of a knife and then darkened, with soot or with a pencil, so that it showed up in the torchlight and would not have shown up in any other.

It was not a pig.

"It was a face," said Leonard. "Seen from the front. Like a big cat's, a tiger's, with little eyes, close together. And two teeth coming up out of the bottom jaw, either side, long and curved. Like a boar's tusks. And a tail, a long thin tail, that went all the way round the outside of the face and came back to cross over itself, where it started." He drew it in the air with one finger, a slow circle. "No bigger than a penny. And very well done. Whoever did it had done it a great many times before."

I did not say anything. David had whispered about it to me once, in 1943, drying the cups, but I had never seen it. I did not know what it was. But I felt the hair rise on my arms, sitting on the stool in his shed, and I did not know why.

"I'd never seen it either," said Leonard. "I thought it was a joke. One of the lads, larking about. I nearly sanded it off. Then I thought, no. Nobody goes down there to lark about. It's dark and it's cold and you have to lie on your side between the frames. Nobody goes down there unless they've a reason." He looked at his hands. "So I looked round it. With the torch. Very slowly. The way my father taught me to look at a hull. And I found the holes."

* * *

They were under the frame. Below the mark, along the line where the inner skin of the hull was fastened to the frame, in a row. Six holes, drilled through the copper fastenings, cutting them, very neatly, from the inside, each one with a small bit no thicker than a knitting needle. And then filled again with stopping, the putty they used for filling the holes over the rivet heads, and smoothed off, and painted over with the same red lead as the rest of the bilge, so that unless you knew exactly where to look and ran your thumbnail along it, you would never have known they were there.

"Six fastenings cut," said Leonard. "Out of thousands. It doesn't sound like much. It wouldn't have been much, at the quay. Or in the creek, or going up the river on trials at ten knots, with an Admiralty overseer on her deck with his clipboard, passing her." He picked up the plane again, and looked at the blade, and put it down. "But at forty knots, Wendy. In a sea. Off Cherbourg at night, with her bow out of the water and her stern dug in and three engines driving her, and every frame in her working. That's where those six would have let go. And when six let go, the next six go. And then the planking starts to open. Right under her engines." He was quiet for a moment. "She'd have gone down in about four minutes. In the dark. Thirty miles from home. And everybody would have said, it's the sea. The sea takes boats. It's a war."

"And the mark?"

"The mark was so somebody would know it'd been done," said Leonard. "Somebody who'd paid for it, and would come and look, afterwards, when nobody else would. To check the work before he

paid out." He shook his head. "That's what I thought then. I still think it."

* * *

He did not tell the manager.

He told me that very plainly, because he wanted me to understand that it was not an accident and not carelessness. He did not tell the manager, and he did not tell the Admiralty overseer, who was a nice young lieutenant from Plymouth with a clipboard who came every week to pass the hulls, and he did not tell the foreman or any of his own men.

"Because it was done inside the yard," he said. "By somebody with a pass. Somebody who knew those boats as well as I did. Who knew where nobody would look. It wasn't done by a German parachuting in from the sky, Wendy. It was done by somebody I'd had my tea with." He looked out through the open shed door, down the long garden, to the creek. "And I didn't know who. So I didn't know who I could tell."

He filled the holes properly, himself, that night, alone, with new fastenings, by the light of a hurricane lamp, and David held the lamp. He did not sand off the mark. He made a careful drawing of it first, on the back of a timesheet, and then he did sand it off, because the Admiralty overseer would be in the bilge in the morning, and if the overseer was the one who had paid for it he would be looking for the mark, and must not find it gone and the holes filled, or he would know.

"I sanded it off so he'd think it had never been done," said Leonard. "So he'd think the man he paid had taken the money and not done the job. Let them fall out among themselves." He almost smiled. "My father's idea, that was. When I showed him."

* * *

Old Edward Harvey came down to the yard the next afternoon, the Sunday. He was seventy-four. He had not been to Galmpton in years; he did not like boats, he said, he liked things with rails under them. Leonard took him down to the hull on the slip, which had been launched that morning on the tide, perfectly, and was lying at the quay, and took him down into the bilge with the torch, very slowly, because of his knees, and showed him the place.

There was nothing to see by then. The mark was sanded off and the holes were filled and the red lead was fresh. Leonard showed him the drawing instead, on the back of the timesheet.

"He looked at it," said Leonard, "for a long time. In the torchlight. Down in the bottom of that boat. And then he sat down. Right down, on the frames, in the bilge, in his Sunday suit. And he said, *Oh, Christ, Len.* I'd never heard my father swear in my life."

I waited.

"He said he'd seen it before," said Leonard. "Twice. Once cut into a farm gate at Preston, above two dead ponies, in February 1896. And once scratched into the brass hand rail at the top of the stair on a Torquay tramcar, on a Sunday morning, at ten past six, in the same month. On the car where they'd found a conductor's button

the month before. The conductor was never found alive." He looked at me. "He said it had a name. He said it was called a *taowu*. He said it was a thing from an old Chinese story that somebody had told them in the back room at Bailey's Hotel, and somebody else had taken it, and drawn it properly, and cut it on his friend's gatepost, and made it theirs."

"Whose?"

Leonard Harvey picked up his plane again, and looked at the edge of the table top he had been working on when I came, and ran his thumb along it, very lightly, feeling for anything that was not quite true.

"He wouldn't tell me, then," he said. "He said, take that drawing to Johnny Hills, Len, tonight, and give it to nobody else. And then he got up out of the bilge, with me holding his arm, and went home, and never came to the yard again." He set the plane to the wood. "But I'll tell you what he said, on the quay, while we were waiting for the bus. He said, *They've come back, Len. Forty-seven years, and they've come back. And they've brought the mark with them.*"

He drew the plane along the edge of the table top, once, slowly, and a long pale shaving curled up out of the mouth of it and fell among the others round my feet.

# Chapter 17 – *Douglas*

*Friday, 22nd October 1965. Arrivals: Mr D. Hills, London. Room 2. Two nights. (Not in the book. Mother said not to write him in.)*

He came down on the Friday evening train, which I did not expect, and my mother had a room ready for him, which I did not expect either.

"Johnny rang him," said my mother, when I asked her. She was making up the bed in Room 2 herself, which she never does now; the girl does the beds. She tucked the sheet in with a hard flat push of her hand under the mattress, the way she taught me. "On Wednesday night. After you went to Leonard's. He said if you were going to write about the yard you'd better have it right, and there was only one person alive who had all of it, and it wasn't Leonard." She straightened the pillow. "Don't put him in the register."

"Why not?"

"Because he's never been here," said my mother, and went out with the old sheets.

* * *

Douglas Hills is fifty-six. He is thin still, and grey, and wears a dark suit like a bank manager's, and spectacles, and he has the London voice I remembered from the back room, a little drier. He works in a government office in London. He has worked in it since 1936. He

has never told anybody in his family what it is, and I did not ask, and I am not going to guess here, though I could.

He sat in the back room after dinner, at the long deal table, in the chair at the end by the scullery door where his father used to sit, with his back to the wall. I do not think he knew he had chosen it. My mother brought in a pot of tea and two cups, and put them down, and went out, and shut the door, which she has never in her life done for a guest.

He looked at me for a long time over his spectacles, the way he had looked at me once in 1942, to see whether the door was shut.

"You'll understand," he said at last, "that there's a great deal I can't tell you. I signed a piece of paper in 1936, and I've signed several more since, and they are still in force, and they will be in force when you and I are both dead. There are things that happened in this room in the war that I will take to my grave. Not because they matter any more. Because I promised."

I said I understood.

"Good." He poured the tea himself. "Then I'll tell you what I can. And where I stop, you'll know there's something there, and you'll leave it. Like your mother."

* * *

Leonard's drawing reached him on the twenty-third of March, 1943. Johnny took it up to London himself, on the night train, in his helmet.

"Inside his helmet," said Douglas. "Folded up in the lining. Dad never trusted a briefcase." He almost smiled. "He gave it to me on the platform at Paddington at six in the morning and went straight back to Devon on the next train down. He had a court case at ten."

Douglas had the drawing on his desk by eight. And he looked at it, and then he did something I would never have thought of, and which I think is the reason he was where he was in the war and his father was where he was.

"I went and got the box," he said. "My grandfather's books. The old ones. They weren't in Preston then, they were at my grandfather's house in Paignton, but I'd copied some of them, the early ones, before the war, because I had a feeling I might need them. I went through 1896. February and March." He took his spectacles off and polished them on his tie. "And there it was. Not a drawing. A description. *A seal, black wax, carved in the Chinese manner, very fine. The mark: a flat head, close eyes, tusks, a long tail coiled round.* On the back of an envelope that came to Gran's in March 1896, addressed to Rage. Telling them to get a certain young woman out of Torbay by Lady Day."

He did not say which young woman. He did not need to.

"So I knew it wasn't a drawing a saboteur had made up to amuse himself," said Douglas. "It was a mark. An old one. A family mark, if you like. And I knew the family."

* * *

I am going to set down the next part as nearly as he said it, and I know that it will read strangely, and I am sorry for that. He was choosing every word.

"In the spring of 1943," he said, "certain letters were coming into this country from Lisbon. Ordinary letters. In Spanish. From a gentleman in Lisbon to a lady in London, about family matters. Her aunt's health, a cousin's wedding, the price of cork. They came in the post, and some of them came by other means, in the pockets of seamen on neutral ships. And some of them, by means I shan't describe, were read before the lady got them."

He turned his cup round in its saucer.

"They were not about family matters. You'll have guessed that. They were instructions. In a code inside the Spanish. A clever one. Whoever wrote them wrote Spanish like a native, and thought in Spanish, and made his jokes in it, and the code was built into the jokes." He looked at me. "There was a German admiral, Wendy, who had learned his Spanish in Chile in 1915, escaping from an island on a horse. Who had run his country's secret service since 1935. Who liked to write his own letters, when they mattered."

I sat very still.

"I'll not say the name," said Douglas. "Dad's told you it, I expect. He shouldn't have. But it was in the papers in 1946, so it doesn't matter."

"And the lady in London?"

"The letters were addressed," said Douglas, "to a Mrs Inge Peters. A Norwegian refugee. Widowed, she said, in the invasion of

1940, escaped across the North Sea in a fishing boat. She had a room in a house in Bayswater and worked as a translator for a firm in the City, and she was a very respectable woman, and every one of her papers was in order." He paused. "The letters came to her care of a firm of importers in Wapping."

"Tremayne and Rook," I said.

Douglas Hills looked at me over his spectacles for a long time.

"Your father," he said.

"My father," I said. "And my mother. She was in service in Mr Rook's house. In 1934."

He did not say anything to that. He wrote something down, in a small black notebook he took out of his inside pocket, with a silver pencil. I did not see what. I have the feeling I should not have said it. I have the feeling, too, that he knew it already.

"Mrs Inge Peters," he said, "was not Norwegian, and had never been married, and had never been in a fishing boat in her life. She was born in Hamburg in 1905. Her father was a shipping and clay merchant called Klaus Petrick. Her grandfather was an English gentleman who rode the 8.40 tram from Paignton into Torquay every morning for twenty years and was buried in St John's churchyard with lilies on his grave. Her name was Ingrid Petrick."

* * *

He found out by going to look at her.

"Which was stupid," he said. "And which I'd tell any young man under me never to do. And which I did anyway, because I was

thirty-three and I'd been reading her letters for six weeks and I wanted to see her face."

He went to the house in Bayswater on an evening at the end of April, in the blackout, and stood across the street in a doorway for two hours, and saw her come home: a tall, fair, handsome woman of about forty, in a good grey coat, with her hair up, walking very fast and very straight, with a little bag. At her throat, on a chain, outside her collar, something small and dark that caught the light of the street's one hooded lamp as she went up the steps.

"I couldn't see what it was," he said. "Not then. I thought it was a cross." He was quiet for a moment. "It wasn't a cross."

Three nights later somebody tried to kill him.

* * *

I will tell this as he told it, briefly, because he told it briefly, in a dry flat London voice, as if it had happened to somebody he had once worked with and had not much liked.

He was walking home from his office at half past eleven at night, through the back streets behind Victoria, in the blackout, with no torch because there was a moon. He had walked the same way every night for two years. He had been told never to walk the same way two nights running, and he had not listened, because he was tired and it was the quickest way and nobody had ever paid him any attention.

Halfway along a narrow street of bombed-out houses, a car came up behind him with no lights.

"I heard it," said Douglas. "That's the only reason I'm here. I heard it because there was no other noise. No other traffic, no people, nothing, only my own feet. And then an engine, behind me, idling, coming slowly. No lights. And I thought, that's wrong. And I went over the nearest wall."

It was the wall of a bombed house, a front wall with nothing behind it but a heap of rubble and a cellar, and he went over it head first and landed in the rubble and rolled and lay still. The car stopped. He heard the doors open, two of them. He heard two men get out and walk, slowly, to the wall, and stand there. One of them had a torch, and the beam went over the rubble above his head, back and forth, very slowly, and he lay in the dark among the bricks with his face in the dust and did not breathe.

"And I heard a woman's voice," said Douglas. "From the car. Not loud. A very good voice. English, with nothing in it, the way a foreigner speaks English when she's learned it perfectly. She said, *Leave him. He has seen nothing. He will not walk this way again.*" He paused. "And she was right. I never did."

The men got back in the car. The car went away. He lay in the rubble until it was getting light, and then he got up and walked home by the main roads, and changed his clothes, and went to his office, and wrote it down.

"And in the rubble," said Douglas, "about a foot from where my head had been, there was a little piece of folded paper, that must have come out of somebody's pocket when they leaned over the

wall with the torch. Folded very small. A bus ticket. Devon General. Paignton to Galmpton, return."

* * *

It was my father who found the rest. Douglas said so very plainly, and I want it set down, because my father will never say it himself.

Douglas went to him in May, to the shop in Brent Street, on a Tuesday, at a quarter past three, and asked for a quarter of Darjeeling, and said it was too dear, and was taken into the back. And he told my father about the bus ticket, and the yard at Galmpton, and the letters care of Tremayne and Rook, and asked him whether there was any way a person from Wapping might come and go from a boatyard in Devon in wartime without a pass.

"He thought about it," said Douglas, "for about as long as it takes to weigh out a quarter of tea. And then he went to the Association files, the members' complaints, and came back with a letter. From a grocer in Kingswear, in 1942, complaining that he'd lost the contract for supplying the canteen at a certain boatyard to a London wholesaler who'd undercut him by a farthing in the pound on tea and sugar and fats." Douglas put his cup down. "The London wholesaler was Tremayne and Rook. They'd had a van going into that yard twice a week since the summer of 1942. With a canteen pass. Through the main gate. Every Tuesday and Friday. And nobody had ever once looked in the back of it, because who looks in the back of a grocer's van?"

I thought of my father in the college garden with his half a cheese and pickle sandwich. *This time everything that matters will travel in a grocer's van.*

"Your father," said Douglas Hills, "found the door. In twenty minutes. From a complaint about short weight in currants." He stood up, and took his cup to the sink, the way his father used to, and rinsed it, and put it upside down on the draining board. "He's never had a medal for it. He never will. Nobody'll ever know." He turned round. "But I know. And that young man who was the navigator on that boat David swept out, he'd know, if anybody ever told him. Which they won't."

He dried his hands on the tea towel. It was the same tea towel. My mother has never thrown anything away.

"That's what I can tell you," he said. "The rest happened down here, in the summer, and Dad tells it better than I do. Ask him about the tunnels." He hung the tea towel back on its rail. "And Wendy. Whatever you write. Leave your father the Darjeeling. Let them think he was only a grocer. He'd want that more than anything."

# Chapter 18 – *The Raid*

*Sunday, 30th May 1943. Breakfasts: 6. Miss Ania asked that Wendy stay in today. Agreed.*

That is in my mother's daybook, in her hand, between the number of breakfasts and a note that the fishmonger had not come. I have read it many times. It is the only line in three years of daybooks that is not about food or laundry or money. I did not know it was there until last week.

I have been putting off this chapter. I have written round it for two days. I have done the bookings and the accounts and walked to the end of the road and back, and sat down at the long table, and got up again. My mother has watched me do it and said nothing. This morning she put a cup of tea down by my elbow and said, "You'll have to write it sometime," and went out.

So I will write it. I will write it plainly and once, the way Johnny Hills's father wrote about the things he saw on Paignton sands, and I will not write it again.

* * *

First the tunnels, because they come into the next chapter too, and because nobody who was a child in Torquay in the war will ever forget them.

Torquay was bombed. People forget that now. They think of the bombing as London and Coventry and Plymouth, and it was, but it was here too. Not the great night raids, with hundreds of

aeroplanes. Ours were the other kind, the kind they called tip-and-run. Two or three or a dozen German fighter-bombers would come in very low over the sea from France, in daylight, under the radar, so low you could see the crosses on their wings, and drop their bombs on whatever was in front of them and machine-gun the streets and be gone back out to sea before the sirens had finished going. The sirens were always late. There was no time to get anywhere. You lay down where you were, in the gutter or under a table, and waited for the noise to stop.

But at night, when the sirens went and there was time, the people in the middle of the town went to the tunnels.

They had been cut into the rock under the town before the war, or at the start of it. I never knew which. Long galleries going into the hillside, with a concrete entrance and a heavy door and a blue-painted lamp over it, and inside, rows of wooden bunks along the walls, three high, and benches, and a smell of damp stone and paraffin and people, and water running down the walls in the far parts where the rock wept. There were side passages, short ones, for stores and the warden's post and the lavatories, which were buckets, behind a curtain. And at the very far end of the main gallery, where the lamps gave out, there was another door, a locked one, iron, with CORPORATION STORES painted on it in white, that nobody ever went through.

We went to them from Widecombe Cot when the raids were bad, in the winter of 1942 and the spring of 1943, my mother and I and whatever guests we had, down the hill in the dark with blankets

and a thermos. The Canadian came too, sometimes, when he was not on duty at the Wing, limping with his stick, carrying my blanket. Ania came every time. She did not carry anything. She walked beside me in the blackout with her hand on my shoulder, and she never once stumbled, though there was no light at all, and I thought nothing of it, because I was seven.

Inside, people sang. They sang to drown out the noise from outside, which came down through the rock as a sort of deep shaking you felt in your stomach rather than heard. They sang the songs from the wireless, and hymns, and *Ten Green Bottles* for the children, and the old men sang songs I did not know, about Widecombe Fair and Uncle Tom Cobley, which made me laugh because of our name. A woman from the bakery in Union Street had an accordion. A warden in a tin hat walked up and down the gallery with a lantern, counting heads.

I liked it. I am ashamed of that too. I was seven and it was an adventure, and I was allowed to stay up, and there were other children, and nobody I loved had ever been hurt.

* * *

It was in the tunnels, in April, that I saw the lady with the pig.

I want to put this down here, because it belongs here, and because I did not understand it until Douglas Hills sat in the back room last Friday and told me about a woman in a good grey coat with something small and dark at her throat that was not a cross.

It was a bad night, a long one. The sirens had gone at eleven and we had been in the tunnels since half past, and at about two in the morning I needed the bucket, and my mother was asleep on the bench with her head against the wall, and Ania was sitting beside her with her eyes open looking at nothing, so I went by myself, along the main gallery towards the curtain at the back, where the lamps were few and far between.

There were two people in the side passage before the curtain, where the warden kept his stores. In the dark. Standing very close together, talking, low. A man in naval uniform, an officer, young, with his cap under his arm. And a tall woman with fair hair, in a good coat.

They stopped talking when I came past. The woman turned her head and looked at me. There was a little light from a hurricane lamp hanging on a nail further along, and it fell on her face and on her throat.

She had a chain round her neck, outside her coat. And on it, hanging at the hollow of her throat, a little flat dark thing, black and shiny, the size of a penny. It caught the light. And I saw what it was, because David had told me about it a month before, in the scullery, drying the cups, in a whisper, because his father had said not to tell anybody and he had to tell somebody: a face like a tiger's, with little eyes and two tusks coming up, and a tail curled round the outside.

*A pig*, he had said. *Somebody drew a pig in the boat. Only it isn't a pig.*

I stood in the dark passage in my nightdress and coat and looked at it. The woman looked at me. She did not smile. She looked at me the way a cat looks at something in the grass, without any feeling in it at all, and then she said to the young officer, very quietly, "*A child*," and turned her back on me, and they walked away together down the side passage into the dark, towards the stores.

I went to the bucket and came back and lay down on the bench beside my mother, and did not say anything to anybody, because I did not know what I had seen. I told David the next Thursday. David went very quiet and said I must tell his father. I did not. I was frightened to. I thought I would be in trouble for being out of bed.

I have thought about that every day for twenty-two years. If I had told Leonard Harvey on the next Thursday, would it have made any difference to what happened in the summer? I do not know. Douglas says no. Douglas says they knew already. I do not believe him. I think he is being kind.

* * *

Now the Sunday.

The thirtieth of May was a hot day, the first really hot day of the year, very still, with the sea flat and blue and the sky without a cloud, the kind of day when the whole of Torquay comes out. I was to go to Sunday school after dinner, at St Marychurch, as I had every Sunday since we came. I liked it. There was a lady who told the stories with pictures pinned on a board, and you got a stamp in a book for every week you went, and there were girls from my class

at school, and afterwards some of us went to the sweet shop if anybody had any coupons.

Ania was at her table in the bay window at breakfast. I brought her toast. She said, "Thank you, Wendy." And then, as I turned to go, she said, "Wendy. Will you stay with me today? This afternoon. I should like to walk in the garden, and I should like somebody to tell me the names of the flowers."

I said I had Sunday school.

She looked at me. Then she turned her head and looked across the dining room at my mother, who was at the sideboard with the teapot. She did not say anything. She did not need to. My mother put the teapot down. And I saw my mother's face, and I did not understand it, and I have understood it every Sunday of my life since.

"You'll stay in today," said my mother. "Do as Miss Ania asks."

I sulked. I remember that. I sulked all morning, because I had been going to get my stamp, and there was a girl who had promised to bring her cat's kittens in a basket to show us, and I was going to miss it. I dragged my feet through dinner. And at about half past two I went out into the back garden with Ania, in the heat, and walked round the flower beds with her, sullenly, telling her the names of the flowers. Lupins. Roses. Sweet williams. London pride, which my mother had brought from Hendon in a pot.

She listened to every one, and said it back to me.

And at a quarter to three, or a little after, I heard them.

You heard them before you saw them. A noise coming in from the sea, very low and very fast, getting louder all at once, a roaring that came up out of nothing and filled the whole sky. Ania took hold of me and pulled me down onto the grass by the monkey puzzle and lay half on top of me, with her arm over my head. I could see nothing but grass and her grey sleeve. The noise went over us. It was so loud that I could not hear my own screaming. Then there were the bangs, away to the north of us, up the hill, one and then three or four together, and the ground shook under the grass, and a window went somewhere in our house, and then the guns, and the planes again, going out, and then the sirens, late, as they always were, starting up all over the town, when it was already over.

Ania did not let go of me for a long time.

When she did, and I sat up, there was smoke going up into the blue sky to the north, over the roofs, from the direction of St Marychurch. A great column of it, black and grey, very straight in the still air.

* * *

I will say what happened, plainly and once.

The German aeroplanes had hit the church at St Marychurch while the children were inside it at Sunday school. The church fell in on them. Twenty-one children were killed, and some of the teachers. A great many more were hurt. They spent the rest of the afternoon and the night digging them out of the rubble, the firemen

and the soldiers and the men of the parish with their hands, and the mothers stood in the road and watched.

My mother went. She went the moment the all-clear sounded, without her hat, running, which I had never seen her do, up the hill towards the smoke. She did not come back until after midnight. When she did, her hands were cut and her dress was grey with dust and she would not speak. She went into the back room and sat at the long table in the dark, and I came down in my nightdress and stood in the doorway, and she did not send me to bed. She held out her arm, and I went to her, and she held me against her, very hard, so hard it hurt, and did not say anything at all, and I could feel her shaking.

I knew some of them. I am not going to write their names. Some of their mothers are alive. One of them comes in here for her morning coffee on Wednesdays and does not know who I am.

The girl with the kittens was not there that day. Her cat had had them in the coal shed and she could not get them out. I found out on the Tuesday. I have never been so glad of anything in my life, and I have never been so ashamed of being glad.

* * *

My mother has gone to the eleven o'clock at St Marychurch every Sunday since they rebuilt it. She sits at the back. She has never told me why, and I have never asked, and I am not asking now, because I know.

I asked Ania. Once. In October 1955, when I was twenty, in Room 3, on the last day of her stay, with my coat on to go to the station with her. I had carried it for twelve years and I could not carry it any further. I said, *You knew. On the Sunday. You knew they were coming.*

She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her carpet bag at her feet. She did not answer for a long time.

Then she said, "I knew that I could keep you."

"And them? The others?"

"I could not keep them," said Ania. She was looking at her own hands. "If I had kept them, other things would have happened. Worse things. Things you cannot imagine, and I cannot tell you." She was quiet. "There are things that must happen, Wendy. Even when they are terrible. I have known that for a long time. I have never once in all that time been able to make it hurt less."

I did not say anything. I could not.

"I am sorry," said Ania. "I have been sorry every day. I will be sorry every day there is." She looked up at me, and her eyes were perfectly steady and perfectly dry, and I did not know, I have never known, whether that was because she could not cry or because she had decided not to. "I kept you because you have to be here. For what comes after you. That is the only reason I have. It is not enough. It will never be enough. But it is the only one."

*For what comes after you.*

I was twenty, and not married, and I did not know what she meant.

I have a son now. He is three and a half, and he loves trains, and he was born in this house in the room above my head.

I know what she meant.

# Chapter 19 – *The Tunnels*

*Saturday, 23rd October 1965. Back room, 8 p.m. Sandwiches for eight. (Mother wrote it in the daybook herself. She wrote "Bowls Club".)*

They came by the back gate.

I did not ask them to. I did not know they were coming. At half past seven on the Saturday evening my mother went down the passage to the scullery and slid back the bolt on the back door and left it on the latch, and came back into the kitchen and began cutting bread, and when I asked her what she was doing she said, "Sandwiches for eight," and did not look up. There has not been a guest at Widecombe Cot since Tuesday except my father in Room 1 and Ania in Room 3 and Douglas Hills in Room 2, who is not in the register.

At a quarter to eight Johnny Hills came in out of the dark by the scullery door, slowly, with a stick I had never seen him use, and a very old black Labrador at his heel, and stood on the mat and looked round the kitchen once, all the way round, the stove and the dresser and the back door and the window and me, before he looked at my mother.

"Nance," he said.

"Johnny."

Leonard came at five to eight, with sawdust on his jersey, though it was Saturday and he had told me on Wednesday he did not work Saturdays any more. My father came down the passage from

Room 1 in his cardigan. Douglas came down the stairs. And at eight o'clock exactly, without anyone having heard her on the stairs, Ania came in from the hall and went into the back room and sat down in the middle of the long side of the table, facing the fire, with her back to the window, in the same chair, and my mother put a cup of tea in front of her, and she took it in both hands.

They all sat down. They all sat in the same places. I do not think any of them decided to. My father took the chair at the end by the range, where my mother used to sit with the accounts, and my mother sat beside him, which I have never seen. Johnny sat at the far end with his back to the wall and the old dog under his chair. Douglas sat beside his father. Leonard sat at the end by the window. There were two chairs empty, side by side, near the fire. Nobody sat in them. Nobody mentioned them.

I stood in the doorway with the tray of sandwiches. I was thirty, a married woman, and I stood in that doorway with that tray exactly as I had stood in it at seven, with my tongue between my teeth.

Ania looked up at me.

"Sit down, Wendy," she said. "You are not carrying the tray any more. You are writing it down."

So I put the tray on the table and sat down in the last chair, at the corner, next to Leonard, with my exercise book, and Johnny Hills put on his reading glasses and opened a small black pocketbook with a stained cover, and began.

* * *

"The sixteenth of July, 1943," he said. "A Friday. That's the night Doug means. The tunnels."

By July, he said, they had most of it. They had the van: Tremayne and Rook's, going into the yard at Galmpton twice a week with a canteen pass, Tuesdays and Fridays, which my father had found in a complaint about currants. They had the driver, a quiet man from Wapping called Spratt, who had never driven a van for anybody in his life before 1942 and who stopped every Friday on his way back from the yard at a public house in Paignton and had one half of bitter and left. They had the bus ticket from the rubble in London, and the letters to Mrs Inge Peters care of Wapping, and Leonard's drawing. And they had the mark.

"What we didn't have," said Johnny, "was the man inside the yard. The one who'd drilled those fastenings. And the one who came to check the work and pay him." He turned a page. "We knew there had to be one who could go down into a finished hull, by himself, with a torch, the day before a launch, and nobody'd think twice about it. That's not a labourer. That's not a van driver. That's somebody whose job it is."

He looked down the table at Leonard.

"The Admiralty overseer," said Leonard quietly. "That's whose job it is. He goes down in every hull before she's passed. Every one. On his own. With a torch and a clipboard."

"So Len set him a trap," said Johnny.

* * *

Leonard told this part himself. He told it the way he told the yard on Wednesday, slowly, with his hands flat on the table.

"There was a hull on the slip," he said, "to be launched on the Saturday morning, the seventeenth. I'd been over her myself, every fastening, every inch, with a torch, three times. She was sound. And on the Thursday night, I went down into her bilge with a knife and I cut the mark." He looked at his hands. "In the same place. Low down on the inside face of a frame, aft, above the bilge water. As near to the first one as I could make it from my drawing. And I darkened it with a pencil. And I didn't touch a single fastening. Not one."

"So that whoever had paid for the first one," said Douglas, "would come and look at the second, and think the job had been done properly this time."

"And go to pay for it," said Johnny. "On the Friday night. Somewhere he thought nobody would see him." He turned another page. "Where do you go, in Torquay, in the summer of 1943, if you want to meet somebody at night where nobody will look twice at you? Where there's a crowd of people, all in the dark, and nobody looking at anybody, and the noise of the guns to drown out what you say?"

"The tunnels," I said.

"The tunnels," said Johnny. "If there's a raid. And there was a raid. Doug's people knew there'd be one, the Friday night, the sixteenth. I'll not say how."

He did not look at Douglas. Douglas did not look at him.

* * *

I was there. I want to say that before Johnny tells the rest, because I did not know until that Saturday night in the back room that I had been there, and I have been putting the pieces together ever since.

The sirens went at about half past ten. My mother got me up out of bed and into my coat and we went down the hill with our blankets, as we always did, with Ania beside me, and her hand on my shoulder, and we went into the tunnels and found a bench halfway along the main gallery, and I lay down with my head on my mother's lap and went to sleep. I did not wake up for the guns. I did not wake up for the singing. I woke up once, at about eleven, because my mother's hand had gone tight on my shoulder, and I opened my eyes and saw, going past along the gallery, very fast, a big man in a policeman's cape with a hooded lantern, and behind him a thin man in a dark suit, and behind him Ania, walking, not hurrying, towards the far end of the tunnel where the lamps gave out. My mother stroked my hair, and I went back to sleep.

The next time I woke, it was to a shout. One. A man's voice, very loud, from the far end, and then something falling, a lot of things, like a pile of papers, and then nothing.

My mother put her hand over my eyes. She held it there. I could feel her heart going through her skirt against the back of my head. And after a while, a long while, I heard feet coming back along the gallery, several people, slowly, and somebody breathing hard, and a voice I did not know saying, quite calmly and very bitterly, *You've no idea what you're doing, Sergeant. None at all.*

And then they were past, and gone towards the entrance, and my mother took her hand away.

I sat up. I saw the backs of them going out of the tunnel door into the dark: the big policeman, and the thin man, and between them a young man in naval uniform with no cap, with his hands behind his back.

I asked my mother who he was. She said, *Go to sleep, Wendy.*

I did not know, until last Saturday, that I had seen him before. In April. In the side passage by the warden's stores, in the light of a hurricane lamp, with a tall fair woman.

* * *

"He came down the main gallery at a quarter past one," said Johnny Hills. "Alone. In uniform. Cap under his arm, the way they do indoors. Nobody looked at him. There were a dozen naval officers in those tunnels most nights, and a hundred airmen, and the whole of the Union Street fire watch. He walked straight down to the end, where the lamps give out, to the iron door. *Corporation Stores.*" He looked at me over his glasses. "You'll remember the door."

I did. I said so.

"It's a stores," said Johnny. "Sandbags, stretchers, buckets, spare lamps. But it goes back into the hill a long way, and at the back of it there's another door, that comes out in a yard behind a garage in a street down near the harbour. A fire exit. Locked. The Corporation had the keys, and the ARP, and the police." He paused. "And somebody had a copy."

"Who?"

"The van," said my father, from the end of the table. It was the first thing he had said. "The garage behind the yard was a Tremayne and Rook depot. They'd rented it in 1942. For the canteen deliveries." He took his glasses off. "I found the lease on the Wednesday. Two days before. I thought it was too late. I'm sorry, Johnny."

"Wasn't too late," said Johnny. "Was just right."

* * *

They were waiting inside the stores. Johnny and Douglas, in the dark, among the sandbags and the stretchers, with the lantern hooded. They had been there since eleven. Ania had come with them as far as the iron door and then stopped, in the gallery, outside it, in the dark where the lamps gave out, and stood there, and would not come in.

"I asked her why," said Johnny. "She said, *Because somebody will come out of the other door, Johnny, and somebody should be standing here when they do.*" He shook his head. "I didn't know what she meant. I did after."

The young lieutenant came in through the iron door from the tunnel at a quarter past one, and shut it behind him, and stood in the dark among the sandbags. And a minute or two later the other door, at the back, the fire door from the garage yard, opened very quietly, and somebody came in from that side, with a small torch.

A tall woman. Fair. In a grey coat.

"She had a satchel," said Johnny. "He had an envelope. A big one, foolscap, stuffed fat. They didn't say good evening. She held out her hand for the envelope and he held out his for the satchel. And I took the hood off the lantern."

He stopped. The old dog under his chair sighed in its sleep.

"I've arrested a good many men, Wendy," he said. "Forty years. I never in all that time saw anybody move as fast as that woman. The light came on, and before I'd got the first word out she'd dropped the satchel and gone. Back through the fire door. Into the garage yard. It slammed behind her, and I heard a car start in the street, and she was gone." He looked at his pocketbook. "And he went the other way. Back through the iron door, into the tunnel, with the envelope. Where the people were. Where he thought he could lose himself in the crowd."

"And Ania was standing there," said Douglas.

"Ania was standing there," said Johnny. "In the dark, outside the door. He came through it at a run and nearly went into her. And she didn't move. She didn't touch him. She just stood there, in front of him, in the dark, very still. And he stopped." Johnny shook his head slowly. "I don't know why. He was a big young man and she was a slip of a thing. He could have knocked her flat. He stopped dead, a foot from her, as if he'd walked into a wall. And he shouted. That was the shout you heard. And the envelope came open in his hand, and everything in it went all over the floor of the tunnel."

* * *

"What was in it?" I said.

Leonard answered. He had not spoken for a long time.

"Drawings," he said. "Our drawings. The yard's. The lines of the boats, the frames, the engine beds, all of it, copied. And a list." He looked at his hands. "Every hull on the slip, and every one we'd launched since January. With the date she'd gone to her trials, and the date she'd gone to the Navy, and the flotilla she'd joined. And her number. And against two of them, a little mark in the margin, in pencil." He drew it with his finger on the table, very small. A circle. Two curved lines. "Those were the two he'd been paid for. One was the hull David swept out in March. The other had gone out of the creek in January." He was quiet. "We found her. Doug's people did. In the dockyard at Dartmouth, waiting for her engines. They had her up on the slip by the Monday and found the fastenings cut, the same as the other. She'd have gone out on her first patrol in August."

Nobody said anything for a while. The fire settled.

"And his name?" I said. "The lieutenant."

Johnny Hills took off his reading glasses and folded them and put them down on the open pocketbook.

"I asked him," he said. "In the tunnel, on the floor, with Doug kneeling on his back and the papers all round us, and the singing still going on down at the far end because nobody'd heard a thing over the guns. I said, as I'd said to a thousand men, *What's your name, sir?* And he turned his head on the floor and looked up at me. And he smiled." Johnny's big hands lay flat on the table. "And he said, *Lieutenant Roger Eden, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. My*

*grandfather's cousin had a house above Babbacombe, Sergeant. Ravenscroft. Perhaps your family remembers it.*"

He looked down the table. Not at me. At Ania.

"I was six," he said, "when my father wrote that name in his book for the last time. In March 1896. On a cliff at Daddyhole, over a dead man. I'd heard it at the kitchen table all my life. And here it was again, forty-seven years after, on the floor of a tunnel, smiling at me."

"Johnny went very still," said Douglas quietly. "I'd never seen him do that. I've only seen it once since."

"And then he said," said Johnny, as though Douglas had not spoken, "*You've found the hand again, Sergeant. You'll never find the arm.*"

* * *

The room was very quiet. Outside in the yard the wind had got up and was moving the dustbin lids.

"What happened to him?" I said.

"He went to London," said Douglas. "With me. On the Saturday morning. And after that he went somewhere I'm not able to tell you about." He took his spectacles off and polished them on his tie. "He was never tried. You couldn't try him, in 1943, without telling the world how we knew. He died in the summer of 1944, somewhere in the north of Scotland. Pneumonia, it said." He put his spectacles back on. "I don't know if it was."

"And the woman?"

Johnny looked at Ania again.

"I asked her that," he said. "That night. Outside the tunnel, at three in the morning, with the all-clear going. I said, *She came out of that fire door into the garage yard, and you knew she would, and you stood the wrong side of the iron door on purpose. You let her go.*" He paused. "And she said—"

"I said, *Not her. Not yet,*" said Ania.

Everybody at the table turned to look at her. She had not spoken since she told me to sit down. She was holding her cup in both hands, with her thumbs over the rim, looking into the fire.

"I said it then," she said. "And it was true then." She turned her head, and looked at me, across the corner of the table, at my exercise book and my pen. "Write it down, Wendy. *Not yet.* You will need it, when you come to the summer of 1944."

# Chapter 20 – *The Chase*

*Saturday, 23rd October 1965. Back room, continued. 10.40 p.m. Mother made more tea. Nobody went home.*

Nobody moved for a while after Ania spoke. My mother got up and filled the kettle and put it on the range and stood with her back to us, waiting for it, which she never does; she always says a watched kettle is a waste of a woman. Johnny Hills took his reading glasses off and put them on again. The old dog under his chair woke up and looked round the room and went back to sleep.

Then Leonard put both his hands flat on the table.

"She went to the water," he said. "That's the rest of the night. I'll tell it."

* * *

Ania had told them she would. Outside the tunnel, at three in the morning, with the all-clear going and the people coming out round them into the dark, yawning, with their blankets. Johnny had said, *You let her go,* and Ania had said, *Not her. Not yet.* And then she had said one more thing, to Douglas, who had Roger Eden by the arm with his hands tied behind him with Johnny's whistle cord.

*She will not go by road. They will be watching the roads by morning, and she knows it. She will go to the water. There is a boat in the inner harbour that has been waiting for her since June.*

"Doug rang Dartmouth," said Leonard. "From the police box on the Strand. To the Coastal Forces base. I don't know who he spoke to or what he said. Something that got a duty officer out of his bed at three in the morning and on to a telephone to Brixham. And then he rang me."

Leonard had been at home, in the cottage at Galmpton, asleep, with David in the next room. He had not been in the tunnels; he was not on the list for that night. The telephone in the hall rang at twenty past three, and it was Douglas, and Douglas said: *There's a boat at Brixham, Len. At the fish quay. One of yours. They're getting her crew out of their beds. She's short. Go.*

"One of mine," said Leonard. He looked down the table at me. "You'll have guessed which."

I had not. I said so.

"The one David swept out," he said. "In March. The one with the pig in her bilge." He turned his hands over on the table and looked at the palms. "She'd gone round to Dartmouth for her engines in April and been commissioned in June, and she was working up at Brixham with a new crew. Brand new. Her captain was a sub-lieutenant of twenty-two who'd been a bank clerk in Leeds a year before. And her coxswain was in hospital in Exeter with his appendix out."

* * *

He drove to Brixham in the yard's lorry, without lights, along the back lanes, faster than he had ever driven anything in his life. He

got to the fish quay at ten to four. The boat was alongside, with her engines already turning over, a deep rough mutter that you felt in your chest, and figures running about on her deck in the dark, and a young man in a duffel coat and a cap with a badge on it standing by the wheelhouse shouting at them in a voice that kept going up at the ends.

"I knew him," said Leonard. "He'd been down to the yard in March to see her launched, and he'd stood on the slipway and looked up at her, the way they all did. I went down the ladder onto her deck and he turned round and saw me and said, *Who the hell are you?* And I said, *I built her, sir. I'm told you're short.*"

The sub-lieutenant looked at him in the dark for perhaps two seconds.

"He said, *Can you steer her?* And I said, *I can steer anything I've built.* Which was a lie. I'd never steered an MTB in my life. I'd been out in them on their trials, standing beside the coxswain with a notebook, listening to the hull, a dozen times. I knew how she'd feel. I'd never had the wheel." He paused. "And he said, *Then get in there,* and pointed at the wheelhouse. And I got in there."

* * *

She came out of the inner harbour at Torquay at five past four.

They saw her from Berry Head. There was a coastguard on the head with a night glass, and he had been told by somebody, by the same chain of telephones that had got the sub-lieutenant out of bed, to watch Tor Bay and report anything moving. At four minutes past

four he telephoned Brixham and said that a motor vessel, unlit, about forty feet, had just come out past the end of the Haldon Pier at Torquay and was heading out across the bay, south-east, at speed.

"A motor yacht," said Leonard. "A pretty thing. White, before the war. Somebody's pleasure boat. Painted grey now, and laid up all the war in the inner harbour under a tarpaulin with her name painted out, like a dozen others. Nobody looked at her. Nobody had looked at her for three years. She'd been fuelled in June." He shook his head. "In June. Like Jory Tozer's sovereigns. They always got ready in June."

"She was going to France?" I said.

"She was going to meet something," said Douglas, from his end of the table. "Halfway. That's all I'll say."

* * *

Leonard told me about the next forty minutes very slowly. He chose his words the way he chooses a plank, turning each one over, looking along it for the grain. I am going to put it down as near as I can, because I do not think he has ever told it before, and I do not think he will again.

"We came out past the breakwater at Brixham at a quarter past four," he said. "Slow, through the harbour. The sub-lieutenant beside me in the wheelhouse with his glasses up. And then he said, *Right*, and put the throttles down. All three."

He stopped.

"You've never been in one," he said. "There's no way to tell you. She was sitting in the water and then she wasn't. She got up. Her whole bow came up out of the sea and she sat back on her stern and the noise of the engines came up from under my feet like the end of the world, and the sea went white on both sides of us and the spray came over the wheelhouse like hail, and we were doing thirty knots, and then thirty-five, and then forty. In the dark. Across Tor Bay. And I had the wheel in my hands and I could feel every frame in her working, through the wheel, through the deck, through the soles of my boots, the whole length of her, every timber we'd cut and every fastening we'd clenched, all of them working at once, like a body."

He looked at his hands.

"And I thought of the six," he said. "Aft. Under the engine beds. Where David had found the mark. The six I'd cut out and put back with my own hands, by a hurricane lamp, with David holding it. And I thought, if I've done it wrong, Len, this is where you find out."

"And?"

"She held," said Leonard Harvey.

He said it very quietly. Nobody said anything. My mother had turned round from the range and was standing with the kettle in her hand, not pouring it.

"She held," said Leonard again. "Every frame. Every one. We'd done every rivet right."

* * *

They saw the yacht at half past four, a mile off Berry Head, going south-east, with the first grey just beginning in the sky behind her. A small dark shape on the dark water, with a white bow wave. She had no lights. She was fast for a yacht, perhaps twenty knots, and she had a long start. But she was not an MTB.

"We went after her," said Leonard, "like a dog after a cat."

They came up on her quarter at a quarter to five, about ten miles out, in the open Channel, south-east of Berry Head, with the light coming and the sea grey and flat. The sub-lieutenant had a loud-hailer, and he stood up in the open door of the wheelhouse in the spray and shouted to her to heave to, and the yacht did not heave to. Somebody on her after deck fired at them with a machine gun. The bullets went over. Then one of them did not.

"Through the wheelhouse window," said Leonard. "Beside my head. I felt it go past my ear like a wasp." He touched the side of his head, just above his left ear, without seeming to notice he was doing it. "The sub-lieutenant fired back. We had a pom-pom forward and twin machine guns either side of the wheelhouse. The boy on the starboard gun hit her engine. You could see it. Smoke came out of her, black, all at once, and she slowed, and slewed round, and lay there."

And then the sub-lieutenant said, *Christ,* very quietly, and pointed ahead, past the yacht, to the south.

There were boats there. Two of them. Long and low and dark, lying stopped on the grey water about two miles off, with the light behind them. Waiting.

"E-boats," said Leonard. "German. Schnellboote. They'd come over in the night from Cherbourg, the way they did, to lie in the Channel and wait for our convoys. And to wait for her." He was quiet. "Two of them. Bigger than us and faster than us and better armed than us. And we were one boat, with a scratch crew, and a coxswain in hospital, and a carpenter at the wheel."

* * *

"The yacht was burning by then," said Leonard. "Properly. The engine fire had got into her. Flames out of her hatch and the smoke going up straight in the still air. And the E-boats saw it and started to come. Both of them, at once, straight at us, very fast, with their bows up and the sea white under them. And the sub-lieutenant said, *Get us out of here,* and I put the wheel hard over."

He drew it on the table with his finger: a sharp curve.

"And as we came round," he said, "I saw her."

He stopped. He did not say anything for so long that I thought he was not going to go on.

"On the yacht," he said. "On the stern. In the smoke. Standing up. A tall woman, with her hair down, blowing, in a coat. Quite still. Watching us come round. The fire was right behind her and she didn't move away from it." He shook his head slowly. "I've thought about it for twenty-two years. She wasn't frightened. She was waiting. The way you wait at a bus stop when you can see the bus coming."

"And then?"

"And then the E-boats opened fire," said Leonard, "and I didn't look at anything but the sea for the next ten minutes."

* * *

They got away. Leonard did not say how. He said only that he had built her, and she was the fastest thing on the water that morning, and he made her do something with the wheel and the throttles that the sub-lieutenant said afterwards no coxswain in Coastal Forces would have dared, and the E-boats' shells went into the sea behind them, and then, after a long hard run to the west with the E-boats behind them, they were in among the rocks under the Start, in the shallows, where an E-boat with a deeper draught would not follow, and they lay there with their engines stopped and listened to the E-boats circling outside, and after a while, as the light came up full, the E-boats went away south, towards France, at speed.

When they came out and went back to look, an hour later, there was nothing where the yacht had been. A slick of oil on the flat grey water, very wide. Some charred planking. A life ring with the name painted out. A woman's shoe, floating, upside down.

"No body," said Leonard. "No bodies. Not hers, not whoever was firing the gun, not whoever was at the helm. We searched till nine. Then we had to go back for fuel." He spread his hands on the table. "She went down with her boat. That's what the Navy said. That's what Doug's people said. That's what everybody said."

He looked down the table at Ania.

Ania was looking into the fire, holding her cup.

"She didn't, did she," said Leonard. It was not a question. "She went across. To the E-boats. In the smoke. While I was looking at the sea."

Ania did not turn round.

"I told Johnny," she said. "In the tunnel. *Not yet.*" She put her cup down on the table, very carefully, the way my mother puts down her reading glasses, square to the edge. "She went home, Leonard. To her father. In Hamburg. She will come back."

"When?" said Johnny.

Ania looked round at him then. And then, very slowly, round the table, at each of us in turn: at Johnny, and at Douglas, and at Leonard, and at my father and my mother, and last of all at me, with my pen in my hand and the exercise book open in front of me under the lamp.

"When she is needed," she said. "It will not be in this war."

* * *

I asked Leonard afterwards, at the scullery door, with his coat on, at half past one in the morning, when Johnny had gone out by the back gate and he was the last, whether they had ever given him anything for it. The Navy. The Admiralty. A medal, a letter, anything.

He looked at me as if I had asked whether he had been paid extra for building the boat properly.

"The sub-lieutenant wrote to me," he said. "In 1946. From Leeds. He'd gone back to the bank. He said he'd been made a lieutenant and got a bar to his DSC, and the boat had done thirty-

one patrols and sunk two E-boats and a flak ship and never once lost a man, and she'd been paid off in 1945 and broken up at Falmouth, and he'd gone down to see her before they did it." Leonard buttoned his coat. "He said he went down into her bilge, aft, with a torch. And he found a place on one of the frames, low down, where somebody'd sanded something off. And he put his hand on it." He stopped. "He said he didn't know why. He just wanted me to know he had."

He went out by the back gate into the lane. I stood at the scullery door and listened to his footsteps going away down the hill, and then I went back into the back room and wrote it all down before I could lose any of it, and the fire went out, and Ania sat across the table from me and watched me write, and every so often she blinked.

# Chapter 21 – *Two Sides*

*Sat. 17 July 1943. ——*

*Sat. 24 July. ——*

*Sat. 31 July. ——*

*Sat. 7 Aug. Room 5: one bar Sweet Marie. Mother said yes.*

That is from the inside of the lid of my cigar box. I had forgotten it. I found it on Sunday morning, after the back room, sitting on the edge of my bed at seven o'clock with the box on my knee, going down the entries with my finger, looking for July.

Three Saturdays with nothing against them but a dash. I put the dashes in myself. I remember doing it. I remember sitting on this bed in the summer of 1943 with my pencil, writing in the dashes, very carefully, so that the record would be complete, so that he could not say afterwards that I had missed one. I was seven. I thought he had forgotten me.

He had not forgotten me. I know that now. I know exactly what happened on the first of those Saturdays, because I was at the reception desk when it began.

* * *

The telephone rang at five past seven in the morning. The seventeenth of July, the Saturday, a few hours after the tunnels, though I did not know that then. I had been sent down early to sort the post, because my mother had been out half the night, she said, at

the shelter, and was tired. The telephone was in a wooden box in the hall beside the reception desk, with a little glass window in the door, and a stool inside it. I was not supposed to answer it. I answered it anyway, because I liked to, and because nobody else was there.

"Widecombe Cot," I said, the way my mother did.

A man's voice. Not English. Not Canadian either. A flat, careful voice with nothing in it, like the voice of somebody reading out a timetable.

"I wish to speak to the Flight Lieutenant in Room Five."

I said he was not down yet.

There was a pause on the line. Then the voice said, "Then please give him a message. Tell him that the shipment has been lost at sea. Tell him there is nothing more to be done. Tell him to proceed as before." Another pause. "Can you remember that?"

I said yes. I said it back, the way I had been taught to say back messages for the guests: *The shipment has been lost at sea. Nothing more to be done. Proceed as before.*

"Good girl," said the voice, and the line went dead.

I wrote it on the pad by the telephone, in my best round hand, and tore the page off and took it up to Room 5 and knocked, and he called *come in*, and I went in.

He was sitting on the edge of his bed in his shirt and trousers, with his bad leg stretched out, putting on his shoes. He looked up and smiled at me, the way he always did, and held out his hand for the paper, and I gave it to him.

I watched him read it.

I have never forgotten his face. I was seven, and I did not know what I was seeing, and I knew. It did not go white, the way my mother's had in the hall on the first night, or the way people's faces go in books. It went still. Everything in it stopped, all at once, as if somebody had pulled a plug out of the bottom of it, and for a moment it was not a face at all. It was a mask somebody had left on a bed.

Then he folded the paper in half, and in half again, very small, and put it in his shirt pocket.

"Thank you, Wendy," he said. His voice was quite ordinary. "Who gave you this?"

"A man on the telephone. He didn't say his name."

"No," he said. "He wouldn't." He looked at the window, at the sea. "Did he say anything else?"

"He said I was a good girl."

The Canadian looked at me then. And for the only time in all the seventeen months he was at Widecombe Cot, he did not smile at me, and he did not say anything kind. He looked at me for a long time, as though I were very far away, at the other end of a long road, and he could not quite make out whether I was coming towards him or going away.

"Go and have your breakfast," he said.

He did not come down to breakfast. He went out at eight, in his uniform, with his stick, very fast, and did not come back until after midnight. I heard him on the stairs. He fell, halfway up, and lay there for a while, and my mother went out of her room and helped

him up the rest of the way and into Room 5, and I heard her voice through the wall, very low, for a long time, and his, once, saying something I could not hear, in a voice I had never heard him use, that broke in the middle.

He did not come to the office door that Saturday with anything in his hand. Nor the next. Nor the next.

* * *

The Bowls Club met on the Thursday. The twenty-second.

I took the sandwiches in at a quarter past eight and stood outside the door with the tray to get my breath, as I always did. I want to be honest, here more than anywhere: I did not always stand outside the door to get my breath. Sometimes I stood there to listen. That Thursday I stood there to listen. I had a message on a telephone pad that I did not understand and a face on a bed that I could not forget and a cigar box with a dash in it, and I wanted to know.

"…telephone call at seven on the Saturday morning," Johnny Hills was saying. "To the hotel. For him. Nance says Wendy took it."

"What did it say?" That was Douglas.

My mother told them. Word for word. She had found the pad on the Sunday, and the page under the one I had torn off, with the marks of my pencil pressed into it, and she had rubbed a soft lead over it the way they do in books, and read it. I did not know she had done that until I stood outside the door with the tray and heard her

say it. *The shipment has been lost at sea. Nothing more to be done. Proceed as before.*

There was a silence.

"So he knew her," said Leonard slowly. "The woman on the yacht. He knew her."

"He was sent with her," said Ania.

I had not heard her come in. I never did. But it was her voice, quiet and level, from the middle of the long side of the table, where she always sat, with her back to the window and her face to the fire.

"Sent with her?" said Johnny. "What do you mean, sent with her?"

"They were sent together," said Ania. "From the same place. By the same hand. In the same month. She was sent to the yard, for the boats. He was sent here." A pause. "One for the boats. One for the child."

Nobody said anything. I heard the fire. I heard my own heart.

"For the child," said my mother. Her voice was very flat.

"Yes."

"Wendy."

"Yes."

"Why?" That was my mother again, and her voice had changed. "In God's name, Ania. Why would they want Wendy? She's a child. She's seven years old. She's a grocer's daughter from Hendon. What's she to them?"

There was a long silence. And then Ania said a thing that she did not mean to say. I know that she did not mean to. I have known

her for twenty-three years, and I have heard her say a great many strange things, and I have never once, before or since, heard her say anything she had not decided beforehand to say. I heard it that night, through a door, with a tray of fish-paste sandwiches in my hands.

"Not what she is," said Ania. "What comes after her. She will marry Leonard's boy. And they will have a son. And they want there to be no son."

* * *

The silence in that room was the longest I have ever heard.

I stood in the passage and did not breathe. I could hear nothing at all from inside: not the fire, not a chair, not a cup. It was as though everybody in that room had stopped, the way the Canadian's face had stopped on the edge of his bed.

Then Leonard said, very quietly, "My David?"

And Ania said, "I should not have said that."

She said it in a voice I had never heard her use. I can only describe it as frightened. Not of anybody in the room. Of herself. As though she had put her foot down on a stair in the dark and found it was not there.

"I should not have said it," she said again. "I am sorry. I am still learning when to be quiet. Forget it. All of you. Please." A pause. "Johnny. Do not write it down."

There was another silence. And then Johnny Hills said, slowly, in his slow sergeant's voice:

"I've already written it, Miss Ania. My father never once crossed out a line in fifty years. I'll not start now."

* * *

I went to the scullery.

I did not take the sandwiches in. I put the tray down on the hall table and went to the scullery and stood at the sink with my back to the door, and after a while David came in from the bottom stair, where he always sat on Thursdays, and took the tea towel off its rail, and stood beside me, and waited for me to start washing up. There was nothing to wash up. The cups were still in the back room.

"What's the matter?" said David.

He was ten. He had sawdust on his jersey and a scab on one knee and a penknife in his pocket with a screwdriver in it, and he had fixed the tap. I looked at him, standing there with the tea towel over his arm, very grave, waiting for the cups.

I did not tell him. I did not tell him then and I did not tell him for fifteen years, and when I did tell him, it was the night he fixed the tap the second time, in 1958, standing at the same sink with the same tea towel, after he had asked me to marry him and I had said yes. I told him then. I said, *Somebody told me you'd ask. When I was seven.* And he looked at me for a long time with his father's quiet eyes and said, *Was it the lady from Room 3?* And I said yes. And he said, *She told me too. When I was ten. On the back step. She said, look after her, David. And I said, I will.*

He had never told me either.

But that night in 1943 I only said, "Nothing," and went back into the hall and picked up the tray and took the sandwiches in, and they all stopped talking and turned to look at me, the way they always did.

Except Ania. Ania was looking at the fire.

* * *

The Canadian came to the office door on the seventh of August, at teatime, with a bar of Sweet Marie, and knocked, and stood there with it in his hand, and said, "Mrs Mallyon. May Wendy have this?"

My mother looked at him for a long time across her desk. He looked thinner. He looked older. He had stopped going out in the evenings to the cadets' dances at the Spa, and he had stopped smoking in the garden under the monkey puzzle, and he sat in the lounge after dinner with a book he did not read, and watched the door.

"She may," said my mother.

He gave it to me. I said thank you. He did not smile, but he put his hand on my head, very lightly, for a moment, the way you would touch something to make sure it was still there. Then he went up to Room 5.

I wrote it in the lid of my cigar box, under the three dashes. *Sat. 7 Aug. Room 5: one bar Sweet Marie. Mother said yes.*

* * *

I asked Ania about it on Sunday afternoon, the day after the back room, in Room 3, while she was packing her carpet bag. She leaves on Monday. She always leaves on the last Monday in October.

I said, "You said it in 1943. About David and me. And a son. Before any of it happened."

She folded a grey blouse and put it in the bag. She did not answer for a while.

"Yes," she said.

"And you said you shouldn't have."

"Yes."

"Why not? If it was true?"

She stopped folding and looked at me. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, as she had been in 1955 when I asked her about St Marychurch, with her hands in her lap and the bag at her feet.

"Because when you say a thing aloud, Wendy," she said, "you change it. A little. Even when it is true. Especially when it is true. It goes into the people who hear it, and they carry it about, and it makes them choose differently, a little, without knowing." She looked out of the window at the bay. "I was very bad at that, then. I have tried to be better. I have said a great many fewer things since 1943 than I wanted to."

"Did it change it? What you said?"

She looked back at me. And something happened at the corner of her mouth.

"Your husband fixed a tap twice," she said. "And you told him on the second time, and not before. And he told you on the second

time, and not before. Neither of you let it choose for you." She picked up the grey blouse again and finished folding it. "I think that is the best thing I have ever seen two people do."

# Chapter 22 – *The Ledger*

*Monday, 25th October 1965. Departures: Miss Ania. Room 3. By the 10.15 up train. No bill.*

I walked her to the station. I have done it every year since I was fifteen. She does not need me to carry the bag; it is a small carpet bag and there is almost nothing in it, and she could carry it to London and back without noticing. But my mother began sending me with her in 1950, and I have gone every year since, and neither of us has ever suggested stopping.

We did not talk much on the way down the hill. We never do. At the station she stood on the platform under the canopy with her bag at her feet and looked along the line towards Paignton, and I stood beside her, and the train came in, and she picked up her bag.

At the carriage door she turned round. She has never done that before. She always gets straight in and sits down at the window and does not wave.

"Ask your father for the other ledger," she said. "The one at the bottom of the case. Without the crest."

Then she got in, and sat down at the window, and the guard blew his whistle, and the train took her away up the line towards Newton, and I stood on the platform and watched it go until it was a red lamp and then nothing, the way I do every year.

It was only when I was halfway back up the hill that I remembered I had never told her what was in my father's cardboard case.

* * *

My father had it out on his knee when I went into Room 1. I think he had been waiting for me since breakfast.

"She told you," he said. It was not a question.

"At the station."

He nodded slowly. He did not ask how she knew. Nobody in this house ever does.

It was a big ledger, bound in brown leather gone dark with handling, the size of a family Bible, with a brass clasp that had been forced at some time and hung loose. There was no crest on the cover. There was nothing on the cover at all except a white paper label gummed on the front, and on the label, in faded copperplate, in a clerk's hand:

*TREMAYNE & ROOK LTD.*
*Private Ledger. No. 4.*
*1942–*

The dash had no second date after it.

"Where did you get it?" I said.

"Mr Talland gave it to me," said my father. "In December 1943. In the back of the shop. He said, *You found the door, Mr Mallyon. You should have the key.*" He put his hand flat on the brown leather. "Douglas and his people went into the Wapping warehouse in the first week of September, after the tunnels, with a warrant from somewhere that didn't have a name. The firm had gone. Overnight. The van was gone, and the driver, Spratt, was

gone, and the clerks had been paid off with a month's money and told the business was closing on account of the war. The warehouse was empty. Swept out. Not a box of currants in it." He paused. "But there was a safe in the counting house that they hadn't been able to shift, because it was bolted to the floor and weighed half a ton. And this was in it."

"Why would they leave it?"

"They didn't," said my father. "Not on purpose. The safe had a time lock. Somebody had set it on the Friday night, the sixteenth of July, the night of the tunnels, before they knew anything had gone wrong, so it couldn't be opened till the Monday. And by the Monday they'd gone." He almost smiled. "It took Douglas's people a week to open it. Then they couldn't make head or tail of what was inside. So Mr Talland brought it to me."

"Why you?"

"Because it's a wholesaler's private ledger," said my father. "And nobody can read a wholesaler's private ledger except a grocer."

* * *

He showed me. He turned the pages on his knee, slowly, with his finger, the way he used to turn the pages of the order book in Brent Street, and he showed me how to read them.

It looked like any other ledger. Columns of dates and names and figures in a clerk's neat hand. Currants, sultanas, coffee, tinned salmon, tinned peaches, sugar, cases and hundredweights, delivered

to such-and-such a grocer on such-and-such a day, with the price and the discount and the carriage. Pages and pages of it. The ordinary business of a firm of importers in Wapping, in wartime.

"Except it isn't ordinary," said my father. "Look at the quantities."

I looked. I did not see anything.

"A grocer in Kingswear," said my father, "whose canteen contract they took, would buy perhaps a hundredweight of sugar a month. For a shop that size. That's the trade. I've been in it thirty years." He put his finger on a line. "Here's Tremayne and Rook delivering a hundredweight and a half of sugar a week to a boatyard canteen in Galmpton that feeds two hundred men. In the middle of the war. On the ration." He moved his finger down. "And here's the price they charged for it. Look at the discount. They were selling it at a loss. Every week. For a year." He looked up at me. "No wholesaler in England sells at a loss for a year, Wendy. Unless he's being paid for something else."

He turned the pages. And as he turned them, he showed me the something else.

It was hidden in the carriage. In the column for the cost of delivery, where a wholesaler puts down what it cost him to get the goods from Wapping to the customer: the van, the driver, the petrol. Ordinary sums, a few shillings here and there. Except that on certain lines, against certain deliveries, the carriage was not a few shillings. It was ten pounds. Or twenty. Or fifty. And each of those lines had a

little set of initials in the margin, in pencil, very small, that a clerk would have taken for a checker's mark.

"*S.*," said my father, putting his finger on them one by one. "That's Spratt. The driver. Three pounds a week, every week, over his wages, from June 1942. *R.E.*" His finger moved. "Fifty pounds. Twice. The nineteenth of January, 1943, and the twentieth of March. The two hulls." He did not look at me. "And this."

It was a line in February 1943. And another in March. And April. And every month after, until July. Ten pounds a month, against a delivery of tinned goods to a private hotel in Torquay that had never, as far as I knew, bought a single tin from Tremayne and Rook in its life. The initials in the margin were not a name. They were three letters.

*F/Lt.*

I sat on the end of the bed and looked at them for a long time.

"Ten pounds a month," said my father quietly. "Expenses, I'd call it. Not a fee. A man living away from home, in a hotel, on an instructor's pay. Somebody was paying his board." He closed his hand over the page. "They paid him to be here, Wendy. In this house. I've known that since December 1943. I've never told your mother. I've never needed to."

* * *

"There's one more page," said my father. "And then one that isn't there."

He turned to the back of the ledger, to the last written page. The entries stopped in the middle of it, on Friday the sixteenth of July, 1943. Under the last entry there was a gap of a few lines. And then, in a different hand, not the clerk's copperplate but a bold black upright hand in thick ink, written straight across the columns as if the columns did not matter, there was one more line.

> *28 July 1943. Hamburg house destroyed. Account closed. Per G.P.*

I knew those letters. Johnny Hills had read them to me from his father's pocketbook, ten days before, in Preston, with a lemon drizzle going stale on the table between us. *With deepest sympathy. G.P.* On a card wired to a wreath of white lilies on an old man's grave in Paignton churchyard in July 1916.

"Hamburg," I said. "What happened in Hamburg? On the twenty-eighth of July?"

My father looked at me over his glasses.

"We burned it," he said.

He said it very quietly. I have never heard him say anything about the war in that voice, before or since.

"At the end of July 1943," he said, "the Royal Air Force and the Americans bombed Hamburg for a week. Night and day. The worst of it was the night of the twenty-seventh. It was hot and dry, the way it had been here, and the fires joined up, and made a wind, and the wind made more fire. They called it a firestorm. Forty thousand people, they say now. In one night." He took his glasses

off. "Some of those boys from the Grand were in those aeroplanes, Wendy. The ones who marched past this house in the mornings with their arms swinging. The ones who gave you pennies on the Strand."

I did not say anything. I could not.

"The firm in Hamburg was down by the docks," said my father. "Shipping and clay. It was there on the twenty-sixth of July, and it wasn't there on the twenty-eighth. Mr Talland found that out after the war. The office and the warehouses and the house behind them. All of it." He put his glasses back on. "Somebody wrote that line in this book on the twenty-eighth. In Hamburg, or in Lisbon, or in London, I don't know. Somebody who could still write. And closed the account."

"Klaus Petrick," I said. "Was he—"

"Nobody knows," said my father. "He'd have been sixty-eight. He was never heard of again. Not in Hamburg after the war, not anywhere. Mr Talland looked for ten years." He shook his head. "But that's not his hand, Wendy. Mr Talland had his letters from before the war, to the solicitor in Union Street, about Petherick's estate. I've seen them. It's not his hand."

"Then whose?"

My father did not answer that. He did not need to.

*Not her. Not yet.*

* * *

"And the page that isn't there," I said.

My father turned back through the ledger, slowly, to the autumn of 1942. September. October. November.

There was no November.

There was October 1942, three pages of it, currants and coffee and tinned salmon. And then there was December. And between them, close to the stitching, so close you would not see it unless you were looking, there was a narrow strip of paper standing up from the binding, perhaps a quarter of an inch wide, where a page had been. Not torn out. Cut. With a razor or a very sharp knife, straight down, very close to the spine, in one stroke. The edge was perfectly clean.

I put my thumbnail against it and ran it down. I thought of a thing Johnny Hills had read me from his father's book, about a dead surveyor on Paignton sands in 1895 whose coat lining had been cut open. *Cut, not torn. Clean edge.*

"November 1942," I said.

"Yes."

"The month Mum bought this house."

"Yes."

I looked up at my father. He was sitting in his armchair with the ledger open on his knee, very still, looking at the place where the page had been.

"Was it cut when Mr Talland gave it to you?"

"Yes," said my father.

"Did he cut it?"

"I asked him," said my father. "In December 1943. In the back of the shop. I said, Mr Talland, there's a page gone. And he looked at me for a long time over his Darjeeling, and he said, *I gave you the book exactly as I received it from the safe, Mr Mallyon. I give you my word.*" My father closed the ledger. "He never once lied to me in twenty-seven years. I believed him."

"Then who?"

"I don't know," said my father. "It was cut before July 1943, when the safe was locked. By somebody in Tremayne and Rook, or somebody who could get at their books." He laid both hands on the brown leather cover. "Somebody who didn't want anybody, ever, to read what was on that page. Not the police. Not Mr Talland. Not me." He looked at me. "Not you."

I sat on the end of his bed for a long time.

My guess is still my guess. I have set it down in an earlier chapter and I will not take it back. But I know now that if there was ever a piece of paper in this world that answered it, somebody took a razor to it twenty-three years ago, very carefully, in one stroke, and I do not know who, and I do not know whether they did it to hide something from me, or to protect me from it.

There is a letter upstairs in my dressing table drawer, under my jumpers, that I have not opened.

* * *

I will put one more thing in this chapter, because it belongs to the end of 1943, and because I found it this afternoon, after I came up

from my father's room, when I could not sit still and went to put the cigar box back in the cupboard.

At Christmas 1943 I made the Canadian a present.

I had forgotten. I had truly forgotten until I saw the last of the pencil entries on the lid itself, before the list ran on to the bottom of the box, the one for Christmas Eve, which I wrote in very large letters, underlined twice: *Room 5: tin of Laura Secord chocolates, WHOLE TIN, Mother said yes, I gave him my picture.*

My picture. I remember now. I had drawn it at the kitchen table with the coloured pencils my father sent from London, over three evenings, and my mother had found me a piece of card and helped me cut the edges straight. It was a lake, a very big blue one, with a wooden house beside it with a long verandah, and snow on the roof, and a jetty going out into the water, and on the end of the jetty a girl in a red coat standing next to a canoe. I had copied the house from his photograph. I had put myself on the jetty instead of his niece.

I gave it to him at the office door, on Christmas Eve, when he came with the tin of chocolates. He looked at it for a long time, standing in the doorway with his stick, and then he said, "Thank you, Wendy," very quietly, and put it inside his tunic, against his chest, and went upstairs. He ate his Christmas dinner alone at his table by the door the next day, as he always did. Afterwards I saw that the picture was propped on the mantelpiece in Room 5, against the clock, when I went in to turn down the bed.

It was not there when he left, in 1944. I looked. The room was quite empty.

I did not think about it again for twenty-one years.

I am thinking about it now.

# Chapter 23 – *The Americans*

> *Tuesday, 26th October 1965. No arrivals. No departures. Rain. Father in Room 1 with the wireless. Chris with me; David at work. I am on my own now with the rest of it.*

Ania has gone, and Douglas went back to London on the Sunday night train, and Leonard is in his shed at Galmpton, and Johnny Hills is in his bungalow at Preston with his tin box and his old dog. The back room is just the back room again. The chairs are back against the wall. My mother has put the green accounts ledger in the middle of the long table, where it lives out of season, and I am writing at the end of it, by the window onto the yard, with Chris on the floor at my feet pushing a wooden engine along the skirting board and saying *chuff* very quietly to himself.

From here to the end, there is nobody left to ask. Everything else I have written, somebody told me, or helped me, or sat across the table and corrected me. What is left, I saw for myself, at eight years old and at nine, and I have nobody to check it against but my own memory, which I said at the start I did not trust.

I still do not. But it is all I have. So I will write it down.

* * *

The Americans came at the beginning of 1944.

There had been some before: a few officers in the autumn, in very smart uniforms, looking at maps on the harbour wall, and a

lorry or two. But in January they began to come in earnest, and by March there were so many of them that Torquay did not feel like Torquay any more. It felt like a town in a film.

They were everywhere. They were bigger than our soldiers, or seemed it, and louder, and they had better uniforms, smooth and well cut, in a browny-green cloth that the boys at school called *pongo*, and soft caps and boots with rubber soles that did not crunch on the road but made a sort of squeak. They walked differently. Our soldiers marched. The Americans strolled, with their hands in their pockets, chewing, and leaned on things, and called each other *Mac* and *Joe*, and called the girls *honey*, and called me, once, on the Strand, *little lady*, which I liked very much.

And they had everything. That is what every child who was in Torbay in the spring of 1944 remembers first. They had chocolate, Hershey bars, flat and brown in brown paper, which were not as good as the Canadian's Neilson's but which they gave away by the handful. They had chewing gum, which none of us had ever seen. *Got any gum, chum?* we said to them, all of us, all the time, the way you said good morning, and they laughed and gave it to us. They had oranges. They had tinned peaches and tinned ham and white bread as soft as cake, and cigarettes in packets with camels on them, and nylon stockings, which I did not understand the importance of at the time but which my mother very clearly did.

We had been at war for four and a half years. We had not had enough of anything for most of it. And suddenly there was a whole army in the town that had too much of everything, and gave it away.

My mother did not approve. She did not approve of anything that came too easily. But she let me have the gum.

* * *

They were not here for long, and they were not here for us. Even at eight I understood that. You could feel it, the way you feel weather coming. They were here for something else, somewhere else, and they were waiting.

They camped in the parks and the fields on the edge of the town, in rows of brown tents and long huts with curved tin roofs, and they took over hotels the Air Force had not already taken. They put up signs on the corners in American spelling. They drove enormous lorries with white stars on the doors through streets that had been built for pony traps, and knocked the corners off walls, and nobody minded. They drove things I had never seen: little open cars with no doors that went up and down the steepest hills in Torquay as if they were flat, and great square ones on tracks that tore up the roads.

And they built the hards.

Leonard took David and me to see them, one Saturday in March, down at Torquay harbour, from the end of the Haldon Pier. Along the shore, below the town, the Americans had laid enormous slopes of concrete going down into the sea, like the slipways at his yard but wider and flatter and much rougher, with steel mesh set into them so that lorries and tanks would not slip. There were others

at Brixham, he said, and up the coast, all along the south of Devon, and Dorset, and all the way to the east.

"For the landing craft," Leonard said. "They'll bring them in on the tide, bow first, and drop the ramps on the concrete, and drive straight in. Tanks and lorries and men. Hundreds at a time." He looked at the concrete for a long time. "And then they'll take them over there, and drive them straight out again."

"Over where?" said David.

His father did not answer.

* * *

The landing craft came in April.

I woke up one morning at Widecombe Cot and went to my window at the top of the house and looked out over the roofs at the bay, as I did every morning, and the bay was full of ships.

I do not mean there were a lot of ships. I mean the bay was full. From Hope's Nose round to Berry Head, as far as I could see, the water was covered in grey shapes, big and small, lying at anchor in rows, with smoke going up from them and little boats going between them, and more coming in round the headland while I watched. Some of them were tall, with funnels and masts. Most of them were low and flat and square-ended, like floating boxes, like the tin trays my mother put the dirty cups on. I counted them. I gave up at a hundred and forty.

My mother came up the stairs behind me in her dressing gown and stood at the window beside me and looked at them for a long time.

"It's soon, then," she said. Not to me. To the window.

"What's soon?"

She put her hand on my head and did not answer.

* * *

From the first of April nobody was allowed to come into Torbay. Nobody who did not live here. There was a line drawn on the map, ten miles back from the sea, all along the south coast, and nobody could cross it without a pass, not visitors, not commercial travellers, not anybody's aunt coming for the weekend. The trains were checked at Newton Abbot. The roads had soldiers on them. We had no guests at Widecombe Cot for three months except the officers who were billeted on us, two Americans in Rooms 7 and 8, polite, very young lieutenants from somewhere called Ohio who called my mother *ma'am* and stood up when she came into the room and brought her a tin of peaches every Sunday, which she accepted. And the Canadian, in Room 5. He was still there.

He had changed, that spring. I noticed it, at eight, the way children notice things, without knowing what they mean.

He was more often at home. He had stopped going up to the Wing in the evenings. He sat in the lounge after dinner and did not read, and watched the door, and every time it opened he looked up. He walked in the garden under the monkey puzzle until very late,

and I heard his stick on the path below my window at one and two in the morning, up and down, up and down. He was thinner. He had a cough. His hand shook when he lit his cigarettes, all the time now, not only after Ania had spoken to him.

And he was kinder to me than ever. Too kind. Even I could tell.

He gave me things that spring that were not sweets. He gave me a book of Canadian birds with coloured plates. He gave me a pair of red woollen mittens, too big, that he said his sister had knitted. And on a Saturday in May, at the office door, when he came with his chocolate and asked my mother, *May Wendy have this?*, he had something else in his other hand.

"And may she have this?" he said. "It's not a sweet. But it's for her."

My mother looked at it. It was a compass. A small one, brass, with a lid that snapped shut and a ring on the top for a chain, worn smooth at the edges, with a needle that floated in some clear liquid under the glass and turned round and round and then settled, trembling, pointing north.

"It was mine," he said. "When I was a boy. On the lake. My father gave it me." He did not look at my mother. He looked at me. "So you can always find your way home, Wendy. Wherever you are."

My mother did not say anything for a long time.

"She may have it," she said.

I have it. It is in the drawer of my dressing table, upstairs, with the letter. I put it there twenty years ago, and I had not looked at it

again until this morning, when I went up to get a cardigan for Chris and opened the drawer and saw it lying beside the blue envelope, and stood there with it in my hand. I opened the lid. The needle went round and round and settled, trembling, pointing north, out of the window, across the bay.

* * *

He asked my mother again at the end of May. I did not hear it this time. I was in bed, asleep. My mother told me, last week, in the back room, in two sentences, without being asked, and then went back to her accounts.

"He came to the office the week before they all went," she said. "And he said, *After this, Nancy, it'll be too late. Once they've gone over, it'll all change, and they'll come for her, and I won't be able to stop it. Let me take her now.*" She turned a page of the ledger. "And I said no. And he said, *Then God help you both*, and went upstairs."

I asked her who *they* were. Who would come for me.

My mother looked at me over her reading glasses.

"I asked him the same thing," she said. "He didn't tell me either."

* * *

Ania went away in the first week of June.

That was the strangest thing of all that spring, stranger than the ships or the Americans or the line on the map that nobody could

cross. In nineteen months she had never once gone away. She had walked, all day sometimes, on the moor and the cliffs, and come back in the dark without a coat. But she had always come back, and she had always been at her table in the bay window in the morning with her cup of tea, and she had never once spent a night anywhere but Room 3.

On the Saturday, the third of June, at breakfast, she said to my mother, across the dining room, "I must go away for a little while, Mrs Mallyon. There is something on the other side of the water I must see."

I did not understand that. Nobody could go anywhere. There was a line on the map.

My mother put down the teapot.

"When will you be back?"

"Soon," said Ania. "Not long. A week. Perhaps two." She looked at me, standing by her table with the toast rack. Then she looked back at my mother. "Johnny will be here. I have asked him. He will come every night. He will sit in the back room until it is light."

My mother did not say anything. But I saw her hand go flat on the sideboard, the way it went flat on the green ledger when she did not want anybody to see what was in her face.

"Why now?" she said.

"Because I cannot be in two places," said Ania. "Not yet. And I must be there. It is the one thing that I must see happen with my own eyes, or it will not happen the way it must." She stood up. She

had never stood up from the breakfast table before the end of breakfast. "I am sorry, Nance. I would not go if I did not have to."

She had never called my mother Nance before either. It had always been Mrs Mallyon.

She came round the table to where I was standing with the toast, and she bent down, so that her face was level with mine, which she had never done. She looked at me for a long time with her clear, steady eyes.

"Wendy," she said. "When I am away. If anybody you know, anybody, asks you to go with them somewhere, early in the morning, when it is still dark, and does not want your mother to know. You will not go. You will shout. As loudly as you can. Do you understand me?"

I said yes. I did not understand her at all.

"Promise," said Ania.

I promised.

She straightened up. She went out of the dining room and up the stairs, and came down ten minutes later with her carpet bag, and went out of the front door and down the path past the monkey puzzle and through the gate, and turned left down the hill towards the harbour, not right towards the station. I ran to the front room window to watch her go. She did not look back.

* * *

On the night of the fifth of June, I woke up at about two in the morning, because the whole house was shaking.

Not the way it shook in the raids. Not bangs. A long, deep, steady trembling, that came up through the floor and through the bed and into my bones, and went on and on, and did not stop. And a noise with it, very low, so low that you felt it more than heard it. Like the sea, but not the sea.

I went to my window.

The bay was empty.

I could not believe it. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. In the light of the moon, from Hope's Nose round to Berry Head, where there had been ships, so many I could not count them, there was nothing. Flat dark water, shining. A few small boats near the shore. And far out, at the very edge of the sea, going away to the south-east in long lines, a great shadow on the water, very low, with tiny lights moving in it, getting smaller.

And over the house, so high I could not see them, so many that the sky was nothing but noise, aeroplanes. Going the same way. For hours.

I stood at the window in my nightdress until it began to get light. Then I went downstairs. My mother was in the back room in her dressing gown, sitting at the long table with a cup of tea she had not drunk, and Johnny Hills was sitting at the far end, with his back to the wall, in his uniform, with his helmet on the floor beside his chair and his little black notebook open in front of him.

He looked up when I came in. He did not tell me to go back to bed.

"They've gone, then," I said.

"They've gone," said Johnny Hills.

He wrote something in his book. I asked him what. He turned it round on the table so that I could read it, which he had never done before.

> *Tues. 6 June 1944. 5.40 a.m. Widecombe Cot, back room. Nance, Wendy, self. The bay empty. They went in the night. All of them. Ania not yet back.*

"Write it down, Wendy," he said. "When you're older. That you saw the bay empty. Nobody will believe how many there were."

I have written it down. I have never forgotten it. I am thirty, and I have seen a great many things, and I have never seen anything since like that bay full of ships one night and empty the next.

Ania did not come back that week. Nor the next.

Johnny Hills sat in the back room every night until it was light.

And on the twentieth of June, at a quarter to five in the morning, he was there.

# Chapter 24 – *Dawn at Widecombe Cot*

*Wednesday, 27th October 1965. 4.40 a.m. Front gate. Dark. Wind SW. I went out and stood where the car was.*

I set the alarm for half past four. I did not tell anybody. I got up in the dark and put my coat on over my nightdress, the way I did not have one that morning, and went down the stairs in my stockinged feet, past Room 1, where my father was snoring, and past my mother's door, and through the hall, and let myself out of the front door very quietly and went down the path to the gate.

It was quite dark. There was no moon. The monkey puzzle was a black shape against a sky that was only a little less black. The lamps at the bottom of the hill were lit, but they are a long way down, and they do not reach. The road outside the gate was empty.

I stood at the gate with my hand on the cold iron and looked at the place in the road where the car had been, and I tried to remember.

I have told everybody who asked me, all my life, that I do not remember much about that morning. That is not true. I remember a great deal. I remember it in pieces, very bright, with nothing between them, like the slides my father used to show on the wall of the flat in Hendon with a lantern, one after another, with a click and a dark moment in between. I have never put the pieces in order. I have never wanted to.

I stood at the gate until it began to get light. Then I went in and sat down at the long table in the back room and wrote down the pieces, one after another, the way I remember them. And then, afterwards, I wrote down what I have worked out since. I will keep them apart. The first is what I saw. The second is what I think it means. They are not the same thing, and I will not pretend they are.

* * *

**What I remember**

*One.*

A hand on my shoulder, in the dark. Shaking me, very gently. A voice saying my name, very low, close to my ear. *Wendy. Wendy. Wake up. Don't make a sound.* The smell of tobacco and shaving soap and wool. His voice.

I opened my eyes. The room was dark. He was crouching by my bed, in his greatcoat, with his cap on, and his stick leaning against the bedside table, and his face very close to mine, and I could just see it in the grey from the window. He had his finger to his lips.

*Two.*

What he said. I have it exactly. I have said it to myself so many times that I could not lose it if I tried.

*"Wendy. Listen to me. I'm going to take you to see the lake. And the snow, and the canoe, and Margaret. All of it. It's all arranged. Your mother knows. It's a surprise. But we have to go now, very quickly and very quietly, before anybody's awake,*

*because there's a train. Can you do that for me? Can you be very quiet, and very quick, and very brave?"*

And I said yes.

I want that down. I said yes. I did not think of Ania at all. I did not think of my promise. I thought of the lake that was like the sea, and the snow you could jump into from a barn roof, and the girl with a canoe of her own, and I was eight years old, and he was the kindest man I had ever known, and he said my mother knew.

*Three.*

The stairs. In the dark. Him carrying me, because I had no shoes on and there was no time to find them, with my arms round his neck and my face against the rough wool of his greatcoat, and his stick hooked over his arm, and his bad leg, step by step, very slowly, and his breath very loud in my ear. Past my mother's door. Past the door of Room 1, which was empty then, because my father was in London. Down into the hall.

The hall clock said a quarter to five. I saw it over his shoulder in the grey light from the fanlight. I remember thinking that I had never been up at a quarter to five before.

*Four.*

The front door, and the cold. It was June, but it was cold, the way it is before the sun, and I had nothing on but my nightdress, and the cold came up off the path into my bare feet when he put me down. The monkey puzzle, black. The gate, open. And in the road outside the gate, a car.

A big black car, with its engine running, very quietly, and no lights. Its back door open. And a man sitting at the wheel, in a dark coat and a hat, who did not turn round.

*Five.*

He lifted me into the back of the car. The seat was leather and very cold. He put his greatcoat round me, over my nightdress, and it came down to my feet and smelled of him. He stood in the open door, bent over, tucking it round me, and I looked up at his face, and it was the face I had seen on the edge of his bed with the telephone message in his hand. Stopped. Like a mask.

And the man at the wheel said, without turning round, in a flat careful voice with nothing in it, like the voice of somebody reading out a timetable:

*"Good girl."*

*Six.*

I knew the voice.

I did not know where from. Not for a moment. I sat in the back of the cold car in the Canadian's greatcoat with my bare feet drawn up under me and heard that voice, and I knew it, and something went right through me from the top of my head to my feet, like cold water, and I did not know why.

And then I did. The telephone box in the hall. The stool. The little glass window. *Tell him the shipment has been lost at sea. Proceed as before. Can you remember that? Good girl.*

And then I remembered Ania. Bending down in the dining room, with her face level with mine. *If anybody you know, anybody,*

*asks you to go with them somewhere, early in the morning, when it is still dark, and does not want your mother to know. You will not go. You will shout. As loudly as you can.*

*Seven.*

I shouted.

I have been told since that they heard me at the bottom of the hill. I do not know if that is true. I know that I shouted until there was nothing left in me to shout with. I know that I shouted *Mummy* and I know that I shouted *No* and I know that I shouted a word I had heard the American lieutenants use in the hall and had been told never to say. I know that the man at the wheel turned round, for the first time, and I saw his face in the grey light, and it was nobody, an ordinary face with nothing in it, and he said something to the Canadian, very fast, in a language I did not know.

And I know that the Canadian, standing in the open door of the car, did not put his hand over my mouth. He could have. I have thought about that every day of my life. He was standing right there, bent over me, with his hand on the edge of the door, and I was shouting the house awake, and he did not touch me. He stood there and let me shout. And his face was not a mask any more. It was wet.

*Eight.*

The front door of Widecombe Cot banging open. Feet on the path. Not my mother's. Big feet, heavy, in boots, running. A light. A bull's-eye lantern, swinging. And a voice I knew, very loud, louder than I had ever heard it, a voice that could have stopped a horse:

*"Police. Stand still. Both of you. Stand absolutely still."*

*Nine.*

Johnny Hills. In his shirtsleeves, with his tunic undone and no helmet, with the lantern in one hand and the other hand on the edge of the car door, over the Canadian's hand, holding it there. A big hand. Much bigger than the Canadian's.

I remember his hand. I said so at the beginning of this account. I remembered one of them on the handle of a car door. That is the moment. That is the hand.

*Ten.*

My mother. On the path, behind him, in her nightdress, with her hair down, which I had never seen. Barefoot. Running. Not saying anything at all. Coming straight past Johnny and past the Canadian and into the back of the car and taking me out of it, out of the greatcoat, which fell in the road, and holding me so hard against her that I could not breathe, and standing in the road with me in the grey light, shaking.

*Eleven.*

The car. Going away. Very fast, down the hill, with its back door still swinging open, and no lights, and the man at the wheel bent over it. Nobody inside it. Johnny Hills had stepped back to get between it and my mother, and the man had simply put his foot down. I heard it go round the bend at the bottom of the hill. I heard its door bang shut on the corner.

*Twelve.*

The Canadian, standing in the road. Alone. In his uniform, without his greatcoat, which lay in the road at his feet. Without his

stick, which was still leaning against my bedside table at the top of the house. Swaying a little on his bad leg. Looking at my mother.

And my mother looking at him, over my head.

*"You promised me,"* she said.

*"I promised you I'd keep her safe,"* he said. *"I still mean to."*

*Thirteen.*

Johnny Hills, by the light of his lantern, in the road, reading papers. A long envelope that the Canadian had taken out of his inside pocket and handed to him without being asked. Johnny reading them slowly, one by one, the way he read everything, holding each one up to the lantern. His face not moving at all.

And then folding them, very carefully, and putting them inside his own shirt.

*"These are no good, sir,"* he said. Quite quietly. Quite politely. *"This one's signed by a magistrate I give evidence in front of every Wednesday. That isn't his hand. And this one's a travel permit through the coastal zone with a stamp from an office in Exeter that closed in April. And there's no consent from the child's mother on any of them. I'll have to ask you to go back into the house, sir. And stay in your room. I'll be reporting this to your commanding officer at eight o'clock."*

The Canadian looked at him for a long time.

*"You've no idea what you're doing, Sergeant,"* he said.

I knew that sentence. I had heard it once before, in the dark in the tunnels, in a different voice, going past me between two men,

with its hands tied. I did not know then where I had heard it. I know now.

*"No, sir,"* said Johnny Hills. *"Very likely I don't. But I know what I'm doing it by."* He held out his hand towards the gate. *"In you go, sir."*

*Fourteen.*

The Canadian went in. He did not look at me. He walked up the path past the monkey puzzle very slowly, without his stick, with his hand on the wall, and in at the front door, and I heard him on the stairs, a long time, and then the door of Room 5.

Johnny Hills picked up the greatcoat from the road and folded it over his arm.

*Fifteen.*

The sun. Coming up over the sea at the bottom of the hill, red, huge, all at once, the way it does in June, and the whole bay going pink and then gold, the bay that had been full of ships three weeks before and was empty now. And my mother standing in the road in her nightdress with her hair down and her feet bare, holding me, with the sun on both of us, and Johnny Hills standing beside us in his shirtsleeves with the greatcoat over his arm and his lantern still lit, though there was no need for it any more.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

Then Johnny Hills said, *"Well done, Wendy."*

That is all I remember.

* * *

**What I have worked out since**

I was not taken anywhere. I was in the back of that car for perhaps a minute and a half. When I tell it, it sounds like an hour. It was a minute and a half.

The Canadian was reported to his commanding officer at the Wing at eight o'clock that morning, by Sergeant Hills, in person, in his tunic, with the papers. I have never seen the report. Johnny Hills has never shown me it, and I have never asked. By the evening of the following day the Canadian had been posted away from Torquay. Somewhere in the north. He packed his things in Room 5 on the Wednesday, the twenty-first, and left on the Thursday morning. I will come to that.

There was no prosecution. Nobody was ever charged with anything. The papers in Johnny's shirt went to London, to Douglas, and from Douglas to somewhere I will never know. The car was never found. The man at the wheel was never found. Johnny Hills took its number by the light of his lantern as it went down the hill, and it was a number that belonged to a baker's van in Bristol that had been in a garage with its wheels off since 1941.

I have tried, for twenty-one years, to decide what that morning was.

The simple answer is the one the town has always given, when it has given one at all: that a man who believed himself to be my father, and was refused, tried to steal me away to Canada, and was stopped by a policeman. That is what it looked like. It is what my

mother has always let people believe. I believed it myself until I was twenty.

But it does not explain the man at the wheel. It does not explain the voice on the telephone the morning after the tunnels, telling the Canadian that a shipment had been lost and to *proceed as before*. It does not explain ten pounds a month in the carriage column of a wholesaler's ledger in Wapping against the initials *F/Lt.*, paid by the same people who paid a naval lieutenant fifty pounds a hull to sink boys at forty knots off Cherbourg. It does not explain Ania, in the back room in 1943, saying, *One for the boats. One for the child.*

And it does not explain the thing I have thought about every single day since: that he stood in the open door of that car with his hand on it, and I was shouting the house down, and the man at the wheel was saying something to him very fast in a foreign language, and he did not put his hand over my mouth.

He let me shout.

If he had been taking me for them, for the man at the wheel and the people who paid him and whoever wrote *Account closed* across a page in a bold black hand in July 1943, he would have stopped me. It would have taken one hand. He did not. He stood there with his face wet and let me wake the house.

*I promised you I'd keep her safe,* he said to my mother, in the road. *I still mean to.*

I have thought for twenty-one years that a man can be sent to do a thing by people he cannot refuse, and set out to do it, and in the

last minute, in the open door of a car, with a child in a greatcoat on the back seat, decide not to. I have thought that a man can be working for the people who want you gone and be the one person in the world trying hardest to get you away from them. Both at once. I have thought that the most dangerous man in a house and the most useful can be the same man.

Ania said that once, about somebody else, in 1915. Johnny told me.

I do not know whether any of that is true. I am guessing. I said at the start I would say where I was guessing, and I am. I have nothing to go on but a minute and a half, and a wet face, and a hand that did not move.

And a letter in my dressing table drawer, under my jumpers, beside a brass compass, that I have not opened.

I am nearly at the end now. I will open it when I get there.

# Chapter 25 – *What He Said*

*Thurs. 22 June 1944. Departures: Flight Lieutenant ———, R.A.F. Room 5. Posted. 7.20 a.m. Bill settled in full.*

My mother wrote that line. Not me. I was not allowed at the desk that week. I was not allowed anywhere much. I have the register open in front of me now, at that page, and I have been looking at it for some time before I could begin.

*Bill settled in full.* He paid. Of course he paid. Seventeen months in Room 5, every week, on the nail, and he paid on the last morning too, before he left. My mother would have taken it. She would have counted it and written it in and put it in the cash box and said thank you, the way she did with every guest.

I find that I cannot write about the last two days without that line. So I have put it at the top.

* * *

He did not come out of Room 5 on the Wednesday.

I do not know whether he was told not to or whether he chose not to. Johnny Hills had said, in the road, *stay in your room*, and he stayed in it. My mother took his meals up herself. She would not let the girl do it, and she would not let me near the stairs. She took a tray up at eight in the morning and at one and at seven in the evening, and knocked, and he opened the door, and she gave him the tray and he took it and said thank you, Mrs Mallyon, and she

came down again. I sat on the bottom stair, where David used to sit on Thursdays, and listened to her feet going up and his door opening and her feet coming down. She did not look at me when she passed me. Her face was the face she wore for the women in the bacon queue in Hendon.

Johnny Hills came back on the Wednesday afternoon in his uniform, with his helmet on, and went up the stairs and knocked at Room 5 and went in, and was in there for an hour. I heard their voices through the ceiling of the hall, low, the whole time. Not angry. I listened as hard as I could and I could not make out one word. When he came down, he stood in the hall for a moment with his helmet in his hands, looking at nothing. Then he saw me on the stair.

"He's being posted," he said. "Tomorrow. First thing. North." He paused. "You'll not see him again, Wendy. I'm sorry."

I asked him if he was being sent to prison.

Johnny Hills looked at me for a long time with his farm-gate face.

"No," he said. "He's not being sent to prison."

"Why not? You said the papers were no good."

"They're no good," said Johnny. "And he's not going to prison." He put his helmet on. "There's a lot of things in a war, Wendy, that aren't what they look like. And a policeman's job is to stop what's happening in front of him, by the book, and write it down, and let somebody cleverer than him work out what it means. I stopped it. I've written it down. Doug'll work out what it means."

He looked up the stairs towards Room 5. "Or he won't. And then we'll never know."

He went into the back room and sat down at the end of the table with his back to the wall, and stayed there until it was light the next morning. My mother made him a pot of tea at midnight and another at four.

* * *

His stick was still in my room.

I had not noticed it on the Tuesday, in all the noise and the crying and my mother holding me, and having my feet washed, which were filthy from the road, and being put back to bed in the middle of the morning like a baby, which I hated. I noticed it on the Wednesday night, when I went up. It was leaning against my bedside table, where he had leaned it while he woke me. A plain walking stick, ash, with a rubber end and a crook handle worn smooth and dark where his hand went.

I sat on my bed and looked at it for a long time.

I knew I was not supposed to touch anything of his. I knew I was not supposed to go near Room 5. I knew my mother would be angry. I sat on my bed in my nightdress with the stick across my knees and thought about how slowly he had gone up the path on the Tuesday morning, with his hand on the wall, because he had not got it, and how he would have to go down the path and down the hill and on to a train in the morning without it.

I did not take it to him that night. I was too frightened. I put it under my bed and lay awake.

* * *

The RAF car came at ten past seven on the Thursday.

I was at my window. I had been at my window since five. I saw it come up the hill, a big dark-blue car with a white number on the bonnet, and stop at the gate, where the other car had stopped, and an officer get out of the front, an older man with grey hair and a great deal of braid on his cap, and a young corporal in a white belt and white gaiters get out of the back and stand by the gate.

I took the stick out from under my bed and went down the stairs in my school frock with it under my arm.

My mother was in the hall. So was Johnny Hills, by the back-room door. So was the Canadian, at the foot of the stairs, in his uniform and greatcoat, with his cap under his arm and his leather suitcase in his hand, the one he had come with, seventeen months before, and would not let me carry. He had come down while I was getting dressed. He was standing very straight, and he was holding on to the newel post with his free hand.

They all looked at me, coming down the stairs with his stick.

Nobody said anything. I went down the last of the stairs and across the hall and held it out to him.

He looked at it. Then he looked at me. He let go of the newel post and took it. His hand was shaking.

"Thank you, Wendy," he said.

Then he looked at my mother. I did not see her face. I was looking at him. But I saw his, and I saw him ask her something without saying it, and I saw him get his answer, because he nodded, very slightly, the way he had nodded in the hall on his first day, like a man accepting a correction in a court.

"Two minutes," said my mother. "At the gate. Where I can see you."

* * *

We went down the path together, him and me, very slowly, because of his leg. He did not take my hand. I did not take his. The officer by the car saw us coming and turned his back, and walked a little way down the road, and stood looking at the sea with his hands behind him. The corporal stayed by the gate, looking at nothing.

My mother stood on the front step with her arms folded. Johnny Hills stood beside her.

At the gate the Canadian stopped. He put his suitcase down. And then, very slowly, holding on to the gatepost with one hand and his stick with the other, he went down on one knee on the path, his good knee, so that his face was level with mine. It must have hurt him very much. He did not show it.

He looked at me. He looked at me for a long time without saying anything, the way you look at something you will not see again and want to remember the exact shape of. I looked back. I was eight. I did not know that was what he was doing. I know now. I have done it myself, at railway stations.

Then he said it.

I have it exactly. I have never told anybody. Not my mother, not David, not Johnny Hills. I have carried it about for twenty-one years like a stone in my shoe, and taken it out and looked at it, and not understood it, and put it back. I am going to write it down now, because I think, at last, I do understand it.

"Wendy," he said. "Listen to me. You're Harold Mallyon's daughter. Remember that. Whatever anybody tells you. Whatever anybody says in this town. And whatever I write."

That was all. He did not explain it. He did not say anything else.

*Whatever I write.*

I did not know what he meant. I was eight. He was going away. Nobody had said anything about writing. I thought perhaps he meant he would write to me from wherever he was going, and that I was not to believe him if he said he was coming back. I thought it every way I could think of, for years, at night, in the little room at the top of the house. I never once thought of a blue airmail envelope with red and blue chevrons round the edge, coming twenty-one years later, through a firm of solicitors in Toronto, to my father's shop in Hendon, after he was dead.

He knew. On one knee, at the gate, with his stick in his hand, in June 1944. He knew he would write it. He knew he would not send it while he was alive. And he knew that when it came, I would read it, and it would try to change what I remembered.

And he told me, at the gate, the one thing he wanted me to hold on to when it did.

* * *

He got up. It took him a long time. The corporal came forward to help him and he waved him away. He stood up at the gate with his hand on the gatepost and looked past me, up the path, at my mother on the front step.

She had not moved. Her arms were still folded.

But she called down the path to him. Not loudly. Her voice was perfectly steady, the voice she used for guests who were leaving and had paid their bill.

"Write to her," said my mother. "When she's grown."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"When it's safe," he said. "Not before."

My mother nodded once.

Then he picked up his suitcase, and went out through the gate, and down the road to the car, slowly, with the corporal walking beside him, not helping. The grey-haired officer opened the back door for him and he got in. The officer got in the front. The corporal got in beside the driver. The car turned round in the road, which took a long time, because the road is narrow, and went away down the hill towards the town, not fast, and round the bend at the bottom, where the other car had gone round on the Tuesday with its door swinging.

He did not look back. I do not know whether he did not want to or whether he could not bear to. I have never known which. I stood at the gate and watched the bend in the road for a long time after the car had gone round it.

When I turned round, my mother had gone in, and Johnny Hills was standing on the path behind me, by the monkey puzzle, with his helmet in his hands.

"Come and have your breakfast, Wendy," he said.

* * *

My mother stripped Room 5 herself that morning. All of it. The sheets and the blankets and the pillowcases and the towels, and the curtains, which she had never once taken down in the middle of a week in her life. She opened the window as far as it would go. She scrubbed the floor. She scrubbed the washstand and the skirting boards and the inside of the wardrobe. She did not let the girl help her. I watched from the landing through the open door.

My picture was not on the mantelpiece. I looked for it. The room was quite empty. There was nothing of him left in it at all, not a match, not a hair, as if he had never been there.

Except one thing. At the end, when she had done the floor and was standing up with the bucket, my mother put her hand into the pocket of her apron and took out a small envelope. Not blue. Plain white, square, the kind you put a card in. It had been sealed. It had been opened. I had not seen her open it. I do not know where she found it; under his pillow, or on the mantelpiece where my picture

had been, or pushed under the door of her own room in the night. I do not know what was in it. I saw her take out a single sheet of paper, folded in half, and look at it, standing in the middle of the empty room with the bucket at her feet, for perhaps half a minute.

Then she went down the stairs, past me on the landing, without looking at me, and into the kitchen, and opened the door of the range with the poker, and put the envelope and the paper into the fire, and watched it until it was gone.

Then she closed the range door, and put the bucket in the scullery, and went into the office and shut the door. I heard the adding machine start.

I have never asked her about that either.

* * *

Ania came back the next evening. The Friday. The twenty-third.

She came up the hill at about seven o'clock, from the direction of the harbour, with her carpet bag, the way she had gone. I was at my window and saw her at the gate. I ran down the stairs, two at a time, and was in the hall when she came in at the front door.

She looked different. I could not have said how. She looked as she always did: a young woman in a grey costume with dark hair, neither pretty nor plain. But there was something in her face that had not been there before, a kind of greyness under the skin, like somebody who has not slept for a very long time, though I had never once known her to sleep. Her shoes were white with dried salt

to the ankles, and there was sand in the turn-ups of the sleeves of her jacket.

She stopped in the hall and looked at me. She looked at me for a long time, the way he had at the gate, as if she were checking the exact shape of me against something she remembered.

"You shouted," she said.

It was not a question. I do not know how she knew. Nobody had told her; she had not been in the house a minute.

"Yes," I said.

She nodded slowly.

"Good," said Ania.

She put down her carpet bag. And then she did a thing she had never done in nineteen months, and did not do again until 1965, at the reception desk, with ink on my finger. She put her hand on my head, very lightly, for a moment, the way he had in August 1943 when he gave me the Sweet Marie, as if to make sure I was still there.

My mother had come out of the office. She stood in the doorway with a pencil in her hand, as she had stood on his first day.

"You knew," said my mother. "You knew he'd come while you were away."

"I knew he would come," said Ania. "I did not know whether she would shout." She took her hand off my head. "That was hers. Not mine. Not yours. Not his. Hers." She looked at me. "I could not choose that for her, Nance. I could only tell her what to do and hope."

"And if she hadn't?"

Ania did not answer that. She looked at my mother for a long time, and my mother looked at her, and something went between them that I did not understand, and I understood that I was not meant to.

"Where were you?" said my mother at last. Very quietly. "Across the water. What did you see?"

Ania was quiet for a moment.

"A beach," she said. "A long one, with sand dunes, and a low wall along the top of them. And a great many boys from Torquay harbour, running up it." She looked down at her salt-white shoes. "And one of them who had to come back. I had to see that he did. Nobody else would have known which one."

"Did he?"

"Yes," said Ania. "He is in a hospital in Southampton tonight with a hole in his shoulder. He will be a grandfather."

She picked up her carpet bag and went up the stairs to Room 3. Halfway up, she stopped, and turned round, and looked down at me in the hall.

"Wendy," she said. "Whatever he said to you. At the gate. Keep it."

And she went on up, and I heard the door of Room 3 close.

I have kept it. I have written it down now, for the first time, at the long table in the back room, on the twenty-eighth of October 1965, twenty-one years and four months after he said it.

*You're Harold Mallyon's daughter. Remember that. Whatever anybody tells you. Whatever anybody says in this town. And whatever I write.*

I went upstairs a few minutes ago, before I sat down to write this last part. I opened the drawer of my dressing table and took out the blue envelope, and held it, and looked at his name on the flap in that upright shaky hand, and at the brass compass lying beside it with its needle trembling towards the window and the bay.

Then I put it back.

Not yet. There is a little more first. There is the end of the war, and then there is my father in Room 1 with his wireless, waiting. And then I will open it.

# Chapter 26 – *June*

*Friday, 29th October 1965. Walked Chris down to the harbour after lunch to see the boats. Stood on the Haldon Pier. There is nothing on the wall.*

I took Chris down to the harbour this afternoon because the rain had stopped and he had been indoors for two days pushing his engine along the skirting board, and my mother said if she heard *chuff* once more she would put it on the fire. We went down the hill and along the Strand, past the clock tower, and out along the Haldon Pier to the end, where I stood with Leonard and David in the spring of 1944 and looked at the hards.

They are still there. You would not know what they were if nobody told you. Long slopes of rough grey concrete going down into the water below the town, with rusty steel showing through in places where the sea has worn the surface away, and weed on the lower part, and gulls standing about on them. Some boys were fishing off the end of one. A man was scraping a dinghy on another. Chris wanted to know what they were for.

"For boats," I said. "A long time ago."

"What boats?"

I did not know how to tell him. I stood on the end of the pier with my son's hand in mine and looked at the hards, and the harbour, and the boats bobbing in it, the yachts and the pleasure launches and the crab boats, and I tried to see it the way it was, with the landing craft three deep against the concrete and the lorries and

the tanks going down into them in long lines, and the Americans everywhere, chewing, with their hands in their pockets. I could see it. I could not make it go into words for a boy of three.

There is nothing on the harbour wall to say they went from here. No stone, no plaque, no brass letters. I walked the whole of it, from the pier to the Strand and back, looking. The town has not put anything up. I suppose it thinks everybody remembers.

I think one day somebody will. I think one day there will be letters on that wall, and somebody will stand in front of them on a cold morning and read them, and understand what it meant, that this little town once sent thousands of men across the sea in a single night in boats it had built hards for in a matter of weeks. And I think they will be angry, whoever they are, that it was ever forgotten.

I bought Chris an ice cream from the kiosk, though it was October, and we walked home.

* * *

The bay was empty for the rest of June.

I have said that I woke on the sixth and the ships were gone, and that I have never seen anything since like that bay full one night and empty the next. What I have not said is what it was like afterwards. It was like a house after a funeral, when the people have all gone home, and there are the chairs still out, and the cups on every surface, and nobody quite knows whose job it is to start putting things away.

The camps were empty. The tents were still standing in rows in the fields at the edge of the town, and the long huts with the curved tin roofs, and the cookhouses and the latrines and the notice boards with the American spelling on them. But there was nobody in them. The lorries had gone, and the little open cars, and the square ones on tracks. The roads had holes in them where the tracks had been. The hards were empty, with tyre marks on them, and oil, and rubbish, and a few gulls.

David and I went to look at the camp at the top of the town, on the first Saturday after. We should not have. There was a notice on the gate that said KEEP OUT in English and in American, and a white rope. We ducked under the rope.

It was very quiet. That is what I remember. Rows and rows of brown tents in the sun, with their flaps tied back, and nothing moving, not a person, not a dog, only the canvas stirring a little in the wind off the sea. We walked down between the rows. Inside the tents there were camp beds, folded, and wooden boxes, and in some of them things left behind: a magazine with a girl in a bathing costume on the cover, a single sock, a tin of shoe polish, an empty Hershey wrapper, a photograph of a woman and a baby pinned to the canvas with a safety pin.

David stopped in front of that one for a long time.

"He'll want that," he said.

"He's gone."

"He'll still want it," said David. And he took out his penknife and opened the safety pin very carefully and took the photograph

down and put it in the pocket of his jersey. He did not say what he meant to do with it. Six weeks later he took it to the American Red Cross office in Union Street, which was still there, with two ladies in it, and asked them to find the man in the photograph, and they laughed at him, kindly, and said there were a million American soldiers in France, sonny, and he said, *He was in the third tent from the end in the fourth row at the top camp, and his wife has red hair, you can tell even in the photo,* and they stopped laughing and took it off him and wrote it down.

I do not know if they ever found him. David does not either. I asked him on Sunday. He said he thinks about it sometimes.

In the last tent in the row there was a helmet. A steel one, upside down on a box, as if somebody had taken it off and put it there to have a wash and meant to come back for it. Inside it, in white paint, there was a name and a number. David picked it up and turned it over and looked at it, and then put it back exactly where it had been, upside down on the box, and we went home without saying anything.

* * *

The wounded came back in the second week.

Not to Torquay, mostly. To Southampton and Portsmouth and Plymouth, where the big hospitals were. But some of them came through Torquay, in the ships that had taken the soldiers out, coming back empty to be loaded again. They came in to the harbour at night, and in the morning there were ambulances on the Strand, a

long line of them, khaki with red crosses, and stretchers being carried up from the quay, and nurses, and men walking with their arms in slings and their heads bandaged, smoking, looking at the town as if they had never seen it before, though some of them must have walked through it three weeks earlier, chewing gum.

Johnny Hills was on duty on the Strand those mornings, keeping the road clear. I saw him there once, from the top of the bus, standing in the middle of the road in his uniform with his hand up, stopping the traffic while they carried a stretcher across, and I saw the man on the stretcher reach out as he went past and touch Johnny's sleeve, and Johnny bend down and say something to him, and the man laugh.

I asked Johnny about it on Saturday in the back room, at the end, when the others had gone. I asked him what the man had said.

"He asked me," said Johnny, "if this was England." He shook his head. "I said yes. And he said, *Thank Christ. I wasn't sure they'd send me back to the right one.*"

* * *

Our two lieutenants did not come back.

I have not said much about them, the two young Americans from Ohio who were billeted in Rooms 7 and 8 that spring. They were not important. They were polite and very young and a long way from home, and they called my mother *ma'am* and stood up when she came into the room and brought her a tin of peaches every Sunday, and one of them taught me to play a card game called gin

rummy and let me win, and the other one taught David to throw a baseball in the yard with a tennis ball and broke a pane of the scullery window doing it and paid for it the same afternoon. They went in the first days of June, a few days before the bay emptied, with their kit bags, and shook my mother's hand on the front step, and saluted her, which made her go pink, and went down the hill to the harbour.

One of them was called Lieutenant Clifford Dawes, of Dayton, Ohio. The one who taught me gin rummy.

In the second week of July, a letter came for my mother from a hospital in Southampton. It was in pencil, on lined paper with a printed heading, in a hand that sloped a great deal and was not very steady, because, he said in the first line, he was writing it with his wrong hand. He had been hit in the right shoulder on the beach, the first morning. He was going to be all right. He was going home to Dayton when they let him, and he was going to marry the girl whose photograph he had shown my mother in the lounge, and he wanted to say thank you for the peaches, which was a joke, because he had brought them.

And then, at the bottom, under his name, a line I did not see for twenty-one years, because my mother did not show me the letter until last week, when I asked her if she had kept anything from the war that I did not know about, and she went up to her room and came down with a shoebox.

> *P.S. Please tell Miss Ania thank you. I don't know how she was there. I was in the water and I*

*couldn't get up, the pack was too heavy, and somebody took hold of my collar and pulled me up the sand to the wall. I looked round and it was her. In that grey suit. Then she was gone. The medics said I must have dreamed it. Please tell her anyway. Cliff.*

I read it at the long table in the back room last week with the shoebox open in front of me, and I read it again, and I put it down, and I could not say anything for a long time.

*One of them who had to come back. I had to see that he did. Nobody else would have known which one.*

*He will be a grandfather.*

My mother watched me read it. She did not say anything either. When I looked up, she said, "I gave her the message. In July 1944. In the dining room, at breakfast. I read it out to her."

"What did she say?"

"She said, *Thank you, Nance. Tell him he is welcome.*" My mother took the letter back from me and folded it and put it in the shoebox. "And then she said, *Tell him to call his first grandson Clifford, after himself. It will matter.* I didn't. I never wrote back. I didn't know how to say a thing like that to a stranger in Ohio." She put the lid on the shoebox. "I've wondered since whether I should have."

* * *

The other lieutenant did not write.

His mother did. In August. From Toledo, Ohio. A long letter in a careful round hand on blue paper, to *Mrs Mallyon, Widecombe Cot, Torquay, England*, because her son had written home about the hotel and the lady who ran it and her little girl, and had said in his last letter, which came after the telegram, that if anything happened to him she was to write and thank us for being kind to him, because we had been, and he had been homesick.

He had been killed on the twenty-second of June, near Cherbourg. A fortnight and two days after the beach. He was twenty-one.

My mother read that letter at the kitchen table. I was there. I was drying the breakfast things with the tea towel, the one that David used on Thursdays. I saw her read it, and I saw her put it down, and I saw her sit for a long time with her hands flat on either side of it, not moving, the way she sat at the long table on the night of St Marychurch.

The twenty-second of June. The Thursday. The morning the RAF car came up the hill and the Canadian knelt at the gate with his stick and said what he said to me, and I gave him back the stick, and he went away and did not look back. On the same morning, in France, across the water that Ania had gone across and come back over with salt on her shoes, a boy of twenty-one who had broken our scullery window with a tennis ball was killed, and nobody went across to pull him up the sand.

I did not think of it like that then. I was eight. I think of it like that now. I think I have thought of it like that ever since my mother showed me the shoebox.

She wrote back to his mother. I know, because I posted the letter. It took her three days and a great many sheets of paper; I found the spoiled ones in the range. I do not know what she said. She has never told me, and I have not asked. But I know that a parcel came from Toledo at Christmas 1944, with a tin of peaches in it and a pair of mittens for me, and a card, and that my mother sent a parcel back, every Christmas, until 1958, when a letter came instead from a lawyer in Toledo saying that the lady had passed away.

There is a photograph in the shoebox, of a boy in uniform with his cap on the back of his head, grinning, in front of the monkey puzzle. I do not remember anybody taking it. On the back, in my mother's hand: *Lt. Eddie Kowalski, Room 8, May 1944. Broke the scullery window.*

* * *

The flying bombs began on London in the middle of June.

We heard about them on the wireless. Pilotless aeroplanes, they said, at first, very carefully, and then everybody called them doodlebugs, or buzz bombs, because of the noise they made, a loud rough buzzing like a motorbike in the sky, and then the noise stopped, and you counted, and then they fell. They fell on London day and night all that summer. Hundreds of them. And London had thought, after the Blitz, that the worst was over.

My father was in London.

He telephoned on Sunday evenings. He always had, every Sunday since we came down, at seven o'clock, from the telephone in the flat over the shop, and my mother took it in the box in the hall with the door shut. That summer she took it with the door open. I sat on the bottom stair and listened. He talked about the shop, and the Association, and how many ounces of butter Hendon was getting that week, the same as always. He never said anything about the buzz bombs at all.

In July one fell in Hendon. Not on Brent Street. On a street near it, at night. It blew the windows out of every shop for a quarter of a mile, including ours, and the big plate glass with *MALLYON'S PROVISIONS* on it in gold letters came in all over the counter and the bacon slicer and the order book, and my father was asleep upstairs and was not hurt.

He told us on the Sunday. In the same voice. *Bit of a mess in the shop this week. Had to put boards up. Mrs Ackroyd came round with a broom. Business as usual on Monday.*

My mother put the telephone down at the end, and sat in the box in the hall with the door open for a long time with her hand on it, and then she came out and went into the back room and shut the door, and I heard her, through it, for the only time in my life, crying.

She has never known I heard. I am not going to tell her now. I am going to leave it in this book, where she may read it one day, or may not.

* * *

On my ninth birthday, the second of October 1944, Ania gave me a present.

She had never given me anything before. She did not give people things. I did not think she had anything to give; everything she owned went into one carpet bag. But at breakfast, when I brought her toast, she put a small parcel on the tablecloth beside her cup, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string, and pushed it towards me with one finger.

"Happy birthday, Wendy," she said.

I opened it at the table. It was a notebook. A small black one, with a band of elastic round it, and nothing written in it at all. And a pencil.

I looked at it. I did not understand. I had wanted a doll, or a book with pictures, or chocolate, though I knew there would be no more chocolate now.

"Every day," said Ania. "The date. The time. The weather. What you see. What you are told, and who told you. Not what you feel. You will think you will remember. You will not. Nobody does. It goes." She looked at me with her clear steady eyes. "And then there is only what was written down."

I said thank you. I did not mean it. I put the notebook in the drawer of my dressing table and forgot about it.

I found it on Tuesday, the morning I went up for Chris's cardigan and found the compass. At the back of the drawer, under the blue envelope and the brass compass. A small black notebook,

with a band of elastic round it gone slack and perished, and nothing written in it at all.

I have never used it. I have been writing in a school exercise book from the newsagent's in Union Street for three weeks, because I had forgotten it was there.

I took it out and put it on the long table beside me, where I am writing now. I am going to finish this in the exercise book, because I started in it. But when I have finished, and I have opened the letter, and read it, and done whatever I am going to do about it, I am going to start writing in this one. Every day. The date. The time. The weather.

I am thirty years old. I think I am about twenty-one years late.

# Chapter 27 – *Peace*

> *Saturday, 30th October 1965. No arrivals. Father asked for his tea in the back room for the first time. Sat with me while I wrote. Did not read his paper.*

This is the last chapter before the letter. I want to say that at the start, so that I keep to it. There are twenty years between the end of the war and the morning my father came up the hill with a cardboard case, and I could fill another exercise book with them and not be done. I am not going to. I am going to set down what belongs to this account, the things that finish what was started in the back room, and then I am going to stop, and go upstairs, and open the drawer.

My father is sitting at the other end of the long table while I write this. He asked my mother at lunch whether he might have his tea in the back room this afternoon instead of in Room 1, and she looked at him for a long time and said he might. He has a cup of tea and the *Western Morning News*, and he has not turned a page of it in an hour. Every so often he looks at me. He does not say anything. I think he is waiting, as I am.

* * *

The war ended in the spring.

Not all at once. It ended the way the tide goes out on a flat beach, so slowly that you do not see it going, and then you look up

and the sand is bare for a mile. The raids stopped. The blackout became a dim-out, and then nothing. The cadets went from the Grand and did not come back. The hotels along the front took down their barbed wire and their sandbags, and the old ladies began, very cautiously, to return, with their maids and their trunks, and stood on the Strand looking at the empty hards as if somebody had left the furniture in the wrong place.

On the eighth of May it was over. The wireless said so at three o'clock in the afternoon, in Mr Churchill's voice, and everybody in Torquay came out into the streets.

I was nine. I remember it as a noise. Bells, every church bell in the town at once, which I had never heard in my life. Ships' sirens in the harbour, all of them, hooting and wailing. People singing in the street outside Widecombe Cot, people I did not know, with their arms round each other. Somebody had a trumpet. David came up the hill at six o'clock, running, with his father, with a Union Jack on a stick, and stood at the gate shouting for me, and my mother let me go down to the harbour with them, in the dark, which she had never once done.

The harbour was lit. That is what I remember most. For five years and eight months there had not been a street lamp lit in Torquay, and for most of them not a light showing after dark, not a lamp in a window, not a torch in the street, not a match struck on the front. That night every light in the town was on. The street lamps along the Strand, which had been dark since I was three, and every window of every hotel on the hill, and searchlights from

somewhere, going back and forth across the sky like great white arms, and bonfires on the beaches, and the ships in the harbour lit from end to end with strings of bulbs. The whole bay was shining. I stood on the end of the Haldon Pier with David and his father and looked at it, and I did not understand why the grown-ups round me were crying.

Leonard was crying. I had never seen a man cry before except the Canadian. He stood at the end of the pier with his hand on David's shoulder and looked at the lights on the water, and the tears ran down his face, and he did not wipe them.

"What's the matter, Mr Harvey?" I said.

"Nothing's the matter, Wendy," he said. "That's the matter."

* * *

When we got back up the hill at midnight, the sign at the gate was lit.

My mother had never had a lamp on it. You could not, in the war. But there was a hook on the gatepost, from before, from Miss Prowse's time, and that night my mother had found an old hurricane lamp in the scullery and filled it and lit it and hung it on the hook under the sign, so that the words showed in the dark, cream and green and faded: *WIDECOMBE COT. Private Hotel.*

And Ania was standing beside it.

She was not celebrating. She had not gone down to the harbour. She was standing by the gate in the lamplight, in her grey costume, with her hands at her sides, looking not at the bay and the

lights and the bonfires, but up. At the sky. It was a clear night, and with all the lights there were not many stars to see, but she was looking at them anyway, very steadily, as if she were looking for one in particular.

"Is it over?" I said to her. I do not know why I asked her. My mother had told me it was. The wireless had told me. The whole town was singing it.

Ania looked down at me.

"This one," she said.

* * *

The Bowls Club met for the last time on Thursday the sixteenth of August 1945. The day after the Japanese surrendered. I know the date because my mother wrote it in the kitchen daybook, the last time she ever wrote *Bowls Club* in it until last Saturday: *Bowls Club. Back room, 8 p.m. Sandwiches for nine. The last.*

Nine. I counted them through the door. Old Jack Hills, who was seventy-eight, and had come in a taxi, with his stick and his gold watch, and sat by the fire. Old Edward Harvey, who was seventy-six, and had come on the bus, and talked all evening, the way he always did, and called Ania *my bird*. Johnny Hills. Douglas, down from London on the night train. Leonard. My mother. Ania. Sam Hannaford, the printer, whom I had never seen before, a stout, cheerful, bald man with ink on his cuffs who winked at me when I brought the tea. And David, at the end, on a chair by the door. He was twelve. They had let him in.

They did not send me out. I did not know why, then. I brought the sandwiches and put them on the table, and my mother said, without looking up, "Sit down, Wendy," and I sat down on the stool by the range, where I used to cut the crusts off the bread, and nobody told me to go.

I did not understand most of what was said. I have put some of it together since. I will put down only the parts that finish things.

* * *

Douglas told them about the admiral.

"The Germans hanged him," he said. "In April. At a camp in Bavaria, called Flossenbürg, on the ninth, at dawn. With some others. For plotting against Hitler." He was looking at the table. "We had it from the Americans in June. It's not been in the papers. It will be."

Nobody said anything.

Old Jack Hills, by the fire, took his gold watch out of his waistcoat pocket and looked at it, and put it back. Then he looked across the table at Ania.

Ania had not moved. She was sitting in her chair with her back to the window and her cup in both hands, looking into the fire.

"Yes," she said.

That was all. Just that. *Yes*. As if somebody had told her a train had arrived on time.

Then she put her cup down on the table, very carefully, square to the edge, and got up, and went out of the back room and along

the passage and out of the scullery door into the yard, and we heard the back gate. She did not come back for an hour. When she came back her shoes were wet with dew, and she sat down in her chair again and picked up her cup, which had gone cold, and held it.

I asked Johnny Hills about that, years afterwards. He said she had told his father, in October 1915, in the back room at Bailey's, that the young man on the tram would matter more than any man in that war and the next, and that one day they would hang him. Thirty years. And she had sat in the back room at Widecombe Cot and heard that it had happened, and said *yes*, and gone out into the dark for an hour.

"I never knew," said Johnny, "whether it was because she was sorry, or because she was glad it had happened the way it had to. I asked my father once. He said he thought it was both. He said that was the worst thing about her. She was always both."

* * *

Then Douglas told them about the others.

There was nothing to tell. That was what he told them. The firm in Hamburg was ashes. The house behind it was ashes. Klaus Petrick had not been seen since July 1943, and the British officers who had gone into the ruins of Hamburg in May had found no record of him, alive or dead, in any office that still had records. Tremayne and Rook had been struck off the register of companies in London. Its directors had never existed. Its City office was a brass plate on a door that opened onto a bombed-out stairwell. The

solicitor in Union Street who had acted for George Petherick and for his son had died in 1942, and his firm had been wound up, and its papers burned, as the papers of a dead solicitor generally are.

"And the woman," said Leonard.

"No trace," said Douglas. "None. Not in Germany, not in Lisbon, not anywhere. Mrs Inge Peters of Bayswater has vanished off the face of the earth." He looked at Ania. "As you said she would."

Ania did not say anything.

"And the man who wrote *account closed*," said my mother. "In the ledger. In that hand. Who's that?"

Douglas did not answer. He looked at his grandfather, by the fire.

And old Jack Hills, who had not spoken all evening, put his hand flat on the small black pocketbook on his knee, the way his son puts his hand on the tin box in Preston, and said, in a voice that was very old and very clear, with Harberton still in the bottom of it:

"It's not a man. It never was. It's a chair. And somebody's always sitting in it." He looked round the table, at each of them. "It sat in it in 1895, on top of a tram. It sat in it in 1915, on a quay at Brixham. It sat in it in this war, in Hamburg or Lisbon or God knows. And it'll sit in it in the next one, and the one after that, and the one after that, long after there's none of us left in this room." He looked at David, on his chair by the door. Then he looked at me, on my stool by the range. "So you'd better write it down."

* * *

Ania told them she was leaving at the end of the evening.

Not for a week. For good. She was going away the next morning, she said, by the early train, and she would not be living in Room 3 any more. My mother put down the teapot.

"Where?" said my mother.

"Away," said Ania. "It is finished here. For now. There is nothing more I must see happen in this house for a long time." She turned her cup round in her hands. "I will come back every October. If you will keep the room."

"Room three," said my mother. "Always."

"Always," said Ania.

I cried. I am not ashamed of it. I was nine, and she had been there every morning at her table in the bay window for two years and nine months, and I had brought her toast every morning that she never ate, and she had pulled me down under the monkey puzzle when the planes came and made me promise to shout. I sat on my stool by the range and cried, and nobody told me to stop.

Ania got up from the table and came round it to me. She did not bend down this time. She stood beside the stool and looked down at me.

"October, Wendy," she said. "Every year. You will be at the desk."

I was. I have been at the desk every October since. I have never missed one.

* * *

She went in the morning. By the early train, she said. But she turned left at the gate, down the hill, towards the harbour, the way she had gone in June 1944, not right towards the station. I watched her from my window at the top of the house until she was out of sight round the bend.

Johnny Hills says she was at his father's funeral, in 1947, at the back of the church. And at Edward Harvey's, the year before, at the back of the churchyard, by the wall, while my father stood by the grave and gave old Jack Hills a message from a man called Talland about a coil of rope, and Jack Hills laughed out loud. I was not at either. I was at school. Nobody thought a girl of eleven should go to funerals.

* * *

My father came down for the first time at Christmas 1945.

I had not seen him since Paddington, in November 1942. Three years and a month. He came up the hill in a taxi with two suitcases and a parcel from the shop, and got out at the gate, under the sign, and stood there looking at the house, at the monkey puzzle and the cream walls and the eleven windows, for a long time, before he came up the path. My mother was on the front step with her arms folded, the way she stands. When he got to the top she put up her hand and straightened his tie.

"You're late," she said.

"The train was late."

"Trains are always late. You should have allowed for it."

I have heard them say that to each other every Christmas and every August for twenty years, and once more, at the beginning of this month, on the same step, when he came for good. I did not know until I heard it the first time that it was the same thing they had said in the doorway of the shop in Brent Street, on the first night of their marriage, when he came up from the cellar late for his supper. My mother told me that last week. She did not tell me anything else.

He stayed a fortnight. He did not ask about the war. He did not ask about the Canadian. He did not ask about Room 3, which was empty, with the bed made. He sat in the lounge and read the *Observer* and helped me with my sums, and on the last night, at dinner, he looked down the table at my mother and said, *You've done well, Nancy. I'm proud of you.* And my mother went pink to the roots of her hair and did not say anything at all.

* * *

I will put the rest very quickly, because it is mine, and it does not belong to the back room.

My mother gave me the christening mug on my eleventh birthday, in October 1946, and said it had come from a customer. She painted the sign that spring, all of it, and has painted it every spring since, and never put her own name on it.

David went to the grammar school, and then to the Post Office, as an engineer, on the telephones, and did his National Service in the Signals, and came home, and fixed things. He came to

Widecombe Cot most Thursdays, all through the fifties, for no reason that anybody ever said out loud, and sat in the kitchen and had a cup of tea and mended whatever was broken, and went home. My mother let him. She never once asked him why he came.

I went to the girls' grammar school, and left at sixteen, because I wanted to, and came into the hotel, because I wanted to, and my mother made me a partner when I was twenty-one and said it was only fair because I did the work. I was at the desk every October when the gate went at ten past four.

In 1955 I asked Ania about St Marychurch, in Room 3, on the last day of her stay.

In 1958 the scullery tap began to drip again, and I rang David at the telephone exchange, and he came round that evening and fixed it, and dried his hands on the tea towel, and asked me to marry him. And I told him, at the sink, what I had heard through the door in 1943. And he told me what Ania had said to him on the back step.

We were married at St Marychurch in June 1960, in the church they had rebuilt. My mother sat in the front pew. My father gave me away. Leonard was there, and Johnny Hills, on his own, because Edie had died two years before, and Douglas, down from London, and a great many people from the town. And at the back of the church, by the door, at the end of the last pew, a young woman of about twenty-five in a grey costume, who did not sing the hymns, and who had gone before we came out.

It was June. She only ever comes in October.

Chris was born in March 1962, in the little room at the top of this house, under the slope of the roof, where I slept from the age of seven. My mother delivered him herself, with the midwife standing by, because the midwife was late. When it was over, and he was lying on my chest, and the gulls were going on the roof, my mother sat down on the end of the bed, which I have never once seen her do in any bedroom in this house, guest or family, in my whole life. She looked at him for a long time.

Then she said, not to me, to him: "There you are, then."

As if she had been waiting.

* * *

My father has put down his newspaper. He has not turned a page in an hour and a half, and now he has folded it, very neatly, the way he folds everything, and laid it on the table beside his cup. He is looking at me.

"Is that it?" he says. "Is that all of it?"

"That's all of it," I say. "Up to now."

He nods slowly.

"Then go and get it," says my father.

So I am going to put down my pen, and go upstairs, past Room 1, past my mother's door, up the narrow stairs to the little room at the top of the house where my son was born, and open the drawer of the dressing table, under my winter jumpers, and take out a blue airmail envelope with red and blue chevrons round the edge, and a

brass compass, and a small black notebook with nothing in it, and bring them down here, to the back room, to the long deal table.

And then I am going to open it.

# Chapter 28 – *The Letter*

*Saturday, 30th October 1965. 6.10 p.m. Back room. Father, self. Rain again. The envelope.*

I put the three things on the long deal table in a row, in front of me, under the lamp. The blue envelope. The brass compass. The small black notebook with the perished elastic and nothing in it.

My father did not move from his end of the table. He had folded his newspaper and laid it beside his cup, and he sat with his hands together on his cardigan, over his stomach, the way he sits when a customer is deciding, and he did not say anything at all.

I looked at the envelope for a long time. At the Canadian stamps, and the Toronto postmark, and the red and blue chevrons round the edge, and the solicitors' letter still pinned to the back with its dressmaker's pin. *Miss Wendy Mallyon, c/o Mallyon's Provisions, Brent Street, Hendon.* Miss. He had written it to the girl. Not to the woman. I think he did that on purpose. I think he wanted it to be the girl who opened it.

I took the pin out and put it on the table beside the compass.

Then the back-room door opened, and my mother came in.

She did not say anything. She shut the door behind her and stood with her back against it, with her arms folded, in her apron, the way she stood on the front step on the morning he went, and she looked at the envelope on the table, and then at me.

"Do you want me to go out?" I said.

"No," said my mother. "I want to stand here."

So she stood there. And I opened it.

* * *

There were two things inside.

The first was a sheet of thin card, folded in half, gone soft and grey at the fold, as if it had been folded and unfolded a great many times. I opened it out on the table under the lamp.

It was a lake. A very big blue lake, in coloured pencil, with a wooden house beside it with a long verandah and snow on the roof, and a jetty going out into the water, and on the end of the jetty a girl in a red coat, standing next to a canoe. The blue of the lake had faded. The red of the coat had not. In the bottom corner, in large round letters, not very straight: *FOR ROOM 5 FROM WENDY. HAPPY CHRISTMAS 1943.*

I could not look at it for very long. I put it face down on the table, beside the compass. My father looked at it. My mother did not. She was looking at me.

The second thing was the letter. Four sheets of thin blue airmail paper, written on both sides, in the upright educated hand from the back of the envelope, the hand I had dotted the i's under in the register in February 1943. It was steady at the beginning. It was not steady at the end.

I am going to copy it here. All of it. I have thought about this for a long time, sitting at this table, and I have decided that I must, because I said at the beginning that I would write down everything before I opened it, so that whatever it said could not change what I

remembered. I have done that. Now it is here, and it is part of what happened, and it must be written down too. Johnny Hills's father never crossed out a line in fifty years. I will not leave one out.

* * *

*Toronto,*

*November 1964.*

*Dear Wendy,*

*If you are reading this, I am dead, and you are not a little girl any more, and your mother has kept her promise to me and I have kept mine to her. I told her in 1944 that I would write to you when you were grown, and when it was safe. It has never been safe. It is not safe now. But I am not going to live long enough for it to become safe, the doctors tell me, and so I am writing anyway, and leaving it with people I trust to send when I can no longer be asked any questions about it.*

*I am going to tell you some things that are true. I am not going to tell you everything. Some of it is not mine to tell, and some of it would put you in danger, and some of it I do not know.*

*I was sent to Torquay. You will have guessed that by now, I expect. You were always clever. I did not choose Widecombe Cot from a list at the Billeting Office. I was told to go there. I was told by people I had worked for since before you were born, in London, in 1934, when I was young and stupid and short of money and flattered to be asked. I will not*

*tell you their name. You may know it already. If you do, do not say it aloud in that town.*

*They told me to bring you away. They told me how, and when, and they gave me money for it, every month, and papers, and in the end a car. They did not tell me why. They did not need to. I knew what they did with things they wanted out of the way. I had seen it. I will not write down what I had seen.*

*So I tried to take you myself.*

*Do you understand me, Wendy? I tried so hard, for eighteen months, to take you to Canada, to my sister's house on the lake, because if I did not take you, someone else would. They had made that very clear. And whoever else they sent would not have taken you to Canada. I thought if I could only get you onto that ship, if your mother would only sign, you would be on a lake in Ontario with a canoe and a dog and four thousand miles of sea between you and them, and they would think I had done what I was told, and they would leave you alone. I begged your mother. She would not. She was right not to trust me. She had no way of knowing which side of me was asking.*

*That last morning, in June, I had been told it must be that day or not at all. The man in the car was theirs. I did not choose him. I had a berth for you on a ship from Liverpool on the Friday, and papers that would have got you onto it, and a letter for my sister. I had never in my life been so frightened. And then you shouted.*

*I want you to know that I am glad you shouted. I have been glad every day for twenty years. The man in the car said to me, in German, put your hand over her mouth, and I could not do it. I stood in that door and I thought, she has been told to shout, by somebody who knew this would happen, and if I stop her now I am one of them all the way through, and there is no other side of me left. So I let you. I would let you again.*

*Your sergeant did the right thing. Tell him so, if he is still alive. Tell him I said that he did not know what he was doing, and that he was right anyway. He will understand. He knew what he was doing it by.*

*I hope the house has been a good home to you. I hope your mother has never had cause to regret it.*

*I know that you are married. I know that you have a son. I have not been told this by anybody you would want me to have been told it by. The people I worked for have never stopped knowing where you are. That is why I have never written. That is why I am writing now, when it cannot matter to me any more what they do.*

*The woman from the boat is not dead. You will not remember her. She told me you had seen her once, in the shelter, when you were seven. She came to see me in Toronto last year, at my sister's house on the lake. She sat on the verandah and drank a cup of coffee and asked me about you, and about your boy, and what I knew. I told her nothing. I think*

*she knew it all already. She was very polite. She had not changed at all.*

*So I am going to ask you to do one thing, Wendy, and then I will stop.*

*Keep the boy away from the station square.*

*I do not know which station. I do not know which square. I do not know when. I only know that when she was leaving, on the steps of my sister's verandah, she turned round and said to me, as if it were a pleasantry, as if she were telling me the weather: "It will all come back to the station square. It always does, in that bay." And she smiled. And I have not slept properly since.*

*You will think that I am a sick old man who has had a bad dream. Perhaps I am. But I have watched the people she works for, for thirty years, and they have never once said anything as a pleasantry.*

*I am sending back your picture. I have had it with me for twenty-one years. It has been to a great many places. I should like it to go home.*

*There is one more thing. I have thought about whether to write it for a long time, and I am going to write it, and then you are going to do with it whatever you choose.*

*I would have been very proud to be what your mother never let me be.*

*That is all. That is all I am going to say about it, and all you are going to get from me. I told you at the gate what I wanted you to remember. I meant it*

*then and I mean it now, with my hand shaking so that I can hardly hold the pen. Remember what I told you. Whatever I have written here.*

*Thank you for the sweets. I mean for letting me give them to you. It was the best part of every week of the war.*

*God bless you, Wendy. And your boy.*

And then his name. The whole of it. In the same upright hand, gone very small and shaky at the end, as if he had had to stop and rest between the letters.

* * *

I sat for a long time with the four sheets of blue paper in my hands.

It was quite dark outside now. The rain was running down the window onto the yard. In the kitchen the range ticked as it cooled. Upstairs, through the ceiling, very faint, I could hear Chris turning over in his cot, in the little room at the top of the house, and settling again.

*I would have been very proud to be what your mother never let me be.*

I knew what it meant. I knew all the things it could mean. It could mean my father. It could mean my guardian. It could mean the man who took me to Canada and taught me to paddle a canoe on a lake, the man I would have grown up with instead of the one at the other end of this table with his hands folded on his cardigan. It could mean all of those at once. He had written it, I think, so that it

could mean any of them, and so that I would never know which, and so that I would have to choose.

*Remember what I told you. Whatever I have written here.*

At the gate. On one knee, with his stick, in June 1944. *You're Harold Mallyon's daughter. Remember that. Whatever anybody tells you. Whatever anybody says in this town. And whatever I write.*

He had known. Twenty-one years before he wrote it, he had known exactly what he was going to write, and he had knelt at the gate and told me what to do with it when it came.

I put the four sheets of blue paper down on the table, very carefully, square to the edge, the way my mother puts down her reading glasses.

Then I looked up.

My mother was still standing with her back against the door, with her arms folded. She had not moved in the whole time I had been reading. She did not ask me what it said. She would never ask me. She had made me promise in this room, three weeks ago, that I would never ask her, and she was keeping her side of it by not asking me.

*Your mother has kept her promise to me.*

I thought of a small white envelope, square, the kind you put a card in, and a single sheet of paper looked at for half a minute in the middle of an empty room, and the door of the range opening. I had never known what was in it. I think I know now. Not a love letter. Not an apology. A promise asked for, and given. That she would never tell me what he might have been to me. Not me, not my

father, not anybody. And she had burned the only piece of paper that held it, so that nobody could ever read it, and she had not said one word about it in twenty-one years.

Two promises, in this house, and both of them silence. Hers to him, and mine to her. I had not known until that moment that they were the same promise, kept from opposite ends.

My father was looking at me from the other end of the table. His mild, plain, careful face, with his glasses on the end of his nose. A column of figures that did not add up, and a man too polite to say so. He had sat at that end of the table for an hour and a half without turning a page of his newspaper, waiting. He was still waiting.

So I chose.

"He says," I said, to my father, "that I'm to remember I'm Harold Mallyon's daughter. Whatever anybody tells me."

I did not say anything else. I did not need to. It was true. It was in the letter, every word of it, at the bottom of the last page, in his shaking hand. I had only left out the line before.

My father did not say anything for a long time.

Then he took his glasses off, and put them on the table beside his folded newspaper, and put his hand over his eyes, and sat like that. His shoulders moved. He did not make a sound. In thirty years I had never once seen my father cry. He did not wipe his face. He sat at the end of the long table in the back room of his wife's hotel with his hand over his eyes, and wept, quite silently, and I sat at the other end and let him, because there was nothing in the world I could have said that would have been better than letting him.

And my mother came away from the door.

She came round the end of the table, behind his chair, and stood there. She did not put her arms round him. She is not that kind of woman. She put one hand on his shoulder. Just that. Her small straight hand, on his old cardigan. And she left it there.

She looked at me across the top of his head. And I saw in my mother's grey eyes, for the first and only time in my life, that she was grateful to me, and that she would never say so, and that she knew I knew.

Then she said, quite ordinarily, "I'll put the kettle on," and took her hand off his shoulder and went out to the kitchen, and I heard the tap run.

* * *

When she had gone, my father took his hand away from his eyes, and put his glasses back on, and cleared his throat, the way he does before he gives a customer their change.

"There's something in the case for you," he said. "I was keeping it until you'd opened that."

He went down the passage to Room 1 and came back with the cardboard case, and put it on the long table, and took out the two things that had been under the ledgers since Paddington. The Bible I had not recognised, and the bundle of letters tied with string.

The Bible was small and black and very worn, with a brass clasp and *MALLYON* stamped on the spine in gold that had nearly gone. My grandmother's, he said. I had never seen it; it had lived in

a drawer in the flat over the shop all my life. He opened it at the front, at the page they used to print in family Bibles for the births and the deaths, and turned it round on the table to face me.

His parents were there, in an old brown hand. And his own birth, in 1893, in the same hand. And under that, in his, in black ink, the small square careful writing I had seen on ten thousand price tickets and order books:

> *Wendy Mallyon. Born 2nd October 1935, at Hendon, 4.10 a.m.*
>
> *Father: Harold Mallyon. Mother: Nancy Mallyon.*

The ink was the same all the way down. He had written all of it at once.

"I wrote that the morning you were born," said my father. "After the order book. When the midwife had gone, I got this out of the drawer and sat at the kitchen table and wrote you in, before I opened the shop. Before anybody had said anything to me, or not said it." He looked at the page, not at me. "I'd thought about it for some months. And I decided. And I wrote it down, so that it was done." He closed the Bible, gently, and put it in front of me. "You've just done the same thing. I wanted you to know that you weren't the first."

I could not say anything. I put my hand on the Bible and left it there.

He untied the string on the bundle of letters. They were all in the same hand, in the same cheap blue envelopes, all addressed to

*Mr H. Mallyon, Mallyon's Provisions, Brent Street, Hendon*, and all with a Torquay postmark, and there were a great many of them.

"Your mother's," he said. "One every week, from November 1942. These are the war ones. The rest are in the tea chest." He did not offer them to me. "They're hers to me, Wendy, and I'll not show you them. But there's one I'd like you to see." He went through them, slowly, without needing to look at the dates, and took one out, and opened it, and laid it on the table in front of me.

It was a single sheet. It was dated Wednesday, 21st June 1944.

> *Harold. He came for her yesterday before it was light. She shouted. Johnny was here. She is asleep now, and her feet are clean, and he goes in the morning. I am all right. Do not come. N.*

"That's the only time in twenty-three years," said my father, "that she ever wrote *I am all right.*" He folded it up again and put it back in its place in the bundle, and tied the string. "That's how I knew she wasn't."

* * *

I have put the letter in the drawer of my dressing table, under my winter jumpers, with my picture of the lake, and the brass compass, and the solicitors' letter with its pin. It will stay there. I am not going to burn it. Johnny Hills's father never burned a page in his life, and I will not start.

But I will not read it again.

* * *

There is one more thing to write, and then I will close this exercise book and open the other one.

*Keep the boy away from the station square.*

I have been thinking about it all evening, since my father went back to Room 1 and my mother went up to bed, and the house went quiet. I have been sitting at the long table with the lamp on and the rain on the window, thinking about station squares.

Torquay has one, a small one, outside the station where I met my father three weeks ago with Chris holding my hand, looking at a Western. Newton Abbot has one, where they change for Exeter. And Paignton has one. A big untidy square in front of the station, with the bus stops and the taxi rank and the level crossing gates, where the whole town stops and waits every time a train goes through. And on the far side of it an old railway hotel, Victorian, with a public bar and a back room, called Bailey's.

Johnny Hills told me, nearly three weeks ago, in Preston, that it began there. In the window of the public bar at Bailey's Hotel, in October 1895, where a young tram conductor called Edward Harvey looked up from his pint and saw a stranger come off the train. And that in 1915 his father took him to the back room there, for his first meeting. And that a young woman in a grey costume, who has not changed, was sitting at the end of the table with her tea.

*It will all come back to the station square. It always does, in that bay.*

I do not know what it means. I am not going to pretend that I do. I am a hotelier's daughter, and I write down what I see and what I am told, and I have been told this, by a dead man, in a letter, who had it from a woman on a verandah who smiled when she said it. That is all I know.

But I know this as well. Chris is three and a half. He loves trains. He stood on the platform at Torquay three weeks ago and said *oh*, very quietly, when the Western came round the curve, and did not say anything else until it had stopped. One day he will want to go and stand at the level crossing in Paignton and watch the trains go through, the way all the little boys do. One day he will be grown, and go where he likes, and I will not be able to stop him.

So I am not going to keep him away from it. I have decided that tonight. I am not going to frighten him with it, and I am not going to make him live his life walking round the edge of a square in Paignton because a dying man in Toronto had a bad dream. I am not going to let it choose for him. Ania told me, last Sunday, in Room 3, that that was the best thing she had ever seen two people do. I think she was telling me something.

But I am going to write it down. Here, in this book, and in the other one. And I am going to put this book with the letter, when it is finished, and the cigar box, and the compass. And one day, when he is grown, and he has his own son, I am going to give him all of it, and tell him to keep it, and to give it to his son. And to write everything down.

Johnny Hills told me that is all it has ever been. A few people who won't forget.

* * *

It is a quarter to one. The rain has stopped. I have just been out to the hall to check the front door is bolted, which I do every night, and on the way back I stopped at the reception desk and opened the register, as I always do, to look at the week's bookings.

We have nothing next week. The season is long over.

I turned the pages forward, the way you do, to the new book for next year, which my mother keeps in the drawer under the desk and does not bring out until the first of January. I do not know why I took it out. I had no reason to. It is a new book, with stiff covers and nothing written in it.

There was one line written in it.

Not in my hand, or my mother's. Small, very neat, perfectly regular, the letters all the same height, like print. On the page for the middle of October, 1966.

> *Friday, 14th October. Miss Ania. Room 3. No address.*

I put the book back in the drawer and closed it.

Then I came back in here, to the back room, and sat down at the long table, and picked up the small black notebook with the perished elastic, and took the elastic off, and opened it at the first

page. And I took the pen my father gave me for my eleventh birthday, and I wrote:

> *Sunday, 31st October 1965. 12.50 a.m. Widecombe Cot. Fine after rain. Wind SW, dropping. Chris asleep upstairs. Opened the letter. Have written it all down.*

And now I am going to go up to bed.