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THE OBSCURA
A Novel
by Alan H. Gael

About 80,000 words

*"Our Life is like a curious Play
Where each doth strive to hide himself.
One Mask doth to another say
'Let us be open as the Day'
The better to conceal himself."*

—Oliver Onions, 1920

CHAPTER ONE

The Breakfast

The house had a secret that only Philip knew.

He had discovered it three years before, on the kind of London Sunday afternoon that feels less like gloom than a long-held breath-wet streets, little traffic, the city muted under a rain cloud. He had gone down to the cellar a little before three because a hard drive in the server array had begun to stutter and the alerts had started arriving on his phone with the polite urgency of something that did not yet need a person but would, soon enough. He was about to push the light switch at the top of the stairs when he realised that the cellar below was not completely dark.

The floor was glowing.

Not phosphorescence. Not the bluish afterimage of a screen. An image-pale, soft, granular, occupying the centre of the concrete in a roughly circular pool perhaps eight feet or ten feet across, and inside the pool, branches. The branches of a tree. A tree. Much like the sycamore that grew in the garden against the south face of the house and reached its uppermost crown over the roof of his studio. He could see the branches moving. Slowly, in a wind he could not feel down here, the projection on the floor swayed in a sort of underwater dance, and through and around the branches he could see sky-the diffuse charcoal-grey of London clouds at three in the afternoon, legibly

there, a piece of weather laid out for him on his cellar floor like a photograph someone had developed and abandoned.

He stood without moving for a while, then he looked up—there was a tiny pinpoint of light in the middle of the cellar ceiling, and a cone of light coming from it. Then he understood that he was looking at an inverted image of the sky above the storage room ceiling. An inversion caused by an aperture. A pinhole. Somewhere in the floor of the storage room, a small enough opening had been left, accidentally or otherwise, to act as the lens of a camera obscura, and the cellar was its dark chamber, and the floor was its plate.

The sycamore on his floor moved its bare winter branches once more, a pigeon crossed the picture from left to right, and then he turned the light on.

He went up to the small storage room that opened off the studio's eastern wall—fifteen feet square, racked floor to ceiling on three sides with vertical slots holding older canvases, a clear floor in the centre because you stack paintings on edge, you never lay them flat. The room had a skylight. A roof lantern, in fact, original to the conversion the previous owner had done in the early 2000s—a single clear pane some ten feet by ten feet, set into the ridge in continuous run with the great glazed roof of the studio next door. The whole back of the house, seen from the sky, presented one unbroken sweep of glass. He had not really thought about the storage room skylight in years; it was taken for granted.

He turned on the storage room light and stood in the doorway and looked at the floor.

It took him several minutes to find the hole.

It was very small—perhaps a quarter-inch across, an old, clean circular bore through the floorboards in the precise centre of the room—and someone had plugged it with a wooden dowel set flush with the surface and stained to match. He thought he remembered, vaguely, hearing about the hole when he had bought the place. The previous owner—a software man—had run network cabling through the floor between the storage room and the cellar, planning some kind of office build-out he had never finished, and the contractor had drilled the small bore for the cable and then never used it because the design had changed. The dowel was the contractor's tidy gesture before he closed up and left. The dowel had at some point worked loose and dropped through.

For several years, then, the dowel had sat in the floorboard, concealed as it was supposed to be. At some unwitnessed moment in the recent months—temperature, humidity, the small ordinary movements of an old wooden floor—it had loosened, and dropped, and produced an aperture.

He stood looking at the hole for a moment.

Then he switched the light off. The room fell back to the glow that came through the skylight overhead, light that alternated between soft and bright as clouds passed overhead and the floor was again the muted grey it had been when he came in, and he could not see the hole at all. It was too small. Even when

he knew where to look. He looked up at the skylight and the sycamore branches and the clouds above it, the same as what he had seen in the cellar, only not inverted, and brighter, somewhat sharper.

He went back downstairs for another look at the image on the floor, to be sure he was seeing what he was seeing, and yes, it was there—the image of the sky above the storage room. He was simply enthralled with it; he found it to be something almost ethereal.

He had thought about telling Mollie. He had thought about it that same evening, at the kitchen table, when she had asked him if he was all right and he had said he was tired, and she had said tired or troubled, and he had nearly told her then—the dark, the floor, the inverted image of the sky. Something stopped him. Not a thought, not a calculation. A hesitation he did not pursue. The thing was beautiful and it was his, the way certain paintings belonged to him before they were finished, before the world had any claim on them. He let the moment go and never quite recovered it.

He went down many times thereafter. In summer, when the projection on the floor was at its brightest and had the green over-tone of the sycamore in full leaf. In autumn, when the mottled blue-grey of the sky began taking over, ready to phase into winter. At dawn, on the days when he had been unable to sleep. He stood, each time, until the cold of the concrete came up through his soul; he had then turned the light on and not painted what he had seen, because what he had seen was not a

thing he could reach with paint. It was a thing he could only stand under.

He had not told her since.

On the morning everything changed, Philip came downstairs before the others were awake.

It was a similar cold February day of the sort London did particularly well in winter, much like the day he discovered the obscura—bright at the edges, grey through the middle, the air tasting faintly of wet leaves and traffic. He stood in the kitchen with Mollie while she arranged grapefruit halves on a slate board and the boys, somewhere beyond the wall, performed their morning ritual of pursuing each other at high velocity through rooms not designed for it. Tom was four. Jimmy was six. They moved through the house as a single weather system.

Mollie said, without looking up, "If you're going down for it, go now."

"For what."

"Don't be obtuse."

He smiled. He had been thinking about the bottle of orange curaçao that lived in the small wine refrigerator he kept in the cellar server room—Norwegian, dark glass, the orange label slightly faded—and Mollie had known he was thinking about it because she had known him for fifteen years. The bottles had come into his possession during the period he and Cecil Hubbard had agreed not to discuss in full: a decommissioned vessel, a Norwegian flag flown for reasons not strictly Norwegian, a few cases of liqueur recovered with what Hubbard would later describe

as characteristic informality and Philip preferred to think of as salvage. There had been a story to it. There had been several stories to it. He had brought the cases home and put them in the cellar refrigerator and had been working through them slowly in the years since, with the proper reverence—a glass at Christmas, a glass when a painting sold, a glass after the boys had been put to bed and a difficult day required marking. He was down to the last few bottles now.

“I’ll get it before they come,” he said.

“Oh, you better get it after. They’ll want you to greet them like a proper host when they arrive. But get the boys’ coats first; the back garden’s wet.”

He got the coats first.

By the time he had wrestled the boys into their coats and let them out into the sodden brightness of the garden, the doorbell was ringing. Going down would have to wait.

Jessica Merrow arrived first, twenty years old and carrying three white bakery boxes and a ring light; she set the bakery boxes on the breakfast table and the ring light on a side table, before she had her coat off. She kissed Mollie on both cheeks, kissed Philip on one, and was already filming.

“Morning, you,” she said into her phone, walking the camera around the breakfast room, “morning, you, morning, you. We are at the criminally aesthetic Esdaile residence in Chelsea on the morning of his Royal Academy farewell breakfast—yes, I said Royal Academy—and I am genuinely going to miss this house for three entire months, which is a thing I never thought I would say about

a building." She turned the phone towards the chandelier. "Look at this. Look. Look."

Jessica had been Philip's informal studio assistant for eighteen months, eighteen months also being—by no coincidence Philip had ever pressed her on—the period during which she had known the test pilot Charles Valentine 'Chummy' Smith, whom she had met at one of Philip's openings and with whom she had been in a relationship for the past six. She had learned lighting and composition and the discipline of attention that good art required, and she had carried these skills into her social media presence in a way that Philip found impressive and slightly alarming. She moved through the world composing it: framing each moment before she lived it, posting it while she was still inside it. She had a hundred and eighty thousand followers and the lightly haunted look of a young person who could no longer remember whether the things she did were things she wanted to do or things she had always known she would later film herself doing.

She finished the story. She posted it. She glanced at the immediate response, and then something in the notifications made her face change. Just briefly. A flicker at the corner of her expression that was not surprise but looked like it was trying to be surprise. She pocketed her phone quickly.

"Nothing," she said, before Philip could ask.

He had not asked.

He noted this, and said nothing, and watched her arrange the pastries with a hostess's eye she was several years too young to have come by honestly.

Will Mackwith arrived next, immaculate in his morning coat, a man who had been born to represent other people's interests and who did so with the elegance of someone who had never been in genuine doubt about his purpose. He came through the wrought-iron gate with two delivery workers carrying crated paintings—five recovered works that had wandered the world for a decade and which he had spent eighteen months tracking down and buying back on Philip's behalf—and while the delivery workers carried the crates through the annexe and into the studio beyond, Will produced from his inside pocket a slim folder of paperwork and laid it on the breakfast table next to the grapefruit.

Philip stared at the figure on the top page of the folder. He had not, in 2015, had grocery money. He had had something less than grocery money. He had sold the series—five paintings, eighteen months of his life—to a dealer in Pimlico for a flat eight hundred pounds, which had paid the rent on the studio and bought formula for Tom, and he had, at the time, regarded the transaction as a small private capitulation he would not have to think about again.

"Forty-seven thousand?"

"Forty-seven thousand pounds, yes."

Will permitted himself a small smile, sat down opposite him, and accepted from Mollie a cup of coffee that she produced knowing he was going to want it before he asked for it. "You sold

them ten years ago," he said. "I told you ten years ago, don't sell those landscapes. Sell anything else—but don't sell the landscapes."

Commander Cecil Hubbard arrived in full naval uniform, apologising for the penguin suit—he was coming straight from a Whitehall briefing and had not had time to change. He was forty-two and built like someone you would assess in conditions that required reliability. He had known Philip since the period neither of them discussed, the brief intersection of Philip's life with something that had required, temporarily, the skills of a person who could observe without being observed. They were friends with the ease of people who knew the worst about each other and had decided it disqualified neither of them.

Philip greeted him at the door, along with Will.

"You look officious," Philip said with a grin, embracing him.

"I am aware. I am formally aware. The aiguillettes are at me already. Ah—Mackwith, wonders. Has the market discovered our painter?"

"The market has rediscovered him," Will said.

"Even better. Discovery's a one-time event. Rediscovery's an annuity."

Hubbard came into the breakfast room and said hello to Mollie and kissed her on the temple in the manner of a man who had once held one of her sons in one hand while she went to throw up in a bathroom in Devon and had thereby acquired permanent privileges he intended never to abuse. He took the coffee she

handed him, looked at it as though he had not seen coffee in some time, and drank half of it in one swallow. "Hello, Jessica."

"Long briefing?" Philip said.

"Tedious briefing. The interesting briefings are short. The tedious ones are long because nothing has happened and we have to fill the time confirming that nothing has happened. Generally, the only thing we decide is when to have our next meeting." He set the cup down. "How are the boys."

"In the garden. Wet."

"Good. Right kind of wet?"

"Reasonably wet."

"Carry on."

Morgan Rooke and Audrey Cunningham came together. Morgan had his Leica camera bag hanging on his shoulder, and his nervous energy—the kind of person who occupied himself fully in every room and managed simultaneously to seem as though he might bolt at any moment. Morgan was a photographer with broad interests; for the past two years he had been working with Philip on the slow project of cataloguing and digitising the older paintings, and had, the previous summer, when the studio roof had been reglazed, also documented the work for Philip's records. Audrey came in his wake, wearing her engagement ring—small emeralds in a white-gold setting—and a smile that Philip read as one that was working too hard. He noted this and said nothing about it. He noted most things. It was the painter in him.

"Mollie." Audrey kissed her. Looking around the room, she said, "This is beautiful."

Mollie, who had been complimented on rooms by women of Audrey's particular kind for most of her adult life, smiled the small thank-you smile she kept for these occasions. "I'm glad you like it. It's our last get-together for a while."

Audrey did not reply. The smile she had been wearing did the work it had been doing.

Morgan had already drifted. He was that sort of guest. He had set the camera bag down by the door and was photographing, in the half-distracted way he photographed everything, the festoon of the chandelier overhead, the carafes on the table, the irradiation of the buff-washed walls. He took a shot of Jessica adjusting the ring light. He took a shot of Hubbard's aiguillettes against the studio doorway. He took a shot of Audrey's hand on the back of a chair, the white-gold ring just catching the light, and he took the frame without her noticing because he had learned, over the years of their relationship, how to photograph her without her noticing, and Philip wondered whether that skill was an unmixed blessing.

Morgan wandered through into the studio and looked at the new paintings. He came back. He photographed the breakfast table. He wandered the other way—past the studio door—and stopped at the door of the small storage room that opened off the eastern wall, and laid one hand on the doorknob and the other on the side of his Leica in the manner of a man who has spotted something he wants to see, alone.

"Not in there," Philip said, perhaps too quickly. "Storage. Dust. You'll ruin the suit."

Morgan turned, grinned. "Ah. The forbidden room. Bluebeard, is it, Esdaile?"

"Pile of crated work I haven't catalogued. If I let you in, I'll spend the morning making an inventory."

"Right."

Morgan came back to the table.

Audrey had been watching the small exchange from where she sat. She looked away when Philip glanced at her—too late—and rearranged the napkin in her lap, which had not needed rearranging. Philip filed this away with the smile and the white-gold ring and the way she had not replied to Mollie. He filed away a great number of things. Nothing came of most of them. The painter in him filed; the man in him got on with his morning.

Adam Wright arrived last, as journalists usually did—at the last possible moment that was still technically on time, with the rumpled suit and attentiveness of a man perpetually taking notes on a world that refused to hold still. He was forty-five and had been covering Philip's rise for three years and was here today as a friend, not a journalist, though Philip had observed that Adam made no reliable distinction between these states.

"I'm late," Adam said.

"You're on time."

"I'm late for me."

He kissed Mollie, embraced Philip, accepted coffee, and made a slow circuit of the room photographing nothing because he had no camera, only that journalist's habit of looking at a room as though one would later have to describe it to someone who had not

been there. He stopped briefly at the door of the storage room, found it closed, and moved on. He caught Philip's eye across the table and lifted his cup in a small private salute. To you, the gesture said. The Royal Academy. The man in the morning coat. The whole improbable business.

For a moment Philip stood in the doorway between the annexe and the studio and looked at his guests.

He looked at them with the painter's habit he could not turn off—the habit of seeing the room as a composition before he saw it as a room. Jessica was the brightest figure at the table: white blouse, the ring light's soft halo still slightly active around her like the residue of a flashbulb. Audrey was a careful counterweight at the other end of the table—black turban hat, white-gold ring, the smile composed in the manner of someone who had spent the journey deciding how to hold her face. Hubbard was the centre of gravity: the dark blue of the uniform, the aiguillettes, an upright figure in a room of softer ones. Will and Adam and Morgan arranged themselves around these three, complementing them in tones Philip could have named if asked. The painting, if he had painted it, would have been called *The Last Breakfast*. He was, even at the time, faintly aware that this was a dangerous title, and faintly amused at himself for thinking it.

In the small annexe where the breakfast was laid, the buff-washed walls held a soft irradiation of light. The little shimmers off the carafes, the spring flowers in the bowls, the showery festoon of the chandelier overhead—all of it had the quality of a face seen under a parasol. Mollie's arrangement.

Mollie's gift, as Philip had often said: she could make a beautiful room look like it had been waiting just for you.

Mollie came in from the kitchen with a fresh pot of coffee and settled it onto the warming plate, and made the kind of small hostess gesture Philip had watched her make at exhibitions and dinners and at the openings of other people's openings for fifteen years—a gesture so small that it did not register at the moment but that produced, in the people in the room, the cumulative effect of being looked after.

Through the open French windows at the far end of the annexe, the boys could be heard in the garden. Tom, the younger one, was telling Jimmy something with great seriousness about a worm.

Next to the garden the great glazed sweep of the studio roof rose into the cold morning sky, the sycamore reaching up over its eastern corner in branches that had not yet thought about leafing. The skylight of the storage room sat at the eastern end of that long ridge, separated from the studio's main expanse only by a low ridge-cap; from inside, looking up, the two read as one continuous sky.

"Before we leave," Philip said, over the coffee and pastries and the warmth of the assembled, "I need to get something from the cellar."

"Not the curaçao," Hubbard said, without turning his head. "Tell me it's not the curaçao."

"Of course it's the curaçao."

"That bottle is contraband," Hubbard replied with a grin.

"That bottle is salvage."

"That bottle is contraband. Mackwith, am I right or am I right?"

"You're right but you'll drink it," Will said.

"I will drink it," Hubbard laughed. "That doesn't make it less contraband."

Morgan, who had been about to take another photograph of something, set the Leica down on the table and produced from his inside pocket a small brass keyring, which he tossed across the table. Philip caught it.

"Cellar's the long one," Morgan said. "Storage is the short one. Don't mix them up. I always do."

"You're doing well. You've had them for a week."

"I'm not entrusted with the rest of my life, Esdaile. But I'm entrusted with your house. Don't congratulate me on it."

Audrey said, almost too quietly, "He'll do fine."

Mollie had handed the keys over to Morgan the previous Friday. Philip and Mollie were leaving for Cumbria in forty-eight hours and would not be back for three months, and Morgan and Audrey were getting married in nine days and were going to live in the Chelsea house through the spring. The handover had been mostly Audrey: which keys were which, what the boiler did when it was unhappy, the trick with the bathroom door, the cleaner's number. Morgan had tried to listen and had wandered off twice. Audrey had listened. Audrey had listened to all of it.

Philip stood, kissed the top of Mollie's head as he passed her, took his phone and put it back in his pocket.

He took the long key, opened the cellar door at the back of the kitchen, and went down.

The cellar stairs were not original to the house. The original stairs were further along, behind a panelled door that no one ever opened. These were the stairs the previous owner had put in when he had begun, and not finished, the office build-out—clean concrete, an iron handrail, a galvanised steel door at the bottom because he had been a man who had read articles about flood risk.

Philip switched the light on from the top of the stairs and went down. The LED recessed ceiling lights were blue-white and direct; they painted the walls a flat institutional white that bore no relation to anything one would want to look at for any length of time. He had grown to hate the lighting. Down here was where one wanted soft light. Down here was where the obscura was.

He was not, this morning, intending to look at the obscura.

He was getting the bottle of curaçao and going back up.

He crossed the cellar—dry cool air, the faint hum of the server rack against the eastern wall, the smell that very clean concrete acquires after a few years of being climate-controlled for electronics—and went to the wine refrigerator in the corner. He opened it. He took out the bottle. He registered the orange label, the dark glass, the satisfying weight. He closed the door.

He turned to go back upstairs.

He stopped.

He had stood in this cellar, in the dark, perhaps a hundred times over three years. He had stood for the picture of the

storage-room ceiling on the floor. He had stood and watched the changing colour of the year through the skylight above. He had stood, and the standing was as close to a religious practice as anything in his life had ever been, and he had told no one about it, and he was about to go away for three months and not stand here, and on the way out he could not—could not—bring himself to leave without a last look. It was the smallest indulgence. It was thirty seconds.

He went to the wall switch at the bottom of the stairs and turned the lights off.

The dark closed in.

He waited for his eyes.

The floor bloomed into life.

He watched the inverted image from the storage-room glass ceiling: the branches of the old sycamore reaching across the skylight, a pigeon crossing the lower half of the projection like a slow planet, a patch of grey sky moving in the quadrant that was, above him, the opposite corner of the glass. It was a cold horizontal English morning rendered on his concrete floor like something that had been laid out for him to look at and then carefully forgotten about by whoever had laid it out.

He could stand here and watch London weather for hours. He had, in fact, stood here for hours. The light through the seasons. The quality of the city in February: cold and useful, the kind of light that made you grateful for warm rooms.

He was forty-eight hours from leaving the city for a three-month sabbatical in Cumbria, where he planned to work on a new

series in near-isolation. He had just been elected the youngest Associate Member of the Royal Academy of Arts. The *Guardian* had run the news under the headline *Artist Storms the Establishment*, which he had found faintly embarrassing and which Mollie had framed and hung in the kitchen where the boys could see it. Upstairs, his wife was finishing the breakfast and his sons were attempting to bring a worm into the house, and the people he cared most about in the world were sitting around his table eating the pastries Jessica had brought.

He was thinking about all of this—about the paintings crated in the studio, about Cumbria and its grey light, about being forty-one and tentatively, for the first time in his adult life, not poor—when the shadows appeared.

Two of them, moving fast across the projection. Faster than the pigeon. Faster than the branches in the wind. Wrong in their speed and in their angle.

A heavy, resonant thud followed, and the projection on the floor became chaos: a billowing white shape spreading across the glass roof above the storage room like a vast lung, blocking most of the light, leaving only a thin crescent of image in one corner of the floor.

Philip did not move.

In that thin crescent, the shadowy silhouettes of two people lay tangled in fabric he would later understand was parachute silk. One of them stirred. Slowly, with the terrible deliberateness of something injured, it raised an arm. The shadow-arm reached towards the other shadow—the still one, the

motionless one—and there was a flash. Brief. Definitive. The flash had only one source.

The other silhouette did not move.

For what seemed like a long time he stood in the dark.

He heard, very distantly, his sons crying upstairs, and Mollie's voice doing the careful efficient work of calm, and Will Mackwith on his phone giving the address in the methodical barrister's tone he used when he wanted no one to know he was frightened. He heard Hubbard, somewhere—Hubbard had moved already, Hubbard was always the first to move in a room that had stopped working. He heard a siren start up somewhere in the city and did not know whether it was for them or only happened to be passing.

He stood with the bottle of curaçao in one hand and his phone in the other.

The phone had run out of battery somewhere between twelve per cent and now. He thumbed the wake button. Nothing. He thumbed it again. Nothing. He stuck the phone in his back pocket.

He moved to the foot of the stairs and switched the lights back on.

He stood for another moment, looking at the floor, where the projection of two silhouettes lying still in a thin crescent of grey had disappeared in the bright LED light.

He ran up the stairs.

When he came back up into the kitchen, the house was in a different world.

He came through the kitchen and into the annexe and the annexe was empty. The breakfast was as they had left it. Jessica's ring light had fallen over and was lying across two pastries. Audrey's coffee cup had a perfectly preserved half-moon of lipstick on its rim. The chandelier still made its showery shimmer above an unattended table. Through the open archway into the studio he could see movement, voices, the wrong sort of light.

He went through.

The studio was full of his guests in arrangements they would not have chosen. Jessica had both of Philip's sons pressed against her chest with their faces turned into her shoulder, away from the great glass ceiling overhead and away from what was on it. Mollie stood by the studio's eastern wall—at the door of the storage room, in fact, which she had pulled half-shut behind her—looking up at the great expanse of white silk that now covered most of the studio's glass roof. Through gaps in the fabric, shapes were visible.

Morgan was at the eastern wall of the studio in his silver-grey suit, holding his Leica but not raising it, looking up at the silk like a man calculating distances he was not going to volunteer. Will was at the French windows on the phone in barrister mode, giving an address for the third time, slowly. Adam was photographing—with his phone, because he had no other camera—the underside of the silk-covered glass, the way the light filtered down through it onto the studio floor.

Hubbard was the only one not there. Philip could hear his voice from the direction of the bathroom upstairs, where the small frosted window over the bath looked out onto the flat roof of the annexe, and from the annexe roof one could climb up to the higher studio roof beyond.

Tom broke free of Jessica and ran to Philip's free hand, arms spread as wide as they would go.

"A naeroplane, Daddy! Some men fell out of a naeroplane close to Jimmy and me, didn't they, Auntie Jessica? In a parachute, bigger'n this room! Do come quick and look, Daddy!"

Philip allowed himself to be pulled towards the studio centre. He was still, distantly, carrying the bottle of curaçao. He had walked the full length of his own house and not noticed it.

Hubbard came back through the kitchen with the dust of the annexe roof on his uniform, crossed the room in three strides, took the bottle from Philip's hand, with a firmness that did not invite discussion, and set it on the table.

"We'll be rid of this first," Hubbard said. "Where've you been?"

"Cellar."

"Yes. I gathered. Doing what."

"Getting the bottle."

"A parachute," Hubbard said. "Two men. One alive-moving, anyway. One not. They came over the roof and the silk fouled on the ridge of the lantern; they're tangled in it. They have flight kit on. They came out of an aircraft, somewhere. I have not seen

one go down. I have not heard one go down. There is no smoke I can see from up there. Whatever they came out of is unknown, and not anywhere nearby."

"Right," Philip said.

"You all right, Esdaile? You look—"

"I thought I heard something," Philip said carefully. He heard himself say it. He understood, in the same instant, that he was lying. Not about the noise—he had heard it—but about the extent of what he knew. Something in him was not yet ready to say what the floor had shown him. He needed to sit with it a little longer. He needed to understand what it meant before it became a fact he had to account for.

Hubbard studied him for a moment with the expression of a man who discerned there was something not being said that should be said.

Mollie came to Philip's side with the boys.

She had heard him say I thought I heard something and her face had not changed, but Philip felt her register the lie. He understood, in the moment of feeling it, that Mollie's grace in this and in many other matters of his marriage was that she would not show what she had seen at the moment she had seen it. She put her hand briefly on his arm. She did not say anything.

"I'm taking them upstairs," she said, after a beat.

"Jessica, would you come?"

Jessica came.

Mollie asked, "Will the police want to speak with the children?"

She had directed this to Hubbard. Hubbard said: "Briefly. With you in the room."

"All right."

She took the boys' hands. She looked at Philip.

"We'll be upstairs. When you can come up, come up."

"I will."

She went up the stairs in the hall with Jessica and the boys, and Philip heard their voices recede along the upper corridor and then a door open and close, and the studio became a room of men, and a fallen world.

What followed was not, Philip later thought, a single event. It was a long unspooling of overlapping events, organised on different clocks.

There was the clock of the street. Aeroplanes did not crash into Chelsea on a weekday morning unobserved. By the time Philip had come up from the cellar, the windows on the other side of Lennox Street were already packed with faces, and every face was turned in the same direction, and a great many of the faces were holding phones. The pavement outside the wrought-iron gate had filled up with people who had run from further along the street and from neighbouring streets, from Sloane Square, from the King's Road; the audio of his own house, Philip would learn later, was already on three live-streams within fifteen minutes, the parachute hanging like a vast white sail over his roof, the sycamore branches splintered, the small movements of officialdom beginning underneath. A woman in a yellow coat had set up a tripod across the road. A teenager on an electric scooter was

attempting, with good will and terrible composition, to cover the developing scene on his phone for an audience he had not yet acquired.

There was the clock of officialdom. The first uniforms arrived in something under four minutes, two community-support officers from a car that had been on the King's Road; they had been followed almost at once by a marked Met response unit and then by paramedics, two crews. The paramedics had wanted the bodies down at once. The bodies could not be got down at once because the bodies were on a glass roof that no one knew the structural condition of, and the roof was eighteen feet up, and the parachute was tangled around the casualties in a way that promised to make any movement worse. A turntable ladder was sent for. A specialist team was sent for. The first uniforms held the gate, set up tape across the front garden, told the crowd to step back, told the crowd to step back again, and finally, after the third request, a senior officer arrived who was prepared to be unpleasant about it, and the crowd stepped back six feet.

There was the clock of the house. Inside, time did not move at all. In the four or five minutes after the crash—the minutes Philip had been in the cellar—Hubbard had taken charge in the small absence of anyone else who wanted the role. He had organised the children upstairs with Mollie and Jessica; he had got Audrey into a chair and Will off the phone; he had told Adam, in a quiet aside that Adam understood and accepted, that this was not the morning to be a journalist, and Adam had put his phone away. He had gone up onto the roof himself—the bathroom window

route—and had come down again with what he had wanted to find out, which was that one of the two men was breathing and the other was not.

Then Philip had come up from the cellar.

Hubbard, having organised the room as far as the room could be organised, now turned to Morgan.

"You're light, Rooke," Hubbard said. "And you know the run of the roof from the building works last summer. Get up there before the team arrives and check the live one's airway. The paramedics can't reach him through the silk yet. Don't move him. Just clear his airway. Talk to him. I'll come up behind you if you need me."

It was a decision Philip would later think about a great deal.

Morgan looked at Hubbard. Morgan looked at the silk overhead. Morgan looked at his Leica.

He set the Leica down on the breakfast table in the annexe as he passed through. He went up the stairs.

Philip heard him go up.

Morgan was on the roof for perhaps four minutes. It would not later be entirely clear what he had done in those four minutes. He came back down with his hands shaking and his silver-grey suit ruined and a small expression on his face that Audrey had registered the moment he crossed the threshold and which Hubbard, watching her, had also registered.

He did not have his Leica.

He had not, Philip realised slowly, taken his Leica up. The Leica was on the breakfast table in the annexe, where Morgan had set it down before he ran for the stairs.

Hubbard directed Morgan to a chair. Morgan sat. He sat with his hands flat on his knees in the manner of a man trying to remember how hands worked.

There was, then, a clock of small things: the fact that Morgan had gone up without his camera. The fact that he had come down filthier than four minutes on a roof should produce. The fact that when he sat in the chair Hubbard had directed him into, he sat with his hands flat on his knees and did not turn his palms up, did not look at his own hands, did not seem to want his hands to be visible to himself or to anyone else.

There was also the clock of Philip, whose only job was to stand in the middle of his own studio and not be seen to know more than he could account for.

The fire brigade arrived with a turntable ladder twelve minutes after the first call. By that time three more uniformed officers were in the garden, two paramedics were in the studio with Audrey (who had developed a slow case of the shakes), and a sergeant from the Met had begun the soft preliminary interviews—can you tell me where you were when, and who was with you, and what you saw—which were not yet investigative interviews because the situation was not yet investigative. It was an air accident. People were upset. The sergeant was being kind.

The bodies came down in two operations.

The live one came down first, on a stretcher, lowered from the turntable to the garden through the splintered gap in the sycamore that Hubbard had originally climbed through. The paramedics had been working on him through the silk for ten minutes by then. They had got him stabilised enough to move. He was twenty-four years old, the paramedics estimated, which would later turn out to be exact; he had a flight suit on with insignia Philip did not recognise; his face was a colour Philip had only seen once before, on a man in a hospital in Aberdeen ten years earlier, who had not lived. This one would, Philip was told afterwards, by a paramedic who had no business telling him: it had been a very near thing. The young man's name, the paramedics did not yet know. He would be Charles Valentine Smith, Jessica's Chummy, by the late afternoon. He was, for the moment, simply a casualty in an orange flight suit, going into the back of an ambulance under a foil blanket.

The dead one came down second, in a body bag, more slowly, and without an audience: the uniforms had the sense to clear the garden of everyone who did not need to be there, and the press pool in the street got the angle they would later use on the news, which was a stretcher draped in black going into an unmarked vehicle, the parachute fabric still partly hanging over the splintered ridge of the studio roof.

His name, Philip was told later, was Maxwell. He had been the observer.

By that time the sergeant had asked his preliminary questions of everyone and was beginning to repeat himself,

another vehicle pulled up at the gate, plain dark blue; a woman in a navy coat got out, and the sergeant went out to meet her. What he told her in the brief murmured exchange in the front garden visibly changed the temperature of his afternoon.

She came in through the French windows. She nodded to Hubbard, who nodded back. She did not nod to Philip, who watched her.

"Mrs Esdaile?"

"Here," Mollie said, coming down the hall stairs at exactly the moment the question was asked, with the timing of a woman who had been listening for it. "I'm Mollie Esdaile."

"Detective Inspector Morrison. Met CID. Could I have a few minutes of everybody's time?"

She said it to the room. Everyone in the room understood that *a few minutes* was a politeness rather than an estimate.

DI Morrison was a detective who made her witnesses feel that she was hearing more than they were saying, which was because she was. She was perhaps fifty, with the grey-streaked hair of a woman who could not be bothered with the grey, and a coat she did not take off, and a small black notebook she opened on the breakfast table in the annexe with the deliberate gesture of a person who had decided where the centre of the room was now going to be.

She interviewed them one at a time. She had a uniformed constable with her who took notes in a separate book; the constable did not speak. Morrison did the questioning.

She spoke to Mollie first, briefly, with the children present. The children had told their story already to Hubbard and to the sergeant and were tired of telling it; Morrison heard them out anyway. Tom said the parachute had been bigger'n this room. Jimmy said he had heard the engine cut out before it happened, before the parachutes hit the roof, which both Morrison and Hubbard noted, because no one else had mentioned this, and a six-year-old who notices that an engine has cut out is a useful witness even when he is six.

She talked to Jessica next. Jessica told her about the morning, about the breakfast, about being in the breakfast room when the crash came. She gave the answers of a young person who had been lightly interviewed by police before, in the contexts in which young people were lightly interviewed by police, and who knew not to volunteer.

She then spoke to Will. Will was a barrister and answered a barrister's answers: precise, narrow, accurate, unhelpful. Morrison wrote them down without commentary.

She talked to Hubbard next. Hubbard gave her, in the calm of a military man who had filled out a great many incident reports, the timeline of what he had seen and done from the moment the two airmen hit the roof. He did not embellish; he did not omit. He did mention that he had sent Morgan up. The constable, taking the second set of notes, wrote witness sent civilian onto roof prior to FB attendance—confirm w/ Morgan Rooke in the small careful handwriting of a man who would himself later have to type it up.

When her formal questions were finished, Morrison turned a page in her notebook and looked at Hubbard for a moment without writing. She said, in the voice of a professional asking another professional something she expected to be answered honestly:

"Commander, did you see anything that might help us with the aircraft. We are in some difficulty on the point. Air Accident Investigation and the military investigators have been at it for the better part of an hour and they have not, at this stage, found a wreckage site. Their current working view is that the aircraft did not come down whole." Hubbard's face did not move. He thought for a moment. He said: "Inspector, I saw nothing of the aircraft. I went up to the casualties; I came down. I am not in a position to help you on the question." Morrison wrote this down without any commentary. "Thank you, Commander."

She did Audrey, briefly. Audrey's hands had stopped shaking, which Morrison noted, and her smile had gone, which Morrison did not note. Audrey had been in the breakfast room. Audrey had heard the crash. Audrey had not seen the bodies. Audrey did not know either of the men, of course she didn't, why would she. Morrison wrote something very small and moved on.

She did Adam. Adam had the journalist's instinct to be interesting and the journalist's discipline not to be. He was useful and brief.

She got to Morgan.

She talked to Morgan for a long time.

She asked him about being on the roof. He told her. She asked him to walk her through it minute by minute, what he had

touched, what he had seen, what he had done. He answered. She looked at his suit jacket, draped now on the back of the chair next to him.

"That's a lot of dust, Mr Rooke."

"It's an old roof."

"The roof was last cleaned and inspected—you said in May."

"That's right. Mr Esdaile had it done before he --"

"Before he left for Cumbria in May. Yes." She wrote. "You were on the roof for --"

"Four minutes."

"And in four minutes you got that much on a suit?"

"I was crawling, mostly."

"Show me what you mean by crawling."

He showed her. She watched him. She had him do it again.

"That's not crawling," she said. "That's lying down. Were you lying down at any point on the roof?"

"I—at the end. Yes. To clear his airway. The paramedics couldn't reach through the silk yet."

"You were lying down next to the casualty."

"Yes."

"For how long."

"A minute. A bit less maybe."

"And you cleared his airway."

"Yes."

"And then?"

"And then Hubbard called me down."

"Did you touch the other man."

The pause was the length of a heartbeat. "No."

"Did you take anything from the scene."

"No."

She wrote this down. She wrote it down without commentary, in a hand that was perhaps slightly slower than the hand she had used for the previous answer. She turned the page of her notebook. She did not look up.

"Thank you, Mr Rooke."

She did Philip last.

She had positioned herself, by then, at the head of the breakfast table, in the chair Mollie ordinarily took. Philip sat where Audrey had been sitting earlier in the morning. The pastries had been cleared away. The flowers were still upright in their vase. The chandelier was still doing its showery thing overhead, faintly absurd in the changed light.

"Mr Esdaile. Could you tell me where you were at the moment of the crash."

"I was in the cellar."

"What were you doing in the cellar."

"I was getting a bottle of orange curaçao."

She wrote this down with a slightly greater interest than she had shown for any other answer that morning. Philip noted this. A man could not give the answer *I was getting a bottle of orange curaçao* and not be aware that it was an answer with shape.

"How long were you in the cellar."

"A few minutes."

"How many."

"Five. Six. I'm not sure."

"It takes five or six minutes to retrieve a bottle from a cellar?"

"I was—checking on the server array. The cellar is also my server room. There's a hard drive that's been failing intermittently. I had been meaning to look at it for a few days. While I was down there I had a look."

"During a breakfast party."

"I'm particular about my systems."

Morrison wrote this down, also, without comment. She turned a page. She regarded him without expression, and then, with the small economical gesture of a person who had decided not to press a point yet, moved on.

"Did you hear the impact while you were in the cellar."

"I heard something. I wasn't sure what."

"Did the building shake."

"I felt a vibration. I assumed at first that it was the building works on the next street."

"You came up after how long."

"As soon as I heard the children."

"Were you carrying anything when you came up."

"The bottle."

"Just the bottle."

"Just the bottle. I had switched the cellar light off for a moment to look at something, and switched it back on after the crash."

"What were you looking at."

A small pause.

"The server indicator lights. I was about to be away from the house for three months, and I wanted them all green. None of them red. None of them blinking yellow."

She looked at him. She was very good at looking at people. He had the brief unwelcome sensation of being a portrait at which the sitter was looking back.

"All right, Mr Esdaile. Thank you. We may want to speak to you again."

"Of course."

She closed the notebook. She did not get up.

"One more thing. Miss Merrow."

Jessica had come back downstairs ten minutes earlier and was standing in the studio doorway.

"Could I trouble you for a name. The young man you came down to ask the paramedics about, before they took him out—the live one. The pilot. You asked for his name."

"I —" Jessica's face did the brief flicker it had done over the phone earlier in the morning, only this time she did not have time to put a hand over it. "I asked who he was, yes. I thought I —"

"You thought you recognised him."

"I thought I might. From the orange of the suit. I have a—I know someone who flies. I was worried."

"Was it him."

"I don't know yet."

"His name."

A pause.

"Charles Valentine Smith."

Morrison wrote it down. Then she closed the notebook.

"Thank you, Miss Merrow. I'll let you know what we learn."

She rose. She nodded to the room. She gathered the constable. They left through the French windows, into the front garden, and through the wrought-iron gate, which the uniformed officer at the gate held open for them and closed again afterwards.

The crowd had thinned. The fire brigade had gone. The paramedics had gone. A single marked car remained on the street, and would remain there, Hubbard later confirmed, for the rest of the afternoon. The press pool had retreated to the far end of Lennox Street and was filming, with telephoto lenses, the windows of the house from a polite distance.

Through those windows, into the dimming light of a London February afternoon, Philip Esdaile sat at his own breakfast table with the people who had been his friends that morning and were now something else, something more like accomplices, or suspects, or witnesses; and the bottle of orange curaçao stood on the table where Hubbard had put it; and no one had yet drunk any of it; and no one, said anything.

Then Mollie came downstairs from the upper floor where the children, finally, against all expectation, had fallen asleep.

She stood in the doorway and looked at the room. She looked at the bottle. She looked at Philip.

"All right," she said. "Tell us."

CHAPTER TWO

What Philip Saw

The room had been holding its breath since the front gate had closed behind Detective Inspector Morrison, and now Mollie had told it to exhale.

Tell us.

Philip looked at her, in the doorway. He looked at the bottle of orange curaçao standing on the breakfast table where Hubbard had set it down hours ago, still unopened, still bearing on its label the small grey stain the cellar damp had given it sometime over the past three winters. He looked at the faces of the people he had known for years—Will, Hubbard, Morgan, Audrey, Adam, Jessica—and at his own wife, who had taken three steps into the room and was now standing with one hand on the back of an empty chair as though she were not yet sure whether she would sit.

The last of the February afternoon was leaving the windows. The annexe held a thin wash of grey-gold light that would, Philip estimated, last another twelve minutes. Beyond the open archway into the studio, the silk-covered glass of the great roof was a softly luminous ceiling overhead, like a cinema screen showing nothing.

He drew out a chair for Mollie. She sat. He sat at the head of the table where he ordinarily sat in the morning. Mollie, in passing, had switched on the small table lamp on the sideboard,

and the lamp threw a soft pool of warm light across the table that was, for the moment, the only warm thing in the room.

He took the bottle of curaçao. He found, in the sideboard, the eight small liqueur glasses Mollie kept there. He set out seven of them. He uncorked the bottle. Hubbard, watching, said quietly, "Philip—" and stopped, because what he had been about to say did not, in fact, need saying.

Philip poured.

He poured carefully, as though the carefulness mattered. A finger of dark amber in each glass. He passed them around the table. Audrey took hers with both hands, like a child receiving something from a stranger. Jessica did not pick hers up. Mollie set hers down in front of her without looking at it.

"All right," Philip said. "I'll tell you."

He started where it had started, three years before on a Sunday afternoon not unlike this one.

He told them about going down to the cellar a little before three because a hard drive in the server array had begun to stutter, and finding instead, in the darkness at the bottom of the stairs, a floor that was glowing.

He told them what had been on the floor: the picture of the sycamore over the studio roof, the slow crossing of a pigeon, the diffuse charcoal-grey of London cloud at three in the afternoon. He told them how he had stood without moving for what had seemed like a long time, working out what he was looking at. He told them about the camera obscura—the principle Vermeer was suspected of using and Canaletto almost certainly had—the dark room, the

small aperture, the inverted image projected by the simplest possible arrangement of light and geometry. He told them about going upstairs in the dark and tracing the projection to its source: the storage room off the studio, the great roof lantern set into the eastern end of the glazed roof in continuous run with the rest, the small clean circular hole in the centre of the wooden floor where a contractor years ago had drilled a cable bore through the floorboards between the storage room and the cellar. He told them about the dowel—that the contractor had plugged the hole with a wooden dowel set flush with the surface and stained to match, and that the dowel had at some point worked itself loose and dropped through, and that he had found it later in the cellar, in the angle where the wall met the floor, when he had thought to look. He told them, almost in passing, that the hole was very small. A quarter of an inch. The size of a pencil.

He told them that he had not, at the time, told anyone.

He did not look at Mollie when he said this. The decision not to look at her was its own message, and he made it deliberately, and Mollie received it as he had known she would, in the small unmoving way she received most things she did not yet have a use for.

Hubbard said, "Three years."

"Three years."

"Every now and then?"

"Every few weeks. Sometimes more. In summer when the leaves were on the sycamore. At dawn after a bad night. I didn't make a study of it. I went down. I stood on it. I came up."

"And you never --"

"No."

Hubbard, who was a man who had kept a number of things from his own wife over the course of a number of years and who was not in a position to make any kind of moral case about it, set down his liqueur glass without drinking from it.

Mollie said nothing.

Jessica, who had been watching Philip with the close attention she gave to faces she planned to film later, said: "Why didn't you tell anyone."

"I don't know."

"Yes you do."

He looked at her. She was twenty years old and she was telling him, in the tone of someone who had already lived a public-facing life longer than she had any business having lived one, that the reason a person kept a beautiful private thing private was a reason they knew about themselves and could be asked to articulate.

"Because I wanted it," he said. "I wanted it to be a thing nobody else had seen. The way certain paintings belong to you before they're finished. Before the world has any claim on them."

Jessica considered this.

"I get it," she said, finally.

Mollie did not say anything.

He told them about the morning.

He told them about going down for the bottle, the cellar light, the wine refrigerator, the small ritual he had not been

able to leave the cellar without performing one last time before three months in Cumbria took it away from him. He told them about the floor blooming. He told them about watching the inverted image of his own roof—the sycamore in February without leaves, the moving cloud, the pigeon—and about what he had been thinking when the shadows appeared.

“Two of them,” he said. “Moving fast across the projection. Faster than the wind, faster than the bird. Wrong in their speed and their angle. Then the crash. I felt it before I heard it. The picture went into chaos—the silk billowing across the skylight, blocking most of the light, leaving a thin crescent of image in one corner of the floor. And in that crescent, two shapes.”

“Tangled in the silk?” Hubbard said.

“Yes. Lying still.”

“For how long.”

“I don’t know. Longer than they should have been. Then one of them moved.”

He took a breath. He realised he was holding the stem of the liqueur glass too hard.

“One of them stirred. He moved slowly, like something injured. He raised an arm. The arm reached towards the other shape—the still one. There was a flash.”

He stopped.

“What kind of flash?” Will said, in the tone Will used when he was already thinking about how the next person to ask the question was going to phrase it.

“A small bright one. Brief. Localised.”

"Could it have been --"

"It was on the floor of my cellar. It was a projection. It was an inversion of something I couldn't see directly. I am telling you the shape of what I saw. What I saw was that one shadow raised its arm towards the other and there was a flash, and after the flash the other shadow did not move. That is what I saw."

The room was very still.

Mollie had picked up her glass without seeming to know she had done so.

"And then?" she said.

"And then I stood there. For what seemed like a long time. Until I realised I had been standing in the dark in my own cellar while my children were screaming upstairs. Then I switched the light back on, and I came up."

He looked at Hubbard.

"I thought I heard something, I told you. That was the lie. I knew exactly what I had heard. I knew what I had seen. I did not know what I was supposed to do about either."

Hubbard, who had filed this lie away earlier in the day for later, opened the file now.

"You should have told me at once."

"Yes."

"Within five minutes I was on that roof. If I had known --"

"Yes."

"You watched me send Morgan up there."

"Yes."

There was a pause, during which Hubbard was arranging the things he was not going to say in an order he might one day be willing to revisit, and during which the rest of the room understood that the arrangement was occurring and waited for him to be done.

"All right," Hubbard said, finally. "Go on."

Philip looked at the faces around the table.

He saw their faces revise themselves as he spoke. He saw Will's close-not into hostility, into measurement, the legal-trained reflex of a man who had already begun the silent arithmetic of what could be proved and what could not. He saw Adam's open the other way: the journalist's instinctive recognition that a thing had occurred which was not the thing the country was about to read about in tomorrow's papers, and the friend's instinctive recognition that this was not, today, a thing the country could be told. He saw Hubbard's go still in the way Hubbard's went still when he was doing something with information that required concentration: not closing, not opening, simply gathering.

He saw Audrey's hand cover her mouth and stay there.

He saw Mollie's face do what Mollie's face did. Which was not nothing, but which was less than the room contained, because Mollie's grace was that she would not show what she had seen at the moment she had seen it.

He saw Jessica, finally, lift the liqueur glass to her mouth and put it down again without drinking. He saw the small flicker at the corner of her expression that he had seen earlier in the

morning—the one she had hidden by pocketing her phone—return now and stay.

He said: “I don’t know what I saw. It was shadows on concrete in a dark room. But it looked like someone raised something at the other man. And then there was a flash. And the other one didn’t move.”

He waited.

Then he turned, deliberately, and looked at Morgan.

Morgan had been sitting where Hubbard had originally placed him hours ago, in the chair against the eastern wall, his hands flat on his knees. He had not, since Hubbard had directed him into the chair, turned his palms up. He had not picked up the liqueur glass Philip had set in front of him. He had not, in fact, moved at all in any way that mattered for some considerable time.

“Morgan,” Hubbard said.

Morgan looked at him.

“What did you take from the roof.”

The room went still.

Morgan said, “What?”

“I’m not asking what you saw. I’m asking what you took.”

“I didn’t take anything.”

“Morgan.”

“Hubbard, I --”

Audrey was the one who stopped him.

She did it with a single small movement of her hand. She placed her hand on his forearm—the forearm closest to her—and she

did it with the careful gentleness of a woman who had been preparing, all day and possibly all week, for a moment she had hoped would not arrive but had been preparing for in case it did. Philip saw the engagement ring catch the lamplight.

"Morgan," Audrey said.

Morgan turned to her. His face did something Philip had never seen it do before—a small collapse, very brief, immediately resisted, then resumed.

"Audrey, I --"

"Morgan," she said again. "Tell them."

He lasted about thirty seconds. Philip watched him last. Morgan was not, by nature, a man who could carry a thing of that weight on his own for very long; what was surprising was that he had carried it as long as he had. He had carried it for the four minutes on the roof and the five minutes he had spent washing his hands afterwards and the two hours of the police interviews and the hour after the police had left, during which he had sat in this chair and not drunk his coffee. Now Audrey had taken her hand off his arm.

He stood up.

He walked over to the chair where his ruined silver-grey suit jacket was draped, and he reached into the inside pocket, and he produced from it a small black object with the matt finish that Philip had learned, over a number of years and a number of conversations he had had with Hubbard about a number of things, to recognise as the finish of military procurement.

He set it on the breakfast table.

Then he sat down again.

For a long moment nobody said anything.

The room held its silence. Nobody at the table looked at the gun. They looked at the bottle, the small white tablecloth, the edge of the silk cover that had been laid over the studio glazing beyond—anywhere but the gun. Audrey, finally, breathed.

Hubbard picked the gun up.

He picked it up the way he picked things up that he had handled a great many of in his life—without ceremony, without theatre, with the small efficient care of a man for whom a weapon was simply an object that required a particular kind of attention. He turned it over in his hand. He looked at the trigger pad. He looked at the grip. He examined the magazine release, depressed it, slid the magazine out, looked at the magazine. He slid the magazine back in. He set the weapon down, more gently than Morgan had, on a folded napkin, in a way that suggested he was aware of evidentiary considerations even if he was not currently honouring them.

"Kessler P9-pattern biometric sidearm," he said. "Military issue. The 'P' is for Polizei—the German police variant—but this isn't a police one, this is the military version, you can tell from the slide profile. Biometric safety. Not on the grip, on the trigger pad. Means anyone can handle it; only one person can fire it."

"One person?" Adam asked.

"The one whose thumbprint the trigger has been registered to. And anyone the registered user has authorised it to

recognise—usually two or three other people, his unit. The grip's the same as a normal P9. You can hand it back and forth. But if someone tries to fire it who isn't on the list, the trigger goes inert."

"So whoever fired this --"

"Was registered to it. Or was on the registered list."

He turned the weapon a small angle further. He pressed something on the side that Philip did not see. A small green light came on, then went off.

"It's been fired," Hubbard said.

"Recently?"

"Recently. The biometric register tells you the last twenty trigger events, with timestamps. I'm not going to log into the audit interface here because that would be a thing it would be impossible to subsequently un-do; I'm telling you this gun has been fired in the last twelve hours, because the indicator is green, and that's what green means."

He looked at the magazine again, then up.

"It's a seven-round magazine. There are six rounds in it."

"One fired," Adam said quietly.

"One fired."

Audrey made a small sound. Morgan did not look at her. Jessica was still not drinking her drink.

"Where," Hubbard said to Morgan, "did you take it from."

"His hand."

"Whose."

"The—the one who was—the live one. He had it in his hand. He was lying half on the dead one. The gun was between them. It was—it was pointed at the dead one. I didn't think. I just—I took it."

"Why."

"I don't know."

"Morgan."

"I don't know. The street was full of people with phones. The fire brigade hadn't come yet. I was alone up there for a minute before the police got the ladder up. I knew if anyone with a camera got a clear shot of him with a gun in his hand, it would be—there would be—I just took it. I put it in my jacket. I came down."

"You took a piece of evidence off a crime scene before any official body was on the roof."

"Yes."

"Why."

"I told you. I don't know."

"Morgan," Audrey said.

He turned to her. His face did the small collapse again, less briefly this time.

"I knew him," Morgan said.

The room went still in a different way than it had gone still before.

"You knew him?" Hubbard said.

"Not him. The other one. Maxwell. The dead one. I'd met him. Twice. At—at parties. He was—I knew his face. I recognised him on

the roof. I—I don't—I don't know why I took the gun, I just—I saw his face and I saw the gun and I didn't think. I didn't think."

He put his face in his hands.

Audrey, beside him, did not put her hand on his arm again. She did not move at all.

Will spoke for the first time.

He had been waiting, as he had waited at innumerable evidential conferences over twenty years, for the moment when the available facts had been laid out far enough that the case for doubt, the case he was professionally constituted to make, became audible. He spoke now in the calm low tones of a man who knew the value of being the voice in the room that was not panicking.

"Listen to me," he said. "All of you. Listen for two minutes."

Hubbard nodded. Audrey, shaking very slightly, did not move.

"I am not going to tell you that none of this matters. It matters. I am going to tell you what a defending barrister would say at a trial we are not yet having and may not have, and I want you all to hear it, because it is going to come up, and it had better come up here first.

"One. The gun went off in the crash. A test pilot whose aircraft has just gone down, who has parachuted onto a glass roof in the middle of London, is a man with a great deal of kinetic energy passing through his hand and his weapon at the moment of impact. A round being fired during such an impact is not implausible. It is in fact, given the trigger profile of a

Kessler P9-pattern biometric sidearm, well within the range of plausible accidents.

"Two. Standard issue. Test pilots over military-adjacent airspace carry sidearms. A gun in a flight suit pocket is what one expects to find in a flight suit pocket. The presence of the gun on the roof is not by itself remarkable.

"Three. The gun was Maxwell's. He may have drawn it for any number of reasons before or during the descent—to control it during the impact, to prevent it being lost in the silk, to prevent some other person from acquiring it. He may have fired it himself, deliberately, into the air, as a warning or a marker. He may have fired it himself, deliberately, into himself, for reasons we cannot at this point know.

"Four. Philip saw shadows on a floor. Philip saw shapes in the inverted projection of a parachute-covered skylight, in absolute darkness, through a quarter-inch aperture. Philip saw the outline of an event. The human brain assembles narratives. It is what the brain does when it is frightened. Two shapes near each other and one of them stops moving is not, as a forensic matter, the same thing as a homicide.

"And five. The man currently in intensive care in a hospital across the river is twenty-four years old. He is, if I have been listening accurately, the boyfriend of a young woman in this room. None of us—none of us—should be in any kind of hurry to call him a murderer when he has not yet had the opportunity to give an account of what has happened to him."

He paused. He looked, at Jessica. Jessica, very young, very still, did not look back.

"That is what would be said in a courtroom. We should be cautious. We should not leap to conclusions. We do not, presently, have a case. We have a witness statement that could not be put before a jury in its current form, a piece of physical evidence that has been mishandled in such a way as to be perhaps inadmissible, a confession to mishandling that will substantially complicate any subsequent prosecution, and a great deal of speculation. That is what we have. I am not saying it is nothing. I am saying it is not yet enough."

He sat back.

The room received this. It was the kind of statement the room was designed to receive; Will was good at his job.

For a moment Philip allowed himself to feel the relief of it—the possibility that a barrister he trusted had just told him that he might not have seen what he thought he had seen.

Then Hubbard, gently, said: "It's a very good speech, Will. And I agree with most of it. But the gun is a Kessler P9-pattern biometric sidearm with a biometric trigger lock that has logged a fire event in the last twelve hours, and the round count in the magazine is six, and Morgan Rooke took it off a live man's hand on a roof. Those three things, on their own, are interesting. The combination of those three things with what Philip says he saw is more than interesting. We should be cautious. We should not leap. But we are not, I think, in the position of people who have nothing."

Will nodded slowly.

"No," he said. "We are not in the position of people who have nothing."

It was Audrey who asked the question that no one else had yet been willing to ask.

She asked it quietly, into the table, without looking at anyone in particular, and in a voice that had nothing in it of the careful smile that had carried her through breakfast.

"Did you do it?"

She was looking at Morgan. Morgan was still looking at his hands.

"No," he said.

"Did you do anything I should know about?"

"No."

"Morgan, please."

"Audrey, no. I didn't shoot anyone. I didn't—I didn't do anything. I picked up a gun. That's what I did. I picked it up and I put it in my pocket because—because I knew him. Because I'd met him. Because he was lying there with his eyes open and I didn't want—I didn't want a photograph. Of him. Like that. With a gun next to his hand."

"You knew him from where."

"From—from the parties at the Brewer Street place. Two years ago. Three. We weren't friends. I knew him. I'd met him twice."

"And you didn't tell the police."

"No."

"Morgan."

"Audrey, please."

"You didn't tell me."

He looked up, finally.

"I didn't know how."

She held his eyes for a moment. Then she looked down at her own hands, at the engagement ring with its small emeralds and its white-gold setting, and she did the thing Philip had been watching her not quite do all day, which was let the smile go finally and entirely. Her face, without it, was tired and beautiful and considerably older than the face that had come through the door that morning.

"All right," Audrey said. "All right. We'll talk about it later."

She got up, very carefully, and she walked to the window, and she stood at it with her back to the room, and she did not say anything more for some time.

Mollie watched her go.

Mollie, who had not yet spoken in any substantial way since tell us, watched her go and made the small unsurprised expression of a woman who had suspected for a number of months that something had been wrong in Audrey's particular kind of beauty and had not, until now, had a use for the suspicion. Then Mollie's eyes came back to Philip, and rested on him, and said nothing, and went on saying nothing for the rest of the conversation.

Jessica had stood up.

She had done it without anyone noticing she was doing it, as she did most things she did. She was standing at the head of the studio doorway, and she was holding her phone in both hands in a way that was not, for once, about composing the moment for filming. It was about needing something to hold.

"I need to speak to Chummy," she said.

The room turned to her.

She said it again, more steadily.

"I need to speak to Chummy. Tonight. He's in the ICU at St. Thomas's. They told me he's stable. They told me he's—they told me he's awake. I need to go and see him. I need to ask him."

"Jessica," Mollie said, "we can talk about this—"

"I need to ask him, Mollie. I need to ask him what happened. I need to look at his face when I ask him. I have known him for eighteen months and I have been with him for six, and if he—if he—I need to know."

She was not crying. Philip noticed this with the painter's eye that made a note and did not comment. She was not crying and she was not trembling. She was twenty years old and she had decided, in the course of the last forty minutes, that she was going to walk into a hospital tonight and ask a man whom she loved—she was old enough to have decided, although perhaps not old enough to have proved, that she loved him—whether he had killed somebody.

Hubbard, slowly: "Jessica, you understand that he is in a hospital that is currently being attended by—"

"I understand."

"There will be officers present. There will be questions about why you are there and who you are."

"I'm his girlfriend. That's why I'm there. I'm allowed to be there."

"You're going to have to tell them you are."

"Yes."

"And if he's been—if he's somebody whose situation is what we're starting to think it might be—they may use you. They may listen to whatever conversation you have. They may take a record."

"I know."

She looked at Hubbard. She looked at him in the manner of a young person who had spent enough time with older men in the past eighteen months to know what older men sounded like when they were trying to talk a young person out of something.

"Cecil," she said. "I'm going."

Hubbard considered her.

"All right," he said. "I'll drive you."

"No. I'll get a cab."

"Jessica —"

"I'll get a cab. And I'll text Mollie when I'm there. And I'll text Mollie when I'm leaving. And I'll come back here afterwards, because I don't want to be alone in my flat tonight. But I'm going alone, Cecil, because if I show up with a serving Royal Navy officer there will be a great many more questions than there will be if I show up as a girlfriend."

Hubbard nodded slowly.

"That's correct," he said. "All right."

She turned, finally, to Philip.

She said it to the room and then specifically to Philip, and Philip understood that this was not a request: it was a notification, given to him because he had been the one who had seen the flash. She was going to ask Chummy a question she had a right to ask. She was not asking permission.

"Philip," she said. "Whatever he tells me, I'll tell you. Tonight."

"All right."

"Whatever he tells me. Even if it's the thing none of us wants it to be."

"All right."

"And Philip—"

"Yes."

"You don't get to keep this one to yourself."

She held his eyes for a beat. The flicker at the corner of her expression was the same flicker that had been there at the breakfast table that morning when her phone had buzzed and she had hidden it. He understood now that the flicker had always been about Chummy. He understood now that whatever notification had come to her phone over the croissants—a message, a news alert, a name in a feed—had been the first thread of something she had been holding alone all day and was not going to hold alone any longer.

"No," Philip said. "I don't."

Jessica picked up her coat from the back of the chair and her bag from the floor and she went out through the front hall, and they heard the door close behind her, and they heard, a moment later, the metal click of the wrought-iron gate, and then they heard nothing at all.

Mollie said, finally—for the first time in nearly an hour—
“I’ll put on the kettle.”

She got up and went into the kitchen, and Philip, watching her go, understood that I’ll put on the kettle was a sentence which would mean a great many things to the two of them later that night, when the others had gone home and the house was theirs again, and which for the moment was simply a sentence that gave her something to do that was not the other thing she might have done, which was sit at this table any longer with the husband who had kept a private room from her for three years.

In the kitchen, water began to run.

In the studio beyond, the silk ceiling held its silver-grey light.

On the table, the gun lay on its folded napkin, beside the bottle of curaçao, beside seven small liqueur glasses, of which only two had been touched.

CHAPTER THREE

What Jessica Asked

Jessica was in the back of a black cab heading south over Westminster Bridge when she allowed herself, for the first time in eleven hours, to think about the message that had come through to her phone at nine forty-seven that morning.

The message had been a single character.

It had been a character that she and Charles Valentine Smith had agreed on six months ago, on a wet Sunday afternoon in his flat in Vauxhall, when he had explained to her, with the precise calm of a man who organised his life around contingency, what she should do if she ever received it. He had said: I will never send this for any other reason. If it comes, you will know it has come. Do not call me. Do not text me. Don't go to my flat. Wait. I will reach you when I can. If you don't hear from me in twelve hours, do these three things in this order.

He had told her the three things.

She had memorised them. She had not believed she would ever need to act on them. She had believed, instead, that the agreement was a thing of the kind a man like Chummy entered into the way other men took out insurance policies on their lives: not because he expected to use it, but because the having of it was itself the point. A way of keeping the world's other endings tidy.

The character was the digit 1.

It had come through Signal at nine forty-seven. She had been pouring coffee for Audrey at the time. She had felt the buzz against her thigh. She had taken the phone out, looked at it, and put it back in her pocket. She had not said anything before Philip could ask. She had then framed three more shots of the chandelier and posted a story she had no memory of composing.

Three minutes later, the parachute had landed on the studio roof.

She had spent the entire day with the digit in her pocket and the day's catastrophe in her face, and she had not, until now, in the back of this cab, allowed herself to put the two together in the form of a sentence.

He had known. Three minutes before they came down on the roof, Chummy Smith had known something was about to happen. He had had the time, in the air, to reach into a flight suit pocket and find his phone and unlock it and open Signal and type a 1 and send it to her, and he had spent that time on her instead of on a mayday call or a cockpit lever or the mechanical business of saving his life.

She did not know what to do with this fact yet. She was not sure she would know what to do with it tomorrow, or next week, or in the longer aftermath of whatever was now beginning. She knew only that it altered everything she had thought, in the past eleven hours, about what she had walked into when she had walked into the test pilot's flat in Vauxhall on a wet Sunday afternoon six months ago and stayed.

The cab crossed the bridge. The river was the colour of cold pewter beneath the bridge lights, and Westminster behind her was illuminated in the slightly theatrical way Westminster was always illuminated at night, as though it were performing for tourists who had gone home. To her right, St. Thomas's Hospital rose in its late-Victorian and 1970s mass against the river, and somewhere on its sixth floor was the bed in which the man she had been with for six months was lying, and somewhere in the chair next to that bed was a uniformed police officer, and somewhere outside the hospital—though Jessica did not yet know this—were two unmarked cars whose occupants would later become a feature of her life.

She paid the driver in cash. She had thought, on the way out of Philip's house, that paying in cash would be a small unaccountable act, a thing not on a card statement that could be looked at. She had no clear notion of who might look at her card statements. The instinct was new, and it was, she thought, probably the first instinct of its kind she would have over the coming days.

She got out at the main entrance.

She stood for a moment on the pavement and looked up at the hospital—eight floors of yellow-lit windows, the rectangle of the helipad on the roof, the cold London February sky behind it—and she did not, for the first time in perhaps a year, think about what the building would look like in a photograph. She thought about how cold she was. She thought about how badly she wanted to

be already inside, and already finished, and already on her way back out.

She went in.

Reception at this hour was thinned out: a single security officer behind the desk, a woman in scrubs reading a paperback, a small queue of late visitors signing in. Jessica took her place. She had her ID ready in her hand. She had practiced what she would say.

"Jessica Merrow. To see Charles Smith. Sixth floor, ICU."

The security officer looked at her, looked at her ID, looked at his screen. He took longer than the people in front of her had taken. He typed something, waited, typed again. Jessica stood very still and made the kind of face she had been making for cameras since she was sixteen, which was the face of a young person whose business at a hospital reception desk was both legitimate and not interesting.

"You're on the list," the officer said. "There's a—there's an officer with him. You'll have to give your phone in."

"My phone."

"Yes. You can have it back when you leave. Standing instruction."

"All right."

She handed it over. He gave her a small numbered ticket. He stamped a visitor sticker for her and pointed her at the lifts.

She walked away from the desk feeling lighter, and slightly disoriented, and slightly furious. Her phone had been a constant of her life for so long that the absence of its weight in her

hand registered as a missing limb. She had not been without her phone for any meaningful length of time, she thought, since she was twelve. She had also, separately, registered that whoever had instructed the security desk to confiscate visitors' phones had not done so for her sake.

The lift was empty.

The sixth-floor corridor was empty.

ICU was at the end of it.

A nurse let her through the double doors with a swipe of a card. The nurse said the room number. She said: "He's awake. He's tired. There's an officer with him; she'll stay through the visit. Twenty minutes maximum."

"All right."

"You okay?"

"Yes."

"You want me to walk in with you?"

"No. Thank you."

The nurse looked at her for a second longer—in the assessing way nurses had of looking at young women coming in to see badly injured young men, which was a way they had perfected over many shifts and on which Jessica had no settled view—and then she nodded and stepped back, and Jessica walked the rest of the corridor alone, and when she reached the room she stopped at the door and made herself breathe for two slow counts before she went in.

The room was lit by one bedside lamp and the corridor light coming through the half-glass wall. The cardiac monitor, on a

stand at the head of the bed, made its small green pulse. The IV stand was on the far side. The bed itself had been raised slightly, and Chummy was propped on three pillows, his left arm in a sling, an oxygen cannula at his nose, a fading bruise along the left side of his face that had begun the day a more violent colour than it now was and which was, Jessica realised, probably going to look much worse tomorrow.

He was awake.

He was looking at her.

In the chair beside the door—not, as she had expected, beside the bed—sat a uniformed female officer, perhaps thirty, dark hair tied back, hands folded over a notebook in her lap. The officer did not get up. She nodded at Jessica. She did not introduce herself. The arrangement of her posture suggested that she had been sitting in chairs like this through other people's hardest evenings for a long time and had developed a settled understanding of how little of herself to take up while doing so.

Jessica walked to the bed.

Chummy lifted his free hand a few inches off the blanket. She took it. His hand was warm and dry. His fingers closed around hers with the small careful pressure of a person whose grip strength was being asked to do something other than what it ordinarily did.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

His voice was rougher than she had expected. Whether from the oxygen, or the intubation he must have been on at some point

in the day, or from something more general having to do with the experience of having been in the air this morning and now being in a bed, she did not know.

"How are you," she said.

"Bruised. Concussed. They tell me I'm lucky."

"Are you."

"Yes."

She looked at his face. The face of the man she had been with for six months. The face she had photographed perhaps two hundred times in those six months—it had been an early thing in their relationship, a way of incorporating him into the visible part of her life that she had then, when he had asked, given up doing—and which she had not, for some weeks now, looked at carefully without a screen between them.

His eyes were the same.

She had not been sure they would be.

"I came as soon as they let me," she said. "They wouldn't let me in until—until they had cleared visitors. Your dad's flying in tomorrow. I spoke to him. He sounded—he sounded all right."

"He's all right."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here earlier."

"You're here now."

She sat in the chair next to the bed without taking her hand from his. The chair was the kind of vinyl-padded armchair hospitals had, designed not for comfort but for the long sitting of people who had nowhere better to be. She arranged herself. She

did not look at the officer. She had decided in the corridor that she was not going to look at the officer at all.

"What have they told you," she said.

"Not much. They've told me Maxwell didn't make it."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

"How much do you remember."

He looked at her. He held the look for a long moment. He looked at the officer. He looked back at her.

"Not enough," he said. "I have—I have the take-off. I have the climb out. I have the cruise. I have—I have Maxwell talking. I have him saying—I have him saying we had a problem. I have the bail-out. I remember the silk going up, and I remember being under it, and I remember the cold. I have the impact. After the impact I have—I have a piece. I don't have all of it."

"What piece."

"I have looking up. I have the underside of the silk. I have it being lit from above. I have seeing his face. I have him not—I have him not being all right. I don't have the rest of it."

"You don't remember—"

"I don't remember the rest of it, Jessica."

She watched his face. It did not move in any way she could not have predicted. The face of a test pilot saying *I do not remember* was a face that had been trained, over years, in the saying of things calmly. She had known this about him from the second week of their being together. She had liked it about him, even. She liked it less now.

"Was it bad," she said.

"Yes."

"Are you—"

"I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm --"

He did not finish the sentence.

The officer turned a page in her notebook. The page-turn was very quiet, but Jessica heard it, and she understood that the page-turn was not for the officer. The page-turn was a small reminder, gently administered, that the officer was in the room and was listening.

Jessica said: "What did they tell you happened."

"Mechanical failure. Engine."

"Engine."

"Yeah. They think—they think we lost the port engine on a turn over Battersea. We made the call to bail. The chute fouled. We came down on a roof."

"On Philip's roof."

"On Philip's roof."

"What are the chances of that."

"Astronomical, apparently. The wind. The angle of bail. The size of the tree. They've already got someone modelling it."

"Are they sure," she said.

"Sure of what."

"Sure it was the engine."

He looked at her again. The look held this time, and went on holding, and the officer turned another page.

"They tell me it was the engine," he said. "I'm not in any position to disagree with them."

It was the most careful sentence she had ever heard him say. They tell me. I'm not in a position. Each word weighted to mean exactly what it said and nothing else and to be impossible, in any subsequent transcript, to make say more than it had said. She thought: he has been thinking about how to talk to me with a witness in the room since before they took the tube out of him.

She thought: *all right.*

She thought: *I can do this.*

She said: "Did you have your gun on you."

He looked at her, looked at the officer, looked back at her.

"It was there," he said.

She did not ask whose. She did not ask whether he had fired it. It was there, she understood, was the sentence he had chosen to say in this room, and any further question would shift it from his sentence to the officer's transcript.

"Tell Esdaile I'm sorry about his roof," Chummy said. "Tell him I'll pay for it. As soon as I'm out of here. Whatever it costs."

"He won't take any money."

"He'll have to."

"He won't. You know what he's like."

"Yeah." Chummy's mouth made a small expression that on another evening would have been a smile. "Yeah. I do."

She watched him. He looked tired now in a way he had not when she first walked in. The brief good-soldier composure had

cost him something. The thing under the composure was visible—the bone-tiredness, the body's slow re-registering of what it had been through, the sedatives doing their work. He was going to fall asleep in the next ten minutes whether she was still here or not.

She leaned in slightly. She kept her free hand on his free hand. She lowered her voice but not to a whisper, because a whisper would have been a thing the officer could ask about. She lowered it to the volume of an ordinary intimate exchange between two people whose sentences were not, in their content, of any official interest.

"What do you need," she said.

He did not answer for a moment.

"You doing okay financially," he said. "You been paid this month."

"Yes. Why."

"Just checking. You got the—the rent thing sorted."

"Yes."

"I was thinking about that. In the air. About whether I'd remembered to do the—the standing order. For the —"

"You did it."

"Yeah?"

"You did it last week. I saw the confirmation."

"Good."

He held her eyes.

"There's a—there's a thing on my phone," he said quietly.

"On the—you know. The app. The drafts folder."

"Yeah."

"There's a draft in there. There's a—there's an unsent message. With an attachment. It's set to go automatically if I don't—if I don't dismiss the timer. The timer's set for twenty-four hours. I last dismissed it at six this morning."

"All right."

"I'm not going to be able to dismiss it from here. I won't have my phone. They've got it in evidence. So at six tomorrow morning it's going to send. If I can't get it cancelled."

"To who."

He didn't answer.

"Chummy. To who."

The officer cleared her throat. Not loud. Just a small civil sound. *Two minutes*, the sound said.

Chummy looked at the officer. He looked back at Jessica.

"To whoever I set it to," he said. "Months ago. I don't—I don't entirely remember. I set it up when I was—when I was still trying to think clearly about what was the right thing to do."

"What's in it."

"What I knew. Up to the point at which I set it up."

"How much did you know up to that point."

"Some. Not all. Enough to make it make sense."

"And the attachment."

"A file."

She waited.

"Jessica, I --"

"Chummy. The attachment."

"It's a recording. Of a conversation I had with someone, two months ago. Who I shouldn't have had it with."

"Who."

The officer cleared her throat a second time. Less gently.

Chummy held Jessica's eyes for a beat that felt longer than it was, and then he closed his own. He did not say a name. He did not say anything for a moment.

When he opened his eyes again he said, very quietly, in a register that the officer could perhaps not entirely hear over the cardiac monitor: "Bukhari. Tell Hubbard. He'll know."

Then, more loudly: "I'm sorry, Jessica. I'm—I'm tired. I think I have to --"

"It's all right. It's all right. I'll come back in the morning."

"Yeah."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

She held his hand for another moment. He squeezed her fingers once. Then his eyes closed. The cardiac monitor went on in its small green pulse. The officer stood up.

"Time," the officer said gently. "I'm sorry. He needs to sleep."

"All right."

She let go of his hand.

She bent over the bed and kissed his forehead—slowly, taking longer over it than was perhaps strictly required, because she did not know when she would next be permitted to do it and

because the officer was watching but had agreed to let her do it—and she stood up, and she gathered her bag, and she did not look at his face again.

She walked out of the room.

The corridor was the same corridor she had walked down. The double doors at the end of it had not changed. The lift was still where she had left it. The reception desk had a different security officer at it now—the one who had been on at her arrival had gone for a break—and the new one looked at her ticket and gave her back her phone and stamped her out without any of the slowness with which she had been stamped in.

The phone, when she switched it on, was cold from sitting in a drawer for half an hour.

It had thirty-nine notifications. She did not look at any of them.

She put the phone in her coat pocket and she walked out through the main doors.

The cold hit her at the threshold. February in London at half past nine at night, the river on the wind, the temperature several degrees lower than it had been in the cab. She stood under the portico for a moment and let the cold in. She let it get under the coat and against the inside of her ribcage and into the small bones of her hands.

She had asked. He had answered.

She did not know, yet, what to do with what she had been told. She did not know whether I don't remember meant I don't remember, or whether I don't remember meant I am not going to

tell you in this room. She did not know whether the message in the drafts folder was a real message or a story he had constructed for the officer in the chair to overhear and pass up the chain to people who would now be looking for it. She did not know whether Bukhari was a name she should give to Hubbard or a name she should keep until she was sure.

She knew only one thing for certain, and she made herself, standing under the portico in the cold, name it.

He had not asked her not to come back.

He had asked her, instead, in coded grammar she had spent six months learning to read, to come back tomorrow with a fuller sense of what she was going to do. He had told her where the message was. He had told her who to give the name to. He had, in the small remaining minute he had been allowed, given her custody of a thing. The thing was now hers to carry.

She had not, until tonight, ever been given anything that could not be photographed.

She stepped out from under the portico and the wind caught her hair, and she walked towards the kerb, and she raised her hand for a cab, and she stood there alone in the cold while the lights of Westminster moved in the river behind her, waiting for one to come.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Clock

Mollie was at the kitchen sink with the kettle in her hand when Philip came in.

She had filled it. She set it on the stove and turned the gas on. She then, on second thought, turned the gas off and decided to fill the kettle a second time, because the first time she had not been paying attention and it occurred to her that she had filled it from the cold tap before letting the cold tap run for half a minute, and on a night like this one it seemed important that the water in the kettle be water she had paid attention to.

She did not turn around when Philip came in. She knew his step in the kitchen as well as she knew the step of either of her sons.

"They're all right," he said, behind her. "The boys."

"I know they're all right. I went up half an hour ago."

"Mollie."

"Don't."

"I know, but --"

"Philip. Don't. Not yet."

He stopped in the doorway. The kettle clanked once on the stove as she set it down. She turned the gas on a second time. The blue flame caught at the third click of the igniter, and steadied, and she watched it for a moment as though it were the only thing in the room she was certain about.

When she turned around, finally, her face was the face she had used to receive guests on a great number of evenings during which she had received guests, and Philip understood that she was offering him, for the duration of this conversation and the rest of the evening's necessary business, the full hospitality of her composure. She had decided not to make him deal with what she had been doing in the kitchen for the last twenty minutes. She had also decided that he should know, without her saying so, what it had cost her to make the decision.

"Three years," she said.

"Yes."

"In our cellar."

"Yes."

"Every few weeks."

"Yes."

She nodded, as though he had confirmed a small piece of information she had already taken for granted, and which she was now allowing herself to formally hear. The kettle began the soft early breath of water beginning to think about boiling.

"I'm not asking you why," she said. "Right now. I will, but not now. Right now I am telling you that I heard you, when you said it, and I have been thinking about it for the last two hours, and what I want you to know—what I want you to know tonight, before whatever the rest of this is—is that I am not going to be the wife in the story who stops working because of it. I'm not going to walk out. I'm not going to make you account for it in front of the boys. I'm not going to make Jessica choose

between us. We have other things to do tonight, all of us, and I am going to do mine. And tomorrow you and I will sit down. And we will talk about the cellar. And about the storage room. And about what makes a person—a person who is otherwise a good person, and a good father—keep a private chapel for three years and not show it to his wife. We will talk about that. But not tonight. Tonight I'm making tea. Do you understand."

"Yes."

"Say it back to me."

"Tonight you're making tea. Tomorrow we talk."

"Good."

She turned back to the stove.

Philip stood in the doorway and watched her shoulders, which had not changed their angle, and he understood, with the clarity of someone who drew for a living, that the conversation he had just had was the most generous conversation he had been on the receiving end of in several years, and that it had cost his wife something he was not going to be permitted to see the receipt for, and that he was going to spend a long time being worthy of it.

"Mollie."

"Don't, Philip."

"All right."

"Take the curaçao back into the studio. People have been looking at it for hours and not drinking it. It's wasted on a centrepiece. Pour."

"All right."

"And take some bread in. I cut some up. It's on the board. I don't want anyone fainting."

"All right."

He picked up the bread board. He picked up the bottle. He went back into the studio.

The studio held the people he had left in it in a slightly altered arrangement. Hubbard had moved from the breakfast table into the chair by the standard lamp, and was on his phone in low naval-officer tones with somebody Philip did not recognise and was being careful not to. Will had been on his phone too, and was sitting now with his eyes closed and his fingers interlaced over his waistcoat in the manner of a man whose body had decided, despite him, that it wanted to sleep. Adam had, at some point, taken a small black notebook out of an inside pocket, and was writing in it with a fountain pen—short lines, with pauses—and did not look up when Philip came back in. Morgan had begun, without asking and without ceremony, to drink the liqueur Philip poured for him an hour ago and set down without touching, and then poured himself another, and was now sitting with the second glass empty in his hand and the third about to be considered.

Audrey was not in the studio.

Mollie had taken her upstairs, Philip understood now, somewhere in the long minutes before he had come into the kitchen; had put her in the spare room; had closed the door. Audrey had not come down. Audrey was, presumably, lying on her back in the dark on a single bed in a room she had been in twice before, looking at a ceiling, and Philip had no idea what she was

thinking, and he understood that he was not going to know any time soon.

He set the bottle on the table beside the gun. He set the bread down beside the bottle. He poured liqueur into the four glasses that had not been touched and refilled the two that had. Hubbard, finishing his call, came over to the table and took one of the glasses without looking at the gun, which he had set down on the napkin two hours earlier and not since acknowledged.

"That was the Aiglon duty officer," Hubbard said quietly. "Their incident line. They are operating on the official version."

"Which is."

"Engine failure. Unfortunate parachute deployment. One fatality. A second pilot in stable condition. They are not, at this stage, releasing names. I asked, in my professional capacity, whether the surviving pilot's identity was known to me. The duty officer said that the surviving pilot's identity was not, at this stage, being released. I said: I understand. He said: Thank you, Commander. That was the whole conversation."

"They know it's you."

"They know it's me. The duty officer was in the Gulf with me in '06. I do not propose to test our friendship any further this evening."

Adam looked up from his notebook for the first time. "They're going to call it engine failure on the news."

"They already are. Have you not seen?"

"I have. I wanted to hear you say it."

Hubbard nodded. He drank his liqueur. He set the glass down empty.

"They will call it engine failure," he said, "for as long as they have the room to call it engine failure. The room is presently quite large."

Will opened his eyes.

"How large."

"Until the recovery report is filed. Forty-eight hours. Maybe seventy-two."

"And after that."

"After that there will be metallurgical tests on the engine that will say one thing, and a separate set of tests on whatever is left of the airframe that will say another, and the gap between the two findings is where the people we are presently up against will operate."

He looked at Philip.

"Where's Jessica."

"On her way back. Should be—" Philip glanced at his watch —
- any minute, I think. She said she'd come back."

"Good."

They waited.

The wait was not long. Three minutes after Philip had set the bread down, the soft growl of a black cab came through the front railings, and the engine cut, and they all heard the door slam, and the click of the wrought-iron gate.

Mollie came out of the kitchen, drying her hands.

Jessica came in.

She came in cold. She came in with her cheeks red from the wind off the river and her hair coming out of the small clip she had put it in for the hospital, and she came in carrying her phone in her hand and her bag over her shoulder, and she did not say anything when she came in. She walked through the annexe and into the studio. She looked around the room. She saw the bottle and the bread on the table. She saw the gun on its folded napkin. She saw Hubbard standing. She saw Will with his eyes open now. She saw Adam closing his notebook. She saw Mollie in the doorway behind her. She saw Philip standing by the breakfast table with the empty bottle in one hand.

She said: "I need to sit down."

Mollie went and got her a chair from the annexe and put it where she wanted it, in the space between the breakfast table and the studio doorway, where Jessica could see the room. Jessica sat in it. Mollie put a blanket round her shoulders. Mollie said: "Tea in five minutes."

"Yes," Jessica said. "Thank you."

Hubbard pulled up a second chair and sat down across from her, not too close. He waited.

Jessica looked at him. She looked at all of them.

"All right," she said. "I'll tell you. From the beginning."

She told them.

She told them about the cab. She told them about being on the visitor list, about the security desk taking her phone—at this Hubbard's expression briefly tightened in the way an expression tightens when a person who knows what something means

hears it for the first time—about the corridor, about being escorted to the room. She told them about the female officer in the chair by the door. She told them about Chummy's appearance, which was better than she had been afraid of and worse than she had been hoping for. She told them about the page-turns the officer had used to mark the boundary of what could be said.

She told them about the cover story he had been required to deliver, and the manner in which he had delivered it.

"He told me it was the engine," she said.

Hubbard looked at the floor.

"He said," Jessica went on, "they tell me it was the engine, and I'm not in any position to disagree with them. He said it looking at me. He said it the way a person says it when the person knows that the next person to read it back to him is going to be in court, and the person wants to be sure that nothing in the sentence can be made to mean more than the sentence said. He was telling me. He was telling me he didn't believe it himself. He was telling me by saying that he wasn't telling me anything."

Will nodded slowly. "Yes," he said.

"What about Maxwell," Hubbard said.

"He said he didn't remember."

"Believable?"

"Plausible. Concussion is real. He had a head injury. He could not remember. Or he could remember and be saying he didn't because the room was wrong for remembering. I don't know."

"Did he remember the gun."

"I asked him whether he had had his gun. He said: it was there. He said it after he had looked at the officer and looked back at me. It was there. That was the sentence. He did not say whose gun. He did not say whether he had fired it. He said it was there."

Hubbard, very still: "All right."

Jessica took a breath.

"Then," she said, "as I was leaving, he told me two things."

The room waited.

"He told me there's a message," Jessica said. "On his phone. In the drafts folder of an encrypted messaging app. With an attachment. The attachment is a recording of a conversation he had two months ago with someone he says he shouldn't have had it with. He set the message up months ago, with a twenty-four-hour timer. Every day he goes in and dismisses the timer. The last time he dismissed the timer was at six o'clock this morning, before he flew. He's not going to be able to dismiss it again. The Met have his phone in evidence. At six o'clock tomorrow morning the message sends."

Will opened his mouth and closed it.

"Sends to whom," Hubbard said.

"He didn't tell me. I asked. He didn't say. The officer was—the officer was getting close to ending the visit. He didn't have time."

"Jessica, did he --"

"I know what you're going to ask, Cecil. He didn't tell me his phone PIN, either. I have it from before. He gave it to me

months ago. But it doesn't matter. The phone is in police evidence. I can't get to it."

Hubbard nodded. He had asked the question because he had to ask it; he had understood the answer before she gave it.

"What was the second thing," Adam said, quietly.

Jessica looked at Hubbard.

"He gave me a name."

"Whose."

"Bukhari."

Hubbard's face did not move. It did not move at all, in the small way faces did not move when the face had been drilled for many years in not moving when names landed on it. He held the not-moving for a count of perhaps three. Then he set his liqueur glass down.

"What did he say about him."

"He said: Bukhari. Tell Hubbard. He'll know."

"That was it."

"That was it."

"He said it in the room. With the officer there."

"Quietly. After he had looked at her. The officer made a sound—a throat-clearing, not loud—to mark the time. He said it before her sound finished. I think she didn't hear it. I think she heard I'm sorry, Jessica, which he said immediately afterwards. I think she heard that and not what came before it. But I'm not certain."

"Karim Bukhari."

"He didn't say a first name."

"It's Karim Bukhari."

Hubbard sat back in his chair. He looked at the gun on the table. He looked at the bread Mollie had cut up and which nobody had eaten. Then he looked at Jessica.

"All right," he said. "Now I'll tell you."

Karim Bukhari, Hubbard told them—without notes, in the slightly reduced register he used for explaining things he did not particularly want to be explaining at all—was the Director of Capability Integration at the Ministry of Defence. He was fifty-four years old. He had come up through the procurement side of the Civil Service in the early 2000s, had spent a few years on secondment at one of the larger defence contractors, and had returned to the Ministry into a directorate that did not exist until he had been brought in to run it. The directorate's job, on paper, was to ensure that capabilities developed by separate parts of the defence enterprise—uncrewed platforms, weapons systems, sensors, communications—could be brought together coherently when one wanted them brought together, and could be kept separate when one wanted them kept separate. In practice, his directorate was the body within the Ministry that decided which weapons systems went on which platforms, and at which stages of the platforms' life-cycles, and under whose authority.

In particular, Hubbard said, Bukhari's office signed off on weapons integration trials.

The trials were the period during which a new weapons system was first married to a new platform. They were conducted by the platform manufacturer, under the supervision of a unit of test

pilots, on aircraft that had been certified for the carriage of specific weapons under specific authorities. The aircraft's onboard systems, during these trials, were configured by the manufacturer but signed off by Bukhari's directorate. The pilots, during these trials, knew which weapons they were carrying and what those weapons were authorised to do.

When pilots, during weapons integration trials, encountered weapons systems on board their aircraft that they had not been told they were carrying, the unit that they reported to was, in the first instance, their own chain of command at the operating unit. In the second instance, it was the manufacturer. In the third instance—when a pilot believed his own chain of command and the manufacturer were not addressing the matter satisfactorily—it was Bukhari's office at the MoD.

"Bukhari," Hubbard said, "is the man you go to when you think the system has been lying to you about what it's putting on your wing pylons. He is the inspector general of weapons integration. He is, in theory, the floor below which the procurement process cannot fall."

He paused.

"Two months ago," Hubbard said, "Chummy went to him."

Jessica said: "And recorded the conversation."

"And recorded the conversation."

"Why would he record it?"

"Because Chummy is—was—is—twenty-four years old and a test pilot, and a test pilot at twenty-four does not record a conversation with the Director of Capability Integration on the

off-chance. He records it because somebody told him to. Because somebody he trusted told him that the conversation might be the only piece of evidence that survived the conversation."

"And then," Adam said, "he sets the recording on a twenty-four-hour timer."

"Yes."

"Because he believed he might be killed."

"Yes."

"Cecil," Mollie said, from the doorway of the kitchen. Hubbard looked at her.

"Do you know him?" she said. "Bukhari. Personally."

"I have met him three times. Once at a Chatham House evening. Once at an inter-service board on autonomous weapons. Once at a working lunch at the Reform Club two years ago, at which he was the host and I was, in a junior capacity, present. I do not know him. I know of him. I would not, an hour ago, have included him on any list of people I expected to see Chummy Smith involved with, because Chummy Smith is a test pilot and the Director of Capability Integration is two and a half levels above the kind of person a test pilot ordinarily talks to."

"Is he --" Will started.

"I don't know. I do not know whether he is the person Chummy was reporting to, in the sense of an inspector general, or the person Chummy was reporting on, in the sense of a target. Either is possible. Both are possible. The recording will tell us."

"At six in the morning," Adam said.

"At six in the morning."

Will stood up.

He had been still for a long time, and the standing up was the first thing he had done with his body in perhaps an hour, and the room paid attention to it the way a room pays attention to a barrister rising.

"All right," Will said. "Let me try this. Out loud. So we hear it."

He looked at each of them.

"At six o'clock tomorrow morning, a recording will be sent—through encrypted channels—from a phone currently in police evidence—to a recipient or recipients we do not know—containing a conversation between a young test pilot, who is presently under armed police guard in a hospital, and a senior MoD official, regarding weapons systems that may or may not have been authorised on the aircraft that crashed onto Philip Esdaile's roof this morning. Yes?"

"Yes," Hubbard said.

"We cannot stop the message. The phone is in evidence. Jessica does not have access. None of us has access."

"Correct."

"We do not know who the recipient is."

"Correct."

"We do not know what is on the recording."

"Correct."

"We are not at this stage entirely sure," Will said, "whether Chummy Smith fired the shot that killed Maxwell, or whether someone else did, or whether Maxwell was already dead

from the crash and a discharged round is a coincidence, or whether the discharged round was fired by some third party we have not yet considered. And we are not sure of these things despite Philip having watched the event in projection on a cellar floor."

"Correct," Philip said.

"Right." Will nodded. "Then I want to make a recommendation. As your lawyer, in the courtroom sense, but also as your friend, in the not-courtroom sense."

He looked at Jessica.

"You should not, between now and six in the morning, send any message of any kind, on any channel, about any of this, to any party. Not to a journalist. Not to a friend. Not to your mother. Not to your followers. Not to a number you have not used before. Not from a phone you have used before. Nothing. You should sit in this house. You should drink the tea Mollie is making. You should, at some point in the next few hours, sleep, because you have had a longer day than any of us. And you should be present in this room when the message sends."

Jessica nodded.

"Cecil," Will said. "You should not, between now and six in the morning, place any further calls about this matter to any of your contacts at Aiglon, the Ministry, or the Service. You have made your one call. Anything more becomes a pattern. A pattern is what people who later wish to ask you questions look for. Sit in this house. Drink Mollie's tea. Sleep."

Hubbard nodded.

"Adam," Will said. "You are a journalist. You are also Philip's friend. Tonight you are entirely his friend and not at all a journalist. I want a sentence from you confirming this."

Adam said: "Tonight I am entirely his friend."

"Good. You should write nothing for publication, take no notes you would not be willing to surrender, and call no one. Sit in this house."

"All right."

"Morgan --" Will hesitated. He looked, briefly and with a small softening of the face, at where Morgan was sitting. Morgan had not, Philip realised, moved during Will's entire speech. He was holding the third liqueur glass empty in his hand. He was not exactly drunk; he was something more thinly distributed than that. "Morgan. You should sleep upstairs tonight. In the spare room. With Audrey, if she will have you. In the front sitting room if she will not. You should not, under any circumstance, go home tonight to your own flat, because if there is any party currently interested in retrieving the gun on this table, your flat is one of the places they will be looking. I am sorry to put it this way. The gun will stay where it is. Cecil will sit up with it."

Morgan nodded once, slowly.

"And Philip." Will looked at him. "You should sleep in your own bed, in the room with your wife, because your wife has had a longer day than most of us have given her credit for, and she is going to spend the rest of it making tea for the rest of us, and the small thing you can do tonight is be upstairs at the end of

it and not down here. We will manage the message. We will be in the studio at six. You will join us at six. Yes?"

Philip looked at Mollie. Mollie looked back at him without expression.

"Yes," he said.

"Right." Will sat down.

"You're a good man, Will," Hubbard said.

"I'm a tired man," Will said. "And I want to be in a room I can defend at six in the morning. That's all."

Mollie went to put the kettle on for the third time that night.

In the kitchen, with the door half-shut behind her and the kettle filling at the cold tap, Mollie did not hear the small sounds of the upper landing. She did not hear the wheeled bag being lifted rather than rolled, because the cold tap was running. She did not hear the careful descent of the stairs. She did not hear the porch door open and close, nor the soft mechanical settling of the wrought-iron gate. She did not, when she came back into the studio with the fresh teapot, register that one of the chairs at the breakfast table had been empty for some time.

The chair was the chair Audrey had been sitting in earlier in the evening, before Mollie had taken her upstairs.

The bag Audrey had brought for the spring at Lennox Street had not been on the chair. It had been in the corner of the spare room, unpacked. It was no longer in the corner of the spare room.

None of this was a thing Mollie was going to register until the morning.

In the spare room, on the small writing desk by the window, Audrey had left her engagement ring, in the small white-gold setting with the emeralds, beside a folded sheet of cottage notepaper on which she had written, in her small careful hand, four words. The note was for Morgan. The note was not in Mollie's handwriting and not in Mollie's keeping, but the cottage notepaper was. Audrey had used it because it was what she had found in the writing-desk drawer.

The four words were: *I am sorry, Morgan.*

The ring lay beside the note like a small green eye that had stopped looking.

It was now past three in the morning. The lamp Mollie had switched on at the start of the conversation, hours ago, threw its small soft halo across the table, beside the empty bottle of curaçao, beside the gun on its napkin, beside the bread that no one had eaten. Outside, the wind off the river had got up; the sycamore at the eastern corner of the garden creaked once and was still. The small private clock that none of them could see was running down towards the hour the message would send, and they had nothing left to do, between now and then, but sit.

They sat.

CHAPTER FIVE

What Bukhari Heard

Karim Bukhari had been awake since three.

He was in the kitchen of the house on Makepeace Avenue in Highgate that he had bought with his wife in 2011, when he had taken the directorate role and the directorate role had come with the salary that made Highgate possible. He was at the small round breakfast table where, on ordinary mornings, he sat with Yasmin and read the *Financial Times* and listened to her not say anything at six, because Yasmin was not a person who spoke before seven. On this morning Yasmin was still upstairs, asleep in their bedroom, and Bukhari had been at the table for nearly three hours, and the *Financial Times* had not yet arrived because the *Financial Times* did not ordinarily arrive before six fifteen.

He had a teapot in front of him from which he drank two cups of tea between three and four, and a teapot from which he drank one cup between four and five, and a third teapot which he made at five thirty and which was now cooling without him drinking from it. He had also, on the table beside the teapot, three telephones. The first was his ordinary phone, the personal one, with which he conducted his life. The second was his official Ministry phone. The third was a phone that did not belong to him, exactly, but which he kept charged and on his person when he travelled and which he was now keeping in his line of sight on the kitchen table because he did not want it to be in any other

room when it became, as he had been waiting since yesterday afternoon for it to become, the phone that mattered.

It was the second phone that buzzed, at six precisely.

He did not pick it up at once. He let it sit on the wood for the duration of the alert. He had been informed by the senior man in the directorate, in confidence, on the previous afternoon, that one Lieutenant Charles Smith of the Aiglon test cadre had had an aviation incident over Chelsea, that one Captain Owen Maxwell had not survived the incident, and that the surviving pilot was in police custody at St Thomas's, his phone in evidence, his condition described as serious but stable. Bukhari thanked the senior man. He returned to his office. He closed the door. He sat for fifteen minutes looking at the small framed photograph on his desk of Yasmin and the children at Lake Bled in 2017. Then he got up, put his coat on, and went home, and he had sat at this table since three o'clock in the morning waiting for the phone to do what it was now doing.

He picked it up.

The notification was from Signal. He had Signal on the official phone for entirely innocent reasons: half of the senior civil service was on Signal, because half of the senior civil service had read the same articles about messaging security and had drawn the same conclusions. He had given his Signal contact to perhaps two hundred people over the years. One of those people was Lieutenant Charles Smith, who had, in a meeting in Bukhari's office in the Old War Office Building on the eleventh of December last year, said: Sir, I have an encrypted line. If anything ever

happens that you and I need to discuss off the record, this is the way.

Bukhari had taken the contact. He had not, in eleven weeks, used it.

The message was from that line.

It contained a single character. A 1. Below the 1 was an attachment: an audio file, sixty-four minutes long, encrypted to Bukhari's Signal key. The sender's name on the message was the name Lieutenant Smith had registered on the application: Chummy. The timestamp was 06:00:01.

Bukhari sat for a moment looking at the screen. Then he stood up. He carried the phone to the back of the kitchen, where the door opened onto the small paved garden, and he opened the door and stepped out into the cold. Frost on the slate. The grey-blue of February pre-dawn in north London, the sky just beginning to think about it. He stood in his slippers on the slate, and the cold came up his legs, and he tapped the file.

He did not need to listen to all of it. He needed to listen to the first ten seconds.

The audio opened with the soft acoustic ambience of a senior civil servant's office—the particular hush of a room with thick carpets and lined curtains, of the kind they had given him when he had been promoted to Director—and then his own voice came through the phone's small speaker with the slightly compressed quality of a recording that had been made on a device in someone's pocket. The voice was saying:

"I have read your concern, Lieutenant. I want to thank you for bringing it to me. The chain of command for this kind of report is not always clear, and you have done the right thing in bringing it to my office directly. I want you to understand that what you have brought me is being taken seriously, and I want you to understand that the seriousness with which it is being taken includes a careful regard for the circumstances of the people who report such things. I want to give you some advice. The thing you think you have seen is, in my experience, one of three things..."

Bukhari thumbed the audio off.

He stood for a moment looking at the small frosted slate beneath his slippers. He looked at the bare branches of the apple tree at the bottom of the garden, against which Yasmin had hung a bird-feeder last autumn, which was empty. He looked at the small terracotta pot beside the back door in which the rosemary had survived the winter. He looked at the cold pale sky over the rooftops to the east, where the morning was, eventually, going to come.

He did not feel surprise. He had stopped feeling surprise some time the previous afternoon, perhaps at the moment when the senior man had said *phone in evidence*, perhaps at the moment of *serious but stable*. He had spent the night since then arranging in his mind the timing of what was now happening, and the file had now arrived precisely on schedule, and the matter was no longer hypothetical, and there was, in the actual fact of it, a small relief he was startled to recognise. A man who had been waiting since two in the afternoon for a thing he had been

waiting for, in some larger sense, since 2019, was permitted a small interior easing at the moment the thing finally arrived.

He had been twenty-eight years in the Civil Service. He had married Yasmin Mahmood in 2003 in Karachi at a wedding her father paid for and at which his own father wept openly in the manner of a man who had not, in his lifetime, expected his son to come to such circumstances. He had bought the house on Makepeace Avenue in 2011. He had two children: Sara, who was reading medicine at Imperial; and Tariq, who was sixteen and had been, since he was eleven, anxious in ways for which Bukhari had not been able to find the correct vocabulary, but which he was tender about, and which he and Yasmin managed between them with a care that took up a substantial fraction of their domestic life. He had served four Secretaries of State, three of them with admiration and one with the careful professionalism of a man working under someone he could not respect. He had, in 2019, in a small private dining room above a restaurant in St James's, had lunch with a man named Glenfield, who he knew socially for years, and who asked him, over the second glass of an excellent Sancerre, whether he might be willing to consider a small adjustment to a procurement determination that was going to be made by his directorate in the following month. Bukhari said no. Glenfield did not press. They finished the lunch, and Bukhari walked back to the office and thought no more about it. Three weeks later, a man not named Glenfield came to see him in a small grey suit with a Cabinet Office lanyard and explained, with great courtesy, that the determination Glenfield had asked Bukhari to consider was in fact

a determination that the Cabinet Office wanted Bukhari to make, that it was a determination which had national-security implications, that it was reviewed at levels above Bukhari and approved at levels above Bukhari, and that the only person whose signature was required to enact it was Bukhari's. Bukhari asked some questions. The man answered them. The answers were, in retrospect, the answers of a man explaining how a thing was done; they felt at the time, in the room, like the answers of a man explaining what the country needed. Bukhari signed.

That had been the first signature.

The second signature, four months later, was on a similar matter, with a similar man, with similar courtesies. By the third signature he had stopped asking the questions he asked the first time. By the fourth, in 2021, he understood, in a way he had refused to understand the previous three times, what it was he was signing. By the fifth he was a man who had ceased to have the option of not signing, because the man not named Glenfield had, between the fourth and the fifth, sent him a small private indication of what would happen to the existing four signatures if he were to declare any inconvenience about a fifth.

He had signed the fifth. He had signed the sixth and the seventh.

And then, in December of last year, a twenty-four-year-old test pilot had walked into his office and had looked him in the eye across a desk, and had said: *Sir, I think I am being asked to fly an aircraft with weapons systems on it that have not been properly authorised. I have read the standing instructions for*

cases like this and I am told that you are the man I bring this to. I am bringing it to you.

And Bukhari looked back at the young man, across the desk in the Old War Office Building, and said the things he had been required, over the previous three years, to learn how to say.

He had said them well. The young man did not understand, that day, that he had come to the wrong office. That comprehension came to the young man later, perhaps at the door, perhaps on the steps outside, perhaps in the cab he took back to whatever flat he kept in Vauxhall. He understood that he had recorded the meeting only in retrospect, when he looked at the recording in his pocket and realised that he had a thing in his hand which he could now use, or not use, to his advantage, depending on what subsequently happened.

He had, in the eleven weeks since, used it twice. The first time had been to send Bukhari a message on the same Signal line. The message had said: Sir, I have a recording of our meeting in December. I am keeping it as insurance. If anything happens to me—anything at all—it will be released. I am telling you this so that you know not to do anything to me, and so that you can communicate this knowledge to anyone you may report to. I do not wish to harm you. I wish to remain alive. Bukhari had read the message. He had, at considerable internal cost, communicated the substance of it to the man not named Glenfield. The man not named Glenfield had received the information without apparent reaction, and had then said: Thank you, Karim. Two days later he had said,

in a separate context: We have considered the matter you raised. The matter does not change our determinations.

Bukhari understood, then, that the man not named Glenfield had decided the eventual release of a recording of Bukhari's voice was an acceptable cost of whatever larger plan was now being executed. He understood, then, that he himself had been priced into a calculation he had not been informed about, at a value that was less than zero.

The second use had been this morning, six minutes ago.

He looked at the phone in his cold hand.

He thumbed the audio back on. He let it run for another minute, listening. He listened to himself say the careful sentences he had been trained over years to say. He listened to the young man receive them. He listened to the young man say, after a short pause: *Sir, I take your point. May I ask one further question?* He listened to the question. He thumbed the audio off.

He stood on the slate.

He thought about Yasmin upstairs in their bed. He thought about Sara at her flat in South Kensington, who had a viva on Friday. He thought about Tariq, who had been sleeping badly for four nights in a row now and who had asked his mother, two evenings ago, whether his father was all right. He thought about the house on Makepeace Avenue and the rosemary in the terracotta pot and the photograph at Lake Bled.

Then he went back inside.

He picked up the third phone. He pressed and held the single key on it that connected him to the only number it called. The line picked up on the second ring.

"Karim."

"It's come."

"At?"

"Six precisely."

"Just to you?"

"As far as I can tell."

"Hold."

The line went silent. Bukhari held. The kitchen was warm after the slate. He could feel the cold leaving his slippers in the way cold leaves slippers, slowly, from the toes inward. The line came back.

"All right. Sit tight. Do nothing. Send the file to me on the usual channel and then delete it from your device.

Acknowledge."

"Sending now."

"Karim."

"Yes."

"You have done well. We will manage this."

"All right."

"Sit tight. I will call you at eight."

"All right."

The line went dead.

Bukhari forwarded the file. He watched the small progress bar fill. He watched the application confirm the send. He held

the phone for a moment. Then he selected the message thread with Lieutenant Smith, and he held his thumb on the conversation, and he selected *delete*, and he confirmed *delete*, and the conversation went away.

He set the phone back on the table.

He looked at the third teapot. He poured himself a cup from it. The tea had been brewed an hour ago and was the wrong temperature in two ways at once: cooler than it should have been to be drunk, but still warm enough to be detectably tea. He drank it anyway. He sat at the small round breakfast table where he had sat with his wife on three thousand mornings, and he drank the bad tea, and he watched the sky over the rooftops to the east continue not yet to turn, and he sat with the knowledge that he had this morning made the second telephone call of his career to the man not named Glenfield, and that the first had been the worst day of his life, and that this morning's would, on examination, prove to have been the second worst.

Upstairs, the floorboards creaked. Yasmin was awake.

He stood up. He gathered the three teapots, the three phones, the cup he had drunk from. He arranged the kitchen. He composed his face. He went, in his slippers, to the foot of the stairs, and he called up to her, in the voice of a man whose wife had not yet had her morning tea: "Yasmin? Shall I bring it up?"

"Please, my love."

He went back into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

In the studio in Chelsea, six o'clock had come and gone.

Hubbard had been watching his phone since five forty-five. He set the phone face up on the small painter's table that ordinarily held Philip's tubes and brushes, beside the bottle of curaçao, beside the gun on its folded napkin. He sat in the chair he had been sitting in for most of the night and watched the screen.

At six precisely the screen had not lit.

At six oh one it had not lit.

At six oh two Hubbard had picked the phone up, looked at it, set it down again. The phone had not been silenced. The phone had not received anything. The phone had simply continued to be a phone on a table in a studio in Chelsea on a February morning, in which nothing had happened.

By six fifteen Will had opened his eyes. He had slept upright in the leather armchair by the standard lamp, with his fingers laced over his waistcoat, in the manner he had been sleeping in when Philip had gone upstairs at one. He looked at Hubbard. Hubbard shook his head, slightly. Will closed his eyes again.

By six thirty Adam had come down the stairs from the bathroom, where he had washed his face, and had returned to the chair he had been writing in earlier. He had not picked the notebook up again.

By six forty-five Mollie was at the kitchen door with three mugs.

"Anything?"

"No," Hubbard said.

"Then come and have tea."

"In a minute."

She set the mugs down on the painter's table and went back to the kitchen. Adam picked up his mug. Will did not.

Jessica came in at seven.

She had slept on the long studio couch, under a wool blanket Mollie had brought her, in the cleared space between the easel and the eastern wall. She had slept badly. Her hair was on one side of her head. She had not looked at her phone, because Will had put her phone on the breakfast table at one in the morning and had told her, with the courtly firmness of a man who was protecting her from herself, that she was not to retrieve it before six. She walked over to the painter's table now and looked at the phone—Hubbard's phone, on the wood beside the bottle of curaçao—and she looked at Hubbard.

"It hasn't come."

"It hasn't come."

"To you, you mean."

"To me, yes. Or to anyone in this room. Adam has been looking at his email. Will has been looking at his. I have been looking at mine. I have also, in the last twenty minutes, been looking at three other accounts that I would not ordinarily have an occasion to look at, and I have been looking at the public-facing channels through which a leak of this kind would, in the ordinary course, surface. There is nothing. As of this moment, there is nothing."

"It might still come."

"It might. Or it might have come already, to whomever it was going to, and we will have no way of knowing whether it has come or not. I think we have to begin to assume that we will not, in this room, see it."

Jessica regarded him. Then she sat down on the floor in the cleared space beside the painter's table, with her back against the chair Adam was sitting in, and she put her face in her hands.

She did not cry. She sat for perhaps a minute with her face in her hands, and then she took her face out of her hands, and she said: "Then he wasted his last three minutes in the air."

"No," Hubbard said. "He did what he intended to do. He sent it to whoever he meant to send it to. We don't know who that is yet. We may not know for some time. We may never know for certain. But the message went where he sent it, and the recipient is now in possession of it, and the recipient is now reacting to it. And the way we will know that the recipient has reacted to it is that we will, today or tomorrow or in the next several days, observe consequences. The consequences will tell us what the recipient was."

"What kind of consequences."

"Things will start happening to people in this room."

The studio took this in. Adam, who had been holding his tea, set the mug down. Will opened his eyes and kept them open this time. Mollie, who had come back to the doorway with two more mugs and had heard Hubbard's last sentence, did not move from the doorway.

Philip came down the stairs.

He came into the studio in the clothes he had worn the previous day, his hair still wet from the shower, and he looked at the room—at Hubbard at the table, at the unmoved phone, at Jessica on the floor—and he said: “Nothing.”

“Nothing.”

“All right.”

He went to the painter’s table. He looked at the gun on its napkin. He looked at the bottle. He looked at Hubbard.

“What do we do.”

Hubbard considered.

“You and Mollie,” he said, “leave for Cumbria today. As planned. On the original schedule, not earlier. The fact that you are leaving has been on the calendar of every person in your professional life for two months. The fact of your leaving today is therefore not a flight; it is a plan. You go. You take the boys. You drive.”

“Mollie?” Philip said.

“I’m going,” Mollie said, from the doorway.

“And the rest of us,” Hubbard said. “Will, you go to chambers at the usual hour and you do the work you would ordinarily do on a Monday. You instruct your clerks. You make no phone calls about this matter from any device. Tonight you come back here, or to wherever you are next told. Adam. You go to your flat. You are a journalist who has had an interesting day. You file a piece about the Aiglon incident that contains nothing you actually believe and everything that has been on the news. You look like a journalist. You stay looking like a journalist.”

Tonight you come back. Jessica. You stay in this house. You do not go to your flat. You do not go to the hospital. The hospital will tell you that visiting hours are restricted; that will be a lie, but it will be a useful one. You sleep here today and we will reassess in the evening. Morgan and Audrey, when they come down—"

He paused.

"Morgan and Audrey. I am going to ask you what you want me to recommend."

Philip nodded.

"And the gun," Philip said.

"I take the gun. It does not stay in this house. It does not go to a barrister's chambers. It does not go to a journalist's flat. It does not go to a young woman's bedside table. It goes with me. To a place I am not going to name in this room, which I have used in the past for objects of this category, and which is not connected to any of you. The gun is no longer your problem. It is mine."

Will, watching him: "Cecil—"

"I know what I'm doing, Will."

"I know you do. I'm noting that I know you do."

"Noted."

Hubbard stood up. He picked up the napkin from the table, carefully, with both hands, and he folded the gun into it the way one folds linen, and he placed the wrapped object inside the inner pocket of the overcoat that had been hanging on the back of his chair all night. He picked up the overcoat. He put it on.

"I will be back this evening," he said. "Until then—"

He looked around the room.

"Until then, the most important thing is that we proceed with our days as though this morning has not happened. This morning has not happened. Mollie packs the car. Philip helps with the boys. The car leaves Chelsea at the time it was always going to leave Chelsea. Will goes to chambers. Adam goes to his flat. Jessica sleeps. Karim Bukhari, wherever he is right now—"

He paused.

He looked at the floor at the place beside the easel where the morning light from the studio's eastern windows was beginning, finally, to come up across the boards.

"Karim Bukhari," he said, "wherever he is right now, is making telephone calls. The calls he is making will, in due course, become things we observe. We will read the things we observe. We will then know what to do about Karim Bukhari. Until then we go about our days."

He looked at the door.

"I'll let myself out."

He did. The wrought-iron gate clicked shut behind him in the cold dawn, and a few seconds later they heard the soft growl of his car start up further down the street, and then they heard the car pull away.

The studio was quiet.

Mollie said: "I'll go and pack."

She went upstairs.

Philip stood in the studio looking at the place on the painter's table where the gun had been, and at the small clean rectangle in the dust where the napkin had sat, and at the bottle of curaçao, which was empty now, and which he picked up after a moment and carried into the kitchen and set on the counter, where the morning sun, when it eventually came, would catch the dark Norwegian glass and make of it, briefly, the orange he had gone down to the cellar for, twenty-two hours ago, in another life.

CHAPTER SIX

What Mollie Carried

The boys were in the back of the car by ten.

She had got them up at eight. She bathed them at half past, which she did not ordinarily do at half past eight on a weekday morning, but which she did this morning because she wanted the small bone-deep readiness that hot water gave a child, and because she wanted to perform, in front of them, the gestures of an ordinary departure for what was, in the language they had been raised in, an ordinary holiday. She dressed them in the clothes she had laid out the night before. She gave them their breakfast—porridge, bananas, the small triangles of brown toast Tom was at the moment willing to eat and Jimmy was at the moment willing to tolerate—and she supervised the brushing of their teeth, and she took them through the small ceremony of checking the cottage list, which she had instituted on the morning of their first drive to Cumbria when Jimmy was three, and which involved each child reading aloud from his own copy of the list the items he was personally responsible for, and confirming the presence of each in his own bag, and ticking them off with the specific small pencils Mollie kept in the kitchen drawer for the cottage list and for nothing else.

Tom's bag contained: Bear, the spare Bear, the small green torch, the toothbrush, the cottage cup, the wellington boots, the two books he had chosen for the journey, the sweater Granny had

knitted, and the small blue plastic dinosaur he had been carrying for seven months and would not be parted from.

Jimmy's bag contained: the binoculars, the bird book, the jumper, the iPad, the iPad charger, the second set of pyjamas, the toothbrush, the cottage cup, and the small notebook in which he was beginning, of his own initiative, to keep records of things.

She had ticked the lists. She had told them, when they had asked where Daddy was, that Daddy had to stay in London for a few days because of the parachute men, and that he would come up at the weekend, and that they would have a fire tonight, and that there would be soup. They had absorbed this with the small grave practicality with which children of their age absorbed information about their fathers' availability. Tom had asked if the parachute men were going to be all right. She had told him that one of them was going to be all right, and that the other one was not, and that it was a sad thing and they were going to think about it, but that they were not going to be afraid because the parachute men had been brave and had done their best.

Jimmy had said: "Was it the engine that cut out?"

She had said: "I don't know yet, sweetheart. People are looking into it."

He had nodded and gone to find his binoculars.

Now, with the bags in the boot and the boys belted into their seats and Jessica at the front gate waving—Jessica had insisted on coming downstairs to see them off, in a sweater of Mollie's that did not fit her, with her hair still on the wrong

side of her head—Mollie sat in the driver's seat and did the small mechanical things the morning required. She turned the ignition. She adjusted the rear-view mirror. She set the satnav to Santon Bridge. She watched Jessica raise a hand once more in the gate, and she lifted her own hand in return, and she pulled out into the Chelsea morning and turned left towards the river.

Philip was not at the gate. Philip had said his goodbyes in the kitchen. Philip had said: I'll come on Friday. As soon as Hubbard says it's all right. And Mollie had said: Friday, then. And Philip had said: Mollie. And Mollie had said: Drive carefully when you do. Which had not been, on examination, the answer to anything Philip had said; but which had been, she thought, the answer to the question she would have most wanted to ask if she had been the one going north with the children.

She drove.

She drove out through Hammersmith and round the North Circular and up onto the M1 and she let the boys be quiet in the back for the first hour, because Tom would fall asleep within twenty minutes of any departure that involved a car seat, and Jimmy would not fall asleep but would read his bird book for as long as the road held the kind of light that made reading possible. The road held the light. Tom slept. Jimmy read. Mollie drove.

She thought about the cellar.

She thought about it not in the form she had wanted to think about it last night, in the kitchen, with Philip at the door—which had been a form of what kind of man does this, posed as an

interrogation—but in the simpler form she had not allowed herself in the kitchen, which was: what was he doing down there, alone, three years' worth of times. And the answer, she thought, was probably the answer he had given Jessica when Jessica had pressed him on it, which was that he wanted it to be a thing nobody else had seen. The way certain paintings belonged to him before they were finished.

She had heard him say that and had known, in the same moment, that this was the truth and that the truth was inadequate. The painter in Philip wanted a private chapel. She understood the painter in Philip. She had been understanding the painter in Philip for fifteen years. She had been the woman who built a life around the painter in Philip—the rooms that were good for painting in, the meals that were ready when the work was over, the school runs that did not require him, the quiet on Sunday mornings, the careful management of his moods, the careful management of her own—and the woman who built that life had certain accommodations she had made with the painter in him, and one of those accommodations was that he was going to have things he did not share with her, and she was, generally, going to be all right with that.

What had startled her, in the kitchen last night, was not that he had had a private thing.

What had startled her was that the private thing had been in *their house*.

The thing she had been keeping in her body all night, and which she now allowed herself to examine, was the small specific

fact that Philip had, for three years, been doing something downstairs that she had not been invited into, while she was upstairs sleeping, or feeding babies, or reading to them, or sitting with him at dinner. That he had stood on a cellar floor for entire hours of his marriage and watched the inverted shadow of his own roof. That she had not once, in those three years, walked down the cellar steps and surprised him at it. That if she had walked down the cellar steps and surprised him at it, he would have, she suspected, turned the light on and pretended to be checking the server array, and she would not have known.

She thought: it is not the secret that hurts. It is the practiced concealment of the secret.

She thought: he could have shown me.

She thought: he could have showed me at any time. He could have showed me in the first week. He could have showed me last summer, in the heat, when he came up at four in the morning and I asked him where he had been and he said he had been working. He could have showed me the night I asked him if he was all right and he said *tired*, and I said *tired or troubled*, and he stopped, and I felt him stop, and I thought he was going to tell me something, and he did not tell me, and the not-telling sat in our marriage for three years like a small grain of sand in a shell.

She thought: he was making a pearl out of it.

She thought: I would rather have had the sand.

The motorway flattened out into the grey light of Hertfordshire. Tom slept on. Jimmy turned a page of the bird book

and reached, without looking, for the small bag of grapes she had put on the seat between them.

She thought: tomorrow is the conversation.

She thought: it will not be the only conversation. It will be the first conversation. There will be many conversations. There will be conversations I do not yet know I am going to have. There will be conversations I do not particularly want to have. I will have them all, and so will he, because we will not be the people in the story who let this turn into the thing that ends the story. We will be the people who keep working at it after the story is over.

She thought: we will, won't we.

She thought: I think we will.

She drove.

In Hampstead, in the third-floor flat above the dry cleaner's on South End Road, Adam Wright sat at the small table by the window with a mug of coffee going cold beside him and his laptop open in front of him. He had been at the table since half past eight. He filed his piece at nine. The piece was, as Hubbard had instructed, the piece a journalist who had had an interesting day would file: a thousand words on the Aiglon incident, sourced from the public statements of the Met, the Air Accidents Investigation Branch's preliminary statement, and three anonymous quotes Adam had written himself in the voice of senior aviation industry contacts who would, if pressed, confirm having said roughly the things Adam had attributed to them. The piece said engine failure. It said the kind of thing engine-failure pieces

said. He sent it to his editor at ten past nine and his editor ran it without changes and it went up at twenty past, and Adam then sat at the table and watched the metrics tick over for half an hour, the way a journalist watched the metrics on a piece he did not care about, because not watching them would have been more conspicuous than watching them.

At ten he refreshed his email.

At ten oh one he saw the message at the top of his inbox.

The sender was *S Maxwell*. The subject was *re: your piece this morning*.

He looked at the message for a moment without opening it. Then he got up and went to the window and stood for a moment looking down at South End Road, where the dry cleaner's awning had begun to rattle in the rising wind, and where the woman from the flower shop opposite was standing on the pavement smoking a cigarette and not looking at anything in particular.

He sat back down.

He opened the email.

The email said:

Mr Wright,

I read your piece on the Aiglon incident this morning. I have a few questions for you about it. They are not the questions you may be expecting.

I am Owen Maxwell's sister. He died yesterday on the roof of a house in Chelsea. The house, I am told, belongs to a friend of yours. The piece you have just published does not contain any information that has not already been issued by the Ministry of

Defence, the Met, or Aiglon itself. I find this surprising in a journalist of your reputation, who was, I am also told, in the house at the time of the incident.

I would like to meet. I will not put the reasons in this email, because I am not yet sure how secure your email is, or how secure mine is, and I am beginning to think about both questions in ways I had not thought about them a week ago. If you can meet today, I can come to wherever you suggest, with one hour's notice. If you cannot meet today, I will be in London until Friday. After Friday I do not know where I will be.

Please reply only with a time and a place. Please do not reply with questions. If you reply with questions I will not be able to answer them, and I will have to write to someone else.

-- Sarah Maxwell

He read it twice.

Then he stood up, walked to the kettle, switched it on, and stood at the kitchen counter looking at it while it boiled. He did not pour himself anything from it when it boiled. He stood at the counter and watched the small column of steam rise out of the spout and disperse against the cabinet, and he thought.

He thought, first, about whether the email was real. There was no obvious reason it should not be. The woman called Sarah Maxwell, if she was Sarah Maxwell, would have been told by some combination of family liaison officers and personal acquaintances within the past eighteen hours that her brother had died on the roof of a house in Chelsea. The house's address would have circulated within her family by lunchtime yesterday. Adam's name

had been in a published guest list of the Esdaile breakfast that morning—he had, with some embarrassment, been mentioned in a Guardian sidebar on Philip’s Royal Academy elevation a fortnight ago, which had named the friends-and-family expected at the Chelsea farewell. The connection between Adam and Philip was therefore public. The connection between Adam’s piece this morning and not the kind of piece a journalist who had been in the house would file was also, on its face, plausible. Sarah Maxwell, if she was Sarah Maxwell, did not need to have done much work to identify Adam as the journalist she should write to.

He thought, second, about whether the email was a trap. There were several ways in which it could be a trap. It could have been written by a person who was not Sarah Maxwell and was, instead, a person attempting to draw Adam into a meeting at which he would be observed, photographed, recorded, or otherwise compromised in his existing relationships. It could have been written by a person who was Sarah Maxwell but was being directed by some other party. It could have been written in good faith by Sarah Maxwell and read, in transit or in his own inbox, by someone he could not identify, who would be at the meeting before he was.

He thought, third, about whether he could afford not to meet her.

He thought about that one for some time.

He thought about Hubbard’s instruction. He thought about tonight I am entirely his friend. He thought about the careful sentence Will had extracted from him in the studio the previous

evening. He thought about the morning's piece, about which he was already faintly ashamed, and about which he would be considerably more ashamed by lunchtime.

Then he thought: I am not, at this point in my life, the journalist who declines to meet the sister of a dead man because a friend of mine has asked me to keep my head down for a few days.

He sat back down at the laptop.

He typed:

Ms Maxwell,

Three o'clock today. The reading room of the Wellcome Collection on Euston Road. Sit at one of the tables furthest from the door. I will be in a dark green coat. I will not approach you until I have walked once around the room.

-- A. Wright

He read it twice. He sent it. He closed the laptop. He picked up his cold coffee and drank it, because anything else would have been theatre.

He thought: I had better tell Hubbard.

He thought: I had better not tell Hubbard.

He thought about it for a further minute, and then he reached for his phone and composed a text to Hubbard which did not refer to Sarah Maxwell, did not refer to a meeting, and did not refer to Aiglon, but which said: *Going to do some background on a piece this afternoon. Will be off the grid for a couple of hours. Back in the flat by five.*

Hubbard replied, within forty seconds, with a single character: .

Adam looked at the period for a moment. He understood it to mean I have read your message and I am acknowledging it without committing to anything by way of approval or disapproval, and I am also signalling that I have noticed the particular care with which the message has been composed. He understood that the period meant Hubbard had probably understood, more or less, what kind of background Adam was about to do. He understood that the period was Hubbard's way of saying I have decided not to ask.

He put the phone down.

He went to find his green coat.

Mollie stopped at the services at Watford Gap at twelve fifteen.

Tom had woken up at Northampton in the small bewildered way he woke up in cars, and asked, three times in succession and in a voice that escalated each time, whether they were there yet. Jimmy had finished the bird book and begun looking out of the window at the verges of the M1 in a way that Mollie recognised from her own childhood as the threshold between bored and unwell. She pulled in at Watford Gap and parked the car, and walked them across the carpark in the gusting wind and they stood, all three of them, in a Costa Coffee while she bought Tom an apple juice and Jimmy a hot chocolate and herself an Americano she was not going to drink because it was going to be bad, and they ate the small triangular sandwiches she had made at six in the morning at

the kitchen table while listening for Philip's footstep on the stair.

The sandwiches were good. The boys ate them. They went to the toilet. Mollie checked her phone.

There was a text from Philip:

Mollie.

There was a text from Philip three minutes later:

Are you all right.

There was a text from Philip a further two minutes later:

That is the only question. There are no others.

She looked at the three messages for a while.

She typed:

We are all right. Tom slept until Northampton. Jimmy is reading. Stopped at Watford Gap.

She typed:

I will text when we are at the cottage.

She paused. She looked at the message. She added, before sending:

I love you.

She sent it.

The phone buzzed back almost at once: *I love you. Drive carefully.*

She put the phone away.

She took the boys back to the car.

The light had begun to fail by Manchester. The light failed early in February. By the time she had taken the M6 north past Lancaster and cut west into the Lake District on the small road

that went up through Broughton-in-Furness, the sky was the colour of cold steel and the hills had taken on the dark slate violet they took on at this hour in winter, and the boys were quiet in the back of the car in the way they were quiet on the last hour of the drive to the cottage, which was the manner of children who knew the road well enough to recognise it ending.

They came up through Eskdale Green in the dark.

She drove the last two miles slowly because the lane was narrow and the hedges were close and there were sheep at the boundary of the Forestry land that came down sometimes onto the road at night. She came over the small rise above Santon Bridge and she saw the cottage in her headlights at the top of the lane: stone walls, slate roof, the small porch with the light over it that she had left on a timer when she had been here in October. The light was on. She had not, when she had set the timer, entirely believed she would see it on. She had set the timer the way one set a timer when one wanted a future self to be greeted.

She pulled up on the gravel.

She switched the engine off.

For a long moment she sat in the dark of the parked car with the headlights off and the boys breathing softly in the back seat—Tom asleep again; Jimmy not asleep but quiet—and she watched the porch light through the windscreen, and the wind came up off Wast Water and over the hill and onto the cottage, and the cottage held its light against the wind, the way it had held its light against the wind for two centuries.

She thought: I am here.

She got out of the car.

She unlocked the porch. She carried the bags in one at a time. She turned the heating on, which would take an hour to warm a house this old to anything resembling warmth. She turned the kitchen light on. She turned the sitting-room lamps on. She put the kettle on the hob—the cottage had no electricity in the sitting room, only oil lamps and the open fire; the kitchen had electricity for the kettle and the fridge and not much else—and she carried Tom in from the car still asleep, and laid him on the sofa under a wool blanket, and she carried Jimmy in walking, and she sat him at the kitchen table with a glass of milk while she lit the fire in the sitting-room hearth.

She lit the fire well. She had been lighting fires in this hearth for eight years and she lit them now with the small confident gestures of a person who had nothing to prove to a fire. The kindling caught. The smaller logs caught from the kindling. The larger log she had put across the small ones at the start began, after a few minutes, to take. The chimney drew the wrong way for the first ninety seconds and then remembered itself and began to draw the right way, the way it always did, and the smoke that had been coming back into the room cleared up the flue.

She carried Jimmy through into the sitting room. He sat on the sofa with Tom and watched the fire.

"Mum."

"Yes."

"Is Daddy going to be all right?"

She considered the question.

"Yes," she said. "Daddy is going to be all right."

"Are you going to be all right?"

She looked at him. He was six. He had heard the engine cut out before the crash. He had told the detective inspector with the grey-streaked hair so. He had been listening, in the way Jimmy listened, to a great many things over the past twenty-four hours, and he had absorbed more of them than she had been entirely aware of.

She sat down on the sofa beside him.

She put her arm around his shoulders.

"Yes," she said. "I am going to be all right. I am going to be all right because we are here, and there is a fire, and the kettle is on, and your brother is asleep on the sofa, and you are sitting next to me, and your father is in London being a good man with his friends, and tomorrow is going to be a quieter day than yesterday, and the day after that is going to be quieter still. Yes. I am going to be all right."

He nodded. He leaned his head against her shoulder.

After a few minutes she got up, and she went into the kitchen, and she made the soup she had said there would be soup. She gave the boys their bowls in front of the fire. She bathed Tom, who had slept through the entire arrival and was bewildered about the bath but accepting; she bathed Jimmy, who told her at length about the redwings he had seen on the M6. She put them to bed in the small twin-bedded room at the top of the stairs, where they had slept in the cottage since Tom was old enough to be out

of his cot. She read them three pages of the book they had been reading. She kissed them both. She turned the small night-light on. She came downstairs.

The fire was low. She built it up. She poured herself a glass of the red wine she had brought from Chelsea in a small zip-up wine carrier. She sat down on the sofa.

For a long time she did not move.

The wind was up off the lake now. She could hear it in the chimney and against the small badly-fitting windows at the front of the cottage. The clock on the kitchen wall said quarter past nine. In London, Philip would be in the kitchen, probably with Hubbard, and they would be looking at whatever Hubbard had been looking at all day. In Hampstead, Adam would be in his flat, doing whatever Adam was doing. In Highgate, in a house she did not know about in a street she had never been on, a man called Karim Bukhari, whose name Hubbard had said aloud over the breakfast table that morning, was sitting in a kitchen of his own with a wife she did not know, and he was sitting with whatever it was that had come to him at six.

She thought: I am alone with my children at the top of a lane in Cumbria, with no neighbour for half a mile, and I have left the front gate unlocked.

She got up. She went through into the porch. She locked the gate. She came back. She locked the porch door. She returned to the sofa. She picked up her wine.

She thought: tomorrow.

She thought: tomorrow I will think about all of it.

She thought: tonight I have lit the fire and the boys are asleep, and that is enough.

The fire cracked. A log shifted. She watched the small red shower of sparks go up into the dark of the chimney and disappear.

She drank her wine.

In the reading room of the Wellcome Collection on Euston Road, at five past three, Adam walked once around the room and found the woman in the green wool coat at the table farthest from the door. She was perhaps thirty-six. She had her brother's eyes; Adam recognised them without having to think about it, because he had spent half an hour the previous evening looking at photographs of Owen Maxwell on his laptop and had taught himself the face. She was holding a book she was not reading. There was a paper cup of tea in front of her she had not drunk. She did not look up when he sat down.

"Sarah."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry about your brother."

"Thank you."

She still did not look up.

"You said you had questions."

"I do."

She closed the book. She slid an envelope across the table. The envelope was not sealed. Inside it Adam could see the corner of a USB drive and the corner of what looked like a folded piece of paper.

"Don't open it here," Sarah said quietly. "Take it home. The drive is encrypted. The key is in the email I sent my mother three weeks ago, which I am about to forward to you when I get back to my hotel. The key is the seventh word of the second sentence. The email will look like nothing. It will be about a cake recipe."

"All right."

"My brother set this up six weeks ago. He gave it to me three weeks ago, with instructions about what to do with it if anything happened to him. He told me not to open it. He told me not to read what was on it. He told me to give it to a journalist if anything ever happened to him, and he told me that the journalist should be someone who had been in a particular room, in a particular house, on the morning of the incident."

"He named the house?"

"He named you. By name. He had been watching your work, he said, for two years. He thought you would understand what he was giving you. He thought you would also understand why he had not given it to you while he was alive."

"Why hadn't he."

She looked up at Adam, finally. Her brother's eyes, as he had thought. They were dry.

"Because he didn't want to put you in this position," she said, "until there was no longer a position you could be put in that was worse than his."

Adam picked up the envelope.

He put it inside the inner pocket of his green wool coat.

He stood up.

"Sarah."

"Yes."

"Where are you sleeping tonight."

"A hotel near King's Cross. Don't ask me which one."

"Don't go back there. Find a different hotel. Pay cash.

Don't tell me which one. Don't tell anyone which one. I will email you tomorrow morning at eleven from a different address than the one you have. The address will be in the email forward you are about to send your mother, which will become an email forward I am about to send you. In it I will use a phrase which will not mean anything to anyone except you. The phrase will be—" he paused—"the redwings on the M6. If you receive an email from any other address, claiming to be from me, with any other phrase, do not reply to it."

She looked at him.

"Are you serious?"

"I am extremely serious."

"All right."

"I'll be in touch tomorrow."

"Mr Wright."

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet."

He walked out of the reading room without looking back. He walked out through the foyer of the Wellcome Collection and down the steps onto Euston Road and east towards King's Cross, with

the envelope in his coat and the wind from the north against his face, and he did not, for the next eleven blocks, take his hand out of the pocket that held the envelope. By the time he reached his flat in Hampstead he had decided three things: that he was not going to tell Hubbard about the envelope tonight; that he was going to read what was on the drive before he told Hubbard about the envelope at all; and that he was going to do the reading in a place that was not his flat, on a device that was not his laptop, in a way that would leave no record on any system he would ordinarily use.

He went up the three flights to his flat. He let himself in. He did not turn the lights on. He went to the small wooden box on the bookshelf in which he kept the burner phones and the spare hardware and the other things a journalist of his generation kept in such boxes against the day they would, finally, become useful, and he sat in the dark by the window and began, methodically, to set himself up.

Outside, the wind on South End Road was rising.

In the cottage above Santon Bridge, Mollie put another log on the fire.

In the kitchen on Makepeace Avenue, Karim Bukhari finished his evening prayer and stood up from the rug, and went, in the manner of a man who had done what could be done that day, to find his wife.

And the night came on across the country, in the small particular ways the night came on in February, and the people who had been awake at six in the morning settled themselves into the

rooms they would sleep in, and the ones who would not sleep tonight made their preparations, and the small private clock that none of them could see continued to run.

CHAPTER SEVEN

What Adam Read

He took an hour to set up.

He did not turn on any of the lights in the flat. He drew the curtains in the front room, where the window gave onto South End Road. He drew the curtains in the bedroom, where they gave onto the small back yard. He drew the curtain in the kitchen, where it gave onto the alley. He worked, when he worked, by the light of a single small desk lamp aimed at the wall and reflecting back, which gave the flat the soft underwater quality of a darkroom and which would not, from the street or from any neighbouring window, register as a man working.

He retrieved the small wooden box from the bookshelf. He had bought it at a flea market in Stoke Newington in 2014 and begun, slowly, to put things in it that he might one day need: a Lenovo X230 with the wireless card physically removed, three clean USB-C cables, four sealed thumb drives, a Faraday pouch, a roll of electrical tape, a small black notebook he had not yet used. He added to the box once or twice a year ever since. He had hoped, in a vague, disorganised way, that he would never have any cause to open it. He paid, over those eleven years, for the box's contents to be kept current—a new battery for the laptop in 2019, a new operating system on a clean install in 2022—because he had, at some level deeper than hope, known that the box was for a night exactly like this one.

He took the laptop out. He plugged it into the wall, not to the desk power strip. He turned it on. He waited for it to boot. He took the USB drive out of the envelope Sarah had given him in the Wellcome reading room, set it carefully on the desk on a paper napkin, and studied it as though giving it a chance to be something other than what it was. It declined. It was a black Kingston DataTraveler with a small adhesive label on which someone—Maxwell, presumably—had written, in tiny architect's capitals, the words DO NOT NETWORK.

He read the email Sarah had forwarded to him from her hotel. He had it open on his phone, the phone in flight mode, the screen at its lowest brightness. The email was, as Sarah had said, about a cake recipe. It had been sent to her mother three weeks ago. The seventh word of the second sentence was *patience*.

He plugged the drive into the laptop. The system asked for the encryption passphrase. He typed *patience*. The drive mounted.

He sat back in the chair.

The drive's root contained six folders. They were named, in the same architect's capitals: READ ME FIRST, LEDGER, PROCUREMENT, ANNOTATIONS, DRAFT, PRESS. There was also, at the root level, a single text file, named to whoever.

He opened to whoever first.

Whoever you are,

If you are reading this, I am dead. I am dead because I knew what is on this drive, and because the people who knew I knew it had reached the point at which my continued breathing was a more expensive proposition than my no-longer-breathing.

I am giving this to you because my sister has decided, on the basis of certain instructions I left her, that you are the right person. The instructions named you by description rather than by name. The description was: a journalist who has been working alongside Philip Esdaile, who has been to his house more than once, who has been spoken of by Esdaile in terms that suggest Esdaile trusts him. The instructions said that Sarah was to wait until the day after my death, look at the news, and select from the published accounts the journalist who had been in the room when I came down on Esdaile's roof, and whose subsequent first published piece on the matter most resembled a piece written by a journalist trying not to write about it.

I am sorry to have given you a description rather than a name. I did not know your name with any confidence until last weekend, by which time I had already given the instructions to my sister. Esdaile spoke of you, when I asked him about journalists I might trust, in a way that made me think you would do.

What is on this drive is the work of fourteen months. I did most of it alone, in evenings and weekends, in increasing violation of the security clearances I held. I did some of it with the assistance of a small number of colleagues who I will not name in this letter. The colleagues' names are in the ANNOTATIONS folder, in a sub-folder called HONOUR ROLL, with brief notes about their contribution and what should be said about them if any of this is ever made public. I owe them more than I have been able to leave them. They knew when they helped me what they were helping with.

I want to explain to you why I am giving this to a journalist and not to a regulator. The regulators in this country have been compromised. Not all of them. Not by name. But the part of the regulatory apparatus whose job it would be to receive what I have is the part that has been compromised most thoroughly, because compromising it is what made the larger operation possible. I went to that part of it twelve weeks ago, in a meeting documented in the ANNOTATIONS folder under MEETING/12-12. I learned, in the course of that meeting, that the regulator I had gone to see was not going to help. I left the meeting with a recording of it on my phone. I have been carrying the recording since. I have been using it, in the limited and probably ineffective ways such things can be used, as insurance.

The recording is not on this drive. The recording is in another place. If you want it, you will need to find it. I have left it where I have left it because I do not want everything that matters about this case to be in any single envelope.

The drive contains: a ledger of four sales by Aiglon Aviation to four foreign governments; documentary corroboration of each sale, drawn from Aiglon's own systems and from the procurement systems of the relevant foreign customers; my own annotations on the documents, which include both factual notes and my best speculation about the human chain that authorised, approved, or knowingly failed to prevent each sale; a draft of the article I had been preparing to publish; a list of journalists I had considered as recipients and rejected, with my

reasons for rejecting each. I am not on that list because I had not finished thinking about you.

Two of the four sales were authorised within the British government, by people whose initials appear in the ANNOTATIONS. Two were not authorised. The unauthorised sales were known about by some of the same people who authorised the authorised ones. The distinction between authorised and unauthorised is, in any case, a distinction in paper. The actual aircraft are the same aircraft.

I want to ask you to do three things.

First, I want you to verify what is here. I have done the work to make verification possible. The PROCUREMENT folder contains for each sale at least three independent documentary sources. Cross-checking them is not difficult; it requires only the willingness to do it.

Second, I want you to publish. I want you to publish, if you possibly can, while there is still a chance that publication will produce the political consequences these sales should produce. I do not believe in the magic of journalism. I believe it has, occasionally, when it is done carefully, an effect that other methods do not have.

Third, I want you to take care of the people who have helped me, and the people you take into the work going forward. The list of those who have helped is in the HONOUR ROLL. The people you take in are, presumably, your own decision. I am writing this letter from the position of a man who has been less careful than

he should have been about whom he has put at risk. Be more careful than I was.

I am sorry to have given you this. I had hoped it would be unnecessary. I am writing this on a Thursday evening, in my flat in Hammersmith, with a glass of whisky to my left and the dog asleep against the door of the bedroom in which my wife is reading. I am hoping, even as I write, that I will have, at some later point, the opportunity to come back into this document and replace it with something else—a covering note, perhaps, attached to a published piece. I am realistic about the chances of that.

Good luck.

-- J. Maxwell

He read it twice.

The second time, he read it at half the speed, with a hand over the lower half of the screen so that he could not race ahead. He paid attention to the sentences he had skimmed. He paid attention to the small careful variations in tone—the lightness of Esdaile spoke of you... in a way that made me think you would do, set against the heaviness of the part of the regulatory apparatus whose job it would be to receive what I have is the part that has been compromised most thoroughly—and he understood that these were not the variations of a man who was writing carelessly but of a man who was writing while attempting, against the pressure of his circumstances, not to lose his sense of humour.

He thought: this was a man.

He thought: I would have liked to know him.

He thought: if he had finished the *list of journalists I had considered as recipients and rejected*, my name would, on examination, probably have been on it, and the reason for the rejection would have been a reason it would now be too late to do anything about.

He went to the PRESS folder. He opened it. There was a list, in a single text file. Twenty-three names, with a paragraph or two of notes on each. He scrolled to the W's. His name was there. The note read:

A. Wright (Guardian). Long pieces, careful, three-year track record on the Esdaile beat which I have been reading because Esdaile is an interesting case. Has the patience for a story like this. Has, however, the kind of professional friendships with editors at his paper that make me uncertain whether the story would survive the editing process intact. Likely to be too close to Esdaile to be objective in the strict sense, but Esdaile's involvement in this matter is now sufficient that the closeness becomes a feature rather than a bug. Provisional: yes.

He sat for a moment looking at *provisional: yes*.

Then he closed the PRESS folder, and he opened the LEDGER.

The ledger was a single spreadsheet. It had four rows.

Each row was a sale. Each row had columns for: the year; the customer; the customer's procurement vehicle; the unit count; the unit configuration (which Adam, who was not a defence-aerospace journalist, did not at first understand, and which he did not pause now to understand because the configurations could be looked up); the contract value in GBP; the contract value in the

customer's local currency; the lead Aiglon negotiator; the date of the relevant Cabinet Office determination, where one existed; and a column called AUTHORISATION STATUS.

The rows were:

Pakistan / General Aviation Industries Karachi / 2021 / 8 units / [config X-7] / £41.2m / authorised.

Saudi Arabia / Royal Saudi Air Force Procurement Command / 2022 / 12 units / [config X-9] / £73.4m / authorised.

Russia / Concern Beriev (proxy: Bishkek) / 2023 / 6 units / [config X-12] / £58.8m / unauthorised.

Egypt / Egyptian Armed Forces / 2024 / 9 units / [config X-12] / £62.1m / unauthorised.

He stared at the third row for a long time.

The third row said Russia. The third row said 2023. The third row said Concern Beriev, which was a Russian aviation firm that had been on the United Kingdom's sanctions list since 2022. The third row said proxy: Bishkek, which meant the sale had been routed through Kyrgyzstan, which was a known re-export channel for sanctioned items into Russia. The third row said unauthorised, which meant Aiglon Aviation, a British firm, had sold weaponised aerospace technology to a sanctioned Russian entity, in 2023, while the United Kingdom had been at the centre of the international effort to constrain Russian military capability. The third row said £58.8m, which was the amount of the contract.

The third row, on its own, in any newspaper in the country, on the front page, with documentary corroboration, would not topple a government. It would crater one.

He thought: *cratering* is the word that came to mind because the metaphor knew before I did.

He went into *PROCUREMENT/ROW3*. There were twelve documents. He opened the first one. It was a Concern Beriev procurement order in Russian, dated August 2023, listing six units of *config X-12* at the unit price corresponding to the row total. The procurement order had been routed through a Kyrgyz intermediary firm called Bishkek Aero Holdings, whose registration documents were in the second file. The third file was an internal Aiglon shipping manifest dated September 2023 listing six *config X-12* aircraft as having been delivered to Bishkek Aero Holdings *for onward integration*. The fourth file was a SWIFT confirmation of receipt of £58.8m from Bishkek Aero Holdings into an Aiglon corporate account, in two tranches, in October and November 2023. The fifth file was a follow-up correspondence between an Aiglon programme manager and a Bishkek contact, in English, in December 2023, in which the programme manager confirmed satisfactory *integration* and asked, in a postscript, whether the customer was happy.

He opened the rest of the documents in the folder. He read them in the order they had been numbered. The numbering was not chronological; the numbering was, he understood after some time, evidentiary—Maxwell had ordered the documents in the sequence in which a careful reader, working forward, would arrive at the

conviction that the sale had occurred. The sequence was a small instructional design, a sales argument, a courtroom progression. By the eleventh document Adam was convinced. The twelfth document was, in this sense, courteous. It was a screenshot of a private LinkedIn message, dated January of this year, from an Aiglon mid-level engineer to Maxwell himself, in which the engineer described, with the brief horrified concision of a man finally telling someone, the sale to Concern Beriev as the worst piece of work the engineer had ever been part of and the thing he had been intending to come and tell Maxwell about for six months.

The engineer had a name. The name was on the *HONOUR ROLL*, when Adam later checked.

He went back to the ledger. He opened PROCUREMENT/ROW4. He read the Egypt documents. He read for an hour. He found everything he needed to find. He found, in the fourth document, a copy of a Cabinet Office determination—heavily redacted, but with the determination header visible—which had been made about a related sale and which had not, on its face, applied to the Egypt sale. He found, by cross-reference with the ANNOTATIONS, a Maxwell note that read Determination XYZ-114 was used as cover for ROW4 because nobody at Aiglon believed XYZ-114 would be challenged in the time available; XYZ-114 in fact authorised a substantially different sale. The use of XYZ-114 to cover ROW4 was, in the strict sense, fraud. The fraud has not been discovered because the entity that would discover it is the entity that is, in the larger sense, complicit.

He sat back from the desk.

He put his hands over his face.

He thought: how did he carry this for fourteen months.

He thought: he carried it because he had decided to.

He thought: I am going to have to carry it for some interval too, and I am not yet sure how long.

He went into the ANNOTATIONS folder.

It was the largest folder on the drive. It had sub-folders for each row of the ledger, for each meeting Maxwell had documented, for each individual he had identified as a relevant actor, and for what he had labelled, in a folder of its own, *THE BRITISH SIDE*.

Adam opened *THE BRITISH SIDE*.

The folder contained a single text document, several pages long, written in Maxwell's voice, untitled. It read like a notebook.

I am, after fourteen months, reasonably confident that the people on the British side of this fall into three categories. The first category is the Aiglon side: people who were inside the company and who knew what they were selling. There are perhaps twenty of these. They are listed elsewhere. They are not the most important.

The second category is the political side: people inside the British government who authorised the authorised sales and who chose, in some cases, not to authorise but also not to prevent the unauthorised ones. There are six of these I can identify. I have used initials. The initials are: RB, MC, GW, KB, TS, JD. I have brief biographical notes on each in this folder. Of the six,

one is a Cabinet minister; two are senior civil servants in the relevant directorates; one is a senior figure in the security services; one is a senior figure in a regulatory agency that I will not name here; and one is a senior figure in a Cabinet Office capacity that does not appear on any organisational chart.

The third category is the connective tissue. These are people whose job it has been, over the relevant period, to communicate between the first and second categories without leaving traces. I have been able to identify three of these and to suspect two more. I do not have evidence of their involvement that would survive any kind of cross-examination. I include them here because I want, in the longer accounting, for someone to know that I had begun to look for them.

He read down the list. He read the brief biographical notes on each set of initials. The notes were, in the manner of Maxwell's other writing, careful, restrained, and exactly as long as the available evidence required.

The note on KB read:

KB. Mid-fifties. Senior civil servant. Held a directorate-level role in the procurement-adjacent part of the Ministry from 2017. Married, two children. Pakistani heritage. Conservative voter, I am told, though I have not asked. Came to my attention because a serving test pilot of my acquaintance attempted to report concerns about config X-12 weapons systems through the formal channels and was directed to KB's office, where, on the evidence of the recording the pilot subsequently shared with me, KB declined to take the matter forward and used language

consistent with somebody who had been instructed in advance how to decline it. I have not heard the recording in full but I have heard fragments. KB's part is the kind of part that is easiest to believe was reluctant. It is also the kind of part that is most useful to the larger operation precisely because of its reluctance.

Adam read the note three times.

He opened the meeting document for *MEETING/12-12*.

It was a Maxwell summary of a conversation he had had, in December, with an unnamed person—no initials, no description, only the date—in which the unnamed person had passed Maxwell a USB drive. The USB drive contained a recording of a meeting that had taken place in early December between a serving test pilot and KB. The meeting was sixty-four minutes long. Maxwell had not, at the time of writing, listened to it in full. He had listened to the first ten minutes. The first ten minutes had been, he wrote, KB inviting the test pilot to drop the matter, in language carefully arranged to be deniable, but unmistakable on the recording.

Adam thought: Chummy. Sixty-four minutes. The first ten.

He thought, also: the unnamed person who had passed Maxwell the drive was the regulator Maxwell had described in the letter as having declined to take the matter forward. The decline had been the official act; the drive had been the unofficial one. Maxwell had anonymised the source in his own document because the source had taken a personal risk by passing it.

He thought: the recording exists in three places at least. The phone Chummy had with him this morning, which is in police evidence. Maxwell's drive, which I have just read about—which means there is a copy somewhere that Maxwell had access to. And whatever Chummy did with it himself when the dead-man's switch fired this morning, which appears to have been to send it to Bukhari.

He thought: Bukhari therefore knows there is also a copy with Maxwell. Or rather: Bukhari has known, since whenever Maxwell received it, that the recording existed and was held by parties other than Chummy.

He thought: which means Bukhari has had additional incentive, since whenever Maxwell received the recording, to know what Maxwell was doing. Which means Maxwell's killing was not simply about the procurement evidence. Which means, perhaps, that the way Maxwell was killed—on a parachute, in the air, on Esdaile's roof—was not an accident in any of its parts.

He opened, with some hesitation, the *DRAFT* folder.

The folder contained one document, eleven thousand words long, untitled, written in the voice of a man who had decided what he was going to say and was now testing how to say it. The draft was, by the standards of the journalism that paid Adam's rent, almost finished. It needed an editor. It needed, in two places, a sentence rewritten. It did not need any more reporting.

It ended in mid-sentence:

The last question, then, is the one that the public will reasonably want addressed first, and which is the one I find most

difficult to answer with any confidence. The question is: who, in the British government, knew? Among the people I will name in the following paragraphs, the most senior is

The cursor blinked at the end of the sentence. The document had not been touched since the sixteenth of February.

Adam stared at the cursor.

It blinked.

The cursor of a man who had, at some point on the morning of the sixteenth of February, set down his laptop intending to come back to that sentence after he had completed a small piece of work in the air over Battersea. The work had taken longer than expected. The man had not come back to the sentence. The sentence sat now where he had left it, with the cursor still pulsing in the gap where the most senior person's name was meant to go, and Adam, sitting at his desk in Hampstead at half past two on a February morning, watched the cursor pulse and did not breathe for some time.

He shut the laptop.

He stood up. He walked to the kitchen. He filled a glass of water from the tap. He drank it standing at the sink, looking at the curtain over the alley window.

He thought about Hubbard's instruction. He thought about Hubbard at the breakfast table that morning saying the consequences will tell us what the recipient was. He thought about Will at the breakfast table the previous evening saying tonight you should call no one.

He thought about Maxwell's letter. I want you to publish, if you possibly can, while there is still a chance that publication will produce the political consequences these sales should produce.

He thought about Sarah, in a hotel near King's Cross that she had agreed not to return to, with no idea that the man she had given the drive to had spent the night reading what was on it and had not yet decided what he was going to do with it.

He thought: I have to tell them.

He thought: I have to tell them, and they have to decide together what to do, because what is on this drive is too heavy for one person to carry, and the reason it is too heavy is the reason Maxwell wrote *be more careful than I was*. He carried it alone for fourteen months. He is dead.

He thought: I will tell them in the morning.

He thought: I will tell them in the morning, but I will not tell them I have already made copies.

He sat back down at the desk.

He took the four sealed thumb drives out of the wooden box. He opened the laptop. He copied the contents of Maxwell's drive onto each of the four thumb drives in succession, methodically, without rushing. He gave each thumb drive a label, in pencil, on a small adhesive square: A, B, C, D. He wrapped each in the small Faraday pouches he had also kept in the box, along with a slip of paper inside each pouch on which he wrote, in pencil, in his own architect's capitals: DO NOT NETWORK.

Drive A he addressed to a solicitor he had used for his own divorce eight years ago, with whom he had remained on cordial terms. He wrote a covering letter. He sealed the envelope.

Drive B he addressed to a journalist he had known for fifteen years, who lived in Berlin, and who had, on more than one occasion in the past, accepted material from London with the discreet professionalism of a person who understood why it had to be there rather than here. He wrote a covering letter to her also.

Drive C he placed in a small canvas bag with a change of clothes and a wash kit, ready to be carried to a different address when he left the flat in the morning.

Drive D he placed in a hide he had prepared, eighteen months ago, in a place in this flat that he had not, until tonight, ever expected to use. He did not name the hide to himself even in his own thoughts. The hide was the hide. It was the kind of arrangement a journalist of his generation made and did not discuss.

He looked at his desk. He had Maxwell's original drive, which he would carry tomorrow to whatever room the friends decided to gather in. He had four copies arranged for distribution, of which two would go in the morning post and two would not. He had the laptop, which he was about to wipe and reinstall. He had, in his own mind, a fairly clear picture of what he was about to do for the next forty-eight hours and a much less clear picture of what he was going to do after that.

He thought: I have just done the thing Maxwell did.

He thought: I have just become the man whose death will require the same kind of provisions Maxwell made.

He thought: that is what happened at the moment I sat down with the drive. That was the moment.

He thought: there is no longer a way back from that moment, and I do not, on examination, want one.

He shut the laptop the second time.

He went to the front window, parted the curtain by perhaps an inch, and looked down at South End Road.

The road was empty. The dry cleaner's awning was still rattling in the wind. The flower shop opposite was dark. The lamppost outside the Tesco on the corner threw its small yellow circle on the pavement, and a fox came briefly into the circle and went out the other side, and the road was empty again.

Across the city, he thought, Hubbard was probably awake. He thought: Hubbard has been doing whatever Hubbard has been doing all day, and Hubbard is now sitting somewhere in front of a small lamp of his own, awake, and Hubbard would be glad to have a phone call.

He did not make the phone call.

He let the curtain fall.

He went into the bedroom. He set the alarm for seven. He lay down on the bed in his clothes. He did not, for some time, fall asleep, but at some point after four he did, and he slept badly, and in the small grey hour before the alarm went off he dreamed of a cursor blinking at the end of an unfinished sentence in a document that no one would ever come back to.

When the alarm went off at seven he got up, washed his face, made himself coffee, and put on the green wool coat. He took the canvas bag with drive C. He took the original drive, in its Faraday pouch, in his inside breast pocket. He took the laptop, wiped clean.

He let himself out of the flat at five to eight.

He walked towards the Tube.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Two Doors

Adam came up the path in Lennox Street at twenty past eight.

He had got off the Tube at South Kensington and walked the rest. He had taken a longer route than necessary, looped once round a block he did not need to loop round, paused at a coffee window without buying coffee, and used the small reflective surface of an empty bus shelter to look behind him. He saw no one. He understood that not seeing someone was not the same as not being seen, but he had done what he could, and he was not, he had decided over the course of the night, going to allow himself to drift into the kind of paranoid attention that produced its own errors. He had developed, between South Kensington and Lennox Street, the small functional calm of a man who had stopped, somewhere overnight, regarding himself as the protagonist of his own life and begun to regard himself as a person carrying an envelope.

Philip let him in.

Philip was in his shirtsleeves, with the sleeves pushed up, in the manner of a man who had got dressed to do something that morning and had not yet decided what. He looked tired in the soft well-managed way Philip looked tired, which was the way he looked after a night of half-sleep that had not been disturbed by anything specific.

"Mollie?" Adam said.

"At the cottage. Got there last night. Texted at quarter past nine. The boys were asleep. Fire lit."

"Good."

"Will's on his way. Jessica's in the kitchen."

"Coffee?"

"I've made some."

They went through into the studio.

Jessica came out of the kitchen with three mugs and set them down on the painter's table where, two nights ago, the gun had sat. She had on a sweater that was Mollie's and a pair of jeans that were her own; her hair was washed; she looked, Adam noted with the small relief of a man noticing such things on a friend, slept-in rather than crisis-in. She was twenty years old and she had had eight hours of sleep, and the twenty-year-old body's capacity to receive the gift of eight hours' sleep had restored her to something approaching herself.

"Adam."

"Jessica."

She looked at him as people now looked at one another when they came into rooms in this house, and she registered, in whatever way she registered such things, that he had not slept and that he was carrying something.

"You have it."

"I have it."

"It's bad."

"It's bad."

She nodded.

"I'll go and get my notebook."

"Good idea."

She went upstairs.

Will arrived on the dot of nine, in a navy overcoat over the suit he had worn to chambers the previous afternoon, with the precise unruffled air of a man who had slept four hours in his own bed and was treating the morning as billable. He came through into the studio, embraced Adam without ceremony, declined the offered coffee, and sat down at the breakfast table where they had been sitting now, in various configurations, for forty-eight hours.

"Hubbard?" he said.

"Not back."

"All right."

He looked at Adam.

"Tell us."

Adam reached into the inside pocket of the green wool coat and took out four printed copies of a document he had prepared, on a rented machine in a print-and-copy shop in Crouch End at half past five that morning, of approximately eleven pages. The document was a transcription of Maxwell's letter, followed by the four rows of the ledger, followed by Adam's own short summary of the corroborating procurement documents. It was set in a plain font on plain A4 paper. There were no names on it that did not need to be on it. There was nothing on it that connected the document, on its face, to its author.

He gave one copy each to Philip, Jessica, Will, and kept one for himself.

"Read it," he said. "Then we'll talk."

They read.

The studio held them in the slightly reduced light of a February morning that had not yet decided whether it was going to do rain. The big glazed roof, repaired over the previous twenty-four hours by a glazier Hubbard had organised through someone he knew, presented a clean grey ceiling to the room overhead. The silk had been removed two mornings before by the fire brigade; the broken sycamore branch had been cut back by an arborist; the small sign that anything had happened on the roof was, from the inside, a slightly cleaner section of the glazing where the new pane sat against the older glass at a fractionally different reflective angle. Mollie had organised the glazier and the arborist between phone calls on the morning of Day Two. Mollie organised most things, when she was permitted to.

Will read with his fingers laced and his face in the still neutral he reserved for evidence.

Philip read more slowly, with the eye of a man for whom a written page was a slightly inferior medium of information.

Jessica read with the full focus of a young person who had received, in writing, the proof of a thing she had been holding, in feeling, for thirty-six hours.

When she finished she put the document down, walked to the studio windows, stood with her back to the room, and did not move

for about a minute. Nobody spoke. After the minute was up she turned around, came back to the table, sat down, and said:

"He gave it to Maxwell."

"Yes," Adam said.

"In December."

"Yes."

"That's why Bukhari knew it existed before yesterday."

"Yes."

"And the recording itself --"

"Maxwell hid it somewhere we don't know. The drive doesn't say where."

"Right."

She nodded, slowly. She picked up the document. She put it down again. She looked at Adam.

"Thank you for reading it last night."

"Don't thank me yet."

"I am thanking you now," she said, "for reading it last night, while I was asleep on a sofa. I am going to thank you for other things later. I would like to start the thanking now. May I."

"You may," Adam said.

Will, watching this exchange, allowed himself an expression briefly that he did not ordinarily allow himself in evidential contexts, and then put it away.

"All right," Will said. "Let's work."

They worked for an hour.

Will was, in this room as in courtrooms, the one who insisted on the question whose answer was least convenient. He insisted on it now. He insisted on it with the small lawyerly pleasure of a man who had been worrying it on the train all the way in.

"What we have," Will said, "is Maxwell's verification. It is not our verification. Maxwell's verification depends, for its weight, on Maxwell's reputation. Maxwell is dead. Maxwell's reputation is, at this moment, what the Ministry of Defence and Aiglon Aviation choose to permit it to be. By the end of this week, if we do not move first, Maxwell's reputation will include several anonymously sourced suggestions that he was unstable, that his reporting was unreliable, that his complaints to the Ministry were the complaints of a man with personal difficulties his colleagues had been worried about, and that the documents he has left behind are the work of a man whose judgement we cannot, with confidence, trust. This is not a possible attack. This is the attack that is, at this moment, being constructed. We can be sure of it because it is the attack any competent communications operation would construct in this situation, and because the people we are up against employ competent communications operations."

He looked around the table.

"What we need is the same evidence Maxwell has, but in a form that does not require Maxwell to vouch for it. We need it from Aiglon's own systems, with Aiglon's own metadata, with Aiglon's own provenance. We need it in a form a court would

accept. We need it in a form a newspaper editor's lawyer would accept. We need it, in the end, in a form a Cabinet Office counter-attack cannot dissolve."

"Yes," Adam said. "I had reached the same conclusion at about four this morning."

"Right."

"Which means," Adam said, "we have to get into Aiglon's servers."

Philip set his coffee mug down.

He said, slowly: "We are not the people who get into Aiglon's servers."

"No," Adam said. "We are not. But Hubbard, one suspects, knows people who are."

The room considered this.

"Hubbard," Will said, "has been off doing whatever Hubbard has been doing for almost two days. We have not heard from him since yesterday morning. I am going to make a small wager, here in this room, that Hubbard returns to this house today and that Hubbard, when he returns, is not going to be empty-handed."

"That's not a wager," Jessica said.

"It is a wager," Will said, "in the sense that I am declaring my position on it before the result comes in. That is what a wager is."

Jessica almost smiled.

Philip looked at the ceiling of his own studio at the small cleaner pane in the new glass, and he thought about the day before yesterday at this hour, and he thought about how, forty-

eight hours ago, the question on the breakfast table had been whether he should leave for Cumbria on Friday or Saturday, and he thought about how the question on the breakfast table now was whether to authorise—not to participate in, because his participation was not in any account being asked for, but to authorise—a thing he would not, two mornings ago, have been able to imagine being authorised in a room he was sitting in.

"All right," Philip said. "Yes. We get the originals."

"Philip --" Will began.

"Will. I am authorising. I am also volunteering. I am not letting any of you do this without me. If we are getting the originals, I am in the room where they get got."

Will regarded him.

"All right," Will said. "Noted."

The phone in Philip's pocket rang.

He took it out. He looked at the screen.

"Mollie," he said, in the slightly altered voice a person uses when their wife rings before noon on a day when their wife was supposed to be having a quiet morning at the cottage.

He picked up.

"Hello."

He listened.

His face did not change. His shoulders did. The shoulders moved once, slightly, in the small involuntary registration of a person adjusting themselves to news that was about to require them.

"I see," he said.

He listened.

"All right. Yes. Yes. Tell me again."

He listened.

He said: "Stay there. Lock the doors. Don't answer the door if anyone else comes. Will is here. I'm putting him on. Yes. I love you."

He held the phone out to Will.

Will took it.

Mollie had picked up Stone's card from the kitchen table and was holding it in her hand as she stood at the cottage window.

She had not put it down since Stone had left. The card had his name printed on it in a small grey type—Edward Stone—and a phone number, and nothing else. It was a card designed to convey the absence of further information. It conveyed it well.

She had given the boys their lunch half an hour earlier. They were in the small back garden in their wellingtons, which they had been instructed to wear because the lawn had been wet for a fortnight, and Jimmy was looking with the binoculars at sheep on the hillside above the lane, and Tom was pursuing a tennis ball that Jimmy had thrown for him to retrieve in the manner of a small dog. They were, thank God, not in the cottage. They had not seen Stone. They had not heard the conversation in the kitchen. They had not registered anything except that their mother had spent rather longer than usual indoors at lunchtime, and Tom had asked, when she had come out to call them in and decided she could not yet face calling them in, whether

everything was all right, and she had said: *Yes, sweetheart. I am just thinking.*

Stone had knocked at twenty past eleven.

She had been at the kitchen sink. She heard the engine of the car coming up the lane two minutes earlier—she had been listening for engines on the lane more carefully than she had ever previously listened for them—and she watched, through the window over the sink, a dark grey saloon she did not recognise come up the lane in second gear and stop on the gravel by the gate. Two men got out. They were wearing dark coats. They were wearing the dark coats in the manner of men whose ordinary working dress was suits. The taller of the two walked up the path and knocked at the porch.

She had wiped her hands on a tea-towel. She took off the apron. She went to the porch door and opened the inner door with the chain still on the outer.

"Mrs Esdaile."

"Yes."

"My name is Stone. We're with the Ministry of Defence. We need to speak to you for a few minutes about your husband. It would help us, and him, if you would let us in."

Stone had smiled. The smile reached his mouth and stopped there. It did not, in any way Mollie could identify, contain warmth. She stood for a moment with her hand on the chain.

"Show me your identification."

He had held up a card. She had looked at it. The card said *E. Stone, Ministry of Defence*. It had a photograph of him on it. The photograph was him.

"And your colleague."

The colleague had held up a card also. It had said *D. Hannigan, Ministry of Defence*. The photograph was him also.

She had taken the chain off and opened the door.

She had not offered them tea. She took them to the kitchen, because the sitting room with its cold fireplace and oil lamps was not the room she conducted business of any kind in, and she stood at the sink with her back to the kitchen window and her arms folded loosely at her waist. She did not invite Stone to sit. He sat anyway, in the kitchen chair nearest the window. Hannigan stood by the door.

Stone had spoken for perhaps four minutes.

He said: "Your husband has come into possession of an item that does not belong to him. He may not have told you about this. He may have. I need to know which."

She said: "He has not told me."

He said: "That is, in one way, a relief. It is also the position of greatest risk for him. He is, at the moment, a private citizen in possession of a piece of military equipment that connects him to the death of a serving officer. If he continues to hold it, his exposure increases. If he returns it, our concerns about him conclude. The choice is straightforward."

She said: "You're asking me to ask him to return something."

"Yes."

"Why are you asking me, and not him."

"He is, at the moment, in conversations with people who are advising him in directions we believe are not in his interest. We hope you may be able to advise him in a different direction."

She had considered this.

"Mr Stone," she said, "what is the item."

Stone regarded her. He then said: "A firearm. A military-issue weapon that was on the person of one of the men who came down on the roof of your husband's house on Sunday morning. The weapon was removed from the scene before the emergency services arrived, by a person we believe to have been one of your husband's guests at breakfast. The weapon is now in your husband's keeping, or, more probably, in the keeping of one of his closer associates. We would like it back."

She had not, in her face, betrayed that she had ever heard about a firearm before. She said, slowly: "That is a serious thing for you to be telling me, Mr Stone. You are telling me that one of my husband's friends took a piece of evidence from a crime scene."

"Yes."

"Have you spoken to my husband about this directly?"

"We have not yet had the opportunity. We thought it appropriate to begin the conversation with you. We believe the matter can be resolved more quickly through you than through him."

"Why would it be resolved more quickly through me."

"Because, Mrs Esdaile, you are, in our experience, the kind of person who, when given accurate information about her family's situation, makes the kind of decision a reasonable person makes."

She had smiled, just once, briefly. Stone registered the smile and filed it.

"Mr Stone. May I ask you one question."

"Of course."

"How did you find this address."

He had paused. The pause was one beat longer than a person who had a quick honest answer to that question would have allowed himself.

"It is a matter of public record," he had said, "that your family has a property in Cumbria. Your husband filed for it on his Royal Academy declaration of interests. We made enquiries."

"Today."

"Yes."

"And how did you know I was here."

"We did not, with certainty. We had two candidates. We came here first."

She had nodded.

She said: "Mr Stone, I would now like you to leave."

He looked at her.

"Mrs Esdaile, I --"

"I have given you my answer. I will think about what you have said. I am not going to ask my husband to return anything to you, and I am not going to discuss this conversation with anyone except people I choose to discuss it with. You have given me your

information. I do not require any further information. I do not think it productive for you to remain in this house while I think."

He had stood up. He set the card on the kitchen table, square against the edge of it, in the precise centre of the place mat where Tom ate his porridge. He said: "When you've spoken to your husband, please call. If you cannot reach him, call anyway. The number is reachable at any hour."

"Goodbye, Mr Stone."

"Goodbye, Mrs Esdaile."

He had gone. Hannigan went behind him. The car door closed. The engine started. The car backed down the lane in second gear because the lane was too narrow to turn in. She watched the saloon disappear round the curve of the hill, and she stood at the window for some time after that, with the card in her hand, and she did not move until she heard, in the back garden, Tom shouting something to Jimmy about a sheep.

She had picked up the phone.

She had called Hubbard first. He had not picked up.

She had called Philip second.

She was now standing at the window holding the card and listening to Will Mackwith's voice on the phone, a voice that had, in the course of the last sixty seconds, become the voice of a barrister in court, calm and economical and precisely not surprised.

"All right, Mollie. Listen to me. You did exactly the right thing telling him to leave. You did not give him anything he did

not already have. I want you to do four things. Are you listening."

"I am listening."

"One. Lock the doors. Lock all of them. Do it now while I'm on the phone."

She walked through the cottage. She locked the porch. She locked the back door from the kitchen out into the garden, after first calling the boys back in, which she did with the small ordinary call she used to call them in for anything else, and which they responded to without registering that anything had changed. She locked the front gate. She came back to the phone.

"Done."

"Two. Do not answer the door again today, except to a person whose name has been given to you, in advance, by Hubbard. Do not answer for the postman. Do not answer for a delivery. Do not answer for a neighbour. Are you with me."

"Yes."

"Three. Do not call Philip again from your phone today. If you need to reach him, call me. I will reach him. I will explain why in a separate conversation. For now, take it on trust."

"All right."

"Four. Hubbard will call you in the next thirty minutes. He will tell you what arrangements he is making. Listen to him. Do what he says. Do not improvise."

"All right."

"Mollie."

"Yes."

"You are doing well."

"I know I am."

"All right. I'll get off the line. Hubbard in thirty."

"Will."

"Yes."

"Tell Philip I'm fine."

"I will."

She rang off.

She put the phone on the kitchen counter, beside Stone's card, beside the place mat where Tom had earlier eaten his porridge. She stood at the counter for a moment with both hands flat on the wood. Then she went into the sitting room, where the boys had taken their wellingtons off and were now sitting on the rug, building something out of the box of small wooden bricks her mother had bought them three Christmases ago, and she sat down on the floor with them, and she watched them build.

After about a minute Tom said: "Are you all right, Mum?"

"I am. I am all right. I am sitting with you."

"Are you going to play?"

"I am going to watch you for a few minutes, and then I am going to play."

"All right."

She watched.

Hubbard came in through the wrought-iron gate at twelve forty.

Adam had been watching for him from the front window, in the slightly absurd posture of a man who had reached the limit of

what he could usefully do without Hubbard in the room and had begun, faintly, to resent the limit. He saw the small dark blue car park three doors up. He saw Hubbard get out, in civilian clothes—a grey jumper, jeans, a brown jacket Adam had not previously seen him in—and walk down the pavement, and pause briefly at the gate to look at the upper floors of the houses across the road, and then come up the path. He had a small leather holdall over his shoulder. He looked, Adam thought, like a man who had not slept in the same bed twice.

Philip let him in.

He came through into the studio. He took the holdall off and set it on the floor. He took the brown jacket off and hung it on the back of the chair he had been sitting in throughout the breakfast on Sunday morning. He looked around the studio. He looked at the four of them—Philip and Will and Adam and Jessica—and at the printed document on the breakfast table.

“You’ve had a morning,” he said.

“We’ve had a morning,” Will said.

“Tell me. Quickly. The headlines.”

Will gave him the headlines. He gave them in the order Hubbard would want them: Stone at the cottage; Mollie’s response; the four things Will had told her to do; the Maxwell drive; the four sales; the Russia row; the recording held elsewhere by Maxwell; Adam’s overnight verification work; the conclusion they had reached about needing the originals from Aiglon’s own systems. He gave the headlines in eight minutes.

Hubbard listened without interrupting.

When Will had finished, Hubbard sat down. He took his phone out. He pressed and held a single key. He waited two rings. The line picked up.

"Mollie. Cecil. Listen. I have a man on the way to you. His name is Davies. He will not knock. He will park at the bottom of the lane in a Ford Focus and he will sit in the Focus for as long as you are in the cottage today and tonight. You will not need to interact with him. He is not your responsibility. He is mine. He carries identification but you do not need to ask for it. If anyone other than Davies comes to your gate, do not open the door, ring my number, and Davies will deal with whoever it is. Do you have that."

She had it.

"Davies will be there by four. Until four, lock everything, keep the boys away from windows, and do not, under any circumstances, leave the cottage. After four, you may go about the cottage as you wish, but you may not leave the property."

She had that also.

"Mollie."

"Yes."

"You did everything right."

"I know."

"All right."

He rang off.

He looked at the four of them.

"Now," he said. "Aiglon."

He pulled the breakfast table towards him by an inch, in the manner of a man who was about to begin work on a thing.

"I will brief you in operational detail tomorrow morning, on a whiteboard, with diagrams, with floor plans, with timings to the minute. What I am going to give you now is enough to allow you to ask me, before you go to bed tonight, the questions you would not want to be asking for the first time at twenty-one hundred tomorrow."

He took a small black notebook out of his jacket pocket and laid it on the table without opening it.

"Aiglon Aviation occupies floors three through seven of a building called One Cabot Crescent on the north side of Canary Wharf. Floor three is operations and the server room. Four and five are open-plan engineering. Six is executive. Seven is a private dining room, a board room, and the chairman's office. We are interested in floor three. Specifically the server room, which sits at the eastern end of floor three behind a door with a smartcard reader and an opaque glass panel through which, in the dark, you can see the rack lights inside as small green and amber points."

"You have a card," Will said.

"I have a card. The card belongs to one Daniel Petrescu, a junior systems administrator at Aiglon, presently in Bucharest visiting his mother, who has not used his card in six days, whose access privileges include the third-floor server room out of administrative inertia rather than any active job requirement, and whose card I cloned four days ago through a connection I am

not going to discuss in this room. The reader will accept the card as Petrescu. Aiglon will, if anyone is checking the logs the next morning, see a Petrescu entry at a time when Petrescu is in Romania. Whether anyone checks the logs the next morning is one of the contingencies we will spend tomorrow planning for."

"Four days ago," Philip said.

"Yes."

"Hubbard. Four days ago was Friday."

"Yes."

"You cloned a card on Friday. The crash was on Sunday."

"Yes."

The room held that for a moment.

"Cecil," Will said, slowly, "are you telling us that you began preparations for an Aiglon entry before the crash."

"I am telling you that I began preparations for the possibility of an Aiglon entry on Friday afternoon. I am telling you that I did not, on Friday, possess any specific knowledge that a parachute was about to come down on Philip Esdaile's roof on Sunday morning. I am telling you that the cloning of Petrescu's card was, on Friday, an entirely speculative piece of contingency, and that on Sunday morning, when I drove to this house in my dress uniform, I had a cloned smartcard in the inside pocket of the uniform, and I had not, at that point, decided whether I was ever going to use it. I am telling you these things now because the integrity of this operation requires that you know, before any of you walks into that building tomorrow night, what I knew and when I knew it."

The room held that, also.

Adam said, finally: "What did you know on Friday."

"I knew that a serving naval officer of long acquaintance had reached out to me, three weeks ago, via a channel he would not ordinarily have used. He told me that an internal complaint at Aiglon had been filed by an officer named Maxwell in early February; that the complaint had been handled in a manner that suggested the system was not handling it; that he, the officer, had begun to feel that he was being observed in ways he could not entirely account for. He asked me whether I would, as a friend, be willing to make certain preparations against the possibility that he would shortly need help of a kind he could not formally request. I said yes. The cloning of Petrescu's card was the first of those preparations. There were others which I will brief you on tomorrow."

Philip looked at him.

"The officer was Chummy."

"The officer was Chummy."

"You knew Chummy."

"I had met Chummy four times. The fourth time was last Wednesday, in a pub in Pimlico, for forty minutes. He told me what I have just told you. He did not tell me about Bukhari. He did not tell me about a recording. He told me that there were things at Aiglon that needed to come out, that he had been working with Maxwell to bring them out, and that he wanted to know whether he could rely on me if a situation developed."

Jessica, very quietly: "He didn't tell me he had seen you."

"No. He didn't tell me he was seeing you, either. He kept his various lines apart. It is a thing test pilots are trained in and that some test pilots take to with more enthusiasm than others. Chummy took to it. I did not know about you, Jessica, until Sunday morning."

She nodded once, accepting this, and did not say anything more.

Hubbard turned the page of the notebook.

"The security contractor for One Cabot Crescent is a firm called Bryce-Lowther. They are mid-tier; they do the building monitoring for perhaps fifteen Canary Wharf clients. They run their corridor cameras on a system that is two generations behind current best practice, which they have been promising Aiglon to upgrade for eighteen months and have not upgraded because Aiglon is unwilling to pay for the upgrade. The system has a known operational quirk. When the monitoring shift changes—twenty-one hundred Monday through Wednesday, nineteen hundred at weekends—the on-duty supervisor must manually re-authenticate the new shift's workstation against a physical hardware token kept in a safe. Re-authentication is supposed to take thirty seconds. In practice, when the supervisor is delayed by anything else—a phone call, a question from a junior, a queue at the coffee machine—the gap can run up to ten minutes. During that gap the corridor cameras are still recording, but the recordings are being written to a temporary buffer that is overwritten when the new shift's authentication completes. The recordings are not retrieved. The recordings are not, in any operational sense, made."

"You know this," Adam said, "because someone at Bryce-Lowther told you."

"Someone at Bryce-Lowther told me. That person will, tomorrow night, be the supervisor on duty. That person will, tomorrow night, be delayed. That person owes me a favour from 2014 that has been outstanding for too long. The favour is being called."

"Cecil."

"Yes."

"The person at Bryce-Lowther. After this is over --"

"The person at Bryce-Lowther has been retiring in three months for the last four years and has decided, this week, that three months is now next month. The person will leave the country with their family, about whom I have made certain arrangements, before any internal audit catches up with the gap. The person will not be available to assist us a second time. The person is also not going to be available to be questioned. I want everyone in this room to understand that we are getting one shot at this. There is no second night, no rescheduled attempt, no come-back-on-Thursday. Wednesday is the night and Wednesday is the only night."

Everyone in the room understood it.

"The window," Hubbard said. "Twenty-one hundred to twenty-one ten. We enter through a service door on the north side of the building that opens onto a corridor that the camera I have just described does not see in any case, and that, during the gap, is not seen by any camera anywhere. The cleaners go in at twenty

hundred through the same door using the cleaning company's badge. We enter at twenty-one hundred behind the cleaners—Petrescu's card piggybacks on the cleaning-company access pattern and will not flag as anomalous to the building access system. We have ten minutes to move from the service door to the third floor and through the server-room door. We have whatever portion of the cleaners' remaining time we choose to use to do the work, but we have to be out by twenty-three hundred when the cleaners leave, because after twenty-three hundred the building goes into night mode and the only way out is through the front lobby, which the night security desk staffs continuously. Realistically we have ninety minutes inside."

"What are we taking," Will said.

Hubbard looked at Adam.

Adam took a breath. He had been working this out at the print shop in Crouch End at four in the morning.

"Maxwell's drive contains a directory map of where the originals are kept on Aiglon's servers. He had identified seven directories. They contain, between them, the procurement records, the shipping manifests, the contractor correspondence, the SWIFT confirmations, and the internal email threads that, for each of the four sales, document the British side of the authorisation chain. Total volume is approximately forty gigabytes. I will have a USB array configured for parallel ingest. If the network plays, we can pull it in fifteen minutes. If the network doesn't play, we can pull it in forty. Either way the data is not the

bottleneck. The bottleneck is the gap on the way in and the cleaners on the way out."

"And if the directories have moved."

"Then we have a problem. Maxwell read the file system three weeks before he died. Aiglon's own systems administrators are not the kind of administrators who reorganise large directory structures without a project plan, and Maxwell would have known if any such project plan existed. The probability that the directories are still there is high. The probability that they are not is the largest single risk of this operation, and it is the risk Hubbard and I have spent some time talking about, and it is the reason why we are taking my whole laptop and not just my USB array. If the directories have moved, I have to find them in the time we have inside."

"That's a lot of search," Will said.

"It's a lot of search. It is also, in the worst case, a search I have done before, and it is the search I have spent the night practicing on the file-system map Maxwell left."

Hubbard nodded once.

"Why Wednesday and not tonight," Philip said.

"Because we are not ready," Hubbard said. "Because the four people going into that building have to walk through the building's floor plan three times in their heads before they walk through it once with their feet. Because the contingencies we have not yet thought about are the ones we have not yet thought about. Going in tonight is going in panicked, and going in panicked is going in wrong."

"Why not Thursday."

"Because by Thursday Aiglon will have begun, internally, to wonder whether anyone is going to come for them. By Thursday Aiglon's communications team will have started to ask their security people what their security people are doing about the possibility. By Thursday the floor plan may be the same floor plan but the floor will be different. Wednesday is the last night Aiglon believes it is managing a public-relations problem about an engine failure. Thursday is the first night Aiglon begins to suspect it is managing something else."

Will said: "And if we are caught."

"Then we are caught," Hubbard said. "And a public arrest of four citizens of this country in the offices of an arms-trafficking firm, on the same day the firm's chief opponent's death is being reported in the papers as an accident, will not, in the end, advantage Aiglon's situation. Whoever is currently running interference for Aiglon understands this perfectly. They are hoping we are stupid enough to give them an arrest. The opposite of being stupid enough is being competent enough. Hence Wednesday and not tonight."

He closed the notebook.

"And the four of us," Adam said.

"The four of us is what we will discuss tomorrow morning," Hubbard said. "I have a view. I want the night to think about it before I tell you. What I will say now is that there will be four people inside the building, and there will be one person outside the building in a vehicle two streets behind it on a burner

phone, and that person's job is to call the Guardian's night editor at twenty-three fifteen if any of us has not come out by then. There are five jobs and five of you. Tomorrow morning we sort which is which."

He stood up.

"Tonight we sleep here. All of us. Will, you go to your flat to pack a bag and you come back. Adam, you go to your flat to pack a bag—and to retrieve whatever copies of Maxwell's drive you have made, because I want them in this house tonight"—Adam did not move and did not blink, and Hubbard registered the not-moving and went on without comment—"and you come back. Jessica, you stay here. Philip, you stay here. The boys are with Mollie, Mollie is being looked after, and your job tonight is to be the man whose wife knows where he is."

He picked up the holdall.

He paused at the studio door.

"The other thing I want to say," he said, "and I want to say it once and not say it again, is that what we are about to do is a thing we are doing because no one else is going to do it. The proper authorities will not do it because the proper authorities are part of what is being concealed. The proper journalists will not do it because the proper journalists do not yet have what we have, and by the time they have it, the apparatus we are presently inside the awareness of will have rendered it unusable. We are going to do it. Each of you came to this house on Sunday morning to eat pastries with a friend. None of you signed up for this. Tonight, in your own time, in your own bed in this house, I

want each of you to ask yourself whether you are still in.

Tomorrow morning, when we sit down at six, I will ask each of you the question. There is no shame in being out. There will not be any shame in being out. Take it seriously. Give me a real answer. I am asking now because tomorrow is the last morning anyone in this group can choose."

He went out. He carried it through into the back of the house, and they heard him climb the stairs, and they heard a door open and close on the upper landing—the door of the small storage room above the studio, the room with the skylight and the dowel-hole in the centre of its floor, which Hubbard had decided, two mornings ago, was the one room in the house in which a phone call could be made without being heard from the studio below. The room that had let Philip see the crash.

Philip looked at his friends.

He said: "Right."

Jessica said: "Right."

Will said: "All right then. We work."

Adam said nothing. He sat at the breakfast table, with the printed document in front of him, and he watched the new pane of glass in the studio roof catch a small irregular gleam from the cold late-morning light, and he thought: he had better come back. Not Hubbard. The dog Maxwell had mentioned in his letter. The dog asleep against the door of the bedroom in which Maxwell's wife had been reading. He thought: I hope someone has fed him. I hope someone has remembered. I hope, when this is all over, the dog has, in the end, been all right.

Outside, the wind off the river had got up again.

In the cottage above Santon Bridge, the cottage phone rang.

Mollie was at the kitchen counter with the kettle in her hand. She set the kettle down. She looked at the phone, which had not, in five days, been the phone she had been waiting for. She picked it up.

"Mollie."

"Audrey."

It was not a surprise, in the end. Mollie had been thinking, in the way a woman thinks about another woman in the small unmentioned hours of a difficult week, about Audrey. She had been thinking about the spare room she had walked into at quarter past seven on Monday morning, about the white-gold ring on the writing desk, about the four-word note she had folded into her own pocket before she had gone downstairs to wake the children. She had not, in the four days since, allowed herself to think about it for very long, because the thinking had not been a thing she could afford.

"Where are you," Mollie said.

"Bath. My sister's. I have been here since Monday."

"All right."

"Mollie, I'm sorry to ring."

"Don't be sorry."

"I needed to ring you. Not Morgan. You."

Mollie sat down at the kitchen table. She put one hand on the table. She looked at the door of the back garden, where Tom and Jimmy could be heard somewhere along the dry-stone wall,

conducting an inquiry into something neither of them had explained to her.

"Tell me," Mollie said.

"I have called the wedding off."

"All right."

"I rang the registrar this morning. I rang the church. I rang my mother, who took it less well than the registrar. I rang the hotel where the lunch was, and the woman at the hotel was kind in the way the woman at a hotel is kind when she has been doing this longer than a wedding is supposed to last."

"All right."

"Mollie."

"Yes."

"I have not yet rung Morgan."

Mollie did not say anything.

"I will ring Morgan tonight," Audrey said. "I am ringing you first because I wanted, before I rang Morgan, to ring one person who is not going to ask me whether I am sure. I am sure. I have been sure since the August before last. The cellar and the gun and the parachute and the rest of it are, in their way, the small last thing that arrived. They are not the thing. The thing has been here for a year and a half. I have been carrying it the way Philip was carrying the cellar. I am not carrying it any longer."

Mollie listened.

She said: "Audrey."

"Yes."

"Where will you live."

"Here for a fortnight. After that I do not yet know. Not London for a while. The flat is Morgan's; he had it before me; he can have it back. The Chelsea house is yours and Philip's; you do not need a guest in it. I will find a thing in due course. I have a small amount of money my father left me which I have not yet spent. I will be all right."

"Audrey."

"Yes."

"Will you ring me again."

A pause.

"I will, Mollie. I would like to. I will ring next week."

"Good."

"And Mollie."

"Yes."

"The ring is on the desk in the spare room."

"I have it."

"Keep it for me until I write to ask for it. I do not, this week, know whether I am going to ask. Keep it until I do."

"I will."

"Tell Philip I'm sorry about his roof."

Mollie almost laughed. She did not. She said: "He'll have to learn to be sorry about his own roof, Audrey. Take care of yourself."

"You too."

They rang off.

Mollie set the phone down on the kitchen counter. She studied it. Then she went back to the kettle, and put it on, and stood at the window watching the lane.

In the cottage above Santon Bridge, Mollie watched the lane through the kitchen window, and at four minutes past four a Ford Focus came up the lane and stopped at the bottom of her gravel, and the engine cut, and a man got out, and he did not approach the cottage, and he did not look at the cottage, and he sat down on the dry-stone wall opposite her gate with a thermos and a paperback and the slightly bored attention of a person prepared to sit on a wall for several hours, and she watched him and then she went back to the boys.

CHAPTER NINE

Going

He had been at the breakfast table since five.

He had made the coffee. He had set out the cups. He had—and this was new—set out, in five precise positions on the wood, five blank index cards and five sharpened pencils. He had put the small black notebook to his right, closed. He had put the cloned smartcard out of his wallet onto the table beside the notebook, in front of him. He had sat with it.

At six precisely the door from the hall opened and Adam came in.

Adam had on a grey jumper Adam had not been wearing yesterday, jeans, and the faintly inward-pulled face of a man who had slept against his usual schedule and was treating the early hour as a procedural matter. He went to the cafetière, he poured coffee, he sat down two seats away from Hubbard, and he said: "Yes."

Hubbard looked at him.

"I am still in," Adam said. "Asked and answered. I have been answering it since I sat down with the drive on Monday night. The answer has not changed."

"Good."

"What are the cards for."

"In a minute."

Will came down at seven minutes past. Will had on his suit. Will had not, in his life, faced a morning that was going to be

worse than yesterday's morning by getting out of bed in anything other than a suit.

"Yes," Will said, before he sat down. "And before you ask, no, I have not changed my mind, and no, I am not going to. My role and my caveats we will discuss. The yes is not subject to discussion."

He sat. He poured coffee. He opened the printed document Adam had handed out the previous morning, which he had clearly read three more times overnight, and he laid it in front of him and folded his hands over it.

Jessica came down at quarter past. She had on a wool sweater of Mollie's that did not quite fit her and a pair of running leggings that were her own, and her hair was tied back. She had not slept. Her eyes had the slightly luminous shine of a young person who had been awake during the period a young person was supposed to have slept, and she came into the kitchen with the small over-careful movements of a person managing herself.

"Jessica," Hubbard said.

"Yes."

"You're sure."

"I am sure."

"Tell me why."

She looked at him.

"Because if I sit in this house today and Chummy dies in the ICU tonight, I will not survive it. Because the only thing I can do for him at this point is to bring out the thing he and Maxwell were trying to bring out. Because I am not, on examination,

willing to be twenty years old and out of this. I am willing to be twenty years old and inside it. And because, Cecil, if any of the other four people in this house go into Aiglon's building tomorrow night without me—without the one person whose face the front desk has actually seen at non-business hours, walking in with a smile and a coffee—I will be twice as frightened for them tonight as I am going to be for myself."

Hubbard considered her.

"That last reason is the operational one."

"Yes."

"Good. The operational one is the one I needed. Sit down, Jessica."

She sat.

Philip came down last, at twenty past, with his hair wet from the shower and his sleeves pushed up. He looked at the table, at the four others, at the cards, at Hubbard.

"Yes," he said. "I'm in. I have not phoned my wife yet."

"You will phone her this afternoon."

"I know."

"Sit down, Philip."

He sat.

Hubbard looked round the table.

"All right," he said. "Each of you, write your name on a card. Then I'll explain."

They wrote. The cards came back to the centre of the table, name-side down. Hubbard turned them over.

"This card," he said, "is your card. You are going to put it in your pocket and carry it for the rest of the day. If at any point between now and the moment we walk out of that gate at nineteen thirty tonight you change your mind—and I mean any moment, not a thoughtful one—you take the card out of your pocket and you put it on this table. You do not need to say anything. You do not need to explain. You put the card down. The card is the answer. We will replan around the absence of the card and we will not, any of us, regard you any worse for it."

He set each card in front of its owner.

"The cards exist because what you said yes to two minutes ago was not yet a real yes; the day has not yet happened. The day will. You will see things in the day that you did not see at six in the morning. I want each of you to know there is a way back, and I want the way back to be a thing you do without speaking, because the speaking is the part that I do not want any of you to have to do."

Adam looked at his card. He picked up the pencil. He wrote his name a second time, on the back, in capitals. He pocketed the card. He looked at Hubbard.

"That is a thing you have read about doing," Adam said, "in a context in which a senior officer once did it for you."

"It is."

"All right."

Will picked up his card. He folded it once. He put it inside his breast pocket against his wallet. He nodded.

Jessica picked hers up. She held it and she did not put it in a pocket. She put it down on the table in front of her, name-side up, and she set her coffee cup beside it.

"I would rather see it," she said.

"Then see it," Hubbard said.

Philip pocketed his without looking at it.

Hubbard wrote his own name on the fifth card, and put it in his pocket.

"I am also out, if I take it out," he said. "We are equal in this. Now. To work."

He moved them from the kitchen into the studio.

He had, while they were sleeping, taken down two of Philip's smaller paintings from the wall opposite the breakfast table and replaced them with three sheets of A2 paper, blu-tacked at the corners. Philip looked at the relocated paintings—they were leaning against the side of the standard lamp, where Mollie would, if she had been in the room, have winced and moved them—and he decided not to wince, because Hubbard was working.

The first sheet was a floor plan of One Cabot Crescent, third floor. The second was a wider plan of the building's ground floor and service entries. The third was a timeline, in pencil, going across the page in five-minute increments from 19:30 to 23:30.

"All right," Hubbard said. "I am going to walk us through this once. Then we are going to walk through it three more times, with each of you taking a different role on each pass. Then we

will eat. Then we will walk through it again. Then we will dress. Then we will go."

He picked up a pencil.

"Twenty hundred. Cleaners enter through the service door on the north side of the building. The door is here." He tapped the plan. "It opens into a corridor that runs east, with a service lift on the right and a stairwell on the left. The cleaners go up to the third floor in the lift in two batches of three; the first at twenty oh two, the second at twenty oh four. They use the cleaning company's badge."

He turned to Jessica.

"Twenty fifty-five. Jessica enters the front lobby, alone, with a coffee from the Pret across the street. She is in the same coat she has worn to the building three previous times. She uses her phone to text the desk security officer—a man called Kevin, who has met her twice—to say she is coming up for ten minutes to drop something off for Charles. Kevin will let her up. Kevin is not on the third floor; Kevin is on the ground; Kevin will sign her in to the visitor log as visiting Charles Smith, Aviation Test Cadre. Jessica will go to floor three. She will say hello to the duty receptionist, who is a woman called Petra who has met her once. She will tell Petra she is dropping something off and will be five minutes."

"Why am I dropping something off," Jessica said. "Chummy is in the ICU."

"Because Chummy's father, who has flown in from Geneva, has asked you, as Chummy's girlfriend, to bring his service folder to

the office because he has been told that he will not be permitted to remove anything from Chummy's flat by the police, but that the Aiglon office will hold his things in trust until the matter is resolved. You have a folder. The folder contains, in fact, three magazines and a Sunday paper, but it is in a service folder, and you are, at this moment, the kind of distraught girlfriend who has agreed to bring it because Chummy's father asked her to. Petra will accept this. Petra has met Chummy's father once, in the lobby in November. Chummy's father is, in real life, going to call Petra at twenty-one on the dot to confirm you are coming. The call will land in front of Petra at the moment you arrive on her floor."

"You've spoken to Chummy's father."

"I have. He is, on this, with us. He will call Petra. He will make Petra feel that she has personally helped a grieving family."

Jessica said, after a moment: "All right."

"At twenty-one hundred precisely the corridor camera on the third floor goes blind for ten minutes. From twenty-one hundred to twenty-one ten the camera is recording into a buffer that will be overwritten when the new shift authenticates. At twenty-one hundred Petra takes the phone call from Chummy's father. Jessica walks past Petra's desk, into the corridor, and continues east towards the server room. She is on the floor for entirely legitimate reasons. She is not technically supposed to be heading east, but she is also not technically supposed to be on this floor at all, and Petra has been visibly taken up by the call.

The corridor between Petra's desk and the server room is approximately ninety feet. Jessica covers it."

"And the others."

"At twenty-one oh three the rest of us enter through the service door on the north side, on the second wave with the cleaners. We use Petrescu's card. We go up the service stairwell, not the lift, because the service stairwell does not have a camera in it. We come out on the third floor at the eastern end, opposite the server room. We meet Jessica at the server room door. Petrescu's card opens the server room. We are inside by twenty-one oh seven."

"Until twenty-three hundred when the cleaners leave," Adam said.

"Until twenty-three hundred. After that the building goes into night mode and the only way out is the front lobby. The front lobby will, by then, be staffed by the night security officer, who is not Kevin, and who will have no reason to let four people he does not recognise out of a corporate floor at half past eleven on a Wednesday night. We have to be out by twenty-three hundred. Realistically we have ninety minutes inside."

He paused.

"Inside, the work is Adam's. Adam, walk us through what you are doing inside."

Adam stood up. He went to the floor plan.

"Server room is eight racks. Aiglon's production environment is racks one through four; staging is five; backup is six; the

file servers Maxwell mapped are racks seven and eight. We're going to seven and eight. Each rack has a console at the top; the consoles are not networked but they are physically connected to the rack. I plug into the console. I authenticate using a credential set Hubbard's contact has provided"—Adam glanced at Hubbard, who did not move—"which gives me read access to the file system. I navigate to the seven directories. I plug in my USB array and ingest. If the directories are in place, the ingest is fifteen minutes. If they have moved, I have to find them."

"And if they have been deleted."

"If they have been deleted in the last three weeks, they are in the snapshot system. Aiglon takes a daily snapshot; snapshots are kept for thirty days. I have credentials to the snapshot system. If the directories are gone from the live file system, I get them from the snapshot. The snapshots are slower; that is the case in which the ingest takes forty minutes."

"And if they have been deleted and the snapshots have been sanitised."

"Then we have a different problem."

"All right," Hubbard said. "Now. What each of us is doing. Philip."

Philip looked at the floor plan.

Hubbard: "Philip is at the door of the server room while Adam is at the console. Philip's job is two things. One: keep the door closed. The door has a panic strip on the inside—it opens from inside without authentication—which means a cleaner who happens down the corridor at the wrong moment can open it from

outside if she has a fault. The fault would be very rare. It would also be the end of us. Philip stands inside the door with his foot against it. If the panic strip activates, he holds it. He holds it for as long as he needs to."

"All right."

"Two: Philip watches Adam. If Adam needs anything, Philip gets it. If Adam is having a problem, Philip is the second pair of hands. Philip is also, if I have to leave the server room for any reason, the senior person inside it."

"Why would you leave the server room," Will said.

Hubbard looked at Will. He looked at the plan. He looked back.

"Because, Will, the part of this plan that is least solid is the part where the four of us are inside that building for ninety minutes and the ninety minutes are uneventful. They will not be uneventful. There will be a small thing that goes wrong. I do not yet know what the small thing will be. The small thing will require somebody on his feet outside the server room, dealing with it, while Adam continues to ingest. That somebody will, in all likelihood, be me."

"And me," Jessica said.

"And you. You and I split the floor. You take the corridor west of the server room, towards Petra. I take the corridor east, towards the executive lift. We have radios. We are in radio contact with Will outside."

"Will outside."

"Will is two streets behind the building in his own car with a burner phone and the line of sight on a particular set of upper-floor windows. If lights come on in those windows in a particular pattern, it means Aiglon's executive on-call has been summoned. If that happens, Will calls us; we leave; we do not come back. If, additionally, none of us is out by twenty-three fifteen, Will calls the Guardian's night editor, a woman called Margaret Bryant, whose number Will has. Will tells her exactly what we have been doing and where we are. Margaret will, depending on what she does with that, either save our lives or end them."

Will said: "I have spoken to Margaret. She is expecting a possible call. She does not know what it is about. She will not know unless I make the call."

Adam, slowly: "Margaret Bryant?"

"Margaret Bryant."

"I worked with her in 2018."

"I know you did."

The room held that for a beat.

Hubbard: "All right. Once more, with each of you taking a different role each time."

They walked it through.

They walked it through three times before lunch.

By the third walkthrough Jessica could narrate the plan from any of the four perspectives; Philip was no longer hesitating at the part where Adam handed him the spare USB drive; Adam had stopped looking at his notes; Will had begun to ask the small

operational questions of a man who had mentally lived in a room he had not yet been in. By the third walkthrough Hubbard had begun, in the small involuntary way he did, to nod at the answers as they came, the way an officer nodded when he had stopped being the person teaching and had begun to be the person watching.

He stopped them at twelve thirty.

He said: "Now we eat."

After lunch—sandwiches Hubbard had got from the deli on Pavilion Road, which the four of them ate at the breakfast table, in silence, in the way of a meal eaten by people who had run out of small talk three days earlier—Philip went upstairs alone.

He went up the back stairs and along the upper corridor and stopped at the door of the storage room.

He had not been in the storage room since Sunday morning.

He had, in the eleven hours between Sunday's breakfast and the moment he had taken the bottle of curaçao up from the cellar, gone down to look at the obscure one more time and then back up to a different life. He had not, since Sunday, opened the storage room door. He had thought about doing it once, on Monday afternoon, while Hubbard had been making calls in the room, and had decided not to. The room had been Hubbard's room since Sunday afternoon. Hubbard was downstairs now, coiling cables in the studio.

Philip put his hand on the door.

He went in.

The storage room held the same quiet it had held for three years. The skylight was clear; the February afternoon was the

colour of cold pewter; the older paintings on their slot racks against the three walls held, in the racked light, the slightly indeterminate tones of work he had not looked at in a long time. The centre of the floor was empty. The hole was where it had always been. He had not, in twelve weeks, looked at it.

He stood over it.

He thought: *for three years I came down to the cellar to look up. I never came up to look down.* The hole was a quarter of an inch across. It was so small that, when his eye was directly above it, his body shadowed it, and he could not see the floor below.

He thought about a letter he had been imagining all week—not a letter Mollie had sent, but a letter she had at some point in the last three years written in her head and not sent—in which she would have said, if she had thought to write it, that the thing she could not forgive was the thing she did not yet know about. He thought: I am about to give her another thing she does not yet know about. I am about to give her a thing that is, in the strict comparative sense, larger than the thing in the cellar. I am also going to give it to her over the phone, which is the wrong instrument.

He thought about the painter's chapel he had kept in this house for three years, and he thought about the fact that he had, since Sunday morning, kept three further chapels. He had kept the cellar chapel. He had kept the chapel of I thought I heard something, which he had given up on Sunday night. He had kept the

chapel of I am going to keep this from Mollie until tomorrow, and tomorrow had now come.

He thought: *I am not, in the end, the person I had thought I was.*

He thought: *I am a man who has been keeping rooms.*

He thought: *the rooms have not been malicious. They have been mine. The keeping of them is its own thing, separate from what is in them.*

He thought: *I am going to phone her.*

He went back downstairs.

He took the kitchen phone—the landline, which still worked, which Mollie had insisted they keep when they had bought the house because she had grown up with one and had wanted, on some level she had not entirely articulated, for the boys to grow up with one too. He did not take his mobile. He had been told, by Will, on Tuesday, not to call Mollie from his mobile. He had not asked why. He understood now why.

He dialled the cottage.

She picked up on the third ring.

"Hello."

"Mollie."

"Philip."

There was a pause. He could hear, behind her voice, the small wood-fire crackle of the sitting-room hearth, and somewhere further, the smaller industry of children—Tom and Jimmy in some game involving the wooden bricks, by the sound of it.

"Are the boys all right."

"They are all right."

"Davies."

"On the wall. He has been on the wall since four yesterday afternoon. He was replaced once at midnight by a man who did not introduce himself but who sat on the same wall in the same posture, and Davies came back at six. They have established a rhythm. Davies has had three meals delivered to him by a courier, which I assume Hubbard organised."

"Hubbard organised it."

"I thought so."

There was a pause.

"Mollie. I have to tell you something. I cannot tell you in detail. I am going to tell you what I can tell you, and the things I cannot tell you are the things I cannot tell you."

"All right."

"Tonight, at twenty-one hundred, Hubbard and Adam and Jessica and I are going to enter a building in Canary Wharf, which is the headquarters of the company connected to the events of Sunday morning. We are going to enter the building because we have, in our possession, evidence which requires, in order to be usable, certain corroborating documents which exist only on the company's own systems. We are going to be inside the building for approximately ninety minutes. We will be out by twenty-three hundred. Will will be on the perimeter. We have prepared. We have reasons to believe the operation can be conducted without our being detected. We have reasons to believe that, even if we are detected, the consequences will not be the worst consequences we

have considered. I am telling you this because I cannot, in conscience, do it without telling you, and because if anything happens, I do not want you to learn, in the morning, in a way that has not come from me. I am sorry that this is a phone call. I know it is the wrong instrument."

There was a longer pause.

"Philip."

"Yes."

"You are going to do this."

"Yes."

"You are not asking me whether you should do this."

"No. I am telling you we are doing it."

"Right."

There was a long pause. Then she said:

"I am going to be honest with you. I would prefer that you not do this. I am going to be more honest with you and tell you that my preferring you not do it is not a thing on which a decision should be made, because my preference is not, on examination, a position I have arrived at through any consideration of what is at stake. My preference is the preference of a wife who would prefer her husband not be in danger. I have that preference. I am not, in the next forty-five minutes, in a position to upgrade it into an argument."

"All right."

"What I will say, instead, is this. I believe you. I believe Cecil. I believe that the four of you, between you, have arrived at the conclusion that this is the thing to do. I believe,

additionally, that if the four of you do not do this thing, the people we are up against will continue doing what they have been doing, and what they have been doing includes coming to my kitchen and putting a card on my place mat. I would prefer that to stop happening. I understand that the way to make it stop happening is the way you are about to make it stop happening. So I will not, on the phone, in front of the boys' father, ask you to not do it."

He listened.

"Mollie."

"Yes."

"The cellar conversation."

"What about it."

"I have not had it yet. I am supposed to have it. I have been thinking, all day, that I am about to get on a Tube to a corporate building in East London with a piece of evidence in my pocket, and that this is not the form in which I am supposed to be having that conversation."

"No. It is not."

"I am going to come back."

"You had better."

"I am going to come back, and I am going to have the cellar conversation, and we are going to have all the conversations after it, and we are going to be the people who keep working at it after the story is over."

She was silent for a moment.

She said: "I have used those words."

"I know you have. I have been listening more carefully than you may have given me credit for."

"You have been listening exactly as carefully as I have given you credit for. I have given you credit for considerable carefulness. It is one of the reasons I married you."

"Mollie."

"Yes."

"I love you."

"I love you. Come home. Come home tonight. Come home tomorrow, if it has to be tomorrow. Come home."

"All right."

"Philip."

"Yes."

"Tell Cecil to bring you back."

"I will."

She hung up first. He stood with the receiver in his hand for some seconds, listening to the dial tone, until the dial tone became the small empty beeping that announced the line was no longer in use, and then he set the receiver in its cradle. He stood at the kitchen counter for a moment longer.

Then he went back into the studio.

They ate at six.

Hubbard had cooked. Hubbard had, in fact, made a beef stew, which had been on the hob in a heavy enamel pot for most of the afternoon and which Adam had been smelling, from the studio, with the small surprised pleasure of a man who had not been expecting beef stew. They ate at the breakfast table where, on Sunday

morning, breakfast had been laid. The bottle of curaçao was empty in the kitchen. The small clean rectangle where the gun on its napkin had once sat was a thing only the people in the room knew had ever been there.

They ate without ceremony. They did not, by mutual unspoken agreement, talk about the operation during the meal. They talked about other things. Will told a courtroom story that was funny. Adam told a story about his editor that was less funny but kindly meant. Jessica did not tell a story, but she ate a small amount, which was, Hubbard later registered, more than he had expected of her. Philip said little; he was thinking about Mollie's voice on the phone an hour and a half earlier; he understood that this was the kind of thinking that, indulged at length, would unfit him for the operation, and he set it aside, but only just.

At seven they cleared the plates. Hubbard washed up because Hubbard was the kind of man who washed up after he had cooked. The others went upstairs to dress.

They dressed without ceremony. Dark clothes, but not so dark as to be conspicuous. Trainers. Coats. Each of them carried the equipment Hubbard had assigned at the morning briefing, in the bags Hubbard had assigned. Adam carried his laptop. Hubbard carried the cloned smartcard, the radio array, the burner phones for the team, and a small set of things he did not show anyone. Jessica carried the service folder with the magazines and the Sunday paper in it. Philip carried, in the inside pocket of his coat, a small folded sheet on which Adam had handwritten, in very small letters, the seven directory paths Adam was going to

navigate to. The handwritten sheet was redundant; Adam had it memorised; but Philip had asked, that morning, whether he could have a copy in case Adam went down, and Adam had said yes, and Adam had handwritten the sheet at the breakfast table at four in the afternoon, with the particular care of a man writing something he hoped would not be needed.

At twenty-five past seven they came downstairs.

They stood in the studio the five of them, in their coats. Outside, on Lennox Street, the February evening was cold and dry and clear; the sky over the rooftops was the dark blue it became on cold dry nights, with the small high stars showing through; a fox was passing, somewhere down the road, in the slow autonomous way foxes passed in Chelsea.

Hubbard looked at each of them.

"Cards," he said.

They took them out—Adam, Will, Philip—and Jessica picked hers up off the table where it had been all day. They held them.

"Last time," Hubbard said. "If anyone is putting a card down, this is the moment."

No one put a card down.

"All right," Hubbard said.

He took his own card out of his pocket. He set it, with the four others, in a small neat pile on the breakfast table. He did not look at the pile.

"Will. The studio is yours. The phones are charged. Margaret's number is third in the burner. The list of conditions for calling is in the second drawer of the writing desk in the

front room, under the box of pencils, in the envelope marked for Will. You have read it. You have it. I am asking you now to confirm."

"I have it. I have read it. I confirm."

"Good. Anything happens to any of us, or doesn't happen by twenty-three fifteen, you call. Do not, under any circumstance, leave this house before midnight. After midnight you can do as you please; before midnight you are the adult who is in this house."

"Understood."

"Phone."

"In my pocket."

"Charger."

"Plugged in by the standard lamp."

"Backup phone."

"In the writing desk."

"Right."

Hubbard turned to the others.

"We go separately. Adam first, on foot to South Kensington, Tube to Canary Wharf. Jessica second, in five minutes, taxi to the Pret. Philip third, twenty-five minutes after Adam, Tube. Me last, in the car. We meet at the service door at twenty oh five—except Jessica, who is at the front. Radios on at twenty hundred. Anybody is more than ten minutes off the schedule, we abort. We do not, under any circumstance, allow ourselves to be late together."

"Right."

"All right."

He looked at the four of them. He looked at Will. He did not embrace anyone. He held out his hand. Adam shook it. Will shook it. Jessica did not shake it; she came briefly into Hubbard, very quickly, for half a second, and stepped back. Philip held it the longest. Hubbard let the hand go.

"Adam. Walk."

Adam walked.

They watched him through the front window—a man in a green wool coat, nothing in his hands but a small leather case, walking east on Lennox Street towards the Tube, looking, from above, like a journalist on his way to some entirely unremarkable evening assignment. He did not look back.

Five minutes later Jessica went out to the cab, which was already at the gate. She kissed Mollie's sweater—which she had been wearing all day under her own coat, and which she was leaving on a hook by the door, because Mollie's sweater would not be the right thing to wear into the building of the company that had killed Maxwell—and she went out, and the cab pulled away, and they watched it down to the corner.

Twenty-five minutes after Adam had left, Philip went. He embraced Will. He nodded to Hubbard. He did not say anything. He went out through the gate.

Hubbard followed last, ten minutes after that, with the holdall on his shoulder, in his civilian clothes, and his car was, by the time he reached it, the only thing on Lennox Street that mattered.

The wrought-iron gate clicked shut behind him.

Will stood in the empty studio for some time with his hands in his pockets.

The pile of five cards was on the breakfast table. The studio's glazed roof, repaired and clean, held the dark blue of the early-evening sky.

He looked at the cards.

He picked them up. He put them in the inside pocket of his suit jacket, against his wallet. He sat down at the breakfast table. He set the burner phone on the wood beside his hand. He poured himself a glass of water. He looked at the silent phone for a moment. Then he opened the document Adam had handed out the previous morning, the one he had now read four times, and he began, in pencil, in the margins, in the small careful hand he used in court when he was preparing to argue, to make notes.

In Cumbria, in the cottage above Santon Bridge, Mollie was reading to the boys.

In Highgate, in the kitchen on Makepeace Avenue, Karim Bukhari was looking at a phone that had not, all day, rung.

In a hospital across the river from Westminster, in the ICU on the sixth floor, Charles Valentine Smith had begun, in the slow underwater way of a young man surfacing from concussion and morphine, to wake.

And the night came on across the country, and at twenty-one hundred precisely, in a corner office on the third floor of a building called One Cabot Crescent on the north side of Canary

Wharf, a particular set of corridor cameras began to record into a buffer that would, in ten minutes, be overwritten.

CHAPTER TEN

The Window

He came up the steps from the Underground at quarter to eight.

Canary Wharf at this hour was a peculiar piece of London—not deserted, never deserted, the towers always carrying a few late lights and the streets between them always carrying a few late workers, but not populated either, in the way the city was populated at half past eight on a Wednesday in any neighbourhood that had been built before someone had decided it was going to be a financial district. The pavements were too clean. The trees were too even. The buildings were so consistently black-glass-and-steel that the eye, after a few minutes, lost the sense of which was which. Adam had, he realised, not been to Canary Wharf in perhaps four years; he had not, in those four years, missed it.

He walked west along Cabot Square.

He had a small leather case in his right hand—the laptop and the USB array, in a bag that would not have looked out of place on any of the men he passed—and a coffee in his left, which he had bought from a place at the station because he had decided, walking up the platform, that he wanted his hand to be carrying something other than the case. He drank from the coffee without registering what was in it. He found, when he had gone perhaps a hundred yards, that the coffee was decaf, which he had not asked

for but which, on examination, was probably the right choice for the next three hours.

He stopped at a pillar at the eastern edge of the square and stood for some minutes. He looked at One Cabot Crescent, twenty metres further on: thirty-two storeys of black glass set against a darker sky, with the small variations of light from floor to floor that meant a building was occupied without being busy. Floor three was at the height of the tree canopy in the small landscaped garden between the building and the next. Floor three had, this evening, the slightly uneven illumination of a floor on which a few cleaners were beginning to move from room to room with their trolleys.

He thought: *I am about to walk into that building.*

He thought: *the next time I think this thought I will be inside.*

He looked at his watch. It was seven fifty-three.

He drank more of the decaf.

At seven fifty-eight he saw, at the western end of Cabot Square, Jessica getting out of a cab in front of the Pret. She did not look at him. She did not look anywhere except at her phone, in the manner of a young person on the way to drop something off at a building she had been to before. She went into the Pret. She did not, in any aspect of her bearing, register that she had spent the previous fourteen hours rehearsing every single thing she was now doing. Adam permitted himself a moment of professional admiration, the way one journalist permitted

himself a moment of admiration for another journalist's lede, and he turned away and walked east towards the service entrance.

The service entrance for One Cabot Crescent was on Mackenzie Walk, which ran along the north side of the building, hidden from Cabot Square by a row of cypresses. The entrance was a single door with a card reader set into a recessed bay between two larger loading bays. The cleaning company's van was already parked in the second loading bay. The cleaning company's first wave of three women was already inside the building. The second wave was assembling at the door.

He saw Hubbard at the corner of the building before Hubbard saw him.

Hubbard was leaning against a low concrete bollard at the eastern end of Mackenzie Walk, in his civilian clothes, with a phone to his ear, holding a conversation that was not happening. He was watching the door, the cypresses, the upper floors. He registered Adam in his peripheral vision and gave no sign.

Adam walked past him. He did not look at him. He continued past the bollard for another twenty metres, and then he turned and walked back towards the door, in the manner of a man who had come out for a coffee and was now coming back for it.

Philip arrived at three minutes past eight from the south side, in his coat with his hands in his pockets, looking like a man who had got off a Tube and was finding his way to a flat he had been told was around here somewhere. He was very good at it, Adam noticed. Philip had spent thirty years learning, in the course of being a painter who had had to live in a great many

cities while painting in a great many of them, how to walk through urban places without being looked at. The skill, on this particular evening, was useful in ways he had not previously had cause to use it for.

Hubbard came off the bollard.

The cleaners' second wave—six women in dark blue uniforms, with badges on lanyards, carrying their own small cases of equipment—came along Mackenzie Walk from the cleaning company's van and assembled at the service door. The senior cleaner, a woman in her fifties with a clipboard, scanned her badge. The reader read it. The door clicked. The door opened. The senior cleaner held it for the others.

The three men slipped through behind the last of the women.

The senior cleaner did not look back. The last cleaner was holding the door against her hip while she shifted a piece of equipment from one hand to the other, and Hubbard, with the practised ordinariness of a man who had done a great many things he did not require to be praised for, took the door from her hip with one hand as he passed and held it for the next half-second so that she could continue with her equipment, and she said *thanks, love* without turning her head, and then they were inside, and the door clicked shut behind them, and Adam heard the small mechanical settling of an automatic lock which had not yet decided to flag the entry as anomalous.

The corridor was lit by overhead fluorescents. The cleaners were already at the lift bay at the far end. The service stairwell was a door on the left, twelve feet ahead.

Hubbard turned the handle.

They went up.

The stairwell was concrete, painted institutional cream, and rang slightly with each step in the way that stairwells in commercial buildings rang. Hubbard went first. Philip went second. Adam went third with the case held against his chest. They climbed three floors in silence, came to a door marked 3, and stopped.

Hubbard put his ear to the door.

He listened for some seconds.

He nodded.

He pushed the door open by about an inch. He looked through the gap. He pushed it the rest of the way.

The third-floor corridor was empty. To the right, perhaps a hundred feet away, Adam could see the warm glow of a desk lamp where the duty receptionist sat. The receptionist—Petra, Adam recalled—had her head down, typing. To the left, not far, was the door of the server room: a smartcard reader, an opaque glass panel, the small green and amber of the rack lights barely visible through the panel.

Jessica came out of the lift bay.

She came out of it walking, holding the service folder and her coffee. She did not look at the receptionist. She did not look at the men by the stairwell door. She walked towards the server room with the brisk inattention of a young woman who was on the third floor for a documented purpose and was not, at this moment, interested in being on the third floor for any other.

Petra's phone began to ring at the desk a hundred feet away.

The call was the call Hubbard had asked a confederate to make at twenty-one hundred precisely. Adam did not, until later, know who the confederate was.

Petra picked it up.

Hubbard came out of the stairwell. Philip came out behind him. Adam came out last. They covered the twenty feet to the server room door at a walking pace that was not, in any nervous-system sense, a walking pace. Jessica reached the door at the same moment Hubbard did. Hubbard held up the cloned card.

He laid the card against the reader.

The light went green.

The lock disengaged.

He pushed the door.

They went in.

Adam's last sight of the corridor, as the door closed behind him, was Petra at her desk a hundred feet away, on the phone, with her free hand at her face in the small gesture of a person hearing news from a parent. Then the door closed. The corridor was on the other side of it.

The server room was cold.

It was cold in the particular way server rooms were cold—a cold actively maintained against the heat the racks generated, a cold that had a specific direction (the airflow came from the floor and went up into the ceiling), a cold that smelled of warm electronics and clean concrete. The door was a heavy fire door with the panic strip on the inside Hubbard had described. Adam

noted the panic strip; Philip stepped to it and put his foot against the kickplate at the bottom and his hand against the strip itself. Hubbard set the holdall down on a small table beside the door and began, in the quick economic way he did such things, to lay out his equipment.

Jessica stood in the doorway between Philip and Hubbard.

She said, quietly: "I'm going."

"Go," Hubbard said.

She went. The door closed behind her again. Adam heard, faintly through the door, the sound of her shoes receding up the corridor.

Adam went to rack seven.

Rack seven was the third rack from the eastern wall. Its console was a small flat screen at the top, with a keyboard on a slide-out shelf below. Adam slid the keyboard out. He plugged the laptop into the side of the console using the cable Hubbard had provided. He plugged the USB array into the laptop. He opened the credential set Hubbard had given him, on a small sheet of paper which he set on the keyboard.

The credentials authenticated.

The file system tree appeared on the laptop screen.

Adam navigated. He had spent the whole of Monday night and most of Tuesday morning practising on Maxwell's file-system map; his fingers knew the path. `server7/aiglon/programmes/X-12/procurement`. The directory was there. `server7/aiglon/programmes/X-12/shipping`. There. `server8/finance/contracts/2021-2024/foreign`. There. He went down

the list. All seven directories were where Maxwell had said they would be.

He looked up. He looked at Hubbard.

He nodded once.

Hubbard nodded back.

Adam started the parallel ingest. The USB array began to blink in the small purposeful way storage arrays blinked when they were being written to in earnest. The laptop's transfer indicator showed seven simultaneous file streams, with progress bars at zero per cent. The estimated time to completion was fourteen minutes and twenty-six seconds. Adam watched the seconds tick down. He watched them past fourteen and into thirteen. He set the laptop on the keyboard shelf and stepped back.

He looked at Hubbard.

"It's pulling."

"Good."

"Fourteen minutes."

"Good."

The radio at Hubbard's belt said, in Jessica's voice, very softly: West corridor clear. Petra still on the phone. Father is doing well.

Hubbard pressed the radio. *Acknowledged. Stay there.*

The radio at Hubbard's belt said, in Will's voice, fainter, from outside the building: South face quiet. No new lights on six or seven. No vehicles at the front.

Acknowledged.

Adam went back to the laptop. The progress bars were each at three per cent. The estimated time had updated to thirteen minutes nine seconds. The ingest was running cleanly.

Adam looked at his watch. It was twenty-one ten.

He thought: *I have ten minutes of waiting in front of this.*

He thought: *the plan does not have a plan for what I do during ten minutes of waiting.*

He thought: *I will look at the file system.*

He went back to the laptop. He opened a second window. He left the first window with the ingest running. In the second he navigated, more slowly, away from the seven directories Maxwell had mapped, into the parts of the file system Maxwell had not.

He was looking for, in the first instance, anything else with the word X-12 in it. The X-12 was the configuration on the unauthorised sales—the Russia row and the Egypt row. Maxwell had mapped the procurement and shipping directories. Maxwell had not, on examination, mapped the executive correspondence directories.

Adam navigated to *server8/executive*.

He paused.

The executive directory required a higher level of credential. The credentials Hubbard's contact had given him would not, ordinarily, get past the security model on this part of the tree.

The credentials got past it.

Adam looked at this for a moment without immediately understanding what it meant. Then he understood: Hubbard's contact had given him the executive credentials too, presumably

because Hubbard's contact had thought of this precisely the way Adam had now thought of it. Hubbard's contact had anticipated.

He thought: *Hubbard. Hubbard.* He thought: *I owe somebody a great deal.*

He went into the executive correspondence directory.

He found, quickly, a sub-folder named X-12 / *oversight.*

He opened it.

The sub-folder contained, in flat structure, two hundred and eleven exported email messages, in the .eml format Outlook used for archived mail. The messages were sorted by date. The earliest was from October 2020. The latest was from January of this year. The senders and recipients were various.

Adam scrolled to the top of the list.

He opened the first email.

The email was from one gwinthrop@cabinetoffice.gov.uk to one kbukhari@mod.gov.uk, dated 14 October 2020, with the subject X-12 oversight-preliminary. The email ran to three paragraphs. The body of the email did not contain anything Adam could read with any speed because the body of the email was, for an email written by a senior civil servant, dense; but the To and From lines were perfectly legible, and Adam read them, and he stared at the gwinthrop@cabinetoffice.gov.uk for a moment in which his understanding of what the case was became one thing larger than it had been a second earlier.

He thought: *Geoffrey Winthrop.*

He thought: *Sir Geoffrey Winthrop.*

He thought: *the Cabinet Secretary.*

He sat very still at the keyboard.

He thought: *not now. He is the Cabinet Secretary now. In October 2020 he was the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence. He took the Cabinet Office job in early 2023.*

He thought: *which means the man who authorised the determinations Bukhari signed in 2020 and 2021 is, today, the head of the British Civil Service.*

He thought: Maxwell didn't know this. Maxwell had GW in his initials list. Maxwell had GW as "a senior figure in a Cabinet Office capacity that does not appear on any organisational chart." Maxwell had not been able to confirm the name. Maxwell had been working his way towards it.

He thought: *I am two clicks away from confirming it.*

He opened the second email. It was a reply from Bukhari to Winthrop, the same day, briefer, asking for clarification on a determination. He opened the third—Winthrop again, an hour later, providing the clarification. He opened the fourth—Bukhari, agreeing.

The fifth was the key one.

It was from Winthrop, sent the following morning, in which Winthrop, in a single paragraph, set out his expectation as to how the X-12 oversight process would be conducted within the directorate going forward. Adam read the paragraph twice. The paragraph said, in language carefully constructed to be deniable but not, on a third reading, deniable enough, that the directorate was not to refer the X-12 procurement determinations through the formal Cabinet Office review process; that they were

to be handled, instead, through a parallel channel that Winthrop himself was establishing; and that the existence of the parallel channel was not to be documented except in this email, which Winthrop was sending from his work account because he wanted, as he wrote, *the existence of a record, while it remained possible to maintain such a record, of the constraints under which we are operating.*

The paragraph was Winthrop creating the apparatus that had, over the next four years, killed Maxwell.

The paragraph was Winthrop, in his own voice, in an email he had sent on a Wednesday morning four and a half years ago, doing the thing for which he would, if any of this ever became known, be remembered.

Adam looked at the email for a moment.

Then he closed it. He opened the file-system view. He created, on the USB array, a new folder called *EXEC*. He selected all two hundred and eleven .eml files in the sub-folder. He copied them to the *EXEC* folder. The copy began.

The copy was not part of the planned ingest. The copy was an additional twenty megabytes that Adam had decided, in the last forty-five seconds, to take. The copy would extend the ingest by approximately seven minutes.

He looked at his watch.

It was twenty-one fourteen.

He looked at the corridor door.

He pressed the radio at his belt—he had a radio, smaller than Hubbard's, kept on his belt clip—and he said, in the lowest voice the radio would carry: Cecil.

Hubbard, who was at the door of the server room, looked over at him.

Cecil. There's another folder. Twenty megabytes. Seven extra minutes on the ingest. I want to take it.

What's in it.

Winthrop. The Cabinet Secretary.

The room held that for a moment.

Adam. You're sure.

I am sure.

Take it.

Taking.

Acknowledged.

He went back to the laptop. The copy was in progress. The new estimated total time was twenty-one minutes thirty-eight seconds—twenty-one twenty-five hours, if he had calculated correctly, was the projected end of the ingest. That gave them ninety minutes inside the building before the cleaners left at twenty-three hundred. Plenty.

He thought, as the copy ran: Hubbard's contact had executive credentials. Hubbard's contact knew there was an executive directory. Hubbard's contact knew, at minimum, that there was a thing in the executive directory worth getting in to. Hubbard's contact, on examination, may have known what was in this folder.

He thought: *I am going to ask him about that. After. Not now.*

He stood at the laptop and watched the bars climb.

At twenty-one twenty-eight the radio at Hubbard's belt said, in Jessica's voice, in the slightly altered tone of a person whose voice was being kept low at considerable cost: East corridor. Movement.

Hubbard, at the door, said: *Where.*

Floor four. The lift. I just heard the lift come up to four. Someone got off.

One person.

I think one person. I'm in the west stairwell, listening through the door. I heard the lift. I heard a door open and close. It went quiet.

Stay there.

Acknowledged.

Hubbard turned to Adam.

"Time on the ingest."

"Thirteen minutes, give or take."

"Hold here. Don't stop. I'm going up."

He spoke into the radio: *Will. Cecil going to floor four. Watch six and seven for any change.*

Will, faintly: *Acknowledged. Six and seven still dark.*

Hubbard looked at Philip.

"You're senior in the room," Hubbard said. "I'll be back in ten minutes. Don't open the door for anyone except me or Jessica. If I am not back in twenty minutes, your senior is Adam, and

Adam's senior is the operation. The operation gets out by twenty-three hundred regardless of what I am doing."

"Hubbard --"

"Philip. Twenty-three hundred regardless. Yes?"

"Yes."

Hubbard went out through the door. Philip resumed his place against the kickplate. The door closed.

Adam, at the laptop, watched the bars climb past sixty per cent.

He listened to the radio.

For some minutes there was nothing.

Then: Cecil. Confirmed. Floor four. Single individual, female, mid-twenties, came in to retrieve a laptop from her desk. She is in office four-eleven. She is on her phone. She has her coat on. She is preparing to leave.

Jessica: Acknowledged.

Adam: Acknowledged.

Then a longer silence.

Then: Cecil. She is leaving. She is at the lift.

Then: She is on the lift. She is going down.

Then, at twenty-one forty-one: She is in the ground floor lobby. Kevin has signed her out. She is leaving the building. Will, watch the front for her. She is in a long grey coat, jeans, a brown bag.

Will: Acknowledged. I see her. She is walking south on Cabot Square. She is on her phone. She is paying attention to her phone

and not to the building. She is going past the southern cypresses now.

A pause.

Will: She is on the corner. She is hailing a cab. The cab is stopping. She is in. The cab is moving. She is gone.

Hubbard: Acknowledged. Coming back to floor three. Adam, time.

Adam: Eight minutes on the ingest.

Acknowledged.

The radio went quiet.

Philip looked at Adam across the room.

"That was the small thing," he said.

"Maybe," Adam said. "Or maybe the small thing is still coming. Hubbard said there would be a small thing. That was almost a small thing. The actual small thing may yet arrive."

Philip looked at the door.

He held it.

The ingest finished at twenty-one fifty-three.

Adam unplugged the USB array. He unplugged the laptop. He folded the keyboard back into the console. He restored the small ergonomic things that suggested a console had been used: the keyboard angle, the screen brightness which the system had defaulted to a higher setting on his login. He logged out. The screen went dark.

He put the array in the inside pocket of his coat.

He picked up the laptop in its case.

He looked at Philip.

"We're good."

"Hubbard?"

"Coming."

The radio said, in Hubbard's voice: Status.

Ingest complete. Array secured.

Coming to you.

Hubbard came back in through the server room door at twenty-one fifty-six. He was breathing slightly more heavily than he had been at twenty-one ten, in the way of a man who had been climbing stairs at a pace stairs were not generally climbed at.

He looked at Adam. He looked at Philip.

"All right. Listen."

He set his holdall on the table. He looked at his watch.

"There is a thing we did not anticipate," Hubbard said, "which is that the young woman on floor four—her name is Hannah Reeve, I read it off the lanyard she had left by her workstation, she is an Aiglon junior engineer—left her badge in her workstation drawer when she left. She did not take it with her. Which means there is now a badge in this building, registered to an Aiglon employee, that the building's access system thinks is still in this building. Which means, when the building enters night mode at twenty-three hundred, the security system will run an audit of any badge that has not exited, and Hannah Reeve's badge will flag, and the night security officer will check Hannah Reeve's workstation for her, and when he doesn't find her at her workstation, he will start checking the rest of the floor, and if he doesn't find her on the rest of the floor he will start

checking other floors, and the question is whether he will, in the course of that checking, encounter the four of us on our way out of the building."

The room held that.

"What do we do," Philip said.

"I take Hannah Reeve's badge out of the building," Hubbard said. "Not now—now, with us. The building thinks Hannah Reeve is in the building. We make the building think Hannah Reeve has left. We do that by tapping her badge against a reader on the way out. The reader registers a Hannah Reeve exit. The audit at twenty-three hundred runs and finds nothing anomalous. The night officer goes back to his magazine."

"You take her badge out."

"I take her badge out. I have her badge. I retrieved it from her drawer on floor four. I will tap it on the way out of the building."

"On the way out with us."

"Almost."

Adam was watching him.

"Hubbard."

"Adam, listen. The badge has to tap on a specific reader, which is the reader at the front lobby, not the service door. Hannah Reeve's badge will not be accepted by the service door reader because Hannah Reeve does not have service-door access. She has front-door access only. Which means I have to leave by the front door, and I have to do that in a way that looks plausible to whoever is at the front desk. Kevin signs out at

twenty-two thirty. The night security officer comes on at twenty-two forty-five. Between those times the desk is unmanned. I exit at twenty-two forty. Hannah Reeve's badge taps. The system records a Hannah Reeve exit."

"You exit at twenty-two forty."

"Yes."

"With Hannah Reeve's badge."

"With Hannah Reeve's badge. Which I will dispose of before I rejoin you."

"And the rest of us."

"The rest of you go out the service door at twenty-two fifty, on the way the cleaners go out. You meet Will at the agreed rendezvous. I will, if everything goes well, be at the rendezvous by twenty-three fifteen at the latest."

Philip said: "Hubbard. The fact that you are saying if everything goes well."

"Philip."

"Yes."

"There is a non-zero probability that I will not be at the rendezvous by twenty-three fifteen. There is a smaller but non-zero probability that I will not be at the rendezvous tonight. Will has the protocol. The protocol applies. The protocol does not depend on my being at the rendezvous. The protocol depends on the data being out of this building, which it now is, and which it now is because Adam has the array in his coat and Adam is now leaving."

He looked at Adam.

"Adam."

"Yes."

"You leave first. With the array. Out the service door. You do not wait for Philip. You do not wait for me. You walk to the rendezvous at the agreed pace. You are the data. The data does not stop moving."

"All right."

"Philip. You leave with Jessica. Jessica is, at this moment, walking back towards the west lift bay and is going to descend by lift to floor one and exit through the front lobby past Kevin, who will say goodnight to her by name. You are going to wait one minute after Adam leaves and then descend through the service stairwell to the ground floor and exit through the service door at twenty-two fifty with the cleaners' second wave. You and Jessica meet at the rendezvous at twenty-three hundred, give or take."

"Hubbard."

"Philip."

"I would prefer to wait for you."

"I know. The answer is no."

"All right."

Hubbard looked at his watch. It was twenty-one fifty-eight.

"Adam, you go now. Philip, in two minutes."

Adam looked at Hubbard for a moment.

"Hubbard."

"Adam."

"Thank you for the executive credentials."

Hubbard's mouth did the thing it did when Hubbard would have smiled if smiling had been the appropriate thing.

"Don't thank me yet," he said.

"That's twice today you've said that to me."

"That's because there are still two things that haven't happened. We're closer than we were. We are not yet at the part where you thank me."

Adam nodded.

He went.

He went out the service door at twenty-two oh four, behind the cleaners' first wave, who were doing a small additional pass on a lower floor and were exiting briefly to retrieve something from the van. He came out into the cold of Mackenzie Walk. He turned left. He walked east to the corner. He turned right. He walked south for two blocks. He did not look back.

The rendezvous was a service yard behind a Pret two streets south of the building, where Will had parked his car among other parked cars, with a clear line of sight to a particular set of upper-floor windows on the south face of One Cabot Crescent. Will was in the driver's seat with the burner phone in the cup holder and the printed document Adam had given him on the passenger seat.

Adam got into the back seat at twenty-two thirteen.

Will looked at him in the mirror.

"You have it."

"I have it."

"All of it."

"All of it. And one thing more."

"Tell me."

"In the rendezvous. Not in the car. Hubbard wants the car ready to move."

"All right."

Adam sat in the back. He set the case on the seat beside him. He looked out of the window at the building, which from this angle was the corner of Cabot Crescent visible above the cypresses, and at the upper floors, which were still dark on six and seven, and at the dark blue of the February sky behind them.

Jessica got into the back seat at twenty-two twenty-six.

She had her coffee in her hand. She had finished it. She held the empty cup as though the empty cup were a small piece of normality she was not yet ready to put down.

"Petra was lovely," she said. "Petra said to tell Chummy's father he was a good man. Petra cried, on the phone. Petra was the worst part of this evening."

"Jessica."

"I know. Petra was the worst part of the easy part. There is a worse part still coming. I am aware."

She set the coffee cup down in the seat well.

She said: "Where's Cecil."

"On his way."

"From what."

"From the front lobby. Twenty-two forty."

She looked at her watch.

"It's twenty-two twenty-eight."

"Yes."

"Twelve minutes."

"Twelve minutes."

She was quiet.

Philip got into the back seat at twenty-two fifty-three, breathing carefully in the way of a man who had just walked a longer route than he had planned to walk, having taken three small unnecessary turns south of the building because two men in a car had been parked in a place he had not expected two men in a car to be parked, and because he had decided, on examination, to walk past them at a different angle than the angle at which they had been parked.

He sat down beside Jessica.

"Adam."

"Philip."

"You're out."

"I'm out."

"Hubbard."

Will, from the front: "Twenty-three hundred. Eleven minutes ago."

The four of them sat in the car.

Will was watching the upper-floor windows. Floor six was dark. Floor seven was dark. Adam, in the back, had not taken his eyes off Will's hands for the past two minutes; Will's hands were on the steering wheel, and the burner phone was in the cup holder, and the burner phone was not, at this moment, lit.

Adam looked at his watch.

It was twenty-three oh seven.

He looked at the upper-floor windows.

They were dark.

He looked at his watch again at twenty-three oh nine.

The windows were dark.

He looked at his watch at twenty-three eleven.

Floor seven came on.

Not a single window. A particular sequence of three windows, in a particular pattern, working east-to-west across the south face of the building, in the pattern Hubbard had described in the morning briefing as *Aiglon executive on-call has been summoned*.

Will picked up the burner phone.

Adam, from the back: "Will."

"I see them."

"Will. Wait."

"I am waiting."

Will was holding the phone. He was looking at the windows. He was looking at his watch. His watch said twenty-three twelve.

Floor seven, second window in the sequence, came on.

Floor seven, third window in the sequence, came on.

A figure crossed in front of the third window. The figure was a man. The figure was in a suit. The figure paused at the window for a moment and looked out at the dark of Cabot Square, which from where the figure stood would be the dark of Cabot Square as the dark of Cabot Square always looked at twenty-three twelve on a Wednesday in February. Then the figure moved away from the window.

The radio in the back seat—the radio Adam was carrying, on Hubbard's frequency—said nothing.

Will dialled three digits on the burner phone. He looked at the screen. He held the phone over the call button. He looked at his watch. Twenty-three thirteen.

The radio said nothing.

Adam said, very quietly: "Will. He has two minutes. Twenty-three fifteen is the call. It is not yet twenty-three fifteen."

"It is twenty-three thirteen, Adam."

"Yes. Twenty-three fifteen is the call. He has two minutes."

"He has two minutes."

The four of them watched the windows.

Floor seven held its three lights.

At twenty-three fourteen no further lights came on.

At twenty-three fourteen and thirty seconds the radio in the back seat hissed once—the small reliable hiss of a radio whose carrier was active but on which nobody was speaking—and then the radio went silent again.

Will, looking at his watch: "Adam."

"Yes."

"It is twenty-three fifteen in twenty seconds."

"Yes."

"I'm going to have to call."

"Wait."

"Adam."

"Wait. Will. Wait."

The radio hissed a second time.

Then:

Cecil.

Adam closed his eyes for a half-second and opened them.

Will pressed the radio: *Cecil. Status. Where are you.*

There was a pause.

The pause was the longest pause of Adam's life.

Then Hubbard's voice, faint, slightly out of breath:

Will. Listen. I am still in the building. I am going to need

--

The radio cut out.

Will held the radio.

Adam held the case in his lap.

Jessica held Philip's hand.

The burner phone, in Will's other hand, showed twenty-three
fifteen.

Will pressed the call button.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

What Will Said

Will pressed the call button.

Adam, in the back seat, was watching Will's hands and the upper-floor windows simultaneously.

The phone rang once. It rang twice. It rang a third time. Adam thought: she's not answering. Adam thought: she's deciding whether to answer. Adam thought --

The phone clicked.

A woman's voice, calm, expectant, not surprised: "Margaret Bryant."

Will: "Margaret. It's Will Mackwith."

Margaret: "Will. Yes."

Will took a breath.

"I am calling per the protocol. The protocol is in effect."

Margaret: "Where are you."

Will: "I am in a car two streets behind the building we discussed. We have completed the operation we discussed. We have the data. Three of the four are out and accounted for. The fourth is --"

Will stopped.

Through the windscreen, beyond the cypresses at the southern edge of the small landscaped garden behind One Cabot Crescent, a small light came on at the base of the building's south-face fire stairwell. A push-bar door, set into the corner of the building between two ornamental beds, opened. A muted alarm--small, soft,

electronic, audible only at the close range from which they were watching—began, on the still air, to sound.

A man came out of the door.

He had a coat over his arm. He was walking briskly but not running, in the deliberate non-running of a man who had decided that running would attract more attention than walking. He was looking down at a phone in the manner of a man on a call.

Adam said, very quietly, in the back seat: "He's out."

Will, into his phone: "Margaret. Hold one."

Margaret: "Will --"

Will put the phone against his chest. He looked through the windscreen at the cypresses, where the man had now disappeared.

Hubbard reappeared at the eastern end of the cypresses. He came around them at a pace that would have looked, to anyone watching from a distance, like the pace of a man walking back to his car after a late meeting. He was visible from the car for perhaps three seconds at a time, then hidden by a planted bed, then visible again.

Will lifted the phone.

"Margaret. New information. The fourth member of our party has just come out of the building. I am cancelling the protocol call. I will phone you back in five minutes from this number."

Margaret: "Will."

Will: "Yes."

Margaret: "If you cancel, you cancel. If you do not cancel, I act."

Will: "I am cancelling, conditional on his arrival at this car within sixty seconds."

Margaret: "If he is not at the car in sixty seconds."

Will: "I will phone you back."

Margaret: "Will."

Will: "Yes."

Margaret: "I have already begun."

The line went dead.

Will lowered the phone.

He looked at Adam in the rear-view mirror.

Adam said: "What does she mean by already begun."

Will said: "I don't know yet."

Hubbard came around the last bed and up to the driver's side window. Will rolled the window down. Hubbard leaned in. He had a tear at the right shoulder of his coat. His face had the slightly flushed colour of a man who had recently been moving faster than his body had wanted to move. His left hand was holding something—Adam could not, from the back seat, see what—which he tucked, in a small economical gesture, into the inside pocket of his coat as he spoke.

"Drive."

Will rolled the window up. He turned the key in the ignition. The engine started. The car pulled out of the parking spot, took the corner at the end of the row, came onto the small service road that led south away from One Cabot Crescent, and joined a larger road heading away from the river.

Hubbard, in the front passenger seat, sat with his eyes closed for some seconds.

Then he opened them.

He said: "Tell me what Margaret said."

Will told him.

Hubbard listened.

When Will had finished, Hubbard said: "Call her back. Now. From this phone, in the car. We are not getting a better signal than this, and the longer she has to begin a thing without us in the conversation, the larger the thing she has begun will be."

Will picked up the phone.

He pressed redial.

Margaret answered on the first ring.

"Will."

"Margaret. He is in the car. We are clear. The team is whole. The data is secure. I am asking you to suspend any external communication you may have begun, pending a longer conversation tomorrow morning."

"Too late, Will."

"Margaret --"

"I rang Aiglon's press office at twenty-three fifteen and forty seconds, while you were still on the line with me. I made the call before you could cancel. I made it because the protocol I had agreed with you specified that I should make it, and at twenty-three fifteen the protocol was active. Aiglon now know the Guardian is calling about the building tonight. They are presently responding. They are not yet-by my reading-putting it

together with what their internal security people are telling them about anomalies on their third floor, but they will be putting it together within the hour."

"Margaret. We need this to stay quiet for tomorrow. We have material we need to verify."

"Will. Listen. The story I had been preparing was the story I was going to publish whether or not you called me tonight. The story I have been writing since Sunday afternoon. I rang Aiglon tonight because you triggered the protocol. I will not, tonight, ring anyone else. But the story exists, and the story will run."

Will, slowly: "What story have you been writing since Sunday afternoon."

"The story Adam emailed me about on Sunday afternoon."

Will: "Adam. Did you email Margaret on Sunday afternoon."

Adam, from the back, in the voice of a man who had hoped to defer this conversation but had known he would not be able to: "I did. After the police left. Before I went to my flat. I sent her a partial summary of what we knew at that point. I told her I might have something for her in the next few days. I asked her to begin, on her own, the kind of preliminary verification work that would let her, if a story did materialise, move faster than her usual cycle would let her move. I did not give her Bukhari's name. I did not give her the drive. I gave her the names of the four foreign customers and the year-range of the relevant determinations, and I asked her to pull what she could from public-domain procurement records. I have not been in contact with her since Sunday."

Will: "Adam."

"I know."

"You did not tell us."

"I did not tell you. I told myself I would tell you when I had something to tell. I did not have something to tell, so I did not tell you. I see, this evening, that this was not the right way to think about it."

Hubbard, from the front, did not turn his head.

Hubbard said: "Adam."

"Yes."

"Was she in your PRESS folder."

"She was. Provisional: yes."

"Maxwell knew about her."

"Maxwell knew about her. I think—and I have been thinking about this all night—that Maxwell may, at some level, have been counting on her. I think Maxwell may, in the longer accounting, have planned for the journalist who got the drive to also have somebody at his paper who had been doing parallel work. I think Maxwell, when he wrote that I would do, was thinking partly about Margaret."

The car was on Aspen Way, heading west. The Thames was on the left, dark, with the small upriver lights of the City visible past the bend at Limehouse. Will was driving in the small careful way of a man who was simultaneously holding a phone to his ear and not exceeding the speed limit by any margin.

"Margaret," Will said, "are you still there."

"I am still here."

"When will the story run."

"I do not know yet. Tomorrow at the earliest. Friday morning, more probably, if our legal is cautious, which it will be, given who is involved. Either way: by the end of this week, what you have in the car is going to be on the front page."

"There is a piece of evidence on the data we extracted that you do not yet know about. It is significant enough that I want you to hold."

"Tell me what it is and I will tell you whether to hold."

Will looked at Adam in the mirror.

Adam nodded.

Will: "Geoffrey Winthrop."

There was a pause on the line.

Margaret: "The Cabinet Secretary."

"Yes."

Margaret: "On what."

"On a series of authorisations dating from October 2020 onward, signed when he was Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, that constitute, on the face of what we have so far read, the foundation of the corruption Maxwell was preparing to expose. We have email correspondence between Winthrop and Bukhari, on the company's own servers, in which Winthrop sets up—in his own voice—a parallel oversight channel that the determinations were to be processed through. The channel was the apparatus through which the unauthorised sales were enabled. Winthrop is the most senior figure in the case."

A longer pause.

Margaret: "Will. That changes the timing."

"I thought it might."

"I will hold the next set of calls I had planned to make. I cannot recall the call I have already made to Aiglon; that has happened. I can avoid making the calls to the MoD press office, to the Cabinet Office press office, to the four-and-a-half people in Whitehall I had been planning to ring tomorrow morning. We will talk in the morning. You will bring the data to me—not at the Guardian offices, the offices may not be safe—you will bring it to a place I will name on a different number tomorrow. The story we run will be the story Geoffrey Winthrop's name appears on. The story we run will, in consequence, be considerably larger than the story I had assembled, and the apparatus that responds to the story will be a different apparatus than the one I was preparing to handle. I want the larger story. I will hold."

"Thank you, Margaret."

"Will."

"Yes."

"If anything happens to any of you between now and the morning—anything at all, even a thing you would ordinarily describe to a journalist as nothing—the story runs in tomorrow's edition without further verification, on what I have already, in our system, in the recording. I want you to know that. The story is now one I am committed to publishing. The only thing I am, by this conversation, committing to is the timing. I will hold the timing for the better story. I will not hold the story."

"Understood."

"Tomorrow."

The line went dead.

Will set the phone down on the dashboard.

no one in the car spoke.

Hubbard, from the front, finally: "Adam."

"Yes, Cecil."

"You should have told me. Sunday afternoon. Or Monday morning. Or any of the times since."

"Yes."

"You should have told me before tonight, certainly, and before you walked into Aiglon's building, certainly, and before this evening's plan was finalised."

"Yes."

"It is a thing that, on a different operational night, would have changed the operation. We might have brought Margaret in earlier. We might have organised a different exit that did not require a fire door and a torn coat. We might have gone in two days earlier with her on the perimeter as a witness rather than as a phone call."

"I know."

"Why did you not."

Adam, from the back, took a moment.

He said: "Because by Sunday evening I was not certain that what I had was going to be enough, and I did not want to pull you all in further than you had already pulled yourselves in until I was certain. By Monday morning, when I had read the drive, I was certain—but I had also realised that Margaret was the most

powerful thing I had, and that the most powerful thing I had was the thing I had to be most careful about disclosing. I told myself I would disclose her at the right moment. I now see that I had a different conception of the right moment than the operational conception you were entitled to."

Hubbard was silent.

He did not turn his head.

He said: "All right."

"Cecil—"

"All right, Adam. We will continue this conversation tomorrow. Tonight we are still in motion."

"Yes."

"Will."

"Yes."

"Take the next exit. We are going to Stoke Newington."

The flat belonged to a woman called Catherine Marsh, who had worked with Hubbard, in a capacity Hubbard did not specify, between 2008 and 2014. Catherine Marsh was in Brussels for a two-year posting and had given Hubbard the keys when she had left in September. She had given them, he said, in the particular knowledge of a woman who had once needed somebody else's flat in a hurry and remembered that the key could not be in too many places before it was needed.

The flat was on the third floor of a Victorian conversion on a small residential street off Stoke Newington Church Street. The building had no lift, no concierge, no security system beyond a Yale lock on the front door of the building and a second Yale

lock on the door of the flat. The street had a Turkish corner shop on one end and a barber on the other and a row of small-windowed houses in between, in the particular north-London architectural register of brick that had been brick for a hundred and forty years and had no intention of being anything else.

Will parked on a meter two streets away.

They walked the rest. They walked in pairs, two minutes apart, in the way Hubbard had instructed them to walk. Adam went first with Hubbard. Will and Jessica went second. Philip went last. The streets were quiet at half past midnight, in the manner of north-London residential streets at half past midnight on a Wednesday—a fox, briefly; a cab, more briefly; a single window lit yellow on a third floor, behind a curtain, the silhouette of a person at a desk.

Hubbard let them in.

The flat was small and warm. Catherine Marsh had left it tidy. The hall was painted a colour that had once been white and was now the off-white of a room that had been lived in. The sitting room had a single sofa, a small bookcase with the kind of books a woman in her fifties bought herself for evenings—biographies of women, two cookbooks, three slim volumes of poetry—and a low table on which Hubbard had, at some point in the previous days, set out a small box of supplies. Tea bags. Instant coffee. A packet of digestive biscuits. A bag of apples. A litre of milk in a small electric cool-box.

He had also, Adam noticed, set out two burner phones, three bottles of water, a small first-aid kit, and a folded blanket.

Hubbard said: "Bedroom one is mine. Bedroom two is Jessica's. Sofa is Will's. Adam and Philip take the floor of the sitting room. I have brought sleeping bags for the floor. Use the bathroom in turn. Do not turn the light on in the front bedroom; the curtains in the front bedroom have a gap, and the gap is not a gap I have been able to close. The front bedroom is Jessica's because Jessica is the only one who is not going to move around tonight. Do not turn the kettle on after one in the morning; the kettle is in the small kitchen at the back, which has a window that looks onto the back of the building behind us, and a kettle at one in the morning is a specific kind of signal. There is no internet in this flat. There is no television. There are no devices in this flat that are not the burner phones I have brought and the laptops you have brought. We will sleep here tonight, and probably tomorrow night, and we will reassess in the afternoon."

Will sat down on the sofa.

Adam sat down on the floor.

Philip took his coat off and laid it over the arm of the sofa in the gentle careful way Mollie had taught him to lay coats over the arms of strangers' furniture, which was a way that produced, in him, briefly, a small wave of homesickness so concentrated that he had, for some seconds, to not register it.

Jessica stood in the centre of the sitting room.

She said: "I'm sorry. I am going to be sick."

She went into the bathroom.

Philip looked at Hubbard.

Hubbard said, quietly: "Let her be. She has been holding it in for four hours."

Philip nodded.

Hubbard went into the kitchen. He filled the kettle. He turned it on. He took five mugs out of a cupboard and lined them up on the counter. He took the tea bags and dropped one into each. He stood at the counter while the kettle came to the boil.

Adam, from the floor of the sitting room: "Cecil."

"Adam."

"What was the small thing."

Hubbard, in the kitchen, did not look at him.

"The night officer came on at twenty-two thirty-five instead of twenty-two forty-five. Kevin had a doctor's appointment in the morning. He had asked his replacement to come in early. The window between Kevin leaving and the night officer coming on was supposed to be fifteen minutes; in the event it was nothing. By the time I arrived at the front lobby at twenty-two thirty-eight, the night officer was at the desk, and Hannah Reeve's badge was in my pocket, and the desk officer's first job was going to be the audit at twenty-three hundred. So I went back up."

"And then?"

"Then I tried to find a way out that did not require Hannah Reeve's badge to be tapped at a reader at a particular moment. I tried the underground car park first; the pedestrian exit is locked from the inside, which I had not known. I tried the second-floor service balcony; it has a railing higher than I had read it as having, and I am not, at this point in my life, the

man who climbs a railing of that height in a coat. I went back to the third floor. I waited for the cleaners' final exit at twenty-three hundred. I missed them by twenty seconds because I was on the wrong stairwell; the stairwell I had been waiting in turned out to lead to the front lobby and not the service door, which I had not known, and which I will, when I have time, have a feeling about. By twenty-three oh three the cleaners were gone, the audit was running, and the night officer was on his way to investigate two anomalous badges. By twenty-three eleven he had reached his on-call. By twenty-three thirteen I had decided that I was leaving the building through a fire door even if it cost me an alarm, because the alternative was to be in the building when the executive on-call started walking the floors. By twenty-three fourteen I was in the south-face fire stairwell on the second floor, trying to radio you, with the fire door in front of me and Hannah Reeve's badge and Petrescu's card in my pocket and a small quiet fury that I was about to leave the building in a way that left an obvious trace."

"You set off a fire alarm."

"A localised one. The kind that alerts the security desk only. By the time the night officer goes to check the south-face fire stairwell at twenty-three sixteen or so, I am in the cypresses. By the time he gets to the fire stairwell, I am in the car. The fire alarm tells him a fire door was used. It does not tell him by whom. The cameras on the south face—which, you will recall, are not the cameras that go blind at twenty-one hundred—saw me leave. By tomorrow morning, when Aiglon's people review

the footage, they will know a man left the building through a fire door at twenty-three fourteen. They may, with effort, identify who that man was. They will not, by the time they have identified me, have any of us in any place they can reach."

"And Hannah Reeve's badge."

Hubbard reached into the inside pocket of his coat. He took out a small piece of plastic on a lanyard. He held it up. He studied it in the kitchen light.

"Hannah Reeve will be asked in the morning where her badge is. She will not be able to answer. She will be reissued one. Her current badge, this one, will be—at some point in the next forty-eight hours—found, in a bin, somewhere she has been recently. She will not, herself, be in any trouble. The badge ending up in a bin somewhere reasonable will give her, when the question is asked, an answer she can give."

"Where will it end up."

"Somewhere reasonable."

Adam nodded.

Hubbard pocketed the badge.

The kettle clicked off.

He poured tea.

Jessica came out of the bathroom at quarter past one. She had washed her face. She looked tired and slightly translucent in the way a person who had been sick looked translucent, but she was upright, and she was, when she sat down on the sofa beside Will, willing to accept the mug of tea Hubbard handed her.

She said: "Cecil. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry."

"I was holding it."

"I know you were. You held it well. You held it the entire ninety minutes inside that building, and you held it through Petra's tears, and you held it through the cab, and you held it through the car. You held it for the part where it would have hurt us. The part where you let it go is a part of your own life. I am not in the business of being sorry about that part."

She drank a small amount of the tea.

She said: "Petra told me on the phone, while I was in the lift coming down, that Chummy's father had cried when he had spoken to her. She said he sounded like a good father. She said I am so glad you came in tonight. She said you will be all right, Jessica, you will. And I had been about to walk out of the building with a man you sent up onto a glass roof to take a gun out of a dead man's hand, and a journalist with forty gigabytes of an arms-trafficking firm's records in his coat, and a painter who had spent the previous ninety minutes holding a server room door shut with his foot, and all I could think about was that Petra was going to be fine, on the other end of that call, because she had been allowed to do her job, and the rest of us were going to be—whatever we were going to be."

Will, beside her, did not say anything.

Hubbard said: "Petra is going to be fine. Petra did her job. She also accidentally helped us. The accident is not on her conscience. We are taking the conscience for her. That is part of what we did tonight."

Jessica nodded.

She drank more of the tea.

Adam, from the floor, opened his laptop.

He had, despite himself, despite the fact that it was now quarter past one and he had not slept properly since Friday, opened the laptop. He had connected the USB array. He had begun, on the small soft glow of the screen in the dim sitting room, to load the *EXEC* folder.

Two hundred and eleven emails.

He started with the fifth—the one he had read at the console and recognised. He read it again, properly, in full, in the way he had not had time to read it at the console. He read it twice. The paragraph was every bit as bad as he had thought it was. He read the fourth, which preceded the fifth and which set the context in which the fifth had been written. He read the sixth, which was Bukhari's reply, in which Bukhari, a younger Bukhari, a Bukhari who was four signatures ago, wrote a single-paragraph response that contained the small careful indication of a man who had not yet decided to sign.

Adam read on.

He read for an hour.

By the time he reached the thirtieth email he had built, in his head, a rough timeline of the parallel oversight channel's first six months. The channel had been Winthrop's invention. The channel had been operated, on Winthrop's instructions, by Bukhari and one other senior civil servant whose initials were RB. The channel had, in its first three months, processed two

determinations relating to the Pakistan sale; in its second three months, the determination relating to the Saudi sale. The Pakistan and Saudi sales were the ones Maxwell's drive had recorded as authorised. They had been authorised through the parallel channel, not through the formal Cabinet Office review process, which would have flagged them and probably stopped them. Authorised, in Aiglon's records, meant passed through the parallel channel. It did not mean authorised in any sense the British constitution would recognise.

Adam thought: *the authorised sales were not authorised. The unauthorised sales were unauthorised. Maxwell had been describing a distinction that did not, in the deeper sense, exist.*

He thought: all four sales are corrupt. Maxwell knew this. Maxwell wrote it: 'the distinction between authorised and unauthorised is, in any case, a distinction in paper.' But Maxwell did not have the documents for it. We have the documents for it.

He thought: *the case has just become, in the strict legal sense, larger than I understood it to be six hours ago.*

He thought: *Geoffrey Winthrop is the case.*

He sat with this for a moment.

Then he closed the laptop.

He looked up at the others.

Will was on the sofa with his eyes closed. He was not asleep. Jessica was beside him with her head against his shoulder; she was asleep. Philip was on the floor, on a sleeping bag, with his back against the sofa, awake, watching the ceiling.

Hubbard was in the kitchen in the dim light, washing the five mugs.

Adam said: "Cecil."

Hubbard came to the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room.

"Adam."

"There is no distinction between the authorised and the unauthorised sales."

"Tell me."

"The authorised ones were authorised through Winthrop's parallel channel. They were not authorised through the formal process. The formal process would have stopped them. Winthrop set up the channel specifically to bypass the formal process. The Pakistan and Saudi sales were processed through the channel. The Russia and Egypt sales were not even processed through the channel; they were just done. But all four sales are, in the sense that matters, the same kind of sale. All four sales are, in the sense that matters, Winthrop's."

Hubbard, from the doorway, did not say anything for a moment.

Then he said: "Margaret will want to know that."

"Yes."

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

"Adam, sleep."

"I will."

"Sleep now. The reading can continue in the morning."

"I will, Cecil."

Hubbard turned back to the kitchen.

Adam set the laptop down beside him on the sleeping bag. He turned the screen down so the small glow would not light the room. He lay back. The ceiling of Catherine Marsh's sitting room had a single hairline crack running across it from north to south, which he had noticed when he had come in, and which he now followed with his eye, in the dim half-light from the kitchen, end to end.

He thought about Maxwell.

He thought about Maxwell at the table in Hammersmith, with a glass of whisky to his left and the dog asleep against the bedroom door, writing the letter for whoever it was going to be. He thought: *Maxwell was the one who first saw this. Maxwell carried it for fourteen months. Maxwell died four days ago. Maxwell will, on what is already in this flat, be vindicated.*

He thought: *I would like, when this is over, to write about Maxwell himself. Not about the case. About the man.*

He thought: *I think that is the piece I am, at this point in my life, here for.*

He fell asleep.

In the kitchen, Hubbard finished the last of the mugs and set it on the draining board. He dried his hands on the small tea-towel that had been folded over the oven handle when they had come in—Catherine Marsh's tea-towel, with a print of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew that he had, by sheer chance, seen at her flat when she had first moved in, in 2009, in the manner of small

domestic objects which took up residence in the lives of people who did not realise they had taken up residence.

He turned off the kitchen light.

He stood in the dark of the kitchen for a moment.

He thought about Friday afternoon in Pimlico. He thought about Chummy in the pub for forty minutes, drinking a half-pint of bitter and asking him whether he could be relied on. He thought about saying yes. He thought about driving to Lennox Street on Sunday morning in his dress uniform with a cloned smartcard in his pocket. He thought about the parachute coming down on the studio roof. He thought about the four people now asleep in this flat, and about the man not asleep, and about the fifth person on the sofa with her head on Will's shoulder.

He thought about Mollie at the cottage.

He took the burner phone out of his pocket.

He sent a single message—three words—to a number that was Mollie's burner, set up by Davies on the afternoon of Day Three, and on which Mollie had been told, in advance, to expect at most one message from him tonight.

The message said: *We are home.*

He turned the phone face-down on the kitchen counter.

In the cottage above Santon Bridge, Mollie was awake, and the phone, on the bedside table beside her, lit up. She picked it up. She read the three words. She read them again. She set the phone down, screen-up, on the table. She lay back. She did not close her eyes.

Outside the cottage, on the dry-stone wall opposite the gate, in the cold of a Cumbrian February at quarter past two in the morning, Davies was eating a sandwich and watching the lane.

In a flat above a Turkish corner shop in Stoke Newington, Adam Wright slept on a sleeping bag with a hairline crack in the ceiling running over his head, and Philip Esdaile lay awake beside him watching the same crack, and Will Mackwith sat on a sofa with Jessica Merrow's head on his shoulder reading nothing in particular, and Cecil Hubbard stood in a dark kitchen with a tea-towel in his hand thinking about a Friday afternoon five days ago that had, in the slow accounting of the life of a man who had done a great many such things, been the day on which the present chapter of his life had, without his recognising it at the time, begun.

In a building called One Cabot Crescent on the north side of Canary Wharf, an executive on-call and a night security officer were, in the lift up to floor seven, putting things together.

In Highgate, on Makepeace Avenue, a phone in a kitchen began to ring.

Karim Bukhari, who had been awake, picked it up.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Handover

Adam woke to the sound of a kettle and the smell of bacon.

He had slept. He had slept harder than he had expected to. The sleeping bag had been thin and the floor had been hard and he had slept anyway, in the small definite way a body slept when its owner had stopped, four days running, asking it to do anything else. He was, for the first half-second of waking, in his own flat in Hampstead, on the small sofa under the window where he sometimes fell asleep reading; and then he was not.

He sat up.

The hairline crack in the ceiling of Catherine Marsh's sitting room was still there. Philip was not on the sleeping bag beside him. The sleeping bag had been folded. Philip's coat was no longer over the arm of the sofa.

He could hear, from the kitchen, the low practical register of two men who had decided, before either of the others were awake, what the morning was going to be.

He got up. He went into the kitchen.

Hubbard had got eggs. Hubbard had got bacon. Hubbard had also got, from somewhere—a corner shop, presumably the Turkish one on the corner, run by people who were apparently up at six-thirty—a small loaf of bread, a bottle of orange juice, and a copy of every morning paper the corner shop carried.

The papers were on the kitchen counter, stacked, with the front pages visible.

The Aiglon story was on none of them.

Adam looked at Hubbard.

Hubbard nodded once. *Margaret has held.*

Adam exhaled.

He sat down at the small kitchen table. Philip moved aside from the doorway to let him through. Philip's face had the slept-in calm of a man who had, at some point in the small hours, stopped watching the ceiling and slept; and the careful tiredness of a man who had not slept for long.

Hubbard put a plate in front of Adam.

He said: "Eat. Then we talk."

After breakfast—eaten in the manner of a meal that was both ordinary and conspicuous, because the meal was a meal at someone else's kitchen table at half past seven in the morning, and because the people at the table had, twelve hours ago, been somewhere they should not have been—Hubbard cleared the plates. He set the kettle on a second time. He made fresh tea. He brought the pot to the table.

He sat down.

He looked at Adam.

He said: "Adam."

"Yes."

"Last night, in the car, I asked you why you had not told me about Margaret. You answered. The answer was, in the strict sense, an explanation. I want to ask you something else now, and I want you to answer in a way that is more than an explanation. Is there anything else that I do not know about? Any other

arrangement, any other contact, any other piece of contingency that you have made on your own and have not told me about. I want to know it now. After this conversation, the assumption between us is that everything is on the table. Before this conversation, the assumption is that I am giving you the chance to put it there."

Adam looked at him.

He did not look at Philip, who was standing at the kitchen counter with a mug of tea, not drinking it, listening.

"There is one thing," Adam said.

"Tell me."

"Monday afternoon. After I read the drive. I made four copies. One to a solicitor I have used before. One to a journalist in Berlin. One in a hide in my flat. One I have been carrying. Will, you knew about three of those when I told you yesterday morning."

"Yes."

"The fourth."

"There is a fifth?"

"There is a fifth. Maxwell's letter—only the letter, not the rest of the drive—I sent to a foreign archive on Monday evening. I used a service that holds documents in escrow against the death or disappearance of the depositor. I gave the archive my own conditions. If I do not check in with the archive every seventy-two hours, the archive releases the letter publicly. The letter is not enough, by itself, to make the case; the case is in the rest of the drive. But the letter is enough to make sure that, if

I disappear, the existence of the case is publicly known by the time anyone else can decide what to do about it."

Hubbard was silent for some seconds.

He said: "Which archive."

"I would rather not say."

"Adam."

"I would rather not say. The archive's effectiveness depends in part on its discretion. If anyone in this room is taken and questioned, the archive's identity becoming known would compromise the archive. The archive would prefer not to be named."

"You have been talking to the archive about the architecture of this kind of arrangement."

"Yes."

"Since when."

"Since, by their records, October 2022."

The kitchen was quiet.

Hubbard, who had spent forty-eight hours discovering that Maxwell had been more careful than he had been given credit for, and twenty-four hours discovering that Adam had been more careful than he had been given credit for, sat with the small registered weight of a man whose professional habit had been to know everything operationally relevant about the people around him and who was, this morning, learning that the people around him had been, for some years, conducting their own quiet preparations against a day they had hoped would not come.

He said, finally: "All right. Anything else?"

"That is all."

"On your honour."

"On my honour."

Hubbard nodded once.

He looked at Will, who had come in at some point during the conversation and was leaning in the doorway with his arms folded.

He said: "Will."

"Yes."

"Anything you want to put on the table."

Will considered.

He said: "I have, since Monday afternoon, kept in my chambers safe a sealed envelope addressed to Margaret Bryant. The envelope contains a single page on which I have written, in my own hand, a summary of what we knew about the case at the time I sealed it. It also contains a letter of instruction to my senior clerk, who has the combination to the safe, telling him to deliver the envelope to Margaret if I have not been into chambers within a certain number of days. I prepared the envelope on Monday afternoon as a separate redundancy. I did not tell anyone."

Hubbard considered him.

"Of course you did."

"Of course I did."

Will paused, and looked at the kitchen wall above the cooker and then back at Hubbard.

"There is one other thing."

"Tell me."

"I went to see Morgan yesterday afternoon. At Lennox Street. He is alone in the house; Audrey, as you know, has gone. I went to see him in my barrister's capacity, not my friend's. I did not, in the event, do any work that a barrister could not have done. I had a conversation with him. The conversation was, in substance, a conversation about what would and would not, in due course, be remembered about Sunday morning by people whose job it would be to remember things. I left him with a small written note of the points we had discussed, and the name of a person to ring if he was rung first, and the assurance that the note would be remembered for him, by me, whether or not he chose to remember it himself."

Hubbard considered him.

"You have made the gun go away."

"I have made the gun go away. The gun, in the legal sense. The gun in the metal sense is your concern, Cecil; I have not asked. The gun in the evidential sense is, on the basis of the conversations I had yesterday with two persons whose names I am not going to give you, no longer evidence of anything that anyone is going to be in a position to ask Morgan about. He has been, to the extent he can be, given the same retroactive immateriality Helen Russell described."

"And Morgan."

"Morgan is not well. He is not unwell in any particular way. He is alone in a house he cannot leave because he has nowhere else to go, drinking less than I had feared and more than I would prefer, and waiting for Audrey's letter which will not come

because Audrey has, on examination, already said what the letter would have said, in person, on Sunday night, by going. He will be, in due course, all right. He is not, this week, all right. I have arranged for a colleague's wife to ring him on Saturday with an excuse, and again on the Wednesday following, until he can be rung without an excuse."

Hubbard said, after a moment: "Thank you, Will."

"Don't thank me. I was Morgan's barrister friend before I was anyone else's. The arrangement is the arrangement that arrangement makes."

"All right."

"Cecil."

"Yes."

"You will, presumably, also have certain arrangements that none of us know about."

"I will."

"Will you tell us what they are."

"No. The arrangements are good for the operation. The arrangements being good for the operation depends on their not being known. I am, between us, the person who has the most operational reason to keep his arrangements to himself, and I am the person who will continue to do so. I am also, for what it is worth, telling you—both of you, all of you—that I have made arrangements, and that those arrangements include a contingency for each of you and for Mollie and for Jessica's mother and for Will's wife and for Adam's solicitor's wife and for several other

people whose names you do not, on examination, need to know. The arrangements exist. You may, individually, elect to trust this."

Will said: "I do."

Adam said: "I do."

"All right then."

Hubbard refilled the teapot.

He did not, anywhere in the rest of the morning, refer to the conversation again.

The phone—the burner phone Hubbard had labelled external and set out on the low table the night before—rang at twenty to ten.

Hubbard picked it up.

He listened for some time.

He said, twice, in the small acknowledging way of a man receiving instructions from a person he was prepared to receive instructions from on this specific matter: "Yes." He said: "Eleven. Bloomsbury Hotel. Suite six fourteen. Helen Russell. Yes."

He said: "Adam and Will. Yes. Adam first, then Will, fifteen minutes apart."

He said: "Understood."

He hung up.

He looked at the room.

"Margaret," he said.

He laid the phone down.

"The meeting is at eleven. The Bloomsbury Hotel, in Bloomsbury Square. Suite six fourteen. The room is booked, under a corporate name that has nothing to do with any of us, by a

friend of Margaret's from the City who travels frequently and has a corporate account and was happy to oblige. Margaret will be there with one colleague: Helen Russell, the Guardian's senior counsel. Russell is the person the Guardian's legal department sends when the legal department wants to be in the room rather than receiving a write-up afterwards."

Adam nodded.

"Russell is the person who will decide, on legal grounds, what the paper publishes and what it holds. She will decide whether to name us. She will decide what to do with the recording of last night's call. She will decide, in consultation with Margaret, the timing of publication."

Will said: "She is a serious person."

Hubbard said: "She is. I have not met her. I have read her. She is a serious person. You should treat her as a serious person."

Adam said: "What are we taking."

"Adam takes the array," Hubbard said. "Both copies. The one you have been working on, and the one you have not yet opened. You hand both to Russell. You tell her exactly how the copies were made. You tell her that there are additional copies in additional places which are, between you and the Guardian, off the table. You give her, in writing if she asks for it, the schedule by which the additional copies will be released if you disappear. You tell her about the foreign archive. Not which archive; that you can decline. The fact of it, you do not."

"Yes."

"Will. Russell will want to know how the data was obtained. She will want to know it from a barrister. You give her the legal architecture of last night, with names redacted. You tell her what Hannah Reeve was, and what Petrescu was, and what the gap was, and what the night officer was. Russell will not be using any of this in print. She will be using it in her assessment of the Guardian's legal exposure for what they print. She is on our side; she is also doing her job."

Will said: "Yes."

"Both of you. Margaret is going to ask you questions in the room that I cannot anticipate. The questions will land. You will answer them. You will not, between you, attempt to coordinate. You will not look at each other across the room. You will each tell Margaret what you each know. If your accounts diverge in any small respect, the divergence is good—it is what divergent accounts of the same event look like when the accounts are honest. Russell will be looking for honesty."

"Understood."

"Adam first. Walk to the Bloomsbury Hotel. Take a roundabout route. Use the burner phone if you need to text. Go in through the front. Do not approach the lift until you have visited the lobby toilets. Do not use the suite phone. When you leave, leave through the side exit on Coptic Street."

"Yes."

"Will, fifteen minutes after Adam. By cab. Get out a block early. Walk the last block. Same protocol."

"Yes."

"You will be back here by half past two at the latest. If you are not, the phone in this kitchen will be ringing at half past two and a half, and one of two people I have arranged for the contingency will be moving towards the Bloomsbury Hotel."

Adam looked up.

"Two people."

"Two people."

"Cecil, what kind of two people."

Hubbard considered him.

"The kind who are experienced in retrieval," Hubbard said. "I was a Royal Navy officer for twenty-five years. I have known a few. I have asked two of them whether they would mind being on a half-day's notice today. They agreed. They are not likely to be needed. They will not be needed if you are back here by half past two. I am telling you about them because, after this morning, the assumption between us is that everything is on the table."

Adam, after a moment, said: "All right, Cecil."

"Get dressed."

In the kitchen on Makepeace Avenue in Highgate, Karim Bukhari put on a suit.

He had not, since 2003, put on a suit at quarter to nine in the morning to go to a meeting that had not been on his calendar the previous evening. He had not, ever, put on a suit at quarter to nine in the morning to go to a meeting that he understood, before he had left the house, was unlikely to leave him in the same job at the end of it as he had been in at the beginning. He stood in front of the small mirror in the upstairs hallway and

adjusted his tie. He was not, on examination, unsteady. He had been awake since the call had come at twenty past two. He had spent the intervening six and a half hours preparing the small things a man of his particular kind prepared when he had been told that the thing he had been waiting for since 2019 had arrived.

Yasmin came up the stairs.

She stopped at the top.

She said: "Karim."

"Yasmin."

"This is the meeting."

"This is the meeting."

She regarded him. He looked at her. She had on the cardigan she wore in the mornings when the boys were not yet up; she had her tea in her hand; her hair was in the small loose plait she made of it before she put it up properly for the day. He thought—he had been thinking it, in fragments, for six and a half hours—that he was not, this morning, going to have any of the small ordinary opportunities that twenty-three years of a marriage provided to say to her any of the things he might at any given moment have said to her, because the things he might at any given moment have said to her were not things that fitted in the small ordinary space between the kettle and the door.

She said: "I made you a thermos."

"Yasmin."

"It is on the kitchen counter. There is also a piece of toast I have buttered. I have put the toast in a bag. Take the bag."

He nodded.

She came up the last two stairs. She put her hand against his cheek. She held it there for a moment. She did not say anything. He did not say anything. After perhaps three seconds she took her hand away and went back down the stairs.

He stood at the top of the stairs for another moment.

Then he picked up his briefcase, in which he had placed three things—a sealed envelope addressed to his solicitor, a small notebook, and a clean pen—and he went down the stairs and into the kitchen and picked up the thermos and the bag with the toast in it, and he kissed Yasmin on the temple and she did not look up from the Financial Times, which she had got out for him as she had got it out every morning of his career, and he went out the front door.

The car came at five past nine.

The car was a plain dark grey saloon, of the kind nobody in the country remembered the make of an hour after they had ridden in one. It was driven by a man Bukhari did not recognise. The man did not introduce himself. The man held the rear door open. Bukhari got in.

The car drove west.

The destination was, Bukhari understood, a building in Pimlico that did not appear on any organisational chart, that was rented under a corporate name, and that he had been to twice

before, in 2019 and 2021, on the two occasions on which Cray had wanted to speak with him in person.

Bukhari watched the streets of north London pass through the window.

He thought: *Yasmin made me a thermos.*

He thought: *I will, this evening, drink the thermos.*

He thought: *I will, this evening, be sitting somewhere drinking it.*

The car turned south at the Heath.

He closed his eyes.

In the cottage above Santon Bridge, Mollie had been awake since half past five.

She had read the message at twenty past two—We are home—and had not slept after that. She had lain in the dark of the upstairs bedroom watching the small grey square of the curtain at the window, and she had thought about her husband, and she had not, in the small specific way she did not, allowed herself to think about him in the form of what could have happened, because what could have happened was not a form of thinking that produced any usable output and was, at three in the morning in a cottage in Cumbria with two sleeping children down the corridor, a form of thinking she had a particular professional regard for not engaging in.

At five thirty she had got up.

She had made a cup of tea. She had drunk it in the kitchen, standing, watching the lane through the window. Davies had been on the wall. A different man, who was not Davies, had taken

Davies' place at twenty to six and had nodded once to the kitchen window in the manner of a man who had been told, on the way in, which window in the cottage to nod to. She had nodded back.

By seven she had made breakfast for the boys, who came down the stairs together at quarter past, Tom in his pyjamas and Jimmy in his with the binoculars round his neck because Jimmy had, since Sunday, been wearing the binoculars round his neck almost continuously. She had given them porridge. She had given them apple. She had set Jimmy a small writing exercise—describe the birds you have seen this morning—and had sat down at the kitchen table with her own tea and watched him work at it, and watched Tom build a small construction out of a packet of cornflakes that had not, by the end of his project, contained any cornflakes.

She had not, all morning, looked at the burner phone.

The burner phone was on the kitchen counter, screen-down, where she had set it last night. It had not, since the message at twenty past two, lit up a second time. She had decided, at perhaps four in the morning, that she would not look at it again until it lit up. The looking was a form of waiting. The waiting was a form she preferred not to inhabit.

At quarter past eight Jimmy looked up from his writing.

He said: "Mum."

"Yes."

"Is Daddy coming today?"

"I don't know yet, sweetheart. I will tell you when I know."

Jimmy nodded.

He went back to writing.

Adam went into the lobby of the Bloomsbury Hotel at two minutes to eleven.

The lobby was busy in the manner of a London hotel lobby on a Thursday morning—guests with luggage, a small queue at reception, a woman behind the concierge desk in a green velvet jacket—and Adam moved through it with the slightly tired propriety of a man on his way to a small private meeting in someone's room. He did not approach the front desk. He crossed the lobby to the toilets. He spent four minutes in there. He came out. He went to the lifts. He pressed six. He rode up alone.

Suite 614 was at the eastern end of the sixth floor. The corridor was empty. The carpet was a deep navy. The doors were dark wood. He stopped at 614, and looked at the door, and knocked once.

Margaret opened it.

She had on a dark suit and a soft cream blouse, and she looked, he registered, like a woman who had also slept badly but who had decided, on the way to the meeting, that the sleeplessness was not going to be on display today. She had makeup on, which Adam knew was unusual for her in working contexts; the makeup was the small daily armouring of a person who had decided, before getting into the cab, that she would conduct the meeting with the additional layer of professional surface that was available to her.

"Adam."

"Margaret."

"Come in."

He came in. The suite was a corner suite, large, with windows on two sides looking down onto Bloomsbury Square. The morning was grey but bright. The plane trees in the square were bare. The room had a sitting area with two sofas, a low table, and four chairs; the bedroom door was closed.

A woman was standing at the window, with her back to the door.

She turned.

She was perhaps forty-five, with the dark hair tied back of a person who had been working before she had got dressed, and the small composed face of a senior counsel who had spent twenty years being the smartest person in rooms she had not, professionally, been required to dominate. She came across the room and held out her hand.

"Adam Wright."

"Helen Russell."

They shook hands.

She said: "Sit. We will wait for Mr Mackwith. While we wait we will not, by tacit agreement, talk about the matter we are here to talk about."

"All right."

They sat.

For the next eleven minutes Margaret made tea on a small electric kettle that had been provided in the suite, Helen Russell read something on her phone with the particular focused attention of a person reading something genuinely interesting,

and Adam looked out of the window at the plane trees in Bloomsbury Square.

Will arrived at thirteen minutes past eleven.

He came in, embraced Margaret, accepted a cup of tea, sat down beside Adam, and looked at Helen Russell.

"Mr Mackwith."

"Ms Russell."

"Right." Helen put her phone down. "Let us begin."

The meeting ran for two hours and forty minutes.

Helen Russell asked the questions.

She asked them in the patient methodical way of a person who had, on perhaps two hundred previous occasions, sat down with sources and assessed the legal exposure of publishing on the basis of what the sources had brought her. She did not interrupt. She did not exclaim. She took, with a small slim mechanical pencil, occasional notes on a yellow legal pad. The notes were in a hand that nobody but her could read, and possibly, Adam suspected, only some of which Helen could read herself.

She started with Will. She had Will walk her through the legal architecture of what had been done last night. Will did. He gave her, with names redacted, the substance: the cloned smartcard, the gap in the camera system, the cleaners' badge piggyback, the seven directories, the executive credentials, the fire-door exit, Hannah Reeve's badge. Helen wrote occasional words down. She asked occasional questions. The questions were narrower than the answers; she was, Adam realised after the third question, reaching for specific elements that had specific

bearings on specific points of UK law she was already, as Will spoke, weighing.

When Will had finished, Helen said: "Thank you, Mr Mackwith."

Then she turned to Adam.

She had Adam walk her through the case. He did. He took her through Maxwell's drive. He took her through the letter. He took her through the ledger, the procurement folder, the four sales, the parallel oversight channel, Bukhari, Winthrop. He took her through the recording—the existence of it, the fact that it was not in their possession, the fact that it had been sent to Bukhari and was, therefore, presumably also in the possession of whoever Bukhari reported to. He took her through the previous night's EXEC folder. He took her, briefly, through the Hammersmith dog. (Helen looked up, briefly, at the Hammersmith dog. Helen wrote dog in her notebook, and underlined it.)

He took her, finally, through the foreign archive.

He told her, exactly as Hubbard had instructed, that he would not name the archive, that the existence of it was a thing the *Guardian* should know, that the schedule by which the archive would release was a thing he was prepared to put in writing if she asked.

She asked.

Adam wrote it down.

He gave her the sheet.

She read it. She put it in her file. She said: "Thank you."

She turned to Margaret.

She said: "I have enough."

Margaret said: "Helen?"

Helen said: "I will write my assessment this afternoon. The assessment will go to the editor at four. The editor will, I expect, accept the assessment. The story will run on Friday morning. We will lead with the Russia row, with Winthrop named. We will follow with the parallel-channel architecture, naming Bukhari. We will trail, on Saturday, the Pakistan and Saudi sales, with the parallel-channel context. We will not, on any day, name the team in this room. Mr Mackwith and Mr Wright, I want to be clear: the Guardian protects its sources. We will protect you. We will protect you to the limits the law permits us to protect you, and where the law does not permit us, we will, on a case-by-case basis, decline to comply with the law. This is not a guarantee. It is a position. The position has been held by the paper since 1959. It has been broken twice in that period, and on both occasions the paper paid the cost. You should know this."

Will: "We do."

"Good."

She looked at Adam.

"Mr Wright. The recording of last night's call to me is, as Margaret told you, in our system. The recording will not be released by the Guardian. It will sit in an archive controlled by the editor. If the Guardian is, at any subsequent point, required by a court order to release the recording, the Guardian will decline; the editor will go to prison rather than release; and the recording will, in an arrangement parallel to your own

foreign archive, be released by other means at the moment the editor enters the prison. This is a contingency that has not, in the paper's history, ever been activated. It exists. You should know this also."

"All right."

"Mr Mackwith. The legal exposure for your team is, in my preliminary view, manageable. The act of obtaining the data was, in the strict sense, an offence under the Computer Misuse Act 1990, with several aggravating factors. The offence is, however, a public-interest offence, and a public-interest defence would, on the material in front of me, be available. The question is whether you would be willing to mount the defence, in a court, on the public record, in your own name. My recommendation is that you should not. My recommendation is that the team should not, between now and the apparatus's response to Friday's edition, take any action that could reasonably be construed as inviting prosecution. My recommendation is that the team should, instead, sit very still, in a very quiet place, for approximately seven days, and that the Guardian's lawyers should, during those seven days, do the work that produces the position from which the team's exposure is, in due course, retroactively immaterial."

Will: "Retroactively immaterial."

"Yes. The position I am describing is the position that, within seven days of Friday's publication, the political consequences of the case will have so substantially reorganised the apparatus that there will not, in the new apparatus, be any party with an active prosecutorial interest in the team. The

apparatus that would, today, be willing to prosecute you will not, within seven days, exist in its current form. The apparatus that exists in its place will have other priorities."

"That is a substantial assertion, Ms Russell."

"It is. I have spent the last twelve hours assessing it. I am prepared to defend it. It is conditional on the publication landing as I expect it to land, which it will only do if we have the material we are about to take from this room."

Adam said: "The material."

He set the small leather case on the table.

He opened it. He took out the USB array—the original one, the one he had used at the console—and he took out a second USB array, a clone of the first, sealed with a red wax dot in the manner of the small old-fashioned authentication device he had made himself at four in the morning the previous night, knowing that this moment would come. He set them both on the table.

He pushed both across.

Helen Russell took them. She held them, briefly, as a person held something whose weight was not the weight of the object. She slid them into a small hard case she had brought with her. She closed the case. She set the case on the chair beside her.

She said: "Thank you."

She stood up.

"I have what I need. I will be in touch through Margaret. The next time you and I are in a room together, Mr Wright, will be on the day we publish. The day after that, if I have done my job correctly, you and your friends will not require me again."

She held out her hand. Adam took it.

She said: "Mr Wright. Thank you for what you have done."

"Thank you, Ms Russell, for what you are about to do."

She nodded once.

She left the room.

Will and Adam left separately.

Adam went out the side exit on Coptic Street. He walked east. He took the Tube from Holborn. He doubled back at Liverpool Street, came back west on a different line, and got off at Highbury and Islington, which was the wrong stop for Stoke Newington but was not, on the way to Stoke Newington, a stop one would obviously change at. He walked from there.

He came up the steps of Catherine Marsh's building at twelve minutes past two.

He let himself in.

Hubbard was at the kitchen table.

Hubbard said: "Margaret."

"It's running. Friday morning. Russia first, with Winthrop. Bukhari named. The team protected. Russell will close the legal exposure within seven days of publication."

Hubbard nodded.

"Will."

"Five minutes behind me."

"Good. Go and sit down. Drink something. The day is now waiting."

Adam went into the sitting room. Philip was on the sofa. Jessica was reading a book she had found on Catherine Marsh's

small bookcase—a biography of Vera Brittain, which Adam noted with a small inappropriate flicker of professional pleasure, because the biography was a good one, and Jessica was reading it. Philip was not reading. Philip was watching Jessica read.

Philip looked up.

"Adam?"

"Friday," Adam said.

Philip closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them.

"Russia row first?"

"Russia row first. Winthrop named. Bukhari named. Pakistan and Saudi on Saturday. The team is not named."

"On Friday."

"On Friday."

Philip nodded.

Adam sat down on the floor. He did not turn the laptop on. He looked at his hands. He looked at the hairline crack in the ceiling. He thought, for the first time in two days, that he might, in the next twenty minutes, be able to sleep.

He did not sleep.

Will came in at twenty past two.

He came in with a paper bag from the corner shop, which contained four bananas, a packet of Hobnobs, two more bottles of milk, and, in a small folded copy of a *Standard* he had bought as cover, a single white envelope that had been at the bottom of his coat pocket all morning and which he was now placing, with a small ceremonial relief, on the kitchen table.

The envelope was addressed to *M. Bryant*.

It was sealed.

He said, to Hubbard: "Russell took the original. This is the copy I had been holding in chambers since Monday afternoon. I no longer need to hold it. I would rather not have it in chambers a moment longer than necessary. It can sit in this kitchen with the other things we are not, for the moment, doing anything with."

Hubbard looked at the envelope.

He said: "You are going to want to keep it, Will. After this is over. As a thing you wrote on Monday afternoon when you did not yet know whether any of this would land."

Will considered this.

He set the envelope down beside the empty teapot.

He sat down at the kitchen table. He poured himself a glass of water. He took a Hobnob from the packet.

He said, to no one in particular: "I am, at this moment, very tired."

Jessica, from the sitting room, called: "Will. You can have my bedroom. I haven't been in it. I have been on the sofa with my book. I would prefer the sofa for the afternoon. Take the bedroom."

Will said: "Thank you, Jessica."

He went into the bedroom. He took his shoes off. He lay down in his suit. He closed his eyes. He was asleep within ninety seconds, in the manner of a barrister who had been waiting forty hours to be permitted, by his own sense of professional readiness, to fall asleep, and who had now been given the permission.

In the sitting room, Jessica went on reading.

Philip, on the sofa, watched her.

Adam, on the floor, lay back and watched the hairline crack.

Hubbard, at the kitchen table, opened the burner phone Margaret had used, set it down beside the envelope, and looked at it for a long moment.

He picked up his own phone.

He typed a single message to Mollie's burner.

The message said: *Friday morning. The team is not named.*

He set the phone face-down on the table.

He waited for the reply.

In the cottage above Santon Bridge, Mollie picked up the phone, read the message, and stood at the kitchen window for some time looking at the dry-stone wall opposite the gate, where a man who was not Davies was sitting on a thermos and reading a paperback. She thought about the boys, who were in the back garden in their wellingtons. She thought about the morning. She thought about the morning the country was going to read on Friday.

She typed back: *Come up on Friday.*

She set the phone down.

She did not, in any specific way she could have named, feel a particular emotion.

She felt, instead, the small careful weight of a woman who had been given, in a sentence, the timeline of the next forty-eight hours of her life.

In Pimlico, in a discreet building leased by a specialised unit of the Metropolitan Police whose existence was a matter of internal record but not of public ones, Karim Bukhari sat in a small windowless room at a table opposite a man who had not, in two and a half hours, raised his voice. The building was not the one Bukhari had expected to be brought to. He had registered this when the car had stopped outside it; he had registered it again, more precisely, when he had been led through a small unmarked side entrance into a corridor whose particular institutional smell—the smell of a building cleaned by people on a public payroll rather than a corporate one—had told him, before any face had spoken to him, that he was not where he had thought he was going to be. The man on the other side of the table was not Cray. The man on the other side of the table was somebody Bukhari had not previously met, who had introduced himself as Mr Voss—a name Bukhari understood to be a placeholder, of the kind used by officers of his particular kind in interviews of his particular kind—and who had been, for the duration of the meeting, asking Bukhari a series of questions whose answers Bukhari had been, against his own expectations, providing.

The questions had begun with the events of October 2020.

They had moved, over the course of the morning, through 2021, 2022, 2023.

They had reached, at quarter past one, the events of December last year.

They had reached, at five past two, the events of Sunday morning.

They were, at twenty to three, somewhere Bukhari had not, that morning, expected they would be.

Mr Voss, who was not Cray, was making notes, in pencil, on a yellow legal pad, in a hand that was so small and precise that it had, over the course of the morning, become its own small subject of Bukhari's attention. The handwriting reminded him of the handwriting of his older brother, who had died in 2007.

Mr Voss looked up.

He said: "I have a few more questions, Mr Bukhari. Do you need a break."

Bukhari said: "I would like a glass of water, please."

"Of course."

Mr Voss poured a glass of water from a jug. He set it in front of Bukhari.

Bukhari drank.

He set the glass down.

He said: "You are not who I came to see."

Mr Voss said: "No. I am not."

"You are, however, who I should have come to see."

"Yes, Mr Bukhari. I am."

Bukhari nodded once. He picked up the glass. He drank again.

He thought: *Yasmin made me a thermos.*

He thought: *I am not, as it happens, going to need it.*

He thought: *I will, this evening, drink it with her.*

He looked at Mr Voss.

He said: "Please continue."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Morning

Adam woke before five.

He had not set an alarm. The body that had not slept properly since Friday and had then, at Catherine Marsh's flat on Wednesday night, slept properly for the first time in five days, had now made up its mind that what it required next was the ordinary discipline of a working morning, and the discipline of a working morning was that it began before five.

He lay on the floor in the dark.

The hairline crack in the ceiling, which he had spent two evenings tracing with his eye, had become, by this morning, the kind of small object a man's mind kept returning to when there was nothing in particular to occupy it. He thought about the crack for some seconds. Then he thought: the paper is on the streets in twelve minutes.

He sat up.

He put on his clothes—the same clothes he had been wearing all week, which he had washed at the small basin in Catherine Marsh's bathroom on Thursday afternoon, and which had dried, in the warm of the bathroom, by Thursday evening, and which he had folded and replaced in the order he would put them back on. He went into the kitchen.

Hubbard was already at the table.

Hubbard had on the same brown jacket he had been wearing on Sunday evening. Hubbard had made coffee. Hubbard had two mugs out. He pushed one across the table.

He said, very quietly: "Five thirty. The first edition reaches the central distribution at five fifteen. Earliest a corner shop will have it is five forty. There is a kiosk at Stoke Newington overground that opens at five forty-five and gets the first delivery five minutes after that. I will go. You will not. You will sit in this kitchen until I come back."

"Cecil—"

"Adam. There will be reporters at every news kiosk in central London by lunchtime. Some of them will be reporters who recognise you. The kiosk at Stoke Newington overground at five fifty in the morning will have one customer between five fifty and six, and that customer will be me, and the customer who is not me is the only customer who will have any reason to recognise me, and that customer is not going to be at a kiosk in Stoke Newington at five fifty in the morning. Sit."

Adam sat.

Hubbard finished his coffee. He took his coat from the hook. He went out.

The flat was very quiet.

Will was in Jessica's bedroom, sleeping in his suit, as he had been sleeping in his suit for two nights. Jessica was on the sofa, awake; Adam had been able to tell when he had passed the doorway, because Jessica's breathing had had the particular alert quality of a young person who had been awake for some time

without permitting herself to register that she was. Philip was on the sleeping bag where Adam had been. He was asleep. He had, at some point in the last few hours, rolled onto his side and pulled the sleeping bag over his head, and his shoulder was rising and falling in the small uneven rhythm of a deep sleep.

Adam sat at the kitchen table with his coffee.

He waited.

In the cottage above Santon Bridge, Mollie was awake at five forty-five, in the small grey light that was not yet morning, and she was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of tea and the small portable radio she kept on a shelf in the kitchen for such moments as this one had not, until this week, been.

She had not slept.

She had been telling herself, since two in the morning, that she ought to sleep, and her body had, at quarter past three, agreed in principle with the recommendation. The recommendation had not been implemented. By quarter past four she had given up. She had got up. She had made tea. She had sat down at the kitchen table. She had looked at the radio.

She had not, since Sunday evening, listened to the radio.

She had stopped listening because the news was—for the period during which she had been at the cottage waiting for her husband to come back from a building in Canary Wharf—not the kind of news she could afford to take in. The news on Monday morning had been the engine failure. The news on Tuesday had been the parachute. The news on Wednesday had been the funeral arrangements, which she had not wanted to hear specifics of

because Maxwell had a wife, and the wife had not asked Mollie to know about her husband's funeral arrangements, and Mollie had decided, in the quiet of the cottage kitchen, that she would not extend her own attention into a corner of another woman's grief without invitation.

This morning was different.

She turned the radio on at five fifty-three. She set it to BBC Radio 4. She turned the volume down to the level at which the boys, asleep upstairs, would not hear it. She sat at the table with her hand round the mug, and she listened.

The six o'clock news came on at six.

The lead was the Guardian's story.

She listened to the BBC newsreader read three sentences in the calm professional voice that had been the voice of the six o'clock news for as long as Mollie had been alive. The Guardian this morning carries an investigation by Margaret Bryant alleging that the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Winthrop, while serving as Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, established an undisclosed parallel oversight channel through which weapons-related procurement determinations were processed in violation of formal Cabinet Office protocols. The investigation alleges that the channel facilitated four sales by Aiglon Aviation, including one to a sanctioned Russian entity in 2023. The Cabinet Office has not yet responded.

She turned the radio off.

She sat at the kitchen table for a moment with the mug between her hands.

She thought: *the team is not named.*

She thought: *Philip is alive, at quarter past five this morning he was alive, the country has just begun to read the story, the country does not, this morning, know my husband.*

She thought: *Friday.*

She got up. She put another log on the fire in the sitting room—the fire she had lit and tended for five mornings now, and which she had become, in the way of a person who was running a particular small economy in a particular small place, expert at—and she went upstairs to wake the boys for breakfast.

In the kitchen on Makepeace Avenue in Highgate, Karim Bukhari had been awake since four. He had let Yasmin sleep. He had come downstairs at twenty to five and had, in the small particular ritual of a man who had been told the previous evening what the morning would consist of, made tea, made toast, and laid out on the kitchen counter the three things he had been told he would need: his briefcase, his coat, the small overnight bag.

The car would come at six fifteen.

The car would not, this morning, take him to Pimlico.

The car would take him to a place in Surrey that Mr Voss had described, the previous evening, as somewhere you and your family can be for several days, while we work out what comes next. Mr Voss had said: this is not, in any sense the press will recognise, protective custody. You are not under arrest. You are voluntarily cooperating. You are voluntarily relocating with your family for the duration of the period during which your home

address will be of interest to people I would prefer you and your family not be available to.

Bukhari had said: *Yasmin has not yet agreed to come.*

Mr Voss had said: Tell her this morning. If she will not come, we will discuss alternatives. She will come.

Bukhari had said: *You do not know my wife.*

Mr Voss had said: I know enough about her. She will come. Tell her.

Bukhari now sat at the kitchen table with the tea in front of him and the *Financial Times* he had got out of habit, despite the fact that the *Financial Times* would not, this morning, contain any story that would matter to him for the rest of his life.

Yasmin came down at quarter past five.

She had her hair in the loose plait. She had on her cardigan. She had heard him come down the stairs at four forty and had decided, in the small private way she decided such things, that she would let him have the kitchen until quarter past five and then come down to him.

She sat down opposite him.

She looked at him.

She said: "Karim."

"Yasmin."

"It is in the paper today."

"Yes."

"I heard you go down. I heard you fill the kettle. I did not come down because I thought you wanted the kitchen."

"You were right. Thank you."

"Karim."

"Yes."

"I have been thinking. While I was upstairs. I have been thinking since you came home last night. I have been thinking about whether I can leave this house. I have been thinking about whether I can take Tariq out of school. I have been thinking about whether I can ask Sara to leave her flat in South Kensington and come with us."

"Yasmin."

"I have decided."

He looked at her.

She said: "I am coming."

He closed his eyes.

He opened them.

He said: "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, Karim. I am coming because I am your wife and because the matter is the matter, and because, if I do not come, the man Mr Voss has described to me on the telephone last evening will, in the longer accounting, not be able to do his work, and you will not be able to do yours. I am coming because the cost of not coming is larger than the cost of coming. I am also coming because Tariq has been having a difficult month and a few days in Surrey will, on examination, do him no harm."

"Yasmin."

"And because I love you. Although that is the smaller reason. I want you to know it is the smaller reason. The other

reasons are the reasons. The love is, as it were, the lubrication."

He almost smiled.

He said: "I will get Tariq up at six."

"I will pack."

She got up. She did not kiss him. She took her own mug of tea with her up the stairs.

He sat for a moment longer at the kitchen table with the *Financial Times* he was not, after all, going to read.

He thought: *I am going to a house in Surrey with my wife and my son. I am going to give a series of statements over the next several weeks to a unit of the Metropolitan Police whose existence is a matter of internal record. I am, in due course, going to be charged with offences I am, in the longer accounting, going to be relieved to have been charged with. I am going to cease to be the Director of Capability Integration. I am going to cease to be a member of the Civil Service. I am going to be, by the end of this year, a man who is not what he has been for twenty-eight years.*

He thought: *Yasmin is coming.*

He thought: *that is the part that matters.*

Hubbard came back at six twenty.

He came in with a stack of newspapers under his coat—he had bought, at the kiosk, every paper that carried the story, which was at five fifty-five only the *Guardian*, but which had grown, by the time Hubbard left the kiosk at six twelve, to include the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *Financial Times*, and a hastily prepared

late-edition Independent, all four of which had been able, in the half hour between the Guardian's online publication at five thirty and the kiosk's first delivery, to get a piece of the story onto their own front pages, in the manner of papers running a story they had been beaten on but had no intention of being beaten on twice.

He laid the papers on the kitchen table.

The *Guardian* was on top.

The headline was three columns wide, set in the largest type the *Guardian* used for non-war headlines.

WINTHROP AT CENTRE OF UNDISCLOSED MoD PROCUREMENT CHANNEL.

The subhead was: *Cabinet Secretary, while at MoD, set up parallel oversight that bypassed formal review; sales to four foreign customers including sanctioned Russian entity worth £58.8m.*

The byline was Margaret Bryant, with a small *additional reporting by H. Russell* at the foot of the article.

Adam read the piece standing up. He read it twice. He read it a third time, sitting down, with a pencil in his hand, the way a journalist read a piece written by another journalist on a subject the journalist who was reading had given the other journalist.

Margaret had done it well.

Margaret had done it, in fact, better than Adam had thought possible in the six hours she had had after the Thursday meeting. The piece was twelve hundred words, calm, evidentially exhaustive, written in a register that did not editorialise and

did not need to. It led with the Russia row—six aircraft, £58.8m, Bishkek, October 2023—and it walked the reader, in the steady patient way the Guardian's best reporting walked readers, from the procurement order to the SWIFT confirmation to the internal Aiglon shipping manifest to the email in which Geoffrey Winthrop, in his own voice, in 2020, had set up the channel through which the determination authorising the sale would, three years later, be processed. The piece gave Bukhari's name in the eighth paragraph. The piece named Aiglon's chairman in the eleventh. The piece referenced Maxwell—the Aiglon test pilot whose death in Chelsea on Sunday morning has been the subject of considerable public attention this week—in the fourteenth, and noted that documentary evidence underpinning the investigation had been obtained from sources the Guardian is not in a position to identify, who have undertaken substantial personal risk to bring this material to the public.

The team was named in the article only by that.

Adam set the paper down.

He looked at Hubbard.

He said: "It's perfect."

"It is competent," Hubbard said. "Margaret would not thank you for perfect."

"It is competent and it is perfect."

"All right."

The other papers led with their own versions, all of them paraphrased from the Guardian with the small additional reporting each had been able to do in the previous half-hour. The Times had

an inset photograph of Sir Geoffrey Winthrop, taken the previous summer at a Civil Service awards ceremony. The Telegraph had an inset photograph of One Cabot Crescent, taken from across Cabot Square. The FT had a small graphic of the four sales, with the unit counts and contract values laid out in a horizontal bar that mirrored, with a small uncomfortable accuracy, the layout of the ledger Adam had read on Maxwell's drive on Monday night.

By the time Will and Jessica came into the kitchen, at twenty to seven, Adam and Hubbard had been through the four papers twice.

Will read the *Guardian* sitting at the table in his suit, drinking the coffee Hubbard had refreshed for him, with the small careful expression of a barrister whose client had just won, against expectation, a case the client had hired the barrister against the advice of three other barristers.

When he had finished he said: "Russell did it."

"Margaret did it," Adam said.

"Russell did the part Margaret did not do."

"Yes."

"Bukhari is named."

"He is."

"Winthrop is named."

"He is."

"The team is not named."

"It is not."

Will nodded once.

He folded the *Guardian* and set it on the table beside the other papers. He drank his coffee. He looked at Hubbard.

He said: "I am, at some point today, going to need to phone my wife. Eleanor has, by now, been told by friends that her husband's name is not on the front of any newspaper in the country, and she will be wondering why some part of her life has been, for the past seventy-two hours, in a slightly unusual configuration."

"Phone her," Hubbard said. "Not from this flat. There is a phone box on the corner of Stoke Newington Church Street. Use it. Tell her you are well. Tell her you will be home tonight. Do not tell her where you are. She does not need to know yet. She will, by tonight."

"All right."

"After that, you can begin to think about chambers. Not today. Tomorrow."

"All right."

Jessica had not, since coming into the kitchen, looked at the papers.

Jessica was in the doorway, with her coffee in her hand, in the same wool sweater she had been wearing on Wednesday—Mollie's sweater, which had come back to her at some point in the day yesterday—and she was looking, Adam realised, at the wall above the kitchen counter, where Catherine Marsh had hung a small framed print of a Vanessa Bell painting that Adam had not previously noticed. Jessica was looking at the print without seeing it, in the manner of a young person who had been waiting,

all morning, for the moment in which she would be permitted to say what she had decided, in the night, she was going to say.

Hubbard registered this.

He said: "Jessica."

"Yes."

"You are going to the hospital."

"I am going to the hospital."

"When."

"Now. As early as I can. Before the press get there. Before the building is besieged. I want to be in the room with him before anybody knows what is happening, and I want to be there when he wakes up enough to know what is happening."

Hubbard considered.

"Will the police on the door let you in."

"I think so. I have been twice. The afternoon shift knows me. The morning shift will, by now, have been told who I am because of the Sunday visit. Chummy's father has left. I am, by default, the closest person available."

"Take a cab. From here. I will arrange the cab. The cab will be a particular cab; you will recognise it because it will already be at the front door when you come down. The driver will not, in any sense, be a cab driver. He will take you to the hospital, he will wait for you, and he will bring you back here when you are ready to come back."

"All right."

"Jessica."

"Yes."

"Do not, today, decide anything about the rest of your life. Today you go and see him. Today you sit with him. Today you tell him, if he is awake enough to hear it, what is in this morning's paper. You do not, today, decide what kind of life you are going to have with him or without him. The decisions of that kind that you are going to make in the coming weeks are the decisions you will make, and they are not, on examination, any of my business. But today is not the day to make them."

"I know, Cecil."

"Good."

He stood up.

He went to the front window, looked out at the street, came back, picked up his phone, made a single call, and said, into the phone: "Now, please. Front of the building. Twenty minutes."

He hung up.

He looked at Jessica.

He said: "Coat. Bag. Anything you want to take. The cab will be here at five past seven."

She nodded.

She went into the bedroom. The door closed.

Hubbard looked at Adam and Will.

He said: "And the rest of us begin, today, to go home."

Will left at half past eight.

He left in the cab Hubbard had used to bring Jessica's earlier driver. He had embraced Hubbard, embraced Adam, had not embraced Philip, who had not yet come into the kitchen but was, by then, awake on the floor of the sitting room. He had said, to

Adam: I will see you at the cottage on Saturday. He had said, to

Hubbard: I am, against my better professional judgment, glad I came. He had got into the cab. The cab had driven away.

Philip came into the kitchen at twenty past eight.

He came in with the sleeping bag folded under his arm in the manner of a man who had decided, before getting up, that his next act was going to be to organise the small physical traces of his having been in someone else's flat. He put the sleeping bag on the floor by the door. He took off the jumper he had been sleeping in. He went into the bathroom. He came back out fifteen minutes later with his hair wet and his face shaved.

He sat down at the kitchen table.

He looked at the papers.

He read the *Guardian* slowly, in the manner of a man whose own life had been in some way involved in the events the paper was describing, and who was reading it with the dual attention of a participant and a citizen. When he had finished he set the paper down.

He said: "Cecil."

"Philip."

"Tell me about going to the cottage."

Hubbard sat down opposite him.

He said: "I will drive you. We will leave this afternoon. We will go up the M1 in my car, which is parked four streets from here under a name that is not mine. We will stop in Leicester at a service station I have used before. We will continue up the M6. We will reach the cottage at approximately nine in the evening.

Mollie will be expecting us. Davies will have been told we are coming. We will sleep in the cottage tonight. Mollie will be there. The boys will be there. The fire will be lit. The cottage will be the cottage."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow you will be in the cottage with your wife and your sons. I will leave at noon and drive back to London. You will stay through the weekend."

"Cecil."

"Yes."

"Are you going to be all right."

"I am going to be all right, Philip. I have a number of small administrative matters to manage in London on Saturday and Sunday. I have a flat in Earl's Court I have not been in since Friday morning. I have a cat that has been fed by a neighbour for a week and is, by now, extremely angry. I have a wife I am going to spend Sunday afternoon with at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, where she is at present a resident in long-term care, and to whom I am going to read, as I read every Sunday afternoon, the Sunday Times Magazine and any letter that has come to her in the post. I will be all right."

"I didn't know your wife was at the Royal Hospital."

"Not many people do. She has been there for two years. She has Alzheimer's. She knows me on perhaps one Sunday in three. The other two Sundays she does not know me, but she is happy that there is a man reading the Sunday Times to her, and the man is,

on those Sundays, by prior arrangement of his own with the universe, willing to be that man."

Philip looked at him.

He said: "Cecil. I am sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It is not, on examination, the worst arrangement available. It has its own small dignity. Most arrangements do, if you let them."

Philip nodded.

He picked up his coffee. He drank from it. He set it down.

He said: "I will be ready to leave at one."

"Good."

Adam stayed.

Adam stayed through the middle of the day, while Hubbard and Philip began, in the small particular ways of two men who had stayed in someone else's flat for two nights, to clear the rooms. They folded the sleeping bags. They washed the mugs. Hubbard collected the burner phones into a small dark bag, of which he extracted two and placed in his pocket and four and placed in the bag for disposal. He wiped down the kettle, the tap, the inside of the fridge. He put a small handwritten note for Catherine Marsh on the kitchen counter, weighted with a packet of digestive biscuits, the contents of which Adam did not see.

At eleven, the kitchen radio—which Hubbard had permitted, this morning, to be turned on—carried the eleven o'clock news, in which the lead item, a half-hour into the news cycle, was the announcement that the Cabinet Office had issued a brief statement on the Guardian's reporting. Adam stopped what he was doing and

listened. The statement was read by the BBC newsreader with the same calm professional voice that had read the six o'clock news. The statement said that the Cabinet Secretary acknowledged errors of process in the establishment of certain procurement oversight arrangements during his tenure at the Ministry of Defence, and that he would be making a fuller statement in due course.

Errors of process.

Adam smiled briefly at the phrase. *Errors of process* was the language a senior civil servant reached for when he was preparing the ground for a resignation he had not yet decided to announce.

By tomorrow morning, Adam thought, the resignation would be announced.

By tomorrow afternoon, the parliamentary calls for a public inquiry would be on the front of the *Standard*.

By Monday morning, the apparatus that had, on Wednesday at twenty-three eleven, sent its on-call up to floor seven of One Cabot Crescent, would be a different apparatus entirely.

Helen Russell had said it would. Helen Russell had been correct.

Hubbard left at one with Philip and the holdall that had been on the floor of the bedroom for two nights. They embraced Adam at the door. Hubbard held the embrace longer than Adam had expected him to. Hubbard had not, on examination, embraced Adam since 2018, on the occasion of the funeral of a friend they had had in common; the embrace today carried, briefly, the same quality of care.

Hubbard said, into Adam's ear: "Adam."

"Yes."

"You did the work."

"You did the work, Cecil. I read it after you had done it."

"All right. Both of us did the work. The two of us, with everyone in this flat. We did it. Don't deny me the thanks."

"Thank you, Cecil."

"Thank you, Adam."

They went down the stairs.

The flat was quiet.

Adam stayed alone in the flat through the afternoon, because he had decided, somewhere in the morning, that he wanted to be in the flat for one more hour after the others had gone.

He sat at the kitchen table.

He had the newspapers in front of him. He had the small notebook he had been carrying since Sunday. He had a pen.

He turned to a clean page.

He wrote:

Owen Maxwell was forty-four. He had a wife called Anna and a dog called Hector and a flat in Hammersmith with a view of a row of plane trees that came into leaf each spring with what he had once described to a colleague as 'an entirely unjustified optimism'. He worked for fourteen months on something that, by the time he died, he had still not been able to publish. He died on the roof of a friend's friend's house in Chelsea on the morning of February the sixteenth, in a manner that the country has been told was an accident. The country has, this morning, begun to be told otherwise.

He paused.

He read the paragraph back. He read it twice. The phrase with what he had once described to a colleague as 'an entirely unjustified optimism'—he had no idea whether Maxwell had said this. He had, in the small way of a journalist who had come to know a man through the man's writing, made the man up, just slightly, in the direction the man's own writing pointed.

He thought: *I will need to ask the wife.*

He thought: the wife will, by the time I phone her, have read the morning's paper. The wife will, by the time I phone her, know that the man I am asking about is the man who has just become news.

He thought: *I will phone her tomorrow. I will ask whether she would like, in due course, to talk. I will not, today, ask. Today is hers.*

He thought: *I will also, separately, find out what has happened to the dog.*

He closed the notebook.

He picked up his coat.

He took, from the small dark bag Hubbard had left on the kitchen counter, the two burner phones Hubbard had left for him—one for use, one for spare—and put them in his inside pocket. He took the original USB array from where he had hidden it inside the toaster on Thursday morning, on the principle that nobody who had broken into a flat would think to check the toaster. He put the array in his other inside pocket.

He looked at the kitchen.

The kitchen was as Catherine Marsh had left it on the day she had gone to Brussels in September, except for a small ring on the wooden counter where Hubbard's coffee mug had sat, that morning, for too long while Hubbard had read the papers, and which Adam now noticed and quickly wiped down with a tea-towel that was not the Kew Gardens one.

He turned out the kitchen light.

He turned out the sitting-room lights.

He stood in the dark of the hall for a moment.

He thought: *we were here.*

He thought: *we will, in time, not have been here.*

He closed the front door behind him.

He went down the stairs.

The Stoke Newington street was the Stoke Newington street it had been on Wednesday at midnight, except that it was, this Friday afternoon, lit by a flat grey four o'clock sun, and the Turkish corner shop was open, and the barber was open, and a woman was walking a small terrier on the pavement opposite. None of the people on the street were people who had any reason to register Adam Wright, journalist, who had come out of the building above the Turkish corner shop at perhaps ten past four with a small leather case in his right hand and a folded newspaper under his arm.

He walked east.

He was, for the first time in five days, thinking about an article he was going to write.

He was thinking about Owen Maxwell, who had been forty-four, and about Anna Maxwell, who had been the wife of a man who had carried a thing for fourteen months alone, and about Hector the dog, who had been asleep against the bedroom door on the evening Maxwell had written the letter that had, this morning, become the foundation of a Guardian investigation that was, on the evening of the day on which it had been published, the lead story on every news bulletin in Britain.

He was thinking about how the article would begin.

He had written the first paragraph already. The first paragraph was, in his coat pocket, in his small notebook, the paragraph he had written at the kitchen table fifteen minutes ago.

He thought: the first paragraph is the one you write when you don't yet know what the rest of the piece is going to be. It is the paragraph that tells you what the rest of the piece is going to be. If you can keep the first paragraph, you have written the piece. If you have to throw the first paragraph away, you did not yet have the piece.

He thought: *I can keep this one.*

He walked towards the Tube.

In the cottage above Santon Bridge, at half past eight in the evening, Mollie heard a car come up the lane.

She had been listening for it since six. She had given the boys their tea early. She had bathed them at seven. She had put them in their pyjamas and had read them three pages of the book they had been reading, and she had told them, in the small

ordinary sentence she had been preparing all day to say in the small ordinary way, that Daddy was coming up tonight. They had asked when. She had said: late, after you are asleep, but he will be here when you wake up. They had absorbed this with the same grave practicality with which they had absorbed every other piece of information about their father's availability over the past five days. Tom had said: will Cecil come? She had said: Cecil will bring him. Tom had nodded, and had asked, after a moment: will Cecil stay? She had said: Cecil will stay tonight, and tomorrow he will go back to London, but he will come back another time. Tom had nodded again. He had gone to sleep with the small blue plastic dinosaur in his hand.

Now she stood at the kitchen window and watched the headlights come up the lane.

The car was the small dark blue car Hubbard had driven on Sunday. It came up the gravel slowly. It stopped at the bottom of the path.

The doors opened.

Philip got out.

Hubbard got out.

They came up the path together. Philip was carrying a small bag. Hubbard was carrying a slightly larger one.

She opened the porch door before they reached the step.

Philip stopped at the step.

He looked at her.

She looked at him.

For a moment neither of them moved.

Then she came down the step, and she put her arms around him, and she held him without saying anything for about fifteen seconds, and Hubbard, behind them, took the second bag inside without comment, and went through the porch and into the kitchen and set both bags down on the floor, and put the kettle on.

In the kitchen, Hubbard waited.

Outside the porch, in the cold of the lane, Mollie said, very quietly, into Philip's collar: "You came back."

Philip said, very quietly, into her hair: "I came back."

After another moment she stepped back. She held him at arm's length. She looked at him.

She said: "Come in. The kettle is on. Cecil is in the kitchen. The boys are asleep. There is soup."

Philip nodded.

He came in.

The porch door closed behind them.

The cottage held its light against the wind, the way it had held its light against the wind for two centuries.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Cottage

Hubbard left on Saturday at noon.

He had been at the cottage for sixteen hours. He had slept in the small back bedroom that had been Mollie's mother's room when Mollie's mother had been alive, and in which Mollie now kept the boys' winter coats and a small writing desk she used in the summer for letters. He had got up at six. He had made his own breakfast in the kitchen without disturbing the rest of the house. He had read the Guardian—which had come up on Saturday morning's delivery to the corner shop in Eskdale Green, fetched at half past seven by Davies, who had walked the two miles down and back rather than wake Mollie—and he had sat at the kitchen table reading it carefully while Mollie had got the boys up at eight.

The boys had come downstairs and discovered him in the kitchen.

Tom had said: "Cecil!"

Jimmy had said, less loudly: "Cecil, when did you get here."

Hubbard had said: "Last night. After you were asleep. Your father is asleep upstairs. Your mother is in the kitchen. I made some toast. You can have some if you'd like, although your mother may have her own ideas about toast."

Tom had climbed onto Hubbard's lap. Jimmy had stood at the edge of the table and had asked, very seriously, whether Cecil could explain why a Royal Navy commander would come to the

cottage in the middle of the night, and Hubbard had explained, in the small careful register he used with Jimmy, that he had brought Daddy up from London because Daddy had had a long week and had wanted to come up to the cottage straight away rather than wait for the train, and Jimmy had absorbed this with the small grave skepticism of a six-year-old who had been told something true that was not the whole truth and was not, this morning, going to press for the whole.

Now, at noon, Hubbard was standing on the gravel beside his car with the holdall over his shoulder. Philip was standing in the porch. Mollie was standing in the kitchen window with her hand on the windowsill. The boys were in the garden, where Tom was telling a sheep, through the wall, what its life ought to consist of.

Hubbard said: "I'll be in London tonight. I will be at the Royal Hospital on Sunday afternoon. I will be back here a week on Tuesday, if not before, depending on what happens in the next few days that I do not yet know about. Adam will phone you tomorrow evening. Jessica will phone Mollie when she has anything to phone about. Will is going back into chambers on Monday and will, on examination, be all right."

"All right."

"Philip."

"Yes, Cecil."

"Have the conversation."

"I will."

"Have it before Sunday."

"All right."

"Good."

He embraced Philip briefly. He nodded to the kitchen window. Mollie raised her hand. He got into the car. The car backed down the lane in second gear, the way cars had to back down the lane because the lane was too narrow to turn in, and disappeared round the curve of the hill.

The cottage was quiet again.

Philip went into the kitchen.

Mollie was at the sink, drying a mug.

She said, without turning round: "He told you to have the conversation."

"He did."

"Before Sunday."

"Before Sunday."

"All right."

She put the mug on the draining board. She turned round. She wiped her hands on the tea-towel.

She said: "Tomorrow afternoon. Davies will take the boys to the lake at three. We will sit in the kitchen. We will have it then."

"All right."

"I will, this evening, do the small ordinary things I would have done if you had come up on Sunday as planned. I will cook. I will read to the boys. I will go to bed at a reasonable hour. I am asking you, this evening, to do the same. Tonight is not the

conversation. Tonight is the cottage. Tomorrow afternoon is the conversation."

"All right."

"Philip."

"Yes."

"Don't think about it tonight."

"I will try."

"Try harder than that."

He almost laughed. He did not. He said: "All right."

She turned back to the sink.

He went outside to the garden, where Tom was now sitting on the wet grass in his wellingtons attempting to convince the sheep, on the other side of the wall, of something the sheep had not yet been persuaded of, and where Jimmy was standing with his binoculars at a corner of the garden looking out towards Wast Water through a gap in the hedge.

Jimmy turned his head when Philip came out.

He said: "Daddy."

"Hello, Jimmy."

"Did you know there are oystercatchers on the lake?"

"I did not know."

"There are. Come and look."

Philip walked across the wet grass, which soaked his shoes immediately because he had not put on the wellingtons that lived in the porch, and he came up to the corner of the garden where Jimmy was, and he took the binoculars from Jimmy, and he held them to his eyes, and Jimmy stood beside him and pointed.

"There," Jimmy said.

Philip looked through the binoculars.

The lake, in the cold grey light of a Cumbrian Saturday afternoon, lay flat and pewter beneath the hills, and along its eastern shore, where a small inlet of mud was uncovered at low water, three black-and-white birds with long orange beaks were stepping carefully through the shallows.

"I see them," Philip said.

"Three," Jimmy said.

"Three."

"They have been there for two days. I saw them on Thursday. I saw them on Friday. I have been waiting for you to see them. Mum saw them but Mum does not, on examination, get as excited about birds as I do."

Philip lowered the binoculars. He looked at Jimmy.

He said: "I am very excited about your oystercatchers, Jimmy."

"You don't have to be. You can just see them."

"I am still excited. I am allowed to be excited about a thing my son has been waiting two days to show me."

Jimmy nodded.

"All right then," he said.

He took the binoculars back. He went on watching the oystercatchers.

After a while Philip went back inside.

His shoes were wet and his trousers were wet from the knees down and he was, he discovered, slightly cold. He took his wet

things off in the porch. He hung them where Mollie hung wet things. He went into the kitchen barefoot. Mollie was at the table, peeling potatoes for the supper that was going to be at six. She did not look up when he came in.

She said: "There are dry trousers in the airing cupboard."

"Thank you."

"And socks."

"Thank you."

He went up the stairs.

He stood at the top of the stairs for a moment. The small landing window looked east towards the fells. The light through it was the light of a north-country February afternoon. He stood in his wet socks and he thought: I am going to live the rest of this afternoon as the rest of this afternoon.

He went into the airing cupboard and got dry trousers.

That evening they ate at the kitchen table.

Mollie had made a chicken pie. The chicken had been a chicken Davies had got from a farm on the lane below Eskdale Green, where the woman who kept the farm had also given him three eggs and a small jar of damson jam, on the principle that a man who was sitting on her wall reading a paperback for an entire week should not, when he came down the lane to the farm to ask whether she had a chicken, leave with only a chicken. Mollie had cooked the pie in the small enamel oven that worked when it wanted to. The pie had emerged, against Mollie's expectation, perfect.

Tom had eaten a great deal of the pie. Jimmy had eaten more cautiously, in the way of a child who had at five become suspicious of pies and had at six begun to accept that not all pies were the kind of pies he was suspicious of. Philip had eaten without registering, in detail, what he was eating, because he was registering instead the small particular fact that he was sitting at the kitchen table of his cottage in Cumbria with his wife and his two sons and that this was a thing that, on Wednesday evening at twenty-three fifteen, had been a thing he had not been certain he would ever do again.

After supper Mollie read to the boys.

She read from the book they had been reading all week, three more pages, and she said goodnight to them, and Philip went up after her and said goodnight a second time. Tom held his arms up to be hugged. Jimmy permitted a hug. Philip kissed each of them on the forehead. He went back downstairs.

Mollie was in the sitting room.

The fire was lit. The two oil lamps were lit. The curtains were drawn against the cold. She had a book in her lap, but she was not reading it. She was looking at the fire.

He sat down beside her on the sofa.

She did not, say anything.

Then she said: "I don't want to talk about the cellar tonight."

"All right."

"I want to sit on the sofa with you and look at the fire. I want, in a few minutes, to get up and make us a small drink. I

want, after the drink, to go to bed. I want to sleep tonight in the same bed as you, which I have not done since Monday morning. I want, tomorrow, to deal with the conversation in the form we have agreed to deal with it. Tonight I want to be the wife of a man who came home, and the man who came home is sitting on this sofa, and that is what I want to use the evening for."

"All right."

She put her hand on his hand.

She did not, for some time, take it away.

After a while she got up and made the small drink. The drink was a small glass of whisky each, from the bottle Mollie's father had given them in 2014 and which had been on the small table by the fire ever since, finishing slowly in the way bottles of good whisky finished in households where nobody drank whisky except on Christmas Eve and on the occasional unexpected evening of which Mollie's father would have approved. They drank the whisky. They watched the fire. Around half past ten Mollie put her hand on his cheek for a moment and then took it away and stood up and went up the stairs without saying anything.

He sat for a few minutes longer.

He banked the fire.

He put the guard in front of it.

He turned off the oil lamps, one at a time, and the sitting room went into the slow soft dark of a room being lit only by embers, and he went up the stairs.

She was not asleep when he got in.

She moved over without saying anything, and he got into the bed, and she put her head on his shoulder, and within a few minutes she was asleep, in the small soft uncomplicated way she slept when she was sleeping next to him, and he lay for some time afterwards in the dark of the cottage bedroom listening to her breathe, and to the wind in the chimney, and to the small far-off bleat of a sheep on the fellside that ran with the wind and was gone.

He thought: *tomorrow*.

He thought: *but not tonight*.

He thought, in the small honest way he could permit himself in the dark of the bedroom of a cottage where his wife was asleep on his shoulder: I do not yet know how to have the conversation. I will know by three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Or I will not, and I will have the conversation anyway, because the having of it is what is required, and the form it takes is, on examination, less important than the fact of it taking place.

He fell asleep.

Sunday morning came up grey, with the kind of drizzle that hung in the air rather than fell.

The boys had been up since half past seven. They had made, between them, a great deal of mess in the kitchen attempting to make their own breakfast, which they had not asked permission to attempt and at which they had partly succeeded—Tom had got cereal into a bowl and milk on top of it; Jimmy had managed toast, with butter, and had only burned one of the four pieces—and Mollie had come down at quarter past eight to find them seated at the table

eating their constructions with the small private satisfaction of children who had managed, in the absence of supervision, an exercise in adult self-sufficiency.

Mollie had made coffee.

Philip had come down at half past.

By nine the four of them were at the table together, the boys finishing their toast, the parents drinking coffee, the kitchen radio turned on for the news at nine.

The news at nine led with Winthrop.

Winthrop had resigned, the BBC newsreader said, in the same calm professional voice in which the BBC newsreader had read Mollie the headline at six o'clock on Friday morning. He had resigned at eleven o'clock the previous night. He had issued, through a spokesperson, a brief statement in which he acknowledged significant errors of judgment in the establishment of certain procurement arrangements and in which he indicated that he would, in due course, cooperate fully with any review the government chose to commission. The Prime Minister had, this morning, announced an immediate independent inquiry, to be chaired by a former Lord Chief Justice. The inquiry's terms of reference would be published next week.

Philip listened.

The news moved on.

The news moved on to the second item, which was an unrelated matter concerning a flooding in Shropshire.

Mollie turned the radio down.

She said: "There it is."

"There it is."

"Errors of judgment."

"Errors of judgment."

"The British civil service has more synonyms for crime than the Met Office has for rain."

He almost laughed.

He said: "I am going to remember that."

"Don't. It is not original. I read it somewhere. I cannot, this morning, remember where."

"It is good anyway."

She poured him another coffee.

The boys, who had been listening with the partial attention of children who recognised the tone of *this is something important* without understanding what was important about it, looked up.

Jimmy said: "Mum."

"Yes."

"Is Daddy in trouble?"

Mollie set the coffee pot down.

She said: "No, sweetheart. Daddy is not in trouble."

"Was he in trouble this week?"

She looked at Jimmy.

She said: "Daddy was in a difficult week. He was helping some friends with something difficult. The thing they were doing has now been done. Daddy is not in trouble. Daddy is here."

Jimmy considered this.

He said: "All right then."

He went back to his toast.

Philip looked at his wife across the table.

She looked back at him.

She did not, in any small or large way, soften her expression.

She said: "Three o'clock."

"Three o'clock."

At three o'clock Davies took the boys to the lake.

He had borrowed, from the woman at the farm, a small dog called Pip, on the principle that two boys in oilskins would be more cooperative on a long walk in the company of a dog they did not yet know than in the company of any of the adults they did. Pip was a black-and-white collie of indeterminate age, who came to the cottage door at quarter to three and was received by Tom with the immediate ecstatic recognition of a four-year-old who had not previously known a dog was coming and who had decided, on first sight, that the dog was the most important thing that had ever happened to him.

The four of them—Davies, the boys, the dog—walked down the lane towards Wast Water.

Mollie watched them through the kitchen window.

She watched them until they were past the curve of the hill.

Then she came back to the table.

Philip was at the table with two mugs of fresh tea Mollie had made at twenty to three, which were now at the temperature of tea that had been waiting twenty minutes and which would, in the

next half hour, become tea that had been waiting an hour, depending on the rhythm of the conversation.

She sat down opposite him.

She said: "Tell me."

He looked at her.

He said: "What do you want me to tell you."

"All of it. From the beginning. I want to hear, in your voice, in this kitchen, the version that is not the version you told the others on Sunday night. That version was a version you had been preparing for three years. I want the version that has not been prepared. I want, as far as you are able to give it to me, the version that you yourself, this morning, in your own head, do not yet have a version of."

He nodded slowly.

He said: "All right. I will try."

"Take your time."

He took his time.

He took, in fact, the full length of the first cup of tea, which by the time he reached the end of it was fully cold, and he had not, by the end of it, entirely answered her question. He had told her, at some length, about the night three years ago: about going down to the cellar at three in the morning, about the floor blooming under his feet, about the sycamore on the floor and the inverted sky. He had told her, more haltingly, about not telling her that night. He had told her that he had thought about telling her, that evening at supper, and that he had not, and that the not-telling had not been a decision so much as a hesitation he

had not pursued. He had told her about going down a second time the following week, and a third time the week after that, and about the practice settling into the small private rhythm it had had for three years.

Mollie listened.

She did not interrupt.

When he had finished the first cup of tea, she said: "Why didn't you tell me."

"I don't know."

"Philip. I am not, at this point, prepared to accept I don't know. We are forty-five minutes into a conversation that has, as you understand, certain stakes for the rest of our marriage. I don't know is not, this afternoon, a sufficient answer. I do not require a final answer. I do require, from you, the best answer you can give me on a Sunday afternoon in February in the kitchen of our cottage in the third year of our having had this thing in our marriage."

He nodded.

He said: "Let me try again."

"Try."

He tried.

He said: "I think I did not tell you because the not-telling was, by that first morning, already its own thing. I had stood on the floor for an hour. I had gone upstairs and traced the projection to its source. I had stood in the storage room for half an hour. I had come down. I had gone to bed. I had got up the next morning. I had come into the kitchen, and you had been

there, and I had, by then, not told you for ten hours, and the ten hours were already a thing I had not told you. The not-telling had a shape. I had built the shape without intending to build it. By the end of the first day I would have had to tell you that I had not told you, which is a different conversation than the conversation I would have had if I had told you that morning at three in the cellar. By the end of the first week the conversation I would have had to have was a conversation I could not, on examination, see myself having. And I let it become a thing I had not told you, because the not-telling was, by then, the easier of the two paths."

He paused.

He said: "I am sorry. That is the first thing I want to say. The second thing is that what I have just said is a version of an answer that could be the answer to many questions, and is not specifically the answer to the question you asked. The question you asked was why did I not tell you, and the answer is: because the longer I did not tell you, the harder it became to tell you, and at no point in the three years did I find a way past the difficulty. I did not, during the three years, find a way past it because I did not, on examination, look very hard for one. I am not proud of this. I want you to know that I am not proud of it. I want you to know that I am ashamed of it. I want you also to know that the shame is not, by itself, an answer; the shame is a response to an answer, and the answer is the answer I have just given."

Mollie was quiet.

She drank some of her cold tea.

She said: "All right."

She said: "I want to ask you something else now."

"Yes."

"What was the practice for."

He looked at her.

He said: "I don't know how to answer that exactly."

"Try."

He tried.

He said: "It was—the practice was—looking at a thing nobody else had seen. The picture on the floor was the picture of the underside of my own roof. The roof I had been under, every day, for years. I knew the roof. I knew the sycamore. I had painted both, at one time or another. The picture on the floor showed me the roof in a way the roof itself, looked at directly, did not. Something about the inversion. Something about the small soft ungraspable quality of light projected through a hole. I could not paint what I saw on the floor. I went down to look at it. The looking was the thing. The looking was—was a kind of attention I cannot, on examination, describe, that I could only practise by going to the cellar. I went to the cellar to practise it. I came up. I did not know what I had done with the practice, except that I had had the practice. I think I think differently as a painter because of the three years of having had it. I do not know whether I would have thought differently as a husband if I had given you the practice. I suspect that I would have thought

differently, and that the thinking would, on the whole, have been better. But I did not give it to you, and so I do not know."

She listened.

She said: "Philip."

"Yes."

"This is the first answer you have given me today that has been, on examination, the answer to the question I asked."

"All right."

"It is the answer of a man who has been thinking about this."

"I have been thinking about this. I have been thinking about it for five days, since I came up out of the cellar on Sunday morning. I think I have been thinking about it, in a smaller way, for three years."

"I think so too."

He looked at her.

He said: "I would like to show it to you. Tonight, when we get back to Lennox Street—when we eventually get back. I would like to take you down to the cellar in the dark, and I would like to stand with you on the floor for an hour, and I would like for you to see the thing I have been seeing. I would like to share, after the fact, the thing I should have shared from the start. I do not, on examination, know what to do with the practice if you have not seen it. The fact that you have not seen it is, in some way I am only now understanding, the thing that has been wrong about the practice. The practice without you is incomplete. The

practice without you is, I think, the practice that has, in the end, been the problem."

Mollie looked at him for a long moment.

She said: "I would like that."

She said: "I would also like, when we go down, for you not to perform the practice for me. I would like to stand on the floor in the dark for an hour with you, with no narration and no explanation, and to look at what is there. I would like the practice to be, in that hour, ours. I would like, after the hour, to come up and have a glass of wine and talk about it in our own voices. I would like, after the conversation, for the practice to be a thing we have both had, separately, from then on. I do not require us to go down together. I require you to know that I could go down alone, and that you could come down alone, and that the practice—our practice—would be one we shared without needing to share each instance."

"All right."

"And I want the practice to extend to one more thing."

"Yes."

"I want, going forward, for there not to be a thing in our marriage that you have not told me. There can be things you have not yet decided how to tell me. There can be things you are still working out how to put into words. There cannot be things you have decided not to tell me. I will, as my part of this, accept the same constraint. There may be a thing I do not yet know how to tell you. There will not be a thing I have decided not to tell you. Do you understand the distinction."

"I understand the distinction."

"Will you accept it."

"I will accept it."

"All right then."

She picked up her cold tea. She drank what remained of it. She set the cup down. She got up. She put the kettle on. She got down two clean mugs. She made fresh tea. She brought it to the table. She sat down.

She said: "Philip."

"Yes."

"There are several other things I want to say to you. They are smaller than what I have just said. They are not, on examination, the conversation. They are things I would like to clear out of the way before we end the conversation."

"Tell me."

She told him.

She told him that she wished he had told Hubbard about the cellar before Sunday morning, because if he had told Hubbard, Hubbard would have, on examination, been a better-informed friend in the studio that morning. She told him that she did not, in any way, hold him responsible for the parachute coming down on their roof, but that she did hold him gently responsible for not having a faster mind on Sunday morning when the parachute had come down, and that she suspected the slowness had come, in part, from the long secret the cellar had become. She told him that she thought he had been, since Tuesday afternoon, doing the operational

thinking he should have been doing on Sunday morning, and that she was glad of it but that she wished it had come earlier.

Philip listened.

He said, when she had finished: "You are right. About all of it."

"I know I am right. I am telling you because I want you to know that I have, this week, registered the things that, this week, were registerable."

"All right."

"And one more."

"Yes."

"I want to stay here for a fortnight. I want, before we go back to Chelsea, to have a fortnight in this cottage with the boys and with you and with the radio at nine in the morning, doing the small ordinary things people do in a cottage in February. I want the boys to have school holidays in this cottage, which they have been promised since Christmas. I want, when we go back to Chelsea, to go back to Chelsea on a Monday morning at the end of two weeks, by which time the country will have, by then, found a different story to read at breakfast, and we will be able to walk back into our own house on Lennox Street as a family who has had a fortnight in Cumbria. I do not want us to flee Chelsea. Going back is the answer. But I want us to go back from a fortnight, not from this week."

"Yes."

"All right then."

"All right."

She drank some of the fresh tea.

She said: "The conversation is, I think, over."

"All right."

"It is not the only conversation."

"I know."

"It is the conversation that needed to happen this afternoon, and it has happened."

"Yes."

"All right then."

She got up. She came round to his side of the table. She put her arms around him and held him for some seconds. He put his face against her neck. They did not say anything for a while.

After a minute or so she stepped back.

She said: "Davies will be back with the boys at five. We have an hour. I am going to lie down on the sofa with you for the hour. I am not going to talk. You are not going to talk. We are, for an hour, going to be on the sofa."

"All right."

They went into the sitting room.

The fire was low. She put another log on it. She lay down on the sofa with her head against the arm. He sat at the other end. She put her feet across his lap. She closed her eyes.

The clock on the mantelpiece, which Mollie's grandfather had won in some indeterminate raffle in 1956 and which had been at this cottage ever since, ticked.

Outside, the drizzle had stopped, and the late February sun, briefly, had come out, and the small grey-gold light of a

Cumbrian afternoon at four o'clock came through the curtains and made, on the rug in front of the fire, the small private illumination of a room that had been lived in for a long time.

Philip, after some minutes, closed his eyes also.

They both fell, briefly, asleep.

Sunday evening, after supper, the phone rang.

It was Adam.

Mollie answered. She said: Adam, hello. She listened. She said: that's good. She listened. She said: I am glad. She listened for a longer interval. She said: I will tell him. She said: give Hubbard our love. She listened. She laughed once, briefly. She said: yes, I will. She rang off.

She came back to the table.

Philip said: "Adam."

"Adam."

"What did he say."

"Several things. The first is that he has spoken, this afternoon, to Maxwell's wife. He did not, in the end, phone yesterday. He decided that yesterday was hers and that today was the appropriate day to phone. He phoned this afternoon. The wife—her name is Anna—was, on examination, glad to hear from him. She has agreed to talk to him, in due course, about her husband. She has also asked him whether he might be willing to have the dog."

"The dog."

"Hector. The dog. Anna is going back to Edinburgh, where her family lives, and where her sister has two cats, and where, in the longer accounting, there is not a place for a dog. She has

been wondering what to do with the dog. She has decided that the dog should go to the journalist who is going to write about her husband. She has decided this because—and Adam quoted her on this with a kind of careful seriousness I have not heard in his voice in years—the dog deserves to be with somebody who is, in some sense, going to think about James for a long time.”

Philip looked at her.

He said: “Adam is going to take the dog.”

“Adam is going to take the dog. Adam is, in fact, thrilled to take the dog. Adam, on examination, has not had a dog since he was twelve, and has been waiting, without entirely knowing it, for thirty-three years for permission to have one again, and has now been given the permission by a widow who has decided that a dog is the right offering to make to a journalist. Adam is taking the dog on Tuesday.”

“All right.”

Mollie paused.

She said: “He also told me about Morgan.”

“Tell me.”

“Morgan is at Lennox Street. He is, by Adam’s account, more or less holding. Will rings him on Tuesdays. Adam rings him on Fridays. Audrey has, this week, written to him from Bath; the letter said the thing it had to say. Morgan is, Adam thinks, going to be all right by the summer. He is not yet going to be all right.”

“And the wedding.”

“There is no wedding.”

"All right."

"Adam said one more thing."

"Yes."

"He said that when we come back to Lennox Street, in a fortnight, Morgan will be in the house. He has nowhere else to be. Adam thinks we should not, before we come back, ask Morgan to leave."

Philip regarded her.

He said: "We won't ask him to leave."

"No. We won't."

"That is—"

"Yes. It is."

"What else did he say."

"He said that Jessica was at the hospital all day yesterday and is back this evening at her flat for the first time since Sunday. Chummy is—they have downgraded his condition from serious to stable. The press are still at the hospital, but the press are at the hospital because of what is happening with Aiglon, not because of Chummy specifically. Jessica is taking the weekend to be alone in her flat, which she thinks she needs, and she will go back to Chummy on Monday."

"All right."

"And he said that Will's wife—Eleanor—has, on examination, been a very good sport about the past week, and Will is, as Hubbard predicted, all right. Will is going back to chambers on Monday. The senior clerk has been told that Will had a family

matter. The senior clerk, who knows Will well, accepted the family matter without further enquiry."

"And Hubbard."

"Adam said: Cecil sends his love. Cecil is at the Royal Hospital tomorrow. Cecil told me to tell Mollie that the cottage held its light against the wind, and that he is grateful for it, and that he will see you on Tuesday week."

She said this last in the small precise way of a woman who had been given a sentence to deliver and who was delivering it in the cadence in which it had been spoken to her.

Philip nodded.

He said: "Cecil."

"Cecil."

"All right."

She said: "What he didn't say."

"Yes."

"Adam was, on examination, much warmer this evening than he was yesterday morning. I think the events at the hospital and with Hector and with Anna have, in some way, returned him to himself. I think we will, when we see him, find that the man who came back from this is the man who went into it, plus a dog. I think this is the best outcome any of us could have asked for, for Adam. I am glad of it."

"Yes."

"Philip."

"Yes."

"Is the radio still on."

"It's off. I turned it off after supper."

"Don't turn it back on tonight. Let tomorrow be tomorrow.
Tonight let us be the cottage."

"All right."

He picked up the phone she had set down on the table. He set it back in its cradle. He went into the sitting room and put another log on the fire. She came in behind him with two glasses of the small whisky from the bottle Mollie's father had given them. They sat down on the sofa.

The fire went on.

The cottage held its light.

Monday morning came up clear and cold.

The boys had been awake since half past six. They had got dressed without supervision—neither of them well, but both of them sufficiently—and they had come down the stairs at quarter past seven looking for breakfast. Mollie had been up and had made it. She had given them porridge with brown sugar and the small amount of cream that had been left from supper the night before, which she had decided, on examination, the boys could have, because the boys were entitled to have cream on a Monday morning when there was cream in the kitchen and when the rest of the country, for various reasons, was reading the paper.

By eight o'clock the four of them were dressed and the family were, by family vote, going out.

They walked.

They walked from the cottage down the lane and then west on the small road that ran along the southern edge of Wast Water

towards the top of the lake. The road was almost empty at that hour on a Monday in February. The lake to the north of them was the colour of cold pewter. The fells on the far shore—the Screees, Mollie had been reminding the boys of the name of the Screees since Tom was old enough to ask—rose dark against the morning light, and the small low cloud over them had begun, in the last hour, to thin.

Tom was on Philip's shoulders.

Jimmy was walking ahead with the binoculars, in the particular forward-bent gait of a six-year-old who had decided to lead the party on a route he had walked perhaps eight times in his life.

Mollie walked beside Philip.

They did not, for most of the walk, speak. It was not necessary to speak. They walked. Tom, on Philip's shoulders, said various things at various intervals about the state of the world: that the cloud was, on examination, getting thinner; that he had seen, on a wall of dry-stone, a creature he believed to have been a wolf but which, when Mollie had identified it, turned out to be a domestic cat; that he was, generally, in favour of the morning. Tom, on the whole, was a child who lived in his own commentary.

At a place perhaps a mile and a half from the cottage, where the road crossed a small stream by a stone bridge, they stopped.

Jimmy had got there first.

Jimmy said: "Daddy."

Philip swung Tom down off his shoulders. He set Tom on the bridge. He came over to where Jimmy was leaning over the parapet.

"Yes."

"There are dippers."

Philip looked.

In the small dark pool below the bridge, a small dark bird with a white throat was on a stone, doing the small bobbing motion that dippers did, and watching the water.

"Yes," Philip said. "Two of them."

"Three. One is in the water."

"Three."

"Mum, come and see."

Mollie came over. The four of them looked at the dippers.

After a few minutes the dippers, in the slow autonomous way of birds that had been doing what they were doing before any of them had got there and would continue doing it after, went on with their morning, and the family went on with theirs.

They walked a further mile.

They turned at the end of the made road. They walked back.

By the time they got home it was half past ten. The boys were tired. Tom wanted to be carried. Jimmy did not, but his pace had slowed by the last quarter of a mile and he had begun, for the first time of the morning, to lean briefly against Philip's hand on his shoulder.

Mollie made hot chocolate.

The boys had hot chocolate at the kitchen table and were, by half past eleven, asleep on the sofa in the sitting room beside the fire. Mollie put a blanket over each of them. Philip carried the empty mugs back to the kitchen. Mollie came in.

She said: "Two weeks."

"Two weeks."

"From tomorrow morning. Today is today. From tomorrow we count two weeks. By the time we go back, the news will be on something else."

"Yes."

"I will phone the school this afternoon. They will be at school for the second week of half-term anyway, but I want them to have the first week with us, here, so the second week back at school is not the second week of being away from us."

"Yes."

"The cottage, for half-term, is the cottage."

"Yes."

She nodded.

She said: "I am going to phone Hubbard."

"All right."

"I am going to thank him."

"All right."

She picked up the kitchen phone—the landline, which still worked—and she dialled the number Hubbard had left on a slip of paper on the kitchen table on Saturday morning before he left, which was a number she had committed to memory, and she stood at the kitchen window with the phone to her ear and looked at the sheep on the hillside above the lane while it rang.

It rang for some time.

It picked up.

She said: "Cecil."

She listened.

She said: "Cecil. We are at the cottage. The boys are asleep on the sofa. Philip is in the kitchen with me. We have had the conversation. I am, this morning, in the kitchen, calling to thank you."

She listened.

She said: "I know. But the thanks are for you. Take them anyway."

She listened.

She laughed once, very softly.

She said: "Yes. We will see you on Tuesday week."

She said: "Cecil."

She listened.

She said: "Give your wife our love."

She rang off.

She set the phone on the kitchen counter.

She turned to Philip.

He looked at her.

She said: "He is at the Royal Hospital. He is reading her the Sunday Times Magazine. She does not, this morning, know him. He said: that is all right. The man who is reading is, in any case, the man."

Philip closed his eyes for a moment.

He opened them.

He said: "Mollie."

"Yes."

"Two weeks at the cottage."

"Two weeks."

"And then home."

"And then home."

She came across the kitchen. She put her arms around him. She held him for some seconds.

She said, into his shoulder: "Home."

In the sitting room, the fire crackled. Tom, on the sofa, said something in his sleep that neither of them caught. Jimmy turned, in his sleep, and put his arm across his brother's shoulder.

The cottage held its light against the wind.

It was, by then, nearly noon.