

Alan G. Hagberg  
Writing as  
Alan H. Gael  
P.O. Box 1197  
Harwich, MA 02645  
(774) 789-6647  
info@alanhagberg.com

THE VANISHING YEARS

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

about 61,000 words

## Chapter One

## The Backward Step

Philip Hardin had spent the morning at his desk in Haslemere in the particular struggle of a man who knows what the next sentence should be and cannot find the form for it. The sentence had been clear enough in his head since six o'clock, when he had woken with it already assembled – a gift from the sleeping mind to the waking one, with the small print that the transfer from sleep to page is not automatic and may be declined. By eight he had written it six times and deleted it each time. By ten he had written it a seventh time and left it standing, which was not the same as knowing it was right.

He was fifty years old. He had published four novels in sixteen years, of which two were considered minor, one was considered significant, and one – *A Private Education*, the third – was considered the thing that defined his career, at least for the moment, though he was privately aware that the moment had lasted longer than was entirely comfortable. The novel he was now writing would be the fifth. He had been writing it for two years and eleven months, a period he preferred not to examine too closely.

He did not, ordinarily, think of Alfred Wale while at his desk. There was no particular reason to; they were friends of the irregular city variety, the kind sustained by occasional lunches and mutual respect and the courtesy of people who are not in competition but are playing adjacent games. But this morning –

perhaps because the sentence was stubborn, perhaps because the spring light through the study window had the quality of light that makes a man take stock — he thought of Alfred. Thought of the last time they had met, three weeks ago, at a place in Covent Garden that Alfred favoured for its booths and its noise. Alfred had been slightly not himself. Nothing that a doctor or a wife would necessarily have caught; nothing Philip could have specified to a third party. A quality of distraction that was not Alfred's usual composure. A tendency to let silences go on past where they were useful. And the habit, new that day, of reaching up to touch his collar as though checking that it was still there.

Philip had put it down to the book. *The Glass Orchard* had been finished in January, and finished books left specific aftermath in the people who had written them: the exhaustion of completion, the particular vertigo of a man who has been living inside a sustained project for years and finds himself suddenly outside it. Philip knew this well enough from experience. He had not thought about it since.

He had reconstructed that lunch many times since, looking for the thing he had missed. It had been at the place in Covent Garden with the booths, and Alfred had ordered and not eaten, and had been — Philip had reached, at the time, for distraction, and distraction was not wrong, but it was insufficient. There had been a moment when a young writer Alfred half-knew had stopped at the booth to pay his respects, the way young writers did, and Alfred had been gracious in the automatic way he had perfected,

and the young man had gone off pleased, and Alfred had watched him go with an expression Philip had not had a category for and now did. It had been envy. Not of the young man's work, which was nothing, but of his age — of the simple fact that the boy had the decades in front of him rather than behind, that he was accumulating where Alfred had begun, although neither of them yet knew it, to spend. Philip had seen the expression and filed it as a bad mood. He had not understood that he was watching a man do arithmetic. And the hand had gone to the collar, once, while the young writer talked — the gesture Philip would see again at the Minerva and again at the flat — and Philip had thought nothing of it, because a man touching his collar is the least remarkable thing in the world, until you learn that he is checking, each time, for the place where a mark will surface that he last saw ten years and one body ago.

The train to London took fifty-five minutes. He read the newspaper and drank the mediocre coffee from the buffet car and did not work on the sentence, which was still on the desk in Haslemere and would have to wait. The first Tuesday of each month was for the Minerva: a standing fixture, a reliable set of familiar faces, the pleasure of a room in which everyone's professional identity was already established and did not require re-establishing, which was more restful than it sounded.

He came off the Charing Cross train at half past one and walked up to the Strand in the spring afternoon, which was mild and specific in the way of London spring afternoons that have decided to be what they are: the plane trees along the Embankment

already in leaf, the buses going past with their ordinary unconcern, the city doing what cities do, which is continue. He had a piece of business to attend to in the afternoon – Fenwick's lecture at the Society of Arts, a commitment made months ago when it had seemed perfectly reasonable and which now seemed rather less so – but first the Minerva, and first a drink, and first the pleasure of descending the stairs into a club that had been in the same basement for sixty years and showed no signs of improving itself.

Philip Hardin was fifty and knew what envy felt like, the way a man knows the ache behind his knees after a long climb. He had learned to name it without acting on it, which he considered a modest achievement. But the figure at the end of the corridor, standing beneath the halogen spotlight and studying the framed print on the wall with an absorption so complete it amounted almost to reverence – that figure produced something sharper than envy. A kind of bewilderment. The same bewilderment he felt whenever he encountered proof that the world's gifts were distributed without reference to fairness.

The Minerva Club occupied the basement of a building on the Strand, a members-only literary club of modest fame and immodest pretension. The corridor leading from the coat check to the bar was not long, perhaps twenty feet of exposed brick painted a buff colour, with contemporary prints hung at precise intervals beneath recessed lights – the kind of art that exists in institutional spaces to indicate that aesthetic consideration has been applied without making any particular aesthetic commitment.

The man at the far end of it had no business being down here; the Minerva was Philip's sort of territory, and Alfred Wale had always maintained – publicly, with some heat – that clubs of this kind were exactly the sort of institution he had no patience for. He had said so in an interview in *The Paris Review* two years ago, the piece that had also contained his remarks about critics, which had cost him three friendships and at least one prize.

And yet here was his back. Philip had always been able to recognise Alfred by the back. There was something deliberate about the way he carried himself, as though his body had made certain decisions about its relationship to gravity that the rest of the world had not been consulted on. He had the back of a man twenty years younger than himself, which was not a new observation – Alfred had always had this quality, the unfairness of men who look as if age had negotiated with them and lost – but today the back had something else in it. A stillness that was not composure but its inverse: the stillness of someone who has stopped moving because movement has become complicated.

"Hello, Alfred," Philip said. "One doesn't often see your face here."

The man startled. It was not the mild, social startle of a person caught in a reverie; it was the full-body flinch of someone pulled back from a considerable distance. His hand flew to his collar – a gesture Philip had seen three weeks ago in Covent Garden and was seeing now again, the same gesture, with the same quality of reflex, as though the collar were a thing that required frequent confirming – and his eyes moved from the

print to Philip and back again with the slightly panicked quality of a man arriving late to a conversation that had already reached its conclusions.

"My face? Here? . . . No."

It was a strange answer. Philip moved closer. He glanced at the print, a cheap reproduction of a full moon over water, the sort of thing that would hang in a hotel lobby and be noticed by no one. Then he understood.

The glass was polished to a high shine. In the concentrated light of the halogen above, it was as good as a mirror. And Alfred's eyes, Philip now saw, were not examining the print at all. They were examining his own reflection – working over his cheekbones, his hairline, the quality of the skin around his jaw with a methodical, almost clinical attention.

Searching for wrinkles.

"Well?" Philip said carefully. "Notice anything? How do you look?"

Colour rose in Alfred's face. He had been caught at something, and the embarrassment was genuine and specific, not the general flush of social discomfort but something closer to shame. He glanced toward the doorway at the end of the corridor, where Celia Hart had posted herself to greet arrivals.

"How do I look?" he said, low and urgent, as if the answer might be different depending on who was asked. "I've a special reason for wanting to know."

Philip looked at him. Forty-five years old, Alfred Wale, the author of three novels of sufficient quality and sufficient sales

to have purchased him a loft conversion above offices near Cambridge Circus and a reputation that had survived eleven years since his first book and showed no signs of wearing through. He looked thirty-five. Had looked thirty-five for as long as Philip had known him – one of those men who seemed to have reached an accommodation with age in his thirties and then refused to proceed. The thick dark hair carried no grey. The face was unlined in any of the ways that faces become lined when life applies its steady friction.

"Another ten years will be time enough for you to worry about your looks," Philip said. "For all practical purposes you may consider yourself thirty-five, my young friend."

Alfred turned. The eagerness in his face was startling. His public manner ran toward irony and mild condescension – the easy confidence of a man who has been told he is talented so frequently that he has decided to take it as given. What Philip saw now was something rawer. Desperate was not too strong a word.

"How much?"

Philip repeated himself. Thirty-five, or thereabouts. But Alfred was already past him, his attention moved to the doorway where Celia was engaged in animated conversation with a new arrival.

"Find out for me if there's a Mrs Merrick here."

Philip did not know a Mrs Merrick. The name produced in him only a vague unease – the feeling of encountering a reference he was expected to recognise and didn't. He pressed for details. A

woman named Lydia Merrick, Alfred said. Lydia Wren that was. Published a novel recently, a first novel.

He had the title, as it happened. *A Cold Inheritance* had been reviewed in two of the Sundays a few months back, one enthusiastically and one with the qualified enthusiasm of a reviewer who suspects the book is better than he wants it to be. Philip had not read it, but he had registered the name and the reviews with the reflex attention of someone who tracks these things professionally. He had not made the connection to Alfred.

"Wait a bit. Is it somebody called Lydia Merrick?" And then: "Who published what's called a 'first novel' some little time ago?"

The change in Alfred's face was immediate and violent. Blood moved into his cheeks. His eyes sharpened to something very near to anger.

"Why do you say it like that? 'First' novel, with a sneer? She wrote a novel, if that's what you mean." His voice had risen in a way that was not Alfred's voice as Philip knew it, or rather — and this was the thing that would trouble Philip later — it was too much Alfred's voice. The voice of the man Alfred had been before he became Alfred Wale the novelist. Combative. Certain. A little cruel. "As long as it doesn't make any pretence . . . Have you read it?"

"No."

"Then you don't know anything about it."

Philip went to speak to Celia. She had not seen Mrs Merrick, knew of no plans for her to come. Philip stood with Celia for a

moment while she explained this, registering the practised discretion of a woman who had been keeping the Minerva's social temperature stable for a decade and who could, if pressed, have diagnosed the precise character of most of the crises that had originated in this corridor. He suspected that this one would be beyond her categories.

When Philip returned with this report, Alfred's face did something complicated and then smoothed itself back into the familiar urbane expression, as though a window had been opened briefly onto a different interior and then firmly closed. He thanked Philip, muttered something that might have been an apology, and in seconds was gone – through the cloakroom and up the stairs and out into the spring afternoon with the contained speed of a man who has decided that staying is not possible. Philip caught a glimpse of his magnificent back as Alfred took the stairs two at a time.

Celia appeared at Philip's elbow, silk scarf in hand, wearing the expression she wore when she had collected a piece of information she intended to sell at a profit.

"Quickly, Philip – who is your Beautiful Bear, and why have you been keeping a creature like that from me?"

"Alfred Wale always was good-looking," Philip said.

Celia fell back a step. Whatever she had expected, it was not this.

"That was Alfred Wale?"

She made a sound he had never heard from her before – not quite a word, more like the noise a person makes when they have

encountered something that defeats all their existing categories of response. Philip left her to it and went to get his drink, and stood at the bar and thought about the face in the corridor and the urgency in it and the voice that was too much Alfred's voice, and found that neither the drink nor the thinking resolved anything.

The Minerva filled up around him in its usual way – the first arrivals, the standing greetings, the acoustic of a basement room beginning to hold a crowd – and Philip stood at the edge of it with his whisky and let it happen without him. He knew most of these people. He had known some of them for thirty years. They were the faces of his professional life, the editors and the agents and the writers at every stage of the long attrition that a writing life turned out to be, and ordinarily he found the room restful, an hour in which everyone's place was established and required no defending. Tonight he found he could not enter it. He kept seeing the corridor. He kept seeing the eyes working over the reflection in the polished glass, the methodical inventory of a face for the marks of time, and the urgency of how do I look, which he had answered with a kindness that he now suspected had been the wrong currency entirely.

A man he had known for years – a critic, sharp, not unkind, the sort who had outlived his own cruelty and become almost gentle with age – came and stood beside him and remarked that Philip looked like a man who had seen something. Philip said it had been a long day. The critic accepted this, because the room ran on the acceptance of such things, and moved off, and Philip

understood that he had just told the first of what would be many lies of omission, and that the lying had started already, in the place where the thing had started, within the hour. The keeping of Alfred's secret had begun before Philip had even decided to keep it. That was how secrets recruited you: not by a decision, but by a series of small declinings to speak, each one reasonable, until you looked up and found you had built a wall.

He left the Minerva twenty minutes later, before the usual crowd had properly assembled, and walked up John Street toward the Adelphi.

The Society of Arts stood in John Adam Street, a short walk from the Strand, and the walk was one Philip had made many times, past the same Georgian facades and the same unremarkable parked cars and the same office workers eating lunch on the same benches. He made it now in a slightly different state than usual – the unease from the corridor settling into something he could not quite name, a residue left by an encounter with something he hadn't expected – and he thought about Alfred as he walked. He thought about the mirror. He thought about the urgency of How do I look? and about the register of desperation underneath it, which was not the desperation of vanity but something else entirely.

He thought about the collar. The hand going to the collar, twice now, in two different encounters. As though checking for something.

He went in.

It was there, later that same afternoon, that Philip found him again.

Or found his silhouette, rather – a shadow in the fourth row of a lecture theatre where the overhead lights had been extinguished and a projector threw charts and statistics onto a screen. Dr Harold Fenwick, sixty-odd, white-bearded, possessed of the particular academic talent for draining whatever subject he addressed of all vitality and urgency, was reading from a typescript in a flat voice about American Army intelligence testing. The slide on the screen was dense with figures and dense with the implication that these figures settled something that had previously been in dispute.

Philip had come out of courtesy. Fenwick was a distant acquaintance, the lecture had been in the diary for weeks, and Philip was not the kind of man who cancelled engagements once made. He slipped into a seat in the third row and tried to pay attention to the statistics, which concerned the distribution of human intelligence by age and were arranged in a grid that managed to be simultaneously comprehensive and completely unrevealing.

The argument, such as it was, ran as follows: intelligence – raw cognitive capacity, the ability to process novel problems and form new abstractions – peaks in late adolescence and declines thereafter. What adults accumulate is not intelligence but its applications: knowledge, experience, the accumulated pattern-recognition that goes by the name of wisdom in charitable formulations and habit in less charitable ones. Fenwick, in the

manner of academics who believe that saying a thing clearly is less persuasive than saying it with many numbers, had assembled a great quantity of Army Alpha test data from the First World War to demonstrate this, and was proceeding through it with the thoroughness of someone who has been looking forward to this lecture since he submitted the proposal and is not going to allow anything as inconsiderate as his audience's attention span to interfere.

Philip understood why the lecture had seemed reasonable when he accepted the invitation. He had been, at the time, in a phase of his own work that raised similar questions: the novel he was writing concerned a man of sixty looking back at the quality of his younger mind with a mixture of grief and relief, and the relationship between intelligence and age was genuinely interesting to him. It was less interesting when presented in the form of slides from 1917.

The first sound from the back of the room was a grunt – sharp, frustrated, the sound of a man who has encountered an argument he finds personally offensive. Philip noted it without turning. There were perhaps two dozen people in the room, scattered through the first four rows, and whoever was behind him was apparently in a more reactive relationship with the material than the rest of the audience.

Fenwick continued. The slide changed. Another grid.

The sound came again – louder this time. Almost a groan. Philip turned his head slightly. He could not make out the figure at the back of the room in the dimness, but the quality of the

restlessness was specific: not boredom, not the general fidgeting of someone who would rather be elsewhere, but the particular agitation of a person who has a specific objection and is working out whether to voice it.

Dr Fenwick adjusted his lamp and continued. "Intelligence, as opposed to accumulated knowledge, does not improve past adolescence. What we acquire thereafter is merely information, experience, wisdom perhaps – but the raw capacity is fixed early and immutably –"

The voice from the back was not quiet. "You don't know a damned thing about it."

Shocked silence fell across the few dozen people scattered in the first rows. Fenwick stopped mid-sentence. Several heads turned.

The lights came up.

In the general commotion, a figure was already moving toward the aisle – the same powerful shoulders, the same navy suit. Philip was on his feet before he knew he intended to stand, hurrying after him through the doors and into the entrance hall beyond, where Alfred stood by the glass exit staring out at John Street with an expression that combined fear and pain in proportions that Philip found alarming.

"What's the matter, Alfred? Can I be of any help?"

"Yes – yes – about time I called somebody in – just about enough of it–"

He looked, Philip thought, like a man who had been holding something very tightly for a long time and had only just

discovered that his grip was failing. It was not the look of a man who had lost his temper at an academic lecture; it was the look of a man for whom an academic lecture had been the last straw, and the straw before the last, and the dozen straws before that.

They stood for a moment in the entrance hall, the sounds of the lecture theatre behind them – voices, the scraping of chairs, someone saying something about the extraordinary behaviour of guests. Then Philip said: "Come on." And Alfred came.

They walked north through the Adelphi and then west, and Alfred said nothing. This was unusual enough that Philip noted it but did not attempt to address it; the conversation, whatever it was going to be, was evidently waiting for conditions that a crowded Strand pavement in the afternoon did not provide. Alfred walked fast, the way he did everything – with the physical ease of a body that had, for whatever reason, not received the usual memo from middle age – and Philip kept up with some effort and watched him from the side and thought: something is wrong with this man in a way I have not seen before.

The Soho bar was narrow and loud, which was either an accident or a choice, and they found stools at the zinc counter and ordered, and Alfred destroyed a lobster roll with his bare hands like someone eating for a reason other than hunger – not for pleasure either, but as an act of occupying the body, keeping it engaged while whatever was happening behind his eyes continued to happen. He drank a full bottle of sparkling water without

pausing. His knee moved against the rung of the stool in a small, rapid rhythm that he appeared unaware of.

Philip had seen Alfred eat in a great many restaurants over fifteen years, and Alfred had always eaten the way he did everything in public, which was with a performed and slightly ironic appreciation, the air of a man letting the world know that he knew the difference between a good thing and a bad one and was not to be imposed upon. This was not that. This was eating as ballast. Philip had read once that sailors in heavy weather would sometimes take on water deliberately, flooding compartments to keep the vessel low and stable in the swell, and he thought of it now watching Alfred load the body with food it did not want, weighting himself against some sea Philip could not see. The knee went on with its small rapid rhythm against the rung of the stool. The eyes kept moving to the mirror behind the bottles – not with vanity, Philip saw, but with the same checking quality the collar had, the quick involuntary audit of a face for changes that should not be possible and apparently were.

"You're staring at me," Alfred said, not looking up.

"I'm trying to work out what's wrong."

"I know. I can feel you doing it. You do it to everyone – it's why you're good at the books and why dinner with you is exhausting if a person has anything to hide." He pushed the plate away. "Stop. You won't get it from the outside. Nobody could get it from the outside. That's the whole horror of it – it's the most visible thing in the world and the most invisible, both at once. Anyone can see I look young. Nobody can see what that

means." He finally looked at Philip, and the look had something in it Philip had not seen from him before, a kind of exhausted appeal. "I'm going to have to tell you, and you're not going to believe me, and I'm going to have to make you believe me, and the making is going to be the worst part. Worse than the thing itself. Drink your drink. We're going to need to not be in public for it."

Philip ate his own food and said nothing. He had learned, over fifteen years, that Alfred's silences were of different kinds and that only one of them was an invitation to speak. This silence was not that kind. This was the silence of a man who was getting ready to say something he had not yet said to anyone, and getting ready was a process that required no assistance.

"I'm not unwell," Alfred said, without looking up from his empty plate.

Philip waited.

"I mean I'm not ill in the way you're probably thinking. It's not a breakdown. It's not – I haven't gone peculiar." He looked up. "I need you to hear what I tell you without reaching for the obvious explanation."

"I'll do my best," Philip said.

Alfred looked at him for a moment with the evaluating expression of a man deciding whether the assurance is sufficient. Apparently it was.

"Good," he said. "Then we'll go to the flat. There's something I need to show you."

He did not say what. He stood, left money on the counter, and went out, and Philip followed, and they walked the rest of the way to Cambridge Circus in the early evening light with the quality of two men who have agreed on the next step and have not yet discussed anything beyond it.

Philip had been to the flat once before, for a brief and anomalous meeting about a project that had not come to anything. He remembered the staircase, which was narrow and smelled of the printing business on the floors below, and the door at the top that Alfred pushed open with his shoulder in the manner of long familiarity. He remembered the room. He had not registered, on that earlier occasion, quite what the room said.

It divided itself naturally – one side immaculate, the bookshelves catalogued with a precision that bordered on the architectural, every volume standing at attention with a typed label applied at a uniform height; the other a working wreckage of papers and open books and the specific debris of a mind in sustained motion. But between these two zones something else caught Philip's attention now that it had not caught it before: on the floor beside the sofa, a set of resistance bands. On the kitchen counter, a medicine ball. Against the wall, a set of dumbbells in graduated sizes, as though someone had been building toward heavier loads. The flat of a man who has been exercising with more system than his life had previously required.

Alfred threw his coat at the table. It caught the medicine ball, which rolled an inch, teetered, and fell to the floor with a soft thump. He dropped onto the sofa – this piece of physical

perfection, this man who looked thirty-five and moved like a man in the athletic prime of his life – and closed his eyes. His lids twitched.

"Well," he said, without opening them. "What did you think of it? The lecture."

"I thought—" Philip began, but Alfred was already past him.

"All those silly charts. All those useless figures about the American Army. Waste of time. I could have told him all that straight away." A pause. "Is that what you were going to tell him when you interrupted a little?"

"I was vivisected just as much as you were – perhaps more in some ways. It's a general question. Human functions and faculties at large, not you or me."

Alfred opened his eyes. The expression in them stopped Philip cold. Raw contempt – not social contempt, not intellectual contempt, but something older and less considered. "Q.E.D. Finis, Explicit, and the Upper Fourth next Term."

Philip stiffened.

"When I say 'I' and 'myself,' I mean myself singly and specially, understand – the egregious and indestructible ego – and not merely just as much or as little as anybody else. Get that well into your head or I won't talk to you."

Philip was nearly out of his chair. But Alfred caught himself. The contempt collapsed almost immediately into contrition, and the speed of the transition was itself alarming – the volatility of it, the sense that the man on the sofa was not quite governing his own responses.

"Sorry, old fellow. I'm very sorry. I oughtn't to have spoken like that. But I'm not what they call 'disintegrating'; I'm the last man to do that. When I say 'I' I mean the 'I' I've always been. That's just the devil of it."

Philip said: "Suppose you begin at the beginning."

"There you are! I can't begin at the beginning. All I really know yet's the end, and of course that hasn't come . . ."

He stood abruptly, crossed to a sideboard, picked up a bottle of whisky, stared at it, and put it down again without opening it. "Get yourself a drink if you want one. No, I won't have one; I - I daren't." He returned to the sofa, leaning forward now, hands clasped between his knees. His grey-blue eyes avoided Philip's. "About what you were saying this afternoon in that Club place - my age. You - you meant it, I suppose?"

"That you'd live to be a hundred and be world-famous? Yes, I meant it in a way."

"And you thought it was something to be congratulated about?"

"Well - isn't it? Professionally you've staked out a magnificent course for yourself. Time means practically everything, and so, if you live long enough—"

"I shan't live to be a hundred." The words were quiet and unequivocal, the delivery of a man who has rehearsed them and found no softer version available. He let the silence accumulate. "You're counting the wrong way. You got my age quite right this afternoon. I'm thirty-five."

Philip waited.

Alfred's head dropped over his knees.

"And I shall live till I'm sixteen."

The temperature of the room seemed to drop. Not the temperature of the air – Philip checked himself against the instinct to look for a window left open – but something else. Some warmth that had been in his chest since the afternoon and that withdrew now, quickly, as if a hand had taken it away. He sat very still. He thought: this is a man having a breakdown. He thought: or this is something else. He thought: I have known him for fifteen years and I have not seen him like this, and the difference between a breakdown and something else may matter, and I should find out which it is before I decide what to say.

"Tell me how you know all this."

"By my knowledge of myself, and also by my memory." Alfred finally looked at him directly – his grey-blue eyes steady, the fear in them very clear. "I know what I was at thirty-five, and I know what I did; well, I simply know that I'm that man again, and that I shall go on and re-do more or less what he's already done. At some point in my life I must have got turned round, and now I'm living it backwards."

Philip felt a rush of relief so strong he almost laughed. Memory – that was all. Vivid, intense, the kind of powerful associative recall that could make the past feel more present than the present itself. It was a well-documented phenomenon, and one that was, if anything, more common in people of unusual imaginative capacity. There was nothing extraordinary here, only the ordinary extraordinary of a sensitive mind under pressure

from a finished book, from accumulated guilt, from whatever the business with Lydia Merrick was. He would address it in those terms.

"I see," he said carefully. "I confess you frightened me for a moment. You only have what we all have more or less. You merely bring greater powers than the rest of us to bear on an ordinary phenomenon."

Alfred considered this. His heels and toes rose and fell on the carpet with a gentle, rhythmic motion.

"That's rather a new idea you've given me, Philip. I admit I hadn't thought of that. It might explain the beginning anyway – the turn-round." He paused. "By the way, some of the Saints induced the stigmata on themselves by a sort of spiritual process, didn't they?"

Philip frowned, uneasy.

"So that's useful as far as it goes. But – you'd hardly call this spiritual, would you?"

Without warning, without fumbling at buttons or unfastening pins, he took hold of his collar and tore it open. The soft white fabric gave with a sound disproportionate in the quiet room, the shirt-band separating from the neck of the garment in a single violent motion.

Philip recoiled.

On Alfred's throat: two curved marks. Vivid, purply-red against the pale skin. The shape was unmistakable, and the shape said teeth, and the size of the arc said a woman.

"Alfred, I don't think—"

His hand was on Philip's arm. The grip was not comfortable.

"Don't think that! Don't think I'm such a cur as to – oh, my God, that isn't the point! I'm not bragging about my conquests!" He was almost shaking Philip. "The point is that these marks are ten years old and they weren't there last night!"

Philip tried to free his arm. Could not.

"There isn't much imagination about that, is there? That isn't fancy, is it? A man would be likely to remember that, wouldn't he? He wouldn't forget it, if it was only for the shame of it. And how would you feel when everything was healed over and forgotten, and you'd settled decently down, and hoped everything was forgiven you – and then you were to be dragged back over the ploughshares like that!"

Tears stood in his eyes. Tears, on Alfred's face, where Philip had never seen them.

In fifteen years Philip had seen Alfred Wale produce nearly every emotion a man could produce in company, and had come to understand that most of them were, to some degree, produced – not falsely, but consciously, the way a skilled actor's emotions are real and also deployed. Alfred felt things and then, a half-second later, decided how to present the feeling, and the half-second was always there, the small governing pause of a man who had made a career of the controlled release of interior states. There was no half-second now. The tears arrived without permission and without management, and they were, for that reason, the single most alarming thing Philip had witnessed – more alarming than the marks, which could conceivably be

explained, than the talk of going backwards, which could be diagnosed. The tears could not be explained or diagnosed. They were simply the overflow of a man who had run out of the apparatus with which he ordinarily contained himself, and Philip, looking at them, understood that whatever had happened to Alfred had reached past the performing layer, the professional layer, the layer that was always a little bit on, and had struck the thing underneath it that Philip had begun to suspect, over fifteen years, might not exist at all. It existed. It was weeping in a flat above Cambridge Circus, and the proof of its existence was the end of every reasonable explanation Philip had been holding in reserve.

"I tell you on my word of honour that that happened ten years ago, when I was thirty-five before, and that it wasn't there last night. Now tell me I'm drunk or dreaming."

Philip was not given to sudden reversals in his opinions. He had found, over fifty years, that the first reasonable explanation for any given phenomenon was usually correct, and that the investment of effort required to consider alternatives was rarely justified by the returns.

But he looked into Alfred's eyes.

He saw the fear. The shame. The desperate, specific need to be believed – not as a general human desire but as something particular and urgent and running out of time. He saw the marks on the throat, vivid and curved and exactly the right age and exactly the wrong age simultaneously. He saw the tears, which Alfred would never have manufactured.

And against all his reason – against everything he understood about the world and the way it was organised – he believed him.

Alfred saw it. He released Philip's arm. His hands went to his ruined collar, fumbled with it briefly, gave it up; he turned the jacket collar up instead and sat with it that way, turned up in the warm room, like a man caught outside in weather he hadn't expected.

"All right, Alfred," Philip said, and moved to sit beside him. "Try to pull yourself together. Begin anywhere you like."

And so Alfred began.

The first slip had been in late August, six months ago. He had noticed it in the bathroom mirror one morning – not a dramatic change, a few years only, the kind of thing a different man might have attributed to good sleep or reduced stress or the quality of the light. But Alfred knew himself with the thoroughness of a man who had made himself his own primary subject for twenty-five years, and he knew that the face in the mirror was not the face it had been the previous week.

He had not believed it, at first. This was the part Alfred dwelt on, in the flat, with the specific insistence of a man who needs his listener to understand that he was not a credulous participant in his own undoing. He had stood at the bathroom mirror that August morning and seen a face a few years younger and had done what any sane man would do, which was to attribute it to sleep, to light, to the well-known unreliability of mirrors and mornings. He had gone on attributing it for three weeks,

through two further slips, building each time a more elaborate scaffolding of the reasonable, until the morning he had stood at the mirror and been unable, by any honest measure, to call the man in it forty-five. "The mind is very strong," Alfred said. "It will defend a comfortable belief long past the point of evidence. I'm a professional at it – making things plausible is my entire trade. And I held the reasonable explanation right up until the reasonable explanation required me to be a liar, and then I had to choose between my sanity and my honesty, and I chose honesty, which I sometimes think was the real mistake. A saner man would have gone on lying to himself and might have been happier for it, right up to the end."

The slips had continued. Irregular – not a smooth regression but a series of jerks backward, each one leaving him in a slightly different version of himself. A version he recognised, because it was himself, but a version he had moved past and had no particular wish to revisit. The habits of thought returned first. Then the emotional reflexes. Then the specific flavours of impatience and arrogance that he had spent years working to understand and control. He had been keeping a diary. He had told no one. He had begun exercising more – the weights, the resistance bands – with the private and probably superstitious theory that if he was going backwards in some ways, the body could be encouraged to go forward in others.

Then, two months ago, a book had arrived. Registered post. A *Cold Inheritance* by Lydia Merrick.

He had read it at one sitting. When he finished, he tore it in two – not along the spine but straight across, as a man tears a postcard, the pages fanning and giving with a soft, destructive sound – and the act of tearing it had felt like tearing something in himself, something interior giving way, and the next morning the face in the mirror had been ten years younger than the morning before.

"I keep a diary now," he said. "Memory isn't to be trusted in a matter of this kind. You see, this isn't 2026 for me; it's 2016, and I shan't have written *The Glass Orchard* for another three years yet. Or you can call it both 2026 and 2016 if you like. Bit mixing, isn't it?"

He was speaking faster. His eyes kept moving to the mantelpiece clock.

"And just one other thing before I shove you out. I said I should die at sixteen. If it comes to the worst I hope to God I shall; none of your scarlet second childhoods for me. But how do I know when sixteen will come?"

He was on his feet again, Philip's coat in his hands.

"Sorry, old man – thanks awfully – I expect I shall be all right – don't bother about me—" He was pushing Philip toward the door with the contained urgency of a man who has said more than he meant to and needs very much to be alone with what remains. "I shall have to move sooner or later – looks so dashed queer one man coming in and another going out—"

Philip understood. The landlady. The neighbours. The daily evidence that the man in the flat was not ageing as men were supposed to age.

"See you soon – yourself out – quick, if you don't mind – go, go!"

The door closed. The lock turned.

Philip stood on the landing in the sudden silence, listening. Nothing. After a long moment he went down the narrow stairs and out into the noise of Cambridge Circus.

He stood among the people waiting for buses and looked up at Alfred's window, but the curtains were drawn and no light showed. He stood there for what might have been five minutes or twenty. He thought about fifteen years of friendship – the lunches, the occasional dinners, the professional courtesies and the less formal ones, the texture of knowing someone well enough to notice when they are not themselves. He thought about the evening in the Soho bar, Alfred eating his lobster roll with the focused joylessness of a man keeping the body occupied while the mind dealt with something else. He thought about the collar – the gesture at the Minerva, and again at the flat, the same gesture, checking for something – and he understood now, or understood the outline of it, though the outline was not a shape that any of his existing categories could hold.

He thought about the marks.

He was not a credulous man. He had, over fifty years of reading and living and paying careful attention to both, developed a robust preference for the reasonable explanation over

the extraordinary one, a preference that had served him well in literature and in life. The reasonable explanation was that Alfred was having a breakdown, that the marks were a coincidence or a psychosomatic effect or some form of self-induced injury he was not aware of, that the regression was in his mind and not his body, and that what was required was not Philip's credulity but Philip's clear-eyed friendship and possibly his recommendation of a reliable doctor.

He thought about the tears and the fear in the grey-blue eyes. He thought about the specific grip of a man who needed to be believed and could not afford not to be.

He hailed a cab.

London went on around it. The lights of the Strand passed and fell away. In the back seat, Philip sat with his hands in his lap and tried to construct a sensible account of what he had witnessed, and found he could not. Every attempt arrived at a place where the evidence ceased to cooperate with the framework. The marks were either real and ten years old and therefore impossible, or they were manufactured, and Alfred was not a man who manufactured evidence. He had told the truth tonight as helplessly as a man tells the truth when he no longer has any use for the alternative.

Philip thought about this. He thought about the word backwards and what it would mean, in the practical geography of a person's life, for it to be accurate. He thought about August, and the bathroom mirror, and the six months since. He thought

about *A Cold Inheritance* and what he knew about Lydia Merrick and what he did not know, which was more.

He thought, too, about himself, which was not a habit he indulged often, considering self-examination a vice that writers were especially prone to and especially poorly served by. But the cab was dark and the river was going past and the ordinary machinery of the evening had been so thoroughly disarranged that the usual prohibitions did not hold. He was fifty years old. He had, by the actuarial tables, perhaps thirty years left, and by the harder tables that measured not duration but capacity, perhaps fifteen of any use. He had spent the first half of his life acquiring the equipment — the craft, the eye, the patience — and would spend the second half watching the equipment slowly fail, the eye dimming, the patience fraying, the sentences coming harder. Fenwick's wretched lecture had said as much, in its bloodless way: that the raw capacity peaked early and declined, and that everything after was accumulation and habit. Philip had sat in that theatre and resented the lecture as a personal affront, and Alfred had stood up in the dark and told the man he knew nothing about it, and they had both been right, and they had both, Philip saw now, been talking about the same fear from opposite ends of it. Fenwick said the mind goes backwards in the only way minds can, by losing. Alfred had stood up because he, alone in the room, was going backwards in the literal sense, and could not bear to hear the metaphor recited as theory by a man to whom it was only ever going to be a metaphor. The lecture had

been an abstraction to everyone present except the one man for whom it had become, overnight, a description.

He had the persistent, uncomfortable feeling that the night was only beginning.

## Chapter Two

## The Pursuit Behind

Philip arrived home at half past eleven. He found the front door, the stairs, his study with the efficiency of a man navigating by muscle memory, and poured a whisky in the dark before he remembered to turn a light on.

The light made the room familiar. The desk, the books, the framed prints on the wall that he had looked at so many times they had become invisible – a Nicholson lithograph he had bought at an auction twenty years ago, a framed map of the Thames between Hammersmith and Chelsea, a photograph of his parents on a beach somewhere in the early sixties, faces he could no longer access directly but which the photograph kept available. His study. The room where he had written three of his four novels, where the fifth was currently waiting in a state of suspended animation for the sentence that wouldn't come. He sat in his chair and held the whisky and tried, for the fourth time since leaving Cambridge Circus, to construct a reasonable account of the evening.

He had, by now, stopped expecting to succeed.

He was fifty years old, not a credulous man, and he had found over the course of those fifty years that the world repaid credulity very poorly. He had seen people ruined by their own need for the extraordinary – convinced by grief that the dead were present, by loneliness that the universe was addressing them personally, by the human desire not to have been made ordinary by

biology and physics and time. He had no patience for it. He had friends who were religious and he respected their faith without sharing it, the way one respects a language one has not learned. The supernatural was not a language Philip spoke or wished to speak.

And yet.

The marks on the throat had been there. He had looked at them at close range, in a well-lit room, on the skin of a man he had known for twenty years and whose face he knew the way you know the faces of people you have been paying attention to. He had not imagined them. He had not misread them. They were exactly what they appeared to be – the faded arc of a bite, ten years old and appearing overnight – and no explanation existed for them except the one Alfred had offered, which was the explanation Philip could not bring himself to write down.

He put the whisky on the desk and opened his laptop. He produced three sentences and deleted them. He tried a different approach, which was to set down only what he had observed, without interpretation, and found that the observations, once collected, produced an interpretation of their own that he had no use for. He was a novelist; he knew that a sufficient accumulation of evidence tends to form shapes despite itself, and the shape this evidence formed was not a shape he could comfortably inhabit. He closed the laptop.

He did not go to bed. He sat in his chair with the whisky – drinking it this time – and thought about what belief was, as a category. He believed things every day without examining the

grounds for believing them: that the light would come on when he pressed the switch, that the person on the other end of a telephone call was the person who said they were, that the words on the page in front of him referred to things that existed or had existed. These beliefs were not examined because the cost of examining them was not justified by any available return. What he had witnessed tonight required examination because the cost of not examining it was, potentially, a friend he had failed to help.

He thought about the marks and the fear. He thought about the tears, which he kept returning to, because Alfred manufacturing tears was the least plausible element of any version of the evening in which Alfred was lying, and if Alfred was not lying then the rest of it had to be considered on its merits, and the merits of the rest of it were –

He didn't finish the thought. He went to bed.

His phone was on the bedside table. At ten past midnight, it buzzed once. He read the message: *Thank you for believing me.*

He typed back: *Always.* Watched it mark as READ. No further word came.

He lay in the dark for some time, looking at the ceiling. The house was quiet around him with the quality of Haslemere quiet, which is the quality of a place that has made its peace with the dark and does not find it alarming. He thought about the word believing in Alfred's text and about whether it was the right word, or whether what had happened on the sofa in that flat was something for which believing was too small. Then he slept.

Three days passed without word from Alfred.

Philip telephoned seven times and heard the voicemail each time, which was Alfred's voice in the version from before all this had started – the measured, somewhat ironic intonation of a man who had decided long ago that the public and the private were best kept distinct. Philip left messages. They were brief and informative, in the manner he had learned from Alfred himself: announce your business, leave your number, resist the impulse to perform. He did not perform distress. He merely noted that he was available and wished to hear.

On Thursday morning he went to the café in Covent Garden. Alfred kept a standing table there – not by arrangement, the café did not take reservations, but by the force of custom, in the way that a sufficiently regular customer creates their own reservation simply by having always been there on the same day at the same time. Philip arrived at ten, which was when Alfred arrived on Thursdays, and found the table occupied by a man and a woman who appeared to be in the third or fourth hour of an argument about property, conducted in the exhausted register of people who have covered the factual ground many times and are now navigating the emotional territory at the centre of it. He ordered coffee and sat at a different table and waited for twenty minutes, watching the door, before concluding that Alfred was not coming.

The barista, when Philip asked, shook his head. Mr Wale? No. Not this week, not last week. A fortnight, maybe longer. He said it with the quality of a person who registers the absences of

regulars, who notes when the usual order is not placed and feels, without knowing quite what to do about it, that something has changed.

Philip walked to the British Library. He asked at the main desk, which produced, after a brief internal consultation, a sympathetic response from a young woman with the kind of face that finds ways to be professionally helpful without being unprofessionally forthcoming. Mr Wale was a registered reader, yes. She couldn't speak to his recent movements, of course. But he hadn't been in this week or last. She said this with a slight hesitation that suggested she recognised the name and was uncertain whether the recognition was an asset or a liability.

He went to the bookshop on the Charing Cross Road. He had been here many times with Alfred, who kept an account and a fondness for the secondhand shelves on the first floor, and the woman at the desk – not the young woman he had spoken to before, but an older one with the look of a person who has been in this shop for fifteen years and has absorbed its specific gravity – took his name and said she'd be in touch if Mr Wale came in. She did not say she would be in touch regardless. She did not need to; it was clear from her manner that she considered the second clause implied.

She was not in touch.

He went, on the second day, to Cambridge Circus. He had not intended to; he had told himself there was no purpose in it, that a locked door would tell him nothing a telephone had not already told him. But he found himself on the Charing Cross Road at noon

with no particular reason to be there, and the feet, which sometimes know things the mind has declined to act on, took him the rest of the way.

The street door beside the printing business was propped open, and a woman was sorting post into the pigeonholes in the narrow hall – middle-aged, brisk, with the authority of someone who has run a building long enough to consider its occupants a species of weather. This, Philip understood, was Mrs Iqbal. He introduced himself as a friend of Mr Wale's, and watched her face perform the small sequence he had been seeing on faces all week: recognition of the name, and then the slight withdrawal of someone who has been worrying about a thing and is not sure whether the worrying is hers to share.

"You're the second to come asking," she said. "There was a woman, day before yesterday. Tall. I told her what I'll tell you, which is that I've not seen him in over a fortnight, and his post is piling up, and it's not like him." She tapped a thick wedge of envelopes against the pigeonhole as if to demonstrate. "He's a good tenant. Quiet. Pays on the first without being asked. But the last month or two he'd gone – I don't know the word. Hidden. Coming and going at odd hours, collar up, like he didn't want to be seen on his own stairs." She looked at Philip with a directness he respected. "Is he in trouble?"

"I don't think so," Philip said, which was true in the narrow sense and false in every other, and he disliked himself a little for the economy of it. "He's been unwell. I'm trying to find him so I can help."

"Well." She turned back to the post. "If you find him, tell him his rent's not the issue. Tell him I'd just like to know he's alive. That's all anybody wants, in the end. To know the people are alive."

Philip thanked her and went out into the noise of the Circus and stood for a moment looking up at the windows of the flat, the curtains drawn exactly as they had been on the night he had stood here last, and thought about the phrase – to know the people are alive – and about how it was, in fact, the whole of the problem, since the thing happening to Alfred was not death and not life but a third condition for which the language had no provision and the leases of buildings made no allowance.

On the first evening he sat in his club library and tried to think about something else, and could not. He thought about the testimony he had heard in the flat above Cambridge Circus: the face in the mirror that was not the face it had been the week before; the slips, gradual and then sudden; the book arriving by registered post. The marks. The tears, on a face he would have called incapable of them. He thought about what it meant to have believed something without a framework for believing it, and about whether the absence of a framework made the belief less or more reliable. He had always mistrusted the frameworks more than the things they were supposed to contain.

He called Celia.

She answered on the second ring, which was how Celia always answered – not because she was waiting for calls but because she was always in the middle of something and preferred to address

interruptions briskly. He told her he was trying to reach Alfred and hadn't had any luck. The pause that followed was fractional but diagnostic.

"You saw him at the Minerva," she said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"He's not at the flat," she said. "His landlady rang me two days ago. She's been getting his post in and she says there's been no sign of him for at least a week."

"Does she know where he might have gone?"

"She doesn't. And Philip —" Another fractional pause. "When I saw him at the door of the Minerva. The way he looked. Do you know what that was?"

"I have a working theory," Philip said carefully.

"I've known Alfred Wale for twelve years," Celia said, "and that wasn't the Alfred Wale I know. Something has happened to him. Something recent. Something physical." She stopped. "His face, Philip."

"I know," Philip said.

"If you find him," she said, "please tell him — please tell him I'm not going to say anything. Whatever is happening to him. I don't know and I'm not going to speculate. But he should know that."

Philip thanked her. He rang off. He sat with his drink in the club library and thought about Celia, who he had always considered primarily a conduit for literary gossip, and revised his estimate of her upward.

He saw her two days later, by arrangement, at a quiet place off St Philip's Lane that she favoured for the conversations she did not want carried. She arrived in a dark coat, without the scarf that was her usual flag, and Philip understood from the absence of the scarf that she had decided to be, for this hour, a different version of herself than the one the literary world was permitted to see.

"I'm not going to ask you what's wrong with him," she said, when the coffee had come. "I want you to notice that I'm not asking, because the not-asking is costing me a great deal and I'd like the cost acknowledged." A brief, dry flicker. "I have built a small career on knowing things first. It is not a noble career but it is mine and I'm good at it. And I am telling you that whatever is happening to Alfred Wale, I have decided not to know it. Do you understand what I'm offering you?"

"I think so," Philip said.

"I'm offering him the one thing I have that's worth anything, which is my silence. I don't give it often. I'm giving it now." She turned her cup. "I saw his face at that door, Philip. I make my living reading faces and I could not read his. It had gone somewhere my categories don't reach. And the part of me that trades in faces wanted very badly to find out where. And the other part — the part I don't get to use much, in my line — looked at him and thought: that is a man at the end of something, and the decent thing, the only decent thing, is to look away." She met his eyes. "So I'm looking away. Tell him, if it helps. And tell him that if he needs a room, or an alibi, or a person to

be seen having lunch with so the world thinks he's fine – I'm very good at lunch. It's the thing I'm best at. I can make a man look perfectly well over a long enough lunch."

Philip looked at her and revised his estimate a second time, and thought that he had spent fifteen years in this world mistaking its instruments for its people, and that the crisis was at least performing this one service, of showing him which of the faces he knew had something behind them he had never bothered to look for.

He had also, during those three days, read *A Cold Inheritance* for the second time.

He had told Alfred at the Minerva that he hadn't read it. This was not strictly true. He had read it eight months ago, in a single weekend, and had found it uncomfortable in the way that a correctly aimed argument is uncomfortable: not because it was unfair, but because it wasn't. Lydia Merrick was a more accomplished writer than her first novel had been given credit for. The critical reception had been respectful but cautious – the caution of reviewers who are not sure whether to credit a first novel with the weight it seems to be carrying, who suspect the intensity may be a limitation rather than an asset. They were wrong. The intensity was the point. The book did not simply tell Lydia Merrick's story; it performed its argument in the telling, the prose itself doing what it was arguing words do, which is wound with precision from a distance.

The novel Alfred had published ten years ago – *The Black Aviary*, his second – concerned a man of middle age and a woman

who had loved him in his youth and whom he had left without knowing what he was leaving. The woman was rendered with a compression that Philip had, at the time, admired professionally and had not examined personally. Reading *A Cold Inheritance*, he understood what he had been admiring. Alfred had taken a specific woman's specific grief and had compressed it to the density of art, which meant stripping away everything that made it particular to her and leaving only what was universally available. The result was a technically brilliant piece of controlled distance. It was also, when you understood what it had been made from, a kind of erasure. She had been there, with all her specificity, and he had made her small and clean and usable, and then the book had been published and she had been required to recognise herself in the residue.

He read it again looking for what Alfred had found in it. He found what he expected: a woman's grief rendered with the accuracy of someone who had spent a decade sharpening the instrument. Every detail was a detail that mattered. Every scene was a scene that proved a thesis. Whether Alfred had recognised himself in the portrait was not, Philip thought, really the question. Any sentient person who knew the parties would have recognised him. The question was what recognition had done.

The answer, according to Alfred, was ten years.

What he could not stop thinking about, on the third night, was the geometry of it. Two people had stood in a field in Sussex twenty-five years ago, and one of them had walked out of it into a life of recognition and loft conversions and *The Paris Review*

interviews, and the other had walked back into the village and then, eventually, out of it by a slower road, carrying the field with her. And the one who had walked out had then performed a second extraction, years later, reaching back into the abandoned geography and taking the grief of the abandoned person and refining it into the controlled brilliance of a second novel, for which he had been praised. He had taken the wound he had made and made it into a thing that won prizes. And then – this was the part Philip returned to – the woman had done the only available reply, which was to take the wound back. To write it herself, in her own hand, from the inside, and publish it under her own name, and send a copy by registered post to the man who had thought it was his.

*A Cold Inheritance* was not a revenge, exactly. Philip had read enough revenge to know what it looked like, and this was not that; revenge was a hot thing and this was cold, deliberate, finished. It was a reclamation. It said: this was mine, and you took it, and here it is back in my hand, and you will read it and you will know that I have taken it back. And the taking-back had cost Alfred ten years overnight, which meant – Philip made himself complete the thought – that the book had worked. It had reached him. It had done to him precisely what he had done to her, which was to hold up the accurate version of a thing he had preferred to keep comfortable, and require him to recognise himself in it.

He thought about the registered post. You did not send a thing by registered post unless you needed to know it had

arrived. The whole apparatus of registered post – the signature, the record, the small official certainty – existed for one purpose, which was to convert a thing sent into a thing received, to close the loop, to make the recipient a participant rather than a target. Lydia had not wanted to wound Alfred from a distance. She had wanted him to sign for it.

On the third night, his phone rang.

The voice that said his name was Elena Markham's. Philip knew her in the oblique way of London literary acquaintance: a painter, showed at a gallery in Cork Street, had grown up in the same part of Sussex as Alfred and maintained a friendship that Alfred mentioned rarely and with the particular guarded expression of a man protecting something he has not yet decided whether to admit owning. Philip had met her twice, possibly three times, at the kinds of dinners where you shake hands with eleven people and remember two. He had retained an impression of intelligence and a quality of attention that was not social attention – not the attentiveness of someone mapping a room for its useful connections – but something more direct. A painter's attention. The kind that looks at the thing rather than the purpose the thing might serve.

She had found Alfred. King's Cross – a hotel near the station, the kind of establishment whose main virtue was that no one who stayed there did so voluntarily, which meant no one was inclined to look too closely at anyone else. She had spent two days walking a one-mile radius, methodically, the way a painter checks a canvas: section by section, nothing overlooked.

"Is he all right?" Philip asked.

"Define all right," she said. "He's alive. He's coherent." A pause with something restrained in it. "He looks about thirty."

Philip sat down without looking for the chair, which caught him anyway.

"Thirty," he said.

"Yes."

"He was thirty-five when I last saw him. Two days ago."

"I know. Which is why I'm calling now rather than waiting for him to ring you." Her voice was steady, but had a quality beneath the steadiness that Philip recognised as the effort not to be afraid. "He's lost five years in forty-eight hours, Philip. The rate is accelerating."

Philip said: "Where are you now?"

"My studio. In the Boltons. He's here with me. I've put him in the spare room." A pause. "He didn't need much persuading. I think he's been lying awake in that hotel for two days and not sleeping."

"I'll come tonight."

"Nine o'clock?"

He was there by twenty to.

The studio occupied a converted coach-house off a mews in South Kensington, and the mews itself had the quality of London that Philip had always found slightly vertiginous: the way it made a whole different scale of life available within three minutes of the main road, quieter, older, indifferent to the city pressing against its walls. He let himself through the gate and

crossed a yard where something had once been a garden and was now a considered indifference to horticulture – a stone pot, an unpruned climber extending itself along a wall with the unhurried ambition of something that has been here longer than the building. The skylight above the coach-house showed amber. He knocked.

Elena answered. She was tall, fine-boned, and wearing the expression of a woman who had been keeping something together by the force of her attention for approximately forty-eight hours and was not planning to stop. She looked at Philip with something that was recognisably relief and something else that he filed for later – something he would come to understand better as the weeks went on, which was the look of a person who has been the sole adult in a situation and is not going to collapse simply because a second adult has arrived, but who is allowing herself, briefly, the luxury of acknowledgement. She stepped aside.

The studio was large and inhabited by the particular disorderliness of active work: canvases propped against every wall, the smell of oil paint and turpentine that Philip found bracing in the way of things that are honest about what they are, books stacked at angles that suggested they had been pulled from shelves in sequences of thought and not yet returned. The table in the centre of the room was covered in paint tubes, brushes in a jar of grey water, and an open copy of a psychology text. On the easel to Philip's left: a portrait, near-finished, of a man who looked forty-five and whom Philip recognised despite or because of the authority with which Elena had captured him.

Alfred crossed to it while Philip was still taking off his coat, and stood in front of the canvas looking at the version of himself it held, and for a moment the room contained the strange spectacle of a thirty-year-old face studying a forty-five-year-old portrait of the same man, the present examining the recent past, the diminished considering the lost.

"You painted me old," Alfred said. There was no accusation in it. There was something closer to wonder.

"I painted you as you were," Elena said, from the kitchen end of the studio. "Three months ago. That's not old. That was the prime of you, if you'd only known it."

"I never look at photographs of myself. Did you know that? Not vanity – the opposite. I find them unbearable. There's something obscene about a fixed image of a face; it pretends the face is a settled thing, when a face is the least settled thing a person has." He touched the edge of the canvas, not the paint. "And now look. I'd give a great deal to be the man in this picture. The man I couldn't stand to be photographed as. There's a lesson in that and I haven't the time to learn it properly, which is the lesson, probably – that you spend the whole of a thing wanting to be out of it and only love it once you're past."

"Don't touch the edge," Elena said. "It's not dry." And the ordinariness of it, the small domestic correction, did more to steady the room than anything else could have; Alfred took his hand back and almost smiled, and Philip understood that this was a language the two of them had, the language of small

corrections, twenty-five years deep, and that he was a guest in it.

It was Alfred as he was before any of this. Or as he had been six months ago, which had been before any of this in a way neither of them had known at the time. The portrait had the quality of Elena's work that Philip would come to recognise: technique invisible, presence inescapable. The man on the canvas was looking slightly off to one side, not at the painter, and the look had in it the quality of Alfred's attention when it was directed at something that interested him – angled, gathered, not quite allowing the thing to escape – and it was also the look of a man who was, at the moment of sitting, already somewhere else in his mind. She had painted both things simultaneously. It was, Philip thought, a very good portrait.

He looked at it for longer than was strictly polite, and Elena let him, in the way of painters who have stopped pretending that the work is not the most interesting thing in any room it occupies. He thought about how long it must have taken – not the hours, but the looking; the accumulated attention that a portrait of this kind required, the patient establishment of a face over many sittings until you knew it well enough to render not its appearance but its habits. You did not paint a man like this from a single afternoon. You painted him from years.

"How long have you been at it?" he asked.

"This one? Since the spring." She came and stood beside him and considered the canvas with him, the two of them looking at the same face from slightly different histories of it. "He didn't

know. I told him it was a study, that I needed a male head for something else. He'd never have sat for a portrait of himself – too vain to be painted and too proud to admit the vanity, which is the worst combination for a sitter." A small movement at the corner of her mouth that was not quite a smile. "So I lied to him, and he sat, and I got him. I've been getting him for twenty-five years, on and off. He's the thing I keep coming back to when I don't know what else to paint." She looked at it a moment more. "I didn't know I was painting a record. I thought I was painting a man. It turns out those were the same thing and I just couldn't see it from inside."

Alfred was standing by a window with his back to the room, and when he turned at the sound of Philip's entrance, Philip's first thought was not he is younger but I know this face.

He knew it because he had seen it in the back pages of a novel published fifteen years ago – in the author photograph taken when Alfred Wale was thirty-one and had just been introduced to the world as a writer worth watching. The photograph that people kept returning to when they wrote about Alfred's work, because it had in it something hard to account for: a man who appeared to know something the photograph couldn't contain, and who was trying to decide whether to let it show.

The face in that photograph was the face in front of Philip now.

The difference was the eyes. The eyes were not thirty-one. They were forty-five and had been watching something difficult for longer than forty-five years' experience warranted, and they

sat in that smooth, unlined face with the disconcerting quality of antiques in a modern room. Too old for the container. Wrong in a way that the mind registered before the brain caught up.

"Hello, Philip," Alfred said.

"Hello, Alfred."

There was a moment of the particular English awkwardness that exists between men who have felt too much in the recent past and are now in a room together and must do something about it. Elena solved it from the kitchen end of the studio by producing a bottle of wine and three glasses like a woman who has decided that what is needed is not feeling but soup, and who is deploying the wine as its more immediate predecessor.

"Sit down," she said. "Both of you. We have things to talk about and we might as well be comfortable."

Philip had brought his notebook. He had also, on an impulse he could not account for, brought a roll of drafting paper, which he spread on the table when the bowls of soup were cleared and anchored at the corners with the nearest available objects – a pot of brushes, two books, and what appeared to be a rock that served as a paperweight. Elena brought more wine and sat at the end of the table. Alfred sat opposite Philip. Philip uncapped his pen.

"From the beginning," Philip said. "In order. All of it."

He had brought the notebook for the friend's reasons and the drafting paper for the writer's, and he was aware of the distinction and chose not to examine it. The drafting paper was for the timeline, and the timeline was a writer's instrument –

the externalising of a chaos into a sequence, the imposition of before and after on a thing that did not, from the inside, feel sequential at all. Alfred had said the slips did not feel like a line; they felt like weather, like a series of unconnected squalls. The timeline would make them a line whether they were one or not. That was what timelines did; it was their use and their lie. Philip uncapped the pen and thought, briefly, that he had spent his whole life doing this – taking the formless suffering of imagined people and giving it arrows and dates, a beginning and a middle and the promise of an end – and that he had never before done it to the suffering of a real person sitting across a real table, and that the activity felt, suddenly, less like compassion than like a kind of taxidermy, the arrangement of a living thing into a stable and legible pose.

He drew the line anyway. There was nothing else to do, and a wrong instrument used with love is sometimes better than no instrument at all.

What followed was the closest thing to a medical history Philip had ever heard from a man who was not ill – or not ill in any way the existing frameworks had names for. Alfred was precise. He had evidently been living with this long enough that the facts had sorted themselves from the feelings, or had started to, and he laid them out with the controlled flatness of a writer presenting the facts of a plot before the interpretation. Late August: the first slip, a few years only, the kind of change attributable to a good night's sleep or the quality of a bathroom light. But Alfred had been keeping a diary since the first slip –

not out of writerly habit, he said, but from necessity; memory was not to be trusted in a matter like this. Then the slips that followed: irregular, involuntary, not a smooth decline but a series of lurches, each one depositing him in a slightly earlier version of himself.

He had the manner, Philip thought, of a man giving evidence – not in the legal sense, exactly, but in the older sense, the sense of bearing witness to something he alone had seen and was obliged to render faithfully though he knew it would not be believed. He spoke in order. He resisted, visibly, the writer's temptation to improve the sequence for effect, to move the most dramatic slip to the end, to shape the testimony into a story. He kept it flat. And the flatness was the most convincing thing about it, because a man inventing this would have made it better, and a man enduring it had no use for better; he had use only for accurate, since accurate was the only thing that might, conceivably, be turned into help.

Philip asked questions and wrote the answers down. How many slips in total. Whether they correlated with sleep, with drink, with the menstrual punctuation of his work – the finishing of drafts, the receiving of reviews. Whether the physical change preceded the mental or followed it. Alfred answered each one with the patience of a man who has asked himself the same questions in the dark and arrived at no comfort from any of them. The physical and the mental came together, mostly, he said, but not always; once or twice the body had slipped first and the mind had followed a day later, catching up, like thunder after lightning,

and those had been the worst, the days of being a younger body still containing the older mind, the mismatch like a coat on the wrong hanger. Philip wrote it all down. He was aware, doing it, of the peculiar doubleness of his position – that he was at once a friend trying to help and a writer gathering material, and that the two were using the same pen, and that he would never, as long as he lived, be able to fully separate the compassion from the acquisition. He had chosen a trade that fed on exactly this, and the trade did not pause for grief; it took grief as its richest provender and asked only that you not admit, while taking, how good the taking felt.

Then September. A reading at the British Library, the kind of event he attended without pleasure as one of the duties that came with a career of the sort he had – fifty people in the rare books reading room, warm, the particular smell of institutional carpeting and institutional coffee, a moderator who had clearly read the press release but not the book. And in the seventh row, slightly to the left of centre, a woman who was watching him with an expression he had recognised across fifteen feet of dim light and two decades of not thinking about her.

"The expression," Philip said. "What was it?"

Alfred was quiet for a moment.

"It was the expression I used to see on my own face," he said, "when I was twenty-five and angry and certain I was being wronged by the world. The quality of someone who is watching someone else get something they believe they deserved. I recognised it because I had worn it." He paused. "She was

watching me be praised. She was watching people tell me I was important and she was sitting in the seventh row having spent ten years married to a man she didn't love, and she had written a book, and nobody had come to her reading with that expression. I knew all of this from across the room without being told any of it." He looked at the timeline. "I left by the side door. That night, five years."

Then February. A *Cold Inheritance* arriving by registered post. He had read it at one sitting. When he finished, he tore it in two across the middle, the pages fanning with a soft, destructive sound. The next morning, ten years.

Philip wrote everything down. He drew a timeline on the drafting paper, a thing of arrows and dates that he annotated in his small, clear hand, and when he was done he looked at it and then at Alfred, who was looking at the paper with the expression of a man confronting an X-ray of something he already knew was wrong.

"The large events," Philip said, "connect to Lydia. Everything significant traces back to her." He tapped the timeline with his pen. "Seeing her in September. Reading her book in February. These are the moments when the ground moves."

Alfred said nothing.

"Which suggests," Elena said — she had been quiet through the reconstruction, listening with the complete attention of someone who had already reached the conclusion and was verifying it — "that the mechanism is guilt. Or specifically, this guilt. Whatever you carry about what happened between you."

"Yes," Philip said.

Alfred still said nothing. He was looking at the timeline.

"Then the course of action is obvious," Philip said carefully, "though I recognise you may not want to hear it said."

Alfred looked up.

"You need to see her," Philip said.

The resistance came in the order Philip had predicted.

Alfred stood, moved to the window. The reasons assembled themselves: Lydia hated him, she had written three hundred and forty pages demonstrating it, the best possible outcome was that she would throw him out, and the worst was that the encounter accelerated everything. He spoke to the window. He was not wrong about any of it, which was the problem with people who were genuinely intelligent and genuinely reluctant – there was nothing obviously false to argue against.

Elena waited until he finished.

"And if you don't," she said from the table, "the rate of acceleration continues. You've lost five years in two days. In a fortnight, at that rate, you won't be yourself anymore." She paused. The pause had the quality of weight deliberately set down. "You don't have the luxury of refusing things because they might not work. None of us do."

Alfred turned from the window.

There were, Philip thought, a great many kinds of yielding, and the kind he was watching now was not the dramatic capitulation of someone who has been persuaded but the quieter

stillness of a man who has run his argument out to its ends and found the ends unsatisfactory.

"All right," Alfred said. "I'll see her."

Elena was already reaching for her phone.

"Not through Celia," Alfred said. The name produced a faint, wry movement at the corner of his mouth. "If she gets involved there'll be a dispatch in the Literary Review by Thursday."

"I'll do it," Elena said. "She'll see me. We haven't spoken in years but she'll see me." She was already typing. "I'll arrange tomorrow afternoon. Her flat in Chelsea. Three o'clock."

"Alone," Alfred said.

Philip looked at him.

"If I'm going to do this at all, I'm going to do it without a support structure visible from the street," Alfred said.

Philip understood. He also understood that this was not, purely, stubbornness. There was a kind of accounting that required privacy. The presence of witnesses, however well-intentioned, changed the quality of the debt being settled. You could not make a genuine apology with someone watching who was on your side.

"All right," he said. "But you call me the moment you're out."

"I'll call."

Elena's phone buzzed. She read the reply. Looked up.

"She'll see you. Three o'clock tomorrow."

Philip left at eleven. The studio had taken on the quality of late nights in warm rooms — slightly suspended, the city

receding behind the mews wall, the world outside reduced to the sound of an occasional car on the Old Brompton Road and the sound of London breathing at rest. Alfred was sitting at the kitchen end of the studio with a cup of tea, Elena beside him, and neither of them was talking. This silence had a different quality from the silences earlier in the evening; it was not the silence of people who have nothing to say but the silence of people who have, for the moment, said enough. Philip gathered his coat and his notebook and stood for a moment at the foot of the stairs. He thought about saying something – about the morning, about what to expect, about the range of possible outcomes – and thought better of it. He nodded at Elena. She nodded back with the small, comprehensive nod of a woman who has understood everything that has not been said and has chosen to match the register.

He walked to his car. The October air was cold and specific, the kind of cold that carries the year's acknowledgement that summer is not returning. He sat for a moment before turning the key.

He thought about Elena Markham. He thought about the portrait on the easel – the way it had caught Alfred at his best and most present, with the quality of someone who paints people the way they actually are rather than the way they want to be seen. He thought about the two days she had spent walking a one-mile radius around King's Cross, checking every establishment that rented rooms by the week. The methodical quality of it. The refusal to be defeated by London, which is a city that can always

produce more streets, more hotels, more places where a person might be hiding. She had simply worked until she found him.

He thought about the way she had looked when he arrived: the exhaustion, carefully managed; the relief; the thing underneath the relief that he had filed for later and was now taking out. It was not, he realised, the relief of a friend who has found a friend. It was larger than that. It had the specific density of something that has been carried for a long time and has arrived, finally, at a moment where it can be set down briefly and then picked up again.

In twenty years of friendship he had never seen Alfred frightened before tonight. He had seen him arrogant, occasionally cruel in the offhand way of a man who could afford to be and had not yet decided to stop. He had seen him generous, sharply funny, genuinely moved by things he considered it undignified to be moved by. But the man in Elena's studio was a different composition of those same materials – the intelligence still present, the irony still audible, but beneath them something that Philip would have previously said Alfred did not have access to: the specific terror of a person who has discovered that time, which he had always treated as a renewable resource, was moving in the wrong direction.

He drove home along the Embankment. The river was black and present, the bridges lit with the comfortable indifference of infrastructure. He looked at them through the windscreen and thought about the note in his jacket pocket: Late August.

September. February. Lydia. He thought about the word exponential and what it implied about the days remaining.

He thought about what it would mean for the man in that flat to face the woman he had wronged, in the knowledge that she might send him away worse than she received him. He thought about Alfred's face when he said alone – not stubbornness, as he had said, but something more specific: the understanding that there are forms of damage you can only address unmediated, without the cushion of witnesses.

He went to bed and, against expectation, slept.

Elena called at eight the following morning. Alfred had slept. He looked the same – no additional ground lost overnight, a small mercy accepted with the caution of someone who has learned that small mercies in a crisis have limited lifespans.

"He's going through with it," Elena said.

"I expected he would."

"He's very quiet this morning. Working through something." A pause. "Philip – what do you think will happen? With Lydia?"

Philip considered this. He thought about the book and the precision of its anger and the twenty-five years of accumulated distance. He thought about the woman in the seventh row of the British Library watching Alfred be celebrated, and about the decade of marriage to someone she hadn't loved, and about registered post, which is the method you use when you need to be certain the package arrives and need a record of its arrival.

"I think," he said, "that she will give him exactly as much as she can bring herself to give. Which may or may not be

enough." He listened to the silence on the line. "But I think he needs to have the conversation regardless. Whatever comes of it."

"And if it makes things worse?"

"Then we know more than we knew. And we try something else."

He spent the day in a state of productive uselessness. He worked on the novel for an hour and produced four sentences, of which two were the same sentence with different punctuation and a third was a sentence he had written and deleted three months ago. The fifth novel was in the phase that every novel passes through, which is the phase where the writer is not yet sure whether the central problem is a problem of material or a problem of nerve, and is not able to solve the problem until he determines which it is, and cannot determine which it is because the act of determining requires doing the thing he is not sure he can do. He had been here before. He would get through it. Today was not the day.

He had built his life, he reflected, to be exactly the wrong shape for a crisis of this kind. A solitary trade, conducted at a desk, in a house in Haslemere chosen for its quiet – everything optimised for the long undisturbed concentration that the work required, and everything therefore useless for a situation whose whole demand was availability, presence, the willingness to drop the work and go. He had spent thirty years training himself to guard his attention against interruption, to treat the ringing phone as an enemy of the sentence, and now the only thing that mattered was the phone, and the sentence had become the interruption, the thing that pulled him away from the vigil he

wanted to keep. He sat at his desk and the desk reproached him with its order, its readiness for a work he could not do. He had arranged his entire existence around the proposition that the work was the most important thing, and the autumn had quietly demonstrated that this had never been true, that he had simply never before been presented with the thing that was more important, and had mistaken its absence for its non-existence. Alfred, going backwards, was teaching him this without meaning to: that a man could spend fifty years certain of his own priorities and discover, in an afternoon, that he had had them backwards the whole time, and that the discovery, far from being a tragedy, felt obscurely like relief – the relief of a long error finally corrected, even at this cost, even this late.

He ate lunch at his desk. He twice reached for his phone and twice put it down. He went for a walk along the river at four, the Thames path between Putney Bridge and Hammersmith, the afternoon grey and specific in the way of London October afternoons that have made up their minds. He walked without particular purpose, which was not how he ordinarily walked but was how he walked when he was waiting for something. He noticed the river, which was being itself with the unremarkable steadiness it always brought to the task. He noticed the other walkers, the texture of a Tuesday afternoon crowd on the Thames path: retired people, parents with pushchairs, a man in running kit who was going too slowly to be running but too quickly to be walking. The ordinary inventory of a city afternoon, the inventory that continues regardless of whether anyone takes it.

His phone buzzed at half past five. A text from Elena: *He's back.*

Philip was at the studio in twenty minutes.

Alfred was in the armchair near the window in his coat, which he hadn't removed, the scarf still wound at his throat. He looked – the same. This was what Philip registered first, involuntarily: still thirty, still in possession of himself, still the man who had walked out of this studio six hours ago. Whatever had happened in Chelsea had not, at least visibly, accelerated the thing Philip was afraid of accelerating.

Elena was at the kitchen counter with her back to the room. She handed Philip a mug of tea when he came in and then, on some instinct of knowing when two people needed the third one not to be audible, went back to the easel at the far end of the studio and stood in front of it with a brush that she did not use. This was, Philip thought, the act of a person who understands how to be present and peripheral at the same time, and who has decided that this particular conversation needs the room it needs.

"Well?" Philip said.

Alfred looked at him with the quality of a man emerging from a long and difficult calculation – not the calculation that produces an answer but the calculation that establishes the terms on which an answer might eventually be reached.

"I'm still here," he said. He meant it in all the ways available.

Philip sat.

"Tell me."

Alfred told him. The flat in Chelsea: the address in a street of elegant white-stucco townhouses where the elegance was maintained by sufficient money and the white was the white of things that have been cleaned rather than things that have never been dirty. The door answered after a long pause. Lydia in jeans and a cardigan, as he had expected – she had never been someone who dressed for occasions she hadn't chosen – but something else he had not expected, which was how much she looked like herself. Twenty-five years had done to her what they had failed to do to him: had written themselves in the lines of her face, in the way she held herself, in the grey threaded through the hair she had pulled back simply. She looked forty-one. She looked, Alfred said, like a woman who had absorbed twenty-five years and was not pretending otherwise.

The shock on her face when she opened the door was not shock at his appearance, or not only that. It was the shock of encountering in the flesh the thing you have been carrying as an abstraction for two decades, and finding the flesh more complicated than the abstraction. She had been angry at someone who didn't exist anymore – or had existed only inside her grievance, preserved in the amber of it. The person on her doorstep was someone else. The person on her doorstep was thirty years old and forty-five years old simultaneously, and was standing in her doorway without any of the armour that people usually wear to difficult conversations because he had left the armour at the studio and had come without it deliberately.

She had not forgiven him easily. This Philip had not expected her to do. But she had not performed unforgiveness either, had not used the occasion as a stage for the same anger that had produced the book. She had been – Alfred paused, finding the word – accurate. Specific. She had said the things that were true: that he had been careless with her, that he had used what they had as material without considering the cost, that the particular hurt of *The Black Aviary* was not the use of private detail but the public exposure it invited, the way it made her pain available for other people's edification. She had said it precisely, the way someone says things they have been composing for a long time and have finally been given the opportunity to deliver.

The flat had surprised him, Alfred said. He had built it in his mind over twenty-five years into something that would tell him how to feel – austere, or accusatory, or pointedly successful – and it had been none of those. It had been a home. Books in the sequences of a person who actually read them, not the curated kind; a child's drawing held to the refrigerator with a magnet, which had stopped him in the hallway, because he had not known about a child and the not-knowing had arrived all at once as a measure of how completely he had absented himself from the continuation of her life. A coat on a hook that was not her coat. The specific evidence, everywhere, of a life that had gone on – that had married and raised and grieved and persisted – entirely without reference to him, in a flat in Chelsea, while he had been carrying her around as a fixed point, a grievance he owned, a

character he had written. She had not been a character. She had been a woman making toast in a kitchen he had never seen, for twenty-five years, and the toast and the kitchen and the years had all happened whether or not he chose to believe in them.

She had let him in, and put the kettle on, because that was what you did, and the ordinariness of it had nearly undone him before a word was said. And then she had sat across from him with her hands around a mug she did not drink from, and she had looked at his young face for a long moment with an expression he could not read, and she had said: "Well. You always did get to keep things the rest of us had to give back."

He had not disputed any of it.

"I told her she was right," Alfred said. "All of it. Not as a formula – not because I thought it would help to say it. But because it was accurate. And she had been carrying the accurate version for twenty-five years while I carried the comfortable one, and that needed to be corrected."

"How did she take it?"

"She told me I didn't deserve an apology from her. That she wanted me to suffer as she had." He paused. "And then she said she was sorry."

Philip turned his cup in his hands.

"She took my hand," Alfred said. "Told me not to give up. And then she asked me to leave, which I think was all she had left." He looked at the window. "She was sitting on the sofa with her face in her hands when I went through the door. I didn't look

back. I thought if I looked back I would stay, and staying would have been wrong."

"There was a moment," Alfred said, "near the end of it, that I keep — I can't put it down. She asked me what I wanted from her. Not unkindly. Genuinely. As though it were a reasonable administrative question, which I suppose it was. And I realised I didn't have an answer. I had gone there because Lane — because you all — thought the guilt was the engine, and that addressing it might slow the engine, and so I had a kind of clinical reason for being in her sitting room. But sitting in front of her I understood that I hadn't gone for a cure. I'd gone because I owed her the sight of my face while I said it. The apology wasn't the point. The point was that she got to watch me make it." He turned his cup. "Which is the one thing I'd spent twenty-five years denying her. Not the apology — I'd have written her a beautiful apology, I write beautiful things, that's the trouble. The thing I'd denied her was my presence. The being-there while it cost something. And that was what she wanted, when she asked what I wanted, except it was the wrong way round — it was what she wanted, and I was finally able to give it, which is not the same as wanting anything for myself."

Philip said nothing. He was aware of having been handed something that he would, eventually, have to write, and of the specific obligation that attended it, which was to get it right rather than to get it good. The two were not the same and the temptation to confuse them would, he knew, be the central danger of the book.

"And then she cried," Alfred said. "And I understood that the crying wasn't forgiveness. People think crying is the soft part, the part where it resolves. It isn't. She was crying because she'd had to put down a thing she'd been carrying so long that her arms had grown around it, and putting it down hurt more than carrying it had. I'd done that. The carrying and the putting-down both. I'd cost her the carry and now I was costing her the release." He looked at the window. "I've never in my life felt less like a man who deserved to be helped."

"Is it enough?" Philip asked carefully.

Alfred was quiet for a long time.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I feel different. Something is different. Whether that means anything useful — I can't say yet." He looked at his hands. "But she saw me. And I saw her. And the version of events each of us had been carrying — mine comfortable, hers a wound — we put them on the same table and looked at them together. And I think there's something in that. Some value I can't quite articulate."

Philip looked at him.

What he saw was not resolution. The crisis was not over; the ground that had been lost would not come back in an evening's conversation. The marks on the throat were still there, fainter now but present, and the face across the table was still thirty years old and had no business being so. None of the structural facts had changed.

But the quality of the fear in Alfred's eyes had altered. Not gone — it was still there, and it was still justified. But

what had been the rigid, pressurised dread of a man carrying something too heavy for his arms was now something quieter, less organised. The way dread looks when it has been acknowledged rather than suppressed, when the worst imaginable thing has been said aloud and has proved survivable.

Philip could not account for this in any framework he possessed. He knew only that it was there, and that it was not nothing.

"Get some sleep," he said.

He put on his coat and went back down into the mews. The October dark had settled in properly now. He stood in the yard for a moment, looking up at the skylight that still showed amber – Elena at her easel, Alfred in the armchair, the two of them together in the warm room above, in the specific proximity of people who have not yet resolved something between them but have arrived at a point where the unresolved thing is not, for the moment, a problem.

He walked to his car. He thought about what the night had meant and what the days ahead would require. He thought about Lydia Merrick sitting alone in her flat in Chelsea, twenty-five years of anger finally said and done with and set down. He thought about the hands in the face as Alfred went through the door, and about what it cost a person to let someone see them at the end of their resources. He thought about registered post, and the specific intention required to send something by registered post, and about what it meant that the intention had been, all along, to be seen.

He thought: if guilt can do this to a man, then perhaps the reverse of guilt can undo it. Perhaps the direction of travel is not fixed.

He did not believe this, exactly. But he found, getting into the car, that he had stopped being certain that he did not.

London continued around him, patient and unconcerned. He started the engine. He drove home along the Embankment, past the bridges, past the river that took no notice of any of this, and he found himself thinking – for the first time in a week – not about what had already happened but about what might happen next.

This was, he supposed, a form of hope.

He didn't entirely trust it. But then, he didn't entirely trust very much these days. That, perhaps, was also a form of progress.

## Chapter Three

## The Onlookers

The thing about hope, Philip discovered over the days that followed Chelsea, was that it did not behave the way the novels he had written had taught him to expect it to behave. In novels hope was a turn – a hinge, a place where the line of the story changed direction and the reader, having been held in difficulty, was permitted to lean forward. In life it was something smaller and less reliable. It was a quality of attention that you could maintain for an hour at a time and then lost, and had to find again, and that cost something to find each time.

The regression had slowed. This was not in dispute. The five years in forty-eight hours that had brought Elena to the telephone had not repeated themselves; in the four days since the flat in Chelsea, Alfred had lost perhaps two years, possibly less, and the losses had come gradually rather than in the lurching deposits of the worst week. Lane – they did not yet know Lane; that was still ahead of them – would later call this a deceleration and would decline to call it a recovery, and he would be right to decline, but in those four days the distinction was not available to them and they took what the days offered, which was a man at the kitchen end of a studio in the Boltons who was still, recognisably, himself.

He looked, now, about thirty. The smooth dark hair, the unlined face, the particular ease of a body that had not been consulted about any of this – all of it had settled at an age

Philip associated with the author photograph on the back of the second novel, the one taken before the irony had fully arrived, when Alfred Wale had been a writer who had done something good and did not yet know whether he would be allowed to do it again. The eyes were still wrong for the face. They were still forty-five, and still carrying what they carried. But the gap between the eyes and the face had narrowed, by two years' worth, and Philip found that he was keeping the measurement the way you keep a tide table: not because you can do anything about the tide, but because knowing where it stands is the only form of relationship available to you.

He visited every day. He came in the mornings, when the light through the studio's high windows was good and Elena was at the easel and Alfred was usually at the table with the diary — the diary he had begun in August, when the first slip in the bathroom mirror had taught him that memory was not to be trusted in a matter of this kind. He was still keeping it. He wrote in it every morning before he would speak to either of them, the way some men will not speak before coffee, and Philip had come to understand the diary as a kind of mooring: the place where Alfred confirmed, each day, that he was still the person who had written yesterday's entry. It was, Philip thought, the most rational thing a man in his position could do, and also the most frightening, because the day the entries stopped agreeing with each other would be the day they knew the mooring had failed.

That fourth morning — before Elena told him about the walking — Philip had watched Alfred do a thing he had not seen

him do before, which was to read yesterday's entry aloud before writing today's. He read it the way you read a letter from someone you are not certain you still are: carefully, listening for the voice in it, checking it against the voice in his head. "Listen to this," he said, not looking up. "Yesterday I wrote: 'Elena's coffee is too strong and I told her so and she said it had been too strong for twenty-five years and I had only just noticed, which is the whole of my character in one cup.'" He turned the page. "I remember writing it. I remember the coffee. But I read it this morning and there was a half-second – just a half-second – where I thought, who is the man who finds that funny. And then I was him again. But the half-second was there. It wasn't there last week." He uncapped his pen. "I'm going to keep reading them aloud. I want a witness to the half-seconds. When they get longer, somebody should know."

On the fourth morning Philip arrived to find Elena alone.

"He's walking," she said, before he could ask. "He went out at seven. He said he needed to move." She was at the easel, and she did not turn around, and Philip understood from the set of her shoulders that the walking was a development and not a reassurance. "He's been doing it every day. Earlier each day. This morning it was still dark when he left."

"Where does he go?"

"He won't say. South, I think – toward the river. He comes back about nine, and he's –" She stopped. The brush moved. "He has more energy than the situation should allow. It comes off him. You'll see."

Philip sat at the table and did not open his notebook, which had become his customary relationship to the notebook in that studio: bringing it, setting it down, leaving it closed. There was a discipline in not writing, he had found. The writing was for later, when he could see the shape. To write now was to choose a shape prematurely, and the wrong shape, chosen early, was harder to abandon than no shape at all.

He looked at the portrait on the easel. Elena had been adding to it for weeks – the accumulated canvas, she called it, when she called it anything, which was rarely – and what it held now was difficult to describe and harder to look away from. She was not painting a single Alfred. She was painting all of them at once: the forty-five-year-old of the early sittings, the lines of the face settled and particular, and over and through him the younger men he had been becoming, each laid down without erasing the one beneath, so that the canvas had the quality of a photograph taken with the shutter left open across a period during which the subject had refused to stay the age he was. It should not have worked. It worked. Philip had stopped being surprised that it worked.

"It's getting crowded," he said.

"Yes." She stepped back from it and looked at it with the dispassion she brought to her own work, which was the same dispassion she brought to everything except the man it depicted. "I don't know how many more of him it will hold. At some point I'll have to decide whether it's finished or whether I keep going until it's only the last one." She picked up a rag and worked at

her fingers with it. "I haven't decided. I keep thinking the deciding will tell me something I don't want to know."

The door opened below.

Alfred came up the stairs two at a time – Philip heard it, the old habit from the Minerva, the body taking the stairs the way it had taken them at thirty-five and would shortly take them at twenty-five – and came into the studio with the cold of the October morning still on his coat and a colour in his face that Philip had not seen on him since before any of this began. Elena had been right. The energy came off him. He had the specific restlessness of a young man who has walked five miles and discovered that it has not been enough, that the body has more in it than the morning has found a use for.

"There's a gym," Alfred said, without preamble, by way of greeting. "Off the Fulham Road. A proper one – not the kind with the mirrors and the music. A boxing gym. I walked past it. I want to go."

Philip looked at him.

"I used to box," Alfred said. "At university. I was good at it – not good, competent, but I liked it, which is a different thing." He was taking off his coat as he spoke, and the movement had an impatience in it, the coat treated as an obstacle between him and the next thing. "I haven't thought about it in twenty years. This morning I walked past the door and the smell came out – that specific smell, leather and liniment and old sweat – and I wanted it the way you want a thing you didn't know you'd been

missing." He looked at Philip. "Come with me. This afternoon. I don't want to go alone."

"Why not alone?"

Alfred considered the question with the seriousness Philip was learning to expect from him now, the new willingness to actually answer things that the old Alfred would have deflected with irony.

"Because I'm not sure who'll be there when I'm finished," he said. "I'd like someone in the room who knew me before I went in."

The detective came at noon.

She arrived without warning, which Philip would later understand was a choice rather than an oversight – the unannounced arrival being a tool of the trade, the difference between what people show you when they have had time to prepare and what they show you when they have not. She rang the bell at the mews gate and Elena answered the intercom and there was a pause, and then Elena said, in the careful voice of a person who has decided to say nothing she does not have to say, "It's a police officer. She's asking for Alfred."

Alfred was at the table. He had been about to eat – there was soup, the practical soup that Elena produced at intervals on the theory that the body, whatever it was doing to itself, still had to be fed – and he set down the spoon and looked at Philip with an expression that contained, briefly, the whole shape of the problem.

"The landlady," he said.

"Probably."

"I should have written to her. I meant to." He stood. "Let her in."

Detective Inspector Walsh was a woman of perhaps fifty, in a coat that had been good and was now simply serviceable, with the unhurried manner of someone who had spent a career learning that the fastest way through a conversation was rarely the quick way. She came up the stairs and into the studio and took it in – the canvases, the disorder, the three people arranged around a table with soup going cold on it – with a single pass of attention that Philip recognised, because it was a version of his own: the writer's pass, the painter's pass, the policeman's pass. The trades were not so different. They all consisted, at the root, of looking at people and not being told what to think about them.

"Mr Wale?" she said.

"Yes."

She looked at him. Philip watched her look. He watched the particular thing happen that he had been watching happen to people for weeks now – the small recalibration, the flicker of a mind comparing what it sees to what it expected and finding a discrepancy it cannot immediately name. Walsh had come expecting a man of forty-five. There would be a photograph; there was always a photograph; missing-person reports ran on photographs, and the photograph would be the one from the back of the books, or the one from the newspapers, the weathered handsome face with the studied irony. The man in front of her did not have that face. He had an earlier draft of it. And Walsh, whose business

was faces, registered the discrepancy and filed it and did not, to her professional credit, say anything about it at all.

"You've been reported missing," she said instead. "By your landlady, a Mrs Iqbal, ten days ago. She'd not seen you, your post was accumulating, and a man of your description — " a fractional pause, which Philip alone in the room may have caught " — had not been seen at any of your usual places. We take these seriously. People your age, living alone, with a public profile. It's often nothing. Sometimes it isn't." She had a notebook of her own, Philip saw, and she had not opened it. "You're not difficult to find, as it turns out. Several people had been asking after you."

"My friends," Alfred said. "I'm sorry. I went to ground. I've been — unwell, and I didn't want it known, and I handled it badly. I should have told Mrs Iqbal something. I'll write to her today."

"Unwell," Walsh said. It was not quite a question. She let it sit in the room with the particular patience of someone who has found that silence does more work than interrogation.

"A breakdown, I suppose you'd call it," Alfred said. "I finished a book in January. They take more out of you than people understand. I came apart for a while. Ms Markham and Mr Hardin have been looking after me." He gestured, economically, at the studio, at the canvases, at the evidence of a man being looked after. "I'm not missing. I'm just here. I'm sorry for the trouble."

Walsh looked at him for a moment longer. Then she looked at Elena, and at Philip, and Philip had the sensation – not pleasant – of being assessed by someone who was very good at her work and who had concluded that whatever she was looking at, the three of them had agreed on the version of it she was being given. This was not the same as concluding that the version was false. It was, Philip thought, worse than that, or at least more durable: she had concluded that there was a version, and that it was being maintained, and that the maintenance was the interesting thing.

"Mr Hardin," she said. "You're the novelist."

"I am."

"My sister reads you." She said it without warmth and without its absence, a fact offered as a fact. "She liked the one about the father. A *Private Education*." She returned her attention to Alfred. "I'm satisfied you're alive and not under duress, Mr Wale, which is the whole of my business here. I'll close the report. You'll write to Mrs Iqbal." She produced a card – Philip saw Elena's eyes go to it, and away – and set it on the table beside the cooling soup. "But I'll leave this. People who go to ground sometimes have reasons that aren't the reasons they give. I'm not saying that's the case. I'm saying that if it became the case – if there were something you found you wanted to tell someone, and it was the sort of thing that's hard to tell the people close to you – you could tell me. I've heard a great deal. Very little of it surprises me anymore."

"Thank you," Alfred said.

She went to the stairs, and stopped, and turned back, and for a moment she looked at the portrait on the easel – the accumulated canvas, all the ages of Alfred laid one over another – with an expression Philip could not read.

"That's good," she said to Elena. "That's very good. It doesn't look like a young man and it doesn't look like an old one." She studied it a moment more. "It looks like someone who can't decide. Is that the idea?"

"Something like that," Elena said.

Walsh nodded, as though a small thing had been confirmed, and went down the stairs, and they heard the gate, and then the studio was quiet in the way of a room from which someone observant has just departed: the quiet of a space that has been seen more clearly than it is comfortable being seen.

Alfred picked up the card. He read it, both sides, with the attention he gave to everything now – the attention of a man for whom no information could safely be assumed to be retrievable later.

"She knows," he said. "Not what. But she knows there's a what."

"Yes," Philip said.

"It doesn't matter." He set the card down. "There's nothing she can do. There's nothing anyone can do. That's almost restful, when you think about it – the one advantage of an impossible problem is that you can stop looking for the responsible party." He looked at the soup, which was past saving, and pushed it away,

and stood. "Come on. The gym. While I'm still big enough to be any good at it."

The gym was below street level, down a flight of iron stairs from the Fulham Road, behind a door that announced itself with nothing but a hand-painted sign so old the paint had gone the colour of the brick around it. Inside, it was exactly what Alfred had promised and exactly what Philip had feared: a low room, two rings, a row of heavy bags hung from a steel frame, the smell that Alfred had described coming up off the floor and the canvas and the men in it like a thing with physical weight. There were perhaps a dozen of them, mostly young, a few not, working with the particular self-absorption of people engaged in something that does not permit the mind to wander. No one looked up. This was, Philip understood, the appeal: a room in which a man could be entirely present in his body and entirely unobserved, which were two things Alfred had been finding, lately, increasingly hard to come by.

A man came over – sixty, flat-nosed, with forearms like cabling and the unhurried courtesy of someone who has spent forty years deciding very quickly who is and is not trouble. He looked at Alfred and something passed between them, some recognition below the level of words, the recognition of one body by another of a kind it knows.

"You've done this," the man said. Not a question.

"Long time ago."

"It doesn't leave. Wrap your hands. There's tape on the bench." He glanced at Philip, took in the overcoat and the closed

face and the absence of any intention to remove either, and dismissed him without unkindness as furniture. "Your friend can watch."

Philip watched.

He watched Alfred wrap his hands with the slow competence of a thing the hands remembered without consulting the man they belonged to, and he watched him go to the bag, and he watched, over the next half hour, something he did not have a category for and would spend some time afterward trying to find one.

What he watched was a man getting younger in real time, by effort, on purpose.

It was not that the regression accelerated – afterward, comparing notes with Elena, with Lane, he would establish that it had not, that the day's loss was within the day's expected range. It was that the boxing made visible what the days made gradual. With each round, Alfred seemed to shed a layer of the accommodation that age makes with the body – the carefulness, the economy, the management of a resource one has learned is finite. He hit the bag the way only the young hit anything, which is as though there will always be more where this came from. The old man watched from across the room with his arms folded and at one point said, to no one, "He's got it," in the tone of a man identifying a wine, and Philip understood that whatever Alfred had been at twenty – whatever unguarded force he had carried into the world before the world taught him to ration it – was in the room now, recovered, on display, and that it was beautiful in

exactly the way Alice Torrance would later say it had been beautiful, the way a thing is beautiful while it is running.

The old man put him in the ring, near the end, with a younger fighter – a quiet broad-shouldered boy of perhaps nineteen who moved with the economy of someone who had done nothing else for years – and told them to go light, and they went light, and Philip watched his friend, who three weeks ago had been a forty-five-year-old novelist standing at a club bar checking his reflection for damage, move around a ring with a teenager and hold his own. It was not a contest. The boy was better, and knew it, and had the grace not to show it, carrying his superiority the way the genuinely skilled carry it, lightly, giving Alfred room. But Alfred found things – angles, openings, the half-remembered vocabulary of a body that had done this before the man had forgotten doing it – and once, cleanly, he landed a thing that made the boy step back and nod, the small professional acknowledgment of a hit that counted, and Alfred laughed out loud in the ring, a sound of pure uncomplicated delight that Philip had never once heard from him in fifteen years of dinners and lunches and the long ironic commerce of their friendship. The old man, watching, said quietly to Philip: "Your friend's having the time of his life. Whatever's wrong with him." And Philip, who could not say what was wrong with him, said only that he thought that was probably true, and that it was good to see.

Alfred stopped after forty minutes, not from exhaustion but from something like satiety, and came and sat on the bench beside

Philip with the sweat coming off him and his chest moving and his eyes very clear.

"That," he said, when he could, "is the first time in two months I haven't been afraid."

Philip said nothing. The fear was the through-line of everything; to hear that there was a place it didn't reach was information worth having.

"It's because the body doesn't know," Alfred said. He was unwrapping his hands, watching them do it. "It only knows it's strong. It doesn't know what the strength means or where it's going. It just — is. There's no dread in it because dread is a thing you do with the part of you that remembers and anticipates, and the body doesn't do either. It only has now." He flexed the freed hand, looked at it. "I've spent my whole life in the other part. The remembering and anticipating part. The part that makes books. And it turns out that part is also the part that's afraid, and I never knew, because I never spent long enough in the body to notice the difference."

He was quiet for a moment. Across the room a young man skipped rope with a sound like rain on a roof.

"I keep thinking about the stair," Alfred said.

"What stair?"

"In the book. The one I can't write." He said it the way he said most things about the work now — with the slight wonder of a man examining a possession he is no longer certain belongs to him. "I've been writing the same book my whole life, Philip. Did you know that? Four novels and they're all the same book. A

person at the top of something high, who's climbed so long they can't remember the ground, and can't see it, and there's a question about whether they can get down." He laughed, without much in it. "I never let myself see it that plainly before. You can't, while you're doing it. But I see it now. It's a stair. It's always been a stair." He looked at his hands. "And there's a name in it. There's always been a name in it, and I've never once managed to write the name down, and I —"

He stopped.

"Wren," he said.

Philip looked at him.

It was an odd small moment, and Philip would return to it many times in the months that followed without being able to make it do what he wanted it to do, which was explain itself. Alfred had said the name the way a man says a word in his sleep — not chosen, not produced, simply surfaced, as though some current beneath the conversation had carried it up and set it on the surface and withdrawn. And then, almost at once, the irony came back into his face, the old defensive lightness, and he shook his head as though to dislodge it.

"Wren," he said again, differently this time, dismissively. "I don't know where that came from. Elena, probably — she says things, names, from when we were children. She'll have said it once and it stuck." He stood, the moment closed, the body wanting to move again. "It's nothing. Let's go. I'm starving, which is apparently the one thing I can rely on."

Philip did not write the name down. He had, by then, made it a practice not to reach for the notebook in front of Alfred; it changed the temperature of things, made them evidence. But he kept it. He kept it the way you keep a coin you find on a strange beach – without knowing its denomination, on the suspicion that it might turn out to be currency somewhere. *Wren*. He turned it over in his mind on the walk back through the early dark, and could make nothing of it, and put it away, and did not know that he had just been handed the centre of the thing, two weeks early, in a basement off the Fulham Road, by a man who did not know he was holding it either.

It was Philip who found Lane.

He found him the way he found most things, which was by refusing to stop looking after the point at which looking seemed reasonable. He was a researcher by temperament – it was the part of novel-writing he was best at and enjoyed least, the long unglamorous work of establishing what was true before you were permitted to invent – and he turned that temperament now on a question that had no good place to be asked, which was: *has this happened before?*

He could not ask it directly. There was no one to ask it of. He could not walk into a teaching hospital and describe Alfred's symptoms and expect anything but a referral, gently made, to a service for his own benefit. So he asked it sideways, the way you ask a question you cannot ask, and he asked it of the only archive he had unrestricted access to, which was the written record: the long sediment of case studies and footnotes and

forgotten monographs in which the profession of medicine deposited the things it had seen and could not explain and did not, in the end, know what to do with.

He spent two days at it. He sat in the reading room of a library to which his various memberships entitled him and he followed the question down through the literature the way you follow a thread through a labyrinth, expecting at every turn to lose it, and not, quite, losing it. The phrase he was looking for did not exist; there was no name for the thing, which was itself a kind of finding. But around the absence, here and there, were marks – the way a buried object leaves marks in the soil above it. A line in a paper on accelerated cellular senescence that mentioned, in passing and with audible distaste, "the so-called reversal cases, of which the literature contains a small and unreliable number." A footnote, in a book about the boundaries of psychosomatic medicine, that cited a monograph Philip could not at first locate. And then the monograph itself, finally, retrieved from a store and delivered to his desk in the late afternoon of the second day: a slim thing, privately published, thirty years old, by a clinician named Edmund Lane.

It was not, on its face, about what had happened to Alfred. It was careful not to be about anything, in the way of a document written by a man who has learned that the surest path to professional ruin is to be interesting about the wrong subject. It concerned, ostensibly, "anomalies of subjective and apparent age in the context of profound psychological trauma," and it was hedged in every direction, and it would have meant nothing to a

reader who did not already know what to look for. But Philip knew what to look for. And in the third chapter, embedded in a discussion so qualified it was nearly opaque, was a single case – referred to only as *the index patient* – described in language that lifted the hair on Philip's arms in a reading room in Marylebone at five o'clock on an October afternoon.

The index patient had grown younger. Not in feeling. In fact. And the monograph, having described it in the flattest possible terms, declined entirely to explain it, and ended – Philip turned to the end, because he had to – not with a conclusion but with something closer to an apology, a final paragraph in which the author allowed himself, once, a sentence that was not hedged: *The author records his failure to arrest the process, and his conviction, which he is aware he cannot defend, that the failure was not inevitable.*

Philip sat with the monograph for a long time. Then he found, in the front matter, the name of the institution where Lane had worked, and from there, after some telephoning that took the better part of the next morning and required him to be, by turns, charming and persistent and finally simply honest in a way that surprised the person on the other end into helping him, an address.

Edmund Lane was not dead, which Philip had been prepared for. He was not practising, either, which Philip had also been prepared for. He was a very old man in consulting rooms in Devonshire Street that he had evidently kept on long past any professional need for them, in the way that some men keep on the

structures of a working life because the alternative is to admit that the working life is over. When Philip telephoned and said, carefully, that he was calling about a matter that the monograph of thirty years ago might bear upon, there was a silence on the line so long that Philip thought the connection had failed.

Then Lane said: "How old is he."

Not *who is he*. Not *what makes you think*. Not any of the questions a man would ask who did not already know exactly what was being described to him.

"He was forty-five in August," Philip said. "He's about twenty-six now."

Another silence. When Lane spoke again his voice had changed — had acquired the specific steadiness of a man taking hold of something he has been waiting thirty years to be given the chance to take hold of.

"Bring him tomorrow," Lane said. "Eleven o'clock. Bring whoever else is involved; there's always someone else involved, and they should hear it too." A pause. "And Mr Hardin — come prepared to stay some time. There are things I'll need to tell you that take a while, and that I've never said aloud, and that I'd rather not have to say twice."

They went the next morning, the three of them, in a cab through the thickening traffic of a London Tuesday, and they climbed a staircase in Devonshire Street that smelled of floor polish and old radiators, and they were shown by a silent woman into a consulting room that belonged unmistakably to another era — the heavy desk, the two facing chairs, the third and fourth

chairs brought in for the occasion, the framed certificates gone amber behind their glass, the particular hush of a room in which difficult things had been said to people who had come a long way to hear them.

There were certificates on the wall, gone amber behind their glass, and a wall of books that were the books of a working mind rather than a decorative one – read, reread, broken-spined, shelved by a logic that would have meant something only to the man who shelved them. There was a window that gave onto the backs of the Marylebone houses, the brick and the iron and the strip of grey sky, and there was, on the desk, a single object that did not belong to the consulting room of a retired man: a child's spinning top, painted, old, the colours worn at the edges where a thumb had spun it many thousands of times. Philip looked at it and looked away and did not ask, and would not ask, and would think about it for a long time – a man who had kept a working consulting room thirty years past his need for one, with a child's toy on the desk, waiting, it turned out, for them.

Edmund Lane rose to meet them. He was older than his voice – eighty, perhaps more – but the eyes were entirely present, and they went to Alfred at once and stayed there, moving over the young face with the same methodical, clinical attention that Philip had first seen Alfred turn on his own reflection in a polished print at the Minerva Club a lifetime ago, a month ago. Lane looked at Alfred the way a man looks at a thing he has thought about every day for three decades and has never expected to see again.

"Sit down," Lane said. "All of you. Thank you for coming."

They sat. Alfred opposite the desk, Philip and Elena flanking him, the room arranging itself around the man at its centre as rooms had been arranging themselves around Alfred Wale for his entire adult life, though never before for this reason.

Lane did not ask Alfred to recount the history. This itself was disorienting; they had braced for it, the long sceptical interview, the marshalling of proof. Lane asked nothing. He looked at Alfred, and at the diary that Alfred had brought and set on his knee, and he said only, "You've been keeping a record. Good. He didn't – the other one. The index patient. By the time I understood we'd need it, it was too late to start, and what she could tell me couldn't be trusted, because the trusting part had gone." He said it almost to himself. Then he seemed to recall the room, and the three faces in it, and he set his hands flat on the desk.

"I'm going to tell you what I know," he said. "It isn't much, and most of it is the shape of my own failure, and you may find it harder to hear than what you came in with. But you've found the one man in England who won't tell you it's impossible, and I think, having got this far, you'd rather have the truth from someone who believes you than comfort from someone who doesn't."

He opened a drawer. Philip watched his hand go into it and come out with a folder – old, soft-cornered, the cardboard furred with handling – and he watched Lane open it on the desk and take from it two photographs and lay them down, side by side, facing

the three of them, with the deliberate care of a man laying down cards he has held a very long time.

"Her name was Rebecca Frost," Lane said.

And Philip looked at the two photographs, and felt the room change around him, and reached – for the first time in that studio, that cab, that staircase, this desk – not for his notebook but for the arm of his chair.

## Chapter Four

## The Reckoning

They sat in the silence that follows a significant piece of information, which is different from other silences in that it has the quality of adjustment: the room reorganising itself around what has just been placed inside it.

Lane waited. He had the patience of a man who had spent a career delivering news that required time to land, and he sat with his hands flat on the desk while they absorbed what they had just been told. Philip looked at the two photographs still side by side on the desk. The first Rebecca Frost: thirty-two, eyes carrying what her face had not been asked to carry – the wrong-for-the-face quality he had been seeing in Alfred's eyes for weeks, and which he now understood as a category rather than an individual anomaly. The second: the same woman, except she was no longer the same woman, and her eyes were no longer too old but simply terrified, and she was fourteen and had two weeks left. He looked at Alfred, whose face was the controlled nothing of someone processing something too large to process quickly.

He thought about what it meant that there had been another case. He had been telling himself, in the part of his mind where the honest accounting took place, that what was happening to Alfred was without precedent – that the absence of a category for it was itself evidence of its impossibility. The photographs rendered that position untenable. There was a category. The category had one previous occupant and she had ceased to exist at

fourteen. This was not reassuring information. It was, however, specific information, and specific was, as Philip had been telling Alfred for weeks, more useful than general.

Lane let them sit with the photographs. He did not hurry to fill the silence, which Philip took as a mark of the man: he had delivered news for a living, and he understood that the first thing a person needed after a piece of news was not more words but room.

"She came to me in the spring of 1994," Lane said at last. "She was a teacher. Music – she taught the piano to children in a town outside Norwich, and she was good at it, by every account, and she was thirty-two years old and she had begun, that February, to grow younger." He had the two photographs in his line of sight and did not look away from them as he spoke, as though the looking were a duty he had assigned himself a long time ago and had never been released from. "She did not come to me first. She went to her own doctor, who found nothing, because there was nothing to find – her bloods were a young woman's bloods, which was precisely the problem, except that no instrument exists that measures wrongness of that kind. She went to a dermatologist about the skin. She went, eventually, to a psychiatrist, who was kind to her and gave her a diagnosis that did not fit and a prescription that did nothing, and it was the psychiatrist, to his credit, who remembered a paper I had written years before about anomalies of apparent age, and sent her to me as the last entry on a long list of people who could not help her."

"And you could," Elena said.

"No." Lane said it without drama, the bare correcting of a record. "I could see her, which the others could not. I believed what was in front of me, which the others would not. That is not the same as helping. For two years I watched her go backwards and I applied every method I had and I slowed it, twice, for a few weeks each time, and I told myself the slowing was the beginning of the cure, because a man needs to tell himself something." He moved the second photograph a half-inch with one finger, squaring it. "She was fourteen in this one. It was taken three weeks before the end. She asked me to take it – she had become, by then, frightened of mirrors, but she wanted a record, the way your friend keeps a diary; she had understood that the only version of her that would survive was the one held by other people, and she wanted to choose what was held." He was quiet a moment. "She had two weeks left when this was taken and she did not know the number but she knew the shape of it. You can see it in the eyes. They are a child's eyes and they are not a child's eyes. You will have seen the same thing this month, across a different table."

Philip had. He looked at the photograph of Rebecca Frost at fourteen and then, helplessly, at Alfred, and the two faces – the dead girl's and the living man's – carried, across a gap of thirty years, the identical cargo: the eyes too old for the face, looking out of a youth that was not consent but sentence.

"What was the end," Alfred said. His voice was level. "You keep saying it. The end. What is it."

Lane looked at him for the first time since he had begun to speak.

"She was not there," he said. "I want to be exact, because the inexactness is its own cruelty and you have had enough of those. She did not die in any sense a coroner could use. There was no body. On the morning of the fourteenth of June she was in the room I had taken for her, and her sister was with her, and she was perhaps nine years old by then and very quiet, and her sister went to make tea, and when she came back the room was empty and the window was closed and the door had not opened. She was simply no longer anywhere." He folded his hands. "I have spent thirty years declining to speculate about what that means, because speculation is how a man like me goes mad, and I have a professional horror of the available explanations. I tell you only the fact. She reached the bottom of it, whatever the bottom is, and she went through."

Elena spoke first.

"Rebecca Frost," she said. "Was there anything that might have helped her? If you'd had more time?"

Lane had been expecting this question. Philip could see it in the specific lack of surprise with which he received it.

"I made mistakes with her," Lane said. "Several. The largest was that I treated the symptoms rather than the origin. I tried to slow the progression with what tools I had, and I had some limited success, but I never went back to the beginning. To the moment it started. By the time I understood that the work needed to happen there — at the source — she was already too far gone.

The memory of it was unreachable." He paused. "I have thought about those mistakes for thirty years."

"The origin," Philip said. "You mean the moment the regression began?"

"The psychological moment," Lane said. "Which is not necessarily the same as the chronological first instance of physical change. There was a prior event – something that primed the reversal. An original wound. In Rebecca's case, I never found it. The regression had covered it over before I understood I needed to look." He looked at Alfred. "With you, the origin is recent. Still accessible. Your memory of it is intact." A pause. "For now."

Alfred said: "What are you proposing?"

Lane moved a small lamp on his desk to one side, in the way of a man clearing space for something he has prepared in advance. "Guided regression," he said. "Not physical regression – you have rather enough of that already. What I mean is a structured, supervised return to the memory itself. The moment in late August when the first change occurred. I would guide you back to it, through a state of deep relaxation, and we would examine it together. Try to identify what happened at the psychological level. What broke, and why."

"You want to hypnotise me," Alfred said.

"I want to help you find the origin," Lane said. "The method is a secondary consideration."

Alfred stood. He moved to the window. Philip had seen this movement – the window, the back turned, the posture of a man

buying time for an argument – twice this week already, and he observed it now with the specific alertness of someone who knows the argument that is coming and has already, privately, addressed it.

"I'm not a case study," Alfred said. "I'm not Rebecca Frost. I'm not going to lie in a room and have my unravelling documented while you take notes."

"I'm not asking you to document anything," Lane said. "I'm asking you to let me help."

"Why? Why do you want to help? You had one patient. She vanished. You've had thirty years to think about your mistakes. Is that what this is – a second attempt? Because I'm not willing to serve as a correction to your professional regret."

The room was very still. Lane did not flinch. He had, Philip thought, been waiting for this too, and had decided what it required.

"You're right," Lane said. "Rebecca Frost is part of why I'm sitting here. I won't pretend otherwise. But she is not the reason I want to help you. The reason I want to help you is that you are a person who is disappearing, and disappearing is not inevitable, and I may know something that can prevent it." He looked at him steadily. "The professional regret is real. It does not change the fact that what I know might be of use to you."

Alfred turned from the window. He looked at Philip. Philip said nothing, which was the right thing to say, because Alfred did not need another argument. He needed the argument he was already having with himself to reach its conclusion.

Elena said, from the chair beside Philip: "What's the worst that happens? If you try this and it doesn't work?"

Alfred looked at her.

"The same thing that happens if you don't try it," she said. "Except that if you do try it, there's a possibility – small, uncertain, no promises – that it changes the outcome. And if you don't try it, there's no possibility at all." She met his eyes. "You told Lydia you wouldn't give up. That was three days ago."

Alfred was quiet for a long moment.

"All right," he said at last. He turned to Lane. "What do you need me to do?"

Lane asked Philip and Elena to wait outside. Alfred did not argue about this, which Philip took as its own kind of information: the twenty-five-year-old would have argued. The man who had said all right was not entirely twenty-five.

They found chairs in the small waiting room across the landing. It had the quality of all waiting rooms: the deliberate neutrality of a space designed to be occupied without being inhabited, a few chairs and a low table and a print on the wall that had been selected for its ability to be present without demanding attention. Philip sat. Elena sat beside him and almost immediately reached into her bag and produced a small sketchbook and a pencil, not because she had a specific thing to draw but because, Philip understood, the alternative was to sit with her hands still, which she apparently could not do in the current circumstances.

He opened his notebook. He looked at it. He closed it.

"What do you think he'll find?" Elena said, without looking up from the sketchbook.

"I don't know what he'll find," Philip said. "I know what Lane thinks he'll find. The original wound. The specific failure he's been carrying since he was seventeen and did not, at the time, know to carry it."

"Lydia."

"Perhaps. Or something larger than Lydia. The pattern that Lydia was part of." He looked at the print on the wall, which was a photograph of something coastal, anonymous. "The question is what you do with the origin once you have it. Naming a wound doesn't close it. Lane knows that. He said as much."

"But it might change how he carries it," Elena said.

"It might," Philip said.

They sat in silence for a while. Elena's pencil moved. Philip looked at his closed notebook and thought about what Lane had said about Rebecca Frost – the regression had covered the origin before I understood I needed to look – and thought about coverage and about the way things disappear when they are not seen to. He thought about the things he had been not-seeing in the twenty years he had known Alfred: the quality of his carelessness with people, which Philip had always categorised as a kind of genius-adjacent exemption, the belief that certain people were allowed the collateral damage their gifts produced. He thought about whether the category of genius-adjacent exemption was a category he had invented for his own convenience, and concluded that it probably was.

He opened his notebook and wrote: If the regression is the mind's attempt to revise, then what does revision require? To go back. To be in the place of the original error. He wrote: The wound is the origin. But the origin is also the last moment of innocence – the last moment before the person became someone who had done the thing. He looked at this and did not cross it out, which meant he thought it was at least partially true.

An hour passed. Elena showed him what she had been drawing: a figure seen from behind, at a window, the posture he had been watching for three weeks now – Alfred at the glass, not quite looking at what was in front of him, the quality of a man who has turned away from the room but has not yet arrived at the window. She had caught something he had been watching without being able to name: the posture of a person who is neither inside nor outside, who has left one place and not reached another. He didn't say so. The observation felt private.

Philip looked at the drawing for a long time. It was a few lines only – Elena worked, when she sketched, with an economy that bordered on the severe, putting down the minimum the figure required and trusting the eye to supply the rest – but the few lines held the whole of something Philip had been circling in prose for weeks without catching. The posture. The man at the window. He had described it to himself a dozen ways and Elena had it in seven strokes: the turned back, the slight forward inclination, the hands not quite in the pockets, the suggestion of a face angled toward a glass it was not seeing through. It was Alfred's signature attitude of these weeks, the body's habit of

withdrawal, and it was also, Philip realised, something older and more general – it was the posture of every person who has received news they cannot yet live inside, the universal human attitude of the threshold, neither in the room nor out of it, suspended at the glass between a life that has ended and one that has not yet begun. Elena had drawn a particular man on a particular afternoon and had, without trying, drawn everyone who had ever stood at a window unable to turn back into the room.

"You should keep that," Philip said. "When you do the book – if there's a book – that's the cover. That's the whole thing in one image."

"There won't be a cover," Elena said, not unkindly. "There'll be the painting, which no one will see, and your words, which everyone will. That's the division of labour. I make the thing that holds it and you make the thing that carries it." She closed the sketchbook. "I've made my peace with it. The painting is for the room. The book is for the world. He gets to be in both, which is more than most people get, and a poor exchange for what it's costing him, and the only one on offer."

The door opened.

Alfred came out first. He crossed the landing without speaking and sat in the remaining chair and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, not in distress but like a man who has been somewhere difficult and is giving himself a moment to establish the distance between that place and this one. Philip watched him. The quality of what had just happened was on him – not residue, not aftermath, but something more active: the look

of someone who has been shown something and is still in the process of deciding what to do with it. Lane appeared in the doorway and looked at Philip with the expression of a man who has found what he was looking for and is not certain it was what he wanted to find.

"Give him a few minutes," Lane said quietly.

They waited. The clock on the landing told six minutes before Alfred dropped his hands and looked at them and said: "August."

"August," Philip said.

"Late August. I was finishing *The Glass Orchard*. I had been at it for seven months and I was — emptied out. The kind of tired that sleep doesn't address, because it isn't the body that's tired but the part that generates the work." He looked at the window. "I went to bed. I dreamed."

He stopped. Elena waited. She had the quality, in this moment, of a person who has learned that certain things cannot be accelerated.

"I was seventeen," Alfred said. "Standing in a field near the rectory at Larkfield. It was late evening — I don't know what time, the light was horizontal, the kind of light that comes off the Downs at the end of the day. And Lydia was there. Standing a few feet away, in the way she stood when she was upset and trying not to show it — her arms crossed, her weight on one foot. Asking me not to leave." He paused. "She said: you don't have to go. She said: you could stay. She said it the way you say something when you already know the answer and are saying it anyway because the

asking matters even if the answer doesn't. And I told her —" He stopped. "I told her there was a whole world waiting for me, and she wasn't part of the plan."

"What did you feel?" Philip asked.

"Free," Alfred said. "That was the specific thing. I felt as though I was stepping out of a small room into something large and clear and mine. As though the field and Lydia and the whole village behind her were a room I had been too long in, and the door was finally open." He looked at his hands. "And then I woke up. And the face in the mirror was not quite the face it had been the night before."

"Tell it the way you told me," Lane said. "All of it. They should hear the texture and not only the summary."

Alfred was quiet for a moment, gathering it.

"It isn't like remembering a dream," he said. "That's the thing I couldn't make Lane understand at first, and then he made me understand that he understood. A remembered dream is a thing you watch. This is a thing you are inside. When he took me back to it — and I don't know what to call what he did, hypnosis is the word but it's the wrong word, it was more like he held a door open and I walked through it of my own weight — I wasn't recalling the field. I was in the field. Seventeen years old, the grass to my knees, the particular slant of the light. And the strange part, the part I keep — " He stopped. "I knew both things at once. I knew I was seventeen and I knew I was forty-five lying on a couch in Devonshire Street. The two didn't cancel. They held. I was a boy who had not yet done the thing, and I was a man

who had done it and everything after it, and I was in the one place where the not-yet and the already touched."

"And Lydia," Philip said.

"And Lydia." He closed his eyes briefly. "She was asking me to stay. I told you that. But what I couldn't tell you until Lane took me down into it is what her face was doing while she asked. She wasn't pleading. I'd remembered it for years as pleading, because pleading is easier to have walked away from – you can be cruel to someone who's begging, it's a clean transaction, the begging gives you permission to refuse. But she wasn't begging. She was offering. She was standing in her field, the one she'd named, the one she let me into, and she was offering me the whole of it – the village, the smallness, the known life – not because she thought it was better than what I wanted but because it was what she had and she was willing to give it. And I looked at the offer and I found it small. That was the sin. Not the leaving. The finding-small. I stood in front of a person handing me everything she owned and I priced it and I found the price low." He opened his eyes. "And then I felt free. That's the part I'd buried so deep I needed Lane to dig for it. The freedom wasn't a feeling that came in spite of the cruelty. It was made of the cruelty. The lightness I felt walking out of that field was the exact weight of what I'd refused to carry."

"Tell them what you told me," he said to Lane.

Lane came in and sat behind his desk with the careful movements of a man carrying something he doesn't want to spill.

"The regression is not punishment," he said. "I want to be precise about that, because I think the word has been in the room for some time and it is the wrong word." He looked at Alfred, then at Philip. "What Mr Wale is experiencing is closer to revision. His mind, confronting the accumulated evidence of what he has cost other people, has arrived at the conclusion that the direction of travel is wrong. It wants to go back. To the origin. To revise."

Lane said it with the particular weight of a man correcting an error he had himself once made, and Philip understood, watching him, that the correction was not theoretical. Lane had, thirty years ago, with Rebecca Frost, reached for the language of punishment – had thought, at some point in those two years, that the girl was being made to pay, and had perhaps, in the worst of it, let her think so too, and had been wrong, and had carried the wrongness ever since. He was not going to let Alfred inherit it. "Punishment requires a punisher," Lane said, "and there isn't one. No one is doing this to him. He is not being made to pay for the field, or for Lydia, or for any of it. That framing is seductive because it preserves a kind of order – it suggests a moral universe that keeps accounts and settles them, and even a cruel order is more bearable than no order at all. But it's false, and it's worse than false, it's actively harmful, because a man who believes he is being punished will brace against the punishment, will fight it, will treat the process as an adversary – and the process is not an adversary. It's his own mind, trying, in the only way it knows, to undo something it cannot undo. You

don't defeat that. You can't win against your own mind; there's no one left to do the winning. You can only persuade it to stop." He looked at Alfred. "Which is harder than fighting, and slower, and requires the one thing the punishment-story doesn't, which is mercy. Toward yourself. The thing you have least practice in."

"But you can't change the past," Elena said.

"No," Lane said. "Which is the difficulty. The mind wants to make a different choice in that field in Larkfield, and it cannot, and so it keeps going backwards – trying again, as it were, arriving at the same impassable point, retreating further." He looked at his desk. "Rebecca Frost had a similar dynamic. A series of choices in her late twenties that she spent the rest of her life – what remained of it – trying to unmake."

"So what's the way out?" Philip asked.

"The mind has to stop trying to revise," Lane said. "It has to accept that the choices were made, that the damage was done, and that carrying the knowledge forward is the only revision available." He looked at Alfred. "Which is not the same as forgiving yourself. Forgiveness is too smooth a word for what's actually required. What's required is – specific acknowledgement. Clear sight. The willingness to carry the accurate weight of it rather than the weight your mind has been adding to it in the attempt to reduce it."

"How?" Philip said. Not a challenge – a genuine question. He had been writing this kind of thing for twenty-five years: the idea that a person could simply decide to carry something

accurately. In novels it was always a discovery, a specific moment. He wanted to know if Lane had a specific moment in mind.

Lane looked at him. "That depends on the person," he said. "For some, it's a conversation. For some, it's the act of making something – a book, a painting. For some, it's going back to the geography of the original event." He paused. "For Mr Wale, I believe it's the last of those."

"Why the last," Philip said. "Why the geography rather than the conversation or the work. He's had the conversation – with Lydia, in Chelsea. He's done the work, four times over. If those were going to be sufficient, wouldn't they have been sufficient already?"

Lane considered this with the seriousness Philip was coming to expect from him, the refusal to give a quick answer to a question that did not have one.

"Because the conversation and the work both happen at a remove," he said. "They are representations. A conversation about the field is not the field; it is an account of it, conducted in a sitting room in Chelsea, in language, by an adult. The work is further still – it is the field transformed into something else entirely, sold, reviewed, shelved. Both of them are the mind's preferred mode, which is the mode of representation, of standing outside a thing and rendering it. And the mind's preferred mode is precisely the thing that has failed here. He has represented this wound to himself, brilliantly, for twenty-five years, and the representing has not healed it; the representing may even be the disease. What he has never done is stand in the actual field,

in the actual body, in the actual place, and let it be the thing itself rather than an account of the thing." He folded his hands. "I am not a mystic, Mr Hardin. I have a horror of the mystical; it has cost the people I've tried to help a great deal, over the years, the willingness of doctors to reach for the mystical instead of the difficult. I am proposing the geography for a reason that is almost dully physical. Place is stored differently than narrative. It is held in a part of the mind that does not translate into language and therefore cannot be revised by language. If there is any chance of reaching the wound underneath the representations, it is in the one register he has never been able to convert into prose. Which is the ground. The literal ground."

Alfred, at the window, said without turning: "You're telling me to go home because home is the one thing I was never able to write."

"Yes," Lane said. "That is exactly what I'm telling you."

Alfred said: "That sounds like something you say to a patient who hasn't got much time."

"Yes," Lane said, without apology. "It is."

A silence.

"There's also this," Lane said. He produced a small piece of notepaper and slid it across the desk. On it, in his cramped hand: Larkfield. The rectory. "The origin is in the geography as much as the memory. Being in the place where it happened – the actual physical environment – gives the mind access to what it

was trying to revise. Not to revise it. To receive it. Accept it as having been."

"Immersion," Philip said.

"Yes. It carries a risk — being in that environment might accelerate the regression rather than address it. I won't pretend otherwise. But doing nothing —" He looked at Alfred. "At the current rate, how long do you think you have before the adult memories become inaccessible?"

Alfred's jaw moved. "A week," he said. "Maybe ten days."

"Then the risk of trying is manageable," Lane said. "The risk of not trying isn't."

They left Lane's office at half past four and stood on Devonshire Street in the October afternoon, which was cold and specific, the kind of afternoon that does not apologise for itself. Philip thought about what they had just been told and thought about it the way he thought about information that was going to require living with for a while before it could be used: not trying to resolve it, just holding it, letting it settle into the space available. The dream in the field. The feeling of freedom. The step into the large and clear and his. He thought about how many times Alfred had described his departure from Larkfield — the university, London, the career — as the beginning of everything. He thought about what it meant that the dream had re-enacted the departure as a sin rather than a liberation.

For a while none of them spoke. The street did its ordinary thing — the medical brass plates, the parked cars, a porter wheeling something into a building, the whole discreet machinery

of a district that had been treating the ailments of the well-off for two hundred years and had developed the corresponding hush. Philip thought about all the news that had been delivered on this street, in these rooms, over those two centuries – the diagnoses, the reprieves, the sentences – and about how the street had absorbed all of it and showed none of it, the way the street outside a hospital always does, the catastrophic and the trivial issuing from the same doors onto the same pavement, indistinguishable to the passing eye. A man who had just been told he had a year and a man who had just been told he had nothing to worry about left by the same door and stood on the same step doing up the same coats. There was a democracy in it, and a loneliness: the news was yours alone, the street would not help you carry it, the city had heard everything and was moved by none of it.

"He believed us," Elena said, finally. "That's the thing I can't get over. We walked in there braced for an argument, and he just – believed us. Do you know how long it's been since anyone in an official capacity believed a single thing about this?"

"He believed us," Alfred said, "because he's been waiting thirty years for someone to walk in and let him believe it. We didn't convince him of anything. We arrived as the answer to a question he'd been carrying since before I published a word. That's not the same as being believed. It's being needed, which feels like being believed and isn't." He turned up his collar against the cold – the old gesture, emptied now of its original terror, become merely what a man does on a cold street. "I'm not

complaining. I'd rather be needed by a man who can help me than believed by one who can't. I'm just keeping the distinction. I seem to have a lot of time for distinctions, lately. It may be the last thing to go."

Alfred was looking down the street toward the park at the end of it. He had put his hands in his pockets and was standing in the particular posture of a man who has said what he needed to say and is now in the space after it.

"The field," Philip said.

"Yes," Alfred said.

"You've been dreaming it for years."

"Versions of it. With variations I couldn't account for. Sometimes it was summer, sometimes evening, sometimes both at once in the way of dreams. Sometimes Lydia was crying, sometimes she wasn't. Sometimes my father was there, at the gate, watching." He paused. "The constants were: the field. The feeling of being released. And the fact that I woke from every version of it slightly lighter, for a day or two, and then heavier than before."

Elena hailed a cab. They rode back to the Boltons largely in silence, the city doing its early-evening thing around them, the traffic thickening toward rush hour, the light changing in the way of London October evenings when the amber comes early and the street lamps add to rather than replace it.

They were back in the studio by six, and Elena was packing before she had sat down, in the efficient and slightly brutal manner of someone who has made a decision and is implementing it

before the decision can be revisited. Philip sat at the kitchen table with his notebook and tried to be useful with it. He wrote: Larkfield, Sussex. The rectory – sold, apparently; estate agent managing. Elena will arrange access. Leave tomorrow, first light. He wrote: Lane to be informed daily. Any deterioration – call immediately. He looked at what he'd written and added: Deterioration already under way. Define "more than usual."

Alfred was on the sofa with a book in his lap – *The Glass Orchard*, his own novel, which Philip had noticed him returning to several times this week with the quality of a man checking a document he is not sure he still recognises. He wasn't reading it. He was looking at the cover. The author photograph: forty-five, the slightly weathered face, the studied irony. Looking at it the way you look at a picture of your father.

Philip crossed to the sofa and sat at the other end of it. He did not open his notebook.

"The book," he said. "How much of it can you still feel?"

Alfred looked at the cover for another moment. "The first draft," he said. "I can feel that. I can find the room in Finsbury Park, the quality of the light in the mornings, the specific tiredness of the middle section when I didn't know if it was working. The revisions –" He paused. "The revisions are harder. Later drafts feel like something I read, not something I wrote. As though I'm reviewing the record rather than accessing the experience."

"But the first draft."

"Yes. That's still there."

Philip thought about this. He thought about the quality of a first draft – the specific mixture of wrong and essential that characterises the thing before anyone has touched it, the particular flavour of a mind working at full capacity without the constraint of knowing how to do what it's doing. He thought about the fact that Alfred's first drafts were, by Alfred's own account, the worst prose he produced and the most necessary. He thought about what it meant that this was the part that survived.

"Do you want to?" Philip asked. He meant: do you want to go back there. To Larkfield. To the rectory.

"No," Alfred said. He closed the book. "I haven't been since my father's funeral. That was – I came for the service and I was in the car south before the reception ended. I couldn't wait to be away from it."

"What was so urgent?"

Alfred considered. "Nothing," he said. "There was nothing urgent. There never is, when you're running away from a place. The urgency is manufactured to justify the running."

He set the novel on the table. He picked it up again and looked at the cover and put it down a second time, definitively.

"The dream," he said. "That field. I'd had versions of it before – over the years. Not often. But occasionally. I always woke from them with the feeling of having done something I hadn't known I was going to do. The way you feel after a decision you didn't know you were making." He looked at Philip. "I never connected it to Lydia specifically. I just – I had the dream, and

in the morning everything felt a little lighter, and I put it down to sleep and went to work."

"Until last August."

"Until last August. When *The Glass Orchard* was finished and there was nothing left to put between me and – whatever the dream was saying." He paused. "The book took everything I had. And when it was done, it was done. There was nothing left to fill the gap. And the gap turned out to be large."

Elena came through with her bag packed and a second bag in her hand for Alfred. She set it at his feet. She looked at him with the expression she had been producing with increasing frequency: a kind of fierce, pragmatic tenderness, the look of someone who has committed to a course of action without any certainty about its outcome.

"There's a hotel in the village," she said. "I've rung. They have rooms. We can use the rectory during the day and sleep in comfort, at least." She paused. "If you'd rather stay in the rectory overnight – if Lane's right about the environment mattering – we can."

"The hotel," Alfred said. "I'm not going to sleep on the floor of my father's old study."

"Fair enough."

She sat beside him. For a moment they were just sitting, and Philip found something to need in the far end of the studio, and produced a reason to be there looking for it, and let the moment have the space it was trying to occupy. When he came back, they were talking about the drive.

Philip slept in the small room at the back that Elena used for storing canvases. He slept poorly, which he had come to accept as the condition of a man who has too much to think about and has given his thinking no rest period. He lay in the dark between two stacks of unstretched canvas and thought about Rebecca Frost, who had been thirty-two and then not, and about the photographs on Lane's desk, and about the specific arithmetic of what Lane had said: at the current rate. Lane had not supplied the figure at the end of that phrase. He had not needed to. Philip had the data. He had been keeping the data for three weeks.

At the current rate, Alfred would pass out of reach of his adult life within seven to ten days. After that, the memories of the man he had become – the novels, the friendships, the hard-won specific knowledge of what he had cost and what it had meant – would be, at best, stories he had heard about someone else. At worst, gone.

Philip lay in the dark with this arithmetic and did what he had been doing since the evening at the Minerva Club, which was find the limits of his frameworks and then sit at them, neither retreating nor pretending they extended further than they did. He was a man who was witnessing something for which the existing categories were insufficient, and who had decided, somewhere in the past three weeks, to stop looking for the categories and simply watch. Record what he saw. Make it available. Do what could be done with what he had.

At four in the morning he heard, very faintly, Elena's voice from the main studio. Not the words. Just the voice, and then Alfred's voice, and then a silence of the kind that does not require words to be communication. He lay still and did not move. At five, nothing. At six, the grey of early morning came in under the canvas door and Philip got up and made coffee and waited.

He came down the stairs at half past six wearing the expression of a man who has already checked the mirror and absorbed the information it provided and made the decision to continue anyway. Philip, at the kitchen counter with his second cup, looked at him and completed the assessment without comment: still himself, still present, still in possession of the thread that connected him to the forty-five-year-old novelist who had walked into the Minerva Club a month ago. But younger. Perceptibly, specifically younger. The face that had looked twenty-five two days ago now looked somewhere between twenty and twenty-two, the bone structure of the jaw slightly less settled, the expression slightly more unguarded in the way of a face that has not yet fully decided how to hold itself against the world.

"How much?" Philip said.

"Three years," Alfred said. "Maybe more." He poured coffee and drank it standing at the counter, looking out at the mews where the morning was still deciding what kind of day it intended to be. "I didn't tell Elena yet. She's still upstairs."

"Are you all right?"

Alfred turned. The question had come out less steadily than Philip had intended, with a directness that bypassed the careful

calibration he had been maintaining, and he saw it land in Alfred's face before the answer came.

"I'm here," Alfred said. "I'm coherent. I know where I am and what day it is and I know the names of the people in this room and I know what I'm doing and why." He paused. "Today, that's all right."

Philip nodded. He thought about what he would write in the nightly summary tonight: three years lost overnight. He thought about the quality of writing a sentence like that – the act of reducing a person's losses to a unit that could be set down on a line and compared to other lines. He had been doing it for weeks. He was not sure it was adequate to the subject matter. He was not sure adequate was available.

Elena appeared at the top of the stairs five minutes later. She came down without hurrying and stood in the kitchen doorway and looked at Alfred and then she looked at Philip and her face confirmed that she had already noted it and had made the same calculation Philip had made and had arrived at the same conclusion, which was that the calculation had to be set aside until after the drive.

"Bags in the car," she said. "We leave at seven."

They drove south out of London in the thin morning light, the city giving itself up by degrees – the density of it thinning from the dense packed terraces of the inner boroughs to the semi-detached commuter villages of Surrey to the first tentative suggestions of countryside, the land remembering what it had been before the city arrived and not quite able to forget. Alfred was

in the passenger seat, Elena driving, Philip in the back with his notebook. He did not write in it. He looked at the road.

Philip watched the transition through the window with the attention he gave to all transitions, which was the writer's interest in thresholds – the places where one thing became another and the becoming was briefly visible. The city did not end. That was the thing people who did not know London assumed, that there was an edge, a wall, a moment of leaving; but there was no edge, only a long dilution, the dense terraces giving way to the semi-detached and the semi-detached to the bungalow and the bungalow to the field with the bungalow's lights still visible across it, the city thinning into the country over twenty miles so gradually that you could not name the point of crossing. Alfred was crossing a similar threshold, Philip thought, and it too had no edge. There would be no moment when the man became the boy, no wall, no announcement. There would only be the long dilution, the adult thinning into the adolescent into the child, each stage shading into the next so gradually that the people who loved him would not be able to name the day they lost him, would only know, at some point, looking back, that the city was behind them now and they were in open country and could not say when they had left the last house.

Alfred was quiet. This was not the preoccupied quiet of a man working through something in the usual sense but a different quality: the quiet of a person listening. Philip had the impression, which he could not verify and did not try to, that Alfred was listening to the landscape the way you listen to a

conversation you're approaching before you can quite hear the words.

"Do you remember much of it?" Philip said. "From when you lived there."

"Fragments," Alfred said. "A particular smell – chalk and cut grass and the specific damp of old stone. The sound of the church bell, which was wrong in some way I never identified. The way the lane to the rectory curved just before the gate so that you couldn't see the house until you were almost at it." He paused. "My father's study. The smell of his books. I hated that smell when I was young." Another pause. "I don't remember hating it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I know I hated it. I can access the fact of it. But I can't find the feeling. It's – a note without the music. The information is there but the experience it refers to isn't." He looked at the passing landscape. "That's what it's like, now. More and more. Facts without feeling. Events without texture." He looked at his hands. "I'm becoming a summary of myself."

Philip thought about the phrase for the rest of the drive. It was, he recognised, a writer's phrase – the kind of formulation Alfred produced even now, even diminishing, the instinct to find the clean expression outlasting almost everything else – and it was also, he thought, exactly accurate, which was the unbearable part. A summary was what you were left with when the texture was gone. Philip made summaries for a living, in a sense; the first chapter of every novel was a kind

of summary that the rest of the book then had to earn its way out of, filling the outline back in with the specific weight of lived scenes. He had always thought of the summary as the cheap version and the scene as the dear one. Alfred was being reduced, in real time, from the dear version to the cheap one, the scenes draining out of him and leaving the outline, and there was nothing in Philip's craft that could reverse the direction of that particular edit.

He looked at the back of Alfred's head and thought about the difference between knowing a thing and having it. He knew his own mother's kitchen – he could list its contents, the yellow table, the radio on the windowsill, the specific brand of the biscuits – but on a good day, rarely, unbidden, the knowing tipped over into having, and he was there, four years old, the light coming in low across the linoleum, and the difference between the list and the light was the difference between a man and his summary. Alfred was losing the light. He would keep the list for a while longer. And then, Lane had implied without ever saying it, the list would go too, and there would be a person in the world who could not have told you the colour of his mother's table, and then there would not be that person either.

Elena did not look away from the road, but Philip saw her grip on the wheel change.

"Then we find something to anchor you to," she said. "In Larkfield. Whatever the place has to offer, we use it. We anchor you to it."

"What if what it offers makes things worse?"

"Then we come home," she said. "That was always the plan. We go, we see, and if it makes things worse we leave." She glanced at him. "But it might not make things worse. It might make things clear. And clarity is what Lane said you need."

They drove in silence for a while. The landscape settled into its Sussex character: the particular green of the South Downs, deep and unhurried, the sort of green that has been there long enough to have decided it is not going anywhere. Villages appeared and were passed, each one with its pub and its church and its war memorial.

Outside Lewes, Elena pulled into a petrol station and went in for coffee, and Philip and Alfred sat in the car with the engine ticking. The forecourt was ordinary: a van filling up, a woman in a yellow jacket checking her phone, the specific anonymity of a service stop on a weekday morning.

For a moment neither of them spoke. The forecourt did its small ordinary business; a man in a yellow jacket filled a van, a woman checked her phone, the pumps clicked their digits. Then Alfred said, watching the woman with the phone: "I keep thinking I should be more frightened than I am. About today. Going back." He turned the thought over. "And I've worked out why I'm not, which is that I've already done the frightening version of this a thousand times. In dreams. I've been going back to that field every few years since I was thirty, in my sleep, and waking up lighter and then heavier, and never once connecting it to anything. So the field isn't new. The field is the most familiar place I have. It's more familiar than this car, more familiar

than my own flat. I've visited it more often than I've visited any actual location in England." He was quiet. "What frightens me isn't going back to the field. It's that I might find, when I get there, that the real one is smaller than the one I've been visiting. That the dream-field has grown, the way a thing grows when you tend it nightly, and the real one is just a field, with a stile and some dead cow parsley, and I'll stand in it and feel nothing, and the nothing will be worse than any amount of feeling. Because if the real field is empty then the whole architecture comes down. Then it was never about a place. Then it was only ever about me, and there's nowhere to go to fix what's only ever about you."

Philip said: "Lane thinks the place holds what the mind can't reach. That standing in it might give you the thing the dreams have been circling."

"Lane is hopeful," Alfred said, "in the way of a man who failed once and needs this time to be different. I don't hold it against him. I'd be the same. But I notice it. He needs the field to work for reasons that aren't entirely about me." He watched Elena come out of the shop with the cups. "We're all of us using each other's needs as fuel. You need the book. Lane needs the second case. Elena needs —" He stopped. "Elena needs the thing she's needed since she was a girl, which I've been declining to give her for twenty-five years and may now run out of time to give. And I'm using all of you to stay alive a little longer, which is the most reasonable use of other people there is and still feels like the same old theft in a new coat." The doors

opened; the cold came in with the coffee. "Don't write that down," he said. "Or do. I've lost track of which of us the notebook is for."

"Lane said the origin is in the geography as much as the memory," Alfred said. He was looking out at the forecourt. "I've been thinking about what that means. Whether it means the actual field, or just the place. Whether the place is enough or whether I need to find the field specifically."

"Do you know which field?" Philip asked.

"Yes. It's adjacent to the churchyard. There's a stile at the far end of the graveyard wall, and beyond it a field that in summer is full of cow parsley. It was Lydia's shortcut to the village — she used to come through it to reach the rectory." He paused. "She told me once it was her field. That she'd named it. I don't remember what she called it."

"Did you know that when you wrote *The Black Aviary*?"

Alfred considered this for longer than Philip had expected.

"I think I knew it and chose not to know it," he said.

"Which is a different thing. There's a character in that book who has a field like that. A private geography. I gave it to her. And I told myself it was detail, atmosphere, the kind of specificity that makes a fictional world solid. And it was that. It was also a theft." He looked at the forecourt. "I've been stealing from people my whole career and calling it inspiration. The distinction seemed important at the time."

Elena came back with three cups and they drove the last fifteen miles in the quiet that is not uncomfortable silence but

the silence of people who have said the necessary things and are now simply in the same place together, moving in the same direction.

The land changed as they went, in the way the land does in that part of England when you leave the orbit of London and pass into a country that has been farmed and named and walked for a thousand years and has, as a result, a different relationship to time than the city does. London was always becoming something; that was its character, the permanent demolition and re-erection, the cranes against every skyline, the sense of a place perpetually editing itself. The country they were entering now had stopped becoming a long time ago and had settled into being, and Philip, watching it through the window, thought about how the difference was exactly the difference between Alfred's two conditions – the man perpetually editing himself, refining and discarding, and the boy he was returning toward, who had not yet learned that the self was a thing you could revise, who simply was whatever he was on a given afternoon in a field.

Elena drove well, which Philip had expected; she did most things with the same economy of attention, the refusal to spend more of herself on a task than the task required, holding the surplus in reserve for the thing that would need it. He watched her hands on the wheel and her eyes on the road and thought about what it cost her to be doing this – to be steering, literally, the man she had loved since childhood back toward the geography of the moment he had begun to be lost – and to be doing it without any visible draw on the reserve, the calm maintained not

because the calm was easy but because someone had to keep the car on the road and she had appointed herself.

Philip thought about the notebook in his lap and about the book he had promised to write – Alfred had asked him for it and he had agreed, and the agreeing had been easy because at the time it had been hypothetical, a promise made to a man who was still himself. The man in the front seat was still himself, or was still himself in the ways that mattered, but the margin was narrowing and the thing that Philip had promised to write was still not written and he was not sure he yet had the terms for it. He had facts. He had a timeline. He had the vocabulary of observation. What he did not yet have was the shape of the thing.

He was thinking about this when Alfred said, quietly:  
"There."

They were on a minor road, hedgerows on both sides, and the road had begun to descend, and through a gap in the hedge to the left the Sussex weald had opened up below them: fields and woodland and a river catching the morning light, and in the middle distance, tucked into a fold of the hills, a small village with a grey church tower and a high street and a green with a war memorial.

Philip leaned forward.

He had not known quite what he expected. He had expected something. The village below was modest and specific and did not appear to be doing anything in particular. It was simply a village, in the way that the places of childhood are simply what they are, stripped of the mythology that distance and time apply

to them and reduced – or elevated, depending on how you looked at it – to the thing itself.

Alfred had gone very still.

Elena slowed the car. She looked at him.

"We can stop," she said. "Get some food. Take a breath before –"

"No," he said. "I need to see it. Before I lose my nerve." He looked at the village below them, at the grey stone tower of the church, at the lane that curved away toward the far end of the high street and presumably up to where the rectory stood behind its garden wall. "I need to go now. Before I'm anyone different from who I am at this moment."

Philip understood. He wrote nothing. He looked at the village below and thought: here it is. Here is the field. Here is the seventeen-year-old and the woman asking him to stay. And then he thought: here is also the forty-five-year-old who has been carrying that field for twenty-five years and has been trying to revise it from the inside of a body that keeps going backwards. Both of those things were true simultaneously. Both of them were in the car.

"Philip?" Elena said.

"Yes," he said. "Let's go."

She put the car in gear. They descended toward the village.

## Chapter Five

## The Old Rectory

The village at close range was what it had been at distance: specific, unhurried, committed to being what it was without explanation or advertisement. Elena parked outside the Shepherd's Crook, which had the reassuring solidity of a pub that has been in the same place for three centuries and has no intention of being anywhere else, and they climbed out into a morning that smelled of chalk and damp grass and something harder to name – the quality of air that has not had to contend with very much traffic and has, as a result, retained its own character. Philip stood beside the car and looked at the high street and felt the way he always felt in English villages of a certain age: that the centuries were thin here, one layer over another, and that if the light changed at the right angle you would see them all at once.

Alfred did not look at the high street. He was looking up the lane that ran past the side of the church, toward the far end of the village where a stand of old yews marked the boundary of the churchyard, and his expression was the expression of a man reading a text he has read before and finding it both familiar and strange. Philip noticed this and wrote nothing. There was a time for the notebook and this was not it.

An elderly woman came out of the small general shop with a basket and looked at Alfred in the way of someone who has just encountered a face that is almost a face they know. She looked for a moment, decided, and walked on. Philip watched this happen.

The village knew what it had produced, apparently, and could still identify it in a different generation. He thought about what that meant for the man beside him, who was at this moment approximately the age the village had last seen him, and thought about small communities and long memory and the specific burden of coming from somewhere that remembers you before you became yourself.

They walked up through the village, past the post office and a gallery that sold watercolours of the Downs in various weathers and a small newsagent whose window displayed tobacco alongside local walking maps, toward the church. The village had the quality that Philip associated with the kind of place that had been bypassed by the main road in the early twentieth century and had, as a result, missed both the damage and the benefit of passing traffic. It had stayed itself. It had the high street and the pub and the church and the green with its war memorial – sixteen names, which was a great many names for a village this size – and it had not acquired very much since.

They reached the churchyard gate. Alfred stopped. He put his hand on the latch but did not lift it.

The yews were very old – older than the church, possibly, the kind of yews that predate the Christianity they were supposed to represent and belong instead to whatever preceded it. Their shadows fell across the path to the church door in overlapping dark patches. Headstones tilted at angles that suggested the earth had made up its own mind about them over several centuries.

"Is he in there?" Philip asked.

"Yes," Alfred said. "At the far end, under the north wall." He did not lift the latch. "Not today. I'll go tomorrow morning. On my own." He looked at the church for another moment and then he took his hand off the gate and turned up the lane toward the rectory.

Philip and Elena followed. The lane was narrow and the hedgerows on both sides were in that specific state of autumn where they had not yet given up but were beginning to think about it, the last of the summer's green going amber at the edges. Around the curve – the curve Alfred had mentioned in the car, the one that kept the house invisible until you were almost there – the rectory appeared.

It was larger than Philip had pictured it. Georgian, as the estate agent's particulars had said, with the proportions that the period did well: generous sash windows, a good deal of pale stone, a front garden that had once been formal and was now simply growing as it chose, the box hedges gone their own way, the rose beds returned to rose-and-bramble in roughly equal measure. A FOR SALE board stood at an angle near the gate, as though uncertain of its own welcome.

The estate agent was waiting at the rectory gate, a man in his early forties with the particular bonhomie of someone whose professional manner has been built carefully over years and sits on him with the quality of a good suit: well-fitted, occasionally revealing. He had been told, Philip gathered, that someone with a connection to the property was interested in viewing it, and he had prepared accordingly – which is to say he had prepared the

smile and the patter and the careful deployment of the phrase "original features." He began the patter when he saw them coming and stopped it very quickly when he saw Alfred's face, which had the quality, Philip thought, of a man walking toward something he has spent twenty-five years walking away from and has arrived at the decision, finally, that the walking away has not helped.

"I grew up here," Alfred said, before the estate agent could speak. "My father was the vicar. I haven't been back since his funeral." He paused. "I won't be long."

The estate agent stepped aside.

The house was Georgian, as Philip had known from the agent's particulars, and it had the quality of Georgian buildings in this specific state of vacancy: the bones very good and the flesh having given up without the bones quite following. The wallpaper in the entrance hall had begun a measured withdrawal from the upper corners. The floorboards spoke. The smell was the smell of a house that has been waiting without impatience, which is the particular smell of old plaster and settled dust and the faint ghost of the fires that were lit here for a hundred and fifty years and are no longer.

Alfred stood in the hall for a moment. He put his hand on the newel post of the stairs. He held it there as though he were taking its pulse. The hall was longer than Philip had expected from the exterior, with a succession of doors on the right and the stairs at the far end, and it had the quality of a space that has been navigated thousands of times and carries the memory of that navigation in some way beyond the merely physical.

"The study first," he said. He went to a door at the far end of the hall and opened it without hesitation, without having to work out which door it was, and Philip followed and Elena followed, and they stood in a small room with a window overlooking the churchyard where the yews were dark and the headstones tilted at the various angles of age. Empty bookshelves. A bare desk. The wood of the shelving still darkened in a rectangle where something large had stood. The window glass had the faint distortion of old glass, and the churchyard beyond it had a slight wavering quality, as though the stones were not quite fixed.

"He kept his books here," Alfred said. "Theology, mostly. Commentaries. The standard texts." He looked at the empty shelves. "And the others. The ones he didn't talk about. Dickens, Hardy, a battered Trollope in three volumes. He read them the way some men drink - steadily, without advertisement, as though it were a private vice." He moved to the window. "He used to sit here in the evenings and I would come to the door - I must have been ten, eleven - and I would watch him read. He never looked up. I used to think he didn't know I was there."

He moved along the empty shelves as he spoke, his hand passing over the bare wood, and at the end of the lowest shelf he stopped and crouched and looked at something Philip could not at first see - a place where the shelf met the wall, where the wood was less faded, a small rectangle of darker grain.

"There was a locked drawer here," Alfred said. "Built into the shelving. He kept it locked my whole childhood and I never

knew what was in it – I assumed money, or the parish accounts, the boring administrative secrets of a man's working life. It used to drive me to distraction, that drawer. The one locked thing in a house where everything else was open. I built whole fantasies about it." He stood. "After he died I asked the solicitor. He'd left instructions. The drawer was to be opened by me alone, and what was in it was – " He stopped. "Sermons. Just sermons. The ones he'd written and never preached. Drafts he'd thought too doubtful, too uncertain, to deliver to the parish. He'd locked away the only honest things he ever wrote, because a vicar can't stand in front of his village and admit he isn't sure. The certainty was the job. The doubt went in the drawer." He looked at the place where the drawer had been. "I read them in one night, in a hotel, after the funeral, before I drove south at dawn. They were the best things he ever made and no one was ever meant to see them and he wanted me to have them and couldn't say so to my face. So he used a solicitor and a locked drawer. We really were the same man, posting things we couldn't say through whatever intermediary would carry them. I've spent my life publishing my doubts to strangers, and he spent his locking them in a drawer for one reader, and I used to think that made us opposites."

"Did he?" Elena said.

"I think he always did," Alfred said. "I think knowing I was there and choosing not to acknowledge it was the nearest he could get to an invitation."

"He never asked me what I was reading," Alfred said. "I've thought about that. Other fathers ask — it's the easy currency, what are you reading, what's it about, the small change of paternal interest that costs nothing and buys a kind of credit. Mine never spent it. And I took the silence as indifference, the way you would, the way any child would. It was only this year, going backwards through everything, that I understood the silence might have been the opposite. That he didn't ask because asking would have been a transaction, and what he wanted wasn't a transaction. He wanted the thing itself — the two of us in a room with our separate books, not talking. He thought that was love. He may have been right. It's certainly closer to love than most of what gets called love." He ran a finger along the empty shelf, through the dust of it. "I built a whole career on the conviction that he hadn't loved me, and I'm standing in his study at — whatever I am today — discovering that I may simply have been illiterate in the only language he spoke."

Philip thought about the books the man had kept and not discussed — the Dickens, the Hardy, the three-volume Trollope — and about reading as a private vice, and about the specific loneliness of a man who feels things in a register he has no permission to express, in a vocation that rewards certainty and a marriage and a village that expect it of him. He thought: here is a second man in this story who could not find the language for what he most felt, and who was misread for it by the people who most needed to read him. The father in his study and the son in his novels were the same problem stated twice, a generation

apart, and the son had spent twenty-five years believing he was the cure for the father when he was in fact the repetition of him.

He was quiet for a moment, looking at the churchyard. The window gave the yews that slightly wavering quality, and beyond them the headstones in their various arrangements. Philip thought about the box of reviews – the thing Lydia would describe tomorrow, which none of them yet knew about – and about what it meant to keep something in a box in the room where you worked. Not displayed. Not discussed. Just kept.

"Did you ever read his sermons?" Philip asked.

Alfred turned from the window. "Some of them. He wrote longhand, in a very small hand, in notebooks. When I was twelve or thirteen I used to come in here sometimes – not when he was here, when the room was empty – and I would read them." He paused. "They were about certainty. Everything he wrote was about the value of certainty: the importance of knowing what you believed, of acting from it, of not accommodating the doubt that experience produces. He wrote about doubt as though it were a moral failing." He looked at the empty desk. "I spent my whole adult life writing about uncertainty. About the way experience accumulates and doesn't resolve, about the way people carry contradictory things simultaneously and survive. I always thought of this as a refutation of him." He was quiet. "It may have been a conversation."

They went upstairs. Three doors on the landing, and Alfred went to the one on the right without consulting his feet, which

knew the way. The room was small, with a window overlooking the overgrown garden and a built-in bookshelf along one wall, empty now, and the quality of an empty childhood bedroom which is the quality of a space that has been large and is now, through the operation of the intervening years, small. The window had been painted shut at some point and the paint had cracked along the frame in a pattern that Alfred touched with one finger as though checking that it was still there.

The landing held the particular light of upstairs in an empty house – thinner than the light below, filtered through the dust on windows no one had cleaned in two years, falling across boards that had been walked by a family and were now walked by no one. Philip had been in a number of empty houses in his life, the houses of the dead mostly, the melancholy duty of clearing a parent's home, and he had come to recognise the specific atmosphere of a house that has outlived its purpose: not haunted, nothing so dramatic, but expectant, as though the rooms were still waiting for the life that had filled them to resume, and had not yet been told it would not. The three doors stood as they had presumably always stood. Alfred went to the right-hand one with the unconscious certainty of the body's memory – the feet knowing the distance, the hand finding the height of the handle without the eyes' help – and Philip thought about how the body kept these maps long after the mind had filed them away, how a man could not have told you, asked cold, which door had been his, and yet could walk to it unerringly in the dark of forty years, because the knowing was not in the part of him that answered

questions. It was in the part that had now, in him alone of all of them, begun to be the only part left. The mind was thinning. But the body still knew which door was his, and would know, Philip suspected, after the mind had forgotten that it had ever lived in a house at all.

"I wrote The Rectory at Larkfield in this room," he said. "Sitting on the floor – I didn't have a desk. Just a notebook and a biro and the specific absolute certainty of nineteen that what I was writing was important." He sat on the floor as he must have sat then, back against the wall beneath the window, knees up. He looked at the opposite wall as though the text might still be there. "It was terrible, of course. The book I published wasn't that book. The book I published was written three years later, in a bedsit in Finsbury Park, when I knew enough to understand why the first one had been terrible and what it would have to be instead."

"What was the first one about?" Philip asked.

"Escape," Alfred said, without hesitation. "A boy who leaves a village because the village is too small and the world is too large and the leaving is entirely heroic from his own point of view. The father was a villain. The village was a trap. The city was a liberation." He paused. "Everything the nineteen-year-old who wrote it believed, rendered with all the subtlety you'd expect from a nineteen-year-old who had been told he was gifted and had decided this was a sufficient qualification."

"And the published book?"

"The published book is about a boy who leaves a village," Alfred said. "But the leaving is not heroic. The father is not a villain. The village is not a trap. They are all simply what they are — incomplete, like everything else, containing things of value and things of damage in the proportions that real things contain them. The boy doesn't escape. He just goes to a different place." He looked at the empty bookshelf. "I couldn't write that book until I'd lived in London long enough to understand that London was not the liberation. It was just the next place. And the things I'd brought from here were still there."

Elena sat down on the floor beside him. Philip stood in the doorway with his notebook open and did not write in it. He thought about origin points and the relationship between the terrible first attempt and the finished thing, and about the courage of a person who has sat in a room with a notebook and believed that what he was writing was important. He thought: not entirely wrong.

They stayed there for some minutes, all three of them, not talking. Below, the estate agent moved around the hall with the measured patience of someone professional enough to know when presence is unhelpful. Above, the painted-shut window admitted the Sussex autumn light, which is a yellower and more forgiving light than London's, as though the county has made a different arrangement with the sun.

Philip found that the room produced in him an effect he had not anticipated and did not entirely welcome, which was envy. Not of Alfred — nothing about Alfred's situation could be envied —

but of the room itself, of what it represented: a place a person had begun, a specific small space in which a specific young person had sat on the floor and believed, with the total unembarrassed conviction of the young, that what he was making mattered. Philip had had such a room. Everyone who made anything had had such a room. And the tragedy of the ordinary life, the un-regressing life, was that you could never go back into it – you could visit the geography, stand in the doorway, but the person who had occupied it was gone, dispersed into the man you had become, unrecoverable. Alfred alone, of all of them, was being given the terrible gift of return. He was going back into the room not as a visitor but as the boy, and the cost of the gift was the boy, and Philip stood in the doorway of a childhood bedroom in Sussex and understood that he was looking at the thing every writer secretly wanted – to go back to the beginning, to be again the one who had not yet learned what it would cost – and that he was looking at it in the one form in which no one could possibly want it.

They arranged with the estate agent to have access for three days. There was no furniture, but Philip and Elena had brought sleeping bags and a camping stove and the practical supplies of people who have anticipated rough conditions, and the arrangement took twenty minutes and the agent left looking satisfied in the way of someone who has unexpectedly turned an anomalous situation into a professional resolution. When he was gone, they stood in the kitchen in the pale sunlight of a Sussex October and looked at each other.

"I need an hour," Alfred said. "In the house. On my own."

Elena looked at him.

"Go to the village," he said. "Get food. Get something to cook tonight. I'll be here when you come back. I'm not going anywhere."

Philip could see the calculation moving in Elena's face – the weighing of the risk against the probable cost of refusing – and he watched it reach its conclusion, which was that Alfred had been navigating his own disintegration with more intelligence than anyone had a right to expect, and that the right to some privacy in the place where it had originated was not an unreasonable request.

"One hour," she said.

"One hour," he agreed.

They went to the village. Philip bought bread and cheese and wine at the small shop on the high street while Elena found a butcher. They were gone for something closer to ninety minutes than one, owing to a conversation with the butcher about a local football fixture that Philip could not navigate out of, and when they returned to the rectory they found Alfred sitting at the bottom of the stairs with his head in his hands.

The shop was the kind that had survived by being the only one, and had acquired, in surviving, the character of an institution – the post office counter at the back, the noticeboard by the door advertising a quiz night and a lost cat and a campaign about a bus route, the specific smell of a place that sold bread and firelighters and birthday cards and local

honey without troubling to separate them by theme. The woman behind the counter served Philip with the unhurried courtesy of someone for whom a stranger was a small event, and made the kind of conversation that was really a form of reconnaissance, the gentle establishing of who you were and what had brought you, conducted so skilfully that Philip found he had told her he was visiting the old rectory before he had decided whether to.

"The vicar's house," she said. Not a question. "Been empty two years now. They say it's sold but you never know, do you, the way things go." She bagged the wine. "His son came back, I heard. Yesterday. Made a stir." She looked at Philip with frank, friendly curiosity. "You'd be with him, then."

"I would," Philip said, and understood that there was no point in being anything else; the village had already done its arithmetic, had counted the car and the strangers and the son and reached its sum, and would go on reaching sums about them for as long as they stayed, because that was what a village was – a machine for noticing, a thousand years old, that had been keeping track of the comings and goings of the rectory since before any of them were born and would keep track long after. He paid, and thanked her, and went out into the high street thinking about how Alfred had spent his life fleeing exactly this, the being-known, the small relentless attention of a place that remembered your father; and how the very thing he had fled was the thing Lane now prescribed, the geography that held what the city's anonymity had let him hide from. The village had never stopped watching. That was its menace and, it was turning out, its medicine.

Philip sat beside him. Elena sat on the step above. Neither of them spoke.

After a while Alfred said: "A woman came. While you were out. Alice Torrance. She lives in the village now – she said she'd seen the car, recognised the plates. She knew it was a hire car, she said, but she recognised the specific model, and apparently she knew that I used a particular company." He paused. "She has been noting these things for twenty-five years. Not obsessively. Just – specifically. The way you note things about people you haven't let go of."

He was quiet for a moment.

"She and I were together that last summer. Before I left for London. We were – she was twenty, I was nineteen, and it lasted from June to September and I ended it by telling her I was leaving and not coming back. Not even by telling her. By telling the wall of my room, approximately in her direction."

"What was she like?" Elena said. Philip understood the question: not what was she like when you were nineteen, but what was she like today, in the hall of this house, confronting you after twenty-five years.

"She was –" Alfred stopped. He seemed to be finding words for something he had not yet described. "She was kind," he said, finally. "Not in the way you are kind when you are trying to be kind. In the way you are kind when you have been through enough that cruelty has stopped appealing. She had a quality of – having arrived somewhere. Having done the work." He paused. "She is handsome rather than beautiful now. She looks like a woman who

made choices and knows which ones were wrong and has not turned this into a philosophy."

"What did she say?"

"She married," he said. "Has a daughter. Twenty-three now, doing a doctorate in Bristol. For a few weeks, after I left that summer, she thought the daughter might have been mine. The timing was close enough. It wasn't — she told me that plainly. But she'd hoped, she said. She wanted something of me to stay in the village." He looked at the floor. "I never thought about what I left behind. I thought leaving was the only transaction. Apparently there was a great deal on the other side of it that continued after I departed."

"What did she want?" Elena asked.

"Nothing," Alfred said. "That was the thing. She didn't want an apology, didn't want an accounting. She just wanted to look at me. She said I looked exactly as I had when I was nineteen, before I became Alfred Wale the novelist, and that the boy at nineteen had been beautiful — she used that word the way you use it for something that was and is gone." He paused. "She said: you still look like someone who is going to change the world. And I said: that boy was a coward who ran from everything he was afraid of. And she said: yes, but he was beautiful while he was running." He stood, slowly. "Then she said she was at Primrose Cottage on the green if I needed anything. And she left."

"What stays with me," Alfred said, after a while, "is that she'd kept track. Not in a way that cost her anything obvious — she has a whole life, a husband, a daughter doing a doctorate,

she didn't put her own living on hold to maintain a grievance about me. But she'd kept track. She knew which hire firm I used. She knew the shape of my career from a distance, the way you'd follow the weather of a place you used to live. Twenty-five years of low-level attention to a person who gave her, what, three months, and then a sentence said to a wall." He was quiet. "I have spent my life assuming I was the one who paid attention. The writer, the noticer, the one who saw people clearly enough to use them. And it turns out half the people I walked away from were noticing me the whole time, more accurately than I noticed them, because they had a reason to and I had only a use for them." He looked at the floor of the hall. "You can't put that in a book. The minute you write it down it becomes a thing the writer noticed, and the whole point is that the writer was the one who failed to notice. The form defeats the content. There's no honest way to confess in prose that you were never as observant as your prose."

Philip, who had been thinking about exactly this problem for six weeks, and who would think about it for considerably longer, said nothing, because anything he said would have been a noticer noticing, and the silence was the only available form of agreement.

Philip thought about this. He thought about the specific mercy of a woman who has been offered the occasion for a reckoning and has declined it — not because she has nothing to reckon, but because the occasion arrived looking like a person sitting on the stairs with his head in his hands, and she had

understood that the reckoning was already happening, and that her participation would not help it along but only perform. He thought this was a form of intelligence that deserved to be named. He thought also about the quality of yes, but he was beautiful while he was running, which was not consolation and was not forgiveness and was not absolution, but was something more honest than any of those things: the acknowledgement that the running had had its own truth, its own completeness, before it became the thing it turned into in the longer view.

They cooked that night on the camping stove in the kitchen, the four walls of the room absorbing the warmth the way old walls absorb things: slowly, with the suggestion that they have been waiting to do it. Elena had bought lamb chops and root vegetables from the butcher, Philip had contributed the wine, and Alfred ate with the specific appetite of a twenty-year-old which was one of the few unarguable advantages of the situation. The candles they had found in the camping supplies made the kitchen look less like a vacancy and more like an occupation, which Philip supposed it was.

"It's the strangest thing," he said, between mouthfuls, "to be hungry like this again. I'd forgotten it. Real hunger – the kind that makes food taste the way it's supposed to. Somewhere in my thirties it just – went. Eating became a thing you did, a maintenance, occasionally a pleasure if the place was good enough, but the engine of it went quiet and I didn't notice it going. And now it's back, roaring, and a lamb chop in an empty house off a camping stove is the best thing I've eaten in fifteen

years." He looked at the chop bone in his hand and laughed, the first easy laugh Philip had heard from him in weeks. "I'm going backwards into ruin and the food is wonderful. Nobody warns you that the apocalypse comes with an appetite." Elena, across the candles, was watching him eat with an expression Philip chose not to examine too closely – the specific expression of a woman watching a man enjoy something simple, storing it, the way you store a thing you know you will want to remember the exact shape of later. "Eat," she said. "There's more. Eat while you can taste it." And he did, with the unselfconscious greed of the young, and for the length of the meal the kitchen held nothing but three people and the food and the candlelight, and the thing in the future was not, for that length of time, in the room.

It was, Philip thought afterward, one of the strangest evenings of his life, and one of the best, and the strangeness and the goodness were the same thing. Three people who two months ago had barely known each other, camped in an empty Georgian rectory in the Sussex dark, cooking lamb chops on a single gas ring by the light of camping candles, while one of them grew younger by the hour and all of them knew it and none of them spoke of it, because the not-speaking was the gift the evening was for. There was a particular grace available in such circumstances that was available nowhere else: the grace of the temporary, the knowledge that this could not last and need not be sustained, that the ordinary rules of how much people could mean to each other had been suspended by emergency and would not be enforced. They talked the way people talk in such suspensions –

without the usual rationing, without the careful holding-back that normally governs how much of yourself you spend on people you have not known long. Alfred talked about his father and his books and his childhood. Elena talked about painting, about the years of being a woman in a trade that praised women's work and bought men's, about the specific loneliness of the studio that was also its freedom. And Philip, who had come on this trip resolved to observe, found himself talking too – about his marriage, which had ended a decade ago without acrimony or much grief, the quiet failure of two people who had liked each other and run out of things to say; about the fifth novel and its long stall; about his own father, the unconnected man, the loss he had not prepared for.

At some point Alfred said: "We'll none of us ever have an evening like this again." He said it without melodrama, as a simple forecast. "Whatever happens. Even if Lane's right, even if it works and I come out the other side somehow – we won't have this. This is the kind of thing that only happens once, on the way to something, and you only know it was the thing afterward, when it's gone. So I want to say, while we're in it: this is the thing. Right now. This kitchen. I'd like that on the record, Philip, since you're keeping one. Not the crisis. Not the cure, if there is one. This."

Philip did not reach for the notebook. He kept it, instead, the way he was learning to keep things – in the place that did not require ink. But he knew, even then, that of everything he would eventually write, this was the scene he would most fail to

capture, because the thing that made it what it was could not survive being written down: the specific warmth of a doomed and temporary happiness, shared by three people in a cold house, that was real precisely because it could not last.

Alfred talked about his father. Not the father of grievance and departure – not the figure of authority against whom the leaving had been necessary – but the other one, the one who read Dickens in his study in the evenings and sat with what he knew without advertising it. The father who had written his sermons at the desk in the room overlooking the churchyard, in a language his son had found suffocating, about things his son had needed to disbelieve. Philip wrote nothing. He listened and let the listening be sufficient, and understood that this was what the house was for: not resolution, not revision, but the recovery of what had been there before the leaving made it necessary to reduce it to something manageable.

He talked, also, about the village – the texture of growing up somewhere where everyone knows who your father is, which is a version of being known that is not the same as being seen. He talked about the church and about his complicated relationship with what was said in it, which was the relationship of a person who could not accept the premise but found himself repeatedly moved by the practice: the quality of voice in an old stone building, the ceremony of attention that weekly repetition produces, the way the same words mean different things at seven and at seventeen. He talked about the particular loneliness of being the cleverest person you had access to, in a village, and

what that kind of loneliness does and does not produce in a person.

It produced, he said, two things that looked alike and were opposite. It produced the hunger to leave – the conviction that one's real life was elsewhere, among one's own kind, in a city, in a future – and that hunger was healthy, was correct, was the thing that got a clever child out of a small place and into a large one where it could become what it was for. But it produced also a kind of permanent contempt, a habit of measuring every place and person against the imagined elsewhere and finding them wanting, and that habit did not switch off when you reached the elsewhere. You arrived in the city carrying the village's worth of contempt, and you turned it, for lack of a village, on the people nearest to hand – the ones who loved you, generally, since they were the ones who came near enough to be measured. "I left to escape the smallness," Alfred said, "and I took the smallness with me, because the smallness wasn't the village. The smallness was the way I looked at things. I just hadn't noticed, because in the village there'd been a village to blame for it." He turned his glass on the table. "Lydia wasn't small. The field wasn't small. I was small, in the way of a person who needs everything around him to be smaller than he is so that the leaving will feel like ascent. And I built a career describing other people's smallness with great precision, and the precision was real, I did see them clearly – but I only ever looked down. Twenty-five years of accurate observation, all of it aimed downward. It never once occurred to me to look at someone and find them larger than

myself. That's not a technique you can learn late. I'm learning it now, going backwards, at speed, and it turns out it's the only thing worth knowing and I'm going to have about a week to know it in."

Elena listened. She had been listening, Philip thought, in this specific way for a long time – with the patient accuracy of someone who knows the person well enough to hear what the words are approaching. She refilled his wine glass without being asked. The camping stove hissed. The candles held. Philip looked at them both across the table and thought: this is what twenty-two years of knowing someone looks like, at the end. Not the performance of intimacy but the thing itself, which requires no performance because it has been so thoroughly established that the establishing is no longer necessary.

He slept that night on the floor of the spare room in his sleeping bag. Old houses settle in specific rhythms – the expansion and contraction of wood that has been doing this for a hundred and fifty winters and has the sequence long memorised – and this house settled with the competence of something practised. He lay in the dark and thought about Lane and about the box in the vicar's study and about the specific loneliness of pride that cannot find its language. He thought about Alice Torrance saying beautiful and about the precision of the word – not flattering, not consoling, but accurate in the way that only people who have lost something can be accurate about what it was. He thought about what Alfred had said in the car: before I'm anyone different from who I am at this moment. He had said it

about the urgency of arriving while he still could. Philip thought it was about something larger. He thought about that for a long time, and then he slept.

He woke once, deep in the night, and could not place where he was, and lay for a moment in the absolute country dark – the real dark, the dark that cities have forgotten exists – listening to the house. It spoke in the way old houses speak: a tick here, a settling there, the long sigh of timber giving up the day's warmth degree by degree. And under the house-sounds, faintly, he heard the other thing, which was the sound of someone awake elsewhere in the building. Not distress. Just wakefulness – the small shifts and pauses of a person who is not sleeping and is trying not to wake the others with it. He lay still and did not go to investigate, because some wakefulness is private and the kindest response to it is to leave it alone, and after a while the other sound stopped, or he stopped hearing it, and he thought about the man two rooms away lying awake in the house he had grown up in, in a body that was unmaking itself toward the boy who had slept in that house first, and about how there was no comfort he could bring that would not be an intrusion, and how the deepest form of company, sometimes, was simply to lie in the same dark and let the other person be unwitnessed in their not-sleeping. Then the country dark took him back down, and he slept, and in the morning there was frost on the grass and a door closing softly below.

He woke to the sound of a door closing softly below. By the time he was at the window Alfred was already through the garden

gate and crossing the lane toward the church, his hands in his pockets, his walk the walk of someone going somewhere he has decided to go and has stopped thinking about whether to. The morning was clear and cold, the frost still on the grass at the edges of the lane. Philip watched him until he was out of sight past the churchyard wall.

Elena appeared at the bedroom door behind him.

"He asked me last night if he could go alone," she said. "To the grave."

"Yes," Philip said.

"I said yes."

"Yes," he said again. They stood at the window and looked at the empty lane.

They went down and made coffee and sat at the kitchen table in the Sussex morning, which had the quality of all Sussex mornings in late October: bright, cold, a light that slanted in under the cloud and illuminated things precisely rather than warmly. Elena had the sketchbook on the table in front of her but had not opened it. Philip had the notebook but had not opened that either. They were past the point of occupying themselves against the waiting.

"What do you think he's saying?" Elena asked.

"I don't know," Philip said. "I think he's saying what he should have said thirty years ago and couldn't, because thirty years ago his father was still alive and saying it to the living is harder than saying it to the dead." He paused. "Or possibly the other way around. I've never been sure which is harder."

"Have you been in this situation?"

"My father died when I was thirty-eight," Philip said. "We were not close in any way that required distance to correct. We were simply – not particularly connected. There wasn't a conversation that needed to happen. There was just the fact of his being gone, and the quality of a loss that you haven't prepared for because you didn't realise how much of the preparation had been happening without your noticing." He looked at his coffee. "I wrote a novel about it. Which is what I do."

Elena opened the sketchbook. She sketched without deliberation, the way she apparently always sketched: the hand moving before the mind had committed. Philip watched, without trying to see what she was drawing. After a while she turned the book so he could look. It was the kitchen: the camping stove, the wine bottles from last night, the candles burned to their ends, and at the centre of it the table with three unmatched mugs still there from the night before. No figures. Just the space they had occupied.

"I keep painting rooms where people were," she said. "I don't know why. I find it more interesting than the people, usually." She looked at the sketch. "In this case I'm not sure I could do it the other way. The room has more in it than I can manage."

Philip found that he could not sit any longer. The kitchen, the waiting, the specific helplessness of being a hundred yards from a man at his father's grave and able to do nothing about it – it accumulated past the point where stillness was tolerable. He

told Elena he was going to walk, and she nodded without asking where, and he went out through the garden gate and turned, deliberately, away from the church, because the church was Alfred's that morning and Philip had no business in it.

He walked down the lane and along the edge of the churchyard wall, the old flint cold and damp under his hand, and at the far end of it he found the stile. He had not been looking for it; he had forgotten, in the press of everything, that Alfred had described it in the car – the stile at the end of the graveyard wall, and beyond it the field. But here it was, two worn steps of grey wood, and he climbed it without deciding to, and stood on the other side, and understood that he was in the field. Lydia's field. The one she had named, the name now lost. The one he had given to a character in a book that was a theft.

It was October and the cow parsley was long over, the tall dead stems standing brittle and silvered where in summer they would have been a froth of white at waist height. The field sloped away toward a line of trees and a glint of water beyond, and the light came across it low and yellow, the Sussex light Alfred had talked about, the light that fell at the end of the day off the Downs. Philip stood in it and tried to see what a seventeen-year-old would have seen, standing here, being offered everything a girl owned and finding it small. He could see why a boy would find it small. That was the terrible part, the part you could not say to anyone: the field was small. It was beautiful and it was finite and a clever frightened boy with the whole century in front of him would have stood here and felt the walls

of it, and the world beyond the trees would have pulled at him like a tide, and he would have gone, and any honest accounting had to admit that the going was not, in itself, a crime. The crime was only ever in the manner of it – in the pricing, in the finding-small said aloud to a face that had just made itself defenceless.

Philip stood in the field for a long time. Then he climbed back over the stile and walked up the lane to the rectory, and he did not tell Elena where he had been, and he did not write it down, though he knew already that he would, eventually, have to.

Alfred was gone for two hours. When he came back through the garden gate his face had the quality that Philip had begun to associate with these returns from difficulty: not resolved, not healed, but altered in the way that things alter when they have been looked at directly for the first time. He came through the kitchen door and sat at the table and Elena put tea in front of him without being asked and he held the cup and looked at it.

While he was gone Philip had sat in the kitchen and tried not to imagine it – the man at the grave, the things being said or not said to the stone – and had failed, because imagining was what he did, it was the involuntary motion of his mind, and he could no more switch it off than stop his heart by deciding to. He had imagined a dozen versions of the graveside, each one a small fiction, each one false in the way that all his fictions about Alfred were now false: too shaped, too resolved, arriving at a meaning the real event would decline to provide. This was the discovery the whole autumn kept making him make, in different

forms: that the imagination, his great instrument, the thing he had honed for fifty years, was useless against the actual. It could not predict what Alfred would say to the grave. It could only invent satisfying lies about it, and then be corrected by the man himself, who came back through the gate carrying the real thing, which was, as always, stranger and plainer and less resolved than anything Philip had been able to dream up. He had spent his life believing the imagination was a way of reaching the truth. The autumn was teaching him that it was, at least as often, a way of being comfortably wrong in advance, of pre-filling the unbearable with the bearable so that the unbearable, when it arrived, would find its place already taken.

"Someone was there," he said. "At the grave. A woman. Sixty, maybe older. Well-dressed, carrying late chrysanthemums." He paused. "She said she was Lydia. My father's second wife. She had been the housekeeper, and then, after my mother died, more than that." He looked at the table. "I didn't know. Either I was never told or I didn't read the letters. Both are possible. Both are probably true."

Philip looked at Elena. Elena looked at Philip.

"She'd come to put flowers on the grave," Alfred said. "She does it every week, she said. Forty-five weeks of the year, or thereabouts. She said that when she saw me coming across the churchyard she thought for a moment – from the distance, from the way I moved – that she was seeing him. His walk. And then she was close enough to see how young I looked and she knew she wasn't." He paused. "She wasn't frightened by it. She said she'd heard

rumours in the village that the vicar's son had come back and looked like a young man, and she'd thought: I'll go and see for myself."

"What did she tell you?" Elena said.

"She said he talked about me. Near the end. Said he wished he'd been easier on me. Less rigid. Less certain about everything." He stopped. "She said he kept the reviews. Every review of every book. She said he didn't understand them – the books were too modern for him, she said it the way you'd say the wallpaper was the wrong colour – but he kept them all. In a box in the study. She found it after he died, when she was going through the room. There was no label on the box. But when she opened it, it was all there: every clipping, every photocopy, every print-out. In chronological order." He was quiet for a moment. "He'd been keeping them since the first book. She showed him the box once, she said, and asked whether he wanted to do anything with it. He said no. He just – showed her he'd found it, and put it back."

The kitchen was very quiet.

"He didn't know how to say it," Alfred said. "That was his limitation, and it was genuine, and I spent twenty-five years interpreting it as indifference. It wasn't indifference. It was the absence of the language for something he very much felt." He looked at the window. "I used to think that silence was a form of judgment. It isn't always. Sometimes it's just the end of a man's reach, the point beyond which he cannot extend himself no matter how much he wants to. And when you're young you can't see the

wanting. You only see where the reach stopped." He paused. "Lydia said: he was proud of you. She said it the way you say something that requires no evidence because it is itself the evidence."

"She wasn't asking anything of me," Alfred said. "That was what I couldn't get over, standing in the churchyard with this woman I'd never met, who'd been married to my father for the last decade of his life and had buried him and gone on tending the place where he was. She didn't want me to feel anything in particular. She wasn't there to deliver a verdict. She'd come to put flowers on a grave, the way she did most weeks, and I happened to be there, and she told me the things she thought I should have and then she let me be." He turned the cup in his hands. "She'd outlived him and she keeps the grave, and one day there'll be no one to keep it, and that's the whole of it, isn't it. That's the entire machine. Somebody brings the flowers until they can't, and then somebody else does or nobody does, and either way the stone stays and the name fades and the chrysanthemums rot down into the same ground."

He was quiet a moment.

"The box," he said. "I keep coming back to the box. He kept every review, she said, from the first book on – and he didn't understand them, she was clear about that, he found the books too modern and said so, in the way you'd complain about a draught. But he kept them. In order. And the order is the thing I can't put down, because order is intention. You don't put thirty years of clippings in chronological sequence by accident. You do it because the sequence is a story and the story matters to you and

you want to be able to follow it from the beginning. He was reading my career as a narrative, in a box, in the dark, in a study where I'd decided he didn't love me." He set the cup down with great care, as though it were the thing that might break. "I spent my whole life writing books to prove something to a man I'd misjudged. And he kept the proof in a box and never told me he'd received it. We were both of us posting things to each other by a kind of registered mail and neither one of us would sign."

Elena reached across the table and put her hand over his.

"All right?" Philip said.

"Yes," Alfred said. "Actually yes." He looked up. "I think — I think I've done what I came here to do. Both things. The thing with my father and the thing I didn't know was a thing, which is the Alice thing and the specific weight of what I left when I left." He paused. "I don't think staying longer will help. I think staying longer might be a way of not leaving, which is its own problem."

They packed the car by noon. The estate agent received a phone call from Elena — they were leaving early, grateful for the access, the arrangements for the remaining two days were cancelled — and took this with the equanimity of a man who has been dealing in empty houses long enough to understand that the reasons people want them are frequently not the reasons they give. The keys were left on the kitchen counter. The camping stove and the sleeping bags went back in the boot.

There was a particular sorrow in the leaving that none of them spoke, and that Philip recognised as the sorrow specific to

places one has been changed in and will not return to. They had been at the rectory not two full days. And yet the leaving had the weight of a much longer departure, because what they were leaving was not the house but the version of the situation that the house had held – the suspension, the temporary grace, the doomed warm evening in the kitchen. London was ahead, and London meant the resumption of the clock, the medical schedule, the acceleration that the rectory had briefly seemed to hold at bay. While they were in Larkfield it had been possible to believe, faintly, against the evidence, that the place might do what Lane had hoped, that immersion might work some reversal the city couldn't. Driving away, that belief thinned with the distance, and Philip watched it go, and watched Alfred not look back, and understood that the not-looking-back was the same gesture it had always been – the boy walking out of the field, the man leaving his father's funeral before the reception ended – except that this time it was not cowardice and not contempt. This time it was the hardest version of itself: the refusal to look back not because the past was beneath him but because looking back would not help, and he had finally, at the very end, learned the difference between the two reasons for not looking back, and was practising the right one for the first time in his life, with about a week to practise it in.

Alfred stood at the garden gate for a while. Not a long time – two minutes, perhaps – but long enough that Philip, who was loading the last bag into the boot, noticed and did not hurry. Alfred was looking at the front of the house: the Georgian

proportions, the paint peeling from the window frames, the garden growing as it chose. He was not looking at it with grief, exactly, and not with farewell. He was looking at it the way you look at something you have finally understood, not because it has changed but because you have changed around it.

Then he turned and got in the car.

They drove north through the Sussex lanes. The village receded behind them and Philip, who was in the back, did not see Alfred look back at it in the mirror. He watched for it and it didn't happen. Alfred looked at the road ahead, at the hedgerows going past, at the land as it moved from the character of one county toward the character of another. He had the quality of a man who has set something down in the last hour and is still learning the unfamiliar weight of his hands without it.

They drove for some time in silence. Philip looked at his notebook and thought about what the village had been and what it had given and what it had withheld. He thought about the box of reviews in chronological order, no label, and about what the word chronological did when applied to a box of clippings about your son's career: the implication of maintenance, of keeping track, of a narrative that mattered enough to be ordered. He thought about his own father and his own silences and the things that had been understood after they were no longer available to be said.

Somewhere in Surrey, the motorway still twenty minutes off, Alfred said: "Philip."

"Yes."

"The book. What we talked about before." He looked out at the road. "I want you to write it. All of it – the Minerva, Lane, the rectory, Alice, the grave, everything. I want there to be a record."

"I know," Philip said.

"Promise me."

Philip looked at the back of his head – the dark hair, the young neck, the set of his shoulders that was twenty-two years old and contained forty-five years of living – and thought about the promise he had already made in the flat above Cambridge Circus, when making it had been easy because the cost was theoretical. The cost was no longer theoretical. He had been, by now, inside it for long enough to know what it was. He had also been, today, inside something else: the texture of a life that had been lived at an angle to itself for twenty-five years and was now, at considerable cost, being looked at directly. He had enough for a book. What he was not yet certain of was whether he had the right distance from it. But then, in his experience, the right distance was something you established in the writing, not before it.

"I promise," he said.

Alfred nodded once and did not say anything else. Elena drove. The motorway appeared ahead, the bridge of it arching over the last of the Surrey countryside with the particular unconcern of infrastructure, and they went up to it and then they were on it and London was ahead of them. Philip sat in the back with his notebook and this time he opened it. He wrote one sentence. He

looked at it. He did not cross it out. He closed the notebook and looked at the window and watched London assemble itself around the car in the usual way, the usual indifference, as though nothing particular had happened this week, which was not a lie, only the version of the truth that cities hold.

## Chapter Six

## The Accelerando

The days after Larkfield had a different quality from the days before it. Something had shifted in the manner in which Alfred inhabited the situation, though the situation itself had not changed and the timeline running in Philip's head had not changed and the arithmetic in his notebook had not changed. The twenty-five-year-old's instinct for friction and resistance had given way to something quieter: a person who had absorbed what the rectory had to give and was carrying it differently, more deliberately, with less performance. The combativeness was gone. What remained was not peace – peace was not the word – but a kind of settled attention to the facts, a willingness to be where he was rather than somewhere the facts hadn't reached yet.

Philip visited every day during those four days. He came in the mornings, when the light in the studio was good and Elena was at the easel and Alfred was usually at the kitchen table with a notebook, writing. Not his own work – not *The Glass Orchard* or anything approaching it – but something closer to dictation: the memories he could still reach, set down before they became unreachable. He had asked Philip to sit with him while he did it, not to assist but to be present, and Philip sat and held his notebook and wrote nothing in it while Alfred worked his way through what he could still find.

The method he used was specific: he wrote by category rather than chronology. People first. Then places. Then the work. He

would write a name — Elena Markham, painter, South Kensington, known since secondary school, the person who — and then he would go in, and report what he found, and write it down while it was there. Some categories yielded richly. Others had already thinned to outlines. He noted the difference without visibly grieving it. This, Philip thought, was the change Larkfield had produced: not the recovery of what had been lost, but the capacity to look at what remained without the need to pretend it was more than it was.

Philip sat with him through several of these sessions and found them harder to witness than the crises had been. A crisis had the dignity of emergency; there was something to do, or at least something to be afraid of, and fear is a kind of activity. This was different. This was a man conducting, calmly, the inventory of his own contents, and reading some shelves full and others bare, and recording the difference in a steady hand without permitting himself the luxury of grief, because grief took time and energy and he had budgeted neither for it.

"People is the richest category," Alfred said, on the second morning. "I thought it would be the work. I'd assumed the work was the deepest thing in me — it's certainly the thing I defended most, the thing I'd have said I was, if you'd asked me in September. But the work is going faster than the people. I can still find Elena at nine years old, the specific gap in her teeth before the adult ones came, the way she'd narrate what she was drawing while she drew it. I can find you across a table at the club arguing about a book neither of us had finished. I can find

my mother's hands." He looked at the page. "I can't find the middle of *The Glass Orchard*. I know it has a middle. I wrote four hundred pages and I can tell you the architecture of it, but the rooms are dark. Whereas the people —" He stopped, and Philip watched him locate something, and watched the locating cost him. "The people are still lit. Which is not what I'd have predicted, and not what I'd have wanted, when I was a man who thought the work was the point. It turns out the people were the point and the work was the thing I did instead of being with them."

He wrote that down. Then he looked at what he had written and, after a moment, drew a line through it — not angrily, but with the careful deliberation of an editor — and said: "No. That's too neat. That's the kind of sentence that sounds true because it's symmetrical. The truth is messier. The work mattered. It mattered terribly and it was not a substitute for anything, it was its own thing, and I'm not going to let the regression turn me into a man who renounces it on his way down in exchange for a tidy moral. Two things can be true. The work was the point and the people were the point and I failed to understand that those didn't compete." He rewrote the line. Philip, watching, thought: there he is. Even now. The instinct that outlives everything is not the love and not the fear; it is the refusal to let a false sentence stand because it flatters the reader.

Elena was painting him throughout those days. Not from life — or not only — but from the accumulation of a month's worth of looking, all the versions of him that had occupied the studio

since he arrived: the versions she had been laying down in the portrait one on top of another, each one true, each one incomplete, the forty-five-year-old and the thirty-year-old and the twenty-five-year-old all present in the same canvas. Philip looked at it on the second day and thought: she is painting what he actually is, which is all of these things at once. The canvas was getting very complicated. He thought it might be very good.

On the third morning Philip arrived to find Alfred already at the table, the notebook open, a cup of tea going cold beside it. He had been writing since six, he said. He had woken at six with the specific alertness of someone who has understood in sleep that time is short.

The dictation had become, Philip saw, the organising activity of Alfred's remaining days – the thing that gave shape to mornings that would otherwise have been only waiting. There was a logic to it that Philip recognised from his own trade: when you cannot control the large thing, you control the small one; when the ship is going down you do not stop coiling the rope, because the coiling is the last place your hands still know what they are for. Alfred could not stop the regression. He could, for an hour each morning, sit at a table and convert what remained of himself into marks on a page, and the converting was not futile even though the man it described was vanishing, because the marks would stay when the man did not, and Alfred had spent his whole life believing exactly this about marks on pages, and was not going to stop believing it now merely because the page in question was himself.

"I used to think this was morbid," he said, on the fifth morning, not looking up. "Writers who document their own decline. I thought it was a failure of taste – the inability to stop performing even at the end, the turning of one's own death into copy. I was very superior about it." He turned a page. "I understand it now. It isn't performance. It's the opposite. It's the one thing left that isn't performance. When you've spent your life shaping experience for an audience, there's a specific relief in finally writing something that no one is going to read for pleasure, that has no shape, that is just the thing itself set down because setting it down is the last available form of keeping faith with it. I'm not writing this for anyone. I'm writing it so that it will have been written. There's a difference and I had to come all the way down here to find it."

"The places category," he said, when Philip sat down. "I got stuck. There are places I can still go back to completely – the flat in Finsbury Park, the bookshop, your club. And places I can only describe. The difference is clear from inside. A place I can go back to has weight and smell and the quality of the air on a particular afternoon. A place I can only describe is like a photograph: the visual information is there, but the photograph is not the place." He looked at the notebook. "Larkfield is still real. Both kinds. I can go back into the rectory study, into the smell of my father's books. I can go back into the churchyard and stand in the frost." He paused. "But the field – the field from the dream – I can only describe it. I have the facts of it. I do

not have the feeling." He looked at Philip. "Which is interesting."

"Why interesting?" Philip asked.

"Because it was never a place I went to willingly," Alfred said. "Lydia's field. I avoided it for years. After I left for London I told myself I'd forgotten it. Apparently I had only filed it somewhere I did not need to look." He looked at the window. "And now I can describe it but I cannot stand in it. It has gone abstract. Like something I read about rather than something that happened." He picked up his pen. "I find that interesting. That the thing most bound up with all of this is the thing I have lost the most access to."

Philip wrote it down with the deliberate care of someone who knows they are recording something significant and has not yet decided why.

He thought about it that night, at home, unable to sleep. The field had gone abstract first – the origin of everything, the thing most bound up with the whole catastrophe, was the thing he had lost the soonest. It was as though the mind, in its long campaign of revision, had spent the field. Had visited it so many times, trying to make the choice come out differently, that it had worn the place to nothing, the way a path is worn through grass by feet that take it daily until there is no grass left to take. Lane's word was revision; but Philip, lying in the dark in Haslemere, thought the better word might be erosion. The mind had not been trying to revise the field so much as it had been standing in the field refusing to leave, and the refusing had

worn it away, and now there was no field to stand in, only the report of a field, the survey, the deed – everything except the ground.

On the fourth evening, after Philip had gone and before Elena had stopped working, Alfred read back through what he had written. He read it the way you read something you have produced and are uncertain about: with the focused attention of someone checking whether the thing is accurate, whether it holds. Philip heard about this the following morning from Elena. She said he had sat very still for a long time when he was done. She had not asked what he was thinking. She had simply kept working. This was, Philip thought, the right thing to have done.

This lasted four days.

On the fifth day Elena called Philip at six in the morning. He knew, before she spoke, from the quality of the pause after he answered, that the interval was over.

He had been awake already, which he would later think of as significant, though he knew it was not – he had simply been sleeping badly, as he had been for weeks, and had been lying in the Haslemere dark watching the window for the first grey when the phone went. But it felt, answering it, like the call he had been awake to receive, the body having known before the mind that the night had crossed into the territory where such calls are made. He knew from the silence after his hello, the quality of the pause, that the four-day reprieve was over. He had learned to read Elena's pauses the way he had once learned to read a manuscript's first paragraph – knowing the whole from the opening

cadence, the bad news already legible in the held breath before the words. He sat up in the dark and put his feet on the cold floor and listened to her tell him what he already, from the pause, knew, and thought about how grief announces itself in the gaps between sounds, in the held breath, in the half-second before the speaker can make the words come, and how a person who loves another person learns to hear the news in that half-second and to begin, already, in advance of the words, the work of receiving it.

"He's seventeen," she said. "Or looks it. He lost four years in one sleep. He woke at half past two not knowing where he was – for about thirty seconds he was simply a boy in a strange room, frightened. Then it came back to him." Another pause. "He's in the kitchen having tea. He's coherent. He knows what's happening. But Philip – he looks seventeen. And that's different from twenty-five. It's harder to look at."

Philip drove to South Kensington without eating breakfast, which was unusual for him. He was not, he told himself, in a state of alarm – alarm was not going to serve anything – but he was in a state that was adjacent to alarm, the state you are in when the information is clear and the facts are laid out and you know exactly what they mean and what they mean is something you have been preparing for and have not, despite the preparation, prepared for.

He had been maintaining the preparation the way you maintain a reserve: not drawing on it, holding it available, on the theory that a man who has anticipated the worst is less ambushed by it

when it arrives. This theory, he discovered when he came through the studio door, did not fully hold. The abstract and the specific are two different countries and you cannot cross the border on preparation alone.

What he found in the kitchen was Alfred at the table with Elena beside him, and the two of them were talking about something he couldn't hear from the door, and for a moment Philip stood at the threshold and allowed himself the strange relief of the ordinary: two people at a kitchen table, talking. Then Alfred looked up and Philip came in and the relief concluded.

The person who looked up from the kitchen table was not the person he had left on the motorway four days ago. That person had been young and had been wrong-seeming in his youth, had carried in young eyes the experience of older ones, and this combination had been disturbing in a way that was nonetheless comprehensible. What he saw now was different in kind. The face was thinner, the bones more prominent, the expression not yet settled into any of the adult versions of itself. It was a face in the process of becoming – not yet formed, still in formation – and what it was forming toward was visible in the eyes, which were the same eyes, carrying the same history, and which sat in that unfinished face with the quality of something that has arrived early and does not yet know where to put itself.

Philip's gaze moved, for a moment, to the easel at the far end of the studio. The portrait: the forty-five-year-old Alfred on the canvas, accumulated over weeks, the lines of the face settled and particular, the eyes with their usual cargo. The gap

between the portrait and the person at the table was not the gap between two versions of the same man. It was the gap between a man and his father.

"Morning," Alfred said.

"Morning," Philip said. He sat. Elena brought coffee. The three of them occupied the kitchen table in the companionship of people who have been through enough together to be past the requirement to fill silences.

"Tell me about half past two," Philip said.

"I woke up and didn't know the room," Alfred said. "For about half a minute – probably less – I had no context. I didn't know where I was, didn't know why, didn't know the woman at the easel. And then it came back. Not like remembering, exactly. More like something coming into focus: a field of noise that resolved into a picture." He paused. "I was still me. But the person who woke first, in those thirty seconds, wasn't. He was twelve, maybe younger, and he was frightened in the plain, uncomplicated way of a child in a strange place." He looked at his hands. "That person is closer to the surface than he was yesterday."

"How close?" Philip asked.

"Close enough that I can feel him when I'm not paying attention. The way you feel a bruise when you stop deliberately avoiding it." He drank his tea. "The four years I lost overnight – they weren't only physical. The memories from those four years are gone. Not fogged. Gone. There's nothing in the place where they were."

Philip wrote this down. He looked at what he had written and thought: the rate of loss has changed. Four years in one night was not what four years in one night had meant two weeks ago. The curve of it was steepening, and the thing about a steepening curve is that you cannot read its final value from any point along it. You can only watch the direction.

He thought also about the thirty seconds. He kept returning to it: the thirty seconds during which Alfred had woken as a twelve-year-old in a strange room and had not known the woman at the easel. The thirty seconds had passed. He had come back to himself. But the thirty seconds had happened, which meant they were possible, which meant they would become longer. This was what Lane had been warning them about from the beginning, phrased in clinical language designed to keep it at the right distance. The clinical language was correct in the way that a map is correct: it gives you the territory but it does not give you the experience of standing in it.

He called Lane from the hall.

Lane arrived at noon.

Philip had developed, over the weeks, a practice of watching Lane as closely as he watched Alfred, on the theory that the man who knew most about the situation would show, in his face and his hands, what the words were too careful to say. Lane was good at the words – a lifetime of delivering them had made him good – but the hands were older than the discipline, and they told the truth the words were managing. Today the hands were slow. They took out the instruments and laid them on the kitchen table with a

deliberation that Philip read, correctly, as bad news being paced so that it could be borne. Lane examined the boy – it was hard, now, not to think of him as the boy – with a gentleness that had stopped being clinical somewhere around Larkfield and had become something else, something Philip did not have a precise word for but which was close to tenderness, the tenderness of an old man who has been given, at the very end of a long career, the second chance he had stopped believing in, and who is terrified of failing it the way he failed the first.

The examination took forty minutes. Philip watched from the kitchen doorway while Lane asked questions in the methodical, unhurried manner of someone who has assembled the questions carefully and is now working through them in the right order. He asked about recent events: what Alfred had eaten for breakfast, what he had said to Elena in the night, whether he remembered the drive back from Larkfield. He asked about older events: the titles of the books, the names of the publishers, the year *The Glass Orchard* had been longlisted for the Booker and had not won. He asked about people: Celia Hart's surname, the name of the bookshop on the Charing Cross Road, the name of the detective inspector who had come to the studio.

"Celia," Alfred said. "Hart. The Minerva. She offered me her silence – Philip told me. Tell her I – " He stopped, and Philip watched him reach for the rest of the sentence and not find it, and watched the not-finding register on his face, the small internal stumble of a man whose foot has gone through a stair he expected to hold. "Tell her I received it," he said finally,

recovering. "She'll know what I mean. It's the right verb. We're all of us sending things we hope are received."

Lane wrote nothing; this was not part of the examination; the examination had drifted, as Lane let it drift, into something the patient needed more than the clinician did.

"The bookshop," Lane prompted, gently.

"On the Charing Cross Road. First floor, secondhand. I kept an account there for – I want to say eleven years." He frowned. "Eleven. Or nine. The number's gone soft. It used to be exact." He looked at Lane with a directness that Philip found hard to watch. "That's new, that softness. A week ago the numbers were hard. I could have told you the year of every book, the month, the advance. Now there's a – give in them. They bend when I lean on them. Is that the thing? Is that what it feels like, when it starts to go for real?"

"Yes," Lane said. He did not soften it. He had stopped softening things, and the not-softening had become its own form of respect. "The facts go soft before they go. You'll keep the shapes after you've lost the figures, and you'll keep the names after you've lost the shapes, and you'll keep the people –" he glanced at Elena, at Philip "– after you've lost the names. They go in the reverse order they were acquired. The deepest things last."

"The people last," Alfred repeated, as if testing whether the sentence would hold his weight. It held. He nodded, once, and let the examination resume.

Alfred answered all of it. Slowly, with the slight effortfulness of someone working harder than the questions deserved, but correctly. Philip watched from the doorway and felt the specific discomfort of watching a friend demonstrate what remains. The questions were gentle and the answers were accurate and the gap between the two – the gentleness of the asking and the effort of the answering – was the thing that Philip had to hold without comment.

At the end, Lane put his pen down and sat for a moment looking at what he had written, and then he asked one more question.

"Can you tell me anything about writing *The Glass Orchard*? Not the plot. The experience of writing it. What it felt like. Where you were."

A longer pause.

"Finsbury Park," Alfred said finally. "A flat on the second floor. North-facing window. There was a magnolia tree in the garden below that bloomed every spring. I wrote at a kitchen table that was too low and my back suffered for it." He stopped. "I know all of that. But the feeling of it – the feeling of what it was like to be in that flat writing that particular book – I can't find it. I know it happened. I can't go back into it." He looked at Lane. "That's what you were checking for."

"Yes," Lane said.

He asked to speak to Philip alone.

In the hall, Lane said: "You already know the broad picture. The specific detail is that the episodic memory loss is

accelerating in proportion to the physical regression, and both are accelerating." He kept his voice quiet and without inflection. Cushioning was no longer a thing they had the time for. "He knows who he is and who you are. He can give you the names and publication dates and themes of all four of his novels. But the texture of those memories is thinning. He described *The Glass Orchard* to me just now as something he knows about rather than something he experienced. That distinction will not hold much longer."

Philip said: "Does he know how fast this is going?"

"He understands it," Lane said. "Intellectually. He can reason about it. Whether the person inside the understanding fully grasps what the understanding is describing – that's a different question. One of the effects of this kind of memory loss is that you can lose the capacity for dread about the thing you're losing, because the thing that would be afraid is itself among the things being lost." He paused. "In some ways that's a mercy. In others it's the worst part."

"How long?" Philip said.

"Three days. Perhaps four. After that, the memories of his adult life will be gone, and the physical regression will continue into childhood, and then –" Lane stopped in the familiar place. Then he did something Philip had not seen him do before, which was continue past it. "After that he will be gone. Not dead – I don't know whether he will die or simply cease. Rebecca Frost ceased. She was simply not there. That is what I expect here, if nothing changes."

"There is one other thing," Lane said. He produced a card from his jacket pocket. "A colleague of mine. Dr Sarah Chen, University College Hospital. She has been following your friend's case at my suggestion. She has a treatment – experimental, genuinely uncertain, and I want to be precise about the odds, which are not favourable. But she may be the only person working on something that has any theoretical basis for helping."

Philip looked at the card. "What kind of treatment?"

"An induced coma. A medically controlled sleep state, during which she would attempt to interrupt the regression at a neurological level. Targeted electromagnetic stimulation – the aim is to reset the neural patterns driving the process." He paused. "If it works, the regression stops. If it fails, the procedure may accelerate the timeline. We won't know which until it is tried, and we cannot know in advance which outcome we will get."

"Fifty-fifty?" Philip said.

Lane looked at him with the expression of a man who does not want to say *less than that*. "Approximately," he said.

They went back in and told him.

Alfred listened across the kitchen table with the soup they had made at noon going cold in front of him. He listened without interruption, which was not how the twenty-five-year-old had listened, and Philip noted this: something in the regression had taken the combativeness and left the patience, or perhaps the patience had simply been there all along, a quality that

outlasted everything else. When Lane finished, Alfred looked at the card.

"This afternoon?" he said.

"Dr Chen can have a bed ready within two hours."

Alfred looked at Elena. Elena was looking at the wall above his head, at a point on the plaster that contained nothing at all, and the expression on her face was one that Philip had not seen on her before. Not the fierce and competent resolve she had been producing for a month, but something below the resolve – the thing the resolve had been covering because covering it was the more useful act. He looked at this and looked away.

"Then this afternoon," Alfred said.

He asked them to give him twenty minutes first. They went to the far end of the studio and Elena made more tea and Philip stood at the window looking at the news while Alfred sat at the kitchen table and wrote. Philip did not look at what he was writing. He stood at the window and looked at the yard and the stone pot and the unpruned climber on the wall, and thought about the four days of dictated memories, the categories worked through one by one, the people and places and the work, and about the list that Alfred was now making. The list that was different from the memories because it was not what he could find but what he needed to be able to find. The things he could not afford to lose access to.

When the twenty minutes were done, Alfred folded the paper and put it in his pocket and stood up and said: "Ready."

Philip asked him later what he had written.

"A list," Alfred said. "Of things I know. Names, titles, dates, the texture of specific moments. In case I need to look them up." He said it without irony, which made it considerably harder to hear than it would have been with irony.

The hospital was in Bloomsbury. Dr Chen was precise and unhurried and asked Alfred three times in different ways whether he understood and consented, and accepted his three replies with the same careful neutrality she brought to everything else. She was in her late thirties, with the quality of someone who has spent years working on problems that do not yield to ordinary methods and has arrived at a particular kind of patience: not the patience of someone waiting for things to improve, but the patience of someone who understands that improvement, when it comes, will come through the accumulation of careful work rather than through any single action.

She had read Alfred's case the way Lane had described it to her — the diary, the timeline, the photographs of Rebecca Frost — and she did not, Philip noticed, perform either the scepticism or the wonder that the situation seemed to invite. She had moved past both into something more useful, which was a working hypothesis. She talked about the regression as a pattern, a process with a mechanism, and she spoke of interrupting the mechanism the way an engineer speaks of interrupting a current, and Philip found that her refusal to be amazed was the most reassuring thing he had encountered in weeks. Amazement was what the rest of them had been managing; amazement was a way of standing outside a thing and registering that it should not be.

Chen had dispensed with should-not-be. She had a man in front of her who was going backwards, and she proposed to try to stop him, and the simplicity of that – the absence of metaphysics – was its own kind of mercy.

"I want to be honest about the odds," she said, "because I think you've had enough people protect you from information, with the best intentions, and I don't think it's served you." She looked at Alfred directly. "I have done versions of this procedure for other conditions, with mixed results, and I have never done it for this condition, because this condition does not, officially, exist. I am extrapolating from a mechanism I believe is analogous. I may be wrong about the analogy. If I am right, there is a real chance it interrupts the process. If I am wrong, the procedure will probably cost you time you can't spare. I cannot tell you which it is. Anyone who could tell you which it is would be lying."

"That," Alfred said, "is the most useful thing a doctor has said to me in two months."

The preparation room was white and smelled of clean surfaces and recalibrated air. Lane stayed with Alfred. Before he went in, Alfred stopped in the doorway and turned around. He looked at Elena first. Then at Philip. He said: "Whatever happens – I want you to know that the month has been –" He stopped. He appeared to be looking for the word with the same effort he had been applying to Lane's questions earlier. "Correct," he said finally. "The word is correct. The month has been correct." He turned and went in.

Philip and Elena looked at each other for a moment in the corridor.

"Correct," Elena said.

"Yes," Philip said. He understood it. In the Alfred vocabulary, which Philip had been reading for twenty years, correct was the highest available grade. It meant: this is the thing as it should be. It meant: I would not revise this. He thought about the specific value of receiving that word in a hospital corridor from a man who was about to go under and might not come back to himself.

Philip and Elena were shown to the waiting room across the corridor, and the door closed, and they were in the waiting that there was nothing useful to do inside of.

The room was the usual kind: chairs against the walls, a side table with magazines untouched in their arrangement, a window onto a courtyard where the afternoon was conducting its ordinary business. Philip sat. Elena sat beside him. She did not take out the sketchbook. He understood that this was the kind of waiting that could not be worked through but only endured.

He thought about the others who were not in the room. Celia, who had offered her silence and her lunches and had not been told that the silence had a deadline now. Mrs Iqbal, holding Alfred's post, wanting only to know the man was alive. Alice Torrance in her cottage on the green, who had wanted something of him to stay in the village and had been told, plainly, that nothing of him had. The woman with the chrysanthemums, keeping a grave for a man whose son had misread him for a quarter of a century. Walsh,

somewhere in the city, with her closed file and her open suspicion, going about the business of the missing and the found. The whole faint constellation of people who had brushed against this man's life and been marked by it in their various ways, most of them never to know how it ended, the ending occurring in a Bloomsbury hospital among strangers and vending machines while they went on with their afternoons. Philip thought: this is what a life is, at the end. Not the work, which goes on a shelf, and not the fame, which is weather. It is the small number of people who are in the room and the larger number who are not but who carry some splinter of you regardless, and the splinters are the realest thing, and there is no way to gather them, no registered post that reaches all of them at once, no book that holds them, though God knew he was going to try.

"Tell me something," Elena said. Not a specific request. The request of someone who needs the texture of speech around them.

Philip thought. "When I first knew Alfred," he said, "he was thirty-one and *The Rectory at Larkfield* had just come out. He had the look that writers sometimes have at that age when the first book has done what they needed it to do — not famous, not secure, but recognised, which is the specific thing they wanted and did not know how to ask for directly." He looked at the courtyard window. "He was insufferable, really. He had the certainty of someone who has been right about the most important thing in his life and is now confident he'll be right about everything else. But underneath it — and you only saw this if you spent time with

him — he was very careful. About the work. About what it cost and what it was for."

"He was always careful about that," Elena said.

"Yes. Even when he wasn't careful about people. The work he was careful about." He paused. "I think the regression is frightening for a specific reason that isn't only the loss. I think it frightens him because the work is going. The thing he was most careful about. And without it, he isn't sure he knows who he is."

Elena was quiet for a moment. "He knows," she said. "The work is part of it. But he's more than the work." She looked at her hands. "He's been more than the work for some time, I think. He just hasn't caught up with that yet."

Philip looked at her and thought: she has known him longer than anyone in that room, longer than Lane and longer than Philip and possibly longer, in the ways that matter, than Alfred has known himself. He thought: she is the person in this situation who is most in a position to lose everything, and she is also the person holding it together for everyone else, and these two things are happening at the same time, and there is nothing to say about it that doesn't reduce it.

He said nothing. She looked at the courtyard.

He thought about what she had said — he is more than the work — and thought about whether Alfred himself could access that truth at this point in the process. He thought probably not yet. He thought: this is the thing grief does, in its various forms.

It arrives before the person has caught up with themselves. It always does.

He also thought, in that particular waiting room with its particular smell and its particular untouched magazines, about the shape of what he was supposed to be writing. He had been keeping notes for six weeks. He had the dates and the observations and the careful record of the facts. What he did not have was the argument – not the argument of a brief or a report, but the kind a story makes by existing, the pressure it applies to experience simply by arranging it. He thought: perhaps the shape is only visible from the end. Perhaps you cannot know the outline of a thing until you can see all of it. He had always known this and had never quite made his peace with it.

Two hours went past.

An hour passed. The courtyard window showed the same small square of London sky, the light declining incrementally toward evening. Philip watched a pigeon land on the ledge outside and consider the glass and depart. He thought about what Alfred had said on the third morning: the field is the thing I have lost the most access to. He thought about what it meant that the origin of everything was the thing that had gone first. He thought: the mind protects itself even as it destroys itself. He thought: or perhaps it destroys itself in the act of protecting itself. He thought: this is not a useful distinction right now.

He thought about Lane's word: revision. The mind trying to revise. Going back to the field, to the moment of leaving, to the seventeen-year-old who had stepped out of what he thought was a

small room into what he thought was liberation, and finding the revision unavailable and retreating further, looking for an earlier version that had not yet done the thing. He thought about whether Larkfield had changed this – whether standing in the actual geography had given the mind what it was trying to find by going backwards. Lane had said: it might. It might also accelerate. And here they were.

He thought about what he would write tonight, if they came out of this with something to work with. He had been composing the book in his head for a month, assembling the structure in the way you assemble it when you are not yet writing: knowing the shape without being able to fill it. Tonight, he thought, he might be able to begin.

There were things they did not say during those two hours. Philip kept a list of them, not on paper but in his awareness. The things on the list included: what they would do if the procedure worked and Alfred came out as himself at whatever age he was at. What they would do if it didn't. Whether Elena had eaten anything today. Whether Philip's promise – the book, the record – was something that could be kept. Whether keeping it would help, in any sense that helped meant anything. He kept the list and did not draw on it.

Lane appeared in the doorway. His face was the face Philip had learned to read from the first days: not catastrophe, but a problem with no good solutions, being handed to people who will have to receive it. He sat down.

"The procedure isn't working," he said. "Three pulse sequences, two frequencies. No interruption to the regression pattern." A pause. "And the coma itself – being in the medically induced sleep state has accelerated things. The readings indicate another two to three years of regression during the time he's been under."

Elena's hands were still in her lap. She did not move them.

"So he'll wake up –" Philip said.

"At fourteen, approximately. Possibly younger." Lane looked at them both. "He will know where he is. He will know who you are. But the margin between who he is now and who he cannot yet be is shrinking very fast."

He said the critical threshold again. Philip heard it again the same way: something prepared for, still a surprise.

Philip looked at Elena. She had not moved – her hands still in her lap, her posture unchanged from the moment Lane came in. He had an image, sudden and specific, of the portrait on the easel in the studio: the accumulated layers of Alfred, every version present simultaneously. He thought about what Elena had been adding to it these past weeks, the most recent additions made at night by lamplight while he sat at the table with his notebook. He thought about the version she would have to add now.

"He's still himself," Philip said. Not to Lane. To Elena.

She looked at him. "Yes," she said. Just the one word. Then she stood, and straightened her jacket, and said to Lane: "Take us in."

They brought them in. Alfred was awake when they entered – sitting up in the bed with the gown too large and the look of a person who has been told the result and has decided what to do with it. The face on the pillow was the face of a boy. Not ambiguously young. Not young in a way that required qualification. Young in the simple, unmodified sense: the jaw not yet set, the cheekbones prominent in the way of adolescence, the skin unmarked by any of the accumulated evidence of living. The eyes were the same eyes – the eyes that Philip had been watching for six weeks, carrying what they carried – and their familiarity was, in the new face, the most disorienting thing he had yet encountered in this entire disorienting month.

"Still me," Alfred said.

"Yes," Philip said.

"Fourteen, give or take." He said it with the flatness of someone who has made their peace with a number. "I want to go home."

Dr Chen appeared and explained the monitoring protocols, the reasons for staying, the standard precautions. She was precise and patient about it, as she was precise and patient about everything, and Alfred listened to her with the courtesy of someone who has already reached a decision and is waiting, without discourtesy, for the other person to finish making their case.

What Philip would remember about the hospital, afterward, was its ordinariness – the way the most extreme circumstance of his life had been administered in a building full of vending

machines and laminated signage and people in cardigans waiting for ordinary news. He had expected the extraordinary to come with its own architecture. It never did. It came in rooms exactly like the rooms in which one waited for the results of a scan or the outcome of a relative's hip, and the contrast between the room and the thing the room contained was so total that Philip found himself, at intervals, almost laughing, the inappropriate pressure of a mind that cannot reconcile the magnitude of an event with the banality of its setting. A man he loved was about to be put to sleep so that a doctor could try to stop him from becoming a child, and there was a poster on the wall about hand hygiene, and a machine that dispensed, for one pound twenty, a chocolate bar, and the two facts occupied the same square metres of the world and neither one had the decency to yield to the other.

"I want to go home," he said again.

There was a brief, quiet negotiation between Elena and Chen, conducted in the register of two women who understand each other's positions and have established, without discussion, that one of them is going to yield. Chen yielded. Philip was not surprised.

They discharged him at eight. Philip drove. Nobody talked. The city went past the windows in the usual way, uninterested, as it always was, in the specific nature of what the cars moving through it contained.

The streets were emptying into the particular lull of a London evening between the rush and the night, the offices

disgorged, the restaurants not yet filled, the city in the brief slack interval when it almost seems to rest. Philip drove carefully, more carefully than the traffic required, with the over-attention of a man for whom the simple act of driving had become a refuge – a task with rules, a thing he knew how to do correctly, in a situation that otherwise offered nothing to do correctly at all. He kept his eyes on the road and was aware of the boy in the back seat the way you are aware of a held breath, and he thought about the strangeness of the cargo, a fourteen-year-old who was forty-five, being driven home from a hospital that had tried and failed to stop him from being fourteen, through a city that knew nothing about any of it. At a red light near Russell Square a group of students crossed in front of the car, loud, laughing, fourteen or fifteen of them spilling off the kerb in the way of the young who have not yet learned that the world will not simply stop for them – and Alfred, in the back, watched them cross with an expression Philip caught in the mirror and would not forget: not envy, which would have been bearable, but recognition, the look of a man seeing, on the far side of the windscreen, the country he was being deported to. They were the age he was becoming. They had the whole thing in front of them and did not know it. And he had it behind him and knew it completely, and was being sent back among them carrying the knowledge they lacked, which was the one piece of luggage that could not survive the journey: the moment he was fully their age, the knowing would go, and he would be one of them, laughing on a kerb, with no idea what he had been.

He was aware of Alfred in the back seat – he did not look in the mirror, but he was aware of him as a presence and of the quality of that presence, which was a fourteen-year-old boy who knew he was forty-five and was carrying the knowledge with the composure of someone who has decided that composure is the only tool still available. There was something in this, Philip thought, that was different from the previous braveries of the previous weeks. The previous braveries had been the braveries of a man – against fear, against loss, against the accumulated evidence of his own failure. This was something else. The bravery of a person who has run out of the usual tools and is operating on something more fundamental: the simple insistence on continuing to be present, to be coherent, to be himself in whatever container was currently available. He could not name it more precisely than that. He hoped it would still be there in the morning.

Back at the studio, Elena made the spare room into something that could serve: a proper bed, lamps at the right height, the books and drawing materials Alfred had been using for the past week arranged within reach. Philip made tea and brought it up and sat in the armchair while Alfred sat in bed and looked at the skylight. The London night was amber through the glass, the low cloud picking up the city's light and holding it.

"I'm not afraid," Alfred said, into the quiet. "I want you to know that. I've been afraid for a month and tonight I'm not. I don't know whether it's the exhaustion or whether I've simply crossed some point beyond which fear doesn't have a foothold." He

paused. "I'm not asking you to match it. I know you're afraid. I just —" He stopped. "I need you to be here. That's all."

"We're here," Philip said.

Alfred looked at the skylight for a while longer and then his eyes closed and his breathing changed and he slept. Philip sat in the armchair for some time after, watching. He had been watching Alfred sleep, on and off, for six weeks — in the studio, in the Larkfield hotel, in this spare room — and the experience had not become routine. What changed was not the watching but what the watching contained. In the early weeks it had been vigil in the crisis sense: the watchfulness of a man at a bedside who does not know what the morning will bring. Now it was something else. Something that had moved past the immediate crisis into the quality of attention that belongs to the period after the worst has been survived: not relief, which was premature, but the recalibration of a person who has been very frightened for a long time and is now, in this specific hour, not frightened.

He thought about the list in the folded paper in Alfred's pocket. He thought about what it meant to reduce your own life to a list of things you need to be able to look up. He thought about the four days of dictated memories, the categories worked through in the kitchen while Elena painted and Philip sat with his unused notebook. He thought about the word correct, said in a hospital corridor as though nothing more was required, which was — he had decided — exactly right. Nothing more was required. It was the right word and it covered everything.

He thought about Alice Torrance, who had said beautiful in the rectory hallway and had meant it without sentimentality – had meant it the way you mean it when you are describing something that existed and is now gone, and whose going is part of what made it beautiful. He thought about the quality of that word applied to a person in the act of running away, and about whether it was always true or whether it was true only of certain people at certain ages when the energy and the recklessness were so complete and so genuine that even the damage they caused had a kind of authenticity.

He kept coming back to the word correct. It had been said in a hospital corridor, in the voice of someone making an inventory before going under, with the quality of a word that has been considered and chosen rather than produced reflexively. Correct. The month, with all its cost, had been correct. Philip thought about this and found that he believed it, which surprised him. He had not expected to find the past month correct. He had expected to find it frightening and costly and necessary and worth it, which were all true. But correct was a different category. Correct implied that the thing had been as it should be. That the shape of it was right. That if you could have done it differently you should not have.

He went down to the studio at midnight.

Elena was at her easel, working by lamplight. She was adding to the portrait – the accumulated canvas, all the versions of Alfred layered into it – and what she was adding now Philip could not quite see from across the room, but the quality of her work

had changed over the past weeks and this addition had the same changed quality: less technique visible, more of what the technique was trying to get at. He sat at the table.

He opened his notebook. He had been keeping notes for six weeks – observations, dates, the recorded facts of events. All of it was accurate. None of it was yet the thing he had promised to write, because that thing required not just the facts but the understanding the facts were in service of, and for six weeks he had not had the understanding. He had been waiting to see the shape.

He thought he could see it now. Not all of it. But enough to begin.

The shape, as he understood it in that hour, was this: a man who has spent his adult life turning other people's experience into art had, at the end, been required to have an experience that could not be turned into anything. It could only be lived through. And the living-through had produced, by a route nobody would have chosen, the specific knowledge that the art had always been trying to reach and had never quite managed: that a person is not their work. That the work is what a person does with what they have. And that what they have – the actual thing, underneath the work – is something else entirely, and more valuable, and only visible when the work is gone.

He had tried, that week, to work on his own novel, and had failed, and the failure had taught him something he was not sure he wanted to know. The fifth book had been stalled for two years and eleven months on a problem he had diagnosed, repeatedly, as a

problem of material. He had told himself he did not yet have the thing the book needed. He saw now that this had been a lie of the kind Alfred described – the comfortable explanation maintained against the evidence – and that the real problem had never been material. The real problem was that the book required him to write, truthfully, about a man looking back at his younger self with grief, and Philip had not, until this autumn, had the grief. He had had the idea of the grief. He had had the craft to simulate it. But the thing itself, the actual experience of watching a person be stripped back toward an origin and finding the origin both unbearable and beautiful – that had been missing, and no amount of sitting at the desk in Haslemere would have supplied it, because it was not the kind of thing the desk supplied. It was the kind of thing that arrived, uninvited, in a corridor at the Minerva, and then took everything you had.

This was, he understood, the oldest and least respectable fact about his trade: that the writer needed the wound in order to write about the wound, and that there was no honest way to want the wound, and no honest way to refuse the use of it once you had it. Alfred had spent a career using other people's wounds. Philip had spent a career, he saw now, waiting at a careful distance for wounds of his own that he could use without having had to suffer them too directly – the manageable griefs, the secondhand sorrows, the deaths of parents one was prepared for. And now the distance had closed. The wound was his friend, in real time, and Philip was going to write about it, and there was no version of that which was not also a kind of theft, and

the only thing that separated him from Alfred at his worst was that Philip, at least, knew it was theft, and had been asked to commit it, and would carry the knowing into every sentence as a kind of tax.

He picked up his pen and began.

Not the notes. The book. The first sentence came with the quality of sentences that have been waiting for a long time and are therefore already fully formed: Philip Hardin was fifty and knew what envy felt like, the way a man knows the ache behind his knees after a long climb. He looked at it. He looked at it for a long time. Then he wrote the next sentence, and the one after that, and he kept going until the notebook was full.

He wrote for two hours, steadily, while Elena worked at the canvas beside him in silence, and above them Alfred slept, and outside London conducted its enormous, indifferent, continuing life, carrying all of this in its streets without knowing it was there. Which is what cities do. Which is what they have always done. Which is, Philip thought, one of the things that makes them bearable, that their not-knowing is so absolute and so consistent that it becomes a kind of peace.

## Chapter Seven

## The Last Room

Philip woke to silence, which was the wrong way around. He had been sleeping lightly in the studio storeroom between two stacks of canvas, with the specific alertness of someone who expects to be needed, and what he had been expecting was noise. What woke him instead was the quality of silence's absence — denser than ordinary silence, weighted with something that had already happened before he was aware of it.

The storeroom had no window. He had been using his phone as a clock, and when he reached for it the screen said five forty-seven. The studio beyond the storeroom door was the dark-amber of London nights: the city's ambient light seeping through the skylight, redistributed, giving everything the quality of things seen inside their own glow. He lay for a moment in the sleeping bag and listened to the house. The house was quiet. The house had been quiet for the four days they had been back from the hospital, the specific quiet of a household organising itself around someone who needs to be kept stable. Not crisis quiet. Maintenance quiet. He had learned to hear the difference.

This was not that.

He went to the door and opened it.

Elena was at the foot of the stairs that led to the spare room. She was standing very still, both hands at her sides, looking up toward the landing, and the quality of her stillness told him what he needed to know before she turned around. It was

the stillness of someone who has already encountered the thing they were afraid of, not the gathered stillness of someone preparing.

He had known Elena Markham for two months. He had known her, in the oblique way of literary acquaintance, for somewhat longer. But two months of this had produced a different kind of knowing: the specific knowledge that accumulates in people who have been through something difficult in close proximity and have stopped pretending it isn't difficult. He knew her face well enough now to read it in the dark at five forty-seven in the morning. What he read was: she had held this for twenty minutes, and was still holding it, and the holding was not going to get easier.

"He doesn't know me," she said. Her voice was level. She had, apparently, decided in the past twenty minutes that level was the available register and was going to stay in it. "He woke about half an hour ago. He looked at me and there was nothing there – not a moment's hesitation, not the shadow of recognition trying to form. Nothing. I said my name. He said he didn't know any Elena." She paused. "He asked where his mother was."

"Has he calmed down?" Philip asked.

"He's calmer. I said he was safe, that his parents couldn't be there but that friends were looking after him. He accepted it." She looked at Philip with the very controlled expression of someone who has decided to continue functioning. "He's drawing. He found the materials we left up there. He showed me before I came down." She did not say what he was drawing. "I need you to

go up. I need him to have more than one adult face he doesn't know."

Philip went up the stairs.

The boy who looked up when he came in was eleven, perhaps twelve – the estimate was difficult, the face not quite finished, the proportions still settling into themselves. He was sitting on the bed with a sketchpad in his lap and a pencil in his hand, and on the pad was a tall structure: not architecturally specific, not a staircase in any literal sense, but the idea of a spiral stair, gestural, the lines converging toward a point that was above the top of the page. He looked at Philip with the frank assessing gaze of a child encountering a stranger, neither afraid nor welcoming: simply looking.

"Hello," Philip said. "I'm Philip. I'm a friend."

"She said," Alfred said. The voice was a child's voice, lighter in pitch, the adult resonance gone from it. Philip had known, abstractly, that this moment would arrive and would have this quality, and knowing had not been preparation. "She said you were a friend. I don't remember you either, but she said that was all right."

"It is," Philip said. He sat in the armchair. He looked at the drawing. "What is that?"

Alfred looked at the pad with the specific attention of someone showing their work. "A spiral stair I've been thinking about. I keep drawing it, I don't know why. It's very tall and there's a boy at the top and he can't remember how he got there. He's been climbing for so long that he's forgotten what's at the bottom."

Philip looked at the drawing – at the converging lines, at the small figure implied rather than drawn at the apex. He thought about the name that Alfred had said in the boxing gym, weeks and weeks ago, and then dismissed as something Elena had

said once. He thought: it has been there the whole time. The story the man had been writing, and the story the boy had been drawing, were the same story.

"How does it end?" he said.

"I don't know yet," Alfred said. "I'm still working it out." He looked at the stair. "I think someone has to come who knew him when he was at the bottom. Someone who can remind him what's there. And then he can come down." He paused. "I haven't figured out the middle part yet."

"I think," Philip said carefully, "that you may be closer to the middle part than you know."

Alfred looked at him with the clear, slightly puzzled gaze of a child who has understood a sentence and not understood what it was for. Then he looked back at the drawing.

"Are you a writer too?" Alfred asked.

"Yes."

"She said you both are. But she is a painter." He studied the stair. "I am going to be a writer. My father does not think it is a practical ambition. I am going to do it anyway. I have already started."

"I know," Philip said.

Alfred looked at him with the frank assessment of someone who has been told something that requires explanation. "How can you know? We just met."

Philip looked at the drawing: the stair, the converging lines, the implied figure at the apex. "Because a person who has already started does not say: I am going to be. They say: I am.

You said I am. You corrected yourself immediately, but you said it first."

Alfred considered this. He had the quality, Philip thought, of someone who would not forget a conversation. He went back to the pad.

Philip sat in the armchair and watched him work for a few minutes without speaking. He watched the pencil move – the sure, absorbed movement of someone engaged in a problem that has all of their attention – and he thought about what it meant to be sitting in this room with a twelve-year-old boy who contained forty-five years of a person he had known and loved and watched diminish and who was now, in this specific morning, simply a child drawing a stair and working out the ending. He thought about the ending. He thought: the child has already worked out the ending. He just doesn't know yet that it is the ending.

He thought about the forty-five years that were somewhere in this boy, compressed and inaccessible and present in ways the boy himself could not feel but which were visible in the eyes, in the quality of the concentration, in the specific patience with which he worked at the stair that was the same patience the forty-five-year-old had brought to every book he had written. The patience, Philip thought, was the thing that had outlasted everything. Even the regression, even the loss of the adult memories, had not taken the patience. It was the deepest thing in him and it was still there.

Philip called Lane from the landing.

Lane arrived within the hour. Philip watched from the doorway as Lane sat on the edge of the bed beside Alfred with the unhurried manner of someone who has examined children before and understands that the pace of the examination needs to be set by the child. He asked simple questions, the kind a twelve-year-old could receive without alarm: what school does he go to, what was he having for breakfast when this was written (gesturing at the sketchpad, making it about the drawing rather than the examination), whether he could name three rivers. Alfred answered with the polite competence of a child who is used to adults and has decided, apparently, that these particular adults were managing a situation he did not fully understand but which he had decided to trust.

Lane asked him one more question at the end: whether he had any brothers or sisters. Alfred looked at him with the specific look of a child who has registered something unexpected in an adult's manner.

"No," he said. Then: "Why did you ask that one differently from the others?"

Lane looked at him steadily. "Because I wanted to see how you noticed things," he said. "You notice very well."

Alfred considered this. "I know," he said, without vanity, as a fact. He looked back at the drawing.

Lane asked Philip and Elena to come down to the studio with him.

On his way down the stairs he paused and looked back at the door to the spare room, which was closed. Philip heard, faintly,

the sound of the pencil on the pad – the steady, absorbed sound of someone working on a problem they have not yet solved. Lane looked at the door for a moment and then continued down.

He sat at the table and said: "Today."

No preamble. No clinical preparation. He had been delivering difficult information since Devonshire Street with the specific care of a man who understood the value of framing, and now he had set the framing down, apparently, along with the pretence that framing was still doing useful work.

"Today," Philip said.

"Or tomorrow morning at the latest. After that –" He stopped in the familiar place. Then he did something Philip had not seen him do before, which was continue past it. "After that he will be gone. Not dead – I don't know whether he will die or simply cease. Rebecca Frost ceased. She was simply not there. That is what I expect here, if nothing changes." He looked at his hands on the table. "I have been wrong about a great deal in this case. I may be wrong about the timeline. But I don't think I am."

The studio was very quiet.

Philip looked at Elena. Something passed between them – not the efficient look of people who have an action to take and are coordinating, but something simpler and larger than that: two people who have been in something difficult together long enough to have arrived at a shared understanding that does not require words.

"There is one thing I should have said weeks ago," Lane said. "I didn't say it because I was still thinking medically,

and medicine is not what this situation has required from the beginning." He looked at them. "Alfred's regression began with guilt about Lydia Merrick. She forgave him partially in Chelsea, and things slowed. The hypnosis reached the origin but could not repair it. Larkfield helped but did not stop it. The procedure made things worse." He paused. "What I didn't try – what I didn't think to try – was the forgiveness that the origin point can actually receive. Not the adult forgiveness he negotiated with the adult Lydia. The kind that a twelve-year-old boy in a spare room could understand. Which requires someone who knew him at twelve."

"Lydia," Elena said.

"They grew up together," Lane said. "He remembers her. She is the only person alive who knew him before everything that came after. If she can reach the part of him that is still there – the part that has been drawing the stair and working out the story his whole life –" He stopped. "I don't know whether it will help. I know that it is the last thing I have to offer that has any logic behind it."

Elena was already picking up her phone.

Lydia answered on the second ring. Elena said what needed to be said in three minutes – the tone of someone relaying information they know will be acted on, because the person receiving it has been waiting to be asked. Lydia's reply, when it came, was simply: "I'll come now." No hesitation, no questions. Philip heard it from across the studio and did not write it down.

Some things do not need to be written down. They need only to have happened.

Philip had wondered, in the days since Chelsea, what it had cost her – the visit, the forgiveness, the hand taken and the door closed. He had filed her, after Alfred's account, as a woman who had done a hard thing once and gone back behind her own door to recover from the doing of it. He had not expected her to be waiting. But the way she answered – on the second ring, with no surprise in her voice, as though the call were one she had been keeping a part of herself free to receive – told him he had misjudged the geometry of it again, as he kept misjudging it. She had not done a hard thing and retreated. She had done a hard thing and remained available for the next one, holding herself ready in the way of a person who has understood that the account between herself and this man was not yet closed and would require, before it closed, one more entry that only she could make.

She arrived forty minutes later in a coat she had grabbed from the hall, slightly out of breath, and she stood in the doorway and looked at Philip and Elena and Lane with the contained focus of someone who has been given a task and intends to understand it correctly before they begin. Philip looked at her. He had seen her twice: in the cold Chelsea flat and in the hospital corridor with her hands over her face. Both times she had had the quality of a person moving through a specific difficulty that had been hers for a long time. Today she had the different quality of someone who has set a long-standing

difficulty down and is in the space where it was – lighter than expected, uncertain what to do with the lightness. She had, since the hospital, put the thing down. What she was here to do today was something else, and she knew it, and the knowing was in her face.

Lane explained, briefly, what the situation was and what he believed was needed. He told her about the stair, about the story the boy had been drawing. He told her what he thought could happen if the forgiveness could reach the part of Alfred that was actually present – not the forty-five-year-old, not the guilty conscience that had been driving the regression, but the actual boy in the actual room who had been drawing and trying to work out the ending.

She asked two questions: whether the boy upstairs would be frightened, and whether she could take her time. Lane said probably not and yes. She nodded once, the nod of someone confirming an understanding and not a preference, and handed Elena her coat.

"He won't be frightened of you," Lane said. "That's rather the point. You may be the only person in England he isn't a stranger to. The adult relationships have gone – he doesn't know Ms Markham, he doesn't know Mr Hardin – but you he knew before any of it. You're not in the part that's been erased. You're underneath it."

Lydia took this in. She had set her coat over the back of a chair and stood with her hands quiet in front of her, and Philip saw in her the thing he had seen in Walsh and in Elena and in

Lane, the quality the whole autumn had been collecting around this man: the quality of a person deciding to be wholly present to a difficult task, spending nothing on display. "When we were children," she said, "before any of it – before the field, before he left, before the book, before all the things we did to each other – we used to make up a story. He'd start it and I'd take it on and he'd take it back. A boy at the top of a tower who couldn't get down. We worked on it for years. I'd forgotten it until last week, until all this. I thought it was nothing – two clever children passing the time." She looked toward the stairs. "It wasn't nothing, was it. He's been writing it ever since. Four books and they're all the tower. And I'm the one who knows the ending, because we made it up together, in a field, before either of us had done anything that needed forgiving." She picked up nothing, fixed nothing, simply stood. "I know how it ends. I've always known. I just stopped being willing to tell him, somewhere along the way, because being angry was easier than going back to the field." She moved to the stairs. "I'd like to go up alone."

"I'd like to go up alone," she said.

"Yes," Elena said.

She went up the stairs. Her footsteps were quiet and even on the boards. Then the door at the top opened and a small sound came down: Alfred's voice, lighter and clearer than any of them had heard it in weeks, saying her name with the simple and complete recognition of someone encountering a face that has always been part of the world they know.

The studio door at the top of the stairs closed.

Philip sat at the table. Elena sat beside him. Lane took the remaining chair. They could hear, from above, the faint and intermittent sound of voices — Lydia's mostly, low and patient, and then Alfred's, answering — but the words did not come through the ceiling. Philip did not open his notebook. He had been keeping notes for weeks but he understood, in the way that you understand the things that matter without being able to explain why they matter, that this was not a thing to take notes on. It was a thing to be present for, and that was a different activity.

He had spent his life confusing the two — presence and recording — and had told himself, when challenged, that the recording was a form of presence, the writer's way of attending more closely rather than less. He had believed it. He was not sure, sitting at the foot of these stairs with the voices going on above him, that he still did. The notebook was a membrane. It let you be in a room while keeping a thin transparent layer between yourself and the room, and the layer was where the writer lived, and it had its uses — it was where the seeing happened, the cool exact seeing that the work required — but it was not the same as being in the room with nothing between you and what the room held. Lydia was in the room above with nothing between her and the boy. Elena had been in rooms with nothing between her and this man for twenty-five years; that was what the love had been, the willingness to dispense with the membrane. And Philip, who had loved Alfred too, in the undemonstrative way of men of his generation and temperament, had loved him through the membrane the whole time, had loved him the way he loved his characters,

with attention and accuracy and a final reserve, and he understood now that the reserve was the thing he would have to give up if the book was going to be any good, and that giving it up was the one thing his entire training had taught him how not to do.

"What is she saying to him?" Elena said, at some point. Her voice was very quiet.

"I think she's telling him his story," Philip said. "The one he's been drawing upstairs. Or she's listening to him tell it. One or the other." He looked at the ceiling. "I think she's doing what Lane said. She's going back to the bottom with him."

Lane said, without being asked: "I didn't help Rebecca Frost the way I might have." He was looking at the table. "I knew what she needed – I formed the hypothesis, I understood the mechanism – but I didn't know who could have given it to her. She was estranged from the people who knew her before. The people she had wronged. I thought: medicine. I kept thinking: medicine." He paused. "There was no medicine. There was only the one person who knew her at the origin point, and I did not find them in time, and they did not come, and she ceased." He looked at Philip. "I have thought about this for thirty years. Every version of it. What if I had looked earlier. What if I had understood sooner. What if the person had been findable." He stopped. "This time the person came."

Philip looked at him. He thought about what it meant to be Edmund Lane: thirty years of a specific failure, carried without being able to discuss it with anyone who could understand it,

looking for the second case that would allow a different ending. He thought about the word singular, which was what Lane's colleague had used about his career. He thought: not singular. Unfinished. He has been waiting to finish it.

"She came," Philip said.

"Yes," Lane said. He looked at the ceiling, at the sound of voices that still moved above them. "She came."

An hour passed. Then another. Elena got up at some point and made tea and brought it back without anyone asking for it, and Philip drank his and did not taste it. Lane checked his phone once and put it away. The afternoon light came through the skylight and moved across the studio floor in its ordinary way, crossing the floorboards at the rate appropriate to the time of year, indifferent to what was happening in the room above it.

Philip had thought, in advance, that the waiting would be the hard part, and the waiting was hard, but it was hard in a way he had not predicted. He had expected suspense – the sharp forward-leaning anxiety of not knowing an outcome. What he got instead was something slower and stranger, a kind of suspension of time itself, the hours in the waiting room not passing so much as accumulating, piling up around them like snow. He had read, somewhere, that the dying often report that time loses its forward motion near the end, that the past and present cease to keep their proper places; and he thought that the people who wait near the dying must experience a version of the same thing, the clock continuing to mark its minutes while the minutes refuse to add up to anything, to progress toward any resolution, simply

sitting in the room with you, one after another, identical, going nowhere. He looked at the courtyard window and the light declined across it by imperceptible degrees, and he understood that he was not waiting for time to pass. He was waiting for time, which had gone wrong for Alfred in the most literal way a thing can go wrong, to be set right – or to fail finally to be set right – and that until one or the other happened, time would not resume its ordinary motion for any of them, would hang in the room as it was hanging now, refusing to be either the past or the future, only this, only the long suspended present of people who love someone and can do nothing but be in the building while it is decided.

Philip looked at Elena across the table. She had her hands around her mug but was not drinking from it. She was looking at the ceiling – not anxiously, not with the specific alertness of someone listening for the wrong kind of sound, but with the steady attention of someone who is simply present to the place where the thing is happening. He thought about what she had told him in the hospital corridor six weeks ago: I have loved him since we were children. He thought about the quality of that love as he had observed it over two months – the quality of a feeling that has been carried without being said for twenty-five years and has survived the not-saying, has retained its force, has not become bitter or resigned or converted into something else. He thought: this is what it looks like when a feeling is genuine. Not performed, not managed, not maintained by will. Simply present, the way things that are real are present: without needing to announce themselves.

He thought about the summer she had spent walking a one-mile radius around King's Cross looking for him. The methodical quality of it. The section-by-section certainty that this was what needed to be done and she was the person to do it. He thought about the portrait on the easel downstairs – all the versions of Alfred accumulated into one canvas, none of them complete, all of them true – and about what it said that she had been building it for months before any of this began. Not because she knew what was going to happen. Because she was the kind of person who kept track of the people she loved with the attention she brought to everything, which was the attention of someone who understood that the thing you are not recording might be the thing you will most need later.

Philip thought about what Alfred had said in the spare room: I think someone has to come who knew him when he was at the bottom. He had been working on this story his entire writing life – in *The Rectory at Larkfield*, in *The Black Aviary*, in *The Glass Orchard*, in every book and in the one that followed. The stair had been there from the beginning, unnamed and present, the central structure of everything he had written. And the solution the twelve-year-old had sketched out in a spare room in the Boltons was the same solution he had been trying to write toward for twenty-five years without being able to reach it: someone who knew you at the bottom. Someone who can give the bottom back.

He thought also about what it meant that the person who could give the bottom back was Lydia Merrick. The woman who had sent the book. The final shot loosed in retreat. The anger and

the love inseparable. He thought: the wound and the cure were the same person, and perhaps that was always the case with wounds of the kind that Alfred had been carrying. The person who breaks the thing is the only person who can make it whole, because they are the only one who knows what it was before it broke.

He thought: he has been writing this book his whole life. And the book has been writing back.

He thought about the six weeks between the Minerva corridor and this afternoon. He tried to make them into a sequence – the flat above Cambridge Circus, the studio, the boxing gym, Walsh, Lane's office, Larkfield, the rectory, the grave, Lydia, the box of reviews in chronological order. The procedure and its failure. The boy at the kitchen table not knowing Elena's name. He tried to make the sequence into a shape, and found that it had one, and that the shape was not a decline but an approach. Six weeks of approaching something that could only be approached from this specific direction, at this specific cost, with this specific cast of people who had each given what they had to give.

He thought: none of them chose this. And all of them stayed.

He also thought about what was happening upstairs in terms he had not let himself use before, because using them felt like a form of superstition: that stories are structures the mind builds to make sense of experience, and that Alfred's mind had been building the same structure – the stair, the climbing, the forgetting of the bottom – for forty-five years, and that it had been building it because the structure was accurate. The experience it was trying to make sense of was real. The stair was

real. Not metaphorically real – real in the way that the things that shape a life are real, which is more than metaphorically and less than physically, and is its own category that we do not have a good word for. He thought: the boy upstairs has been trapped on the stair and does not know he has been trapped on the stair. And the woman he sent away at seventeen is the person who can tell him that the stair has a bottom. And the bottom is still there. And it is reachable.

He thought about the quality of forgiveness as Lydia had described it – not a gift to the other person, but something you do so that you yourself can move. He thought about the double nature of what was happening upstairs: Lydia forgiving Alfred, and Alfred forgiving Lydia, and neither of them forgiving the other in the soft and effortless way forgiveness is sometimes imagined to work, but in the harder way, the way that requires you to look directly at what you carry and decide to set it down knowing you will feel its absence for a long time. He thought about what Alice Torrance had said – beautiful while he was running – and about the quality of the running, and about what it meant to stop running not because you have to but because you have arrived somewhere and you recognise it.

He thought: I will write about all of this. Not just the facts of it – the dates, the medical observations, the things that can be measured. But the texture. The quality of the waiting in this room. The sound of the pencil on the pad upstairs. Lane saying forward with thirty years of a different ending in the word. Elena at the kitchen table with the voices through the

floor. The amber London light. All of this. It is the texture that makes it true.

A sound came from upstairs. Not words, not a voice. A sound without a specific category – not quite a cry, not quite the kind of sound a body makes when something physical happens to it – and it was enough to bring them all to their feet simultaneously, and Elena was already at the stairs.

They went up.

Alfred was on the floor. Lydia was kneeling beside him with both hands on his shoulders, and she looked at them when they came in with the expression of someone who has been at the centre of something and has arrived at its edge. "He's breathing," she said immediately, before anyone asked. "Something happened. While we were talking. He – went somewhere. And then he was on the floor."

Lane was there in a moment. He checked pulse, breathing, the neurological signs he had been monitoring for weeks, and he said: "Steady. He's stable." He said it with the quality of a man for whom stable currently means everything. "Let's move him to the bed. Carefully."

They moved him. He did not wake. The breathing was regular, the face composed, the quality of the unconsciousness not the shallow unconsciousness of sleep but something deeper – a place below sleep, where the work of the body is too large for the conscious mind to be present for. Philip stood in the doorway and looked at Lydia.

Philip helped to lift him, and was unprepared for the lightness. The body he had first seen at the Minerva – the magnificent back, the athlete's ease, the physical surplus of a man who looked thirty-five and moved like less – had become this: a boy's frame, light in his arms, the bones near the surface, weighing almost nothing, weighing what a person weighs before life has finished loading them. There is a particular shock in lifting a person and finding them lighter than you have braced for; the arms prepare for the remembered weight and meet only a fraction of it, and the discrepancy registers somewhere below thought, in the body's own grief, before the mind has caught up. He set the weight down on the bed with enormous care, the way you set down a thing that is both precious and breakable and not yours, and he stepped back, and he looked at the boy on the pillow who had been his friend for fifteen years and was now lighter than the years they had shared, and he thought: this is what we are, under all of it. This is what the work and the fame and the careful self come to. A weight a friend can lift. A thing that can be carried to a bed. He had known it intellectually for fifty years. He had never before held it in his arms.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

Lydia was sitting in the armchair with the quality of a person who has been somewhere and is not yet entirely sure of the distance between that place and this one. "He told me the story," she said. "The stair. He has been drawing it all day because he cannot stop, and he told me: I have been drawing this stair since I was small. And I listened."

"And then?" Philip said.

"I told him about forgiveness. Not the version I negotiated with the adult version of him in Chelsea. That requires both parties to understand what they are exchanging, and a twelve-year-old does not have that framework. I told him: you forgive someone not because they deserve it but because carrying the weight of not-forgiving is exhausting, and putting it down is how you get your arms back. That forgiveness is not a gift to the other person. It is something you do so that you yourself can move." She looked at her hands. "He listened very carefully. And then he said there was a person he needed to forgive too. A woman he knew. He told me her name."

Philip waited.

"He said my name," Lydia said. "And I said: I know her. She was angry for a long time. She is not angry anymore. She forgives you. He said: good. I said: do you forgive her? He said: yes. And then —" She stopped. Started again. "I said: I forgive you. And he said: I forgive you. And then he said something very quietly."

"What did he say?" Elena asked.

"He said: I can see the bottom." Lydia's voice was level. The tears on her face were simply there, the way water is where it is. "And then he went down."

Elena took her downstairs. Philip heard their voices below — quiet, steady, the sound of two women being practical together in a kitchen, making tea, talking, the specific domesticity of people who are in the space after something very large and are managing it by attending to small things. This was, Philip

thought, the right thing to be doing. He stood in the doorway of the spare room and looked at Alfred on the bed and listened to the voices below and thought: this is what it looks like when it works. Not triumphant. Not resolved. Just – continuing. The continuing of it.

Lane sat beside the bed. Philip sat in the storeroom doorway across the landing. The evening came in through the skylight in slow amber increments, the city's light picking up the low cloud and distributing it, and the house settled around them with the competence of a house that has been settling for a hundred and fifty years.

He sat with Lane through the first three hours. They did not talk much. Lane monitored, checked readings, made notes in the small deliberate hand that Philip had been watching for six weeks. Philip sat in the doorway with the notebook, not writing, simply present. At some point he thought: this is what Lane has been waiting for. Not the clinical outcome – though that mattered, of course it mattered – but this. Being in the room when the thing that couldn't be fixed was fixed by something outside medicine. Being the witness to it. Thirty years of thinking about Rebecca Frost, thirty years of understanding what he had missed and why, and now sitting in a room in the Boltons at ten in the evening with his hands on a monitoring device and a man on the bed who was, by every reading he had, moving forward.

The house went quiet in stages, the way houses do at night – the street sounds thinning, the pipes ticking as the heating went off, the specific settling of old timber finding its night

position. Philip sat in the storeroom doorway with the full notebook in his lap and watched the line of lamplight under the spare-room door and listened to the small sounds of Lane's vigil: the rustle of a chart, the click of a pen, once, the old man rising to stand at the window and then sitting again. He thought about the strangeness of the company they had become – a novelist, a painter, a retired clinician, a woman from Chelsea who had arrived in a coat grabbed from a hook – assembled around a sleeping boy by no logic anyone would have designed, each of them having given the one thing they happened to have. Elena had given the looking. Lane had given the believing. Lydia had given the bottom of the stair. And Philip – Philip had given the record, which was the least of the gifts and the only one he had, and which would outlast all of them, because that was what records did: they stayed in the room after the people had left it, holding the shape of what the people had been while they were there.

Philip looked at Lane's face and thought: this is what he needed. Not to correct the mistake – you cannot correct a mistake that ended the way Rebecca Frost's ended. But to do the thing correctly once, in full, with the person present who made the mistake possible and the people present who made the correction possible. Philip thought: I will write Lane too. Not as a function of the plot. As a person who carried something for thirty years and was given, finally, a room to set it down in.

At some point Lane said, from inside the room: "The readings are unlike anything I have been seeing." Philip asked what unlike

meant. Lane was quiet for a moment. Then he said one word: "Forward." He said it and went back to monitoring, and did not elaborate, and Philip sat with the word for a long time. Forward. He had been waiting for six weeks for a word that went in the right direction, and here it was, said quietly in a doorway at nine in the evening by a man who had been waiting thirty years to be able to say it, and it was the right word and it was sufficient.

He opened his notebook. Not for notes. He had, at last, the shape of the thing he had promised to write. He had been waiting for it without knowing he was waiting, and the word *forward* had given it to him: a man who has spent six weeks trying to go backwards so that he can go forward, and who has finally, by some combination of geography and grief and a woman coming when called, found the place where forward is possible. That was the book. That was the argument the facts had been waiting to serve.

He wrote steadily, the way you write when the thing is finally ready: not fast, but with the feeling of something that has arrived at the right moment from the right direction and knows where it is going. He wrote about a man going backwards toward something that was not death and was not life but was the terrifying and illuminating space between them. He wrote about a corridor in the Minerva Club and a glass used as a mirror and an expression of shame that a man who was not ashamed would not have manufactured. He wrote about the flat above Cambridge Circus and the marks on the throat and the tears on a face that had never shown them before. He wrote about Elena at her easel and Celia in

the corridor and Walsh with her card and Lane in his office on Devonshire Street with two photographs side by side. He wrote about the boxing gym and the lobby of the Society of Arts and a lane in Larkfield that curved before the rectory gate so that you couldn't see the house until you were almost there. He wrote about Alice Torrance saying beautiful and about a box of reviews in chronological order with no label, and about a woman named Lydia who brought chrysanthemums every week and had been doing so for years without anyone knowing.

He wrote until the notebook was full. Then he wrote in the margins. Then he sat with the full notebook in his lap and the pen still in his hand and listened to the house, which was quiet and occupied and continuing.

At half past eleven, Alfred moved.

A shift in the shoulders. A change in the breathing. Lane was there first, then Elena in the doorway. Alfred's eyes opened. He looked at the ceiling. Then at Lane. Then he turned his head and found Elena.

"Elena," he said.

She made a sound that Philip would not try to transcribe.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. I'm here."

Alfred's eyes found Philip in the doorway. "Philip."

"I'm here," Philip said.

Alfred looked at his hands. He turned them slowly, examining them the way a person checks an inventory after a difficult journey, making sure of what they came back with. The voice, when he spoke again, was not a child's voice. It was not quite an

adult's either. It was something in transit: raw, uncertain in pitch, finding itself.

"How old?" he said.

Lane said: "Seventeen. Possibly eighteen."

Alfred closed his eyes briefly. Philip watched his face. He was not doing the calculation – or not only doing it. He was doing something else, something harder to name: the work of checking what you are and finding it still there.

He opened his eyes.

He looked at the skylight. The amber glow of London through the glass, the low cloud that holds the city's light and gives it back. He looked at it for a long time.

"The stair," he said. "I was at the very top. And I could not remember why I had climbed, and I could not see the bottom. And then she came." He did not say Lydia's name. He did not need to. "And she told me the bottom was there. And I could see it. And I could see the way down." He turned his head and looked at Elena, and then at Philip. In his eyes – the eyes that Philip had been watching for six weeks, carrying what they carried, wrong for every face they had occupied along the way – Philip saw something he had not seen in weeks. Not the forty-five-year-old's composure, not the twenty-five-year-old's unchecked certainty, not the child's blank fright. Something that had come through all of those and was on the far side of them. Something that the journey had produced and that had not existed before the journey.

"I'm coming down," he said.

Philip sat down. He opened his notebook to a clean page. He had been writing the book all night, filling the notebook with what had already happened. Now there was something left to write that hadn't happened yet.

"Tell me," he said.