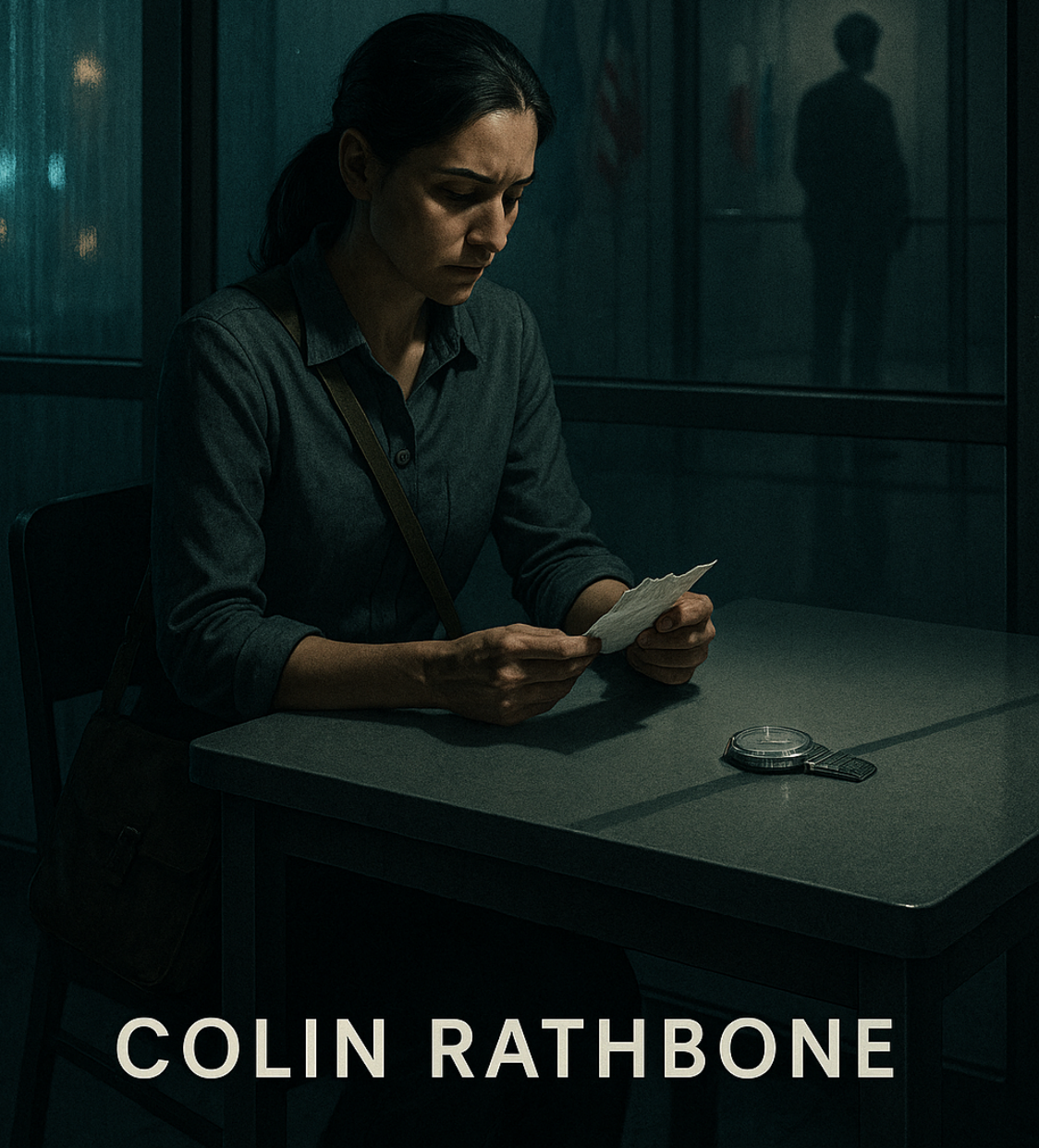


NEGATIVE SPACE



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Negative Space

by Colin Rathbone

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Chapter 1

A Routine Absence

She checked the time.

The secure terminal was a single screen in a row of identical screens, each set at the same angle, each with the same green login prompt. The lighting was flat and cold. Her fingers rested on the edge of the desk, still and aligned, nails short, no jewellery. She kept the satchel strap across her shoulder. She had a window. It opened and closed whether she watched the seconds or looked away, but she always watched. Seven years without a miss built habits. It also reinforced a default to the pattern; she kept that to herself. The work continued, but it had continued under pattern and that gave her something to stand on.

The confirmation was supposed to be nothing. A single routine tick against a schedule that had been designed to be unremarkable. You count the seconds, you note the tick, you move on. She would enter it, close the record, and go home to a flat that held little that could reveal a life. That was the plan she carried in as she typed her credentials and navigated the menu tree toward the watch window.

The hum in the room came from the vents and from the servers behind the wall that nobody saw unless they broke. A low hiss came from the small speakers built into the monitor; it was the sound of a channel open with nothing on it. She observed the signal baseline: flat, steady, no spike, no drop. She checked the time again and did not glance at the second hand twice in the same minute. She set her eyes to move in a deliberate pattern, screen, sideboard clock, screen, door reflection, and kept the rhythm until the mark.

The window opened. Nothing moved on the screen. The cursor blinked where it always blinked when the field was empty. No audible cue would come; there never was one. She watched the carrier for disturbances that had always coincided with content, and saw none. Thirty seconds. One minute. She kept her hands still. Her shoulders did not lift or drop. She held her breath to count five and released it without sound. Two minutes.

Seven years without a miss did not promise eight. It did not promise the next five minutes would behave. She had told trainees that, and she repeated it to herself now without saying the words. Trust the tradecraft. Wait out the buffer. You do not get to choose what you hear.

Three minutes passed. No partials. No noise. She shifted her attention to the auxiliary pane where a timestamp would echo if the routine functioned. Nothing. The room remained as it had been. Someone walked past the open arch behind her. She did not turn. Four minutes.

At five she adjusted to the waiting. The confirmation window had never extended this far in her time with the case. She had a path for drift: a buffer period of fixed length that accounted for equipment timekeeping differences and minor delays. It existed to prevent false positives, to keep a professional mind from chasing noise and breaking work it was meant to protect. She set that buffer in her head, fixed time to spend. She would wait every second of it. No calls. No messages. No improvisations. The discipline did not comfort her; it narrowed her options.

She opened the log placeholder and let the cursor sit. There was nothing to type yet. Her eyes tracked the top right corner where the time rolled over. The seconds seemed slow because she watched them, but they moved at the same rate as always. She counted them, not aloud, not in a sequence she would have to recall later. Six minutes.

She cross-checked the indicator channel that mirrored the confirmation in a different segment. There too the band was flat. She

adjusted the volume by a half notch to verify the speakers functioned and then returned them to their original level. The hiss persisted at a consistent level. She watched for a single spike that would tell a different story. Nothing.

She called up the secondary marker. It was not the same channel. It existed outside the frame of the first, an external reference Nightingale had used in narrow circumstances when the primary had been set aside by design for maintenance or physical risk. It was a timing marker, not content. It confirmed presence without saying anything that could get a man arrested. She looked at the countdown and at the minute offset where it would present if he had set it up. The minute came and went with no change. She logged that to herself. The absence was no longer isolated to one path.

By eight, the temptation was to push hands into action: try a third path, call another unit, break procedure by a hair and tell herself it was still within tolerance. She knew the cost of that impulse. You turned a controlled situation into noise by adding variables when you had no basis to assume they would help. She had learned that before this asset, years ago, before she had trained herself to draw a hard line between boredom and doubt. Doubt was the most dangerous thing in this job because it made smart people invent reasons.

By nine, the buffer was not yet half-spent, but if an error had occurred, she expected to see some residue of it, corrupted packets on the screen, a burp in the carrier, a loose waveform she could point to later as evidence that something technical had misfired. There was nothing. The band was clean. The room's hum did not change. Her own breath created the only variable she could control, so she controlled it.

Ten minutes.

The thought presented: If it was field compromise, nothing she did here would reverse it. If it was a line break, that was another thing, but the system in front of her did not show a break. It showed a line ready to

receive. She marked that distinction and set it aside to avoid filling it with speculation. She watched. By eleven, nothing changed.

The watch face was a plain analogue dial. She had selected it because it did not beep and because its hands did not glow. She checked it and forced herself not to check it again for sixty seconds. She touched the spine of a file on the desk, a reflex she had when she needed to keep her hands occupied without moving them. It grounded her in the physical world of paper and edges and the fact that everything could be weighed.

At twelve minutes, her shoulders began to ache, a sign of tension she had not consciously acknowledged, and she let them settle without rolling them. The discipline did not prevent the body from reporting. It only set the terms for what she would do with those reports. She would do nothing other than watch the window and mark the time.

At thirteen she ran the secondary marker again. Empty. She opened the diagnostic pane to confirm system time. It matched the wall clock to the second. Her own watch showed the same minute. She tightened the fingers of her left hand once and released them.

At fourteen, movement at the periphery: a colleague two rows back stood, gathered a mug, and left without speaking. She registered the steps and the distance to the door out of habit. She did not assign motive. The habit was not a moral judgment; it was a way of knowing who could come up behind you.

By fifteen, the buffer had more time to run. She made herself catalogue the qualities of the absence. Clean band. No partials. No static. No noise. It was absence against a functioning baseline. That mattered. The difference between nothing because a thing was broken and nothing because the thing was empty was the difference between relief later and the report she did not want to file. She did not write the words in the log. She kept them in her head where they would not become part of the record until the record demanded them.

At sixteen she checked the secondary marker again. The external time point she tracked had once been used to announce nothing more than breath and continuation. It was not a place to hide content. It was a place to say yes without saying yes. If he had been able to reach that point, he had chosen not to. If he had not been able to reach it, then she would learn that later from other trajectories. Both options hung in front of her as she watched the empty minute pass.

You stay frosty. You trust the tradecraft. You do not invent a sign because you want one. Her internal tone was the same one she used with trainees in calm rooms where nothing urgent touched them. It did not change here. She did not trigger anything just to ease the wait.

At eighteen she breathed and let the breath settle. She scanned the system error logs for the day. No dropped connections in the last hour. No update in the last twenty-four. The infrastructure stood as it had stood. The absence was on the other end, not on hers. She closed the pane and returned to the band.

At nineteen she counted five and then five again. Marked the time. The buffer reached its final slice. She let it run to the end, not because she believed the last slice would differ from the first nineteen but because the rules existed for a reason and she would not violate them when the violation would serve nothing but emotion.

Twenty minutes.

The countdown ended where it always ended. There had been nothing. No spike. No partial. No late flare. She waited for an extra ten seconds as a personal ritual because she had once seen a late packet arrive after a confirmed end and had decided then that she would give the world ten extra seconds before she closed on it. The ten seconds did not produce anything.

She closed the window and left the log open. The status of the entry changed when she typed the first letter. She did not type. She sat with her hands flat on the desk and rehearsed what became true once it was

spoken: a routine confirmation had not arrived; a secondary marker associated with routine fallback had not appeared; the carrier was clean; the system time had matched her watch; the buffer had been fully observed; she had taken no action outside procedure; she had not attempted contact; she had not initiated an emergency trigger.

The cursor blinked in the empty log field, steady as before. You knew this was coming. You should have seen it. The voice sounded like someone else because it had originated years ago on a night when she had watched a line go quiet and had missed the one irregularity that would have told her why. She had shaped her work to avoid missing that kind of irregularity again. But this absence presented no irregularities to see. That was what made it heavy.

She stood, slid the satchel strap to adjust the weight, locked the screen, and left the bay.

The secondary terminal was on a different floor with a different access list, a small mitigation against local hardware faults that persisted after maintenance. The corridor outside it was colder than the one upstairs. She keyed in, waited for the light to change, and took the station closest to the door where she could see into the corridor without turning her head. The habits were not paranoia; they were standard.

She logged in and called the same paths in the same order. The windows opened the same way. She brought up the listening view on one half, the marker view on the other, and let both run while she reached into her satchel for a notebook she rarely used. She placed it beside the keyboard and did not open it. She already knew the times. If she wrote them, it would be to control herself, not to inform the work.

The systems here showed the same thing as upstairs. At the minutes that mattered, nothing. She widened the view on the marker and scrolled

back an hour to check for misalignment. The stream held its pattern. She scrupulously avoided altering anything that would register as a query outside her normal profile. It was not superstition. It was operational prudence. Any deviation created a trace that had to be justified when the incident moved into formal review.

She muttered sub-vocally as she ran through a cover story she would not use tonight because there was no reason to speak to anyone outside the building yet. It was an old habit; rehearsing gave the words an economy when she needed to use them later. No adjectives. Timestamps, not impressions.

She considered the emergency path and let the consideration run for less than ten seconds before closing it down. Triggering it would force a flare that could expose a hiding man to whoever was watching for exactly that emergency shape. If he was on the run or behind a door with watchers on the other side, any flare would be a signal to the wrong people. You do not save a man by forcing him to announce himself.

She pulled up the external feed she had been granted for the street where the dead drop location sat behind an ordinary shopfront. The view was a washed-out angle from across the street, anchored to a municipal mount that gave a frame of pavement, a strip of road, and the shuttered front of the building she knew without sentiment. Foot traffic moved at intervals. A man in a dark jacket walked past with a plastic bag and did not look up. A pair of women crossed the frame talking, then left it, then reappeared on the reflection of a window two doors down and were gone. The shop was closed, as it should be at this hour. No vans idled. No uniforms clustered. The long view showed ordinary patterns. She watched for the shape of a scoop-up: a rapid arrival, a door opened and held, heads turned down as hands guided someone to a vehicle. None of that appeared in the period she tracked.

She scrubbed the previous two hours at 4x, scanning for event shapes rather than faces. A lorry passing, a delivery at dawn, a woman with a child in the afternoon; nothing out of place. If there had been a public

event at the door, the camera did not hold it.

She returned to the internal view and let the paths run. A clean absence repeated itself. Repetition was data. The conclusion it suggested was not proof; it was a direction to weigh. It suggested decision rather than malfunction. Whether the decision was his or someone else's, she refused to decide in advance. She knew the cost of filling silence with her own voice.

She compiled the brief in her head: times, durations, channels checked, buffer observed, secondary marker absent, external feed without incident shapes. She added nothing to it. She killed the habit of saying that the silence felt structured. She could say that to herself. She could not present it without a foundation. The foundation would not be built tonight.

She ran a small risk assessment in her head, just a list, nothing more: reporting now would initiate the incident review; counterintelligence would be notified; the dead drop would be put on hold until further assessment; the asset would be classified as at risk; if nothing new arrived within forty-eight hours, standard practice would move toward burn. She did not argue with that timeline because the timeline existed to protect people other than her asset, and those people had to be protected too. She also did not accept it as inevitable. Timelines could be interrupted by facts.

Waiting here would not produce new data. She had two views of absence and a corridor full of procedures ahead. She closed the windows and rose. She opened the notebook and wrote four times in a neat column. Then she closed it, slid it back into the satchel, and moved toward the door.

In the corridor, the building's HVAC made a precise, even sound. She pressed the lift call and watched the floor indicator respond. The doors opened. She stepped into the lift and held herself square to the frame where the mirror gave her a slice of the corridor behind her. No one

moved in it. The doors shut. In the brief close, she regarded her own face in the mirror: sharp, tired, controlled. A person trained to report and wait. She did not press her lips together. She did not let her eyebrows move. She pressed the button for the floor where Davies would still be at his desk.

You report. You become a witness. The Service takes the wheel. Trust the tradecraft.

The lift delivered her to a warmer corridor where the carpet deadened footsteps. She measured the distance to the small room they used for start-of-week admin briefings and quiet problems. The door was closed. She knocked once, then once again at the exact same pace.

Robert Davies waved her in with the brief lift of a palm and a half step back from the table, making space for the file he expected she would carry. He wore a rumpled suit. He squared a pad to the table edge before he spoke. He stood later than most because he liked to be the one who turned the lights off, or because going home did not offer relief. He did not smile.

"You're late," he said without accusation. "Not your fault. Sit."

She sat and set the satchel beside the chair. She did not take the notebook out. She placed both hands on the table in a standard posture of readiness, drew one measured breath, and recited the facts with no preface.

"Routine confirmation tied to the drop did not arrive within the window," she said. "Secondary marker also absent. Carrier remained clean. System time matched wall and personal. Buffer fully observed. No action taken outside procedure. Emergency path not initiated."

Davies nodded once and reached for a pad with the institutional logo at the top. He squared it to the edge, then again.

"Time of the window open?"

She gave the time.

"Duration?"

She gave the duration.

"Secondary marker offset?"

She gave the offset and the absence. He wrote each number in a precise stack, pausing between them long enough that she could see the shape of the list forming in his mind before he reprinted it on the page.

"Diagnostics?"

"Checked. No drops, no updates in the last day. Baseline steady."

He underlined one of the times without looking at her.

"External?"

"Camera. Street normal. No movement consistent with a grab."

He allowed a small sound that was not agreement and not skepticism. He set the pen down and stacked his fingers in front of him.

"All right."

He looked at her for the first time since she had started talking. His eyes were tired and guarded, as if he saw both the case and the institution at once and could not split them cleanly.

"Any interpretation at this stage?" he asked, and lifted his eyebrows a millimetre to remind her what that question meant in a room like this.

"Clean absence," she said. "Against a functioning carrier."

He waited. She did not add more.

"Structured?" he said, softer.

She held his gaze for a second then put it back on the pad between them.

"Reads as choice," she said, keeping it flat.

Davies drew a line beneath the last entry and capped his pen.

"Pre-review, we avoid adjectives," he said without heat. "You know this."

"I do."

He closed the pad and aligned it to the edge of the table. It signaled that the informal part had ended and the formal part would begin.

"We freeze contact," he said. "We alert CI. We lock the drop until we know more. We prepare the risk assessment. If there's no change within forty-eight hours, we'll convene the burn board."

She did not nod. She looked at the pad, then at his face, then back at the pad as if the ink could re-order itself into a less predictable sequence.

"Request," she said.

He tilted his head in an invitation to say the rest. He thumbed the pen clip once and waited.

"Quiet review of the last two cycles of logistics around the drop," she said. "Focus on handling assignments and routine deviations. No contact. No field movement from me."

He took longer than necessary to answer. The pause had reasons. He was weighing protocols and risk and the degree to which he trusted her to hold a line that almost no one held when it mattered to them. He also saw the optics. If he let a case officer run a parallel review while CI spun up, he would have to explain himself to people who weighed optics as their own kind of evidence.

"No," he said finally. "Contamination risk. We're not discussing your discipline; we're discussing process. CI will run it."

"They will include me," she said.

"You'll be informed as appropriate."

"Process first," he said.

They both knew what that phrase meant. It meant that the institution would talk to itself first and then talk to her if it had to. It removed her from the center of the problem and turned her into a provider of facts and an observer of consequences. It was the right move for the institution and the wrong move for a person who still had a job to do.

He saw something in her face that he did not like and adjusted his tone half a degree.

"Stand down," he said, with the authority of a man who had signed enough orders to know what his voice sounded like in the minds of other people. "Go home. Be here at eight. We'll brief."

She kept her voice flat.

"Understood."

He pushed his chair back a fraction and then stayed in it.

"Ava, I know what seven years without a miss does to your head," he said, eyes on the table. "It tells you that patterns confer safety. They don't. They just help."

"The signal is in the noise," she said, not as a correction but as a statement of common ground.

"Sometimes," he said. "Sometimes the signal isn't there."

She did not argue. The absence of argument was not agreement. It was control.

"If anything changes," he said, "if anything at all hits a channel tomorrow, call me first. Not CI, not operations. Me."

It was a small concession. It meant he wanted a line that bypassed the people who would write the final story. She nodded once because it

acknowledged something private between them: he knew she was good at reading the early pieces, and he wanted that read before the apparatus took it out of both of their hands.

"That's all," he said. "Go."

She stood and lifted the satchel. She did not reach for the pad or for her notebook. There was nothing more to assemble. At the door she paused with her hand on the frame.

"I don't like the cleanliness of it," she said, looking at the hinge because it gave her a neutral point to aim at.

"You don't have to like it," he said. "You just have to write it."

She walked out into the corridor, counting the steps to the lift without noticing she had started. In the glass she saw herself at a remove, moving like the kind of person she had trained herself to be: measured, precise, outwardly cooperative. The carpet absorbed the sound of her shoes. The clock on the wall marked the same time in this corridor as it had upstairs. She stopped just short of the lift and looked down the hall to the emergency exit. The bar on that door would feel the same under her hand as it always did. She did not press it.

You make a choice now. Obey and let the file grow around the absence. Or find another way to listen. Not tonight. Not yet. Trust the tradecraft.

The lift arrived. She stepped in. The doors closed. She watched the numbers descend and thought of an empty chair and the way a gap changed lines of sight in a room. She did not let the thought go further. She watched the numbers and prepared to sleep without sleep, because that was the next piece of procedure and she was still inside it.

Outside, rain ticked against glass she would not touch. The trains under the river sent a faint vibration through the building at intervals measured by someone else. She could map it if she chose. She did not. She held her satchel closed with one hand and kept the other hand empty.

At the ground floor she crossed to the exit and out into the wet. The air was colder here, and the sound of traffic spread in a pattern that was both familiar and no comfort. She walked to the street, kept to the shadow of the wall, and began the quiet route home she used when she had to carry a day in her head without letting it spill. A thin hiss from a bus brake cut through the traffic.

She checked her watch and did not check it again until she reached the corner.

Chapter 2

The Official Line

She heard the lock tumble and measured the pause before the handle moved again. It had been forty-eight hours since the buffer ended. The briefing room was small, glassed on two sides, the light cold and even. A wall clock sat at shoulder height, analogue, no tick. The HVAC made a constant, low sound that masked the rest of the building's noise.

Davies was already seated. He had placed a pad at a right angle to the table edge and a thin folder aligned to the pad. His suit carried travel creases that he had not bothered to steam. He lifted his eyes when she entered and lowered them to the folder before she reached the chair opposite him.

"Sit," he said.

She sat with both feet on the floor and set her satchel by her left leg where she could feel its weight. She kept her hands still on the table, the left hand over the right. A rule: do not show agitation in a room where words became record.

Davies uncapped his pen and clicked it once. He did not look at her for the first line.

"Counterintelligence has concluded that the absence is consistent with hostile compromise," he said. "We proceed on that basis. The drop is locked. All associated channels remain frozen. The case is administratively closed pending any event that would materially alter the risk picture."

He slid a single sheet forward with two fingers. The sheet had boxes and the Service emblem at the top, a familiar format used when someone

was being pulled off an operation under a neutral phrase.

"Mandatory leave," he said. As he spoke, he set a small evidence envelope by his folder and squared it with the paper. "Effective now. You'll avoid all contact, direct or indirect, with this case and any peripheral actors. That includes the local proprietor at the location of the drop, any liaison familiar with the handling pattern, and any external analysts who have had eyes on. You will not travel in connection with this case. You will surrender your case phone and any removable media registered to it. Your desktop accounts have been put on hold."

He pushed a pen toward her, cap set beside it. She touched the pen and did not pick it up yet.

"On what basis closed?" she said.

He looked at her and held the look for a second.

"Probable hostile compromise," he said. "Clean absence, no partials, against a functioning carrier with diagnostics indicating no fault. Secondary marker absent. Forty-eight hours elapsed without change. No public anomaly on the exterior camera at the drop street during the tracking window. We go with the high-probability explanation that protects the maximum number of people."

"Panic compromise often shows noise," she said. "Packet residue. Partial chain attempts. Emergency flares."

"Often," he said. "Not always."

"This was too clean," she said.

He waited. The clock's hand moved smoothly over the six.

"That's an intuition," he said. "And you know what I'm going to say about that."

She kept her shoulders level. "Seven years of pattern isn't an intuition. It's a set of facts we can weigh."

"Which is why you're not entirely objective," he said. He did not raise his voice. "Your proximity is a factor here, Ava. I'm not lecturing. I'm stating a risk profile. You've been too close for too long to be the person who calls this now."

She held his gaze. "If he's hiding in place, we could flush him."

"Which is why you're on leave," he said. "Because I can't have you carrying the means to act if something moves."

He leaned back a fraction and glanced down at the sheet again, then up at the wall behind her, then back to the paper. His manner was the same as it would be for any officer in her position, and that was both the point and the problem.

"Our brief doesn't extend to managing sentiment, Ava. It extends to managing risk," he said. "You're very good at what you do. This comes with a cost. The cost is that when the case touches you, your judgement has to be buffered by other people's caution. This is that buffer."

He tapped the empty signature box.

She looked at the paper and read the words she knew by format: mandatory leave, duration pending review, no contact regarding the listed case and associated matters, surrender of specified devices, compliance subject to Security oversight, failure to comply subject to disciplinary action including wellness intervention. There was a blank line for a return-to-duty review date left empty.

"Wellness?" she said. The word was precise in context and open in usage.

"If you deviate," he said, "Security will escalate. If you deviate and appear to be compromising your health or the Service's, we will trigger wellness. I'm not threatening you. I'm making sure you're not surprised."

She looked at the pen and then at Davies. "And the safeguards. If he's in a safe posture, if he's doing what he's been trained to do when something smells like an internal leak. What do we do to avoid driving

him out?"

"We lock the drop," he said. "We monitor the environment for external movement. We do not initiate any path that announces London interest. CI leads a review of handling assignments for anomalies. The proprietor at the shop is on a passive screen to ensure no hostile contact."

"Passive," she said. "You'll treat her as a witness without upsetting the floor."

"That's right," he said. "She's a civilian. We're not kicking doors or asking her to remember what she can't."

"And inside," she said. "Assignments, travel records, any temporary swaps."

"CI will run that," he said. "You won't."

She let the silence sit for two beats. Not a rhetorical device. Just time to clear a line in her head. The hum from the vents stayed constant. Outside the glass, two figures crossed the corridor and did not look in.

"I'll ask again," she said. "Panic gives you noise. Clean absence reads like a decision."

"Clean absence could be a decision made by someone with a gun on the table," he said. "Or a decision made by us that we can't see yet because we're not as smart as we think. I'm not gambling on corner cases."

She put her right hand on the pen. The pen was cold.

"This isn't a referendum on your work," he said. "It's about containment. We're minimizing variables until we can define the problem with more than adjectives."

"I didn't use adjectives," she said.

"Not today," he said. "But I've known you a long time. This one has you. You need to stand down."

She steadied the page. The pen hovered for a beat as she held her breath, then she signed. Her name was neat and compact. She dated it, handed the pen back, and pushed the form toward him. He touched the wall panel; a soft chime marked Security receipt with a timestamp. He put a copy in a folder marked with her initials and filed the original in the thin folder aligned to the pad. He slid the evidence envelope across the table.

"Case phone," he said.

She took it out of her satchel, powered it down, and slid it across the table. He added it to the envelope and sealed it with the adhesive strip, pressing along the seam with a thumb.

"You're on the schedule for a return-to-duty review next week," he said, looking at the empty line as if it were already filled. "That's a placeholder. It will move."

"Understood," she said.

"You have what you need," he said.

He opened another folder. It was not hers. He placed it on top of the one that held her leave form. She went still for half a breath, attention on the folder's top edge, and then let the moment pass.

"We're done here," he said.

She stood, lifted her satchel, and left the room. The door closed with a tight seal. In the corridor the light was warmer and the carpet dampened the sound underfoot. She counted the steps to the lift without showing that she was counting. She pressed the call button and watched the display above the doors. The lift arrived. She stepped in and stood where the mirror showed her the corner of the corridor. The doors closed and the weight shifted as the lift moved. She touched the spine of the satchel once and took her hand away.

You stay frosty. You trust the tradecraft. You don't get to choose what you hear.

Her workspace faced a plain partition with a strip of glass at the top that reflected the opposite row. The desk held a keyboard, a monitor on an adjustable arm, a stack of blank forms, and a pencil cup with two pens and a blunt marker. A junior colleague sat three stations down. He looked up when she arrived, then looked at his screen. His hands hovered over the keys without typing for a moment, then began moving again in a work rhythm.

She set the satchel down and opened the top drawer. Paper clips, a packet of wet wipes, a roll of tape. Nothing else. The second drawer held a pair of spare reading glasses and a small stapler. The bottom drawer had a key lock. She took her key ring from her pocket and turned the key. The drawer slid out with a small sound. It was empty. The small binders she had kept there, the ones with non-sensitive calendar alignments and public reference logs, were gone. An administrative sweep had already moved through here. They left the pencils and took anything that suggested thought.

She closed the drawer and locked it.

The junior glanced over and then away, a movement calibrated to show he was not watching. A woman she knew from a different floor came through the aisle with a cup in her hand. She saw Ava and adjusted her path a step wider than necessary. She did not meet Ava's eyes.

Ava lifted the two pens from the cup and put one in the satchel. She left the other. She took the reading glasses from the drawer and set them in a small cloth case and slid it into the satchel. She checked behind the monitor arm where she sometimes tucked a sticky note with a telephone extension for a liaison office she called twice a year. The space was clear.

Her badge opened the nearest door on the first try. The LED above the handle changed, and the lock disengaged. Inside, a small room held a printer and a shredding bin with a sealed top. She dropped two outdated

forms into the bin and returned to her desk. The badge was still good. The looks were not.

A colleague she had trained with years ago approached from the far end of the aisle. He slowed, glanced over the partition to the right, and kept going without turning his head. The signal was not subtle. She had been marked, not formally charged, not quite quarantined, but set apart in a way people understood without being told. It was not unusual. It was how the Service kept distance when contamination risk was live.

She zipped the satchel and lifted it. For a fraction of a second she imagined saying something. Not a defense. A neutral phrase, a spare acknowledgment that the work was bigger than any one case and she would be fine once this run of days passed. The instinct died before it reached her mouth. Explanations were signals. Signals drew attention. She owed the Service no signals now.

She walked past the junior. He did not look up. She stepped into the corridor, walked to the lift, and pressed the call. A different colleague came around the corner and saw her. He drew his mouth into a sympathetic line and then looked away toward the far end of the corridor. The lift arrived. She stepped in and chose the far left position, which let her see the reflection of the hallway without turning. She watched the gap between the lift doors and the frame until it closed.

She ran the scenario in her head, not as a story but as a flow: if a tail picked up inside the building, it would be soft, no touch. One person in the lobby, one outside, one further out for handoff. If she turned left at the exit, the angle of the building's glass would give her a cross-frame reflection from the water. If she turned right, the bus shelter on the second block had a scratch in the plexiglass that distorted faces just enough to force a closer pass for confirmation. She marked where she would accept the close pass and where she would increase spacing using traffic.

The doors opened on the ground floor. She crossed the lobby without looking at Security. The guard at the desk pretended to read a screen. She felt his gaze for three steps and it cut away when she touched the exit bar. Outside, the air was damp and colder than the building. Rain collected on the edge of the low wall that ran along the front.

She turned right, not left, and kept a walking pace that fit the hour. Her shoes found the dry patches almost without looking. She glanced in a window and caught a glimpse of herself, the satchel strap across her chest, her hair pulled back, the set of her shoulders. A glare in the glass showed a second pace behind her; in the next pane it resolved as her own offset, and she moved her planned pass point half a doorway earlier. She looked past the reflection to the opposite side of the street where a man in a dark coat adjusted his scarf. He did not follow when she crossed at the corner.

She varied the distance to the person in front of her and did not vary it in a pattern. She stopped once to adjust the strap on her satchel, giving anyone behind her a chance to decide on a pass. No pass came. She resumed. A bus braked a block away with a thin hiss. She logged the pitch of the hiss; it matched the one from two days before through the glass in the lobby.

She did not look back until she reached a corner that offered a pane of glass at a right angle to the street. She used it. No one tracked into the reflection at a synchronized pace. She continued, shoulders level, breath measured. The hum of traffic rose and fell. The river beyond the buildings lay out of sight, but the air off it carried a faint metallic taste at the back of her throat.

She took a longer route home to Pimlico than she usually did, not because she sensed a tail, but because she avoided a routine route.

In place of the building's HVAC hum, the flat had a faint vibration from the trains.

The flat was as she had left it. A narrow hallway. The living space with a small table, a straight-backed chair, a sofa that doubled as a place to sleep when she didn't trust her bed, and a kitchen unit along one wall. No pictures hung on the walls. The bed in the other room was made with a dark cover. The window shades were down.

She put the satchel on the table and laid her badge beside it. She took her watch off and placed it next to the badge, then put the watch back on. She opened the satchel and removed the notebook. She did not open it. She set her phone face down and put it on mute. The phone did not buzz. The room was quiet. On the bare wall, an unmarked rectangle met the notebook's blank right-hand column for unfilled time slots.

She stood for a minute without moving. In the building, process had been used in a way that removed her hands from the problem. Here, it could be used in a limited way that did not blow her up on the first step.

She pulled a chair out and sat. She placed the notebook in front of her and rested her fingertips on the cover to feel its weight. She lifted her fingers and moved them away. She looked at the wall to her right. The wall was bare. The emptiness was a choice from years earlier, made to avoid leaving personal material in view. Now the wall served another purpose: it offered a blank surface she could use without visual interference.

Her phone remained still. A dim light from the kitchen clock gave the room a point of reference. She didn't drink, turn on music, or make tea.

Obedience here meant waiting for the Service to write the end of the file. The file would be clean. It would state facts, not impressions. It would close with a conclusion that protected the most people and preserved the institution's procedures. If she obeyed, Nightingale would be gone, and the words on the page would remove him from the line of active work a year from now. That was one of the Service's strengths. It

closed files under routine categories once the window passed.

She had promised a man she had never met that she would keep him safe. The promise had not been rhetorical. It had not been made aloud. It lived in the way she had worked the case, the way she had kept to timing, the way she had avoided temptations dressed as solutions. If she obeyed now, she would erase him twice: once in fact and once in the file.

She opened the notebook. The last page bearing writing held four times in a neat column from two nights ago. She counted back from the present along the days and dates she knew by heart. Years of scheduled confirmations and minor variations lived in her head in a way that was not healthy and not unusual in this work. She could hold the key minutes across entire months without searching a system. That was why they had given her the case and left it with her. That was also why they had taken it away now.

Her personal archive was not a database. It was memory, a few hand-marked calendars, and public reference notes that, on their own, showed only general weekly schedules.

She set the scope and the stop in one go: no terminals, no network queries that would register, no asks for help; only what lived in her head and what her own notebooks already held. The question would stay narrow, did known non-events recur in a way that aligned with remembered anomalies in travel and handling assignments? She would lay out two columns: left, dates of prior non-events at the drop that later resolved as maintenance or deliberate set-aside; right, only anomalies she could anchor to public notes or previously logged notices. Minute ranges would be time-boxed. A single tick would mark a candidate; a single strike would rule it out. One night only; she would work until the watch's hour hand touched a mark on the margin.

She drew a line and wrote the first date.

She looked at the wall again and then away. The hum of a neighbor's fridge upstairs started and stopped. She noted it because she noted

everything. You don't get to choose what you hear. That had been true in the building, and it was true here. The difference was that here the only source of error was her own recall.

Next came the minute range that would have held the confirmation, then a hyphen with nothing after it. Another page, same pattern. She wrote at the pace of recall. Lines stayed short and the spacing even. No impressions in the margins. Only times.

At a point between one page and the next, she heard a car outside. It passed. The room returned to its baseline. She looked at her phone without lifting it. No indicator light shone on the edge. She did not turn it over. The watch hand moved in a smooth arc across the dial.

She thought of the shop in Istanbul without letting herself call it by its street. The air there held dust and cardamom and offered nothing that could live in a file. That mattered in a city like that. The shopkeeper was passive now, under a screen. If Ava obeyed, the shopkeeper would be kept safe to the extent that policy could protect someone who hadn't asked for any of this. That calculation had to stand beside the one she had already made for Nightingale. Two obligations stood: keep the shopkeeper out of harm; keep Nightingale safe. Neither aligned with her current remit.

She turned another page and added another date, then the minute range. She closed her eyes for three breaths and opened them before any image could replace the times.

Time passed in measurable units. She lifted her pen twice to rest her hand. She kept her shoulders still to avoid an ache that would distract her and cost her the hour. She wrote two more dates and one note in the right column, tied to a routine set-aside that had resulted from a known technical upgrade that had required a cancelation with notice. That one did not fit the pattern in front of her. She crossed it out with a single line and wrote a mark beside it to signal that it should not pull at her later.

She knew how much time had gone without translating it into minutes.

She stood, walked to the sink, and filled a glass. She drank half and set the glass down in the same place as last night, leaving a ring on the counter that would be gone by morning. She returned to the table and sat, picked up the pen, and continued.

She did not need a full explanation. She needed a repeatable timing gap she could test.

The phone stayed still. The room kept its temperature. The building's vibrations came at a predictable interval that did not intersect with her task. She wrote one more date and then held the pen still over the page while she checked the arithmetic in her head against the memory of a particular seasonal shift when the operating hours at the location had changed by half an hour for three weeks due to a temporary municipal regulation. She adjusted one of the minute ranges to account for that and wrote a small arrow to show the correction's direction.

She placed the pen on the notebook and laid her hand flat on the paper for a moment, feeling the texture through her palm. Then she lifted her hand and checked the watch. The hour hand had moved to the line she'd set as her stop. She wasn't done. She would not extend the boundary on the first night. She created rules to hold herself. She kept them.

She closed the notebook and slid it an inch to the left. She did not stack it with anything else. The table was clear around it. She reached for the phone and lifted it. The screen did not wake. She placed it face down again. The quiet remained. She looked at the watch and then at the wall and then at the watch again, not to count, but to confirm the end point she had set.

The decision was made. The clock started when she wrote the first line. If a repeatable gap existed, it would show up soon. It would not arrive as an alert or an emergency flare. It would present as a repeated absence. She could live with that. She had learned to live with gaps.

She checked the watch once more and did not check it again. The hand moved. The room stayed quiet. She wrote the second date.

Chapter 3

The Pattern in the Void

She uncapped the pen.

The table was clear except for the notebook and the glass she had left by the sink earlier. The watch sat to the right of the notebook, dial plain, second hand sweeping without sound. The flat carried the low vibration that came and went with the trains. She set the pen down and touched the notebook's spine once. She opened it.

She wrote a date at the top of the page and then a time range, the range that had once held confirmation. A hyphen followed with nothing after it. A small box for ticks went in the right-hand margin. A short horizontal line marked the end of the first row, then a second line began with a new date.

The rules came next. She kept them short. No terminals. No queries. No asks. Time-boxed ranges only. Planned silences first, then anything that extended beyond its justification. A stop mark on the watch. No extension of the boundary.

One count off the dial, then her eyes back to the page. She had already given up the habit of re-checking every half minute during the last two days. It pulled anyway. She kept her hand flat on the page and lifted it only when she needed to write.

She started with known set-asides, the ones that had been scheduled for maintenance or risk in the environment. Those had names and notices and post-facto explanations that lived in unclassified logs. She wrote the dates in the left column and marked them with a small circle. Minute ranges went next to each. She added a single line across one that

had later been tied to a city permit problem that had shifted hours for three weeks. An arrow marked the correction she had already recorded the night before.

The next block was emergencies. She listed three sets that had never resolved cleanly. A winter storm that took power out in a part of the city for an afternoon. A vendor firmware push that went wrong. A local police sweep that moved through a market without checking the shop she cared about but changed the pattern of foot traffic for hours. Those were noisy in memory, partial transmissions, jitter on a carrier baseline, a flare here and there when someone pushed a panic shape that did not complete the path. She put a single strike through each. Wrong shape. Wrong feel. She did not write the words wrong feel. She knew what she meant.

She looked up at the blank wall for a count of two, noting the dim light from the kitchen unit's clock, and then put her eyes back on the page. A smaller list went down: planned set-asides that had held longer than necessary. She could hold their edges in her head with more precision than she wanted. Minute ranges followed, with a mark on each to indicate the overrun. Her marks were small and neat. The pen did not leave ink on her fingers.

She took one of the longer overruns and set it aside, writing the date and a question mark on a new line. She held the watch face directly under the light and matched memory to the hand's position. The overrun landed on a weekday where she had been called upstairs for an administrative review that had felt like nothing and then had turned into a quiet realignment of travel approvals two days later. She had attended the review with two other officers. No names were added. She wrote Ldn on the margin.

She found a second. Different year. Another prolonged planned silence, followed by a London meeting that had pulled her into a room with a senior who had wanted phrasing for a brief that would survive an FOI request while saying nothing of use. Ldn went down again. The pen hovered for a fraction of a second before she set it down. A glance toward

the earlier pages, without turning them. She kept the pages still.

A third instance came out of the same disciplined pass. Planned silence, extension, internal review. London again. She made a third Ldn mark, small and angled to fit the margin.

The pen turned in her fingers and went down. She rubbed the inside of her left thumb with the tip of her right index finger once. She kept her gaze on the page. The watch hand moved from one marker to the next. She let the minutes pass uncounted, though she could have. She was not counting yet.

She scanned the list she had built and struck through two items that had flirted with her attention. One was a vendor screw-up she had already identified twice. The other was a civilian demonstration that had forced a street closure with police cordon lines in a different district. Neither fit the pattern on the page in front of her. She crossed them out and put a dot above the strike to remind herself not to return to them.

Her shoulders held the same position they had when she came in. She shifted once to alter the angle of her spine against the chair back. The trains came and went. She registered the timing without translating it into minutes. She took half a glass of water and placed the glass in the same position on the counter. The ring left by the first glass had dried and left a faint mark, not white, not clean. She considered wiping it and decided against it.

She wrote three more dates with minute ranges and left them unmarked for a pass later in the night. She stayed with the planned silences. The noisy ones had already shown their shape and she did not need to see it again. Lines of minutes added up on the page. She recorded where holds collected. Gaps where holds were scarce took a mark. She did not label either. She put a small cross next to the group that matched the years when they had worried more about region-facing exploitation than home.

The watch hand reached the small mark she had set as a mid-run check. She kept going. Pen down, fingers flexed; then it came up and one more date went in, held back because it sat too close to something else she did not want to look at. She wrote it anyway and wrote the range. Nothing else went on the line. She took one breath in and out and let the line sit.

Her mind went briefly to the shop they had used. The smell of paper and dust. The way the light behaved in the back where a person could sit without being watched by customers. She had never sat there. The image came from the way people described it in cables seven years ago when the arrangement began, and from the public camera across the street that had shown a closed door and ordinary walking two nights ago. She set the image aside. The proprietor was on a passive screen now. That had been the one right thing in Davies's speech.

She returned to the page. Three Ldn marks held the eye. Spacing and minute offsets, not images. She looked at the first of the three and then the second and then the third. This was not field. She had spent years building a path across a city that was not hers for a man she had never met. Now the only clean trace she could find lived less than two miles from where she sat.

She kept writing. The rules held. No terminals; no turning a system on to see if anything had moved. Her accounts were cold anyway. Even if she wanted to cheat, she could not. She knew how that would go: a handful of queries out of profile, a call from Security, a wellness check in a room with a glass door and a chair placed at an angle meant to be non-confrontational. None of that would find a missing man.

She drew a small box at the bottom of the page and placed a tick in it to mark the end of this pass. She turned the page.

Seven dates went down the left margin, with every other line skipped. She filled three of the spaces with minute ranges. The others stayed blank for now. Two of the ranges got light pencil rather than ink, and then one

was erased, leaving a trace she could still see if she tilted the page. Eraser crumbs stayed in a small pile near the corner of the notebook before she brushed them into the bin.

Her posture stayed level as the time moved. She glanced at the dial once and then forced herself not to check it again for three lines of writing. The discipline had come from practice. She was not sure when that had become habit.

Old emergencies went down, not to be swayed by them later. She wrote them in brief: blackout, firmware, police cordon. A firm strike went through each. Two planned set-asides that had ended precisely on time joined the page. She left them unmarked. She did not believe in coincidence when systems worked properly, but she did not need to conclude anything about those now. Her job in this hour was narrowing the field until it held only what refused to be ignored.

By the time she reached the bottom of the page, the pattern had stopped being a set of marks and started to act like a structure. She did not write that word. Three dates went in a line, each with a small check mark beside it. She had enough to test what lived inside the holds if they lived there at all.

She turned to a fresh page and wrote 1 through 26 down the left margin in small numerals. A second column, five, nine, twelve, and so on, marked the minute offsets. They had built it in the first year and never used it. That had been a good sign then. It did not feel like a good sign now.

She placed marks beside the corresponding numbers and read without writing letters. She moved to the next line and repeated the work.

She blinked, not to clear her eyes, but to stop the urge to speed up. She matched each hold to its place and then looked at what she had. The first line told her nothing by itself. The second line told her almost nothing. The third line gave her a word that did not belong to field. She looked at it and then wrote it, small, on the right margin.

Compromise.

She moved to the next set. The holds fell into place with a steadiness that convinced her she had not invented it. She translated them without writing anything at first and then wrote the word on the line below the first.

Is.

She kept going. Boundary holds fell on a changed trading hour; she applied the three-week shift noted last night, then the letter resolved. She wrote the word.

London.

Her grip tightened on the pen. She exhaled once.

A pause, not to consider, but to keep her hand steady. She rested the pen between her thumb and forefinger and pressed it gently against the side of the notebook. She placed the pen down and breathed once and picked the pen back up.

She checked the remainder of the holds in the recent cycle and found a shorter fragment that did not need a full line. It asked for caution without a subject. She wrote it anyway, making the implied subject clear to herself.

Trust no one.

She did not look at the wall. Her eyes stayed open. She wrote the two sentences again, smaller, on a new line, then underlined neither. The phrase sat on the page without decoration. She looked at it for the amount of time it took for the second hand to reach the next marker and then looked away.

The missed confirmation two nights earlier was no longer an absence that could be explained by a broken link or panic. It was a message. He had not failed. He had used what they had built years ago and what they had agreed not to need. He had kept to the rule that said content was the risk and therefore content should never travel when it could be encoded

in time.

She touched the notebook page with her left hand and then lifted her hand away. The room had cooled a degree. She did not reach for a sweater. The pen went back to the original list, and a mark went next to the three dates she had used for the test. She wrote, in small letters below the marks, key holds. She did not add anything else.

Reporting this would be an act of faith that the people who received it wanted to see what she had seen. It would also tell them that she held, in her head and in this notebook, a pattern that did not live in any system they controlled. CI would call it an unauthorised archive. Security would call it evidence of instability dressed as rigor. Davies would tell her he had to follow procedure. All of those would be true, and none would do anything for the man who had sent her the only thing he could send without leaving content that would get him killed.

She needed to confirm that the key was not a coincidence wrapped in certainty. She needed the earlier cycles to speak the same way. If they did, then the choice in front of her would not improve. It would only become harder to ignore.

She turned another page.

Three cycles went down, far enough apart to defeat the objection that she had cherry-picked a cluster: one in winter, one in spring, one in late summer. Each date went on the page. Minute ranges followed. She marked the space holds that would create separation between words if the key held. She did not label them as spaces. She just drew them with a longer line.

She translated the first set cleanly and got a simple instruction: Hold. No change handler. The sentence got a second look to be certain she had read it properly. The mapping was correct, the holds aligned, and the spacing matched the week cycle they had used that year. She wrote it again, smaller, to lock it in place.

The second set gave her a route constraint that matched the safe path they had built through the city when they wanted to avoid telegraphing interest. It did not name locations. It named classes of places. She wrote it exactly as it resolved, even though it looked strange in isolation. She put a small dot next to it to indicate that it matched a later, overt instruction they had encoded through ordinary, approved channels months afterward.

The third gave her a single word with two letters that could be read either way depending on the offset she chose for a boundary hold. She checked the correction noted the night before and made the necessary adjustment for a holiday that had changed trading hours. The word resolved to keep. She did not need to know what to keep to understand what the habit was. It was the same habit she was using now: keep what you cannot replace.

She set the pen down and spread her fingers on the page to keep the notebook from sliding when she breathed. The trains' vibration returned and then went away. She registered the sequence without planning anything around it.

She wrote out the three sentences in a column:

Hold. No change handler.

Use book path only.

Keep.

She watched the three lines and felt, not a verdict, but the first clean confirmation she had in two days. He had left a channel inside the routine they had carried for seven years. It was exactly where it would survive a sweep. If someone took every device, if someone disinfected every folder, the channel would still exist because it lived in what they had agreed not to send. There was nothing to seize except the habit itself.

She looked at the lines again and then at the fresh page where she had written the London phrase. She ran one finger along the edge of the

notebook and then pulled it back.

She had enough. The message was clear enough to act. It pointed inward. It turned the handler change into a trigger for suspicion by design. It told her to keep her hands off anything that would announce London interest through the channels her own Service controlled. It did not give her a name. It did not need to. Names were the kind of content that got people killed.

The notebook closed half an inch and opened again. If she carried this upstairs, CI would seize the notebook as an unauthorised record and put Security on her. Wellness intervention would follow, with notes about profile drift. The risk sat against the only obligation that mattered: the source. She would ask once, on record. A fingernail slid under the page that held Compromise is London. Trust no one. She tore the page out along the fold, slowly, to keep the tear from wandering into the next page. The sound was low and steady. The torn page folded once and went into her satchel's inner pocket. She zipped the pocket closed and pressed the zipper tab flat.

She sat without moving for a count of ten and then stood. She closed the notebook and set the pen parallel to it, then crossed the hall.

In the bathroom, she turned the tap and let the water run until it cooled her fingers. Hands cupped water to her face, twice. She reached for a towel and dried her face and neck. She looked at her reflection. The woman in the mirror held her shoulders level and her jaw unclenched on the second breath. The circles under her eyes did not matter. None of it did. She was calculating where the line would fall, not how she would appear when she crossed it.

She went back to the table and wrote a time in the top right corner of a new page. Digits, then a short line under it. No task went beside it. The rest was understood. If the door closed again, if the channel's existence was dismissed as a thing she had imagined because she was too close, she would stop asking for access and take what she needed without a badge.

The satchel went onto the chair and opened. The notebook went inside. Her ID, house keys, and one pen followed. Everything else stayed where it was. A spare folded cloth, nothing more. She did not want weight. Weight suggested flight. She wanted to present exactly one message: she was not hiding and she was not going away.

She glanced at the dial and then forced herself not to check it again for a count of twenty. She did not like keeping count that way. It made numbers imprecise. She did it anyway. She reached into the satchel and pressed her fingertips against the folded page to confirm its presence. The paper edge met her skin. She closed the satchel and fixed the strap across her body.

She turned off the light over the table and opened the flat's door. The hallway held the same smell of dust and old paint. She closed the door and checked the lock. She went down the stairs. No one stood in the stairwell. The bottom step complained under weight. She had counted that creak when she first moved in.

Outside, the air carried the damp of the last rain. The pavement had dried in patches. A bus passed two streets over. The sound was flat and then gone. She took the left at the end of her block and kept to a pace that matched commuters walking without urgency. At the second turn she altered her route, not because she believed she was being followed, but because habits built by repetition were the first thing you gave away.

In the corner shop's broad panes she checked angles behind her. A woman with a bag and a man on his phone, neither aligning with her path for more than a half block. She did not sketch a pattern. She clocked the positions and kept walking.

The torn page pressed against the side of her hand where it lay in the satchel's inner pocket. The pressure did not change. She moved her hand away to avoid wear on the paper. The paper already carried her handwriting and her oil. She did not need to leave anything else on it.

She rehearsed what she would say to Davies with the same economy he liked to hear in a briefing when the material was sensitive: observed timing channel, silent-layer message, London implication. No adjectives. No speculation. No method disclosure. If he asked how she knew, she would cite discipline and prior contingency practice. If he told her to stand down again, she would hold her face still and ask him for his written instruction to ignore an asset's warning. If he declined to put that instruction on paper, she would note that and then walk out.

Stay frosty. Trust the tradecraft. The signal is in the noise.

She thought of those phrases as tools, not as comfort. She kept them where they belonged.

At the edge of Vauxhall she slowed by half a step to let a cyclist pass in front of her, then continued. The river was out of sight behind a line of buildings. The air had the metallic taste that came off water when the weather sat between seasons. One glance at the dial, the allowed check, then she turned her wrist away from it. The time she had written in the notebook would arrive soon enough. It was meant to keep her from bargaining with herself when it came.

She took a small side street that offered a better angle toward the building's approach, then joined the main route again. CCTV domes covered the street at predictable intervals. She did not look up into them. She adjusted the strap of her satchel, not as a signal, but because it had moved out of the position she preferred; the strap lay against her hip where she liked it.

The SIS Building's bulk did not surprise her anymore. The approach still created an effect she had learned not to feel. She was either inside or outside. Today she would be inside until someone decided otherwise. She stepped onto the pavement that ran toward the entrance and kept walking.

Her grip on the strap loosened. Her head stayed level. Not the fact that the last time she had walked through those doors someone had taken

her phone and put it in an envelope she would not see again. Instead, the paper in her pocket, the time in her notebook, and the two sentences on the torn page that had changed the weight of her next ten days. She kept walking.

She joined the foot traffic at the controlled entrance. She touched her badge to the reader. Amber lit, then green, and the lock thumped. The guard glanced once and looked away. The glass door slid; the folded page pressed against her hip as she crossed.

Chapter 4

The Threshold

She stepped into the glassed-in room and let the door seal behind her. The light was flat. The HVAC thrum sat in the background. Robert Davies had a pad and a folder set at right angles, a pen uncapped and parallel to the pad's spine. He did not stand.

He indicated the chair with the pen. "Sit."

She sat. She placed her satchel beside the chair leg where she could feel the strap against her ankle. The folded page was in the satchel's inner pocket.

Davies tapped the pad once. "You said you had something new."

"I do." She kept her hands still on the table's edge. "There is a contingency channel. Timing only. It points inward. The conclusion is London."

His eyes did not move from her face. "What kind of channel?"

"Negative space." She left it there.

"Negative space," he repeated, as if testing whether the words depended on her saying them. He put the pen down. "Meaning?"

"No content. Holds and absences. Scheduled silence as signal." She did not look at the folder. "It is robust across cycles. The sentence resolves to 'Compromise is London.'"

"Across which cycles?" His tone was neutral, but he had shifted his posture by an inch, the distance that meant interest without commitment.

"Multiple. Non-contiguous. Dates where holds extended beyond justification." She shook her head once. "I'm not giving you the key."

He blinked once. "You're not giving me the key." No question mark.

"Not without a guarantee that it won't be burned because it lives off-system." She kept her voice even. "If the key is pulled into procedure, the path dies and he dies with it."

Davies leaned back. The chair creaked once. "Ava, you are on leave. You are not the person who gets to decide what is pulled into procedure."

"I am the person who knows what this is." She did not lift her hands. "You told me to bring anything that hit a channel. This hit."

"By channel, I meant a monitored channel." He gestured toward the building with the pen as if that resolved the matter. "Something we can see, document, and reproduce."

"You can document the conclusion." She reached for the precise phrasing she had rehearsed on the walk in. "Asset contingency channel indicates London compromise."

"How did you come by that conclusion?" He placed the pen across the pad. "Specifically."

"Discipline." She let the word stand. "Pre-agreed practice. Independent confirmation across prior cycles."

He watched her. The room made the sound rooms made when no one spoke and air still moved from vents. "Where is it written?"

"Nowhere you control. It isn't written in any system you run." She did not look at the satchel. "I have what I need. I'm not handing it to CI to run through a sieve until it looks like noise."

Davies's mouth hardened for a fraction of a second and then eased. "I'm not CI."

"You are the door." She said it without heat. "Either we act on the message or we pretend we never saw it."

He picked up the pen and set it down again. "Let's talk about your proximity to this case."

"No." The word was even. "We will not talk about my proximity. We will talk about an asset who built a channel to keep speaking when content would get him killed. And we will talk about your obligation to record a warning without forcing me to break it."

He held her gaze for two beats. "Do you have anything we can independently verify without your intervention?"

"No," she said. "That is the point."

He allowed the silence to run for a measured period. He did not write. When he spoke, the register had shifted. "We both know what the last forty-eight hours have been. You're grieving. You are too close to see where the edges are. A clean absence became a message, and now the message says what you feared." He held up the pen as if that was the argument. "You see how that reads."

"I see how that reads on paper," she said. "On paper, it reads like paranoia. In time, it reads like a sentence." She did not lift her shoulders. "You taught me that prediction sits on variance. This is variance that repeats."

"Even if I were to accept that," he said, "and I am not saying I do, what is the operational ask?"

"Do not burn the path by pulling it into a system that cannot carry it. Extend the watch on the shop, passive only. Do not move any handler except to undo the change that triggered this. And stop telling me to stand down while you close the file." She kept her hands still. "If the source is hiding in place, any signal from London kills him."

Davies exhaled and set the pen down finally. "The shop remains on a passive screen. CI decided that before you brought this in." He looked at the folder and then away again. "We are not moving in Istanbul unless we see hostile movement."

"Hostile movement will come after us if the leak sits here." She tapped the table once with her left index finger and pulled it back. "The message is not about the shop. It is about us."

He nodded as if marking a point in a brief. "Your conclusion is on the record."

"Write it."

He typed one line. The key click was soft.

"I'll note it in the file," he said. Then, after a beat: "You know what happens next."

"Say it," she said.

"Duty of care," he said. He used the tone he saved for worse days. He slid the folder aside and opened the drawer in the table. A small envelope with a printed bar code lay inside. He took it out and placed it on the table between them. "Your badge."

She kept her face still. "On what basis?"

"Containment," he said. "And wellness, if you insist on the formal phrase." His tone was the tone you used when a thing was already decided, and procedure was a vehicle, not an argument. "You're not going to like what I write beside that, but it will keep this from turning into a formal disciplinary event."

She reached down and unclipped the badge from her belt. The clip clicked once. The plastic was cold against her fingertips. She set it on the table without sliding it. "You're restricting me to visitor access or to nothing at all?"

"Escort-only until review," he said. "Security will adjust permissions and the entry control will update in the hour." Security would issue a visitor pass if she was summoned; otherwise she was outside.

She nodded once. "And my desk?"

"You don't need your desk," he said. He aligned the folder with the table edge. "I have to protect operations from contamination, and I have to protect you from yourself." He said the last like a phrase he had learned to say.

She looked at the envelope. "You want me to be the problem you can manage."

"I want you to survive your career," he said. He did not look away. "Medical leave is an option I would prefer not to trigger. But if you continue to run this line outside the Service, I will have no choice."

"There's the threat." She said it plainly. "Dress it how you like."

"Ava," he said, "if there is anything at all, anything, that lands on a monitored channel, you call me first. Not CI. Not anyone else." He reached for the envelope. "But without method, without a record that can be audited, this is an assertion."

"You don't get to choose what you hear," she said. "He sent what he could."

"And you're asking me to act on faith."

"No," she said. "I'm asking you to refrain from actions that will destroy the only thing he left."

Davies lifted the envelope as if that would end the debate. "We're done here."

"Write that you were told." She kept her voice low. "Write the sentence."

"I will note," he said, "that you presented a conclusion derived from an alleged contingency channel and declined to provide methods." He held the envelope. "And I will note that I restricted your access under duty of care."

She stood. The satchel strap fell against her hip. She did not reach for it. He watched her hands, and she kept them open, empty. The door

handle was warm. She paused for the length of one breath, then opened the door.

In the corridor she walked without altering her pace. She did not stop at the first corner. In the lift she stood with her back to the panel and watched the reflected corridor beyond the doors until they closed. Alone, she slid the folded page from the inner pocket of the satchel back into the inside pocket of her jacket. Paper pressed against fabric. If they took the satchel, they would not take the inside pocket unless they took her jacket. She buttoned it.

She exited at the lobby level. The guard at the desk looked at a screen and then past her. She crossed the floor, counted steps, and pushed through the smooth motion of the glass door. Outside, the air was damp, the sky was a flat grey. She turned right. Buses idled on the river road; a siren rose and faded. She checked her watch; the minute hand had moved one mark.

The flat held the same stale paint and dust smell. She closed the door and locked it twice. Her watch sat on the table for six beats before she put it back on her wrist. She placed the satchel on the chair without opening it. No tea. No music. She touched the spine of the notebook and did not open it.

The packing took eight minutes. Two shirts rolled, one pair of trousers, one neutral sweater. Underwear enough for four days. One pair of flat shoes placed heel to toe. Toiletries reduced to a toothbrush, a small paste, and a short comb. She trimmed a travel bottle with scissors, dropping the excess plastic in the bin. The notebook went into the satchel. The pen lay parallel to it. The spare cloth folded small and placed in the satchel's inner sleeve. ID and keys already in place. She left the laptop in the drawer. She took a single paperback without a cover photo,

then put it back and left it behind. There would be time to wait with nothing in her hands.

Cash came next. She lifted a small bag from under the sink and checked the thin envelope of emergency cash. It was enough for a night in a city where she did not want to stay long. Not enough for what came after. She slipped the envelope into her pocket and left the flat, locking the door and testing it once.

On the street, she took a left that made her approach to the cash machines longer than necessary. She chose a bank where the angle of the camera would not record one face for long. She pulled the daily maximum and took the withdrawal in mixed notes. A prompt offered a receipt option. She pressed no, counted the notes once, then split them into three small stacks that sat flat in different parts of her satchel. She crossed the street and used a second machine for a smaller amount. The card went back into the same slot in her wallet. She crossed to a third branch two streets over and took the last amount she could take without flagging anything beyond what would be flagged anyway. She counted the notes. This was the fund. There would be no more.

She stopped at a newsstand that sold pens and envelopes and bought neither. She used the sight lines in the plastic display, scanning the street without appearing to look. A man in a suit waited at a bus stop. A woman pushed a pram past. No one matched her strides beyond a block.

Back in the flat, she set her smartphone on the table and powered it down. She straightened a paperclip and pushed it into the pinhole to eject the SIM tray. The SIM came out. She folded the SIM in a piece of plain paper, placed it on the table, and pressed the edge of the scissors into it until the card split. The halves went into separate small envelopes; she slid one under the sink and one into the trash at the bottom under coffee grounds. The handset went into two layers of plain foil, then a grocery bag with the handles tied. She set it by the door.

She wrote four addresses on a small piece of paper in a neat column. One was a hotel in Fatih where a person could pay in cash without leaving a trace that mattered. One was a ferry terminal she had used for movement while watching someone else move. One was a library. One was a café with no camera covering the back table. Next to them, she wrote two names without surnames: one local contact for books and one liaison-adjacent name that could open a door if she used the right sentence. She stared at the paper for a count of five and then folded it once. Two passes of the list aloud under her breath, no adjectives, no associations to help her remember. She held the edges of memory until they clicked into place, then set the paper in the dry sink and lit it with a match. The paper burned in a clean line. She ran cold water when it finished and pushed the ash into the drain with three fingers. She rinsed the sink and dried it with the cloth she would not take.

She opened a drawer and took out a small travel wallet. She removed the train card inside and left it on the counter. No auto top-up. She slid her passport into the wallet and then into the satchel. She picked up the grocery bag with the phone and left the flat again.

On the pavement, she walked two blocks and placed the bag into a bin that took litter from the top and required an angle to drop items down the chute. The bag slid out of her hand and into the bin. She did not look back.

In the flat again, she performed a factory reset on the laptop without waiting for it to finish. She pressed a paperclip into the router's reset pin and held it for the count she knew would clear the settings. It would not erase the logs that mattered, and she knew it, but it would remove what could be used to reconstruct anyone else's contact with her network in the last three days. She wiped the small strip of adhesive on the suitcase handle with a cloth to remove any printed baggage tags that had left residue. She shook the clothes in the suitcase once and zipped it.

She took the notebook out of the satchel, opened it to the page where she had written the threshold time, and checked her watch. The time had

arrived. She closed the notebook, placed it carefully in the satchel, and zipped the bag.

At the door she paused, looked at the room that had held seven years of a routine she had liked to pretend was life, and then turned the deadbolt. She pulled the door once to test the lock. The bottom stair creaked as predicted. She descended without touching the rail.

Outside, she kept to a pace that allowed people to pass. She let three pass points open and close without using them. The third was at a pharmacy window that reflected the corner behind her. A man in a blue jacket slowed to tie his shoe and then kept walking. A cyclist cut across a lane and then corrected. She moved toward the bus route and boarded at the front, then exited at the back two stops later. She crossed the street at a diagonal that forced anyone behind to commit. No one did.

A high-street travel agent two roads over took cash. She bought the evening flight to Istanbul and left with an itinerary printout and a booking code. Security would update her status inside an hour. She booked inside thirty minutes.

She did not call a car. She chose a bus that ran earlier than she needed and sat near the back where she could see the aisle in the window. She counted stops without looking at the signs. At the transport hub she moved through a crowd at an angle that would make it hard to follow without losing distance. She bought a bottle of water and did not drink it yet. She topped up nothing. She took a second bus toward the airport, now with more people, less line of sight.

At the airport, she moved through the doors with the people who had luggage bigger than hers. At the airline counter she presented her passport and the booking code; the agent printed a boarding pass. She did not check a bag. Security was what it was: remove the belt, the shoes, the jacket, put the items in a tray; the plastic edge was cold under her hand. The watch stayed on; it was plain and did not light. The officer looked at the screen, conveyed nothing, and gestured for her to step

forward after the gate chirped once. She put her belt back on and rethreaded it without looking down.

She found the gate well before boarding. She sat facing the corridor rather than the windows. The strap lay under her foot as she drank half the water and set the bottle between her feet. A family negotiated snacks. A man plugged his phone into a charging station and checked the time twice. A woman spilled something on her sleeve and dabbed at it with a tissue. She did not watch the CCTV dome in the corner of the ceiling.

Boarding started on time. She waited for the second group and then stood, moved forward three steps, and stopped when the line stopped. At the counter, she handed over the boarding pass and passport and looked past the agent's shoulder at the glass door. The agent looked at the screen, checked the passport, and handed them back. No question. No extra marker placed on the pass.

In the jetway she kept her pace steady when the line paused and moved again. In the cabin she found her seat, placed the satchel under the seat in front of her, and sat. The seat belt lay flat across her lap. She pulled it across and fastened it. She took the watch face into the angle of light and tracked minutes, not seconds. Minutes only.

She rehearsed the legend without moving her lips. On leave, visiting a city that was not new to her but would appear to be. Two nights. No checked bag for a short trip. If anyone in the arrival hall asked her about work, she would say she was an analyst in a field unrelated to international movement, the kind of job that made people switch subjects. A hotel booked and a confirmation to show. Nothing else booked.

The plane pushed back and taxied. She watched the wing at an angle that let her see the ground crew's last steps. The engines whined at a pitch that did not change in the way that made people nervous. The plane held at the threshold for the length of the standard gap. She did not count it. The engines rose, the nose lifted, and the runway markings moved under

the wing and disappeared.

Wheels up. Jurisdiction no longer applied in flight; those rules would protect her or bury her only on the ground. She shifted her shoulders once against the seat and let them settle.

She looked at the route map when it lit on the cabin display and then looked away. She could trace it from memory, southeast over the continent, a line toward the water, a rightward curve into the approach, but her mind sat in other places. A narrow street in Fatih that ran downhill toward a main road. A ferry terminal where the horn sounded before ropes tightened. A bookshop with dust on the shelves and a back room that offered a person a place to wait without a face on a screen. A hotel with a counter that accepted cash without remark.

She closed her eyes. The cabin noise settled into a level that could either be ignored or not. She did not try to lower her pulse. She allowed the body to do what it would do on a plane. Her hands lay flat on her thighs. She did not reach for the satchel. The torn page in her jacket rested against her. She kept it where it was.

Trust the tradecraft.

She set a rule: no one else would be harmed. If anyone was harmed, it would be her. She adjusted her seat belt by one notch and closed her eyes again.

They landed at dusk, local time, the light murky and thin across the apron. The cabin bell chimed. People stood before the light went off and then sat again when the crew told them to sit. She remained seated until the row in front of her began to move. The satchel came out from under the seat; the strap went across her body. She joined the line down the aisle without making eye contact with anyone.

The transit hall was large. The signs were clear in two languages. People moved in slow arcs between the posts that formed the queue. Fluorescent lights made everything the same colour. She joined the queue for passport control and did not look at the officers' expressions. She

checked which stations processed faster without appearing to shift. When it was her turn, she stepped forward, slid the passport under the glass, and placed her fingers where the officer pointed when he indicated the scanner. The officer looked at the screen, compared the photo to her face, and did not speak. He took the stamp, pressed it down on the open page with one firm motion, and slid the passport back.

She took the passport, moved three steps, and put it away. The page flexed under her thumb. The ink was still damp. Cameras faced the queue; she moved with it. The number meant she was in and accountable to a system that did not know her name beyond the letters on the page. There would be no easy way back. That was the point.

She walked into the arrivals hall and kept to the side where people waited with signs. Air smelled of coffee and disinfectant. No one held hers. The work began.

Chapter 5

The Last Known Location

She moved with the arrivals flow, neither fast nor slow, keeping a half pace behind a family with two wheeled suitcases and a child wearing headphones. She did not overtake. At the exit from customs the crowd thinned, then thickened at the currency booths and the car service counters. She stepped to the side for a view across the hall and used a column's polished edge to scan one quadrant without turning her head. The same faces recurred in the way faces recur in an airport: a man in a sport coat that did not fit his shoulders, a woman with a scarf and a paper cup, a couple arguing quietly in a language she did not place. None repeated at the intervals that would matter.

At the transport kiosk she counted coins and notes once in her palm, then fed the slot and chose an anonymous card. The machine dispensed a plastic rectangle with a balance sufficient for a set of rides. She slid it into the pocket of her satchel and stepped back to clear the line. Bus signs pointed toward a broad exit with a slow-opening set of glass doors. The metro was down a level by escalator. She chose the path with more branch points: bus to a hub that linked to two metro lines, either of which would take her within five hundred metres of the hotel.

On the bus she sat halfway down, aisle seat, back to the window to preserve line of sight along the aisle and the front door. One hand stayed near the strap of her satchel where it crossed her body. In the reflection on the black glass above the driver's area she saw movement as a pattern, not a set of faces. A teenage boy stood, offered his seat to an older man, then moved to the back. A woman pulled her phone from her pocket twice in five minutes and put it back without tapping the screen. A man in a

jacket held a folded newspaper and did not unfold it. The bus paused at lights where camera mounts were fixed at angles to catch the lane. She mapped coverage without looking up at the domes. Police stood in pairs near the main forecourt of the hub. Their heads turned at intervals that matched training: sweep, pause, sweep again. No one cut angles to match hers.

She changed to a metro line and waited a train. The platform was tiled and bright. The board counted down through a sequence of numbers that held steady when the next train pulled in out of service and passed through without stopping. She let one train go and took the next. Small decisions distributed weight across the hour so that none of them would read as a choice later. Inside the carriage she stood near the doors, right hand on the vertical rail, left arm loose. A camera bubble sat in the corner of the ceiling and a second above the door hinge. The coverage angles overlapped. She stood where both would catch her head at a slant rather than a clear front view. The train moved and the door plates rattled against their tracks at a steady interval that matched the spacing of the joints.

She emerged at a station two stops closer than she needed. The streets cut across each other irregularly here. She walked along a narrow one with apartments overhead and small shops at street level: a pastry place, a hardware store with padlocks in a glass case, a mobile phone kiosk. She paused to let a car reverse into a space and used its rear window to check the pavement behind her. A man she had seen on the platform earlier was no longer in view. She stepped around a delivery trolley and into a shop that sold cheap notepads and pens. She did not buy anything.

Street noise faded at the gate. The hotel sat behind a metal gate with peeling paint. The desk was a counter with a bell and a plastic plant. The clerk registered her with a photocopy of her passport taken on a machine she had seen in small offices across three continents. He wrote a room number on a scrap of paper and placed it on the counter. She asked what

time the door was locked and how late the reception stayed staffed. He said midnight for the desk and an after-hours bell. Cash only, he added. She set the notes on the counter, counted by touch rather than sight, and slid them across. He handed over a key on a fob shaped like a hotel from another decade. The staircase was narrow; the carpet held the dust of other shoes.

The door to the room had a latch and a chain. The gap at the bottom showed light from the corridor when she clicked the switch. The window looked onto a small courtyard with two satellite dishes and a line where a towel hung still damp. She put her bag on the table under the window and set the small case against the wardrobe. She did not sit. The bathroom door opened onto a shower head over the floor with a drain in the corner, hairline cracks in the tiles, a mirror fixed too low by an inch. A free-standing wardrobe held two hangers and a shelf with a folded spare blanket. Standing in the middle of the room, she counted exits and angles: door, window, the space above the wardrobe if needed by someone else. She tried the chain, felt the play in the screws, and accepted it.

She set the satchel on the bed and took out her notebook. She did not open it. The watch face showed the hour hand just past six. She could reach the bookshop by walking, or she could take a bus two stops and walk from there. She would arrive before full dark either way. Dusk simplified some things and complicated others. She set the watch down, then lifted it once to break the habit. Outside, someone shouted a greeting across the courtyard. The sound moved on with the person who had made it.

She rehearsed her legend under her breath without moving her lips. Academic. On leave. Looking for a title that was difficult to find in the UK. No research grant numbers or names that could be verified in a call. If anyone asked which university, she would name one she had taught at once for a term as a guest. If asked about the field, she would say comparative literature and ask about Turkish editions to redirect the

conversation to stock.

She listed what she would carry: passport, cash folded twice in a thin stack in a side pocket, transit card, hotel key, nothing else. The torn page from the notebook stayed in the inside pocket of her jacket. She left the notebook on the table face down and slid one pen under it for when she returned. By morning London would see Istanbul. She checked the window latch. It turned, but the wood around it was soft where water had reached it over years of rain. She shut it and tested the fit. The plaster around the frame flaked under her finger. She brushed it from her fingertip into the sink and turned off the tap she had turned on to wash it off. The water ran clear in a second, then stopped when she closed the faucet.

She stood motionless for a count, then picked up her jacket. The door clicked twice as she locked it and then pulled to confirm that it sat in the frame. In the stairwell, she held the rail lightly to keep her profile low. The clerk glanced up and glanced away again when she crossed the lobby. She stepped into the street and adjusted her pace to fit the people around her.

No one repeated at the corners in a way that mattered. She let a bus pass and took the next one, then got off after two stops and walked downhill until she reached the wider street that would take her toward the market and the shop.

The shop's front window held three stacks of used books arranged by size, not subject. The bell on the door gave a dull sound when she pushed it. The air smelled like paper and binding glue. Dust lay in the corners of the shelves where light did not reach. A woman behind the counter lifted her eyes and set them on Ava's face for a second long enough to fix an impression and then returned them to the page in front of her. Dark hair,

neat cardigan, a hand that turned the page without leaving a crease. Calm even when careful. Her Turkish was market-stall functional; she let English fill the gaps.

“Good afternoon,” the woman said in Turkish.

“Good afternoon,” Ava answered in Turkish with an accent that would mark her as foreign but not specify which country. “I’m looking for something out of print. English or Turkish, I can read either.” She let the sentence sit. She looked along the shelves as if she had not decided yet what she wanted.

“We have some,” the woman said. She closed the book in front of her and left it on the counter. “What subject?”

“Poetry,” Ava said. “Translations. Sometimes the translations are better than the originals.” She moved to a shelf and lifted a thin paperback, then a heavier hardback with a torn dust jacket, reading titles without reading the texts.

“Sometimes,” the woman said. “Not often.” Her eyes moved once to the back of the shop where a thin curtain covered a doorway and then back to Ava’s hands. “Do you want to leave a list? I can call if something arrives.”

“I don’t have a local number.” Ava placed the hardback back on the shelf. “I am only here for a few days. I was told this was a good shop to ask for older things. A friend came through and picked something up from someone who,” She let the sentence trail and picked up a different book. “, knew what he was doing.”

The woman’s face showed nothing, but her hands went still. “We can find things if we know what we are looking for,” she said.

“I was told there was a man who met people before they looked,” Ava said. “To make sure they were looking for the right thing.” She turned the book to read the back as if it mattered. “I was told he is not there now.”

“We have many friends,” the woman said. She adjusted a pile by one centimetre. “They come and go. It depends on the day.”

“On the day,” Ava repeated. She set the book down. “The friend who came through said the man who checked the list was not the man he expected. He said it was a different person.”

The woman’s eyes did not shift. She nodded once, as if acknowledging a general truth. “Sometimes it is not the same person.”

“Was he tall?” Ava asked. “Or did he carry himself as if height did not matter.” She erased height from her voice as something that would fix an image too precisely. “Posture,” she said, low, as if selecting a word in a dictionary. “How did he stand?”

The woman looked down at the counter. She ran a fingertip along the edge of a page and then lifted her face. “Posture,” she said back to Ava. “Like someone used to giving orders. He did not stoop to hear. He waited for someone to speak up.”

Ava’s grip on the paperback shifted once, then steadied.

Ava absorbed the detail and moved on as if it were nothing. “Thank you,” she said. “And the list?”

“You can leave a first name and a book title,” the woman said. “If something appears, I will hold it for a day. Not more than a day.”

Ava shook her head. “I am only here for a day.” She closed the gap with money to avoid words. She placed a small note folded once on the counter and slid a paperback across as if she were paying for it. The woman took the money as payment for the book and placed it under the counter without opening the fold.

“Do you want a bag?” the woman asked.

“No,” Ava said. “It will fit.” She placed the book under her arm as if she had always intended to buy it. “One more thing. The shelves in the back, do you re-stack them at the end of the day?”

“If they are moved,” the woman said, “I move them back.” She let her eyes rest on Ava for a second. “They were not moved.”

“Then I will not trouble you again,” Ava said. “Thank you.” She turned to go.

“A good afternoon,” the woman said. It was a neutral phrase and a wish for uneventful hours. Ava opened the door and the bell gave the same dull sound. Outside, people moved along the pavement in both directions. The light had changed by a fraction and made the shop window more reflective. Ava adjusted the book under her arm and let the flow of people take her two doors down before she stepped aside to look into another window.

The descriptor sat next to the sentence she had carried from London. Compromise is London. No change handler. A man who waited for others to speak up. A posture built over decades in rooms where people wore suits and deferred. The drop had not been moved; the shift happened before the ritual. She had the detail she had come for, and she did not have to put a name to it yet.

She approached the shop again from the opposite side of the street, then crossed to walk on the same side. She did not look directly at the base of the wall where the single brick sat with a hairline of mortar more shallow than the others. She stood for two breaths at a bus stop that had no bench and looked down at her shoes as if thinking. The edge of the brick sat slightly uneven. Dust lay along the mortar line; there were no new scuffs on the paint that would indicate a hand had reached and slipped. She stepped away and toward a side street. At the corner, she stopped to toss the empty water bottle into a bin and used the angle to glance back. Two teenagers walked past the shop without looking inside.

On the side street, the pavement narrowed and one car parked half on the path. She trailed a pair of men talking about football in a language that was not Turkish. She did not match their steps. She let them turn off at a bar with a television playing a recorded match and kept straight to the next corner, then left, then right to create a loose grid with offset lines.

She reconstructed the sequence. The handler check had been swapped before the drop. The cache had not been disturbed. Nightingale had built a message that lived in timing when content would get him killed. The message warned against a change in the handler and placed the compromise in London. The conclusion looked like paranoia if you pulled it apart; in order it was a sentence.

Iranians could force a change by grabbing someone, but it would not look like a man accustomed to obedience. It would look like someone trying to pass in a role learned quickly. The descriptor aligned with her world. The cadence of the shopkeeper's responses aligned with her experience: careful, limited, under pressure. There was no reason to doubt the civilian witness who had more to lose than she did in this room of the story. She accepted that and moved it into the column labelled fact.

She did not touch the brick. She did not lift it and she did not test the mortar with a fingernail. She did not leave anything and she did not take anything. She marked the sight lines for herself and then walked away.

It took her twelve minutes to reach the wider street where she could change direction without making it clear that she had changed direction. She waited at a light with a small group of people who watched the cars rather than the crossing sign. When the cars slowed, the group moved and she moved with them. A tram clattered on a track two streets over. The sound rose and fell with distance.

She justified her exit path by imaginary errands. She let herself stop at a pharmacy to check the display in the window and then moved on. She glanced at metal shutters rolling down for the evening along one side

street and decided not to use it. She chose the next, where lights were still on in two shops. She kept to the left so that oncoming pedestrians would pass on her right, giving her body a predictable line without making everyone else adjust.

Everything confirmed that the break had happened before the ritual. The cache as symbol flowed from that: a practice of trust left intact because the breach had already occurred upstream. She filed it under cause rather than consequence and gave it no more weight than it deserved.

By the time she reached the bus that would take her back toward the hotel, the light had gone from grey to darker grey. The bus was warmer than the street. She did not remove her jacket. She looked at the route map and then looked away. She counted two stops and then three, then exited one past where she had planned and walked the extra distance to burn any simple algorithm that assumed she would choose the shortest route.

The door to the room stuck on the way in and she had to lift the handle a fraction as she turned the key. Inside, she placed the purchased paperback on the table and set the hotel key beside it. She stood still for a minute to let her mind adjust to the room. Then she moved the chair out from the table and sat straight with the notebook in front of her. She opened it and turned to a fresh page.

She drew a line across the top, added a date in the margin. Below that she set four anchor points in a neat column: last clean hold; handler substitution; scheduled drop; missed confirmation, leaving space between each to insert the details that mattered. Next to the third she wrote “cache untouched”; next to the second, “negative space: no change handler.” Her hand slowed for a second, then resumed. The pen dragged

slightly on the paper. Enough friction to steady her letters.

She sketched the ninety minutes that bracketed the swap in two parallel lines, the planned routings, the white-space allowances, the window where a meet could be rewired without breaking any visible rule. “London admin” went at the pivot and she circled it, then added a small side note labelled “authorisers.” Beneath that heading, she wrote a short list of roles, not names: section head with regional authority; deputy with travel discretion; head of counterintelligence with incident remit; liaison gatekeeper for Turkey with cover to make adjustments on short notice for external optics.

She set the pen down and looked at the list from left to right. A chair leg clicked once against the tile. With weight centred it would stay quiet. On the next line she wrote “proximal travel” and in the margin she set three time windows she had memorised: one week before; the three days around; one week after. To the right of those, she marked two country codes and a city that would not appear on most tourist itineraries. She drew a slash through the city: not Istanbul, but a place where arrangements were often made before Istanbul was used.

The redacted internal notes she carried sat in a thin sleeve deep in the satchel. She did not take them out. She did not need to see them to use them. The entries she had selected before leaving London were sparse almost to the point of uselessness on their face: initials of offices, three-letter airport codes, hotel nights listed as counts without names. But the pattern of confirmations, the alignments and offsets, would be enough when divided by what was public.

Open-source traces were less precise than they had been a decade earlier and more precise in ways that mattered: conference programmes, panel listings, public speeches that got posted by venues hungry for attention. An unimportant person took a photograph and tagged it with a place and a date. A news article mentioned a meeting and named one of the attendees because naming them would make the article travel further. She set the search structure in her mind so she could step into it

tomorrow and step out again without leaving more than the minimum scuff on any one machine.

Public terminals at a library and at a café without a camera on the back table would do for the first pass. The library would close early; the café stayed open later. The notebook would stay in the room. She would carry a page torn from the back with no notes on it and a pen she could leave behind if she had to. In the notebook she wrote “library first” and “café second” without underlining. She would not use her languages in ways that suggested more than a casual searcher. To anyone watching, it would pass as killing time.

She returned to the “authorisers” heading and drew a line through the liaison gatekeeper: too many eyes on that path. It would not be used to alter a handler at the last minute for a meet of this sensitivity. She drew a question mark next to counterintelligence and circled the section head and deputy, the pen pressing harder for a moment before it eased. The section head would have reach. The deputy would have proximity. Either could have the posture described by the woman in the shop. Both could step into the meet in a way that felt ordinary to anyone watching without context.

She wrote “hypotheses” in the margin and set the options beneath it. Possibility: the substitution was ordered under legitimate cover to test a procedure and was exploited by an adversary watching the pattern. Another: it was ordered for illegitimate reasons by someone inside with leverage; the adversary did not need to watch because the substitution was the exploitation. Or it was not ordered at all but constructed by an actor claiming authority and accepted without verification by someone who believed the claim.

She put a small dot next to the middle line. She did not outline why. She did not need to. The dot would remind her where the pressure sat while she looked for alignments. She wrote “evidence threshold” on the next line and left it blank. She did not have to fill it here. She knew what it was: more than assertion, less than prosecution. Enough to force a

decision in a room that preferred decisions not be forced.

She checked the thin stack of cash remaining in the satchel and redistributed it without looking at the amounts, one flat stack behind the inner sleeve, one in the jacket pocket, one beneath the insole of her left shoe. She returned the satchel to the floor by the bed, placed her shoes beside it, and set the hotel key on the table again so she would not have to search for it in the morning.

The watch showed a time that would allow food and one walk to the corner and back. She decided not to go out again. The next hours would not change with a meal taken now. She drank water from the bathroom glass and did not wipe the ring it left on the table when she set it down, then moved the chair to where she could see the door and the window at the same time. She stood once and engaged the chain. The screws moved perhaps half a turn under the pressure of her fingers. She accepted that they would hold against casual entry and not against intent.

She thumbed through the pages of the notebook already written, placed the elastic around it, and set it face down again. She stood and used the curtain to block the view of the room from the courtyard without blocking the air from the window. The towel on the line in the courtyard had not moved much; the air was not strong enough to lift it.

Pulling the chair back in, she sat. She set three marks in her mind against the watch face, not on the dial: one for waking before dawn, one for leaving before the library opened, one for a longer pause midmorning to see if anything had shifted in the street. There was no phone to set an alarm. Years of practice meant she woke on time.

Her options were narrower now. The enemy had reach. She would move faster than comfort allowed. The library machines would log her use. The café would not, but someone would remember a face. She allowed those facts to sit as they were. The plan did not ask them to be other than they were.

Sleep was not relief. Sleep was a tool.

Chapter 6

Signal and Noise

She woke before the first call to prayer. The room held its night temperature. The towel on the line in the courtyard hung where it had hung the previous evening. She sat up, checked the watch once, and did not check it again. The chair scraped a straight line when she pulled it back to reach the satchel. She left the notebook on the table, slid a blank page she had torn from the back into her jacket pocket, and stood with the satchel strap across her body. The key turned with the same stiffness. In the stairwell she placed her hand lightly on the rail and let a man pass her on the landing without looking at him. The desk was unstaffed. She closed the metal gate behind her without letting it ring.

The streets held delivery vans and men unlocking shutters. She walked with them, not ahead, not behind. The library sat in a building with stone stairs worn in the centre. She waited at the side door with three others and bought a one-day pass for cash when the clerk slid the window open. The card stock was flimsy. She signed the register with a name she had used in training for a different purpose and placed the pass in the pocket behind the satchel flap.

Inside, the machines were set in a row along a far wall. Two had out-of-order notices taped over the screens. The air smelled of old paper and dust that had been moved but not removed. A guard glanced at her pass and pointed at the far end. She took the last machine and kept her satchel strap under her foot. The reflection from the window glass showed a slice of the room behind her. She set a rule: seven minutes per machine, three machines per hour, then a walk around the block. She logged in with the day pass code printed on the receipt.

She began with the dates she had written the night before. One week before, the three-day bracket, one week after. She typed the first keywords in English and Turkish, then removed the Turkish and tried again. Panels, programmes, opening remarks, working groups, security forums. She excluded the obvious media outlets and selected local publications that still kept their archives intact. A clip from a small broadcaster showed a tight frame of a panel in Ankara. Captions named two academics, a mid-ranking diplomat, and a senior British official. The caption writer had included the word Sir. The audio was poor. In the background, on the stage signage, a line of text included the host's name and the word Ankara. She rewound, paused, and noted the date in the lower corner of the frame. Two days before the Istanbul window. It matched a redacted travel line she had memorised before leaving London. She moved on.

She cleared the session, logged out, and moved one seat along when the man beside her stood up. The new terminal showed a different desktop. She set the chair to the same height and entered the pass code again. She searched for photo galleries posted by venues rather than newspapers. A civic cultural centre had uploaded ten images from the same event. In one, the angle was wide enough to include the first row of the audience. She zoomed in until the pixels broke and then eased back until form returned. The face was clear enough. Silver hair. Profile turned toward the stage. The caption named the people onstage and then, after a comma, listed key attendees in the audience in no particular order. Sir Julian Croft appeared between two names she did not recognise. The mouse shell creaked under her grip; she eased off.

She copied nothing and wrote nothing. She memorised the order of names long enough to hold the context and then let it go. The posted date aligned with the panel's date and with the London entry in the redacted internal travel notes she had memorised. She did not linger on the page. She logged out and looked at the reflection again. No one was looking at her.

She left the first row, crossed to a second set of machines used for general browsing, and took the end seat. A woman in a headscarf watched a cooking video at low volume two machines down. Ava entered a search that paired Croft's name with a London venue and a date three days after the Istanbul window. A local listing came up with a programme title and a speaker roster. Croft's name sat fourth. The page's footer carried a timestamp of when it had been posted. The gap between posted Ankara and posted London left a space wide enough for what she knew had been done in Istanbul and narrow enough to make it easy to miss if you wanted to miss it, the circled substitution window on the torn page. She remembered him at the end of a table in a glass room, speaking low and waiting until talk stopped. Her jaw set, then eased. Deputy Consular Liaison, consular-only remit: excluded. Europe Desk deputy, logged in Brussels that week: excluded. Croft kept showing in the wrong window.

She set her hands flat on the table to keep them still. The chair leg clicked when she shifted her weight. She stopped the movement. The signal was in the noise. He had been close enough and official enough to make the substitution ordinary to anyone who did not know the context. He did not have formal remit there. That did not matter if the posture did the work.

She logged out again and walked around the block. The air off the water carried cold. Vendors set their trays. The same tram line sounded two streets away. She did not look back at the library windows. On the second pass she re-entered and took the third terminal from the left. She searched for board memberships and advisory roles that would put Croft in rooms adjacent to Turkish officials without making that the headline. A think tank listed him as a senior adviser. A trade delegation write-up mentioned him as an invited observer the previous year in a different city. None of it placed him officially in Istanbul. None of it needed to.

She returned to the anchor points. Handler substitution. Scheduled drop. Missed confirmation. The Ldn marks in her notebook. She slid the blank page from her jacket and wrote three lines in a column with a blunt

pencil from the desk:

Ankara panel: Croft present (two days prior). London programme: Croft scheduled (three days after). Gap aligns with Istanbul window.

She added a fourth line: Not his theatre.

She underlined the word gap once. She folded the slip twice and tucked it back into the inside pocket of her jacket.

At the next terminal she entered a search that paired Croft's name with a charity in London that liked to publish donor names and dinners. Photos. Names. Seating charts. Nothing useful for the purpose at hand. Dinners were useless. She needed a vector that connected to a motive that could survive scrutiny and could not be cleansed by procedure alone. At senior level, motive showed in money flows; procedure could not delete filings.

She closed the session and stood. The guard's eyes skated over her. She returned the day pass card to her pocket and left through the side door again. The stairs made the same worn sound underfoot. Outside, shutters lifted in sequence and the tram bell marked the next pass. She walked south along a street that would take her to a café she had selected for its back table and the angle of its window.

The café had two terminals stacked at the rear near a shelf containing board games with pieces missing. The back table sat under a light that did not reach the corner fully. She ordered tea at the counter, paid in cash, and asked if she could sit at the back. The owner nodded, barely looking. She took the tea to the table and set the cup on the wood, letting the heat leak into her fingers through the porcelain. Blank page down, she wrote four words on a new line: Croft = handler change window.

No calls. Not to the Service.

She set the pencil down and mapped the next steps without touching the keys. Beneficial ownership registers. Archived filings. Indirect associates: companies where people with Croft's last name or initials held

roles at arms' length in the years that mattered. Board appointments listed in reports from institutions that liked to publish names. She reminded herself to avoid anything that required her name and a password. No logins. No enquiries that would hold a session. No downloads. No printing.

She checked the watch and stopped her hand before it reached the second mark. Stay frosty. Seconds, not minutes, per query. Rotate terminals. Walk between. If any page returned an error that was not ordinary, stand up and leave.

She wrote a second, shorter list under the first:

, one query per entity , no repeated surnames without an initial ,
abandon machine after first warning

She looked once to the window. The street showed a man pushing a trolley stacked with crates and a woman checking her phone on the corner. No one held still and watched. She folded the slip again and put it away.

She turned the slip face down and set her fingers on the keys.

She took the first terminal. The chair was low and she did not adjust it. She opened a public registry from a small jurisdiction that advertised transparency to attract filings. The search field took a name and returned nothing useful. She added a single initial. A hit appeared from seven years earlier with a company that looked like a holding structure. The directors listed were generic. She did not click through. She logged out.

She walked to the second terminal and entered a phrase that would pick up board appointments for an educational foundation in a different jurisdiction. An archived page from three years ago named a donor with a surname that matched Croft's but with no obvious tie. It could be noise. She closed it. She kept moving.

She tried a different path: a donor dinner list from a security forum in a neighbouring country. Croft listed as attending in his public capacity.

No link to money. She backed out.

She entered a search string that combined a maritime registry with a company name that had appeared in a trade newsletter in the same year as Nightingale's earliest significant product. A list scrolled into view. The terminal fan spooled. She clicked once to expand a record. The page hesitated and then returned to the index. She clicked again. The screen froze fifteen seconds into the load. A small box appeared with a generic message about connectivity. Then the login screen replaced the browser. The other terminal kept its session.

She sat back. The owner shrugged from behind the counter as if the machine did this sometimes. It did not matter what brought it down. What mattered was that she had touched a surface that someone else wanted unmarked.

She stood, walked to the counter, and ordered another tea to give shape to her movement. She handed over her bank card to preserve cash. The terminal beeped, then beeped again. The owner looked at the terminal and then at her.

"Declined," he said.

"Cash," she said, and set the coins down. He took them and placed the tea on the counter with a motion that said he had seen declined cards before and would see them again. She took the tea back to the table and did not drink it. The temperature would drop to drinkable in two minutes. She did not have two minutes.

Her watch showed the same time it had shown less than a minute earlier, but the window had changed. She placed the cup on the edge of the table and looked across the square through the gap in the café's window stickers. A man stood facing away from the café, at an angle that allowed him to see both street entrances without turning his head, a controlled sightline. His weight sat even across both feet. Hands empty. Clothes plain. He scanned every fifteen seconds, a sector-based pattern, not habit. Tourists held their phones up. He did not.

She raised the cup without drinking and set it down again to justify the pause to anyone who cared to assign meaning. Then she slid the chair back without letting it scrape, lifted her satchel strap across her chest, and headed toward the side corridor that led to the service door. The owner glanced up and glanced down again. She pushed the door with her shoulder and stepped into a narrow alley lined with bins. The smell of damp cardboard and old fruit sat in the air. She counted three steps to the street.

She exited into a flow of pedestrians moving toward the tram stop and crossed between them diagonally, keeping her shoulders aligned to avoid jostling. The square lay to her right. She did not look at it. Two shops down, a display window gave a reflection at an angle. She saw the man step off his mark as if to adjust his view. She altered her pace half a beat and turned into a lane that ran parallel to the main road for half a block before slanting away.

She checked lines of approach and exit without moving her head. Ahead: a junction with two options, left to a street with metal shutters halfway down, right to a street with lights on in a grocery and a seamstress. Behind: crowd density increased near the tram stop, which would slow anyone who tried to follow at her speed without drawing attention. Police patrol cadence here ran on a sweep-pause-sweep. She had marked it earlier. She had two minutes before the next pass.

She took the right turn. She let a pair of teenagers pass her on the left and then fell in behind an older man carrying a plastic bag so that any surveillance camera would catch her at half-profile behind him. At the end of the street she crossed at a diagonal that forced a follower to commit, then slowed to check an imaginary shopping list in her head for the benefit of a shop window display. The reflection did not show the man immediately behind her. She did not assume he had dropped. She assumed she had lost him for the moment.

No handset on her. Any outgoing signal would mark her on systems that did not forget. She ran through the implications of the declined card,

the killed session, and the posture in the square. Security had the administrative lever. CI had the lens. Croft had the motive to know who was reaching for his edges. You don't get to choose what you hear. She had heard enough.

She moved through two more turns in a loose grid, then paused at a shop window that displayed tools and paint cans. The reflection gave back an empty pavement to her left and two men arguing about a football score to her right. She checked her watch once and then looked away. The watch gave her a number she could use to set distance. She used it. She walked.

A bus approached at a steady speed. She bought a ticket with coins, stepped on, and took a seat two rows from the back on the aisle. The window showed the street in backward motion. At the next stop, a woman with a red scarf boarded and sat near the front. The man from the square did not board. That did not translate to safety. It translated to a new angle. She counted stops without looking at the route map. At three, she stood and exited through the middle door, then crossed to a different line going in a direction that would not make sense to anyone who thought she was heading back to the hotel.

On the platform she let one bus go and took the next. She used the reflection in the shelter to watch the pavement behind her. A couple arguing over a receipt. A boy kicking a bottle cap. No one fixing on her path. The tram line sounded again two streets away, predictable in its interval.

Onboard the second bus she reached the satchel's inner sleeve and checked the flat stack of notes without looking down. She did not count them. She confirmed by touch that the torn page sat in the inside pocket of her jacket, folded once where she had left it. The words on it were short enough to carry without the page. She kept the page anyway.

She knew the shape now. Croft had been there when he did not have to be. The substitution had been arranged inside the window that placed

him within reach while leaving him clean on paper. The shop's shelves had not moved. The brick had not been touched. The negative space channel had named London and warned her off a change. She did not need to rewrite any of it to fit.

The bus stopped near a market where stalls had begun to close. She stayed on for two more stops and then stepped down into a street she had not used since arriving. She took the left turn at the corner where two cameras had been installed at different heights. She did not look up. The surveillance problem had moved from hypothetical to live. The work continued.

She walked toward a stretch of road that would give her three options in fifty metres and counted ten in her head. At ten, she changed her pace by a fraction and chose the option with the highest foot traffic. The crowd would not hide her from a trained team. It would slow them.

The inside of her cheek rasped against a tooth. She swallowed once, steady, and kept moving. The day had shifted. The margin for error had narrowed by more than half. She adjusted without announcing it to herself. Trust the tradecraft. She would not call anyone. She would not return to the library. She would not check the café again. She had what she needed to act.

The bus noise behind her thinned. A siren rose on the main road and fell away. She took the next side street and let herself walk as if she were going home. The hotel was in a different direction. She did not change course to match it.

A man stepped out of a doorway two buildings ahead of her and lit a cigarette. He looked at her and then looked over her shoulder, not at a shop, not at a sign. She crossed early at the mouth of a side lane, placing a delivery truck between them. When the truck moved, she had already turned again. She would burn the simple route algorithms and carry the pattern in her head, not on any device.

By the time the light began to fail, she had added two more turns and used the mirrored glass of a closed bank once to look behind her. The man had not followed. The first man from the square had not reappeared. The session kill and the declined card had done their work. They did not have to catch her today. They only had to make the city smaller.

She did not go back to the hotel or to the bookshop. She picked a small diner with steam on its windows and sat at a table where she could see the door and the back exit. She ordered soup with cash. She did not remove her jacket. The spoon knocked against the bowl once when she set it down. Her hands were steady when she lifted it again.

Croft had the respect that would disarm a wary source. He had the authority to appear without explanation. He had been near at the wrong time. The numbers and the absence lined up. She traced the edge of the folded page in her pocket with a thumb and then took her hand away. She ate, paid, and stood.

Outside, the streetlights came on in sequence. She stepped into the flow, not fast, not slow. The work had shifted. So had she.

Chapter 7

The Hunter Hunted

She kept to the edge of the pavement where the light from the shops fell short. The steam from the diner windows thinned behind her. The crowd was thin but not absent. Enough people to be ordinary. Not enough to hide.

At the rail kiosk the glass was dull from fingerprints. One touch on the screen, a destination two districts away, and she slid her bank card into the slot. The terminal clicked and paused. No ticket slid out. A small row of red squares lit along the top. She tried again. The same sequence. A guard in a dark jacket watched the space above her head and then looked away. She held the card for a second in her palm, then slid it back into her wallet and closed the wallet without using it.

Coins sat in the change tray of the machine next to hers. She left them. She stepped to the wallmap. The map showed the lines as coloured bands with white circles for stations. She counted three nodes she could use to change direction without returning to the hub. The map was clean but did not show where the watchers would be.

She went downstairs to the platform and let one train arrive and leave. The next carried her two stops. She kept her body at a slight angle to the carriage camera, one hand on the strap of the satchel against her torso. At the second stop she let three people exit and then stepped out, turning left into a corridor with a pillar half hiding the far end. A man stood there with his hands in his jacket pockets, not watching her, watching the space where people came around the bend. He had the stillness of someone who knew he might need to move without warning. He moved his weight from one foot to another on a regular count that did

not match any advertisement cycle. She passed him and did not look at his face.

Up on the street again she bought a tea from a window with a hand-lettered menu. She put coins on the counter and took the cup, held its heat long enough to feel her skin ache and then set it down on a ledge at shoulder height without drinking. Shopfronts were in shadow; rain from earlier had left the asphalt dark. She checked the time by the motion of the minute hand, not the numbers.

The café decline earlier could have been a single error. The kiosk made it pattern. Security had the lever. She moved most of her cash from the inner sleeve to a flatter stack at the base of the satchel where it would not print against the fabric, leaving a smaller bundle where it was. No receipts would be left to name her route now.

She walked two blocks east, then cut through a lane to the south. The lane had bins lined against one wall and a cat under a car. A dolmuş slowed at her hand signal. She stepped in and passed two small notes forward. The driver glanced in the mirror and nodded. She sat where she could see the doors and the street through the window reflection. A woman with a child at her side counted out coins with her thumb on the ridges. The driver stopped short of the posted point and let three passengers off without pulling to the kerb. At the next corner she tapped the metal bar and got out without looking up at the camera bubble mounted on the pole.

She took another dolmuş for a short hop, then a car whose driver did not display a licence in the window. She showed the street name on a paper scrap and paid first. The driver took the note and drove with two fingers on top of the wheel, quiet. She watched the side mirrors and the strip of rear window between the headrests. At the light he turned his head a fraction, judging the gap. She got out two streets shy of the name she had written down and walked the rest.

The pattern was not a single tail. The posture had shifted. Corners with sightlines. Stair heads with clear views down and across. Not following close. Posting at lanes where choices narrowed. A team on two sides was cheaper than a single person on your shoulder for an hour, and harder to shake once they were in position.

She walked past a hardware stall with paint rollers and dull knives on a wire grid. She stopped, pointed, and held up two fingers. The man clipped the smallest box cutter from the rack and a pack of spare blades. She shook her head at the second and held out a coin and a smaller coin for the first only. He took the money and passed the cutter to her without a bag. She slid the small tool into the inner pocket of her jacket. Its weight was clear in the pocket.

The alley she chose next had a light at the far end that left a strip of shadow along the left-hand wall. She used it for a length of wall and then crossed to the right to put an angle in any camera's frame. A busker tuned a saz on a corner in front of a closed shop and then stopped playing. The man was not looking for money tonight. He watched the street.

She ran through the box. A liaison line from the Service to a small unit that could place a car without lights on a side street. Local police would not grab; they would look. The Service team would avoid show. No uniforms. No hand on her arm unless she ran into it. They would not want a street scene that they'd have to explain. They would want her to stop asking questions and to go home. If she bolted, they'd push. If she kept moving, they would keep her between two points and use time to wear her down.

Fatih had the lanes she needed. Windows with mesh. Doors straight to kitchens. Cars that could not fit. Camera coverage with gaps where no one spent money to mend a line.

She checked the torn notebook page in her jacket by touch. The edge was rough where it had separated from the spine. Short lines on it. She knew the words without looking. She touched the face of her watch, then

put her hands still again.

She let a watcher see her. A man at a junction who only moved his head. He needed to pass a short message across a net. She gave him something simple to report: woman, dark jacket, satchel strap across the body, walking north toward the market streets. Deliberately, she let him clock her, then turned into a lane that would take her two streets east before she turned back toward the market. The report would move without sound. She was on their board now. That was the point.

The market block was half-closed. Metal shutters were pulled down halfway, held with chains that showed rust. Stalls under the eaves were still open, selling cheap toys and hairbands and batteries. The lanes cut through the stalls in patterns worn by years of foot traffic.

She stood for a moment where three lines met and ran the exits in her head.

Three ways out. One toward the tram stop through a wider street where a car could pull across. One up toward a mosque where the steps gave height to a watcher. One through a line of stalls into a blind alley that ended at a wall she remembered from years before when she had walked here as cover for another kind of work. Two teams would set on the first two. The blind alley would look foolish to anyone who had not stood at the wall and looked over into the service lane.

A car sat at a tee junction sixty metres off, idling low, nose pointed out toward a road that fed into the big one by the water. The tail lights looked dull as if the car was older than it should have been for this work or the bulbs had been replaced with cheap parts. The driver rested his wrist on the top of the steering wheel and turned his head to each side with small movements. He wasn't parked.

She counted the distance to the blind alley. Twenty steps to the mouth, another fifteen to the wall. Beyond it, a drop into a service lane that ran parallel to the back of the stalls. When the stall lights went out at the end of the night, the lane would be dark. Now it was lit from one bulb

at a door two doors down.

She watched the far corner of the block. A man took position there and took out his phone without unlocking it. He held it in front of his chest in a way that let him look past it. He shifted his weight in counts that matched the man from the station corridor earlier. Comms. A cadence they could hold across a block.

She waited for one cycle. Head turn. Weight shift. Watcher number two put a hand to his ear under the edge of his hood and then let it drop. The beat between those two movements would be the hole.

A family left a stall with a bag of bread and a plastic toy in bright colours. The child looked back at the lights and slipped on a patch of wet stone, recovered, and laughed at nothing she could hear. Ava matched their gait for ten steps, then peeled off on the half-beat and slid into the mouth of the blind alley.

It narrowed twice and then stopped. The wall was low enough for someone with reach and speed. The cement at the top had chipped. Scars along the edge showed that enough people had been over it that the damage had a pattern. She did not slow. She stepped once on the small lip at the base, planted the toe of her shoe in a foothold that was not meant to be one, put both hands on the top, and pushed. Her knee banged the edge and skinned through the fabric. She swung her leg and got the other foot on the top, then didn't pause; she vaulted over and dropped.

The ground on the far side was not level. She hit on the edge of her foot; the ankle turned hard, pain spiked, then it held. Pain ran up her leg and into her hip, a clean pain that told her she was working at the edge but not past it. Something shifted in the satchel. A rubber-banded packet of small notes dropped and skidded out on to the rough concrete. She reached down, caught the strap close to the buckle so it would not swing, and kept moving. The notes remained on the ground.

Behind her, voices came up from the alley and on the far side of the wall. Not English. Not urgent yet. The words were steady. A question and

the start of an answer. She turned right into a gap between a metal door and a stack of folded crates. The gap was narrow enough that the satchel scraped when she forced it through. The rubber on the heel of her left shoe left a mark on the concrete that would smudge when anyone tried to track it with a flashlight.

The gap led to a service lane that dog-legged once to the left and then ran straight. The car would not fit. A hand could reach through the gap to grab her if someone timed it, but no one had their hand there. She kept her pace even, easing weight off the left when the ground changed. The instinct to sprint was a kind of panic that got people hurt.

At the first bin she opened the satchel as she moved and took out the rolled shirts and the sweater. She put them into the bin without compressing them. The sound would carry. Then the toiletries bag. The comb. The travel bottle she had cut down with a pair of scissors at home. All into the bin. The satchel lightened. She kept the passport, the transit card, the folded torn page, and the cash that remained. The box cutter was a hard weight in her pocket.

She came to a stairwell with a metal door at the base. The door was unlatched. The handle left black on her fingers. She went through and moved up into air that smelled of frying oil. On the first tread her step hitched, then steadied. The stairway opened on to a back room with a chest freezer humming and a crate of onions under a shelf. A teenager in a red T-shirt sat on a stool with a phone in his hand. He looked up once and then back down. She pushed the door that led to the front; the bell near the hinge knocked against the wood and made a sound that no one reacted to.

In the café, three men sat at a table with tea glasses and a plate with two halves of a sandwich that had not been eaten. They talked without looking at each other. She walked past the counter and the owner did not raise his head. The door to the street let out a draft that cooled her face and made her eyes water. Outside, the lane opened into a street with a shoe repair shop and a man smoking under a striped awning.

She lifted the scarf from the satchel and wrapped it over her head and hair, changing the line of her spine and letting her shoulders round. She looked down more than up. A different silhouette. Not much, but enough.

Two blocks to the ferry tokens. She did not run. She crossed where the cars had to stop and waited when they did not. On the move, she kept most of her weight on the right, letting the left ankle track straight. At the booth she put coins down and took a token, a small plastic disc that slid through a slot with a satisfying resistance. Three men hurried past her toward the turnstiles in a line that did not make any sense. Near the gates, a man held a phone at chest height and watched past it, his small weight shifts on a steady count. She paused by the tea stall, let a family go ahead, then slipped two lanes over to a quieter turnstile. A bell sounded and a voice called the last foot passengers. She slid the token into the slot and pushed through the turnstile. The gate resisted for a fraction and then yielded. She walked the gangway with a measured pace, shortening the step on the left, and stepped on to the deck.

The air above the water was cold and smelt faintly of diesel. Lights on the opposite bank made a chain across the dark. She sat on a bench near the rail where she could see the entry and the path between the seats. She put the satchel on the bench and pressed one knee against it. The ferry shifted as ropes were pulled clear; then it moved out. Quays on both sides passed by; she stayed still.

Inventory. She slid her hand into the inner pocket of her jacket and touched the folded page. The paper was thin where it had been folded and unfolded too many times in two days. The words on it had not changed. Her brain did not need the paper. Still, it mattered that it existed. She had the passport in the inside sleeve of the satchel where a stitched pocket held it flat and not at the top where someone's hand could pull it. The transit card sat in the same sleeve, no longer necessary once she had crossed the water but useful again later. The cash was reduced: a flat stack in the base of the satchel, a smaller set in the jacket pocket, nothing under her insole now because she had not had time to stop and move it

back. The box cutter was in the inner jacket pocket, the blade retracted and the body rough under her fingers. No phone. No clean device. No way to send anything that did not announce her.

One name. Eliot Parry. Short hair, pale skin that burned easy in summer during the training exercises, a way of talking that kept his voice level even when the room got louder. He liked screens more than rooms. He had been careful once when she had not been. That could be a debt, or it could be nothing. She needed one query that she could not make herself without lighting up every board with her name.

A hard link. Not gossip. Not posture in a photograph. A money flow that would make sense of motive later. Something that could be pointed at without exposing how it had been found. Inadmissible if anyone asked for the paper, but unspinnable if you had the detail. He would know where such a thing lived. He could turn a string of numbers in a way that would not carry his fingerprints into places where he could not remove them later.

The risk was not small. Eliot was inside a system with its own tripwires and obligations. Anything he did would leave a shadow where he stood. Worse options existed: trawl open sources from a café and leave a trace; jab a registry from a public machine and trigger a freeze. A reply might not come at all; that uncertainty was a constraint. If he refused, she would cut the line there and treat the refusal as protection, not a betrayal. If he accepted, it would be once. One question. No follow-up. She set the rule and repeated it once.

She did not speak his name or move her lips. She pictured the path instead: a late-night internet corner that sold time in blocks and had old machines with keyboards where the letters were worn smooth. Cash in a jar by the screen. A bored attendant with a video running on a phone propped on the counter. A dormant cut-out channel she had used once to pass a single sentence. Not her own system, not his. A place that would treat a small text string as one more item in a list that was thirty items long at any moment and of interest to no one until someone asked for

that one string. She could revive it once if she was clean in and clean out.

On the far bank, the Service would be waiting at the ferry exits because that was where anyone would wait. They would pick a stance that said they were people waiting for someone else. They would have spots with clean sightlines to the turnstiles and the stands where sim cards were sold. She would not go where they expected. She would not bounce back on the same ferry. She would take the side exit and step into the line for simit that ran perpendicular to the main flow, then break out of it two places before the cashier and cut behind the shelter marked with the route numbers for the buses that didn't stop at this hour.

She checked the sky above the city. No stars. A helicopter would have put a shadow across the surface of the water and made the lights flicker in a way she could see. There was no helicopter. Not a grab. A perimeter.

She felt the bruise starting above her knee where the wall had caught it. It would stiffen when she stood. She kept the leg straight and moved her foot enough to keep blood moving. The ankle would hold through the next hour. After that, she would need to sit again.

Her hands were steady when she took a coin from her pocket and moved it from one hand to the other. She checked the watch's minute hand and smoothed the scarf under her chin. The city on the far side grew with each second. She watched the chain of lights along the embankment become individual lamps and then the poles that held them.

Chapter 8

Procedural Escape

She heard the gangway clatter into place and did not stand with the first row. Two people moved past, a couple with a plastic bag of bread between them, the steam from their cups lifting in the cold air above the deck. When the couple cleared space, she rose and followed, not too close, not too far, and walked the span with a measured step that did not favour the ankle more than she had to. The bruise above her knee had stiffened. Without making a show of it, she adjusted. The scarf held her hair tight against her skull and changed the line of her profile. Useful.

On the quay, the lights were white and flat. A man near the turnstiles held a phone at chest height and moved his weight in small counts, steady. Watcher posture. No change. She stepped to the right, into the line at the sinit stand that cut across the main flow, two people ahead of a man with a backpack and the strap too long. When the line kinked at the counter she broke away with an uninterested shake of the head, crossed behind the bus shelter with the route numbers covered by tape, and used the side exit that took her down a short flight to a street that ran parallel to the waterfront.

No backward glance. Reflections were enough. A dark window gave her a smear of the street for one second: two men at the top of the steps, speaking without moving their mouths much, no one descending after her. The air smelled of diesel and water and old stone. She moved toward the docks but stayed inland by half a block where pedestrians thinned and the cameras faced retail doors and not the path she chose.

The first internet place sat under a sign with missing letters. Inside, a row of screens were set at uneven heights. The keyboards were worn

smooth where thumbs and first fingers rested. A young man behind a counter watched a video on his phone propped against a jar with coins in it. He looked at her once and then at the jar. She set down coins and lifted her hand so he could see she was not asking questions. He slid a paper slip toward her with a terminal number and the time on it written in pencil.

She sat with the satchel strap under her knee and one foot hooked around a chair leg to bring the line of the strap against the table. The machine took a long second to register the keypress. No second tap. She moved through the sequence without pausing: a prearranged entry marker from years earlier, ten characters, then a symbol, then nine digits that had nothing to do with her, then the second marker as a checksum. The screen returned a text field, bare. No greeting. That was how it should be.

One question. One line. She typed a range: two days before the Istanbul window's first frame, three days after its last. Jurisdiction codes and a registered-agent string went in with a corporate name that contained a word any shell would wear. It went in as a block to avoid keyword triggers that ate single names. She defined a route type and a message shape and narrowed to a time slice anchored to the night of the missed confirmation. She did not ask for an origin beyond the offshore entity. That would be greed, and greed was noisy.

Return protocol added: one packet only, in a fixed size, without a header that named anything; the size would be the answer. If there was nothing, there would be silence. If anything else came, it would be hostile or sloppy and she would treat it as both. She added a final line that said the channel closed after one return and that any repetition should be read as a trap.

She sat still for one breath, then two. She read her own words once and made no changes. With the heel of her finger, she hit send and watched the blink in the corner; the cursor paused a beat, then advanced. No chime. Good. She ended the metered session, purged the browser

data, logged out, then power-cycled the terminal to trigger the kiosk's auto-wipe. Standing, she pushed the chair in with her knee, the satchel strap still across it until the last second. Coins in the jar were scattered, not counted by piles. Cash only. The attendant glanced up, met her eyes for a moment that said nothing, and looked back at his phone.

Outside, she crossed the narrow road and walked without touching the rail. Years earlier, she had watched this street from the ferry on another job and remembered which cameras pointed across it and which pointed at doors. One mounted above a shutter showed moisture on its housing. A light reflected at an angle in its glass. She kept her head down far enough to put the brim of the scarf edge between the camera lens and her face. Pace unchanged.

Three turns formed a slow S that would read as nothing to a passerby and everything to someone trying to fix a position on a map. A delivery van blocked a lane for a minute while the driver rolled a dolly down a ramp. She did not use it for cover. That showed intent. She crossed behind it with an annoyed set to her shoulders. The ankle protested once and then held. Trust the tradecraft. Do not add noise.

The second street ran close to the water. She kept one building in between for a block and then stepped over to the quay side where the stone held the day's damp. Cranes sat as they had sat for years, arms set by bolts and maintenance schedules. A cat slid between two pallets and did not break stride. She watched for watchers. A pair of men in dark jackets stood near a set of steps. They did not look at her. She let a tram glide past at the top of the slope and then took the path down to the lower road.

A concrete structure sat three doors from a shuttered shop that sold fishing line and hooks. Half its windows were empty of glass. Inside, the floor was gritty and a strip of water marked a line where the roof let rain in at the edge. A light on a pole outside flickered once and then steadied. She stepped inside and out of the cone where the light made a shadow. Salt, old oil, and ammonia hung in the air. Back to a pillar, satchel on her

feet: the pillar gave her a solid surface to feel at her shoulders. No one would see her from the street unless they looked straight in. Most people did not look straight in at buildings like this after midnight.

From her inner pocket she took a spare folded page she used for notes. The other page, the one that mattered more, stayed against her inside jacket where a hand could not pull it away with a bag.

She wrote three things in small letters that she could read and that would look like a shopping list to anyone else: time mark; place for retrieval; one return only. She folded the page, put it back, and left it there.

Her ankle had begun to swell. She untied her shoe, slid the foot out, pressed two fingers to the bone on each side, and then put the shoe back on slowly. She tightened the laces on a count and let the pain settle in a narrow band she could manage. She pulled her knees up slightly and set the satchel as a brace. The knee had a raw patch where the wall had caught it; the fabric had scraped and left fibre stuck to skin. She did not pull the fibres away now. They would come free when the angle changed and she would not be thinking about them at the exact moment.

She took the flat stack of notes from the base of the satchel, counted five small ones by touch and not by sight, and moved them to a pocket under the jacket where her hand would find them without looking, the rest left where they were. A small packet of food opened; she ate half and put the other half back. She closed her eyes and counted a square of breaths, four in, four hold, four out, four hold, and felt her pulse steady. Twice was enough. More would put her to sleep. That was not the point.

At headquarters there would be a note on a whiteboard with her surname and three bullet points under it written in a clean hand: leave order issued, device surrendered, internal checks negative. Someone would have added a fourth point by now in a different pen that said travel flagged. In a room down a corridor, there would be a briefing she could write herself: the officer in question appeared to be acting alone; she was

regarded as unstable in the wake of an asset loss; she should be approached with sensitivity but firm boundaries; she should not be allowed to contact potential witnesses. She could hear the words even though she was not in the room. The words were standard and they did a job. They put her in a box that meant her questions did not have to be answered. The label would suit Croft. He could nod at it and keep his hands folded. He would not need to say anything else.

The rain started with a click on a piece of metal outside, then two clicks, then a spread of sound across the corrugated edge of the roof. Water made clean lines down the wall near the loading door. It did not blow in. It thickened the air and cut the noise from the road above by half. Rain masked small movements. A car went by and then another. The second one slowed. She kept still. It took the corner at the far end and the sound went away on a path she could map without looking at it. She checked her watch and then did not check it again. Hold discipline. No noise.

She built a list of contingencies without writing them down. If the packet did not come, she would leave before dawn with foot traffic workers and go to the long-distance buses. If the bus station felt hot she would go past and ride a smaller feeder route two stops, then cut back on foot. She could reach the border in stages if she had to: short hops, nothing booked, pay in cash, avoid repeated faces by changing the time of day whenever she could. If the roads were watched she would skirt them. There were service paths and culverts that paralleled the rail, not comfortable but usable. She could move at night if she had to as long as she kept her feet and did not turn an ankle a second time. The ankle was the limit. She held a breath and released it and made sure the list was complete enough to stand for an hour without her adding to it again.

Eliot sat at the edge of her planning, a single contact to use once, then close. If the packet was intercepted, he would move into a quiet review: a time-window query, roster checks on his floor, usage against pattern. Pull hard enough and someone would mark what he had touched or build a

case from shapes. Risk had been reduced by avoiding origin and destination and by asking for a return that stayed outside his usual systems. Not safety, only containment in one place. That was the price. Coins on the jar had set it. No more asks. If they took her, his name would not pass her lips.

A ship horn sounded once from farther down the water. The tone carried along the stone. She opened her eyes and checked the hand on her watch again, just the angle of it, not the numbers. She stood, let her foot take weight, and marked how the ankle felt. It would hold for the walk out and back. She stretched her leg without moving more than the space the pillar gave her.

You do not get to choose what you hear. She had said that to trainees once. It was true. What you did with it was the only part that mattered.

She waited five minutes. The rain kept the street on the other side of the doorway blurred. A cat shook itself under the lip of the door and then ran into the rain anyway because men stood on the dry side. She did not move until the time she had set for herself came up in her head without a question mark. She took the satchel strap over her head and settled it across her body, checked that the box cutter sat in the inside pocket with the blade retracted, and pushed into the street.

The walk back to the quay took her past a shuttered café and a kiosk with a wind-up shutter that rattled when the wind hit it. The tram at the top of the slope sent red light across the wet road and then left it. She kept to the side where the pools were shallow and looked at the reflections of her own feet to judge where she was stepping. The scarf had warmed with her breath and she adjusted it once without stopping. The pain in her knee tightened when she lifted the leg higher than usual. She lowered it and shortened the step and the pain became a steady band again.

The second internet place was on a side street with a plastic sign propped against the door. Inside, an old heater clicked on and off. The attendant sat on a chair with a newspaper folded to the sports page. A

small television showed a muted game from another country. She set coins on the counter. He counted them and handed her a laminated card with a number on it attached to a key fob. No name. No receipt. She took the card and walked to a terminal near the back, one that was not visible from the street.

The machine carried a different login splash to the first. She used a sequence that did not resemble any she would use on a system she cared about. The page came up. The field was blank. She entered the retrieval string that matched the send in structure and length. A soft system sound came from the small speaker under the monitor. The screen changed to show a list with one item on it. No header. No greeting. No name.

She clicked it and did not blink. A block of numbers and letters filled the screen. In the middle sat a timestamp. It lay in the window she had defined. A line two steps below it was the amount. A line two steps above was the route type. The offshore entity string appeared where it needed to appear. There was no origin listed. Good. There was no destination beyond the offshore stop. Also good. Packet size matched the prearranged byte count; the marker aligned. It was the answer she had asked for and nothing more.

A breath held, then released. She ran the mental overlay without lifting a hand: Ankara two days before the Istanbul window; London three days after; the gap where his name did not belong and yet stood in the wrong city, once, for long enough to change a handler at a bookshop he would never admit he had heard of. The time mark on the transfer fell inside that gap. The number on the transfer was large enough to matter and not so large that it would have tripped alarms on its own. Clean. The jaw muscles tightened and then eased on a count. Her throat stayed still. It matched the torn page's trigger: absence used as proof.

This would never go to court. It would be pulled apart by counsel before it had time to sit on a table. But it was real. It was enough to take a man out of a chair. It was enough to make people choose between him and their own names. The signal was in the noise and she had it now. The

rest would be movement and words and a room where he would see that she had what she needed and that nothing he said in public would help him.

She cleared traces and left.

She cut into a lane where laundry would hang in daylight and used the shadow from the wall to adjust her shoe again. The laces had loosened. She tightened them on a count and stood to see if the ankle would take the new pressure. It did.

The line to him stayed closed. She touched the folded page in her inner pocket and moved on.

She would go out by road. Airports were nets and she had already made enough noise in this city to be on a board by now. An overnight coach would take her far enough in a single block to make the watchers' work expensive, and expense slowed decisions at the hour when men with authority liked to sleep. She would not walk straight to the main station. She would cut it from the side and use a feeder that anyone could ride by mistake, then get off one stop early and walk the last part along a wall where cameras pointed at ticket sellers and not at faces moving on the edge of their frames.

She moved through a district where the streets ran at odd angles to each other and the lamps were set unevenly. She stayed on the side where the ground was less broken. A man with a wool cap swept water away from his doorway with a push broom. A woman carried a crate covered with plastic. A boy kicked a bottle top at a wall and then at another wall until he lost interest.

At a small square, a bus idled with its lights on and its door open. It would go two stops and then stop again near a street where she could cut across to a road that led to the intercity lines without stepping into the forecourt. She boarded and paid with two small notes. The driver watched her in the mirror once and then not again. She stood where she could see the front and the back and the reflection where the windows

made a shallow angle. No one watched her. The bus moved, and she stepped off behind a man with a parcel wrapped in brown paper. She crossed with him and then peeled off.

The forecourt of the intercity station lay ahead. She did not enter it. She ran a line parallel to it behind a low wall and then cut through a gap where the concrete had broken away. Inside the edge of the station, people moved fast without running. Vendors sold tea and bread from small carts. An overhead speaker announced something in a flat voice. She stayed at the periphery where the light reached but did not flatten faces. She watched boards that listed departures but did not look at them for long enough to show interest. Queues counted, she picked the shortest that would sell a slip without a name printed on it and joined it.

When it was her turn she put down the cash and asked for a route by pointing to the board and saying the name of a city two jumps away, not a border city but close enough that a bus would pass within an hour of it. The man behind the glass tore a small paper ticket with a seat number that could be ignored by anyone who wanted to because the coach would be full and the seat numbers would be suggestions. She took the ticket and put it in the pocket with the small notes. The departure time was soon. That was good. She did not want to stand still here.

At the edge of the station, she stood near a pillar with old posters layered under new ones and glue dried in ridges. She scanned faces twice; no one looked back. A security guard walked a line and turned at the end the way men on a line do. He looked at her as he looked at everyone and then looked past. Hands in her pockets, satchel strap across her body.

The coach pulled in and the door folded open with a sound that did not carry. People moved toward it. She did not join the first push. She waited for the second and then stepped in so that she was near a woman with a child and an older man with a flat cap. She did not want to be next to a group that talked loudly or a man who smelled of drink. Five rows back on the aisle she found a seat. The satchel went under her feet with the strap over her ankle. The scarf stayed where it was. The heater under

the seat clicked and then warmed.

As the coach pulled out, she took the same page from her pocket again. She wrote one more line: no more asks. She underlined it once, a straight line with her thumbnail under the paper to make the pencil bite. She folded the page and then tore it into two pieces. She tore the two pieces into four. She placed the four pieces into her mouth one after the other and let saliva soften them and swallowed them. The man across the aisle watched the window and not her. The child fussed and then closed his eyes.

The road out of the city ran along warehouses and lights and then past apartment blocks where one window in ten was still lit. She counted to avoid checking her watch, then let it go. The ankle pulsed and then steadied. The knee ached along the outer edge. She adjusted her position and the pain changed shape. Manageable.

Head back against the rest, she kept her eyes open. Sleep was not the right choice yet. Images came and went: Croft at a table with a glass of water; Croft on a stage in Ankara; a watcher's cadence in a corridor. She did not arrange them.

A man coughed somewhere behind her. The driver leaned on the wheel and moved his hands a little to follow the road. The woman with the child adjusted a blanket and set the child's head against her shoulder. The smell in the coach was ordinary, preferable to the dock building.

As the city lights fell away, she took the other folded page from her inner pocket and did not open it, still. Compromise is London. Trust no one. She knew the sentence order and the period at the end of one and the absence of a period at the end of the other. The paper was a thing to touch when she might have spoken or made a call. She pressed it once and then took her hand away. The signal was in the noise. She had the noise and the signal both now. The work continued.

She did not rehearse how she would speak to anyone yet. She held instead the frame of what she had: a pattern of presence and absence; an

anomaly in a shop; a gap in a diary; a movement of money across a line. That was enough to hold for the space between here and London. The rest would come with the room. She would set the room herself. Not a court. Neutral carpet, upright chairs, walls that did not let sound bleed out where it would be recorded without consent. She would need to move without touching systems for another stretch and then find machines in places where no one connected her to them. She could do that. The ankle would force her to sit sometimes. That could help if she picked the places.

The coach ran on. She kept her eyes open. She drew three small marks on her palm with the pencil point and rubbed them away with her thumb. She closed her hand and opened it. She did not sleep.

At a stop an hour later, the coach took on new passengers and a man got off to smoke and came back smelling of it. She did not leave her seat. She shifted the satchel strap and put her heel on it again so that anyone who tried to pull it would have to pull her foot too. The driver checked a list by holding it to the light at an angle. He folded it and put it back. The door closed and the coach moved again.

She thought of the wall with chipped cement and the movement on the far side. The rubber-banded packet of small notes she left because reaching would have cost a second. The teenager in the café back room who had looked at her and then at his phone and had not moved. These would have to buy her something later.

The sky through the coach window at the edge where the blind did not quite meet the frame showed the early grey that came before dawn. She checked her watch once, just the angle again. She set a mark for herself that said when she would change buses and when she would change the way she carried the satchel and when she would eat the rest of the packet. She set another that said when she would throw the scarf away and fold another piece of cloth differently so that she would not look like this in a place where someone would remember her as the woman with the scarf.

If the Service box held in this city, it would not reach as a shape to the next one with the same faces. They would change faces in new places because that was how men worked when they needed to say they had done a job. She would change her faces too in the ways that were available to her. Sometimes that was as simple as posture. Leyla had known that. The man who had stood in her shop had not stooped to hear; he had waited for others to speak up. That was a thing you could feel and not teach in a day. It still pointed at the same small list of names. One of those names had a route through money that now lay in her head and would sit under someone else's until it was called out in a room. That was enough.

She laid her head back again. The pain in her knee and ankle did not go away. She did not need it to. She needed it to sit where it was and not get worse. She adjusted the shoelace again under the seat edge with the toe of her other shoe and locked it down. She closed her eyes, not to sleep but to rest the muscles that kept them open. She opened them after ten breaths and looked at the aisle and the man across it and the woman with the child and the window again. She listened for any sound that did not belong. There was none.

The road rose and fell. The coach took a long curve and straightened. The driver adjusted his grip on the wheel. The day would be in front of her by the time she reached the first switch. She would not call anyone before then. She would not call anyone then. She would move in the order she had set. One line. One packet. One path. Then the next.

First switch at the outer ring, away from the forecourt.

Chapter 9

Going Home

She watched the lights ahead resolve into an inspection line. The first switch at the outer ring had been clean. The coach rolled forward, braked, rolled again. People gathered their documents before the driver told them to do it. She let the scarf sit low and kept her hands still in her lap until the man in the aisle reached her row. She kept quiet and reached under the strap at her ankle for the small wallet with the passport, lifted it to chest height, and waited for the look from the uniform at the door.

At the first stop, the bus doors opened to wet air and the sound of boots on cement. Passengers filed out in a loose line. She matched the pace of the woman ahead of her, then stepped into the shelter's strip of dry ground. The officer took her passport, looked at her once, turned two pages, and looked at the stamp he was trained to find. He did not ask a question. He pressed a stamp against a pad and then to her passport and passed it back without forcing eye contact. She took it and moved on. No extra glance. No reason for one.

On the far side of the shelter a vending machine hummed. She counted the seconds she allowed herself to look at it, then looked away. Coins were for tickets. Not for sweets that left wrappers where they did not need to be. She tightened the strap at her ankle with her heel and reboarded with the second wave. The driver checked the overhead mirror. The bus pulled out.

Her ankle held at this weight. The knee itched under the fabric where it had skinned against the wall in Fatih. She did not scratch. She checked the laces of her shoe with the toe of the other one and found the knot she had set by count still tight. The under-seat heater clicked and then went

quiet. She folded her hands on the satchel strap and let her head rest against the seat back without giving in to sleep.

Across the line and into the next time zone, the coach stopped again. Language changed on the signs. Numbers changed on clocks she did not carry. She glanced at her watch, not at the numerals but at the angle of the hands, and subtracted an hour without moving her lips. This mattered for London. Each change moved the estimate of when a border hit would cross systems and arrive in a tray with her name on it. She could not know how the internal routing would go on a given night. She could know that the Channel would be the point of certainty.

A boy two rows up asked his mother a question about sleeping. The mother pressed her finger to her lips and pointed at the window. The boy put his head against the glass. The man across from Ava wore a thin jacket and shook his foot every time the coach braked. The shake had a count to it. She measured it without wanting to. Everything now had a count.

At a large depot the driver called a change. People stood as one, then looked at each other and sat again when the doors did not open. When they did open, she let four rows go and then stood. She took the satchel by the strap so the weight stayed on her body. She did not look back; nothing remained on the seat.

Inside the depot the sound ran wide: announcements, shoe noise, the clack of a sign board still running on old mechanics. She stayed at the edge of it and cut behind a column to keep one surface to her right. She checked the boards by looking past them. A regional train would leave in twenty minutes and another in forty. Avoiding the same faces, she chose the twenty.

The ticket window man slid a piece of paper under the glass that listed prices. She put down notes with an even hand and kept her eyes on the ledge. He took them and gave her a paper slip. The ink on the date line was light. Good. Old printer. No surname on the paper. Even better.

She nodded once and moved away.

On the platform she picked the third car instead of the first or last. That avoided men who liked easy exits in either direction. She sat on the aisle to control the bag and to stand without bumping knees. The window seat stayed empty. She swung the satchel in and set the strap under her ankle again. The train pulled out with a smooth motion that eased the knot above her knee. She closed her eyes for thirty seconds and then opened them. She would only get fragments; she did not trust them.

A man selling rolls moved down the aisle. She shook her head. She ate the rest of a packet she had started by the water in Istanbul and stopped at half. Hunger helped to a point; beyond that it slowed you. She found the line and stayed on the safe side of it. Thirst was the same. She took two sips from the bottle and put it away, avoiding a stop that would fix her when the carriage emptied to a platform and she did not move with them.

At a small border crossing the train slowed and stopped with a jerk. Doors opened. Officers walked the platform outside on a parallel line to the train. One climbed into the first car. She waited for the cadence of movement to carry the man down the carriage. A head appeared in the aisle. The man paused by her row. She had her passport in her hand, the cover visible, thumb on the edge of the page with the photo. He took it gently, looked at the photo, looked at her hair, which sat under the scarf, looked at her eyes, and did the math. He handed it back and walked on.

She exhaled once through her nose and put the passport away. She did not move until the train did. When it did, it did not do it quickly. She catalogued sounds until the engine pulled them into a new pattern and the frame of the carriage vibrated with movement again. Outside, the ground changed colour and then changed again. Fruit stalls appeared and then were gone. A small car ran parallel for a minute and fell back. She measured what London would know by now. Nothing, if the Service had not tied any internal pings to her immediate movement. Something, if the card declines in Istanbul had fed a list. Not much new, yet. The first hard

mark would be at the water. She counted back from that and set a hand position on her watch as the window after which the containment could begin to tighten in London.

At the next town the train thinned. She shifted to an open row that let her see more of the carriage. The move kept her away from a man who had started to sit forward every time she adjusted her scarf. It was a small tell, but small tells compounded. Not Service: the heel tap, the stare that kept hopping to the window. Bored could still turn into curious. Curious led to questions. Questions put her in a conversation she did not need.

She watched the door at the far end of the carriage open and close twice. A boy moved through with a tray of plastic cups and a pot of tea. She shook her head again. He smiled at her and moved on. When the trolley turned, she fixed back on the door.

Two hours later, the coach again. She chose it because it remained cash and because the name printed on a bus manifest did not carry the same weight across borders as a flight. The driver stacked bags under the coach with a method that suggested he had done this particular route for years. She kept her satchel on her body and did not offer to put it under. He did not argue. He looked at her scarf once and then looked past her to the next person in line. They ran by night. The coach heater worked for ten minutes and then turned off. The air got cold. This kept tempers down. The cold kept voices down. She drew her jacket tighter and adjusted the scarf once to make sure her hair stayed tucked. She counted ten breaths, opened her hand, and let her fingers rest on the satchel strap. The driver's radio made a noise and went quiet again. She let images pass without holding them: a silver head in a civic gallery shot; a man who did not stoop in a bookshop; a list of names on a programme where the fourth did not belong. The same names and timings matched. It had been building since she had sat at the terminal in London and watched the buffer tick down with no signal and had not moved beyond the ten seconds she allowed herself after the fixed window.

She checked the time zone at the next refuel stop by the cigarettes behind the counter. The prices told her enough. She adjusted her watch by the angle once and then stopped herself from doing it twice. Discipline kept signals small, on the wire and in her body.

Back on the road, she drilled her endgame down to one sentence that she would not say out loud. Not to steady herself and not to test her voice. One meeting in a room that did not belong to the Service. No microphones that she did not put there. No minutes. No windows that looked at the river. She saw the room under a cold bulb; the seal at the door and the split line in the frame; the narrow corridor that led to it. Neutral flags on a wall no one saluted. Appointments sat on the host list and were handled by their staff, which limited Service latitude on-site. She fixed the picture and left it there. She would not name it again. Names had their own weight.

She rehearsed the order of attack on the man who occupied the section head's chair. He would speak first if she let him and try to control the room, so she would not let him. She would begin with a time and a place and a posture that matched a description he had not expected anyone to hear. Then a date that narrowed his options. Then the money. Not the sum as proof, but the fact of the movement at an hour that matched an absence on a day he needed to disappear in one country and appear in another. He would know immediately how close to a public scandal that combination could take him. She would give him a beat before the final detail only he could recognize. He would know where it came from, and who was missing because of him.

She did not let herself see how he would look at the end of that room. She stopped short of it and set her head against the seat and opened her eyes wide enough to keep the lids from dragging. The coach rolled on.

They came to the Channel in rain that marked the road in long stripes. The bus pulled into a lane and stopped under a light that made faces pale. People stood and gathered their things as if customs would happen in the aisle. It would not. The driver called out the order and

people sat again. She tucked her scarf tighter and moved her satchel strap to sit properly under her ankle.

The crossing meant linked databases. She counted back from that to set how much time she had in London before the institution that used to own her movements set a plan to reclaim them. She fixed the rule: no improvisation now, not unless someone forced it. The rule would save her from the urge to re-check, to add, to wander. She could not afford to wander now.

The gangway shook under feet. On the ferry's main deck she stayed inside and kept the glass at her shoulder. She did not go out to the rail. That would make a silhouette. She used the reflections to see behind her and did not stare at them. The boat's lounge had chairs that reminded her of waiting areas in embassies that operated on a plan older than hers. She stayed standing.

She did not drink coffee. Coffee was a line to a card and a receipt. She took a paper cup of hot water and moved it from hand to hand to mask a tremor that wanted to start. She did not let it. She held the cup until the skin on her palm told her the temperature had dropped to a point where it would no longer give her cover. She left the cup on a table she would not pass again and walked the length of the room and back once to measure the movement of the people she would share the ramp with when the boat docked.

Nothing moved above the water that mattered to her. The wind did not carry a sound she needed to parse. She looked at the lights on the far side as fixed points to steady the calculation of distance and time and then set her eyes back inside the room and the doors that would open.

When they did open, she kept half a body behind a woman with a wheeled bag and let three men in fluorescent jackets move ahead to set the pace for the line. At the passport desk, she held her document so the face was visible and did not put her fingers across any line of text. The officer looked at her, looked down, looked at the system screen, and the

angle of his head told her what he was seeing. Green. He slid the passport under the lamp and across a reader; a short wait. She kept her breathing even. He handed the passport back and said nothing.

Salt air stayed in the scarf as the coach rolled off the ramp and into the road. Speed signs read mph. The coach slotted back into the road on the far side and ran north in a way that made distances look shorter than they were. She counted bridges by the pattern of lights on their spans. She did not look at her watch more than once.

When the coach rolled into the city, it did it with the noise of tyres on wet tarmac and brakes that had been used too much for one day. Traffic was thin; buses were spaced out. Cold terminal lights on cleaned surfaces. She let the first group go and then followed a man carrying a violin case. People looked at the case and not at faces. She kept her head down and let the scarf hide the shine of her hair in the flat light.

She did not look up into any camera bubbles. She used the metal of support beams and shop windows to see angles without moving her head. At one billboard a crowd slowed to watch a loop featuring a face they recognized. Small lenses at the top mapped expressions for ad metrics. She turned her head slightly at the right moment to present half-profile and the brim of her scarf. She kept the umbrella she had not yet bought in mind as the next step.

Outside, the air hit with London's particular damp. She did not feel it. She measured it: how it lay on concrete; how people shifted their coats against it; how it changed the way their shoes sounded. She passed two taxis, turned down an access road that ran parallel to the main, and took the first left toward a strip of shops that sold things you did not need unless the weather got in your way.

The man behind the counter glanced once at her as she put down small notes and lifted a plain umbrella from a barrel without price tags. He did not offer a receipt. She did not ask for one. She stepped out and opened the umbrella halfway to watch the line of the canopy break the

camera's expectation of a person's outline. She let the fabric sit there, then opened it fully and adjusted her pace to the people carrying theirs in the same way.

She did not go home. The line down her hall would have been empty for a second and then it would have filled with men who would call her by her first name and ask where she had been. They would be kind about it. They would ask if she had slept. Their faces would be arranged in the way men arrange their faces when they have to give bad news and want to look like they do not like it. She would not give them that room. Not now.

The hostel took cash. The woman at the desk put a key on the counter attached to a metal fob that made pocketing it less likely. There was a sign by the kettle that said the mugs were for registered guests. She put the key in her pocket and did not drink anything. She walked up a flight of stairs that ended at a door with paint that flaked when you touched it. She did not touch it. She let herself into a room with three bunks, four lockers, and a smell of wet fabric that never left spaces like this. She set the key on the edge of a locker to weigh it for a second. Then she put it back in her pocket. She left the room without sitting down on anything.

Back on the street she let the umbrella angle to keep the cameras looking at a shape that did not have a face. She counted the number of billboard frames that had been replaced with digital screens since she had last paid attention to such things. She had learned to see nets after living inside one long enough. She moved in a spiral that put cameras on the far side of glass, not the near, and set her head so that the brim blocked the lenses when she passed under them.

She made a non-time-labeled decision and then gave it time: forty-eight hours. Two processes would cross. Border hits would move through systems and Security would label her inbound. That would push a board around a table where someone would speak her name and not be able to keep impatience out of his voice. He would ask where she had gone in Istanbul. He would say she had no authority to do what she had done. He would tell them to find her. She would be found if she did not

move as if the finders had already begun.

So: two days. Day one to confirm the room she intended to use would be open for her. Day two to put the man she needed in it and show him why he had to leave the building he thought belonged to him. She ran the calculation without running. It lived in her shoulders and her stomach and the way she placed her feet on the wet pavement.

She needed to touch machines that did not remember her. She marked in her head the public places that still had banks of terminals you could reach without a username: a library on a side street where a guard glanced at passes he did not enforce; a community centre with a back door that opened onto a path no one watched; two hotel business corners with machines for guests that no one guarded because no one used them at night. She would never use them for anything that had to remain. But she could use them to confirm a room could be available when she needed it.

She turned off onto a street that ran toward the river and back again. She did not go to the river. The lights by the water were too clean for the kind of movement she needed now. She cut across to a road where the shop signs were small and tilted the umbrella to show a blank face to the camera that hung on a pole near the corner.

Police moved in twos on the main road. Their heads turned with a cadence she recognized from across cities and years. She stepped into a doorway until their line of movement took them past a point where she knew they would not look back. She did not hold her breath, nor let her lungs decide the tempo for her.

A bus hissed as it braked at a stop. People got on and off without speaking. She did not join them, walked parallel, and kept one lane of cars between herself and the bus. Better to stay outside; vehicle cameras could cross-link her face with street captures. Systems built maps with that kind of data now. The companies selling screens liked to say it was anonymous. She knew better.

She reached the edge of Pimlico and made a small turn that took her into a street that smelled of washing powder and fried food. The smell changed the way she remembered the street. It did not belong to her anymore. That made it easier to move inside it as nobody in particular. She used that and did not name it.

The umbrella worked. She watched her outline blur in the corner of a shop window and then re-form. She let herself breathe through her nose for a count of four and then pushed a longer breath out through her mouth. She moved without noise.

Back near the hostel, she did not go in, setting her shoulder to a wall where the rain made a narrow clean strip and standing long enough to confirm that no one had chosen to wait for her. She stepped off the wall and walked again. Forty-eight hours. She would hold to that as she had held to watch marks in empty rooms when she had waited for Nightingale to speak by not speaking. The signal was in the noise. She had learned that in this city.

She sat in a corner that did not have a camera pointed at it and set the watch face under the light of a vending machine that took coins without returning anything. She turned the crown to move the hands forward to a mark she would hold herself to. Two days. Not three. Not two and an hour. Two and the room would be open and the man would have to come and he would have to accept what she would show him or he would have to make a mistake she could use.

Courts would not touch this. She did not plan for a trial. She put it into a room plan where a man would have to choose between his title and the part of himself that could still count consequences. She would not give him a story to tell that made him into a man who had sacrificed himself for the good of the Service. She would give him a ledger that showed the entries he could not erase. Numbers and dates and places and a final detail only he could recognize.

She set out the lever points in her mind because she did not intend to write them down where anyone could pick them up off a table. First: a posture described by a woman who had watched men buy books their hands did not want to touch. He had not bent to hear. He had waited for others to raise their voices. Second: a gap in an itinerary that would look like travel to anyone who had to file expenses, but did not carry the tags that would put him in that city. Third: the money, measured and moved across a jurisdiction that men used when they wanted a thing to vanish. The amount mattered. Not for court. For the line it drew between what he could be paid to do and what he had done. Fourth: a final detail only he could recognize.

She would deliver those four pieces in an order that left him no way to hold all of them at once without missing a breath. She would watch for that break. She would use that moment. Not action-movie tricks. Not the kind of thing young men liked to talk about in pubs when they said they had been trained for this.

She needed a room, his attention, and proof that she could reach across to him without him pulling her into the building that had cut her out of its systems. The room existed. It was not hers, but the corridor and the sound seal and the cold light were there for people who needed a neutral space where no one could get angry without drawing attention. His attention she would take by sending a small thing only he would recognize as real. Not a threat. A small marker that a man like him could not ignore because ignoring it would make him look like he did not care about the thing he had spent his life pretending to care about.

She looked at her hands. They were steady. She wanted them to remain that way. She needed one more thing: the one circuit that would fire if she stopped moving. At a mailbox service, she lodged two pre-addressed envelopes on delayed dispatch: unless canceled in person before 12:00 on day two, they would be posted. No tracking; no receipt. Each held a short, factual summary of the four points with dates and places. One went to a national newsroom tip desk; the other to a

parliamentary committee clerk. If they went into the post, the material would move and she would not be able to pull it back. That would limit what could happen inside.

Eliot had taken a risk that would hurt if exposed. She had asked him to do a thing he could not explain if someone asked him the right question in the wrong room. She had promised herself she would not ask him again. That promise held. She would protect him by never speaking his name in a place where names were recorded. She would protect him by keeping her mouth closed even if someone made her want to open it by making other parts of her hurt. That was a decision she could make in a corridor with no windows. It was easy to make it there. It was harder on a wet London street at midnight when her stomach reminded her that she had spent two days treating food as if it were a favour. Miss the cancel window and the letters would go; the leak would happen without her.

She put her hand inside her jacket and pressed her fingers to the folded page that said two sentences in pencil written so cleanly that the graphite had shone once under a light she could no longer see, her knuckle touching the small box cutter in the inner pocket. 'Compromise is London.' 'Trust no one.' It set her choices. She kept it in the pocket where a hand could not pull it out without pulling her jacket off her shoulders. She breathed around it.

She spoke softly without moving her lips. Trust the tradecraft. Keep your head down. The phrases came and sat in her throat. She pushed them down and left them there. She did not need to say them to use them.

Rain began again. She looked up once to see how thick it was and then angled the umbrella. The streetlight showed dense rain. The umbrella did the job it had been bought for and made her something the cameras would have to work harder to define. She stepped off the curb into the shallow water and did not change her stride when her shoe took it in. The cold moved up her foot and stopped at the laces. She matched the pace of the street. She kept the plan present.

Two days. She set the first appointments in her head by moving her watch hand to the mark and back. The room would be ready. The corridor would be quiet. The flags would hang where they always did. He would walk into a space he had not expected to enter for this purpose. He would realize he had run out of time to make this someone else's problem. She would make sure he had only one exit that anyone could live with. He would take it.

She did not practice her sentences. Practicing was for people who thought language could move faster than a man's fear. She knew better. She set her feet on the wet pavement where the line of lamplight ended and walked forward. Light shifted every few steps and she adjusted. She held the plan tight.

She turned the corner into heavier rain. She tipped the umbrella forward and held her pace.

Chapter 10

The Shape of the Betrayal

She checked the clock behind the librarian's desk and matched the minute hand to her own. The branch opened on the hour. She joined three people waiting under the overhang and kept the umbrella tipped forward to blur her outline for the door camera. Her ankle took the step without pain. The knee twinged once and then settled.

Inside, the floor was clean and the terminal bank along the wall carried small inventory labels. Two screens had 'Out of Order' taped to the corner. She paid cash for a day pass that no one would check and took a terminal that let her see the entrance and the help desk without turning her head. She set the watch hand to a seven-minute mark and placed it by the keyboard, face half under her sleeve.

Seconds, not minutes, per query. No logins. No printing. One query per entity. Power-cycle if the machine hesitated. Leave at the first sign of attention.

She began with public material that did not name him. Panel listings, conference programmes, civic gallery calendars. She kept the phrasing casual as she typed, never using a string she had used before, never repeating a surname without an initial. Ankara two days prior. London three days after. She wrote the bracket on the scrap of paper by her wrist and then drew a line between. The gap included the day of the substitution at the bookshop. She had the descriptor from Leyla: did not stoop to hear; waited for others to speak up. This told her two things. The man was used to deference. The man was wrong for field work.

She folded the scrap in half and slid it under the watch.

She looked for the small things he would have fed to someone to prove he had a line worth listening to. Not the things that would draw attention. A small shipping altercation that made a minister look efficient. A travel advisory that didn't go beyond a paragraph. A port authority memo about a routine inspection that later produced photographs in a friendly newspaper. None of it carried his name. He would never write it down in a way that would survive. But the timing was a signature. The early pieces were close in time to the confirmed presence of genuine material from Nightingale: the sort of material that never went to press. She knew the cycles because she had lived them for seven years.

She cleared the mark and moved her hands from the keyboard. She sat without moving for a count of ten and listened for anything out of pattern. A printer somewhere near the desk ran a job. The air vents made a low sound. A boy laughed once near the children's section and was quiet again. No one had stopped at her back.

After closing the window, she opened a different search page. The cursor lagged once; she restarted the session and kept to the window. Different words for the same pattern: press office archive, reorder by date, second page of results, one click only. She took care not to build a list that would be flagged by language. Her queries never said trade. They never said payment. They never put a proper noun next to a word that meant betrayal. Meaning was in the gaps.

He had used Nightingale's clean product to place his own small bets. A warning about a test that would later be cancelled for a reason that looked like safety. A discrete note to a liaison officer abroad about a potential threat that did not materialise in a way anyone outside the room would remember. The kind of thing that built credit at a rate no audit captured. The pattern under those bets showed a second cadence: money. Not visible. Not named. But the picture she carried from Istanbul, one packet, one timestamp, a route type, an amount, fit into the empty lane between Ankara and London. No origin and no final destination beyond the offshore point. That was by design.

She ended the session and wiped the keys with a tissue taken from the desk. She tore the tissue and dropped the pieces into a bin by the door without stopping, then crossed the street under the umbrella to catch a bus that would carry her three stops. For one stop she stood, then sat for the next, and got off before the map said she should. She chose another library because it stood on a side street with a guard who glanced at passes but did not enforce them.

At the second branch the terminal keys felt older and the screen flickered at the edge. She kept it to five minutes. She built a model on the scrap: early seed items with dates and pointing marks, then later items that were bigger and further apart. He had not needed to walk away with everything to make money. He had needed to make sure the things he moved would not be missed by the people he sat with. That meant using product that did not belong in rooms he would not enter. Nightingale's work had been perfect for this. It was clean. It had reach. It could not be shared widely without someone asking how it had arrived. He had traded around it, using its reputation to bank credit with contacts abroad while staying clean in London.

The librarian told a man to keep his voice down. The door stayed in the corner of her eye. A delivery person came and went. No one looked at her twice. She cut the session at four minutes and thirty seconds and stood, letting the chair move back with no sound. She folded the scrap and put it in the satchel, then changed terminals along the same wall before someone could choose to sit where she had been.

The third branch had a clerk who took cash without looking at faces. She thanked him and he did not respond. She opened the search page and typed a line: foreign press notices filtered by the date of a port altercation she had seen in the first branch. The story was small. The photographs showed uniformed men in raincoats. A caption named a deputy minister. She made a note: deputy credited; date aligns with minor tip two cycles after a confirmed Nightingale hold. She did not name the hold. Instead, she wrote only 'H2' in a small circle. The paper was small enough to fold

twice and fit next to the warning page in her jacket.

She kept going. Ministerial diaries. A flight manifest printed in a foreign language that recorded a last-minute seat change from a block held for officials to a person who did not use the seat. A cultural centre event where three people were named and one person showed up in a photograph standing to the side and speaking to someone whose face was outside the frame. Ankara had not been his theatre. He had been there anyway. The next photograph on the next page showed him in London three days later, fourth-listed on the programme but placed at the centre of the shot for the caption. The gap between those images matched the line she had drawn between the substitution and the money.

She sat back and let her shoulders rest. The seat creaked once. Thirty seconds left on the window before she wanted to cut the session. She wrote one more word on the scrap and then stood. Pattern held.

Outside, the rain marked the pavement in small dark spots that merged. People moved in lines that only shifted at corners. She matched their pace, umbrella keeping cameras from taking her face from above. The ankle settled into a rhythm that did not hurt. The knee itching under the trousers reminded her of the wall she had taken in Fatih. She did not look for the scar. She kept moving.

Across the rest of the morning and early afternoon, she added branches. She never returned to a place. The path varied to force any watcher to choose between losing her or showing themselves. No one showed. She kept each session under seven minutes. She searched for nothing that would be difficult to explain if someone wrote down her query terms, and she wrote down nothing that would incriminate a person who had taken a risk for her. Eliot's name did not touch a surface.

The pattern stabilised at mid-afternoon. Early trades: small, apparently costless. Later trades: fewer, larger, placed to create favour in a room that did not put receipts on the table. It matched months between plays where there were weeks, and a man who had learned when to stop

talking. The last cycle broke the curve. Nightingale had signalled 'No change handler' and then refused to deliver a confirmation. The secondary marker had remained dark. The shop shelves had not moved. The brick had not shifted. Someone had sent the wrong man to check the drop and then felt confident enough to do it without moving the back shelves, because it was safer to appear not to care than to put fingers on dust and leave a mark. Nightingale would have seen the substitution. That made him a liability to the only person inside London who had a reason to fear his silence. The same man who had used Nightingale's product to salt his own trades would need to quiet him. Not by force. Not if he could avoid it. By closing a door and making an absence look like an enemy's work.

She took the small note from her pocket and wrote the phrases that mattered. No full sentences. Cues she would not need to explain to herself. 'No change handler.' 'Book path only.' 'Keep.' She added the time anchors she would use in a room with cold light and a sealed door: the placement of the Ankara and London images, the offshore route type string that sat two lines above the timestamp in the packet, and the amount two lines below that lived at a size that would not trigger a tripwire. She added a final line that only he would recognise once spoken, pulled from a piece of handling trivia that had never been written down because writing it down would have been a breach of her own rules. It would not name Nightingale. It would name the way the work had been done, and it would be enough.

She thought about printing. The thought touched the edge of her mind and then fell away. She would print nothing. The plan would live in her head and on the small note she could destroy with one hand if anyone reached for her. She checked the umbrella angle and crossed a road as the bus chimes sounded out of time with her count.

By the time the lights at the next crossing came to green, she had finished the shape of his scheme. He had traded for years. He had covered those trades by draping them in the legitimacy that Nightingale's

product provided. He had used the procedures of the Service to protect himself. Now those same procedures would mobilise to stop her from cutting him out. If she made it public, the damage would spread past one man. The Service would harden against the story and people who had done nothing wrong would lose their work. There was no ledger for that cost either.

She stopped under a concrete lip and let a group of schoolchildren pass with bags that knocked against their legs. Water hit the edge and fell. She looked at the small note in her hand and then put it back in her inner pocket with the warning page. Blade, not detonator. Her thumb pressed the folded edge once.

She kept moving.

She found a public terminal in a community space that would let her send a message without a login. The machine took coins for ten minutes and did not ask for a name. She typed one line in a generic tip field. It said: 'Historic anomalies in handler assignments linked to internal travel gaps; review past Istanbul schedules; nothing to do with locals.' It did not have names. It did not have dates. It did not have a return address. It would read as a crank's note, but the combination of words would trigger an instinct in a certain kind of reader.

She sent it and then used the rest of the time to open a public news site and read three unrelated stories about road budgets. When the meter hit zero, the screen went to a menu, then returned to the login page. She stood, adjusted her scarf, and left.

Traffic on the bridge ran slow; rain blew under the umbrella. The air off the river carried diesel. She walked to a corner that had a sightline to the main doors of Vauxhall Cross without putting herself under the fixed camera at the entrance. A paper cup of tea from a kiosk stayed in her

hand; she did not drink it. Umbrella up, she blocked a line from a camera mounted on a pole. She stood by a bus stop that would let her move as soon as she chose, and she watched.

Visitor badges came with escorts. That was a rule you could see without going inside. The escorts wore lanyards with a colour she recognised from years of going in and out. There were more of them moving out to collect people, the pairs keeping a steady office pace. She counted the pairs for ten minutes. Brakes hissed at the kerb. The number rose, then held steady. An escort pair paused under a camera to adjust comms; she shifted behind the bus-stop pole until a passing bus broke the line. A pair returned with a woman who carried a folder that had no writing on it. Her lanyard was white with a band of blue. Wellness unit used that band inside certain floors. The woman went back in after giving her name to the desk without raising her voice. A man from a nearby stall called out that he would be closing early, and a colleague walking past said, 'Wellness are on it. Asked after her at the bay. Desk is empty and you can see right through.' The colleague laughed in a way that signalled discomfort rather than humour and kept walking.

No one from the building crossed to speak to police. There were no cars near the kerb with lights that would give off a certain strobe. No liaison office people met anyone at the corner to go for a walk. Movement stayed inside.

She checked the angle of her watch and gave herself two more minutes. Nothing changed in those minutes that would help her. She dropped the tea in a bin and crossed the road when the light changed. She did not look back.

After the bridge, a terminal asked for a login; she walked past. The next one cost coins for time. She bought ten minutes and spent one minute clearing the browser cache the way she preferred. The tip site stayed closed. She looked up a bus schedule that did not exist and then ended the session before the meter ran out. Three quick turns kept anyone who might have been behind her from getting a straight line, and

she boarded a bus without checking the route. She got off after three stops and went down a side street that smelled of frying.

She went back over what she had seen and what she had heard. Wellness on the floor where her desk used to be. Escorts moving more than usual. No outward moves. No calls to anyone who would want to know about Istanbul. Preserve the institution. Contain the noise. Containment under wellness protocol.

It confirmed what she had known in the abstract and needed to see in motion. No official path would survive contact. If she tried to run this through the building she had worked in, it would turn her into the problem that needed to be solved. Croft would be a secondary consideration until the story went to print. Then the story would be contained. He would survive it and she would not.

She ended the test. She closed down the idea of an ally from inside with a single careful turn of her head and sent it away. There were no allies. There was a plan. She had the room she would use and the line that would open it.

She slipped between two shops and waited long enough to count to thirty. When no one turned into the gap, she moved on.

She bought a bowl of soup in a café that did not take cards and carried it to a table that let her sit with her back to a wall. She checked her watch once and set it to the cancel time for the letters she had lodged at the mailbox service. Two marks: the newsroom and the clerk. Two envelopes across the counter. The metal fob of the hostel key sat heavy in her pocket; she had not used the bed. She ate half the bread with the soup and folded the rest into a napkin she could take without raising eyes.

She set the evidentiary picture out in her head and spoke none of it. The offshore confirmation was real and inadmissible. The decoding of the

timing channel had lived off-system and would never survive a chain-of-custody argument. The Istanbul observation that gave her the posture description came from a civilian under a passive screen who had done nothing more than describe a man buying a book he did not want. It would not make a charge. It would make an argument a man could not answer without opening the room to air he did not want to breathe.

Court would die on the first day. The line of questioning was obvious; the first witness positioned to attack her. Stability would be raised without saying the word. The leave order, the badge in the barcoded envelope, the escort-only status, the reset devices. They would say she was grieving and they would be careful, and the careful tone would do more damage than any accusation.

So the room. Neutral ground. A corridor with clean paint and a seal line around a door that put a stop to sound. A table with two chairs. Flags against a wall no one saluted. Appointments handled by host staff who took names and then took the steps they always took.

She set her finger on the folded note with the scalpel phrases. She moved her hand away from it and took another spoon of soup. She chose the order again. Lead with time and place and posture. Make him hear the shop in Istanbul and the way the woman had described him without knowing what she was seeing. Then the gap in his itinerary that sat between Ankara and London. Then the money. Not to say the amount. To say the movement and the absence that framed it. She would give him time to understand that this was a room he could not control by using old words. She would show him the one detail that only he would know could not have come from anyone else. He would know where that came from. He would know who had trusted her with it. He would understand there was no 'we' in what he had done.

She reviewed the fail-safe and left it as it was. Her hand moved toward her pocket and then stopped. Two were enough. A newsroom that would not swallow a story whole, and a clerk who answered to a committee that logged arrivals and did not lose envelopes by accident.

More would be more risk for someone she could not protect.

She wiped the spoon with the bread and ate the last mouthful. She pushed the bowl to the middle of the table and stood. She took the folded note and put it with the warning page and the box cutter in the inner pocket. She paid in small notes and left without waiting for change. She did not look back into the café window.

The hostel was a building she had not planned to sleep in. She took the stairs and used a bend in the corridor where the wall ran out just before the corner. She leaned against the plaster for a count of eight and then straightened. The smell of wet fabric stayed where it always stayed in places like this. She went back down and into the street.

She walked the route that would put her in front of the building with the corridor and the flags the next day. She did not go in. She carried the picture of the room in her head and did not bring the location name into thought.

At a small shop she bought a bottle of water and two packets of nuts. She moved into the shelter of a doorway and ate half a packet. She ran the cancel time again and pulled the sleeve down over her wrist. She kept her hand still for five minutes.

She thought the opening line in her head once without saying it. A fragment only two people could parse, lifted from an unwritten handling tic. Quiet enough to still his hands.

Trust the tradecraft. Keep your head down.

She walked.

The watch hand met the mark on her wrist. A pipe clicked once in the wall.

She lay on a mattress that was not hers in a room she had paid for and had not planned to use. She set a mental alarm. Two hours. She ate the rest of the nuts and drank water and closed her eyes. Her ankle spoke once when she lay on her side and then fell quiet. The knee gave a thin itch. She did not scratch it.

She practised not speaking. In the room the next day, he would try to fill silence. He would use the tone of a man who had earned respect and expected it. He would tell her that she was putting the institution at risk with her lack of restraint. He would tell her that she could be helped if she stopped now. He would look for the part of her that grew up believing in rooms like the ones he sat in. He would test it. He would try disdain and then he would try concern. He would try force last, because force cost him more than it cost her. She would stay seated unless he stood. The table fixed the level of control. She knew it and would use it.

She set the counter-moves in an order that had worked before when men had read the situation wrong. Denial: answer with a detail placed where he could not see it coming. Disdain: answer with a date that had no public face. Institutional threat: answer with the movement of money across a stop designed to hide movement. She did not call it by name. In her head, it was a place designed to hide movement. That phrase would not go aloud either. Only the lines she had written on the folded slip.

She drew breath on a four-count, held for four, let out for four, held for four, twice. Not more. More would tip her toward sleep she did not control.

It's not personal. It never is.

It was personal. But the words did their job. They separated the part of her that wanted to hit him from the part that would do what needed to be done. She needed that separation.

She closed her eyes and kept them closed. The sound in the hall stayed low. A door opened and closed. A foot on a stair sounded near and then far. She slept.

When she woke, the room was colder. She sat up and checked the watch. She had slept one hour and fifty minutes. She took ten minutes to let the cold work through her nerves and clear the heaviness behind her eyes. She stood and rolled her ankle once to make sure it was still holding. It held.

She took the folded note from the inner pocket and read the cues she had written without opening it fully. She touched the warning page behind it. 'Compromise is London.' 'Trust no one.' The paper felt thinner than it had the day she had torn it out of the notebook. She returned both pages and let her hand rest on the inside of the jacket where the box cutter sat. The blade was retracted. The handle felt rough under her fingers. It was not a weapon she would use unless she had to. It was a thing that kept her hand from shaking.

She left the building without meeting anyone's eyes and took the stairs down to the street. The light was pale; edges were clear without glare. She opened the umbrella enough to hide the top half of her face from the nearest camera. She kept her arm still for the next five minutes. She did not need to. The time was set and she would not change it.

She moved toward the part of the city where corridors stayed quiet and doors had seals pressed into their frames. She stayed on the side of the road where the faces on the poles were smaller. She waited at a crossing she could have walked because the red figure marked her present without exposing intent.

Day one was gone. Day two had begun. The work continued. She had until noon to cancel.

Chapter 11

Setting the Board

At the counter, she paid in coins. The shop was the kind that sold everything in plastic: chargers in thin blister packs, adapters that wobbled in sockets, phones arranged by price rather than function. The man behind the counter watched a small screen propped against a jar of sweets and did not look up when she pointed at a cheap handset and a sealed SIM pack. She placed cash on the counter, accepted the items, and declined the offer of a receipt.

Outside, the rain had slowed to a mist that stuck to fabric. Under the bus shelter's new ad panel, the small lenses were bright, so she angled the umbrella to give them the edge of black nylon and not her face. She opened the handset, slid in the card, and snapped the back until it clicked. The plastic felt thin. She held the button until the screen lit and then went dim. No brand showed, only a blue bar and then a number. She entered a series of digits from memory and watched the bars at the top of the screen find a network.

Near the bus line, she didn't join the queue. Three people waited. One carried a white bag with a takeaway box inside; one scrolled on a phone with a cracked screen; one glanced at the clock above the corner shop. Umbrella angled, she hid her mouth. The handset's small speaker gave a hiss as the line rang out. It cut to a recorded voice after two rings. The voice gave a standard message, no names. She waited until the tone.

At the tone, she spoke twelve words. The first two were the line that belonged to Nightingale and to one listener in London. Not written. Not used in any record. She said them the way they had been said in the first year when a method had been tested and then never spoken again. A

small corridor in a safe flat, a location that no longer existed, and two words to say: I'm here. She did not think the words. She formed them and kept everything else out of her voice.

After that, the terms and the place followed: the Swedish Embassy, quiet room near the inner corridor where the flags stood. No names. She set the time by the hand of a watch, not numerals. Two hands crossing at a point she could show with her fingers. She kept it inside a narrow window because that was the signal as well. She did not add threats. The line had already carried one.

When the call ended, she didn't listen for the echo of her own voice on the recorded line. The screen showed call ended and then the network bars again. She held the button until the screen went black. She popped the back off with a thumbnail, took out the battery and the SIM, and wrapped the card in the tissue the shop had used to pad the box. At the corner, the tissue fell through a drain grate. The battery sat in her palm for two steps and then dropped into a bin full of wet coffee grounds. The handset went in next, slid under a paper cup, and disappeared under a drip from the shelter roof. She wiped her fingers on a napkin from her pocket and kept moving.

A bus pulled in. She did not board. She crossed behind it when the doors closed, matching her pace to a woman with a red scarf. She kept the low umbrella angle to keep her face out of the camera cones at the corner and the billboard. Six steps between poles. No glance back.

On the far side of the river, she picked a line where the pavement was even. A courier bike went past without lights. In the locksmith's window she watched reflections: herself as a shape, her hand steady, the umbrella a dark circle. No one followed. Two men stood at a doorway with cigarettes. They looked toward the road, not down the footpath.

At a crossing she could have run if she needed to, she stopped when the red figure showed. She took the analogue watch from under her sleeve with two fingers and turned the crown three clicks to bring the minute

hand forward. She had left it fixed the night before. She moved it anyway. She set it to the mark she had chosen when she drew the route in her head. The cancel window now sat where the room slot would end. If the meeting dragged out past it, the letters would go. If she had to move early, they would go. This advance narrowed only her own cancellation margin; the mailbox service's cutoff stayed fixed at 12:00 on day two. The earlier mark turned the fail-safe from a plan into a near certainty. She closed her hand on the watch, pushed the crown in, and covered it with her sleeve.

Route in mind, she walked: past the shops that sold umbrellas and pencil skirts, past the small bakery that stacked bread behind a plastic curtain, past a gate with a security guard whose stance kept weight on the edges of his feet. A camera cone on the bend got a change of side; the next at the billboard got the same angle. She placed herself inside a line of strangers. The entrance came into her peripheral vision. A flag on a pole hung wet and still.

At the end of the street, she tested the ankle. The muscle held. The knee itched then settled. A pair of office workers passed. She walked on.

By the time she stepped inside, the air was colder. The guard at the desk looked at the umbrella and pointed to a stand. She placed it in the rack with other umbrellas and let droplets run to the tray provided, then took a small paper towel to dry her hands. The guard asked if she had an appointment. She said she had a consular question and kept her voice level, neither urgent nor uncertain. The guard nodded toward the interior desk.

The floor had been cleaned recently. A fresh cleaner sat under the usual carpet smell. At the desk, a woman raised her head, the kind of look that measured whether this was going to take time. The mat on the counter held a calendar under plastic; a pen on a chain sat beside a slot for cards. A wall clock on the far pillar ran two minutes ahead by her measure. She did not correct for it. She would use her hand.

Ava said she needed advice on witnessing a document and asked if there was a quiet place they used for that. She used the word discreet once. No names. No agency words. "We usually book those," the woman said. "If there's a fifteen-minute slot, I'll take it," Ava said.

The woman looked to her left at a door and then back at Ava. She asked if it was urgent today. Ava said it would take fifteen minutes at most. She did not add that there would be a second person. She did not say why. The woman asked Ava to wait while she checked the room list and slid a clipboard for the visitor log across the counter; Ava signed with initials.

Ava did not turn her head, but she catalogued what the desk gave her for free: a corridor beyond the desk, a bend after four doors, a second corridor that ran parallel if the plan on the wall was honest. A fire exit sign lit in green. A small sign with the word quiet translated twice, etched in the pane near a door at the bend, no coat of arms. Two flags at the end of the first corridor with poles that caught ceiling light and left a pale stripe on the polished base.

The woman returned and said the small room was free for a slot. She asked if Ava would like it now. Ava said yes. The woman stood, used a four-digit code at a keypad on the inner door, and led her down the corridor at a measured pace. Two people passed the other way; one carried files, the other a laptop under an arm. No one looked twice.

The room the woman opened was small. A table with a flat edge on one side and a curve on the other. Two chairs with low backs. A seal around the door pressed into a slot when it shut. The light was bright but cool, from a strip fixture that did not hum. A small glass pane beside the door showed a slice of corridor and a sliver of wall.

"We can give you twenty minutes," the woman said. "Please keep the door closed. If you need anything, use the button and someone will come." She pointed to a small button near the edge of the table.

"Thank you," Ava said. Her hands stayed in sight and her voice ordinary.

The woman left. The door engaged. The seal sat in the groove. Ava stood where she could see the hinges. Three, equal spacing. The screws were not marked. She tracked the frame back to the hinge edge and placed a fingertip against the seal to feel the firmness. It held. She listened and heard a faint moving of air through the building, not in the room. She looked up. No visible microphone or camera in the corners. It did not mean there was none. She assumed some observation and behaved as if there were. She had chosen the room because the cost of moving here was high, and because witnesses outside the door would be neutral and not his.

She moved one chair so it faced the door and the small pane. She set the chair with a leg two hand-widths from the table edge and then sat. Her knees cleared the table, and the cross-body satchel strap lay across her lap. The satchel went under her feet and her foot went through the loop so the strap kept contact with her ankle. The box cutter sat in her inner pocket with the blade retracted. She kept both hands on the table, palms down.

From her inner pocket she took the folded slip she had built in the library and added to in cafés. No sentences, only cues. She did not open it far enough for the pane to show it. The first three marks got a brief look, then the paper went back behind the torn page with two lines taken from the negative space. The edge of each paper under her fingertips steadied her breathing. She did not take the watch off; she slid the sleeve back and checked the angle once. The mark she had set earlier sat where the hand would be when twenty minutes had passed.

First beat: posture, time, place. Her left forefinger would rest on the watch glass. She would set the minute and put him at the counter in a small shop, the woman watching his posture at the counter, and the gap between Ankara and London that held the rest.

Second beat: money. The route type two lines above the timestamp, the time in the middle, the amount two lines below, and the offshore point with no origin and no destination. She would give the path, not the sum. Her right hand would stay still on the table's edge.

Third beat: the two-word line. She would leave it last. No names. Voice level. A single line placed where he could not ignore it.

She slowed her breath to a count: in, hold, out, hold, twice. Eyes open. The image she allowed was a chair in a flat seven years earlier where Nightingale had sat twice and looked at a wall while she listened. Not his face. The way he paced a sentence, the way he kept silence. That silence could sit in the room if it kept her still.

This would not bring Nightingale back. If they offered the archive, she would take it; close to the files was close enough to watch. Meetings ended; outcomes were logged; rooms emptied. The purpose here was to stop the next man in a suit from deciding a foreign city gave him permission to do it again. She would do that without giving anyone watching an excuse to turn the hosts into actors.

She thought about outcomes without changing her face. There were two worth weight. Silence: no one came, the slot expired, and the letters went. Force: two people from Security came with a tone of concern and a hand ready for a quiet arm. They would ask her to come with them to a room with a carpet. In both cases the letters went. Attendance was not safety. Attendance meant he believed he could manage this in a small space and then walk out and manage it again in a different room tomorrow. Attendance was value. If he came, he believed the room was his. She would take it back detail by detail.

She had allowed for a substitution. If he sent someone else, she would deliver the first line anyway. If that someone else had been briefed, that person would understand and carry it back correctly. If they had not been briefed, they would repeat it badly and learn that she had more than they wanted her to have. Either way, the room did work for her as long as she

did not leave a mark that could be spun into a threat the hosts would have to respond to with handcuffs and a phone call.

She checked the seat. It did not wobble. A faint mark on the floor showed where the chair had been set before. She had moved it a hand-width. It mattered because people watched chairs when they were nervous. He would look for signs of a setup. She had arranged one and then reduced it to the minimum.

Her left hand slid to the edge of the table and found the smooth varnish with the edge of a fingernail. No nicks that would catch skin. Fingers went flat again. The box cutter had a small rough patch near the slide. She touched that with her knuckle through the cloth. It steadied the small muscles at the back of her hand. The pressure fixed the trembling that wanted to start in her forearm.

The minute hand moved without sound. She kept the angle in her head and did not look again. Cooler air sat against the skin of her wrist where the sleeve had been pulled back. The cuff came down.

Outside the door, a soft movement. Not the seal. The weight of a step on carpet that had been fitted well. Then a second. Not a pause that waited for performance. A pace that belonged to someone who did not hurry. She kept still. She did not look at the pane. The handle stayed in her peripheral vision. Her tongue touched the edge of a back tooth. The taste was metallic and familiar.

The handle turned once. The door did not open. The seal held a second and then released when the latch followed through. She did not move. Both hands stayed in place. Her shoulders held level. Her eyes shifted a fraction to catch the line of the hinge and the first part of the door's swing when it began.

She had called because it was the only way to force a choice without giving the Service control over the ground. She had not called anyone in a week who could be traced to her. She had not called anyone in a week at all. The sound of the cheap speaker on the disposable handset had been enough to bring back a room with a row of green login prompts that hissed because the speakers were never turned all the way down. It had been enough to bring back the night when she had waited twenty minutes and then ten seconds more. She had made herself wait those ten seconds then because it was a rule she had put on herself for days when the rules were not enough to keep a person alive. She did not have to wait now. Others would.

Once, in a different city, a senior man had stepped into a room late and the people in it had shifted for him. They stepped away from doors. They stopped mid-sentence. They added sentences to be near his shoulder in a photograph. The man in this city would expect the same. He would expect to stand, speak, and leave. She had set this room so he would sit. She had set this room so he would have to reach to find control and she would be allowed to take it from him in pieces.

She thought of the day before and the way the Service building had looked across the road. Escorts moved to collect people in pairs. A woman with a white lanyard with blue asked after her at the bay and then walked on when told the desk was empty. From across the road, she watched the pattern increase and then hold. No lights at the kerb. No car pulled up with someone in a suit taking quick steps to have a quiet word. Choices were inward.

The hostel gave her one hundred and ten minutes of sleep. She woke fast and looked at the slip without opening it enough to read. Her thumb found the line that had cost a man his silence and then let it go. The blade stayed closed. It steadied her hand.

She had done the route to the mailbox service in her head and then again with her feet just after she had set the mark on her watch. Crossings counted; the distance between curb and counter measured. Her pace had

been fast without a run. The person behind the counter had not changed between one hour and the next. If she had to cancel, she would have to be there in person. There was no call that mattered. She knew that when she set the letters. She knew that when she decided to leave them. Advancing the watch had only shortened her own margin. The cutoff at the mailbox stayed fixed at 12:00 on day two.

Meetings in the building tended to end without statements. Notes were filed; calendars shifted; rooms were reassigned. A senior could leave one room and walk into the next. That pattern did not move for the outside.

She had spent a week teaching herself to hear the difference between noise and signal again without the building's machines. The hiss in old speakers, the click of a relay in a power supply, the way rain sounded on glass in the small hours, all of it went back on the map. Now, in this room, the only sound that mattered was the door. If the door did not open, she would walk at the mark. If the door opened and it was not the man she wanted, she would sit the same way and use the same words. If the door opened and it was him, he would reach for authority and she would take it one detail at a time.

The door opened. The man on the other side carried himself the way she had expected. That was all she allowed herself to see in that first second. The rest was the work.

She did not stand. She did not offer a hand. Air moved around the person entering; her posture did not change. The first thing was fixed by the layout: the person would have to choose a chair. Chair and table set two equal heights. Two equal heights meant a conversation rather than a speech. She would have that for twenty minutes.

Her hands stayed steady on the varnish. The rough spot of the cutter through cloth pressed into her ribs and gave her three counted beats. Face neutral. The person entering would speak first. The rules she had given herself would carry the first line.

Trust the tradecraft. Keep your head down.

The rest would follow.

Chapter 12

The Confrontation

She watched the handle turn. The seal released. The door opened and Sir Julian Croft stepped in, profile and posture arranged for a room where people took their cues from him. Two men stood in the corridor behind him, visible through the pane. They held the corridor rather than the door. Croft pushed the door shut with the flat of his hand and the seal engaged again. He looked at the table, then at her, then at the chair opposite. He sat.

Silver hair cut cleanly. He aligned a cuff with two short pulls. Three fingers rested on the table, placed where a folder would have been. He left the chair back at the same angle she had set when she moved it.

"Ms Kapoor." The tone was level. "You have caused a number of people to be concerned." A half-beat for effect. "You should have come to me sooner. We could have found a way to address your, "

"No." Her hands stayed flat on the varnish. She did not move them. "We're not doing that."

A fraction in his face, almost nothing. His eyes went to her sleeve, then to the pane. He was counting seconds as well.

"You're on leave," he said. "There are channels. Duty of care is not an insult. It's protection, for you and for the Service." He shaped the word Service as ownership.

She let the words land and go. She had meant to save them for last. She put them first. Then she spoke two words. The same two she had placed on the public phone by the bus stop. Two words that had been spoken once seven years ago in a corridor on a day when everything still

ran to plan. They were not in any record. The seal and HVAC left no echo. She gave them with the timing she had marked on her watch earlier, the same way she had said them into the receiver.

Croft's face did not shift. His hands stopped. Three fingers left the slow, controlled movement they had been making and went still. He looked at her properly for the first time. The aides outside did not move.

"You understand," she said. Not a question.

"I understand," he said. "You've been under strain. People say things."

"You came." She kept her voice ordinary. "You wouldn't have come if those words meant nothing to you."

He lifted his hand, set it down again, and composed the next line. "I came because we take care of our own, even when they make poor choices."

"The day of the switch," she said, watching his mouth rather than his eyes. "Two days after Ankara put you on a stage and three days before a photograph placed you on a programme in London. The window in the middle holds the shop in Istanbul. The counter. A woman who has watched men buy books for twenty years described a man who didn't lower himself to hear her and waited for her to speak up instead. He wasn't trained for that room. He was trained for rooms like this."

"Ankara was public," he said. "A panel. I was fourth-listed in London, as you say. Flights run hourly. Officials move. Pick three points and you can force a match."

She did not answer. She let the quiet sit between them. He looked at the door again, at the pane, at her hands. His breath came out slowly, controlled. No one spoke.

"I wasn't in Istanbul," he said. "If someone spoke to a bookseller, that wasn't me. Others handle that."

She tapped the watch glass once with her forefinger. Not enough to make a sound he could hear; enough to give herself the angle. "The shelves were not moved at close. The brick under the wall outside did not lift. The cache was untouched."

"Then nothing happened," he said. "The rest is grief."

"Grief didn't put you in Ankara two days before a substitution."

He raised his hands, palms down, a gesture that looked like calm. "We don't choose where we're asked to appear. You know that."

She waited. He watched her and spoke into the gap.

"You've been around long enough to recognise how easily lines are drawn. You push on a few public traces, you see what you want. We're both aware of confirmation bias."

She put another line into the room without lifting her voice. "A route-type string two lines above a timestamp. An amount two lines below. The offshore point with no origin and no destination recorded on either side, a Cayman shelf vehicle. That packet landed between Ankara and London on the day a man, not the right man, stood at a counter and waited for a woman to speak up."

He turned in his chair. Only his eyes moved, left and then back. The muscles around them tightened. "Where did you learn that? Who is feeding you garbage they shouldn't have?"

"No one is feeding me," she said. "If I'm not out of this building before my watch matches a mark, two envelopes go into a public system. They describe what you've heard."

"To whom?" His voice stayed even.

"Two places. That's enough." She did not give him more.

"If you send stolen fragments to anyone, you will destroy your life. You will be charged. The Service will be forced to act. There are protocols you're ignoring and they will not be kind." He looked at the door again.

"No one wants that for you."

She named the offshore route without giving a number, the way she had written it on the slip: position relative to the timestamp, relative to the amount. Then she added two words in the cadence of a handling tic that had never been written down. Not the words from the call. Different. They did not belong to her and Nightingale; they belonged to the shorthand used by the people who had arranged a switch and thought the shorthand was invisible. She put the two words there and left them there.

He stopped threatening her. It was not a visible decision. The threats simply did not come again. He set his elbows on the table, then took them off it, then placed his hands flat. He smoothed a cuff.

"What do you want?"

Her left hand stayed still on the watch. "You resign. Today. Health reasons. No honours. No statement. You go quiet and you stay quiet."

He did not lift his head. His eyes raised a degree.

"In exchange," she said, "this stays where it is."

"You would bargain with a career on the basis of gossip and an envelope game," he said. There was less air in the phrase. He steadied the next one. "And you imagine you can do this and not burn the Service you claim to protect?"

"You've already done that. I'm giving you a way to stop the next man from doing it again."

He looked past her to the glass. The two aides had not moved. Breath went in through his nose and out again. "You're not thinking of yourself."

"I am." She shifted the watch inside her sleeve and let the cuff fall back. "And I know exactly what happens to me."

"What happens?" The inflection was neutral.

"I get contained. You know how that's done."

He held her a moment longer with his eyes, testing for movement; she gave him none. "You're asking me to end my career on the word of a bookseller who remembers posture and a made-up packet that won't stand in front of any judge."

"I'm not going to a judge." She turned her hand so the watch face caught enough light for her, not for him. She did not say the numbers. She did the angle in her head. Fifteen minutes to the mark she had advanced to narrow her own margin. "And you're not going to a judge either, unless you are foolish."

He glanced at her sleeve, then the door, then back to her. "You imagine you've made yourself safe?"

"I've made myself expensive to grab in this room. The rest follows." She put the next line where it needed to sit. "The woman behind the counter in the shop said you didn't stoop to hear. You waited for her to speak up. That detail wasn't for me. It was for you." She kept her voice flat. "You trained yourself out of the habit of leaning in."

He gave the smallest shake of his head. It was a habit people with control learned early. She had seen him do it in rooms where microphones could record the movement of a jacket and nothing more.

"There's no chain of custody here," he said. He was back to arguments he understood. "Nothing you have will outlast a hearing about your stability. You are not sleeping. You are not working. You are on leave for a reason."

"If you put that tic on record, we move to a formal interview. Security comes in."

She put two words into the space between them again, the two words from the unwritten tic, timed on the sweep of the minute hand. The words went in at the same interval they would have taken if they were the absence in an intercept. The timing gave meaning the content alone did not. He watched her mouth. Then he looked down at his hands, checking their next move.

He nodded. Once. A human movement he had likely trained himself out of in contentious rooms. He did it anyway. He adjusted a cuff once.

"Health," he said. The word lay flat. He put the rest down without looking up. "Today. No press."

She exhaled once and her shoulders dropped a fraction. She did not change her expression. "No honours."

"No honours," he said.

"No farewell."

"No farewell."

"No more appearances on anybody's board," she said. "You'll find a doctor who writes the right words for the file."

He looked at the door over her shoulder and then back. "What do you do with your letters?"

"If you deviate before the mark, they go. If you keep your word, I cancel."

"If I keep my word."

"Yes."

He put a hand on the table and stood, leaving the chair where it was. "I'll need time to, "

"Fifteen minutes." She did not raise her voice. She put her forefinger over the watch again and lifted it off. "You've had years. You have until my watch meets the hand."

He started to say her name and did not finish it. He closed his mouth and pressed his lips together once. The hands on the other side of the pane did not move. He opened the door, stopped without turning back, and then went out. The door met the frame. The seal set.

She stayed where she was for three breaths. Only the HVAC hum. She slid the cue slip under the torn page and returned both to the inner

pocket behind the box cutter. The handle's rough patch steadied the small muscles in her hand. She stood without scraping the chair feet. She pressed the small white button on the wall and when the woman came, she said, "Thank you. I'm done."

The corridor was the same: four doors and a bend. Two flags at the far end. The aides stood in place on the carpet. They kept their hands at their sides. No one followed her to the desk. She took the umbrella from the stand without shaking it and walked out with her face framed by the canopy, as she had on the way in. The guard nodded once. She nodded back.

Outside, the pavement held water in small seams. She opened it wide, kept her face boxed from the street lenses, and matched the foot traffic, using two mapped turns so no single camera held her twice.

At the turn where the locksmith kept a window of blunt metal tools and blank keys on pins, she used the reflection to take a side look: no one she recognised, no shoulder line repeating. Traffic moved in a way that did not show cars pacing her. She took the road with smaller signs and less polished glass.

She thought of the two envelopes in the hold at the mailbox service. A counter with a bell. A person with a habit of tapping a pen. She had walked that path in her head and with her feet, and would walk it again now. She did not adjust her watch by numbers. She carried the position of the hands in her head and kept her arm still.

The mailbox service smelled of paper backs and adhesive. The same person stood at the counter. He looked up and then at the clock behind him. He neither smiled nor frowned. He lifted his hand and put it down again.

"I need to cancel two held items," she said.

"Name?"

"Initials," she said. She gave them. He held out a clipboard. She signed in the same two letters and a stroke.

He went to a slot rack at the back, found two envelopes of the size she remembered, and brought them forward. He set them on the counter but did not slide them across. "Cutoff is noon."

"I know."

"You're in time."

She placed her palm on the top envelope. The paper was heavier than the shop stock they used for ordinary mail. She lifted them both and put them into the satchel under the strap. She did not look inside. "Thank you."

He nodded. "You're welcome."

She stepped out and into the moving air of the street.

Across the road, two police walked in step. She held the curb until they passed.

At the corner a bus emptied and filled again. She did not get on. She used the movement of the people to carry her through the space under the billboard.

She took a street she had not taken that morning and walked until the embassy flags were no longer at the edge of sight even as a colour. She stopped once to let a delivery trolley pass and turned with it. Then she kept going.

She counted intersections as she moved. At the second she turned left, then left again, then crossed to return to a line she had already walked earlier. The pattern made sense only if you were tracking her. She imposed noise to protect the signal.

She did not think of the building across the river with the white and blue lanyards. Nothing there would move outward today. Nor Eliot by name or numbers. She thought of the table in the room and the way Croft

had put his hands on it when he ran out of lines to try.

She stopped where the pavement stones had been cut around a utility cover. Her ankle took her weight without complaint. The knee itched under fabric; she did not touch it. She pulled her sleeve back and checked the watch to confirm what she already knew. The hands had not yet reached their meeting point. They would do so in less than the time it would take to reach the river's edge. She let the sleeve drop and breathed in for four counts, held for four, out for four, held for four. Twice only.

It was not over. There would be a chair empty by the end of the day in a building she knew very well, a file with a line added to it and some calendar slots cleared. A story no one told and a set of words placed into fields would make a man go away without drama. The work continued.

She looked only at the glass where her shape was a dark oval with legs and a satchel line. Her hand pressed over the inner pocket once, feeling the edges of the folded slip and the thinner page behind it with the two sentences. She did not open the pocket.

Back on the main road, people moved around her with the inertia of late morning. She kept to their rhythm. At the lights she waited even when she could have gone. A van braked and then rolled forward again. At the crossing she moved when the red figure changed.

She turned her head enough to see the river edge and then turned it back. The flags on certain buildings lay against their poles. The light had shifted a degree. She did not look up to see if the sun had come out or gone in. She kept her eyes level with the street and the doorframes and the places where someone could stand and choose not to be seen until a person passed in front of them. No one did.

At a bin with a domed lid she took the envelopes from the satchel, pressed them flat against the satchel, then slid them deeper into the pocket and zipped it closed. She kept moving.

In a small square where two roads met, she stood long enough to count to twenty under her breath. The usual sounds were there: a truck

gear, a child calling for a biscuit, a dog that did not like the sound of a skateboard on wet stone. None of it mattered to the work; all of it mattered to the way a person avoided being remembered. She moved again when it made sense to move. She did not speak.

She walked and kept to the crowd's pace for a while. The satchel strap rubbed the line it always rubbed under her jacket; the box cutter's handle kept the fine muscles in her hand from throwing small tremors into her fingers. Her shoulders were level. Her head stayed down. Trust the tradecraft. Keep your head down.

At a certain door she paused and then did not go in. It was not for her. The next door had a bell. She did not press it. The next had a camera above the arch. She did not look. She walked past a block of offices where a man in a suit checked his reflection and then his watch. She did not look at the watch to align hers. She already knew.

When the hands met the mark in her head, she felt the meeting as a fact rather than as a sound. She let it pass. The letters had stopped being a consequence the moment she signed them back, but the mark was the boundary he would obey. No one else knew that but her and the person behind the counter who had moved two envelopes from a slot to the surface of a worn counter and then into her hand. It did not matter whether anyone else knew. The only ledger that counted was the one that kept the next person alive.

She kept walking. She did not look back. When the rain started again by degrees, she adjusted the umbrella to take the water off her shoulder, stepped through a shallow puddle without changing pace, and felt the cold reach her laces. She did not change anything because of it. She let it be one more thing she would remember from this day when she did not tell anyone about the room with the sealed door and the two chairs and the man who stopped moving his hands when two words arrived at a timing he thought he controlled.

Chapter 13

The Price of Silence

She read the line a second time. The café kept the television muted, a ribbon of text cycling under a panel discussion about roadworks. The words were small and even. A senior official had stepped down for health reasons. No name. No remit. No date beyond today.

Steam rose from a metal wand behind the counter. She did not order anything. A man in a suit at the next table scrolled on his phone and stopped twice, his mouth tightening then relaxing. He set the phone face-down, lifted it again, and then left it. The café door opened and closed in a slow rhythm as people came in out of the wet and left carrying cups with lids.

She watched the ribbon cycle two more times. The phrasing did not change.

Outside, the rain had eased to a fine drift. She raised the umbrella and kept it low, the canopy shielding the upper half of her face from the closest street lens. Buses moved along the river road with gaps between them, lights steady. A delivery van rolled past and stopped at a double yellow line. Two men lifted out a crate, spoke without looking toward the building across the water, and carried the weight inside.

She had not come to stand opposite because she thought anything would move on the façade. The aim was to see if anything had changed in the way people went in and out. It had not. The glass doors slid, escorts collected visitors; guards checked screens and access badges, then nodded. Between one minute and the next there were different faces, different coats, and the same posture. The building's external signals did not change when the access lists changed.

At the bus stop two men in raincoats spoke in low voices. One tapped at a screen and angled the face of the phone so the other could read. She heard the words acting and temporary. The other said no statement, then stopped speaking as a bus pulled in. They did not get on. When the bus left, they stepped closer to the shelter and spoke about someone in a different section and who would cover which meetings.

She kept walking. The umbrella edge hid her face from one dome and then from the next. At a crossing she waited without looking for gaps. The signal changed. She moved with the group. A cyclist, late to notice the change, braked hard and set a foot on the ground, then pushed off and threaded between two people who did not shift.

In a small square ahead of a row of offices, a window reflected the building's internal channel on a lobby television. The same line moved past. She checked again without turning her head. Same words. Nothing added.

She had counted on the form and on the timing. Not on an admission. Health reason covered everything that mattered to anyone outside the rooms. It covered what had put him in the chair and what had taken him out of it. Inside the rooms, a memo would travel with the right phrases. Briefings would be compartmentalised. It would be written by someone who knew what to leave out.

A woman with a blue umbrella stopped under a tree and spoke into a phone with her hand over her mouth. A line of water ran off the umbrella edge in drops, striking the pavement in a thin diagonal. The woman said, They've rebalanced, and then listened. She said, No, no names, just acting this and cover that. She shook her head, though the person on the other end could not see. When the light changed, the woman crossed.

At the next corner, a courier propped a bicycle against a bollard, lifted a canvas bag from his back, and took out three envelopes bound together with a rubber band. He checked the top one and then the building number. He pressed a bell and waited. A woman opened, accepted two

envelopes, and signed on a screen. The courier returned the last envelope to the bag and rode away without looking back.

She crossed the road again and stopped under the awning of a café she had not been in before. The glass held a chalk list of soups and three sandwiches. Inside, a wall-mounted television moved between weather and a feed from a government account. Someone had chosen a slow transition with a dark background and a simple seal. The presenter read three lines. The sound was off. The letters under his mouth made the same shape as the ribbon across the river.

A woman behind the counter said, “Tea?”

Ava shook her head. The woman wiped the counter with a cloth in even strokes. The cloth left wet lines that evaporated and left nothing.

She stepped back onto the pavement and walked toward the bridge. On the middle of the span she stopped long enough to count to eight with her mouth closed and her tongue pressed to the back of her teeth. At eight she moved again. A bus came up behind and passed, and for a few seconds she matched speed with the back end of it, letting the canopy catch the bus’s slipstream and tilt slightly.

She turned right at the far side and took a narrower street. In a recessed doorway two men smoked without shelter, their shoulders up. One said, “Acting,” and the other said, “For now,” and then they stopped as a third man came out holding a folder. He handed the folder to one of them and the three walked away together.

She watched their backs long enough to note they were not matching cadence. Not a team. Not watchers. Three men with a list to work through and a message to deliver that would read the same on every floor.

She entered a different café with steamed windows and a row of small tables. No television. A radio at low volume played a voice reading a list of traffic delays. The counter glass held a single tray of pastries left from the morning. She ordered tea because the man behind the counter looked up when she came in and asked what she wanted.

At the table, a receipt lay on the saucer; she turned it over. The back was blank aside from a grey logo. Borrowing the pen tied to the counter, she wrote one word in small capitals: Nightingale. Three counts, then she tore the paper twice, then again until no piece carried a full letter. The paper tore with a dry sound. The pieces went into a napkin; she crushed it and left it under the saucer.

The tea was hot and she did not drink it. The napkin under the saucer warped, then settled. After a minute the man behind the counter came around with a cloth and wiped an empty table, then this one. When he lifted the saucer, she put her palm over the napkin and then lifted it, as if she were weighing it. She dropped it back onto the saucer and nodded to the man when he looked at her. He nodded back without speaking.

When she stepped outside again the rain had returned. She lifted the umbrella and walked with the canopy low.

She gave herself permission to hold one thought for more than a few seconds. It stayed inside a rule. Count to four holding the line, then let it go. The thought was a list she did not have and would not have. The dates and amounts and names that would never sit together; a selector list here or a tasking note there, none of it complete. The people who had paid for a scrap of something that came from a room where none of them had stood. The small markers that had made a man in London valuable to people who had no reason to trust him and did anyway.

She let the count reach four and then did not bring the thought back.

At the next corner she saw two men in raincoats standing with their hands in their pockets, weight shifting on a shared beat. They were not looking at her. One of them said something about covering a meeting that used to be his. The other said, "You always wanted that one," and the first one said, "Not like this," and then the light changed and they crossed.

She walked past them without turning her head.

On the far side of the bridge, opposite the entrance with the glass gate, she stopped behind a bus shelter and checked the reflection in the

advertising panel. The people entering the building did not look up when they badged in. Inside, someone came to the door to meet a visitor and walked them back inside without speaking at the threshold. She counted the pairs for a full minute and then stopped with no change.

She took the next corner.

At the mouth of an alley she stood with her back to a brick wall and checked the watch. The hands made a familiar angle; no need for numbers. Keeping the face tilted so the glass would not reflect a camera, she let the cuff fall back and slid a hand into her pocket until her fingers found the rough edge of the small cutter. The blade was retracted. She pressed her fingers against the metal to settle the small muscles that had started to move when the words cycled on the ribbon inside the café.

She walked again and did not look into the dome cameras as she passed them.

There would not be a list. Fragments could be held, a sequence fixed. A gap named, a route-type string and the position of a number relative to a timestamp. A two-word shorthand delivered at a set cadence could signal who and when. A ledger would not come out of a system built to keep ledgers separate.

At a bookshop farther down she stopped at the window. Not the shop in Istanbul. A chain place with thrillers in a neat pile and a sign offering loyalty points. A woman at the counter turned a book over and scanned the back with a handheld device. The device beeped once, flat and short. The woman placed the book in a bag and handed it to a man who said thank you and left. He did not look up. When the door closed behind him, she kept going.

The day's movement around the building remained within ordinary range: no police cars on the kerb, no media outside, no cluster of suits arranged to block a line of sight and pretend they were not blocking it. Inside the rooms, entries on calendars moved to different names. Outside, the buses came and went.

She cut back toward Pimlico using streets with fewer cameras. Near a locksmith's window she checked her reflection and saw a woman with a dark umbrella and a satchel strap across the chest, head down. Two schoolchildren ran past with their bags low, talking about a game. A man in paint-splattered overalls tried to light a cigarette in the rain, cupping one hand around the match. The match went out.

At the top of a small set of steps she stopped and put the umbrella down to shake water from the canopy. She checked the watch again without bringing it up to her face. The hands were where she expected them to be. She lifted the umbrella again and walked.

At the corner of a small square, she stopped and watched a group of people waiting for a bus. None of them looked twice at her. None of them lowered their voices when she stood near them. No one said her name.

She took the next street.

No statement. No farewell.

Near four, a message from Davies named a Pimlico address and a time.

Davies had chosen a room above a printing shop in Pimlico. The man at the desk downstairs pointed at a flight of stairs and went back to a ledger. The stairwell smelled of paper and dust. The room itself had a carpet that flattened underfoot without springing back. A table with a white edge. Two chairs. A narrow window that faced a brick lightwell, not the street. A heater that clicked on and then off.

He stood when she came in and did not offer a hand. He looked the way he had always looked when the topic mattered and he needed to make the tone sound ordinary. Shirt collar tired at the edges. Jacket a half-inch out of line on one shoulder. A headache line starting over one

eye.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “Close the door, please.”

She closed it.

He nodded toward the chair opposite and waited until she sat. He had a paper folder on the table that he did not open. A single sheet lay loose beside it, the top third visible: block of text, a date.

“We will be brief,” he said. “An internal review has been conducted.” He kept the next sentence in even measure. “The process is concluding.”

He left out two words that would have changed the posture of the room. He did not say we were wrong. He did not say you were right. He used the kind of sentence that closed a file by describing movement without naming cause.

She kept her hands flat on her thighs under the table and made a count to four for breath without adding a second count.

“You understand,” he said. A pause short enough to check whether she would force him to fill it. She did not. “For the record, references to Istanbul will remain within standard travel entries over a defined period.” He met her eyes to make sure that piece landed. “You should hear it from me.”

He put his hand on the loose sheet and turned it so the text faced her.

“The Service,” he said, “is in a period of recovery.” He did not glance toward the window. There was nothing to see beyond it. “We avoid rash decisions in that period. We make stabilising ones.” He tapped the sheet once, a gentle contact with the nail. “There is a potential placement under consideration. Senior, important, and frankly overdue to have someone competent in it.”

He waited for a reaction he could work with. She did not give him one.

“It would shape workflows,” he said. “Eyes on record paths and audit trails. It would make future,” he searched for a term that would pass a later read, “misalignments less likely.”

He did not say burial. He did not use any word that would live past the minute.

She looked at the page without moving her head. The phrasing was exactly what she expected. Title to be confirmed. Grade and reporting line pending. A line about the value of institutional memory. A line about recognising a period of dedicated service. No mention of the case that had put them in this room. No names.

“This is recognition,” he said.

“It is containment,” she said. Her voice stayed steady.

The skin around his eyes tightened, then reset. “It is both.” Then he added, “And it is necessary.” He placed his second finger on the bottom edge of the sheet, as if to keep it from moving. “The alternative is separation. Rapid separation. I am not recommending that.”

She watched his hands, not his eyes. The skin on his left hand was dry in a line where a ring had once sat. He had either stopped wearing it or never wore it to rooms like this. He did not fold his hands. He kept them in sight, palms down, a posture that read as steady even when it was not.

“Will the file remain closed?” she asked.

“Which file?” he said, as a reflex.

“Nightingale,” she said.

He let out the smallest breath through his nose. “Concluded.” He did not add an adjective. He did not add a hope. “If material changes, the appropriate desks will know. If a change touches something you can see and it is appropriate for you to flag it, you will know how.”

In other words: remain on our side of the door and you might see it. Step outside and you will not.

“Do you understand what is under consideration?” he asked.

Outside meant no leverage; inside meant burial but proximity.

“I understand.”

The heater clicked off.

“The Service is grateful.” He said it as if he had rehearsed the line on the way here. It carried memo phrasing. “We would like to avoid disruption while decisions are made.”

“Yes,” she said.

She did not move her hands from under the table for three counts. On the fourth, she kept them where they were.

“Thank you,” he said. “We will be in touch with next steps. Soon.”

He placed the sheet on top of the folder and squared the corners with his fingertips. He did not ask her how she was. He did not ask what she intended to do with her next day. He did not mention the embassy or the two words used there.

She stood. He did not offer his hand; neither did she. She left the room, closed the door behind her, and walked down the stairs. The man at the desk looked up and then back down at his ledger. She stepped out into damp air and adjusted the umbrella so it covered the top half of her face. She did not look toward the river. She walked toward her flat.

The hallway smelled the way it had smelled the day she moved in: old paint in the cracks where the wall met the floor, dust in the corners where the skirting board had pulled away from the plaster. The bottom stair creaked twice if you put your weight down near the wall. She put her weight down near the centre of the tread and heard only wood.

Inside, the table held a glass and nothing else. The straight-backed chair sat at a small angle to the table because that was how she left it when she wrote something. She did not change the angle. She set the satchel on the floor, slid the strap off her shoulder, and stood for a count of four without moving anything else.

She unbuttoned her jacket and reached into the inner pocket. The torn page lay where she had left it after the embassy, folded once, with the smaller cue slip tucked behind it, the crease softer than when she had first folded it two days earlier. She put it on the table. The words she had written weeks ago from a silence were still there. Compromise is London. Trust no one. The pen she had used then had left the smallest notch in the paper where she had pressed harder at the end of each line.

She set the watch next to the page and did not align them. The second hand moved without a sound she could hear. She let the page sit where the light from the kitchen unit's clock touched the corner of it. She stood with her hands flat on the table and her shoulders level and let the page be visible for as long as it took to count to twelve, then twelve again.

She picked it up and put it back in the satchel. Not the inner pocket this time. She put it inside a thin envelope with no writing on it and placed that under the spare blanket in the wardrobe. It would be there if anyone asked to see the satchel. It would not be in her jacket if anyone asked to see her pockets. If anyone asked to see the wardrobe, they would see a blanket and a folded suit. They would stop before lifting the blanket because there would be nothing to suggest that they should lift it.

She opened the wardrobe and took out a plain dark suit. Single vent. No pinstripes. The trousers had a hem that fell straight with her shoes. She hung the jacket on the chair and laid the trousers on the bed. He might be dead. If called, she would wear it. Then she ran her hand along the inside of the jacket sleeve to make sure there were no threads that would catch. There were none.

On the table she placed the watch on its side and then set it flat. She considered winding it forward and did not. There would be a time on a calendar when she might be asked to attend a room. If called, she would go. She would look at her watch once, not three times.

She poured water into the glass and drank half. She set the glass down and turned it a quarter turn so the water line faced a different direction. There was a ring on the table from a previous glass. She did not move this glass to match the ring.

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the ceiling for a count of eight. She did not allow herself the ninth. She looked at the suit again, then at the satchel. She took the box cutter from her jacket and set it on the table. The blade stayed retracted. She pressed a thumb against the rough part of the handle and felt the small muscles in her hand settle.

Eliot. His name did not need to be said. It was the shape of a risk that was no longer hers to manage. There was no channel to him that would not put weight where it would crush him. Silence would have to mean safe. If it did not mean that, she would not know. She accepted the boundary and did not let it widen.

The empty chair remained a line item she could neither clear nor close. She set her palm on the back of it, then lifted her hand away.

She said nothing now. Small things instead. She checked the lock on her door, checked it again, then stopped; not a third time. She turned out the light in the living room and left the kitchen unit's clock on. After that, she closed the bedroom door and did not turn the handle to see if it would open again. She lay down and set a breath count, four and four and four and four, twice only. No thought of hands meeting a mark. No thought of envelopes on a counter. She closed her eyes and did not open them again until cool air reached her shoulder.

When she woke there was no image left. There was the sound of a pipe in the wall. There was the vibration under the floor from a train. She sat up, swung her legs off the bed, and put her feet on the floor. She did

not look at the watch. She did not look at the suit. She stood and walked to the table and picked up the glass and drank the rest of the water.

She put the glass down and placed the watch next to the suit. She set both hands on the back of the chair for a count of four, then lifted them away. Tomorrow needed a time and a door. If a message came, she would go to the place named. The rest would not be hers to name.

She put her hand on the satchel to feel its weight and then left it there. On the wardrobe door the mirror showed a woman in a plain T-shirt with hair pulled back and no colour on her face. This was the face other people saw when they looked at a person they did not plan to remember.

She returned to the bed and lay down again without removing the suit from the chair. She closed her eyes. The room was still. No sound came from the corridor. Morning would come at its usual time. She waited for it.

Chapter 14

Negative Space

She heard the lock tumble. The door opened into a room that could have been used for start-of-week briefings or small problems that had to look routine. Glass, a table sized for three, chairs with no give. The lighting was even and cold. Papers lay in a stack at the centre of the table. Pens pointed at the same angle.

Ava stepped in and closed the door. She wore the plain dark suit she had hung on a chair the night before. Single vent. No pinstripes. The trousers fell straight. She did not carry the satchel into the room. Her hands were empty.

Davies sat with a folder open in front of him. The edges of the paper aligned in a way that suggested he had checked them twice. Two other people were present. A man with a trimmed beard and a woman with a lanyard that had been folded back through itself so the printed words did not show. They had neutral faces and the kind of posture that read as available without inviting conversation.

“Ms Kapoor,” Davies said. He did not stand. “Thank you for coming in.”

She took the chair opposite and put her hands on the table, palms down. She kept her shoulders level. Her eyes stayed on Davies.

“This is a review panel,” Davies said. “Brief.” He looked down at the page. “We are concluding a process.”

He read from the top sheet. The language was the language used when a decision had already been made. A finding of no disciplinary action. A statement about duty of care and compliance with orders as

they had been written. The phrasing did not name the week she had spent outside their control or the room across the river where a different decision had been made because she made it. It did not use names at all.

“For the record,” he said, “you were placed on leave under section...,” he named the section, “and you surrendered devices and observed travel restrictions as instructed. There were deviations. They were recorded as part of the incident. The panel’s determination is that no further action is required.” He looked up. “You are cleared. On paper.”

The man with the beard adjusted the top edge of his notepad so it sat parallel with the table edge. “We have some questions,” he said. His voice carried no weight. “For the record.”

Ava kept her hands flat. “Yes.”

“During your leave,” the woman said, “did you initiate any contact with Service personnel outside approved channels?”

“No,” Ava said.

“Did anyone from GCHQ contact you?” the man asked.

She kept her hands flat, pressure whitening the skin at the base of her thumb. “No,” she said.

“You did not contact them?”

“No.”

“Any contact with foreign officials or foreign police?”

“No.”

“Did you retain any classified material?”

“No.”

The woman looked at the page in front of her. “You surrendered your case phone on the date recorded. You did not seek to regain access to any internal system.”

“I did not.”

“Thank you,” the woman said. She placed her pen on the upper left of the notepad and did not pick it up again.

Davies turned a page in the folder. The paper made a dry sound. “We note your concern at the time regarding certain handling anomalies.” He kept his voice flat. “That paper is not before us today. We are here for process.” He looked at her and paused. She did not.

“The Service,” he said, “has taken steps in response to your insights.” He chose the next words. “They will prevent process deviations of the sort that,” he did not finish the sentence. “Our thanks are on the record.”

He did not say the name that would have made the sentence honest.

He lifted a single sheet from the pile and turned it so that the printed lines faced her. “Acknowledgment,” he said. “This closes the administrative loop.” He slid a pen across the table. It stopped with the metal tip aligned to the signature line.

She read the text. The words were the ones he had just spoken. She placed her hand on the pen, signed on the line, and dated it. The ink dried without a smear. She set the pen back down beside the paper.

“Thank you.” Davies stacked the signed page on top of the others and squared the corners. He reached down to the bag at his feet, took out a small barcoded envelope, and pushed it across the table. Inside, a keycard lay against a printed induction sheet.

“Effective today,” he said, “you are assigned to the archive floor.” He pointed to the line on the sheet. “You will be shaping workflows and watching record paths. Access will be scoped to that function. No external copying. Red pencils only for annotation. Retrieval by docket number. Two-person checks for sensitive movement. Every removal and return is logged by time and hand.” He tapped the printed list with the back of his fingernail. “It’s all here.”

He paused. “Questions?”

She kept her eyes on the induction sheet, then lifted them to him. “Will Nightingale’s file be reopened?”

The woman answered before Davies could. “That’s not within this panel’s remit.” She adjusted her lanyard. “The status is as recorded. Concluded.”

“Understood,” Ava said.

Davies closed the folder. “Your escort will meet you at the lift,” he said. “Thank you, Ms Kapoor.” He kept his hands on the folder, palms down.

Ava stood. She did not look at the glass as she turned. She did not look at the two other faces. She took the envelope and opened the door. The lock tongue retracted with a clean mechanical sound. She stepped out and closed the door with a controlled pull. Inside, paper edges aligned.

The lift car vibrated once under her shoes; the doors opened onto cooler air and a steady hum.

The archive floor had no windows. A constant hum came from the vents and the cabinets. The lights were steady. A card reader sat beside the main door; her new card made a green flash and a low click from inside the frame. A woman in a plain jacket met her at the threshold and led her past rolling stacks to a desk with a monitor, a keyboard, two red pencils in a tray, and a pair of issued headphones.

“This is you,” the woman said. Her voice was polite and neutral. “We keep it quiet down here. Requests come in through the system.” She pointed to the top corner of the screen. “Docket numbers here; retrieval targets there.” Her finger traced two boxes without touching them. “Gloves and masks at the end of the aisle. Red pencils only. Black pens for

docket sheets. Phones are not permitted.” She held up a hand for the last item. “You know this.”

“I do,” Ava said.

“Good.” The woman placed a small ring of keys beside the keyboard. “These are for the cabinets assigned to this desk.” She tapped the keys once. The keyring made a quiet sound against the desk surface. The metal was cool when Ava drew them closer. “This,” she patted a laminated card, “is your retrieval map. Rolling stacks one through six, cabinets A to M. Your docket queue is there.” She pointed to the screen. “We start with current backlog first. You’ll find the first set at knee height, easier to lift.” She offered a brief smile that did not reach her eyes. “Let me know if you need another pair of hands.”

Ava nodded. “Understood.”

The woman moved on without waiting for a second look back.

A stack of boxes sat at the end of the desk. No names on the labels. Numbers and short codes only. The top box was heavier than she expected for its size. She lifted the lid and set it aside, then counted the file folders inside without taking them out. She wrote the count and the docket number in a log. She pulled a pair of nitrile gloves from the dispenser and put them on. The material snapped against her wrist once and then lay flat.

She started with the first folder. The paper inside had the faint smell of cardboard and time. She made three marks on a docket sheet that matched the three folds in the file. The item number matched the printed code on the top right corner. She checked it again against the docket list on the screen. Then she typed it in. She tabbed down and wrote in the physical log with a red pencil, keeping the line straight.

She kept going until the first folder was exhausted. She slid it back and lifted the next.

When the first set of items had been entered and the docket sheet carried all the marks it needed to carry, she stood and walked to the end of the aisle. The cabinets were numbered in even increments. The metal handles were cold. She used one of the keys, turned it, and felt the pins move. Inside, she placed three files on the assigned shelf, spines out, and read the top line on each again, then closed and locked the cabinet.

Back at the desk she checked the retrieval queue. The next item had a two-letter code she recognised from a different floor, years ago. Not Istanbul. Not a name she had carried in her head for a week. She took the top box from the stack and set it on the desk.

She kept a rhythm. Lift. Count. Log. Check. Move. The hum from the vents set a baseline. She matched her breathing to the work. Her shoulders stayed level. Her hands did not shake.

After the second box she looked at the screen and then at the closed door to the far corridor. The lift was somewhere beyond it. If someone pressed the call button, she would feel it through the floor as a faint vibration. Nothing came. She looked back at the screen and the docket queue.

She set the next box aside and placed her hand on the keyboard. The login screen for the archive index showed two boxes. She entered her assigned credentials. The system accepted them and opened a broader search bar that was not advertised. She typed in a string that only she would know how to type. Not a name. A code from the first year. With it she added the partition code that should have come with the new post, then pressed enter.

The screen changed to a small window that carried a single line in black text. ACCESS RESTRICTED. COMPARTMENT ABOVE CURRENT CLEARANCE. CONTACT RECORD OWNER. She did not. She did not try a second time. She did not change the string. She did not pretend she had clicked in the wrong place. She let her hands hover above the keys until the cursor blinked twice. Then she hit escape. The window closed. The

cursor returned to the docket input box. She logged out and then in again, back to the work screen.

She opened the third box.

A cart stood in the corner near the end of the aisle. She moved it closer and used it to carry two heavy folders to a different cabinet, checking the shelf numbers against a printed list. Each folder went into its place. When she returned to the desk, she updated the log, keeping the pencil point sharp.

The lights did not change. The hum stayed constant. She kept her jacket on and worked only what was in front of her.

The manager passed by once and nodded. "All right?"

"Yes," Ava said.

"If you need to change gloves, the second box is fuller." The manager indicated the second dispenser and moved on.

Ava looked at the small ring of keys again. She lifted them, hooked the ring on her finger, and pushed the cart back to the corner.

She took a short break because the sheet on the desk told her to take one after ninety minutes. She stood at the end of the aisle, moved her shoulders once to reset muscles, and returned. She did not check her watch.

The next docket in the queue was marked high-priority internal. It was not hers from before. She worked it in the same order. The sound of the lock turning matched the rhythm she had already set.

People came and went on the far side of the door at intervals. No voices carried beyond a few words: numbers, a surname said once and then not repeated, a time. No one said the name that mattered to her.

She went back to the desk and lifted the fourth box.

At the end of the next set she opened the right-hand drawer of the desk. It was empty but for a stapler, a roll of tape, and a packet of red pencil leads. She placed those objects to one side and took a blank notebook from her satchel. She opened it to the first page. She wrote one line with a red pencil, then stopped. The line sat in the centre of the page. COMPROMISE IS LONDON. The letters were small, even, and readable.

She closed the cover and placed the notebook in the drawer. She slid the stapler and the tape back into the drawer next to it. The pencil leads stayed on the desk.

She closed the drawer and listened. The HVAC hummed without change. Air moved through a vent somewhere above the rolling stacks and came out again without a sound she could measure. The faint transmission from a lift came through the floor on the far side of the corridor as a barely perceptible change in vibration. She marked it and let it go.

She thought of a wall in another city and a single brick in a low course. She had looked at it from arm's length and made the call not to touch it. The mortar there had been slightly different in colour. Dust had settled in the difference. The dust had not been disturbed. The brick had stayed where it was. It would stay where it was because that was safer for the person who had not come. She drew the image in her head without adding anything to it. She held it and then placed it away.

"Stay frosty," she said. Not loud. The words were for her muscles and her breath, not for anyone else.

She pulled the next file toward her. The folder's edge was rough where the card had been cut. She placed her hands on either side of it and opened it. She looked not at the clock on the wall because there was no clock on this wall. She did not take out the watch from under her sleeve. She kept her eyes on the paper in front of her and the line the pencil would leave when she made the next mark.

Outside, traffic on the river road would have moved the way it always moved at this hour. On this floor, the sound did not penetrate. A train passed under the city. She felt that through the bones in her forearm where they touched the desk. It faded and the hum of the cabinets remained.

She checked the next docket against the index and made the entries. She lifted her head once when someone passed the end of her aisle. A pair of shoes, black, polished, heel taps evenly spaced. She did not look further.

The work continued. She wrote the numbers without error. She placed the files and returned them to their places until the next time someone asked for them. Each movement had a reason. Each reason was recorded.

The second hour matched the first. The box at the end of the desk lightened by a measure she could register by weight rather than by count. Her breathing did not change. Her shoulders did not tighten. When she stood, the chair made no sound under her. When she walked the aisle to the cabinets, her steps fell on the same tiles as before.

A request with a higher priority marker came into the queue with a soft chime in her headphones. She took the headphones off and laid them on the desk. She walked to the cabinet with the right number and opened it. She took the folder with both hands and carried it back to the desk. She made the log entry. She placed a small white slip under the top edge of the folder indicating who had requested it. She put on the headphones again and checked the queue for the next item.

When the light above the door to the corridor blinked once, she looked up. The manager leaned in. "All right for water?" she asked.

Ava nodded. "I have some." She lifted a bottle out of the satchel and unscrewed the cap. She took a small drink and put the bottle back. The manager's footsteps moved away.

In the stillness that followed, a memory came back unprompted. The smell of rain and binding glue in a small shop. A bell that knocked against a hinge when the door moved. Leyla's fingers dusted with paper. A man who had not lowered himself to listen. A wall outside with a brick no one would lift now. She let the memory sit and then put it back on a shelf in her head where it belonged. She didn't let it change her grip.

She worked the next two items from the queue. Then she logged out for the day's mark without checking the time. She took off the gloves and turned them inside out as she removed them, set them in the bin, and wiped her hands with a small wipe from a packet in the drawer. She locked the drawer. She placed the keys in her pocket. She moved the chair under the desk so that it would be where she had left it when she returned.

At the door she used the new card again. The green flash came. The lock opened. She walked out into the corridor and turned left toward the lift. The floor vibrated as the lift rose from below. When the doors opened, she stepped in and pressed the ground button. She watched the numbers light in order and did not adjust her breathing to match them.

On the ground floor, a guard at the desk looked at her and then at a screen. He nodded once. A man with a blue-and-white lanyard passed through the lobby on his way to somewhere else. He did not look at her. She did not look at him.

Outside, the air was a degree warmer on her face. She held the umbrella low past the lobby cameras and took the route with fewer domes.

She would be back in the archive room in the morning. The boxes would be where she had left them. The logs would carry yesterday's marks and wait for today's. The HVAC would hum. The lift would send a

small vibration through the floor at odd intervals. Her hands would go where the files required. She would keep the order.

No one had opened Nightingale's file for her. No one would, unless something changed that would be marked by someone other than her. The page in her drawer did not change that. The words on it were a record she carried with or without paper. The work she had in front of her now was a different kind of record.

The work continued. She kept her head down.

She did not look at the clock.