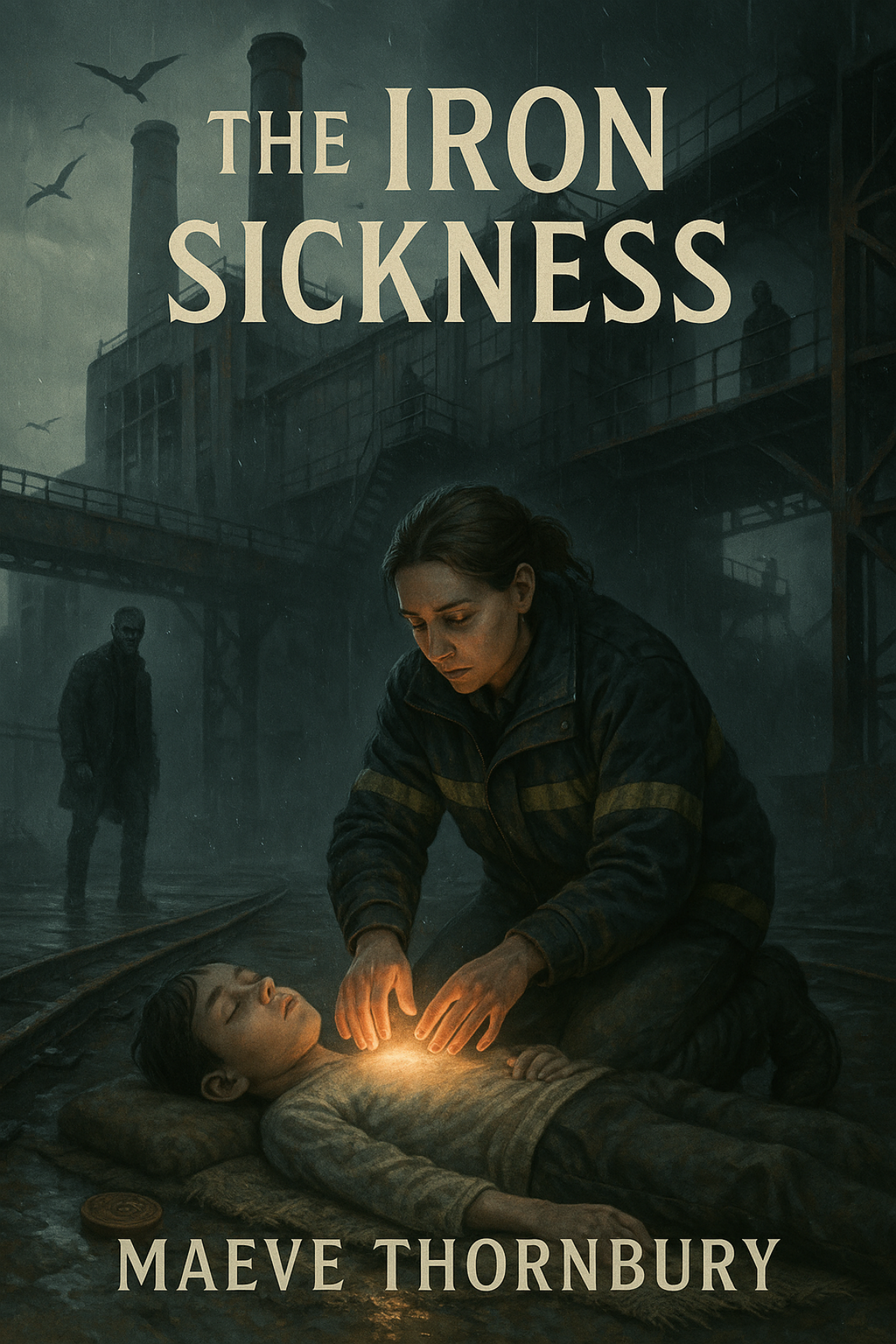




THE IRON SICKNESS

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The Iron Sickness

by Maeve Thornbury

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Chapter 1

The Weight

The siren cut to a pulse and then stopped as Tariq thumbed the switch. Rain beat a steady run across the windscreen. The Northring ahead was a blur of brake lights and hazard flashers, a grey arc of concrete and metal with a lorry skewed across it, trailer crooked, cab at an angle. The hatchback under the trailer had its roof pressed flat to the chassis, glass everywhere.

Cerys felt for the door handle, cool and smooth under her wet glove. She pushed out into the weather. Diesel hung sharp in the air, with the sour from hot brakes. Water ran along the camber, lifting grit. Her boots took the puddle at the gutter and held.

She took it in without seeming to: the man standing in the flash of his hazard lights with a phone to his ear, the teenager in a hoodie trying to rock a fallen bumper off the lane, a woman in a high-vis jacket, probably off a construction site, waving her arms at oncoming cars to slow them. The lorry driver was still in his cab, hands on the wheel, head turned toward the smashed car but eyes out of sight.

She swung open the back doors. The kit was where it should be. She pulled the airway bag and a trauma pouch, handed the defib to Tariq, and shut the doors firm. Inside was order and clean plastic. Outside was the job.

‘Watch for fuel,’ she said.

‘I’ve got it,’ Tariq said. He lifted the radio to his mouth. ‘Control, we’re on scene, Northring overpass, jack-knifed artic, one hatchback involved, multiple walking wounded, one critical. Request Fire for

extrication and police for traffic. We'll update.'

They moved. 'If you're not hurt and you can walk, step behind the barrier,' Cerys called. 'If you are hurt and can walk, sit on the hard shoulder and keep still. If you're not sure, sit anyway. You,' she pointed at the teenager, 'leave that. Now. You're going to lose your fingers.'

The teenager backed away, eyes wide. 'Sorry.'

'It's fine. Step back.'

The hatchback had come under the lip of the trailer. The roof had folded down toward the seats. The driver was pinned in the front, hair against the glass, head slumped. In the back, a boy in a booster seat had his chin on his chest, seatbelt cutting into a thin jumper. His lips were the wrong colour. He made a wet sound trying to breathe.

Cerys put her hand on the smashed window edge and leaned in. 'Tariq, I've got a child with airway compromise. I'm going to him.'

'Copy,' he said. Then, louder: 'Police are en route. Fire five out.'

The boy's eyes rolled when she touched his cheek. She could hear fluid. She couldn't see where it came from. Blood somewhere in the mouth. Maybe vomit. She kept her voice level. 'Can you hear me, love? Blink for me.' Nothing that she could count. She took a slow breath and kept her own steady. 'Okay.'

The driver's face was visible now that she was inside the frame of the car. One pupil wide open, the other a tight pin. His chest rose shallow and fast and then missed a step. She marked it and put him aside. He was beyond what she could do with the metal wrapped hard around him.

She slid the suction into the boy's mouth, careful not to go too deep, and drew fluid away. A string of blood lifted and broke. The sound cleared a fraction. She angled his jaw with a thrust and held it. He coughed against her hand.

'Good lad,' she said. 'You keep breathing. That's it.'

Tariq was at her shoulder, holding the bag valve mask ready, and a woman came up on her blind side, hands out in front of her, ready to catch. 'Please,' the woman said. 'Please, my husband...' She gestured toward the front seat. 'Please look at him. He's not, '

'Stay there,' Cerys said, eyes on the boy. She took the oral airway out but paused. The boy pushed against her hand. He was resisting. She swapped for the nasopharyngeal and slid it in with a soft twist. He gagged and then settled. 'What's his name?' she asked.

'Jamie,' the woman said. Her breath misted. 'Jamie...' She took a step in and then back. 'He's nine. My husband, '

'I hear you,' Cerys said. 'Another ambulance is two minutes. Fire's almost here. I'm with Jamie now. Look at me.' She caught the woman's eyes for one count. 'You can help him by staying out of this space. You can do that, yeah?' A small muscle jumped in her jaw; the woman took it for a nod.

The woman pressed her own hand to her mouth and nodded. She looked as if she might fold at the waist. 'Please. Please.'

'Tariq, collar and blocks.'

'On it.' He passed the collar across the broken sill. His gloves left damp marks on the plastic. The rain hit the roof hard and filtered through into a low drip off the bent metal above them.

Cerys slid the collar in behind the boy's neck with two fingers, avoiding the edge of a jagged screw. She closed the strap, checked his face. The colour improved a shade, a poor shade, but a shade still. She held his head between her hands and leaned in closer, her elbows braced on what was left of the seat.

'Fire on scene,' Tariq said. The first crew in yellow came up fast with a hydraulic pack and a saw.

'We've got a child rear offside, airway secured, collar on, seatbelt still in place,' Cerys said to the first firefighter. 'We need the door and this

pillar cleared without moving him. Driver in front is unconscious, likely head injury, breathing shallow and irregular. He's trapped worse. We need the boy out first.'

'Copy that,' the firefighter said. 'We'll stabilise and spread.' He looked at the lorry driver's cab. 'We'll get a ladder up for the lorry after this cut.'

'Thank you.'

Glass popped as the tool found purchase. The frame shifted a fraction and then held. The smell of metal dust was thick on her tongue. Cerys kept one hand on the boy's jaw and the other at the base of the collar to stop any movement. He made a thin noise when the frame moved.

'Stay with me,' she said quietly, close to his ear. 'I'm here. I'm not going anywhere.'

Her knee ached where it pressed into the seat's broken springs. She ignored it and kept her hands steady. The boy's breath flowed under her fingers in a small, even stream. When it faltered, she felt it and lifted his jaw a bit more.

The firefighter's saw sparked against a bolt and then cleared it. Another tool went in and the door started to peel. Tariq shifted to take weight as the metal gave. 'Ready to take?' he said.

'On my count,' Cerys said. 'We're going to bring him out straight onto the board. No rotation. No flexion. Your hands where mine are until we're swapped.' She looked at Tariq, then at the firefighter. 'You support the seat as it drops. On three. One, two.'

The door came free with a grind and a movement through the whole structure. The woman sobbed behind them, a sound pushed into her sleeve, and then the firefighter steadied the door aside.

'Three,' Cerys said. She cut the belt and they transferred the boy, her hands to Tariq's, without a break. Her glove cuff caught a strap; she flicked it free. The board took the boy's weight. She did not lie him back until she had the mask on properly. Tariq sealed it and squeezed once.

The chest lifted. The colour came up another degree. She watched his eyes. They tracked once and then closed.

‘You’re okay,’ she said. ‘You’re breathing.’ She let herself take one breath there and then she turned her head just enough to see the driver again.

One pupil still wide, the other small. The chest rose, barely. There was a pause that should not have been there between breaths. She traced the rise with her eyes until she was sure she wasn’t making it up. A missed breath. Another shallow. She had seen enough head injuries to know how this went.

The second ambulance pulled in behind theirs, tyres throwing spray. A crew in green jumped down, one of them already pulling on gloves, the other pulling the trolley. ‘We’ll transport,’ the paramedic called. ‘What’ve you got?’

‘Nine-year-old male, rear offside. Airway supported, collar on, extricated. GCS nine. He rouses to voice. Oxygen is bringing him up. No obvious external bleeding. Chest stable on palpation. Abdomen soft. Driver front seat, unconscious, likely intracranial, trapped.’

‘Right. We’ve got him.’

Cerys keyed her radio. ‘Second crew, take the driver front seat. Irregular breathing, significant entrapment.’

They lifted the boy onto the trolley. He turned his head a fraction against the collar, a slow, stubborn movement. As they pushed toward the open ambulance doors, his hand reached sideways until it found air. Cerys stepped into that space and let his fingers meet hers. His hand was small, damp, and it clamped down hard in a grip that surprised her with its strength.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘Strong as you like. We’ll see you soon.’

He held on until the trolley caught a bump at the lip and rolled inside. His grip loosened on its own. A paramedic took his hand, and then he was

in the lit space and away.

The woman, Jamie's mother, stood up from where she'd folded. 'Thank you,' she said. She pressed both hands to her chest. She looked at the front seat again. 'My husband, '

Cerys nodded toward the arriving crew. 'They're with him now.' She was careful with her tone. 'They'll do what can be done.'

'Please,' the woman said, and then she bit on the word and swallowed it, as if even asking again might pull a hand away from her son.

Police had a cordon up now. The lorry driver was still in his cab, face set forward, eyes unfixed. A firefighter brought a ladder and another placed a chock under the trailer to stop any shift. The rain eased, then thickened again.

Cerys stood by while the second crew moved to the driver, and she did a check round for anyone who had sat down on the hard shoulder and gone quiet. A man with a cut on his scalp stared at his own hands. She pressed a pad of gauze to his head and told him to hold it. He nodded without looking up.

'We can take another,' Tariq said, coming up beside her. He had put the bag away and looked at her the way he looked at the monitor when the trace changed in a way he didn't like.

She wiped rain off her face with the back of her glove and didn't answer that. They both heard the driver's breath stutter again from the front seat. Fire had a spreader on the sill, but there were too many points of crush to make it quick. It was going to take time they didn't have.

'We can take another,' Tariq said again, low.

'We can,' she said. 'But he won't be the one.' Her jaw locked.

They handed over what they had done to the police sergeant and cleared the most obvious hazards they could without stepping over Fire's lines. When she finally climbed back into the cab, her legs moved but slow.

Tariq turned the heater up a notch. His beard was wet, water clinging in the short hair along his jaw. He flicked his eyes to her and then to the road. 'Control wants us to clear. We'll head back, restock, wash it off.'

'Fine,' she said.

They pulled away. The tyres hummed on the wet surface. She watched the mirror long enough to see the second crew pull out with the boy, lights on, then the mirror moved and the curve of the overpass hid them.

She breathed too fast. She set herself on the seat, feet planted, and counted. In for four. Hold for two. Out for six. She did it again. And again. The tight pull below her ribs eased.

'They'll add overtime for that,' Tariq said finally. His tone was flat enough that it didn't ask anything of her.

'Great,' she said. She checked the side mirror. Rain ran along the glass in clear paths and then broke.

'Quid says the form's two pages longer than it needs to be.'

'Not taking that bet.' She kept her eyes on the lanes ahead. He didn't push. He never did when he could see she was still in it.

They drove back through the low north roads where old mills stood dark in the grey, and the air tasted of wet iron. She watched the wipers move and then counted one more set for good measure.

Disinfectant still stung her hands from the wash-down. The key turned in the cylinder with the same little grind it always made. Cerys put her shoulder to the door and pushed. The flat came with that first steady breath she always took when the door opened. Damp wool smell from the coat rack, the faint sweetness of cereal, a trace of detergent. A bowl sat by the sink with a bent spoon in it. On the fridge, a fox-shaped magnet held a

new drawing, two rounded shapes for a tree crown and a trunk that leaned to one side.

She put the kettle on without thinking about it. Water hit metal and clicked as it warmed. She peeled off her damp jacket and hung it on the back of a chair. Her boots left dark marks on the lino until she pulled them off and set them on the mat by the door.

The bedroom door opened on a soft scrape. Maya came out rubbing her eyes, hair sticking every which way. The sleeves of her school jumper covered her hands past the knuckles. 'You're back,' she said, voice thick.

'I am,' Cerys said. 'Did you sleep?'

Maya nodded and pushed herself onto a chair, small legs swinging. 'I woke up. Then I didn't.' She looked at the kettle. 'Tea?'

'Tea,' Cerys said. She poured hot water over the bag and watched the colour bloom into the mug. A second mug for Maya, half milk and a splash of tea. She brought the warm cups to the table and set one in front of the child.

Maya cupped hers with both hands. 'It's not night now,' she announced, looking at the window where the light showed the grey. Rain ticked on the sill.

'It's morning. Or something like it.'

'You smell like rain,' Maya said. 'And like the van.'

'Ambulance,' Cerys corrected, automatic, and then she softened it. 'Yeah.'

Maya pointed at the fridge. 'I made a new picture.'

Cerys went over and looked at it. The tree leaned toward the left and the ground sat like a straight line under it. The crown was a scribble of green. There were two stick figures under it: one big, one small, both with hands out. 'Our tree,' she said.

‘The one near the swing,’ Maya said. ‘The bird sat in it last week. The black-and-white one.’

‘Magpie,’ Cerys said. ‘He’ll be back if we bring shiny things.’

Maya’s eyes widened. ‘Like the fox magnet?’

‘Fox magnet is staying put,’ Cerys said. She took the drawing off, smoothed the edge where the paper had crinkled, and put it back. ‘The trunk’s good. I like the bend. Trees don’t grow straight just because we think they should.’

Maya considered that as if it were a new rule in a game. ‘Miss said mine was messy.’

‘Miss can be wrong,’ Cerys said. She kept her tone light. ‘You do your work. You listen. Sometimes you know something she doesn’t. That’s all.’

Maya drank and made a small sound when the warm hit her belly. Then she slid down and fetched her school bag from beside the sofa. ‘We forgot my PE kit yesterday.’

‘We did,’ Cerys said. She stood and lifted the bag onto the table. They packed together, Maya saying the names of things as she tucked them in: shirt, shorts, socks. Cerys found the missing plimsoll under the chair and shook out a dust bunny. She put a small packet of plasters in the front pocket without making a fuss of it.

‘Again?’ Maya said, catching the corner of it.

‘Always good to have,’ Cerys said. She reached to the kitchen drawer and took out the small first-aid kit. She opened it. Things had a way of migrating. The roll of tape had stuck to itself; she freed it and set it right. One bandage was yellowed and stiff from age. She swapped it for a fresh one from the stash under the sink and closed the tin. None of it needed talking about.

‘Mum,’ Maya said, watching rain run down the glass, each line joining another. ‘It’s never going to stop.’

Cerys looked toward the window. A sheet of water ran steady off the gutter onto the concrete below. 'This is Haleston. Stopping would be suspicious.'

Maya smiled with half her mouth. 'What if it does stop?'

'Then we'll have a picnic anyway,' Cerys said. She reached over and ruffled Maya's hair. The curls sprang and fell. 'I'm on again tonight. I'll be back by your bedtime tomorrow. That's the plan.'

Maya looked at her in the way she did when she wanted to fix the words in place. 'By bedtime.'

'By bedtime,' Cerys said again. Plans slipped. She didn't say that part out loud.

They cleared the table. Maya rinsed her own mug with care that made the plate clink against the sink but not break. Then she yawned fast and bright. 'I'm going back to bed. You sleep too.'

'I will,' Cerys said.

She followed Maya down the short hallway. The bed in the small room had a duvet with faded stars on it and a pile of soft animals at the foot. Maya climbed in and pulled the duvet up to her chin. 'You'll wake me for school?' she asked, eyes closing as she said it.

'I will,' Cerys said. She stood in the doorway a moment longer than she needed to. Her palm still held the damp clamp of his hand. She took in the curve of Maya's cheek against the pillow, the way her hands tucked under the duvet, the rise and fall she had counted when Maya had been a baby. She fixed those lines. It was a habit she had made without naming it.

Back in the kitchen, she peeled off her uniform shirt and trousers and draped them over the back of a chair. The creases showed the last hours. She set her phone alarm for two o'clock and plugged it in by the kettle. She left the first-aid kit on the counter. She picked up her mug and let the warmth sit in her hands. The flat was quiet. The only sound was rain on

the sill and the soft run of water through the gutter outside.

When she finally lay down, the images stayed: the boy's hand closing on hers, the woman's lips shaping the start of a plea. She turned her face into the pillow. The pillow smelled of laundry powder and her own hair. Her breath lengthened as the warm mug's last heat left her hands.

By late afternoon the rain had thinned but the sky kept its dull cast. The depot's concrete yard showed every tyre mark. Cerys swung into the bay with the ambulance and lined it up with the yellow paint. Tariq hopped down from the other side and stretched his shoulders until his back clicked.

'Back again,' he said. He flagged her a half-salute and went around to check the side compartments.

'Again,' Cerys said. She logged into the MDT with the number she could key without thinking now. The screen blinked up the Control login, a list of calls already queued. The next job pinged before she could read the rest. Industrial estate at Old Quay. Possible injury, unclear mechanism, caller cut off.

'Old Quay,' Tariq said, glancing at the screen. 'Wet pallets and bored security.'

'Or lads with nothing to do and a forklift,' Cerys said. She pulled her seat belt across and clicked it in. They traded a look; wipers clicked up a notch.

They rolled out past the big new supermarket that had gone up on the old mill site. The road dropped toward the water. Buildings along the way smelled of old brick. She breathed it in. She had slept, but not deep. It was enough.

Traffic slid. Buses threw spray. A cyclist swerved around a pothole he knew was there without looking. They knew these roads and how traffic behaved when wet.

On approach to the estate, the signage got mixed, old companies thrown out, new names bolted on crooked, phone numbers half torn. A warehouse wall took up the view to the left, corrugated metal flaking at the joins. A sign above a loading bay hung on one chain so it sat crooked, two letters gone. The other chain made a sound as the wind hit it. There were no cars in front of that unit, just a skip with wet cardboard sagging over its edge.

Cerys noticed it and then moved on. The estate spread ahead in blocks of storage and light manufacturing, each with a security fence that kept nothing out if someone wanted in. A lone gull stood on the line of a roof and then lifted in a breeze. She marked where they were, mapped the short cuts to the main road if they needed to turn round fast with someone in the back.

The MDT pinged. Tariq put a palm on the dash and sighed a theatrical sigh so it would not be just her hearing the change. ‘Control says reroute. Caller from Old Quay hung up. New job, two streets over: fall at a takeaway.’

‘Copy,’ Cerys said. ‘Blue?’

‘Negative.’

She tapped to accept. The new address was a chicken place with a name that had been old when she started. They swung right and then left into a street lined with shuttered units and three still open because someone always wanted food when the rain took the heat out of the day.

The takeaway was bright inside and steamed at the windows. A man in his thirties leaned on the counter with his left arm hugged to his chest. Oil hung in the air. A girl behind the counter held a wad of blue roll against her lip where she had bitten it.

‘Who’s the patient?’ Cerys asked. The man lifted his chin at himself with a tight mouth.

‘Slipped in the back,’ he said. ‘Floor’s a mess. We mopped. I went over. It hurts.’

‘Let’s have a look,’ she said. In the small back kitchen, the floor was shiny with a film that even shoes with tread couldn’t trust. The man’s trainers had left a skid mark across it, heel-to-toe. He sat on a stool and let her feel the arm. Nothing moved that shouldn’t. There was swelling at the wrist and tenderness over the scaphoid.

‘We’ll put a splint on and you’ll need an X-ray,’ she said. ‘No food prep until that’s sorted. You can’t lift. Boss will hate it. Not my problem.’

He snorted in a short burst that was half laugh, half pain. ‘Boss is me.’

‘Then you’ve no one to complain to,’ Tariq said from the doorway. He had found a dry bit of floor to lean on. He handed Cerys the vacuum splint and tape. She set the wrist straight, kept it there, and wrapped. The man hissed through his teeth and then looked relieved. She checked his fingers for blood flow and sensation. All right. She wrote the referral note even though she knew he might not go until after the supper rush if he didn’t see the need.

‘You can go by car,’ she said. ‘No need for us to take you unless you can’t get there. Keep the hand up when you’re not cutting chips. No oil on the floor. That’s free advice.’

He nodded, chastened but also busy in his head already with how much his absence would cost him. ‘Thanks.’

Back in the cab, the smell of oil lingered in the fabric. Tariq hummed the start of a tune from the radio and then stopped halfway, caught himself, embarrassed. She smiled without showing teeth.

‘Don’t,’ he said, mock warning.

‘I didn’t say anything,’ she said.

The MDT pinged again. A pending job queued up for later. The street name sat on the screen: same road as the derelict unit with the crooked sign. Her thumb paused above the screen.

Tariq saw it too. 'Later, then,' he said. He drummed two fingers on the edge of the screen and then tucked his hand away.

'Later,' Cerys said. She did not comment further. Sometimes a thing was a thing and nothing else. She logged the last job as complete and checked the kit list. Sufficient stock. No reason to turn back to depot yet.

The rain had nearly stopped by then but the roads still shone under the sodium lights. When shutters were up, light from the units fell across the wet road, then cut off when they came down. They took the long route back toward Southside only because it let them see what was moving in the parts of the city that didn't register unless you drove them night after night. Bridges arced in the near distance. Old mill stacks stood black against the sky. On one corner a man in a thin jacket held his arms tight around himself and waited for a bus that might not come for twenty minutes. She noted it the way she always did: this street, that unit, the corner where kids cut between the fences to get home from the estate.

The light faded. Lights came on and the day lost what colour it had. They took the long route past Old Quay. At the derelict unit, the crooked sign moved on its single chain and the loose chain clicked once against metal.

Chapter 2

The First Touch

Rain beaded along the edge of the loading bay and gathered in the lip of the metal, then ran off in slow threads. The sign above sat on one chain, two letters gone. The loose chain clicked once against the bracket when the wind shifted.

Cerys put her palm to the cold door and pushed. The side access gave a centimetre with a scrape and stopped. She leaned in and gave it more. The seal parted with a wet sound. The smell inside was damp and old oil. Something had leaked a long time ago and soaked into the concrete. Water had climbed up the blockwork in a tide mark that reached her thigh.

‘Control, three-four-one on scene,’ Tariq said into the radio. ‘Old Quay, Unit Twelve-B. Welfare check from earlier. No police on scene. We’re going to take a look.’

‘Received,’ Control said. ‘Proceed with caution. Inform if you require assistance.’

Cerys put her shoulder to the door one more time and it opened wide enough to slip through. She held it for Tariq and let it settle against her back for a second before it thudded against a stop. The dark inside was not full. Open floor, pillars, a grid of shadows under the mezzanine. Water dripped somewhere on a steady beat. The beam from Tariq’s torch cut along the floor and picked out a scatter of pallet wrap and a broken broom.

‘Hello?’ he called. ‘Ambulance service.’

Their voices came back thin from the far wall. Nothing moved. She listened past the drip. Behind the crates at the left, something caught her ear. Not a scrape. Breath.

‘There,’ she said quietly. She pointed with two fingers.

They moved together, Tariq a step behind and to her right. Crates stood scuffed and damp at the base, arrows printed on the sides faded to ghosts. The gap behind them opened into a low triangle where someone could have crawled to get out of the wind.

Cerys crouched and angled the torch. A figure lay curled on his side, back to them, knees drawn up. Clothing was wrong for the weather, thin and torn, no coat. The fabric stuck to his skin in a dark patch at the flank.

‘Sir?’ she said. ‘Can you hear me?’ She kept her voice level and low.

He flinched but did not turn. His breath came fast and shallow. Tariq’s torch swept and found the wet slick under him. It was not red. It was darker, almost grey where it pooled.

‘Jesus,’ Tariq said, and then checked himself. ‘You seeing that?’

‘I’m seeing it,’ she said. She slid in on her knee, felt old grit bite through her trousers. ‘Sir. I’m going to help you. Don’t move.’

She touched his shoulder through the fabric. The skin under it was too cold for a closed room, and too smooth. When she eased him half onto his back, his face caught the light. Pale, yes, but not with blood loss. It was the sort of pale that had no depth to it. Silver ran faint under the skin at his temple and along the vein at his neck, a filigree that did not belong on any person she had treated before.

Her gaze dropped to the wound. The tear ran along the edge of the lowest rib and back toward the spine, four fingers long. Not a clean cut. The edge had been torn by something rough. The grey fluid leaked and tracked toward a rusted nail head on the crate base. Where it touched, the metal fizzed and left a pale ring.

‘Cerys,’ Tariq said, a warning and a question both.

‘We’ve got to stop the loss,’ she said. She didn’t stop to make sense of the grey. The body in front of her was losing something it needed to keep. That was enough.

She stripped a dressing pad out of the pouch, but her hands went straight to the tear, fingers wide for pressure. The skin at the flank was cool and dry. It was habit. It was the thing that kept blood in and air out.

Heat surged up into her palms. It was sudden, deep, and wrong. She almost pulled away but the body under her hands stiffened and then eased, and the breath evened, so she held where she was.

Light flared, a hard white. She saw it through her closed lids. It had the glare of welding. The skin at the edge of the tear drew together under her hands as if pulled by a cord beneath. The wet that had slicked the dressing turned thin and stopped. Copper rose in her mouth.

‘What did you,’ Tariq didn’t finish.

Cerys kept her hands set for a count, then leaned her weight back. The torn edges had closed into a narrow seam. It was not clean work like a surgeon’s. The line was puckered, a new scar already raised. The pad in her palm was warm. She pressed again, lighter, and nothing came away.

The man’s eyes opened. They were dark and wide. He looked at her face and then at her hands. He pushed back with heels and elbows until his shoulders hit crate. His mouth shaped a sound; it made it out on a breath. ‘No,’ he said, and then, softer, ‘Thanks.’ The two words did not fit together but he made them fit as best he could.

‘You need to stay still,’ she said. ‘You’ve torn deep. We need to check the rest of you.’

He shook his head once, fast. The movement was jittery with fear. He slid sideways into the gap, found a space she had not seen, and was on his feet before the torch found him. He went into the dark beyond the crates and toward the back.

‘Wait,’ Cerys said, uselessly. He didn’t wait.

Tariq stepped up onto a pallet and swung the beam to the rear. A service door stood ajar. A line of water had tracked in from the alley. Wet prints showed across the dust and then broke up into smear, then nothing.

‘You’re having a laugh,’ Tariq said. He breathed out through his nose, steadying himself. ‘Control, three-four-one. No patient on scene at Twelve-B. Interior searched. Area non-secure. Log as no trace.’

‘Received,’ Control said. ‘Log as no trace. Police informed for building security check.’

Cerys stayed crouched long enough to feel the room tilt and then settle. Nausea rose behind her tongue in a sharp wave and then passed. Sweat cooled on her back under the uniform. Her palms burned as if she had just taken a pan out of an oven. She flexed her fingers once and swallowed.

‘What did you do?’ Tariq said. He did not look away from her hands.

‘Pressure,’ she said. ‘It closed. That’s all.’ She kept her eyes on the floor when she said it.

‘Pressure doesn’t,’ He stopped himself. It was not a conversation to have in a dark unit with a door open to an alley. ‘Right. Fine. We sweep and we go.’

They checked the perimeter by torch. The drip at the far wall hit a puddle and splattered. Somewhere above, a loose panel moved when a gust came through a hole in the roof. They found no one behind the mezzanine stairs, no one in the narrow office space. A nest of old cable ties near the back door held a grey smear. The print he had left was gone.

Outside, the rain started again in a light fall. The chain clicked once and fell still. Cerys pulled the side door shut until the latch caught. Tariq keyed the radio to mark them clear.

In the cab, she stripped her gloves off and tossed them into the orange waste bag. Her hands were pink at the pads, the way they looked

after too much scrubbing. She held them out over her knees and watched the rise and fall of them with her breath. The heat dulled but did not fade. She turned them over. Lines crossed her palms in the same way they always had. Nothing on the skin told the story of what had just happened.

‘You saw it,’ Tariq said. He didn’t try to make it lighter. ‘The light.’

She put her hands on the wheel to give them something to do that was ordinary. ‘I saw a lot of things in there.’

He huffed once and looked away. ‘Right.’ He glanced back at the warehouse. ‘We’ll get one of the night units to swing past. He’ll be gone.’

‘He’s gone now,’ she said. She checked the mirrors out of habit and pulled away.

They drove in silence for three streets. The estate slipped by in blocks of dark and wet reflection. A fox cut across two lanes ahead of them and vanished between a fence and a skip. Her hands had stopped burning by the time they hit the main road, but a fine tremor ran between the heel and the little finger of her right hand. She tightened her grip on the wheel until it quieted.

At the depot they washed down, restocked, logged out. She kept to the steps and found her pace again.

By the time she keyed the flat door, the damp smell was gone; antiseptic clung to her hands.

She shut the door. Damp wool and oil clung until she peeled the jacket off. She dropped her keys in the bowl that sat on the shoe cabinet. It made the same dull sound it always made. She stood in the hallway and listened. The building ticked in small ways. Someone turned a tap in the flat below. No footsteps in her own rooms. Maya slept.

In the kitchen the window showed a slab of grey sky that was not quite morning and not night either. She opened the fridge for milk and cold air washed past her face. On the side of the fridge a photo sat under a plain magnet. Maya at five, in a red coat that ate her hands, standing next to a carved wooden deer with antlers too big for its head. She had been laughing so hard that her eyes had nearly closed. Whoever had taken it had caught her mid-breath.

Cerys's throat tightened against nothing. She waited for the rest of it to come: the name of the place, the path they had walked to get there, the cafe where they had sat after. Nothing came. She reached for the place and found nothing. Just a gap.

She knew she should be able to say it out loud to the empty room: This is where that was. She set the milk on the counter and leaned her knuckles on the bench. The effort to pull the detail in gave her a small ache behind the eyes. She closed them. It did not help.

A door down the hall creaked and Maya came in on soft feet, hair stuck up at the crown. She wore the old star pyjama top and one sock. 'Mum?' she said. 'Is it morning?'

'Close enough,' Cerys said. She made her voice warm. 'You woke up.'

Maya rubbed her eye and looked past Cerys. 'That deer picture. When was that?'

Cerys nodded once and did not let herself look straight at the photo. 'A while ago,' she said. Reaching for the bread, she held up a slice. She wet her lips. 'Toast?'

'Yes,' Maya said. She watched the slice slip into the toaster and then put her hands on the edge of the counter to pull herself up onto a chair. 'Can I have the crunchy bit on the crust?'

'Both crunchy bits,' Cerys said. She glanced down at Maya's feet. 'Where are your school shoes?'

'By the door,' Maya said. 'I put them there. You told me to.'

‘Good,’ Cerys said. She watched the toaster and waited for the heat to take. She kept her face toward the bread as if that were what she had meant to do all along. ‘We’ll leave early if the rain stops. If it doesn’t, we’ll be on the bus.’

They ate the toast at the little table. Maya chewed and kicked her bare heel against the rung in a steady rhythm, then paused to take a sip of milk. She made a face. ‘Cold,’ she said.

‘That’s the point of milk,’ Cerys said. It came out gentler than she felt.

When Maya carried her plate to the sink and put it down without dropping it, Cerys stood and pulled the photo free of the magnet. The magnet stuck to the enamel with a small click. The photo was glossy and stiff. The back was blank. No date. No place. No handwriting to pin it to anything.

She held it away from her face, as if another angle might show her something she had missed. The carved deer stood on a platform with a rope along the edge. Behind it a hedge had been clipped into a tight curve. She could not trace the hedge to any park she knew. The gap stayed a gap.

The ache behind her eyes crept forward toward her temples. She put the photo down on the counter and breathed out, hard. The breath shook at the end. She looked toward the hall. Maya had gone to brush her teeth. The sound of running water in the bathroom covered the small sounds she made in the kitchen.

She pulled the top drawer open. Plasters, the roll of tape, the small metal first-aid tin with a faint dent in one corner. She slid the photo under the instruction leaflets she never read because she could make a sling in her sleep. The back of the photo caught for a moment on a stray paper clip and then lay flat. She closed the drawer, not slammed, just shut.

Her palms throbbed. The skin was no longer pink but the ache sat deep. She turned the tap and ran cold water until it came clear and cold, then held her hands under it, left, then right, then both cupped so the

water pooled and spilled. The ache dulled a little with the cold. She watched the water trail off her fingers and drip into the sink. The routine kept her breathing even.

Maya came back and stood in the doorway with toothpaste foam at the edge of her mouth. 'You forgot the lunchbox,' she announced.

Cerys turned and passed her a cloth. 'You forgot your mouth. We're a pair.'

Maya wiped and grinned. 'We're a pair.' She stood on one foot and then the other, thinking. 'Is the fox magnet going to hold my new picture again?'

'It always will,' Cerys said. She pushed the magnet up with one finger and straightened the drawing underneath it. 'Get your socks. The thick ones.'

'Okay.' Maya padded off.

Cerys shut off the tap and shook her hands dry. She stood there, hands on the edge of the sink, and made herself recount the route from the flat to the school without missing a turn. Left at the end of their street, down past the off-licence, right at the crossing, the big puddle by the broken drain cover, the brown door where the cat watched. The map held. It stayed in place. She let out a breath she hadn't realised she had been keeping and took up the lunchbox to pack it.

When the time came to go, the shoes were by the door where Maya had said. Cerys tied the laces and put a finger to the fox magnet as she passed the fridge, a habit she did not name, and locked the flat behind them.

The canteen's heater clicked as it cycled. The room smelled of vending machine coffee and old toast. A noticeboard along one wall held

shift swaps and a flyer for a charity run no one had signed up for. Cerys sat with her back to the board and her hands around a mug that had given up on heat ten minutes earlier.

Tariq set his tray down. Two slices of toast, no butter. 'Remind me why we do this?' he said. He sat across from her and eyed the toast like it had wronged him.

'Pension,' she said.

'Right,' he said, dry. He picked up a slice and put it down again. 'What did you do in that warehouse?'

She didn't blink. 'Pressure,' she said. 'I told you.'

He tried for levity. 'What are you now, magic hands?' He stopped when she didn't smile.

He glanced at her hands where they wrapped the mug, then away. 'There was light.'

'Your torch,' she said.

'My torch was on the wall,' he said. He swallowed, not toast. 'Look, I don't need a story. I need to know if there's a hazard I should be aware of before I go sticking my hand in places.'

'There's always a hazard,' she said. She kept her voice level, almost soft. 'Rust. Rot. Glass.' She set the mug down, turned it an inch, then back. 'And people who don't want us there.'

He watched her for a count. His mouth tightened at the corners. He paused, jaw set, eyes on her hands.

She didn't smile. 'You know better.'

He let the toast alone. 'I do,' he said. 'I also know I've been doing this same job as you for years and I've never seen a wound close like that. You want me to pretend I didn't?'

She looked down at the table. The laminate had a crack near the corner where someone had set a hot pan years ago. ‘Pretend whatever you need to to keep doing the job,’ she said. ‘We had a patient. He left. That’s what we’ve got.’

He exhaled through his nose and sat back. ‘Control flagged another Old Quay welfare at dawn,’ he said after a moment, as if changing the subject to prove he could. ‘Different unit. Different number. Probably nothing.’

‘Probably,’ she said. She turned the mug and kept her gaze on the table.

He picked up his toast and ate it. When he was done, he wiped crumbs off his hands and off the table into his palm and tipped them into the bin on his way back with the tray. He stood there with his back to her for a second longer than necessary, then came back and sat.

Her hands were under the table. She flexed the fingers of her right hand and watched the small tremor run and then ease when she pressed thumb to palm. She rubbed the heel of her hand against the seam of her trousers to ground it. The heat wasn’t there now. Just the after-tingle and the sense that something had been spent and would not come back.

‘If I’m in your way,’ Tariq began.

‘You’re not,’ she said, too fast, then gentler. ‘You’re not.’

The radio crackled. ‘Three-four-one, are you available to deploy?’ Control’s voice sat flat in the air like it always did when the list grew long and day crews were late on jobs.

Tariq reached for the handset. ‘Three-four-one, available,’ he said. He looked at Cerys. ‘You ready?’

She stood first. The chair legs scraped. ‘Always.’ She meant it and didn’t. She meant she would stand up and go when called. She meant her hands would do what they had been trained to do.

They walked out together into the bay. The ambulance sat with its nose toward the yard, waiting. Rain had started again in a fine mist that turned the concrete dark. Cerys climbed in, logged into the MDT, and put her fingers on the keys. The screen blinked and wrote their next job in the same font it always used.

Tariq got in on the other side and shut the door. For a moment they sat in the small space together and did not speak. She read the address; he keyed the lights. Their hands went where they always did.

Chapter 3

The Child at the Threshold

The knock came before dawn. Two quick, one slow. Not a neighbour's drunk fist, not the meter reader who always hit the wood too hard. Cerys lay still for a second and listened. Nothing else moved. Maya's breath ran quiet down the hall.

She sat up. The sheets were cold at the edge where she had not reached in the night. Her shoulder gave a small ache when she reached for the dressing gown on the chair. That was routine. She tied the belt and moved barefoot through the short hall, past the kitchen where the fox magnet sat crooked on the fridge. She straightened it without thinking and kept going.

At the door she checked the chain, moved the latch, and opened enough to see. Damp air pushed in from the stairwell. Rain had blown into the concrete at the landing and left dark patches where feet had walked. On the landing stood a woman Cerys had not seen before and a boy wrapped in a grey blanket, head against the woman's ribs. The woman's hair sat in a thick grey braid over one shoulder; her clothes were layered and the colours ran to earth. Her hands were lined and knotted at the knuckles, but they did not shake. Her eyes were brown and steady.

'Yes?' Cerys said. Her voice came out low. She kept her body in the gap and did not widen it yet.

'You mend what iron opens,' the woman said. She was not out of breath from the stairs. She was not apologising for the hour. She angled her head so Cerys could see the boy's face. 'He is dying. You can help.'

Cerys's first breath came in short. She did not look away from the boy to the woman until she had taken a second breath and made it full. The boy's skin had no colour to it. Not the chalk of winter children, not the grey of hypoxia. It was pale in another way. His hair stuck to his forehead in points. The blanket was damp along one edge. Under the edge, his wrists showed, and at each wrist a set of fine silver lines traced the veins.

From down the hall, Maya turned over and muttered in her sleep. It was the soft sound she made when a dream shifted and did not settle yet. Cerys held the edge of the door. She knew the weight of the chain in her hand. She knew the shape of this choice the way she knew the steps from her flat to the road in the rain without looking down.

'What is his name?' she said.

'Rook,' the woman said.

The name sat between them. It told Cerys nothing but the sound. The woman did not offer more.

'I'm,' Cerys began, and stopped herself giving her name out of habit. Her name was on the postbox downstairs and the lease and Maya's school records. She put that to one side. 'All right,' she said. 'Come in.'

She slid the chain free and opened the door fully. The woman did not waste the movement. She turned sideways and brought the boy in through the gap with care for his head and for the frame. The boy's breath made a sound high in his chest. Not a whistle. A dry drag. The edge of the blanket brushed the frame and left a wet mark on the gloss paint.

Cerys backed into the small lounge and cleared the end of the sofa with an arm. The woman lowered the boy onto the cushions as if she had been carrying weight for too long and knew how to put it down without losing it. She adjusted the blanket by habit to protect the boy's feet and then took her hands away. She met Cerys's eyes. The woman stepped back. Her face did not change.

'I'm Orla,' she said then, as if a name, once a thing was done, was safe enough to give.

'Cerys,' she said, because there was no point in holding it now. 'Shut the door behind you.'

Orla did. The catch took. Cerys moved around the sofa to the kitchen and filled a clean glass with tap water. The water ran cold at first and then less so. She let it run until it stayed cold. She put the glass on the table and went back to the boy. Up close his skin was damp as if the heat in him had driven water out to the surface to cool him and failed.

'How long?' she said.

Orla looked not at the clock on the cooker, which did not keep good time, but at the boy's face. 'Since yesterday,' she said. 'The spike came in the night.'

'He been drinking?' Cerys said. She put the back of her fingers to the boy's temple and then the inside of her wrist to his cheek. Heat came up against her skin. It was the sort of heat that hangs on and does not break for hours. When she slid two fingers to his wrist for a pulse, his skin there felt warmer than the rest. Up close, the heat at his wrist carried a faint metal tang. The silver lines at the wrist sat under her touch. A copper taste rose at the back of her mouth. The pulse itself came fast and then stuttered and then ran fast again. She counted to fifteen and multiplied and did not like the answer.

'Little,' Orla said. 'He keeps it down but not much.'

'Any cough?' Cerys said.

'Yes,' Orla said. 'Dry. He holds it in.'

'All right.' Cerys slipped her hand to the boy's sternum and watched his breath under her palm. He ran thirty breaths in a minute, too quick for comfort and not deep enough. She lifted his head with a folded cushion to open the airway and did not like the sound that came with the next breath, a scrape that had nothing to do with a blocked nose.

Cerys placed the cushion and pedalled the small window open a thumb's width to let air move. The rain had eased to a fine fall. Cold sat against the glass. At the sink, she dampened a clean cloth and wrung it hard, then laid it across his forehead and the back of his neck. She slid the edge of the cloth under the hair at the base of his skull. He made a small sound at that and his hands shifted under the blanket but he did not wake fully.

'Rook,' she said softly. 'Can you hear me?' She put her voice in the narrow range she used for frightened children and for drunks on the edge of fighting. Warm, even, no surprise in it.

His eyes opened. Dark eyes, too large in a thin face. He took her in and then Orla and then the ceiling. He did not speak. His mouth was a straight line that stayed shut. When she touched the glass of water to his lip, his tongue moved and he made the swallow shape and took two small sips and then turned his head away on his own. He had some control, then. That was something.

'I'm going to keep you cool,' she said. 'Small sips. Slow breaths.' She set a hand at the base of his ribs and moved it in a gentle rhythm he could follow. In. Out. In. Out. He watched her mouth more than he watched her hand. His fingers loosened at the blanket; his jaw unclenched a notch.

Orla stood not far off, out of any line of movement, and did not fuss. When Cerys lifted the glass again, Orla steadied the boy's shoulder with two fingers so he did not twist. There was a kind of approval in it that had nothing to do with manners. It was the approval a person gives when someone else knows the right sequence in the right order.

From the doorway to the hall, Maya said, 'Mum?' The sleep sat heavy on her voice. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. She did not step into the room until Cerys looked up and met her and made the small nod that meant it was all right to come nearer.

'It's early,' Maya said.

'I know,' Cerys said. 'This is Rook. He's a friend's boy. He got sick. We're cooling him down.' She kept her tone like she was talking about toast. She nodded toward the bedroom. 'Can you get the small fan? The white one on the shelf.'

Maya looked at Rook the way children look when they know not to stare and cannot help it. Frank and careful together. She nodded and went to get the fan. Her feet were quiet on the hall carpet. The tap in the kitchen started to ring; the pipes vibrated with the shower in the flat below. Cerys tightened the tap and the noise dropped. The quiet in the room came back: the boy's breath, the soft wet sound when the cloth collected the heat from his head.

Maya came back with the fan braced awkwardly against her stomach. 'It's dusty,' she said, catching the plug lead in one hand.

'Put it on the chair there,' Cerys said. 'Point it low. Not on his face. We'll move the air across, not blast him.'

Maya set it down and crouched to find the switch. The fan was the cheap kind from the supermarket, three blades behind a plastic grille. It made a small hum when it turned and moved a light stream of air across the sofa. Cerys watched the cloth lift a little at the edge and then settle. She set the blanket so it lay across the boy's torso but left his arms free to lose heat along the length of the silvered lines. When she moved the blanket, the lines caught the light and looked deeper for a second, then faded back under the thin skin.

Rook coughed then. It was a raw sound that scraped the throat and came up with nothing useful. He turned his head aside and pressed his mouth into the cloth at his shoulder and held it until it passed. When he eased it, he breathed out hard and kept his gaze on Cerys's mouth while she said, 'There you go. Breathe where my hand is.' She set the pace again and he matched it as best he could in small, quick pulls. On her next count, his breath found her pace sooner.

Orla's hand hovered and then withdrew. She let Cerys lead and did not cross the line she had set. After the cough, she said, in the same flat tone she had used at the door, 'Iron makes us sick. The pipes, the rails, the buildings. This city is full of it.'

Cerys did not look up. 'All right,' she said. 'You're out of the rain now.' She filed the words where she kept things that might matter later and for now did not change what she had to do.

She checked the boy's pulse again. When her fingers found the silvered wrist, a brief heat ran across her palm. It was still high and less erratic. Sometimes that was just the body agreeing with the pace it was given. Sometimes it meant nothing. She checked the capillary refill at his fingernails and found it slow. Dehydration. No surprise there. She raised the glass and let him wet his mouth and take one swallow more. His throat moved and the skin pulled tight in the hollow there. He kept the second swallow down.

'Mum, is he going to be okay?' Maya said. Her voice had lost sleep now and gained something else, the thin edge of worry children hold without the words to hold it up.

'We're helping him,' Cerys said. She did not say more. Help was the true word she had.

Maya nodded like that was good enough and stood on tiptoe to adjust the fan so it moved the air across the cloth and away. She looked at Orla then, as if she had been taught to introduce herself when adults came into the flat. She opened her mouth and then closed it. Orla gave her a small nod that was almost a bow and not the kind of thing most adults did. Maya seemed to accept that and went to the kitchen to get a clean glass like she knew the steps in a drill she had watched before.

Cerys watched Rook's throat move with the next swallow and then set the glass down. She looked for shivering under the blanket and found none yet. She looked at the skin around his mouth for a blue-grey that would mean they were losing the easy fight for air and saw only the pale

he had. She listened for crackles in the chest when he breathed. The breath was shallow and fast but clear at the bases. She did not want to hear the wet rattle of something lower.

'How did you find me?' Cerys said, not accusing. She kept her hand on the boy's chest and the rhythm steady and found she could ask without breaking her line.

Orla's gaze flicked to Cerys's hands and back to her face. 'Word gets around,' she said. 'About the warehouse.'

Cerys kept her eyes on Rook. Yesterday had an abandoned unit with damp in the walls and a man who had fled as soon as he could stand. Her palms had burned for a long time after. The ache was a dull thing now, deep in the pads, the memory of heat more than heat. She turned her right hand under the boy's ribs and felt the small tremor she had come to expect between the heel and the little finger. She pressed her thumb into her palm until it eased and kept the rhythm steady so the boy didn't feel the change.

Maya came back with a clean glass and a tea towel over her shoulder like she imagined herself an assistant. She put the glass on the table next to the first one and stood waiting.

'Good,' Cerys said. 'Can you bring the thin blanket from your bed? The blue one. Not the heavy one. We'll layer.'

Maya nodded and went again. Orla watched the child go and stood very still, as if any movement might break something set in place by care. The hum of the fan filled the small room out at the edges. Rain patted the window. Somewhere beyond the building a bus engine worked up a hill.

When Maya came back with the blanket, Cerys folded it longways and slid it under the boy's arms and over his torso. It trapped enough warmth to keep him from shaking but left his wrists and hands in the cooler air. He watched her mouth and then the fan and then her mouth again. He did not speak. He pressed his lips together and took the next breath where she showed him.

'Thank you,' Cerys said to Maya. 'Can you put the kettle on? Then put two slices in the toaster for you. Not for him. Not yet.'

Maya glanced at Rook and then at Orla and did what she was told. She filled the kettle and switched it on. The toaster took the bread and gave them both a small ordinary noise to hold on to: the click when it went down. The smell of bread starting to brown worked its way into the room in a thin line.

Orla moved a little closer and put two fingers to the cloth at Rook's temple. 'We brought him through places where the metal is thin,' she said. 'It still took from him.'

Cerys didn't look at her. She lifted the cloth, wrung it in the bowl she had ready, and set it back. 'He's here now,' she said.

There was no argument in Orla's face. There was the set of someone who had been making calculations and had found that, for this morning, this was the best one could be made. She steadied the glass when Cerys lifted it and then took her hand away again.

When the toast popped, Maya flinched and then laughed at herself for flinching. She put the slices on a plate and looked at Cerys. Cerys nodded toward the table. 'Eat,' she said. 'Quietly.' Maya sat and did as told, gaze back and forth between Rook and the plate. She ate the crusts first because she liked the crunch and because it kept her mouth busy so she didn't ask the questions that sat at the front of her eyes.

After the water, his pulse sat a little lower. That might hold. She listened to his breathing and counted again. Twenty-eight this time. She pushed the small window open another half detent and watched the air move in a way she could measure: the edge of the paper under the fox magnet lifted and lay down again.

'He'll need more than this,' Orla said. She did not add what more she thought that was.

Cerys said nothing to that. She looked at the clock that ran five minutes fast and at the pale light in the window that said the sky had gone from black to grey. She pictured the route to school and the time. She pictured her login at the depot and Tariq's face when she was late. She put those things one by one in a line and then set them aside and went back to the single count of the boy's breaths under her hand.

By the curtain the light thinned to a pale strip; the fan hummed on.

Cerys rinsed the cloth and set it back. She made herself drink half a mug of tea gone cool without tasting it. The hum of the fan had become part of the room. Rook slept now in the light way sick children sleep, not deep, not easy. Every noise skimmed him and did not wake him unless it had breath in it. He woke to Cerys's voice and to Orla's, not to the kettle or the toaster or the doors downstairs.

She sent a text to the neighbour in the next block, the one with the daughter in the year above Maya who sometimes walked them to the crossing when Cerys was late off nights. "Work's gone sideways. Can Maya come to yours after school? I'll collect by six. I'll owe you." The dots showed and went and came back. "Yes. Of course. Bring her lunch here at drop-off? We'll feed her."

"Thanks," Cerys typed. She deleted the heart. Sent the word. She put the phone down on the table and breathed out.

'You have work,' Orla said. It was not a question.

'I have this,' Cerys said. She glanced at the clock, counted his breaths to ten, then picked up the phone and found Tariq's number. He answered on the third ring.

'You're up early,' he said. She could hear the bay behind him, someone dropping a compartment door too hard and the hollow clang it made. 'We on?'

'I'll be late,' she said. 'I've got, ' She looked at Rook, at the fine lines at his wrists and the rise under the blanket. 'I've got something here that

can't wait.'

'What kind of something?' Tariq said. His tone was flat, the way he made space for the truth without pushing it hard in case it broke.

'Neighbour,' she said. That was almost true. 'Child sick. I won't be long.'

He did not answer for a beat. 'Text Control so they don't start the day with a hole in the roster,' he said finally. 'I'll cover the first job if they send one. Don't make a habit of it.'

'Wouldn't dream of it,' she said. The old joke fit between them, even when the shape around them had changed. She hung up and sent the text to Control that would sit in their system with a time stamp and a brief note: "Delay ETA 30. Family care." She put the phone face down.

Orla watched her set the phone down. 'If danger comes here,' she said, 'I will take him out.'

'No,' Cerys said. 'Not yet.' The word came out faster than she meant. She softened it. 'He's cooling. He took water. Let me keep him like this. If we move him now, he loses what we have.'

Orla lowered her chin a fraction. It was not agreement and not refusal. It was a marker put down between them: she would not argue but she would not forget that she had offered.

Maya had finished her toast and rinsed her plate. She stood by the table with her hands folded tight, a child's neatness that meant she wanted to do something. 'Can he have toast too?' she said.

'Later,' Cerys said. 'When the heat breaks.' She glanced at Maya's feet. 'Socks.'

Maya made a face and then went for them. She came back pulling the thick socks onto her feet with the little heel tab that always turned inside out. She bent double and fixed it in one swift movement and looked pleased with herself.

'Orla,' Cerys said, 'if there's something I need to know so I don't hurt him, say it now. Otherwise let me work.'

'If iron is near, he worsens,' Orla said. 'That's the thing.' She nodded toward the window where the line of rails lay three streets off. 'The whole place is a sickness to us. You know enough.'

Cerys accepted that and left it there. She did not ask what Orla meant by 'us'. The word sat in the room and did not need to be turned over yet.

Rook's eyes opened again. He tracked Cerys's mouth. She put her voice in the same low range and told him the smallest truths. 'You're in my house,' she said. 'You're safe for now. I'm going to keep you cool. We're going to give you water. You're doing well.' He watched her mouth move and his hands stopped twisting at the edge of the blanket. The small muscles at his jaw eased. When Orla spoke, he listened, but it was Cerys's pace he matched.

Cerys stood once and went to the door and checked the lock and then the chain. She did not often use the chain in the day. She set it now and the metal made a small sound when it settled into place. She pushed the door twice to be sure and then went back to the sofa. The habit felt like a thing she had always done even though she had not.

'We would remember this,' Orla said. It was not a warning. It was a plain statement about ledgers and who keeps them.

'I'm not doing it to be remembered,' Cerys said. She set the cloth back on Rook's forehead. 'I'm doing it because he's here.'

Orla's mouth almost curved. It didn't. 'As it should be,' she said.

Maya brought the school shoes and put them by the door and came back and stood on the rug near the sofa, not too close. She looked at Rook and then at Cerys and then at her own hands. 'Can I draw him a picture?' she said. 'So he has something to look at.'

'Yes,' Cerys said. 'Quietly. On the small pad. Use the pencil, not the markers.'

Maya went to the table and set herself up the way she did when the rain didn't let them go to the park. She drew small to start and then bigger when her hand warmed up. She glanced at Rook and her pencil moved. She did not draw his face. She drew the fan and the blanket and the straight line of the window. She drew the fox magnet as a small orange shape at the corner. She drew two sets of hands in lines, hers and Cerys's, and then scrubbed one out and started again.

Rook watched the pencil. His breath rate held at twenty-eight for four full minutes and then dropped to twenty-six. Cerys counted and felt it like a single thread easing a notch. She did not smile. She kept her face the same so he could follow it without wondering what had changed.

The kettle clicked off behind her. She poured hot water on a tea bag for Orla and on another for herself and let them sit until the colour ran. She did not offer milk. Orla took the mug and wrapped her long, knotted fingers around it and did not drink. Cerys did. The tea had gone to that place between hot and not. She did not care. She poured some of the hot water into a bowl and topped it with cold and brought it back for the cloth.

When Rook coughed again, Cerys turned his head gently and let the cough come. It tore at his throat and left his eyes watering but brought up nothing. She had seen coughs like that in winter on estate children with damp in the walls and no money for heat. The body tries to drag heat and wet out and gets only pain for it. She made the breath rhythm again and he caught it and, for a few breaths, made it deeper.

'Good lad,' she said. 'Stay with me.'

He watched her mouth when she said 'lad' and something like a flinch moved under the skin of his cheek and was gone. She did not press on it. She went back to pulse and breath and skin.

The phone chimed with a reply from Control: 'Delay noted. Log in on arrival.' Two words left out told her the rest: do not make this a pattern. She agreed without answering. She did not have breath for anything

beyond the room.

By eight, the light had found the edges of the buildings opposite and drawn a line on the top of the curtain. The rain had gone thin. The fan hummed. Cerys told Maya to put her jumper on and brush her hair and her teeth again because toast had a way of sticking in the gaps. Maya went to do it without complaint. She put her schoolbag near the door and checked for the lunchbox and checked again and looked satisfied when it was there. She came to the sofa one more time and held up the drawing.

'For him,' she said.

Cerys looked at it and nodded. 'He'll like that,' she said. She looked at Rook. 'Do you want it here?' She held the drawing where he could see and then set it on the table in his line of sight when he did not manage an answer.

Maya kissed Cerys's sleeve because she had learned not to kiss her when her hands were needed for something and then went to the door and put her shoes on. She sat on the floor to do it the way she always did. Cerys tied the laces. She put a finger to the fox magnet on the way past the fridge. She did not look for the photo in the drawer. She did not have space for it.

'Come straight back after school to next door,' Cerys said. 'I'll come at six.'

Maya nodded. 'By six,' she said. She repeated it like a promise made two ways. She looked at Orla and at Rook and then at Cerys. 'Bye.'

'Go on,' Cerys said. 'I'll text if anything changes.' She shut the door on her child and locked it and set the chain. She put her forehead against the wood for one second and then went back to the sofa.

'You carry what you can and leave the rest,' Orla said. It might have been to herself. It might have been to Cerys. Her tone did not change.

'I carry him,' Cerys said. 'Now.' She sat down on the floor next to the sofa, level with Rook's chest. She set her back against the base and found

the angle where her spine wouldn't protest in twenty minutes. She set her left hand at the middle of his ribs and her right lightly at his wrist where the silver lines ran. She counted his breaths in sets of ten. She did not look at the clock. Her right hand trembled; she flattened it on the cushion until it steadied. She let the numbers carry her through the next quiet hour. When her mind tried to move to other things, she brought it back to the numbers.

At twenty-six breaths, at the end of one set, Rook's eyes flicked to her mouth. He was still watching. She did not know what he saw there that helped. Maybe only the shape of a person who would not look away.

Orla sat in the chair with her braid over one shoulder and her hands in her lap and did not sleep. Once, she stood and moved to the window and looked at the street and then sat again. The flat held their small sounds and nothing else. No one knocked. The city went on outside with its rails and its wet and its buses. Inside, the boy's pulse sat under Cerys's hand like a thing that might learn to be steady again.

Cerys kept counting. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. At forty, she let herself stretch one shoulder and then set her hand back. She did not let the rhythm falter. She did not let herself think past the next set. She had made the choice at the door with her body. This was the cost and the work. She would keep to it until something changed. At the end of the next ten, his breath caught hard. She started again.

Chapter 4

The Price of a Fever

She turned the cloth and felt the heat of it before it touched her fingers. The bowl was no longer cool. The water had warmed sitting on the table. When she set the cloth back on Rook's head the damp did less than it had done an hour ago. The fan hummed against the chair leg and moved a steady thread of air across his face and chest. The window stood open two notches. The paper under the fox magnet lifted and lay down, lifted and lay down.

Rook's breaths came shallow and fast. Quick in, quick out, no depth. She watched his chest for the count and stopped after twelve because the rhythm was wrong. She put her hand at the base of his ribs and pressed slowly with the heel. "With me," she said. "Here." He watched her mouth and tried. The muscles in his neck stood out then eased. He lasted four breaths before he slipped back to the quick pull.

The room had the kind of heat that came from bodies and from a day that had warmed despite the rain. The wet line at the edge of the rug had dried and left a darker stripe. The flat held that faint wool-damp smell that never left in winter. It made the air taste old. Under it there was the metal tang she had recognised on his skin since dawn.

"Water," Cerys said. Orla had already lifted the glass. Two sips. Rook swallowed and turned away on his own. The skin at his wrist, along the thin silver lines, was hotter than the rest of him. She placed her fingers lightly there and counted a rate that had climbed. The beats jumped and stuttered and jumped again.

"Window another notch?" Orla asked.

Cerys nodded. Orla leaned across and pushed the catch. The street noise came up a little: tyres in wet, someone calling a dog, music from a car that paused at the lights and moved on.

The cloth had already warmed. Cerys went to the kitchen, ran the cold tap, and let it run long enough to flush the pipes. The water went from tepid to cold and she filled the bowl half and topped with fresh from the kettle until it was at the right point, not too cold, not too warm. She wrung the cloth out tight so it wouldn't drip into his ear and set it on his forehead again and then one to the back of the neck. His skin was hot to her touch through both.

He coughed and the cough grated at his throat. He bent his head and pressed his mouth into the blanket to muffle the sound. She eased his head to the side in case anything came up. Nothing came. When the cough passed, the short pulling breath resumed.

"Listen," she said. She put the cadence in her voice and pressed her palm to his ribs. In. Out. In. Out. He managed it for five and then lost it.

He was too hot. The heat had risen despite the fan and the window and the cloths and the small sips. The line of moisture on his top lip ran again. She wiped it with the corner of the cloth. He turned his face to the side and watched her mouth from the corner of his eye. She stroked the hair off his forehead and the skin stuck to her fingers for a second.

The thin blue blanket went up; no shivering. She moved the blanket down so the line of his throat and the tops of his shoulders were bare in the moving air. She slid a folded towel under his shoulders to change the angle. His working of breath did not ease. She reached for his wrist again. The pulse snapped under her fingers and skipped a beat. She froze her hand in place and waited. She counted to three before it caught. The beat returned then left a larger gap then started fast and light again.

"Stay with me," she said. She had said it to children at road edges and to old men in beds where the sheet corners had been folded too tight. She heard her own tone and it steadied her. Rook's eyes tracked to her mouth.

He nodded once, a small movement without strength behind it.

The room was too warm. The day had made it so, and their bodies had done the rest. Cerys moved the fan back a hand's width and changed the angle so the air moved more across the ribs where her hand would set the pace. She lifted the cloth, turned it, set it back. Heat came through the cloth. It made the heel of her hand slick.

His pulse fluttered when she checked again. Another missed beat. She watched the hollow at the base of his throat for the pull that meant he was using the extra muscles. It dipped and rose. Her mouth tasted dry. She took a swallow from her own mug and it had gone to that place between hot and cold and it did nothing for her throat.

"Rook," she said. "Look at me." He did. She did the count out loud so he could hear what the rise should be and what the fall should be. She laid her right palm flat between his sternum and the start of his ribs, careful of weight, careful of angle. She felt the move of his breath under her hand.

The beat under her fingers went high and thin and then fell away for a stretch that was too long. She had listened to heart rhythms enough to know what that kind of pause meant. She looked at the clock then back to his chest and then to his face. His mouth moved with no sound.

She could not wait. The ordinary measures had done what they could and it was not enough. She knew what would come next and she did not want it and wanting had never counted for anything in a room like this.

"Hold the glass," she said to Orla. "Don't talk."

Orla lifted the glass away and stepped back. She did not crowd. She did not reach to help. She let Cerys take the thing she had already taken once in the cold unit behind the broken sign.

The spaces between his ribs drew in with each breath.

Cerys set both palms flat, one above the other, center of the chest where the ribs began their V. She pushed the heel of her bottom hand into the bone not to compress but to make full contact. She took a breath to

keep herself steady and then she stopped bracing.

Heat hit her palms hard. It ran into the pads of her hands and then up into her wrists. It had a bite to it, not burn from the bowl, not heat from a radiator. It had the edge she knew from a welding arc across her eyes, only this time it came through her hands and into her mouth. Copper rose at the back of her tongue. Her vision went hard at the edges for one breath and then cleared. Under her hands the fine muscles across his chest softened and the pull at the base of his neck eased.

“Breathe here,” she said. Her voice came out rough. “Here.”

He matched it. The next breath went deeper. The one after that carried through. She kept her palms where they were until the heat in them eased to an ache. She waited through four breaths and then raised her hands a finger’s width. His chest rose and fell on its own. She waited two more and took her hands back fully.

The silver lines at his wrists had lost their hard shine. They still showed, pale under the skin, but they sat there rather than flaring. The red at his cheeks had eased to a flatter colour. When she touched his wrist again, the pulse still ran fast but it ran in a line rather than in a scatter.

The copper taste remained. It sat heavy in her mouth. The tremor that had run along the edge of her right hand since the warehouse returned and, for a moment, ran through both hands. The sweat that had beaded at her temple cooled too quickly. The floor moved when she stood.

“Cerys,” Orla said.

“I’m all right,” she said. She was not. She swallowed against the taste and it did not go. The room slipped out of level and then came back. Her stomach made a small hard turn and settled.

Orla came in then, closed fingers around Cerys’s elbow and the point of her shoulder, and took some of her weight without making a thing of it. The old woman’s hand was dry and strong. She guided Cerys one step to

the chair and then, when Cerys shook her head, guided her again toward the hall with the same clean economy as before.

“Two minutes,” Cerys said. She did not want Maya to hear her in the bathroom and come in. Maya was at the neighbour’s until six. She still did not want the sound in the walls.

In the bathroom she braced her hands on the edge of the sink. The porcelain was cold under her palms and that helped. She looked up at the mirror because she knew what she would have to look at. The face there was the face she had, grey at the eyes with not enough sleep and a line set to the mouth that had been there for years. The scar on her chin showed thin and pale. She had stopped seeing it most days. Now it was all she could see because there was nothing behind it.

She tried to recall the gravel. The grit that had gone into the cut when she fell. She tried to find the taste of blood in her mouth and the smell of plasters pulled too tight. She cared more about the plaster than the blood when she was small. That was a thing she used to say when the story came up. She reached for that line, and it was not there.

She put a finger to the scar. The skin was smooth over it, a ridge no thicker than thread. The bone under it had that way of pushing back into her finger when she pressed. No picture came. No sound. No place where she could put the fall.

Cold pricked behind her eyes. It moved down the back of her neck. She took her finger away. She did not say anything aloud. She turned the cold tap and ran her hands under it because her palms still burned. The right throbbed deeper than the left. She ran the water longer than she strictly needed so the pipes themselves would cool, and when she shut it off, the room stayed very quiet except for the hum of the fan from the other room. She stood there for one more breath and then went back.

Rook lay as she left him, only the lines at his wrists were calmer and the pull at the base of his throat had eased. Orla had placed the glass back on the table and stood by the window, one hand on the frame. She had

not moved the fan. She had not moved the blankets. She had not tried to take anything in or out of Cerys's hands.

"What did it take?" Orla said. The voice was the same flat voice she had used in the doorway before dawn. It was not a pry. It was a ledger question.

"My scar's story," Cerys said. "How I got it." The words were short because there was weight to them. "It's gone."

Orla inclined her head. "The cost is always paid," she said.

"I know," Cerys said. She put her palms down on her thighs to hide the tremor and then thought better and left them up because hiding tremors made them worse. She shook her hands out once to move the ache. Then she sat on the floor again, the place she had made for herself by the sofa, and set her hand where she had set it all day. Rook moved his gaze to her mouth without being asked.

She watched him breathe. She said nothing more for a long time.

By four, the air had shifted. Rain had either stopped or moved to another street. The light changed in that flat way that told her the cloud had thinned. The room still held heat. She did the cloths again. The bowl water was warm when she put her fingers into it. She changed it, ran the tap long enough to draw cold from the mains, and started over. She kept to the steps and the shaking eased.

When Rook slept, the sleep went light. She could bring him up with his name. He woke to the movement of her mouth and to the line of her hand. He did not wake to the hallway sounds or the traffic. He did not start when a door banged somewhere in the block. She kept him at the edge she wanted because if he slipped back to heat again she might not get him back without another taking.

She checked the silver lines at his wrists. They had dulled to the point where someone who did not know to look might miss them. They were still there. She did not think they ever left. She watched the way the skin lay over them. She put her hand to one and it no longer felt like the line itself had heat of its own.

When his breathing stayed even for ten minutes, she stood. The room wobbled again less than before. She went to the kitchen and reached to the high cupboard over the fridge. Behind the stack of lunch boxes with missing lids there was a biscuit tin with a red lid. She pulled it down and carried it to the table.

Orla watched from the doorway. She did not come closer. She did not ask.

Cerys lifted the lid. The smell inside was paper and old biscuit sugar, a smell she would have called sweet once and now called flat because it did nothing in her chest. The top layer was photos she had not taken out in years. They were loose, some curled at the edges, some with white borders. She lifted them one by one until she found the one she wanted. A small girl with a bandage under her lip and a stain down the front of her jumper where she had dripped juice after someone had told her to sit still. She held the photo at arm's length. The girl looked like Maya around the eyes but that was because children looked like children until they didn't. The image held no heat. It sat in her hand, ordinary paper.

She tried then, not because she thought she would find it, but because she had to be sure. She looked for the rough feel of stone under her palm. She searched for the sudden shock of hard ground. She looked for the taste of blood in a mouth that had not held blood before. Nothing. Her mind made a blank where a picture should be. It did not offer the wrong picture in its place. It did not try to fill in. There was only a gap and a weight where the gap had set.

She put the photo down on the table and stacked the others on top of it. The lid stayed off while she went to the kettle and filled it to one cup

and set it on. She washed two mugs from the sink; clean mugs did not sting when you picked them up. She poured hot water then added a dash of milk from the carton and stood with both hands around the mug while the heat pressed into her palms. It steadied the tremor in her right.

Her phone vibrated once on the counter. Tariq: "You alive?" She picked up the phone. "Still tied up. Sick child here escalated. Taking carers' leave. I'm out today." She sent it and put the phone face down.

She left Orla to set the chain, stepped into the stairwell for thirty seconds to breathe the air that lived there, went to the next block to collect Maya, and came straight back. The latch clicked as they came in. The stairs made her legs feel shaky at the fifth step but that was fine. On the landing Maya's hand found hers and then let go, because the rule was to hold the rail, and the rail was cold and left a patch of chill on the small palm.

"How's the boy?" Maya said as soon as they came in. Her voice went soft when she looked toward the sofa.

"Better than this morning," Cerys said. "Still hot. Still needs you to be quiet."

"I can," Maya said. She set her bag down and kicked her shoes off into their place without looking. She went to the table and saw the tin and the photo and looked at Cerys. "What's that?"

"Old pictures," Cerys said. She put the lid on the tin before Maya could see the bandage photo. She slid the tin to the back of the table and set her mug on top of it. "How was school?"

"Spelling," Maya said. She climbed into the chair with a kind of sideways twist she always did when she was talking. "With the silent letters. Knife. Knee. Knot. I liked that because it's like there's a secret you have to know. And we did the story about the fox because it was raining so we couldn't go out. I did the part where the fox does nothing because it's smarter not to."

“What did you get for lunch?” Cerys asked. She set a plate on the table and put two oat biscuits on it.

“Amira’s mum made pasta and it was in the good container,” Maya said. “And I had a yoghurt. Strawberry. But not the kind with the lumps, the other kind. And she said I could take the spoon home because it’s plastic and we can wash it and bring it back.” She looked at the sofa again and lowered her voice. “Is he sleeping?”

“Light,” Cerys said. She did not turn to look because she did not need to. She knew Rook had lifted his eyes at the sound of the door and had let them go closed again when he heard the line of their talk. “Come say hello without words.”

Maya went to the sofa in her socks and stood where he could see her and put a hand over her heart the way she did when she didn’t know what else to do. Rook opened his eyes for two seconds and looked at her and then at Cerys and then at the fan. Maya nodded and went back to the table and put the biscuit in her mouth whole, then moved it to the side and bit a corner off.

Orla stood in the doorway with her braid along her shoulder. She watched the exchange without moving. The way she held her hands said that she knew she was in someone else’s house and would not cross a line she had not been invited to cross. Cerys caught her gaze for a moment. Orla dipped her chin the smallest amount. A knot in Cerys’s shoulder eased a fraction.

Maya ate the biscuits, swung her legs under the chair twice, then stopped when she saw the look Cerys gave her, and wiped her hands on the towel and went to her bag. “I have to do the sheet of words,” she said. “The silent ones. I can do it on the couch quietly.”

“Table,” Cerys said. “Pencil only.”

“I know.” Maya brought the paper and the stubby pencil and the rubbers that had lost their corners and set to work. She mouthed letters as she wrote them and then crossed them out and wrote them again.

Knife. Knee. Write. Wrong. Half-way through she looked up. "Mum?"

"Mm?"

"Did you ever fall and get a bad cut?" Maya asked. She didn't look at the table when she said it. She looked at the side of Cerys's neck.

Cerys's throat tightened. Her hand half-lifted toward her chin, then stopped. She lifted her mug to cover the pause. "Everyone does," she said. "At some point." She took a mouthful of tea that had cooled too far and set the mug down. "You keep going."

"Okay," Maya said. She did not push. She put her head down and went back to the letters. She tucked her foot up under her leg and then put it down again when the leg went to sleep. She rubbed the place and did not complain.

Cerys breathed out. She put her hand flat on the table next to the tin and let the solidity of wood and metal calm the tremor in her right. Two healings, two holes. The deer by the hedge. The fall and the plaster story. She turned that into a line she could use. Each taking left a mark she could count. The rule inside it was simple and ugly. She would need to know the total she could live after.

She looked across at Rook. He watched her mouth again. He did not watch her eyes. He seemed to have made a decision that the words had the weight he could hold. That was fine. She kept her words level and slow so he could go on holding them.

"Do you want toast?" she said to Maya. "Just you."

"Yes," Maya said in a whisper that was still a whisper. She stood and went to the toaster and slid two slices down and stood by it with her hands behind her back because she had burned herself once and had learned the first time. When the toast popped, she flinched only a little. She buttered them at the table because scraping the bread was quieter than moving pans in the kitchen.

Orla shifted then. Cerys's fingertips brushed the scar on her chin. "You keep paper," Orla said. "We keep the scar." Her gaze flicked to the place under Cerys's lip and then away again. There was no pity in it. "The rest stays in the ground."

Cerys thought of the photo in the drawer and the photo in the tin and the way both had lost their heat. She put the photo of the girl face down on the pile and slid it under two others and then replaced the lid with care. She set the tin back where it had been and placed her mug on top of it to hold the lid down. It would not. She did it anyway because the weight felt right.

"Tea?" she asked Orla.

"I will take it," Orla said. She took the mug and wrapped her fingers around it and did not drink. She moved back to the doorway where she could see both the table and the sofa and the door. She had the stance of someone who had stood more than she had sat for a lifetime because sitting was a luxury you paid for later.

When Maya had finished her sheet, she brought it to Cerys and stood while Cerys looked at it. The silent letters were in the right places. The lines were a little crooked. Cerys put a finger under one and traced it. "Good," she said. "Wash your hands. No running."

Maya went and the water noise covered the room for a few seconds. Rook shifted under the blanket and found the rhythm again when Cerys set her palm and the pace returned. The ache in her hands settled to a steady throb. She drank the last of her tea, cold. She did not taste it.

When the light faded at the window, Orla stepped forward. The braid lay down her chest. Her eyes were the same steady brown they had been before dawn. "We cannot keep him in this place many days," she said. "It is better than the street. It is not far enough from iron."

“He stays here until he can stand,” Cerys said. “I will not move him while he is like this.”

Orla nodded once. “And after?”

“You said there were places where the metal is thin,” Cerys said. “You have one where your people gather.” She did not make it a question because Orla’s way of moving had already told her the answer.

“Hearth Street,” Orla said. “Old works. Brick. Damp. We keep off the platforms. There are safer rooms. There is a way in that does not touch the rails.” She set her mug down. “If you will come there, we will not come to this door again. Not unless you call for us.”

Cerys looked at Rook. His breathing had held to the deeper rhythm for most of an hour. His skin had cooled a little. When he swallowed, the muscle in his throat moved without strain. She glanced to the kitchen where Maya’s drawing sat on the fridge. She pictured taking Rook down the stairs and into the street and into whatever door Orla would show her. He was not ready. “Not tonight,” she said. “Not tomorrow morning.”

“Not until he can stand,” Orla said. There was no edge to the repeat. It was the sound of agreement.

“He stays where I can watch him and put my hands on him if I need to,” Cerys said. “After that, I will come. On my terms.”

“What terms?” Orla leaned her shoulder to the frame and waited.

“You do not bring trouble to this building,” Cerys said. “You do not come to my door except as you did this morning, with me here to open it. If you need me, you put a marker where I will see it. I choose when I move. I will not leave my child at night unless the choice is one life or another and I am the one who has to carry that. If I come to Hearth Street, I leave when I say.” She kept her voice low. The rules came out with no room between them because she had not made them up now. She had learned them one by one across years and she had had to live them or break.

Orla listened without interrupting. When Cerys finished, Orla's mouth moved by a fraction. "No bargain is fair," she said. "That is true. These are not unfair."

Maya appeared in the doorway from the kitchen with her hands wet and shook them over the sink because she had been told not to shake them in the room with the sofa. She came to the edge of the rug and looked between the two women and then at Rook. "Will he live?" she said. Her voice held nothing theatrical. It had the clean line of a question with only one answer acceptable in it.

Cerys did not look away from Maya when she answered. "I'll make sure he does," she said. She took a steady breath. She felt it take its place behind her ribs. She did not let it bend her shoulders. She let it hold her upright.

Maya breathed out and nodded. She went to her bag and began to pull out the reading book and the scrunched paper for signatures that had to be smoothed and laid under something heavy to flatten for the morning.

Orla reached into the inner pocket of her coat and took out a small piece of wood. It was a round cut from a branch, the bark pared away, the face carved with a notch and a line. The surface was smooth from handling. It held a faint smell of cut wood. She put it on the table between the mugs and the tin. "Show this if you come to the mouth of the station," she said. "Hold it in your hand when you step down. It will save you the first questions."

Cerys picked it up. The wood had the last of Orla's heat in it. It was lighter than it looked. The carved line had been cut with a knife that had not slipped. The edge of the disc pressed into the pad of Cerys's thumb. She put it into her pocket for a moment, found it there against the fabric, and then took it out and set it where she would see it if she needed to leave at speed in the night.

"What will I find there?" Cerys asked.

“People with the same lines you see on his wrists,” Orla said. “Some no deeper than his. Some five times that. Children who have not walked under sky for months because their breath goes thin when they do. Old ones who have learned to sit and hear without asking for more. Men who think they can make noise and turn it into safety.” She stopped there. “You will not find comfort. You will find use.”

“Does the iron there not hurt you?” Maya asked from the table without lifting her head. She still had the book open but the words had stopped moving.

“We keep off the metal,” Orla said. “There are places between. In the brick. Under the brick. Nothing is good. Some things are less bad.”

Maya’s pencil made a small sound as it moved again. Cerys went to the sofa, sat on the edge, and watched Rook breathe. He opened his eyes in a slow way that meant he had slept and come up out of it without pain waking him. He looked at Cerys’s mouth and then at Orla and then at the token on the table. His gaze came back to Cerys’s mouth and stayed there.

“You’re here,” Cerys said. “You’re all right. Keep breathing where my hand shows.” She set her palm lightly and he matched. His skin was still warmer than hers. The worst of the heat had gone. He took a breath that went deeper. Another. Cerys counted to ten and then to ten again and did not look at the clock.

“Will he need the hands again?” Orla said. It was a quiet question.

“If he drops,” Cerys said. “If he drops and the ordinary work doesn’t bring him back.” She kept her eyes on Rook and on his mouth and the small mark where the corner of the blanket had rubbed. “I won’t take if I don’t have to.”

“And if you have to?” Orla said.

Cerys did not answer for a beat. Her hand shook once. She put the other over it and stilled it. “Then I pay,” she said. “But I choose when.” She looked at Orla then. “And the place.” She set her shoulders.

Orla bowed her head. “We remember,” she said. “We won’t take you where you do not set your foot first.”

From the kitchen a pot clicked as it cooled. The fox magnet held to the fridge and the paper under it lifted and lay down in the moving air. Outside, a siren came and went somewhere far and someone shouted and laughed on the pavement then the sound died. The light at the window faded a notch. The white edge on the curtain softened. The room cooled half a degree and held there.

Cerys stayed where she was until Rook’s breathing had stayed steady through three full tens. She rubbed a thumb over her chin without thinking and felt the line there and the absence behind it. Two holes now. She would not touch the tin again tonight. There was no point scraping a scar to make blood come years later. You watched it and you did not pick it. You let it be a mark of what you had traded.

She reached for the token and put it in her pocket and stood, and the room did not tilt. The tremor in her right hand had backed off to a small tick that only she would see. She went to the kitchen and set the kettle for Maya’s night-time milk and for Orla’s tea and for her own hot water that she would drink without tasting. She moved the way she always moved at this hour: slow because the day had taken from her, precise because there was still work to do.

Behind her, Rook turned his head on the cushion and tracked her mouth when she spoke to Maya about socks and a bath and ten more minutes with the book and then bed. He held the rhythm she’d given him and did not lose it. He was not safe. He was safer than he had been that morning. It would have to be enough for this hour.

When Orla stepped out to the stairwell to mark the way she would take if she left after dark, she set her palm briefly to the doorpost and looked at Cerys. “Hearth Street,” she said. “On your day. Not ours.”

“On mine,” Cerys said.

When Orla went, Cerys set the chain. Cerys checked it and then set the mugs on the table and sat again on the edge of the sofa. She placed her hand where it needed to be and watched the boy breathe. She could do that all night if it was the thing that kept him alive and kept Maya safe. The rest would be done when it had to be done. She touched the token in her pocket once, then let her hand drop. She let the numbers settle into her head and counted them without speaking.

Ten. Ten. Ten.

She did not look at the tin. She did not reach for the drawer. She did not go near the photo in the drawer that had lost its place in her mind last night. She kept her eyes on the body in front of her and the breath that went in and out and the way the silver lines sat under the skin without flaring. The flat stayed steady. The light dimmed. When Maya put her book down and came to kiss Cerys's sleeve, Cerys bent to give her the right bit of fabric to touch. Then Maya went to bed and Cerys stayed where she had always planned to stay in this life: on the edge of a couch, with a hand ready and a rule in her bones that she would not break.

Outside, a train passed on the rails three streets off. In here, a child breathed and a woman took the cost and did not ask for kindness.

Chapter 5

A Bargain of Sorts

Early afternoon, next day, they left the flat when Rook could stand with help. Cerys tested him in the hallway first. She set her hand at his ribs and said, "Up. Here." He pushed himself upright. His knees trembled but they held for a count of five. That was the line she had drawn. Not carried. Standing.

She closed the window, checked that Maya's drawing held flat under the fox magnet, and slid the chain back. On the landing she locked the door and checked the handle. She put the wooden token in her pocket where she could find it without looking. Orla had come when Cerys sent word. "He goes slow," Cerys told her, as if Orla might not move at the pace he set. Orla nodded and tucked the grey blanket more firmly under Rook's arms.

The stair rail was cold. Rook used his left hand for it, the silver at his wrist dulled under skin that had lost some of its fever shine. The smell in the stairwell was wet concrete and an old curry that had come up through a neighbour's vent the night before and still had not left. They took each flight with pauses. Rook watched Cerys's mouth when she said, "Breathe with me," and his chest followed the line she gave him. On the second landing he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes for a breath. His lips were dry. Orla held water to them. He took one sip. No more.

Outside, rain ticked on the metal lids of the wheelie bins and the top of a railing that had lost most of its paint. The air bit at the throat. Cerys raised her hood and set the pace. Two streets on, Orla steered them down an alley between a back fence patched with plywood and a brick wall with a line of green at its base where damp never left. They followed that wall

until it turned and opened into a low service yard that smelled of wet brick and old smoke.

At the far end a stair dropped where a fence panel had been lifted and set aside. The mouth of it was the shape of a rectangle cut out of the ground with brick lining the cut. A rusted sign on a pole to the left had a name Cerys could not read because two letters had rotted away. She took the token from her pocket and held it up. A figure stepped forward out of the dim space below, eyes on the wood in her hand, then on her face. Cerys put the token into her palm. She held it flat where it could be seen. The figure's gaze shifted from the token to Orla. Orla said, "On my word." The figure stepped back and left them the steps.

The brick was slick. Water beaded on it and ran in lines into the mortared joints. They took the steps with the kind of caution that did not make a show. Cerys kept her weight forward and her hand near Rook's shoulder without touching unless he faltered. He did not falter. At the foot of the first flight, the air cooled into something that tasted of stone and old rails. She could smell iron the way she had begun to smell it on skin: a flat tang, not sharp, but it set a warning in her teeth.

Another figure stood at the bend. This one had hair cut close and a jacket patched at the elbow with a square of lighter fabric. He looked down at Rook's hands where the silver lines disappeared into the grey of the blanket and then back up. Cerys kept her face steady and let Orla speak. "Hearth Street," Orla said. "The old works. Keep the ladders free." He moved aside and they went on.

At the bottom the tunnel widened. The sound changed. It took on a doubled quality, one set of echoes bouncing from round walls and another coming from the brickwork ahead where it had been built squarer and closer. Somewhere to the right, water dripped into water, slow and regular. The air had the faint smell of coal that had burned a long time ago and left its residue in the skin of the place. Cerys kept her eyes moving the way she did when she entered a scene she did not control. She looked for straight paths out, for bottlenecks, for anything

that would slow a stretcher she did not yet have. She saw three routes that would do if she had to run, one low arch that would catch a tall shoulder, and a line of old gates across a cut path that had padlocks she could not trust.

The platform edges lay ahead behind a mesh barrier. The mesh had been wired to posts at three points and tied with old rope at a fourth where the wire had broken. Beyond that, up, the rails sat like dark lines. She did not look at them long. There were rooms off to either side where brick had been knocked through between supports to make spaces big enough for pallets and blankets and a table pushed against a wall with chipped enamel basins stacked under it.

Eyes in those rooms turned to them and then to her hands. The first faces she met had that pale look she now recognised. It was not sick, not by itself. It was a kind of absence of colour that meant something else in their blood, a way light sat on their skin differently. The silver on the nearest man's forearm lay under the skin like wire set too shallow, not bright, but firm. His gaze stuck to her fingers when she reached for the blanket edge at Rook's shoulder. It stayed there as if the bones of her hands were the only thing he trusted. Near the mesh, a man in a dark jacket watched her face and kept his distance.

"Here," Orla said. She slid in front and led them to a cleared corner. There was a pallet low to the ground made from two stacked pallets with a thin mattress on top. Blankets had been folded and placed in a line. A basin sat near a pipe with a slow dribble. She set the basin under the spill with the habit of someone who had done that through too many winters.

They eased Rook down. He turned his face toward the sound of the pipe. The movement was slight, a tilt of chin and eyes. He breathed through his mouth and that breath did not drag as it had done that morning. Cerys put two fingers to the thin skin on the inside of his wrist and counted a line that ran high but regular. She watched the hollow at the base of his throat; it rose and fell without tugging.

She looked up. "I need clean cloths," she said. "Bowls. Two. Not metal if you can avoid it." The words were even, neither soft nor hard. A girl of maybe thirteen with a short plait and a jumper with sleeves pushed back to her elbows stepped forward, then pulled her sleeves down again when she saw the silver on her own wrist and how it stood out when she bared it. She went to the table and brought back a stack of cloths that smelled of soap and a white-glazed bowl with a chip on the lip. A man of sixty with a stoop took another bowl from the shelf and set it down. He did not look at her face. He kept his attention on the bowl, then on the boy.

She set the bowl under the pipe and let water run until it cooled. Wrung tight, the first cloth went to Rook's forehead, another to the back of his neck. Her palm rested at his ribs to set the pace. "In. Hold. Out." He matched it. The skin beneath the silver lines at his wrists no longer burned in that wrong way. Heat sat more even now. Her hand stayed light as she watched for any shift.

Orla stood where she could see both the chamber door and the pallet. "Hearth Street," she said without grandness. "It was warm once when the coal was hauled and burned. That ran out. Now it's brick that keeps what it can, and bodies. The rest comes by bargains." She said it the way a person says a thing she is tired of explaining.

Cerys's gaze lifted to the mesh and the shadows beyond. A train moved somewhere above. The floor gave a small vibration through her boots. The rails carried weight that had nothing to do with her. It would travel through the structure whether she was here or not. She folded the damp cloth and turned it to the cooler side. "We won't be long here," she said. "Not more than we have to." She did not mean the hour. She meant the weeks.

"We keep to the brick," Orla said. "Off the platforms. Away from the mains where we can." She gestured toward the far corridor where white paint had flaked from a door and fallen in a scatter on the ground. "There's a way through there that's better in bad weather." She paused. "You see your exits?"

"Three I like," Cerys said. She pointed with two fingers. "The arch. That door if the lock holds. The mouth we came in by." She didn't point at the mesh or the rails. She wouldn't use them.

A few people came closer and then stopped as if a line had been drawn at the edge of the cleared space. A boy of ten with a shaved head watched her face for a cue. A woman with hair the colour of ash in a tight bun stayed pressed back near the brick and did not come near at all. A big man whose silver ran thick under the skin of both forearms watched her with a kind of careful hunger that she understood without liking. She made a note of each of them the way she would at the foot of a tower block when the lift had failed and the calls had piled up floor by floor.

"Clean cloths," Cerys said again without looking up, and someone set another folded stack by her knee. She took one and turned the one at Rook's neck. The cloth warmed fast against skin. The back of her fingers at his cheekbone read warm, not searing. Two fingers to his wrist again. High but steady. She took a breath and felt it settle somewhere behind her sternum. It didn't ease the tightness in her shoulders. That would ease when he slept an hour without dropping.

Somewhere behind her, a plastic-bodied kettle on a long lead clicked at the far wall, and someone poured water into mugs. The smell of tea put a new layer over the damp in the air. Orla did not move toward it. She stayed where she was with her braid down her chest and her hands loose at her sides.

"He'll sleep," Orla said. "If we keep the heat out of him and the iron out from around him."

"Sleep's not the same as safe," Cerys said. It came out harder than she meant. Orla only nodded.

The girl with the plait came back and touched the top cloth and then pulled her hand away quickly. "Do you want more?"

"Yes," Cerys said. "And the bowls when they're empty."

The girl nodded and looked at Rook's mouth. Rook was looking at Cerys's mouth. He didn't look at the girl. He didn't look away from the line of words he'd fixed on. The cloth slid a little; Cerys put it back with one finger and then left her hand where it had to be.

She felt the small tick in her right hand again. The tremor that had lived there since the warehouse and the work in the flat. It was there now, but it was less. She could pin it under her other palm when she needed to. She didn't hide it. There was no point hiding in a room where every glance tracked the work.

"You have what you need?" Orla said. It sounded like a genuine question and not a ritual one.

"For now," Cerys said. She looked to the side and counted heads and how far each one stood from Rook. She counted the steps to the mouth of the tunnel and the time it would take to bring him up if she had to do it with his weight on her shoulder. She measured the bowls the way she measured oxygen cylinders in a lift: enough for this round, then the next.

The man by the mesh stayed where he was, boots worn, gaze on her face. She turned back to her work because watching him would not change what lay under her palm.

The water in the bowl cooled her fingers as she wrung the cloth. It numbed the ache in the pads of her palms where the heat from yesterday had burned and then receded. She changed the cloth at Rook's neck and leaned back enough to ease the knot in her own shoulder. She let her head drop forward for one breath. The smell of stone was close and she tasted metal at the back of her tongue the way she had since the first time the light had come up under her hands. It did not fade fully. She supposed it never would.

"We'll make this corner yours when you're here," Orla said. "No one will step on him. No one will speak over him." She watched the people in the room without moving her head. Their eyes slid away.

Cerys nodded. She drank once. The tea was strong and had been steeped too long, but it was hot and heavy in her hand and that heat steadied the tick in her right. The cup went down within reach without lifting her hand from the boy's ribs. Another cloth from the girl with the plait; she let the girl see where she placed it, how she turned it so the cooler side met skin first.

"You'll watch him when I'm gone?" Cerys said to the girl.

The girl's mouth tightened. Pride, maybe. "I will."

"Good," Cerys said. She kept her tone flat.

The chamber quieted. It wasn't that sounds went away. Water still tapped into the bowl. A train ran somewhere high. The fan of air that moved at the tunnel mouth made a steady noise. It was that people's bodies stopped making extra sounds. Less shuffling. Less weight shifting. They were waiting for something she would or wouldn't do. She did what there was. She cooled the boy. She watched his breathing. She kept him steady with words and the flat of her hand. That was enough for right now.

When Rook's breathing held to a pace she liked and his pulse stayed in the line she had counted for ten minutes, Orla came to sit near and set her mug on the ground. She drew her knees under her coat for warmth. "It's worse where the rails run close," she said. "Where the pipes are new and carry through every wall. Bridges, stations, all that. We keep away when we can."

Cerys looked at the brick to her left, at the way damp had darkened some of the mortar lines. "You're in a station."

"We're not on it," Orla said. "We keep off the platforms. The air's better in these rooms, and the brick holds enough to keep a breath in. You

can't live in the street and you can't live in a tunnel under a pipe. Here's less bad." She looked at the mesh and then back to Cerys. "Less bad is what we can get."

Cerys changed a cloth and watched the water wring out of it, clear and then clouded by lint. "Are there others like me?" She hadn't planned to ask. She heard the want in the question and did not like it.

Orla did not speak at once. "There were," she said. "I've seen hands that did what yours do. Not as clean. Not as fast. The city takes its own where it can. Or they burn out." Her jaw tightened for a count. Cerys's shoulder drew in, then eased. "Some left. The ones who stayed paid until there was nothing left to pay."

She wet her lips.

Orla's mouth moved in a way that might have been a smile if there had been any room for it. "You keep paper. We keep the scar. The rest stays in the ground." Her voice softened by half a note. "There are names who want to use that."

"Who?" Cerys said. She kept her face straight. She didn't need the names to know the shape. It didn't hurt to have a word to put to it.

"Kaelen," Orla said. Cerys's palms ached once, sharp. She didn't look behind her when she said it. She kept her gaze on Cerys's hands as if to show that the name had no power unless it reached for those hands. "You'll hear him said. He thinks spectacle feeds change. That if you make a noise big enough, the city will have to listen or break." She paused. "He's wrong about the listening. He might not be wrong about the breaking."

Cerys put a flat palm to Rook's chest and watched the rise and fall take her pace. "I'm not to be taken."

"That depends on how loudly you save lives," Orla said. "Some kinds of saving draw eyes. Some of those eyes don't blink."

Cerys's shoulders sat tight. She rolled one with care and stopped when it began to pull. "You know my terms. I don't live here. I'll come when I say. I'll leave when I say." She did not raise her voice. She did not look for agreement in anyone else's face. She did not need them to like it.

"We won't cross your door unless you call for us," Orla said. She lifted two fingers without looking; a younger man who had edged close stepped back. "We won't mark you to be found by others. We'll set a sign where you said and we'll keep distance from the child."

"Her name is Maya," Cerys said before she could stop herself. The word put a shape to the thing she had wanted to keep flat. She did not say it again.

"We'll keep distance from Maya," Orla said as if the name had always been hers to speak.

Rook's eyes were open. He was watching Cerys's mouth without moving his head. When Orla spoke his gaze flicked to the movement at the edge of his sight and then came back. The cloth on his forehead had warmed. Cerys turned it and replaced it. He blinked and swallowed and then did not swallow again until she set the water at his lips. He took a small sip and let it sit before it went down.

Footsteps came from the corridor and an older boy with a grey hoodie brought a bowl that sent up a smell Cerys could not place at first. Then she caught the cut of thyme and something bitter that would settle a stomach. The steam rose and hit the damp in the room and seemed to cut through it in a way that wasn't a word for clean, just different. He said nothing. He set it on a low crate and stepped back.

"Eat," Orla said to Cerys. "You'll shake if you don't."

Cerys took the spoon and set it down again. She wiped her fingers on her trouser seam and picked the spoon up with her left hand instead. The first mouthful sat heavy. It was salt and heat. It woke a hollow place she had ignored all day. She ate a second and then a third, and then she set the bowl down and checked Rook's wrist again. His pulse ran quicker for

a moment and then settled back. She put two fingers at the side of his neck to confirm and felt the beat through warm skin. She did not call it good. She called it all right for now.

The boy with the hoodie still stood near. He said, "Can I, " and then he shut his mouth and looked at her hand on Rook's chest and said nothing else.

"Bring more water in an hour," Cerys said. "Not before."

He nodded and went.

A woman from the edge came forward then. Her hands were knotted, the skin at her knuckles thickened as if she had worked rope or wire until the shape of the work had set there. She did not look at Cerys's face. She looked past it to Rook and then to Orla. "I'll sit," she said.

"You will," Orla said. "You'll mind the cloths and the drink when you're told to. You'll not talk over him."

The woman sat. She folded her hands and placed them on her knees and watched the rise and fall of the blanket with the attention of someone who had done this at a deathbed and did not want that repeated here.

Cerys finished the stew. It settled warm in her stomach and the tremor in her right hand eased enough that she did not have to pin it. She put the spoon in the bowl and set the bowl back on the crate the boy had used. She stood and the room did not tilt. She stretched one shoulder and stopped when it reached the safe line.

"I'll need to go," she said to Orla. "Work doesn't stop because I'm here."

"You'll set the way to call you," Orla said. It was not a question.

"Marker where I said," Cerys said. "And if that's not enough, you knock two quick, one slow. Not at night. Not unless it's a matter of breaths. I'll be back before dark."

"We remember," Orla said.

Cerys looked down at Rook. "I'll be back," she said to him. "Not long. Keep this pace."

He watched her mouth. He blinked. He did not nod. She did not ask for it.

She turned to the older woman. "If he starts pulling at the throat again or if you feel a gap in the beat under your fingers that lasts more than a count of three, you call. If he doesn't wake to his name and to my voice when I come, you call before that. Keep the cloths cool. One at the head. One at the neck. Sips when he swallows without effort. Not if he turns away. Don't force it."

The woman nodded slowly. She repeated, "Gaps more than three. Pull here," and she put a hand to her own throat. "Not waking to name."

"Good," Cerys said. "If he chills, add the blue blanket back to the shoulders, not the wrists. Don't cover the hands."

"Not the wrists," the woman said. She looked at the silver in Rook's skin and then looked away. "Not there."

Cerys took up her coat. It was still damp at the cuffs from the walk down. She shrugged into it. The fabric dragged on her shoulder where it always caught. Orla stood up with a sound like old cloth moving. "I'll walk you to the mouth," she said.

"You don't have to," Cerys said. It wasn't a refusal. It was a fact. Orla chose to walk anyway.

They moved through the corridor with the flaked paint and past the room with the chipped bowls. A man with a knitted cap passed them going in and put his hand to the wall as he squeezed by, not to steady himself, but to keep off Orla's shoulder. At the bend, the figure who had first looked at the token stood again, eyes steady. He tipped his chin at Orla and at Cerys without speaking.

The steps had gathered more beaded water. Cerys placed her feet the way she did on a wet metal fire escape, heel off because the heel slid first.

As she climbed, a train moved on the rails above. The vibration came through the brick, up through her boots, along the tight places in her legs, and a low ache set into the pads of her palms. It set off an old memory she did not try to call all the way up: the overpass, the ladder, the weight of a boy's hand when he had gripped her fingers before he was loaded and taken. She had made a line that day and kept it. The shape of the mother's mouth when she had asked about her husband was a picture Cerys had carried into sleep and back out of it. It sat under the other things. She could still feel the cost of that choice in the bend of her spine when she stood at a sink and reached for a mug. It sat in her back and hands; the bend at the sink, the reach for a mug. No words.

At the station mouth, air changed again. The wet on her face cooled to something close to fresh and then turned back to city when she stepped up. She took the token from her pocket and looked at it because she had to feel its edge before she left. The carved notch sat under her thumb. The wood had warmed against her thigh. She put it back.

They stepped into the service yard. Rain came down at a fine slant and made a sheen on the brick. The cold took her breath for one second and then eased. Orla stopped where the ground levelled. "You'll send word when you're on your way back," she said.

"I'll come when I say," Cerys said. "I won't run a flag up for anyone else to see."

"No flags," Orla said. "No calls you don't want. We remember." She looked at Cerys's face as if to learn it and then looked at Cerys's hands again. "You know the cost."

"I know," Cerys said. It came out like a breath she had been holding too long. She pulled her hood up and turned into the alley.

The street felt wide after the tunnel. The tarmac had a skin of water that made tyres hiss when cars passed at the end of the block. Cerys took her phone from her pocket and typed a heart and "How was the story about the fox?" She watched the message send. She did not write

anything about stairs or brick or water dripping behind walls. The phone sat warm in her hand and then buzzed. Maya: "Good. The fox didn't do the bad thing. Can we have pasta?" Cerys typed, "Yes. After homework." She put the phone away.

It buzzed again before she reached the corner. Tariq's name on the screen. She answered. "On my way," she said without waiting for him to speak.

"We've got a syncopal outside the Co-op on Southside," he said. "Elderly, says he went down, got back up, went down again. Bystander on the line says he's clammy."

"I'll meet you at the yard," Cerys said. She checked the traffic and stepped off the kerb. "Get the trolley bed ready."

"Already out," Tariq said. "You eating real food today or living on toast again?"

"Stew," Cerys said. "It was hot. I'm two streets off."

"Miracle," Tariq said. "See you in two." He hung up.

Pocketing the phone and the token, she set her jaw and lengthened her stride. The token knocked against the phone and made a sound she would know in the dark, its edge pressing the case. Stone damp clung at her cuffs. Her hands were steady enough to carry a cup without spilling. They would be steady enough to put a cuff on a thin arm and to set a cannula if the veins showed and to lift with her legs not her back when they had to transfer. She passed a bus stop where two kids sat inside the shelter, legs tucked up, talking in low voices that cut off when she went by and started again when she had gone.

At the depot gate the yard looked like it always did after rain: concrete darkened to a uniform colour, a few old oil marks spread thin, the ambulance bay lights pale in the daylight. Tariq stood by the open back, the trolley bed at half height. He lifted his chin at her. He had the trolley halfway out. She checked the cylinder gauge. She nodded and

climbed in to check the kit by touch the way she always did: oxygen cylinder gauge in the green, suction charged, airway roll complete, defib ready, blood pressure cuff where it should be and not under a bag.

"You look like you've been underground," Tariq said when she came back down. It was not a question.

"I've been where I needed to be," Cerys said. "Let's go."

They took their seats. Tariq keyed the lights. The siren stayed off. They pulled out of the yard and into the stream of traffic. Rain collected at the bottom edges of the windscreen and the wipers cleared it in a rhythm Cerys did not hear because her head was already at the Co-op. Elderly male. Syncope. Clammy. Maybe a vasovagal. Maybe postural. Maybe blood sugar. Maybe a heart going to its own time. She rolled the options through her hands and lined them up. She held them until they could be sorted by touch.

She did not think about rails or brick for the length of the street. She thought about a cuff and a glucometer and the way skin felt when a person was about to go again. She would recognise that before the person did. She would get her hand under the back of a neck and set weight down on the trolley before the knees went. She would stand between a fall and the ground if there was any gap left to stand in at all.

She looked down at her hands on her knees. At the lines the work had put there. At the small white scar under her lip that had no story behind it any more. You carry what you can and leave the rest. The token sat against her thigh, light and solid. The kettle in the station would click on again for someone else's tea. The cloths would be turned and turned and turned. Rook would breathe where she had told him to breathe. She would go back. Not now. After.

The ambulance took the corner and the Co-op came into view with its blue sign and a small crowd outside. Someone had spread a coat under a thin man who sat propped against a post, eyes half-closed, skin a colour that made her move faster without needing to talk about why. She pushed

the door and stepped down into the wet and lifted a hand to the crowd in a way that was not a request so much as a setting of space. Tariq brought the trolley. She crouched without letting her knees touch the ground and said, "All right, sir. I'm Cerys. We'll sort you." She reached for his wrist; a brief tremor checked as her fingers found the beat.

Chapter 6

Iron and Rust

Mid-shift at the Southside Co-op, she pressed the gauze to the old man's temple and watched the blood find the pad and stop. Not much. A skin break more than a laceration, the sort that bled fast and looked worse than it was. He blinked up at her with eyes that didn't quite focus, mouth slack at the corners. Cold sweat on his forehead. He had gone down, got up, gone down again. The coat under him was a woman's rain mac that smelled of stale perfume. Someone had tried to help.

"Name?" she said. She kept her voice clear and steady, the way she did when she needed people to focus. "Can you tell me your name?"

He gave it. It took two tries. Tariq read it back to him and clipped the blood pressure cuff around his arm. The man's breathing ran shallow for a few seconds then eased. The crowd at the Southside Co-op did what crowds did when given a line to stand behind. They stepped back because she set a boundary with her hand and because Tariq had moved the trolley bed to claim space.

"Sugar," she said. Tariq already had the glucometer in his hand, the strip ready. He pricked the man's finger with a quick flick and fed the drop. The meter beeped. They both saw it.

"Low," Tariq said. "Three point four."

"Let's bring it up," she said. "Any tablets? Eating today?" She asked the man, then the woman who had given up her coat.

The woman shook her head once. "He had biscuits. Tea."

Cerys eased the man's head forward and put a glucose gel between his lip and gum, kept her hand at the back of his neck until the swallow took. He made a face at the sweetness and then took more without her asking. She counted breaths and watched the colour at his lips. Better. Not good yet. She looked at the cut again, cleaned it with saline from a pod, then took an antiseptic wipe from the packet and ran it around the edges. The sharp smell caught at the back of her throat. A small dressing went down with narrow strips, firm enough to hold. The old man winced, then relaxed when she lifted her hand away.

"You'll have a bruise," she said. "We're going to bring you in anyway. Make sure your head's all right and your heart's steady."

He nodded. "I can walk," he said, but he didn't try. Tariq and Cerys moved him onto the trolley with a smooth lift, weight to legs not back, count and shift. The trolley wheels bumped once and rolled.

Inside, the ambulance smelled of plastic and old disinfectant and whatever last meal someone had eaten two calls ago. The monitor leads clicked into place. Cerys watched the tracing. Sinus, with a stray early beat that she noted but didn't chase yet. She checked pupils again and squeezed his hand, felt the grip, light but there.

At the hospital doors, she gave the handover in a low voice: "Elderly male, witnessed falls with hypoglycaemia and a minor head wound; BP one-thirty over seventy-four, improved after oral gel; ECG sinus with occasional ectopy; for observation." The nurse nodded and pushed the trolley through the swing doors. The old man lifted his free hand a few inches as if to wave and then let it fall. He would be fine. Or he wouldn't. Handover done; the department would take it from there.

At the small sink, she washed and rubbed the gel in. The smell of antiseptic sat in her nose and on her skin. Paper dried her hands; she flexed her fingers. The right-hand tremor showed as a small flicker when she reached for the towel. She pressed her hand flat to the dispenser until it stilled. Her palms itched where heat had once burned. They often did

now once the gel had dried. Cold water ran over them for a moment, then she shut it off. No point dulling her fingers for the next call.

“We’ve got a gap,” Tariq said back at the ambulance. “Ten minutes. Fifteen if Control forgets we exist.”

“I’ll be ten,” she said, already thinking of brick and damp and the sound of water tapping somewhere inside the walls.

“I told Control you were scrubbing the stretcher,” he said. He raised an eyebrow and didn’t make a joke because he had come to recognise when jokes bounced off and fell.

She walked fast through back streets that she knew well enough now not to think about each turn. The alley behind the service yard kept its damp even on a dry day. Today the rain had left everything slick. She slipped under the lifted fence panel, thumbed the notch on the wooden token, hoping the edge would wear smoother under her skin. The figure at the stair mouth saw the token and then saw her face and didn’t stop her. The steps down were slick with a film of water that made each footfall a choice. Heel up, weight forward, hand on the brick at one place she had learned was always wet. She kept the token visible and took the first breath of the damp air on the steps.

Hearth Street opened the way it always did, with brick and the smell of old coal and the steady drip of water from a pipe that leaked and could not be fixed without bringing more metal in. The mesh at the far side cut the visibility into bars. The kettle on the long lead clicked; it had been on all afternoon. Orla stood two paces from the cleared corner with her braid down and her hands loose at her sides. Nothing in her face announced good or bad. It never did.

Cerys crossed to Rook first. No change to that order. She set her palm to his forehead and felt heat, but not the kind that made her own skin feel too thin to bear it. His breath rose and fell at a pace she could count without willing it to be anything but what it was. His wrists showed silver that sat under the skin without the hard shine it had carried the day the

fever had spiked. The cloth at his neck had been turned recently. Someone had done it right. She nodded once, more to herself than to anyone else, and eased the cloth down to feel the line of his pulse at the side of his neck. Fast, but regular. She put the cloth back.

“Down,” Orla said in a voice that held the word steady. “We kept him down. No iron near.”

“Good,” Cerys said. “Who’s with him?”

The woman with the work-scarred hands sat where Cerys had told her to sit the day before. She did not look at Cerys, only at the boy. “I turned the cloths when they warmed,” she said. “He took three sips when I offered. He turned away the fourth time so I waited.”

“Right,” Cerys said. “Keep that.” She turned her head as a shadow fell over the threshold of the room. The older boy with the grey hoodie stood hunched, arms folded. He didn’t come in. His eyes tracked her hands. Suspicion sat in his shoulders, with something else behind it she could not call trust. Expectancy, maybe, but held tight.

“We’ve another,” Orla said. She nodded toward a corner where a pallet had been dragged too close to a wall that ran a pipe. The pipe had flecks of orange where more paint had flaked off in patches. The air near it tasted of metal. A thin man lay on the pallet with his forearm bare to the elbow. The skin at the inside was a mess of shallow breaks, as if he had scratched in his sleep until his nails had lifted the surface to ragged edges. A weeping grey at two of the sites had made tracks on his skin that found the angle of the arm and ran toward his wrist. The cloth under that arm was damp.

“Move him,” Cerys said. She didn’t raise her voice. Orla waved two people forward, the big man with silver thick under both forearms and the boy with the shaved head who took instruction without changing his face. They lifted the pallet and carried it three strides away, out of the line of the pipe. Cerys took the damp cloth from under the arm and slid a dry one in its place. She folded the damp one inward so nothing dripped from

it as she took it to a bowl.

“Boil water,” she said, and the girl with the plait ran. “Use sterile saline. Two pods left; ration them.” The older man with the stoop checked the kettle and set out a clean mug.

Cerys knelt and laid out what she had: a few sterile gauze pads, a roll of tape, two saline pods, the last two in her pocket. She cleaned from the center of each break outwards, caught the thin grey weep before it ran. The grey grew lighter as she wrapped it in gauze. She tore tape with her teeth and fixed each dressing, not too tight. The man watched her face rather than his arm. She kept her mouth level. She told him what she was doing and why, the way she would to anyone. “Clean. Dry. Keep it aired and away from the rust. Don’t scratch. If it itches, rub through the cloth. If this wets through, change it. Don’t let it sit wet.”

He nodded. He didn’t ask for anything more. If he wanted something else, he didn’t name it. His other hand lay flat on the pallet, fingers spread as if he needed the contact with the worn wood to make the work real.

Her palms itched. Heat built at the pads. She flexed her fingers and waited for it to drop. She knew exactly what would happen if she laid both hands down and let the heat take the pain and the weep. The cost in her body wasn’t his to decide. She kept to gauze and water. She pressed the last tape down and leaned back, to ease the pull in her shoulder and to put an inch of distance between her and the pipe.

“Keep him here,” she said. “This far from the pipe. Put a dry cloth against the wall. It will stop the damp from touching him.”

The boy with the shaved head nodded once. The older boy in the hoodie took a step closer. “You didn’t,” He stopped.

“No,” she said. “He doesn’t need that.” She kept her voice flat, not inviting argument.

“You’re sure.” An accusation and a hope in the same two words.

“Yes,” she said. “If I wasn’t, you’d know.” She let the last word sit. No one spoke.

She checked her watch. Half four. If she left in ten minutes she could get to the depot, take one more job if Control threw it at them, then get home for Maya. Beans, toast, maybe pasta if the traffic wasn’t thick. The rhythm of the day set itself in her head, a line she could follow. She reached for the boiled water when the girl brought it, tested the heat with the back of her knuckles. The antiseptic’s sharpness still sat in her nose from the old man’s scalp. It mixed with steam and old coal and made a taste she did not want to keep.

Her stomach growled loud enough that the woman with the work-scarred hands looked up. Cerys ignored it. She rinsed her fingers in the cooled boiled water, dried them on the clean scrap of cloth the girl had kept for that. The older boy with the hoodie frowned at the bowl, eyes tight on her hands. His shoulders stayed tight. The hope didn’t go. It never went in rooms like this. It just changed the place where it sat.

When she stood to step around the pallet, her head gave a small lurch. Not the room. Her blood. She put a hand on the brick column, set her palm flat, and waited for the sway to pass. Cold came through the brick into her skin. It steadied her. She took her hand away and flexed her fingers. The right-hand tremor ticked once and stopped when she made a fist and let it out.

“Go home and eat,” Orla said beside her. A flat instruction with the edge of care that never widened into anything you could name as comfort. “You won’t stand long on an empty stomach.”

“In a minute,” Cerys said. “He needs one more layer.” She added a strip of gauze at the inside of the elbow where the arm would bend and pull. She wanted him to reach for a cup without tearing the skin again. Small things, one after another. She spoke to him without looking up. “Show her,” she said to the girl, “how to change it without the tape pulling skin.” The girl nodded, chin tight with the effort of holding the

instructions.

Cerys looked down the room toward Rook. His breathing hadn't changed. The cloth at his neck lay flat. The older woman's gaze never moved from his chest. Cerys breathed in to four, out to four, the same rhythm she used when she needed her hands steady.

"You're done," Orla said softly.

"Nearly," Cerys said. She set the bowl aside and tapped the edge so residue didn't crust where the next person would need to pour clean water. Only then did she step back and roll her shoulders to the line where it started to pull.

A footstep came from the dark corridor. Not fast. Not slow. The kind with a purpose that did not need to announce itself to be heard.

"Who's that?" the older boy in the hoodie said, but he didn't need to ask. The bodies in the room tightened by degrees and then held. The youth nearest the door edged half a step forward and stopped when Orla lifted two fingers.

The man who stepped into the light had the build of someone who had lived on muscle and not much else. Lean, the lines in his forearms caught light where the skin went pale in tracery, boots scuffed white at the toes. His coat was patched in three places that Cerys could see without looking hard. His face had the kind of stillness she recognised in people who had learned to measure distance and time and decide whether to move toward or away.

"Kaelen," Orla said without making a show of it.

He didn't look at Orla. He looked at Cerys's hands, then at her face, then at the man on the pallet with the dressed arm. He looked back at Cerys and let his gaze rest there. "Thank you," he said. He spoke with courtesy, but it was empty. "You make a difference."

She did not give him a reply he could turn into a foothold. She bent and pressed one last edge of tape flat with the heel of her hand and stood.

“Keep him away from the pipe,” she said to the boy with the shaved head. He was already moving a crate to block someone from dragging the pallet back out of habit. The older boy with the hoodie had gone still in a way Cerys did not like.

Kaelen took two steps nearer. He did not wait for an invitation. “Iron takes from us,” he said, voice low, not raised for the room. “For years it has taken. They built this city with it and they never thought of what it would do. There is a weight owed. Blood for iron. You must know that by now.”

She met his gaze, watched the way his eyes didn’t flick to the side the way most people’s did when they lied. He meant it. That wasn’t the same as being right. “I know what it takes,” she said. She didn’t add anything about payment because the cost in her body wasn’t his.

“You’re useful,” he said, and there was nothing in it of a compliment. “You could save more if you didn’t waste yourself on your little circle.” His chin tipped in a fraction toward the edge where the boy lay and the cleared corner where Rook breathed. “You could fix what hurts. All of it.”

“My name is Cerys,” she said.

He watched her for a beat. “Names are for the ones who will be remembered. Names don’t stop bleeding.”

“We set our own terms,” Orla said from his right. She had not moved closer, but people had shifted toward her. The big man with the thick silver under his skin had eased one foot to place himself between Kaelen and the pallet without making it look like a step. The woman with the scarred hands had not lifted her head, but her hands were no longer folded. They had slid to either side of Rook’s neck cloth as if she might turn it at the first sign without waiting for permission.

“How many,” Kaelen said to Cerys, and now he looked at only her, “how many more would breathe if you let yourself be used? If you didn’t waste time walking back and forth between a child and a room? If you didn’t hold to tidy lines?”

She did not give him the word child. "I won't be moved or owned," she said. "Not by you. Not by anyone."

He smiled. It had no heat.

He took the last step in close enough that she could smell rain in the wool of his coat and the iron edge that lived in all of them now that she had tuned her senses to it. He did not reach for her. He had the sense not to. She kept her hands at her sides and kept her voice low; nearby heads angled in, bodies shifted closer to catch it. "When I come, I come. When I leave, I leave. That's the bargain."

"No bargain is fair," Orla said. "You know that."

"I do," Cerys said. She did not break gaze with Kaelen when she said it.

He lifted one hand, not to touch but to indicate the edges of the room, the younger faces near the line drawn at the cleared space. The boy with the shaved head. The older boy in the hoodie whose jaw worked once. Two girls at the door of the next room who had grease on their fingers from the kettle wires. "They are ready," he said. "They don't have your neat lines. They have lives going thin. They don't have your little rules."

Cerys made a quick pass across the faces with her eyes. The urge in the older boy held tight in his shoulders. The boy with the shaved head would wait for Orla's chin to move. The girls had their hands full of the work that kept everyone here fed and warm. She marked it, the same quick triage she did after a crash: who would follow instructions, who would run, who would stand in the way out of love.

He stepped closer again, close enough that another inch would have been inside the line she had already drawn. He did not take it. "When the city takes from you," he said softly, "as it took from us, you will stop pretending your way is enough."

She did not answer him. There was nothing she could give him that he could not turn inside out and hold up to the room as proof. Orla's hand

moved one finger-width in the air. The big man drew breath, ready to move. Kaelen let out a breath and turned away before anyone had to do anything. He walked back into the dim. He didn't look behind him to see who watched him go. He didn't need to.

Cerys lifted her hand to Rook's neck and checked the pulse there again because that was the only thing that mattered in this corner of the world right now. The beat ran fast and clean under warm skin. She pressed the cloth at his neck and turned it to the cool side with one finger.

"I'll be back," she said to Orla. "After shift."

"I'll keep watch at the platforms," Orla said. She did not name what she meant to watch for. It was a list they both knew.

Cerys looked over at the older boy in the hoodie. He looked back, straight on, no tilt of chin. "Help her," Cerys said, indicating the girl with the plait. "Dressings. You'll change them at dusk. Don't stand by waiting for a show."

His mouth opened to say something and then closed. He nodded once. That was enough. She packed the empty saline pods into her pocket to carry out. She did not leave them as trash for someone else to step on or into. People watched her do these small jobs, the way they watched whether she washed her hands between patients. Small habits said more about her than any claim.

The steps up were wet as before. She set each foot by habit, the one she had set with her life until it no longer needed thought. Somewhere above, a train moved and the sound came down through brick and bone, low and regular. Water marked the walls in streaks and drops. The token sat warm against her thigh where her pocket pressed it close.

In the service yard the light had flattened out into a dull grey that turned the brick even. She took her phone from her pocket and typed: "What do you want for dinner?" The answer came fast: "Beans on toast □□." She huffed a small breath that did not quite become a laugh and typed back, "On it. Homework first."

The itch in her palms started again as she walked. It ran across the pads where the skin stayed tender. She looked at her hands. The skin at the pads was a little rougher than it had been a month ago. She flexed her fingers until the heat eased. “Not for this,” she said under her breath. A rule said aloud becomes easier to live inside.

Passing the rusted fence that backed onto the service yard, she glanced at the plate where a sign had once hung; only two bolts remained, dark and round. She looked at the gaps between fence links and through the alley and made a sweep of sight across doorways and windows. No one stood where the wet brick met shadow. She let her shoulders drop half an inch and turned toward the depot at a pace that kept her inside the window she had marked for herself.

At the depot gate, Tariq stood with his hands in his jacket pockets and his shoulders up against the cold. He looked at her face the way he always did after a call that went longer than Control would like, counting for steadiness, for signs that something had tilted. He didn’t ask. He handed her a bottle of water from the cab and tipped his chin at the cab step.

She met his eyes and gave a short nod while she turned the cap. It slipped under her thumb once before it caught. She drank. The water tasted of plastic and cold and then nothing at all. The cap went back on and she held the bottle low in one hand. “We’ve got a half-hour window?”

“Control thinks we’re on a meal break,” he said. “I didn’t correct them.”

“Beans on toast,” she said.

“For you or the small one?” he said.

“Small one,” she said. The corner of her mouth moved. He saw it. He didn’t push on it to make it into more than it was.

“You eat, too,” he said. “And not out of a packet.”

“I’ll see what the cupboards say.”

“You always do.” He looked at her hands. The skin didn’t show much to another person unless they watched as long as he had watched. “You steady?”

“I’m steady,” she said. It came out flat. He didn’t take more from it than the word itself.

The radio crackled with a voice that had nothing to do with them. They both stood there for a few breaths and listened to other people’s problems go to other crews. It was a comfort of a kind. The day would go on. Work would come. She would do what she could on each call and hand the rest over, then take the next when Control sent it.

“Right,” Tariq said. “Ten minutes.”

“Ten,” she said. She slotted the bottle into the door pocket, set her phone with the message from Maya where she could see it when she climbed back in, and rubbed her palms together once. The itch had settled. Her hands were her hands again.

She thought of the boy’s breath rising and falling down there under brick and of the water tapping into a bowl and of the tape pulling clean off skin because the girl would learn to lift it against the hair and not in the same direction as the cut. She thought of the man whose scalp cut would itch in a day and who would forget to scratch around the tape because it would feel better. She thought of beans warming in a pan and toast done light because Maya liked it that way now and not the way she had liked it last winter. She climbed up into the cab. The seat took her weight. Tariq watched the road. She watched his hands and the way he made each small correction to the wheel and the way those small corrections made the big machine move where he wanted it. It was all there was. He eased them off the forecourt.

Chapter 7

Blank Pages

She reached the mouth of Hearth Street as the evening closed in on itself. The lifted fence panel scraped slightly when she shifted it, a metal sound that she felt in her teeth. She thumbed the wooden token in her pocket, felt the notch where the edge had begun to smooth, and showed it at the top of the steps. The watcher below didn't need Orla's word now; he looked at the token, then at her face, and moved back a pace so she could descend. She had said she'd come after shift. So she came.

The steps were slick. She tested each tread with her heel and kept a hand on the brick. She moved the way she always did in places that would take something from you if you missed a line by an inch. The air changed at the third turn; the smell of old coal stayed in her nose; water tapped somewhere she could not see. She counted those taps without meaning to and stopped at seven because she wanted to keep the rest of her counting for what mattered.

Orla stood by the cleared corner with her hands loose. No announcement. No shift of face that said good or bad. The room held pallets along two walls, blankets folded on three of them, a kettle on a long lead that had boiled and cooled twice since she had last been here. The mesh before the platform edge broke the far space into bars. She didn't need to look long. She knew the distances now: the low arch she could use if the door failed, the white-painted door that would hold if its rusted lock didn't shear, the stairs behind her.

She went first to Rook. That did not change. She touched his forehead with the back of her fingers. Warm, but not the kind that ran hot through the skin. She slid a finger under the neck cloth; someone had turned it on

time; it lay cool against the pulse. He breathed at a pace she could count without thinking. His hands lay half-open on the thin blanket, not clenched the way they had been that first morning.

“Down,” Orla said. “No iron near.”

“Good,” Cerys said. “Who’s with him?”

The woman with the work-scarred hands sat where she had been told to sit. “He woke twice. I gave sips when he swallowed. He turned away the third time. I waited.”

Cerys nodded. “Keep that.” She adjusted the towel folded under his shoulders, a finger’s breadth to ease the angle of his airway. His eyes moved under their lids. She said his name once and watched the rhythm of his breath hold steady. She was about to go and wash when his hands flinched, small, just the fingers. Then his jaw moved in a line that was not swallowing or a twitch.

He went rigid. Spine tight, jaw clenched, eyes fixed on nothing. His arms locked, then his legs. The movement was not a jerk yet. It was the kind of stiffness that said a wave was coming and you could not stop it.

“Clear space,” she said. Her voice didn’t rise. The older woman slid back, took the bowl with her, did not stand. Orla moved one step in a direction that opened room to her right and did not step past the line Cerys had set on that first day. The older boy in the grey hoodie stood up so fast his knee knocked a crate and the sound bounced off brick. The boy with the shaved head reached to ease the crate aside and then froze, waiting for Orla’s hand. Orla didn’t need to lift it; he read the angle and moved the crate without dragging it.

Cerys slipped the folded blanket under Rook’s head with one hand and used the other to take the cloth from his neck; she set the cloth aside where she could reach it again. “Don’t hold him,” she said. “Don’t put anything in his mouth.” She made the space, took his chin in her fingertips to ease his face to the side so if saliva came it wouldn’t pool in the back of his throat.

His body jerked then, full and hard, the kind that rattled teeth if you didn't let it ride. She pinned nothing. She counted out loud, low and steady. "One. Two. Three." It kept her steady. It told her when a minute had passed. She watched his chest between movements. He pulled air in, then lost it in the jerk, then pulled again. She didn't look away. "Twenty. Twenty-one." A train moved somewhere above. The vibration came through the floor and into her knees. The mesh on the far side gave a faint rattle. She kept her voice steady, held the train's beat separate from the numbers.

At forty seconds the rhythm of the jerks changed, smaller, closer together, then larger again. She kept his face to the side and reached along his jaw with her fingers to feel for tension she would need to ease when it let go. "Fifty-one. Fifty-two." Spit pooled at the corner of his mouth. She wiped it with the damp cloth and put the cloth down flat on the pallet where he could not pull it onto his face by accident.

"Breathe," she said, the word low, not expecting an answer. His chest tightened in a way that was not a breath. Then, all at once, the stiffness ran out of him. His hands dropped, his legs went soft, his jaw eased, and he lay as he had before, only grey. The colour had leached. She did not like that.

She put two fingers to the side of his neck. The beat ran there, but light, too light. At the wrist it was thinner still. His chest gave a small lift, then hesitated, then lifted again. The pause between the lifts went too long, and her body recognized it before her mind caught up with the count. In another life she would have waited and put oxygen on. Here, hauling a cylinder and mask down the stairs would advertise them and raise fire risk. Not an option.

She set both palms on his sternum, one on top of the other, heel to heel, the way she had done before when his pulse had dropped into gaps that were too wide. Her shoulders aligned. She stopped bracing herself and let the weight run through her arms the way she had learned to, a thousand times in another uniform and now in a way no one had trained

her to do.

Heat took her hands. It ran up into her wrists and along the tendons in a line she could have traced if someone had asked where it burned. A copper taste hit the back of her tongue. The edges of her vision went hard for the length of one breath and then cleared. The air had a sulphur tang. She held her hands steady. She did not press. The work was not pressure. It was contact and acceptance of what would be taken.

“Here,” she said to him. “Breathe here.” Her voice roughened. She knew it would. It always did.

Under her hands the fine muscles between his ribs eased their sharp pull. The small dip at the base of his throat softened. His next breath was deeper. Then another. His fingers, which had curled in when his body locked, opened one by one. She kept her hands in place while the heat burned, then eased, then dropped to an ache that would last for hours. She counted four breaths. She lifted her hands a finger’s width. Two more breaths. She took her hands away and set them palm-down on the pallet to carry the tremor, to keep it away from his chest. Her breath came fast, then steadied.

His colour returned from grey to a flatter pale that he wore every day. The silver lines at his wrists lay under the skin without the hard shine. His pulse at the neck ran fast, but not in a scatter. It lined up. She checked the inside of his wrist with two fingers, felt the beat there where skin sat thin. She drew in air.

Her hands shook. The right hand worse. Sweat cooled where the hair had stuck to her temple under her hood on the way down. She rocked back onto her heels because if she stood up too fast her blood would leave her head and she would be on the ground, and she didn’t have time for the kind of attention that came with that.

Orla passed her a cloth. She did not touch her. The cloth was damp and cooler on one edge and that was the edge Orla held out. Cerys took it and pressed it to the heels of her hands, one then the other, and then to

her mouth just for the feel of the damp against heat. She put the cloth aside and ran both palms, slow, over the legs of her trousers to ground the sense in her skin.

“What did it take?” Orla asked. The question didn’t hold pity; it was a ledger entry. She had asked it before.

Cerys opened her mouth. One word came, then nothing. Not the nothing of a lost word you could chase around a corner and find when you got there. This was clean absence, a cold space in her chest. She tried again and felt the blank hold. “I’ll check,” she said.

Orla’s eyes flicked down and up. “The cost is always paid.”

Cerys looked at Rook. “He needed it,” she said. It came out more fierce than she meant it. She drew breath again and steadied her voice.

Across the room the older boy in the grey hoodie stood with his arms folded so tight across his chest the fabric pulled at the shoulder seams. He looked at her hands, then at her face, then at her hands again. His mouth hung a little open. His weight sat forward on his toes. His knuckles pressed white under the cuffs. She met his eyes because he had asked for nothing out loud and deserved that much. He waited for her to hold the look long enough to teach him something. She broke it first. She wouldn’t be that for him. She couldn’t take that on.

The tremor in her right hand ticked again. She clenched the hand once and opened it. The ache ran under the skin, deep and without mark. She checked Rook once more: neck pulse, the lift of his chest, the way his shoulders sat easier. She set the neck cloth back, cool side down. She told the woman with the work-scarred hands to watch his mouth for tugging and to call his name if his lips went pale. She made the list of what to look for because lists kept people alive.

She rose slow and waited a heartbeat at each degree of upright. The floor did not tilt. A train passed above and the vibration ran through the brick into the bones of her feet. She steadied at the column with one palm and then took her hand away.

“I’ll go home,” she said to Orla. “He’s stable.”

Orla made a small sound that might have been assent. “We’ll keep him down. We’ll keep to brick. If it goes bad, ”

“Two quick, one slow,” Cerys said. She could hear her own voice and hear the space where another voice should be and not feel it. She reached for names, Eira, Gareth, and got the sound of them without the shape of faces behind the sound. She didn’t say the names out loud. Not here. Not with everyone watching for what she could give up and what she would keep.

She took the steps up with care. The watcher at the turn looked at her face and looked away, the kind of respect that came from watching someone work for someone you loved. The air on the service yard was colder than it had been when she went down. The light had flattened. She slipped the token into her pocket with her phone and pressed the notch once, then let go.

Her coat still smelled of coal and damp; the air in the flat was dry and warm. At home she set her keys in the dish and locked the door. She checked the chain and set it. Habit had weight and weight had use. Maya’s drawing sat under the fox magnet, curling a little at one edge where steam from the kettle had lifted it earlier in the week. She smoothed it with the heel of her hand and the paper lay flat again.

“Mum?” Maya called from the bedroom. “Beans?”

“Beans,” she said. “Toast in two. Hands first, then book.”

Maya skidded into the doorway in socks, caught herself on the frame with both hands, and grinned. The gap in her front teeth still surprised Cerys sometimes. She held onto the sight of it not because it was special but because it was there. “Can I butter?”

“You can butter. Knife flat. Not too much.”

Maya nodded solemnly and went to the drawer where the small knives lived. Cerys went to the high cupboard over the fridge and reached

for the biscuit tin with the red lid. She set it on the table and lifted the lid. The paper-and-old-sugar smell came up. The photos were loose inside. She did not look for the bandage picture; she knew what that one did in her. She took three others and set them in a row on the table next to the loaf and the butter.

In the first, her mother stood with one hand on a garden wall. The wall was old brick. Ivy had been cut back and lay in a pile at her feet. The jumper was green. The hair was grey and pulled back with a cheap clip you could buy in any chemist. Cerys knew all of that without any of it meaning anything to her beyond what it was. The face in the picture was a face. She could say it was beautiful or tired or kind and would have been guessing.

In the second, her father stood holding a barbecue fork with three prongs and a blackened handle. He wore a shirt she remembered as blue because it was blue in the picture and because most of his shirts had been blue. He had a smear of sauce near his left wrist that he had not noticed. A fence ran behind him with two slats missing. She had patched that fence once the summer after he died. She knew the feel of the wood and the weight of the hammer in her palm. None of that brought his face into her head.

The third was a wedding photo. Not theirs, but taken there, at the same small garden, the same wall. Her parents stood together, younger by years than she had ever seen them. The dress was simple. The suit did not fit at the shoulders. Someone had put a hand on the focus because the edges were not sharp. She put her finger on the edge of the photograph to keep it flat. The paper slid under her skin with that tiny, smooth catch old glossy photos had. The faces did not resolve.

“Who’s that?” Maya said, butter knife in hand, staying at the boundary of the table because she knew not to drag her sleeve through anything.

“Your grandparents,” Cerys said. Her voice had less in it than she had wanted. She didn’t try to fill it. She wasn’t sure she could.

“Nan and Grandad,” Maya said, as if the names were enough to make them who they had been. Her eyes went big in a way they did when she was trying not to ask something that might be too much. “Are they in the sky?”

“They died,” Cerys said. “Before you were big.” She turned the beans down because she didn’t want them to catch and burn. Maya liked them thick but not crusted. “Wash after the butter. Don’t touch the tap with buttery hands.”

Maya breathed out and went to the sink. The water ran. The pipes hummed. Cerys watched the line of water and remembered tightening the tap last month to stop the knock that came on when the downstairs shower ran. She held onto that, a fix she had made with her hands and wrench, and placed it next to the empty space where those faces should have been.

She said, “Eira.” Her hand stilled on the table. The name came clean and made no contact inside her body. She said, “Gareth.” It was the same. The sound existed. Nothing else did. Her parents’ faces were gone.

Her eyes stung. She swallowed. She put the photos down without stacking them with care because care was not the point now. She reached for the wedding photo again because she was not stupid and she knew how forgetting worked and that sometimes pushing at the gap could bring a fragment. The edges of the image blurred when she tried. Not the paper. The inside of her. She pulled her hand back. She would not press again just to feel the failure.

Maya held the plate out with both hands. “Toast,” she said. The butter shone and pooled in two places where the bread had come hot from the toaster. Cerys took the plate and set it by the stove and scooped beans onto it, careful not to spill. Maya would eat them on the sofa with a towel across her knees. She had learned not to drip on the cushion after

the first time.

“Will the boy live?” Maya asked around a mouthful after she had climbed onto the sofa and tucked the towel in.

“Yes,” Cerys said. That much she could give and not lie. “He will.”

Maya nodded as if that settled something she had been holding for the length of the day. She kicked her feet once and stilled them because she knew not to scuff the table with her heels. The fan sat on the chair where it had lived for two days, quiet now. Maya glanced at it and then at her drawing on the fridge and then back at Cerys, who was stirring the rest of the beans so they wouldn’t skin in the pan.

Cerys put two slices of toast on her own plate and spooned a smaller portion. She would eat. Her stomach had turned over on the stairs after the work and had settled enough now to take something in. She carried her plate to the table and sat. The biscuit tin lid lay to the side. She placed it back over the tin and pressed the edge down until it made the pop it always made when the air left. She put her mug on top to keep it from rattling if a lorry went past.

When she finished eating, she wiped the table with a cloth that smelled faintly of lemon because Maya had insisted on the proper spray last week when they had been down to the pound shop. She carried the plates to the sink and ran water over them without letting the temperature go so hot it steamed the room up and lifted the corner of the drawing again. She dried her hands and looked up into the mirror that sat above the mantel shelf, an old piece that had been there when she moved in, frame chipped at the corner where someone before her had knocked it when bringing in a sofa that had not fit through the door.

Her face was her face. Brown hair pulled back. Lines at the eyes deeper than when she had started this work fifteen years ago. The small scar at her chin that she could no longer place. There was nothing in the mirror that would give her what she had lost. She didn’t know what she had been looking for. Reflex, maybe. A way to see something she could

not bring up from inside. She blinked once and went back to the stove because the pan would take a black line if it sat too long with what was left in the bottom.

They read for twenty minutes, Maya curled against her side with a book about a dog that wanted to go everywhere its person went but had to learn to wait. Maya ran a finger along each word she wanted help with. Cerys made the sounds and let the rest be, even when the eyes on the page were drawn big and wet and a bit false. When the time was up, she sent Maya to brush teeth and set out the school jumper for the morning. She moved through that without watching herself do it. Routine made tracks that you could walk even when the light was bad.

After Maya slept, she washed the pan and left it to drain, checked the window they kept open a thumb's width in the bedroom, and stood in the hallway for a moment, hand on the door to the room where Maya breathed slow and easy. She put her forehead to the wood because it was cool and because it was there. She didn't pray. She didn't ask for anything. There was no one to ask and no reason to think it would make a difference. She stayed there until the ache in her hands eased off its hardest point, then went to bed and set her alarm.

She was back in uniform by mid-morning, the jacket zipped because the wind at Southside did not care what the weather app said. Tariq stood with a paper cup that had not met coffee in its life, just boiling water and a bag that had gone dark and then pale again because he had reused it. He had shaved. He always shaved. His beard lines were clean. It made him look rested even when he was not.

"Falls on King's Terrace," he said. "Neighbour's called. Door's open."

"Right." She checked the kit by feel because looking at each item took longer than her hands did. Oxygen in green. Defib lit. Airway roll complete. Gloves. Her fingers brushed the pocket of her trousers. The gloves sat there. She knew that. She knew that the way you know you have keys when you feel the square of them through the fabric. They

shifted to the door and up two flights.

The flat smelled of toast and cats. A woman sat on the carpet with her back against the sofa and one leg straight out, the other bent, hand on her hip. "I went down like a sack," she said, and then she looked mortified. "Sorry."

"No need," Cerys said, already scanning for blood, for angles you didn't want to miss before you moved someone. "Where does it hurt?"

"Here," the woman said, hand to the outside of her hip. "And my pride." She tried to smile and it turned into a hiss when she shifted.

Cerys said, "Any head knock? Any blood thinners?" She looked to the sideboard because people put their drugs where they could reach them, and saw blister packs for blood pressure and a round tin without a label that probably held the good biscuits.

"Head's fine, love," the woman said. "No blood thinners. I know you lot always ask."

"Good," Cerys said. In the kitchen, cupboards next to the sink often held cleaning gloves, and she reached for the door on habit before the other habit caught her and said her own gloves were in her pocket. Hand on the handle, she looked at it as if it would offer a reason for being there. It didn't, because it was a cupboard. She took her hand away and slid her fingers into her trouser pocket, found the gloves where they had been all along.

"Cerys?" Tariq said from the lounge. He didn't come to the doorway. He said her name in a way that drew her back without letting the woman on the floor hear anything in it.

"On it," she said, a quiet answer for him more than for anyone else. She snapped the gloves on, knelt, and put two fingers to the woman's wrist. The pulse ran even. Eighty-eight if she had to call it without a cuff. "Any chest pain?"

"No. Just the bloody hip."

“All right. We’ll keep you where you are for a second.” She pressed along the pelvis in the way that told her whether she should move at all. The woman winced on the left and not on the midline. Not a break she could feel. A bruise that would tell its own story in a day. “We’ll get you up slow. Can you lift your toes?” The toes lifted. “Good. We’ll stand on three and you’ll tell me if the world goes strange.”

Tariq brought the carry chair in and they leveraged her up with more care than drama, took the weight on the right, and eased her onto the sofa. The woman breathed hard for a few seconds and then steadied. “Silly old cow,” she said, and then looked as if she wished she hadn’t said it.

“No,” Cerys said. “Everyone falls at some point.” She checked pupils, even, reactive, asked where the woman’s glasses were and found them under the cushion where they had slid. She handed them over and watched how the woman took them. No tremor. No delay. “We’ll take you in if you want a film,” she said. “Or we can leave you with advice if you can weight bear and you’ve got someone to call.”

“My daughter’s five streets over,” the woman said. “She’ll come and give me a bollocking.” She looked at Tariq and then at Cerys as if to see if she had gone too far. “Sorry.”

“Fine,” Cerys said. “Call her. Ice if you’ve got it. Not straight on the skin. Paracetamol if you take it. If you can’t put weight down later, or if you feel sick or go fuzzy, call us back.” She wrote the advice down because people forgot when the pain climbed again. She put the pen in the woman’s hand because it gave people a thing to do and made the words on the paper feel more real. “Sign for us?”

The woman scrawled her name and then sat back as if the work had been lifting that pen. “Thank you.”

“Door?” Tariq said, already at it. He had a way of moving through someone else’s space that left everything in place and still made room for the stretcher if it had been needed.

On the pavement, Cerys rubbed her palms on her trousers without thinking. Tariq saw it and looked at her face. “Fit for the next?”

“Yes,” she said, and let that be true on the surface because the next job would need her steady hands and not her inside. There was no space to hand the inside over anywhere safe and come back and collect it later.

The MDT pinged with a key safe code. Control gave the street and house number on the radio. They moved. Tariq drove the first leg and she watched his knuckles on the wheel and the way he rolled the truck’s weight through a turn you could sink in if you came at it wrong. When they changed over at a bus gate she took the wheel and held too tight for a second before she made her hand loosen because stiff hands made sharp moves under pressure and sharp moves in a big vehicle made trouble for everyone.

They did three more jobs before the end of the shift, none of them the kind that required more than what they carried and what they knew. A child with croup who settled with steam and the calm of a mother who settled when you kept your voice soft for someone who had been awake for two nights. A man who had stepped off a low ladder and turned his ankle while swearing at a gutter that would not clear because leaves did what leaves did. A woman who thought her heart was going because it had tripped and then caught again; the trace showed ectopy that would need a GP, not a bed.

They rolled back into the depot after ten. The bay lights flickered once, a thin stutter before the ballast steadied. Across Southside, sirens ran without break, one high, one low, not for them, while people queued outside the pharmacy across the road where prescriptions were being handed out by hand; at the bus stop a couple argued without looking at each other, and a fox slipped out of the verge by the fence and went to the bin, quick and direct. The bay lights flickered again. No one looked up.

Cerys felt for the bottle Tariq had pushed into the door pocket two days ago and drank what was left. The water was warm and stale, a flat

taste that didn't help and didn't hurt. She set the bottle back and pressed her palms together hard enough to feel the ache change. She stood a second longer than she needed to before stepping down from the cab. Then she went inside because the work did not wait for any of them to be ready. It came when it came. She would carry what she could and leave the rest. For now that meant clean the trolley, restock the gauze, check the oxygen. For later, there was a biscuit tin with a red lid and the sound of two names that did not bring any faces with them.

Chapter 8

The Whisper of War

Water surged out of the split tarmac and ran down the camber, brown and fast. The first car had stalled halfway across, bonnet open, hazard lights dead under the flood. A horn sounded from somewhere behind it and then cut off. People shouted without looking where their feet went. A woman with a phone held high over her head waded in to the knee and then stopped with a small gasp when the cold hit.

Cerys took one step down from the ambulance and set her boot in the water. It pushed at her shin and slid her foot along the broken road. She planted hard and then brought the second foot off the step. The smell was heavy: wet concrete, mud from the verge, a thin film of diesel off the surface near the kerb. Behind her, Tariq locked the wheels and threw the handbrake. He had the radio in his hand with his finger off the transmit while Control overlapped with two other units speaking at once.

“Suspected entrapment, small hatchback, driver conscious,” he said, catching a gap.

“Copy, three-four-one,” Control answered. “More crews en route. Flood team en route. Keep safe.”

“We’re on foot,” he said, and clipped the radio back to his vest.

The water ran to mid-calf by the bonnet of the first car and then deeper where the road dipped toward the canal lock. An old man sat in the driver’s seat with both hands on the wheel, face forward. His mouth moved. Counting. Praying. Water lay black in the footwell up to the base of the seat. The door sat tight in the frame.

“Sir,” Cerys said, loud enough to cut through the noise. “Don’t try to get out. I’m coming to you.”

He turned his head a fraction and nodded.

She checked the surface for potholes. The tarmac had lifted with the pressure and then dropped back, broken in places. On the raised parts it felt firm under her boot; she took her weight with her hip against the car to stop a slide. Her trousers took the water up to her knee and wicked higher. It was cold. Surface grit floated and hit her skin.

“Hold there,” Tariq said to a man in a high-vis jacket who had been trying to push from the other side. “Back up. You’ll shift it onto her.” He put his hand out without touching the man and guided him two paces to the left until his feet found better ground.

Cerys put her fingers to the door frame and pulled. The seal held. Water made a low sucking sound at the gap. Bracing one foot against the sill, she drew in a controlled breath. The door moved a finger’s width and then another. The pressure eased in a rush. The water hit her thigh, cold and fast. It pulled the door out of her hand and then pressed it back as it caught on the hinge.

“Seatbelt?” she said to the driver.

He looked down and then up again as if he had not understood. The belt lay across his chest. He had not moved his hands from the wheel.

“You’re on the belt,” she said. “I’m going to cut it.” She had the cutter on her vest, the orange handle bright even in the flat light. She slid it under the webbing and pulled. The belt went soft and fell against him. “Head okay? Any neck pain?”

He shook his head once. “Chest,” he said, and put one hand to his sternum as if to show where it hurt.

“Right. We’ll talk when we’re on the dry.” She tried to move the door further open and got it to a third of the way. It was enough to get him out if she kept his weight close. “Left leg first,” she said. “Turn to me. Slow.”

Up on the footbridge over Old Quay, two figures stood without leaning on the rail. They didn't shift their weight from foot to foot the way the others did when the cold ran up their legs. They didn't shout. Pale skin where sleeves fell back. The skin at the forearms had a dull silver look in the thin light. Cerys took the detail in and put it to the side because she had a pair of lungs and a heart in front of her and not a code for the footbridge.

A young woman stepped off the kerb to her left to cross to an older man waving from the far side. The undermined edge gave and dropped her hip-deep. She went under for a second. Her phone fell and spun away.

"Hold," someone shouted.

Cerys glanced toward the splash, saw Tariq's grip on the hood, then fixed back on the man's belt and breath.

"I've got you," Tariq said, and he meant it. He put his hand in the back of the woman's hood and closed on the fabric as she came up. She coughed and got a breath. He pulled her forward onto better ground. She gagged once and spat mud. "All right," he said, low. "Feet under. To the post. Lean on it."

Cerys kept her hands on the old man. "Turn to me," she said again. "Shoulder to me. Good. I've got you." She put her hand under his left arm and he slid across the seat. The cut belt trailed and caught on the handbrake and then let go. When his foot found the sill, she took him up with her knee against the door to stop it hitting back against him. Water ran over her boot and filled it. Cold reached her ankle bones. She locked her own knee to carry his weight. "Step down," she said. "Flat foot. Good."

He breathed fast. Between breaths he made a small sound that came from deeper than his chest. His skin had a grey tinge that did not belong to the cold alone.

"Keep your head up," she said. "Keep your mouth above the water. Breathe with me." She counted, slow. He matched her without looking at her mouth, just by the sound. "We're going to higher ground. Stay with

me.”

The flow tugged at her when it hit the gap between the cars and ran faster. Gravel tapped against her shin. A plastic crate floated past with the corner of a blue tarpaulin tied to it. Someone shouted for a child who wasn't in the water, just on the wall with his hands flat to the brick, eyes wide.

Sirens overlapped down the long line of the road between the warehouses. Light bounced off the wet brick. On the radio at her shoulder, a male voice began, “Control from, ” and then another voice came in over the top with “We need, ” and both cut for Control's “All units stand by. Repeat, stand by.”

Tariq stepped back from the post where he had left the young woman and waded to meet Cerys on her right. “Two steps to the left,” he said. “Dip there.” He put his own foot where she would have put hers to show her the change in level. She listened because you listen to the person who has just felt the ground.

They made the last three metres to the concrete apron of a loading bay. The water edged down to the ankle and then drained off the side in a steady sheet. Someone dragged a piece of plastic sheeting from a pallet stack and laid it flat. They got the man onto it and eased him to sit, then to lie, with his head against her rolled jacket. His breath ran quick. It did not catch.

“Name?” she asked, and bent close so he wouldn't have to shout.

“Arthur,” he said after two tries. “Arthur Ward.”

“Arthur, I'm Cerys. This is Tariq. We're going to get you warm and breathing easier. Any tablets for your heart?” She glanced at his wrist. No hospital tag. She didn't have time to go through his pockets in that moment and he didn't have the reserve to sit up and reach them.

“Ramipril,” he said. “And something for, ” He shook his head because the words wouldn't line up.

“Okay.” She looked at his colour again and then at Tariq. “Blanket. Oxygen when we move him in.” She set the back of her fingers to the inside of Arthur’s wrist. The pulse felt fast and narrow. “Any pain down your arm?”

“No,” he said. “Just here.” He tapped his chest again and wouldn’t take his hand away.

“Any pressure in your jaw?”

“No.”

Her boot leaked. She could feel the water in it when she flexed her toes. Her trousers clung to her calves. She let that sit at the edge of her attention. “Can you take a full breath with me?” she asked him. “We’ll count to four in, four out.” She counted, slow and steady, and watched his chest. He tried, then hit a patch where the breath didn’t deepen the way she wanted. She didn’t have oxygen on him yet and the cylinder was in the truck. She did what she could do right there. “Again,” she said. “In. Hold. Out.”

Up on the footbridge, the two figures still stood, watching without moving. The water below them scattered the blue from the light bar across the surface. A third figure came onto the bridge at a run, saw the flood, stopped, and put his hands on his knees, breathing hard. The two did not turn. They were there to watch. That was all. Cerys set the thought aside and kept with Arthur because watching would not hold his airway open if he lost it.

“On the three?” Tariq said. “Lift and go?”

“On three,” she said. “One, two, three.” They took him between them with his weight shared and moved to the ambulance, which sat with two wheels still on tarmac and two on the concrete. They got him in by the side door because the rear step was under water. The box smelled of wet canvas and old disinfectant.

“Sat at the side,” she said. “We won’t lie you flat.” She clipped the pulse ox to his finger. It took a second to read because his hands were cold. She dried the spot with a towel strip and tried again. She waited for the numbers to settle. Seventy-nine. Not good. Not terrible for a man in flood water with a fright. “Oxygen,” she said.

Tariq opened the cylinder, checked the gauge, and fed the line out to her. She fitted a non-rebreather mask, turned the flow to fifteen litres, and touched his shoulder once to mark the change. His breathing found the count they had set and held it.

Outside, someone swore as a tyre spun and then stopped. The boy on the wall still had both palms flat to the brick. A man with a shovel tried to move debris from a drain and got nothing for it but a back that would hurt later. A woman in a soaked denim jacket stared at the place where her phone had gone under and then at her empty hand, as if she had only just felt the absence.

Cerys stood with her hand on the rail by Arthur’s shoulder for a beat and looked back to the footbridge. The two figures were gone. She had not heard their steps.

Tariq saw where she was looking. He didn’t ask. She met his eyes. They had the same thought and let it sit.

Control came through clean for once. “Three-four-one, status?”

“Driver extricated, conscious and breathing,” Tariq said. “Transporting one. Scene unstable. Public requests ongoing.”

“Copy. Flood team en route. Police closing the road. Do not redeploy into the water. Repeat, do not redeploy.”

The young woman with the soaked coat had found her footing and her friends. She sat on the wall with her hands between her knees and shivered. She glanced once at Cerys with the startle still in her eyes. Cerys remembered the sound. A small cry. She pushed it down.

They moved. The ambulance took water into the bay and then out as Tariq pulled away. Water splashed under the cabinets and pooled under the cot. Cerys would wipe it later. For now, Arthur's breath filled the small space between each count and that was enough action for her to hold.

Handover at Haleston Hospital done. Control gave them ten for decon and food.

The steps down to Hearth Street were slick. The guard at the first turn saw the token in Cerys's hand and stepped aside. The cold in her trousers had gone to a steady damp by the time she reached the bottom. She could still feel the ring at the top of her boots where the water had sat. She kept the token between her fingers until she reached the cleared corner.

Orla stood by the column with her braid darkened where drops had found it. "We heard," she said. "They're saying the road is a river."

"It is," Cerys said.

Orla's face did not change. "This wasn't a break on its own. The bolts on the feeder were loosened. The joint was weakened. This was done in daylight, not a night cut. A message."

Cerys took that in and then let out the breath she was holding. "Messages that drown streets get people hurt."

"Yes," Orla said. "This is why I am against him. He loosens bolts and calls it clean. He will say no one died so it was not violence."

"Who?" Cerys said, though she knew.

"Kaelen," Orla said, without weight in the name. "He thinks it is a clean mark, a way to leave damage people have to fix. He'll call it clean. He won't smell the diesel or what the drains spit up when the pressure

goes the wrong way.”

Cerys looked over her shoulder to where Rook lay. The work-scarred woman sat at his side with her hands on her knees and her eyes on his chest. “I saw two on the footbridge,” she said. “Still as if they were set there.”

“They will have been his,” Orla said. “Or those who think like him. They watch to see who comes from the street when things break. They take names in their heads. They make lists without paper.”

“He’ll get people killed,” Cerys said. “Maybe not on purpose. He’ll get it anyway.”

“Grief makes bad tacticians when it sits and rots,” Orla said. “He is a good boy for the dead. He is a bad one for the living.” She rested a hand on the column as if to mark her place in the room. She did not lean. “When the young have only known hiding and funerals, they want to pull the door off the hinge and stand in the open. They think the open air itself is safety.”

“Can you stop him?” Cerys said. “If he sets to work on pipes and bridges?”

Orla made a small scratch on the column, then answered. “I can contain him where my word still holds,” she said, and met Cerys’s eyes with that ledger look she had. “I cannot command him. He believes the time for command is past.”

“I won’t be used,” Cerys said. “Not to clean up the mess when he wants to paint a picture in blood and water.”

Orla nodded once. “Then stand where you must and we will mark the line together.”

Rook made a sound, a small one. It might have been a dream out-breath or his body adjusting to the cold under the damp. Orla stepped to him and set two fingers to the blue blanket at his shoulder to ease a fold. She ran a hand over his hair once to smooth it where it had

stuck to his temple. Rook's mouth twitched and then relaxed. Orla's hand fell back to her side.

Cerys lowered herself until she was seated with her back to the cold brick. The cold steadied her; the sway from the flood had not quite gone. She set her palms flat to her thighs. The ache in them was old now, not from today.

"You're tired," Orla said.

"I'm working," Cerys said. It wasn't the same thing.

"We keep him down," Orla said. "No iron near."

Cerys watched Rook's breath lift his chest. She marked the count. It was steadier than last night. "I need to move him out from that wall," she said. "Damp is coming through."

"Yes," Orla said. "Do it." She took a half step back to give Cerys room to organise the space.

They did not speak for a while. Water fell from the seams in the tiles above in a steady drip that had a rhythm she could brace against if she needed to. Here and there in the long room, someone turned and found a blanket edge or took a mug from a hand and set it to the side. The kettle clicked and released another run of steam. Cerys let the room settle her breath.

She got the boy up without moving him to his feet. The two pallets in the corner had sunk into the damp and taken on water at the edges. She slid one out with a hand on the slat to keep it from catching and made a platform with the driest parts overlapped. The big man came from the doorway without being asked and took the weight for the short move so Cerys could keep Rook's head steady and his arms free. They placed him three hand spans out from the wall so the damp wouldn't wick into his

back.

“Line,” she said.

The plaited girl brought a coil from the crate by the pillar. She tied one end off to a pipe bracket and the other to a bolt head that had held a sign when there had been passengers here, pulled it taut, then pegged two folded cloths over it. Drops that would have hit Rook’s face landed on the cloths and ran down into the bowl she had set underneath. It wasn’t elegant. It worked.

An older man with a stoop stood at the edge of the cleared space with a folded blanket in his arms. It was heavy wool, washed thin at the edges. He didn’t speak. He held it out. Cerys took it. “Thanks,” she said, and laid it over the pallet so it would wick from the ground and not from Rook. The man nodded once and went back to the place where he usually sat, near the low arch where you could see who came and went.

Rook opened his eyes. His gaze went to the line of Cerys’s hand as it drew the cord tight and then to the pegs. He didn’t flinch when the first drop hit the cloth. He followed the movement when she pulled a clean towel flat under his neck and slid the edge so his airway sat open. When her fingers set the last peg, his thumb edged toward the cloth and stopped.

“Hey,” she said. She wasn’t sure if he had ever heard a hello in the way other children did. “We’re moving things. You’ll breathe easier here.” She put her hand half an inch from his ribs, not touching, and set the pace: in on a slow four, out on a slow four. He watched her mouth and matched her breath.

“He’ll sleep,” the work-scarred woman said quietly. “He has stayed down.”

“Good,” Cerys said, and let the word be enough praise for the watch that had already been done.

She hummed. It wasn't a song so much as a line that held at one note for two beats and then slid down for one and sat there before going back up. She could not place where she had learned it. A small ache pressed behind her eyes; she held the note. A kitchen. A radio on. A hand cutting carrots. The sound put her breath into something the boy could follow when words were too much. Rook's chest moved with the pattern and then kept the count when she let the hum fall away.

Orla stood by the arch. She watched without saying anything. That was an answer in itself. She did not step in to change the window of care into a lesson or a ritual. She let the small life of it stand.

"Exit?" Cerys said, not loud.

The plaited girl pointed to the low arch. "Clear," she said. "No crate. No bucket."

Cerys looked at the white-painted door. The lock had held when she had touched it last time. There was rust around the hasp now she hadn't seen yesterday. The boy with the shaved head stepped over and put his hand to it without being told. "Still holds," he said. "Sticks."

"Leave it," Cerys said. "We won't go through that if we don't have to." She put her hand to the column and let her fingers ride the edge of the old paint. "Water," she said. "Where?"

The stooped man lifted his chin toward the pipe with the steady dribble. The basin under it was half full. The girl moved to empty it into the enamel bowl near the kettle and set the basin back in the right place under the dribble. The sequence had been taught and learned.

"Supplies," Cerys said. "Gauze?"

"Low," the work-scarred woman said. "Cloths we can boil."

"Do that," Cerys said. "Dry towel here." She pointed to the crate and then moved the towel to the top where it could be reached without looking. She slid tape, a gauze pad, and a folded cloth into the top crate and left the lid half-open for a hand to find without looking.

Rook's eyes followed her hand. When she turned his neck cloth to place the cool side down, his fingers twitched with the reflex of a child who has learned to reach for what calms him and has not learned yet to take it without permission. Cerys left the cloth within his sight line. "If your lips go pale," she said to the woman at the watch, "say his name and mine. If he doesn't respond, send for me."

"How?" the older boy in the grey hoodie said. He didn't sound like he doubted her; he sounded like he was lining up the plan in his head so he could carry it without error.

"Run to the top of the steps," Cerys said. "If I'm still in the yard, you'll see me. If I'm not, Orla will send one of hers along the way she knows. If you have to come to my door, you know the rule."

The boy nodded. "Two quick, one slow. Only if it's breaths."

"Right," she said. "Not at night unless it's breaths."

He looked at Rook for a beat and then back at Cerys. "He'll be all right?"

"He's better here than he was," Cerys said. "Keep him away from the wall. Keep the cloth cool. Don't put anything near his wrists." She felt the itch under her own skin and set her hand flat on the wool of the blanket until the itch subsided.

"Tea?" someone said behind her. The kettle clicked off. A mug was held toward her by a hand she recognised as the stooped man's. She often forgot his name. He always remembered to offer at this exact moment and not sooner, as if he had measured the care to the end and knew she would take it now and not spill it.

"Thanks," she said. She drank half and then set the mug behind the column where it would not be kicked. She bent to Rook again, set the towel at his neck in its place, and held her hand above his ribs for one more count of four and four. "Breathe there," she said, a whisper more than a word.

He did.

She stood and checked the arch a last time. The floor beyond was clear for ten paces and then had debris from an old bench against the far wall. She didn't like it. She left it for later because later existed and the next five minutes were covered. She turned to Orla.

"I need to get back to work," she said. "Flood calls will run through dark."

Orla nodded. "We'll keep him down. We'll keep to brick."

"Two quick," Cerys said.

"One slow," Orla finished, and that was enough between them.

Cerys leaned down to the work-scarred woman. "If his mouth pulls there," she said, pointing with a finger just above her own upper lip, "do not put anything in. Turn him. Call."

The woman repeated the words back to her. Then she said, "Go." It wasn't an order. It was permission of the right sort.

Cerys picked up her jacket from where it had been rolled under Arthur's head an hour earlier and shook water from the cuff. She slid the wooden token into the pocket where her phone lived and felt for the notch with her thumb. She didn't need to look at it. The shape had been learned by skin, not by eyes.

At the stairs she put her hand to the brick and tested the last tread before the turn. Wet and slick, but predictable. The watcher at the bend looked at her face and then at her hands. He said nothing. She said nothing back. Above ground the light would be a flat grey by now and the road near Old Quay would still be draining into the lock. She thought of the woman's small cry as she stepped up into the service yard.

The air outside was cold and smelled of damp ash where a bin had been emptied the day before and the ash in the bottom had gone to paste. Cerys tightened her jacket round her ribs and set off toward Southside at a pace she could hold. Her boots were heavy with water. The soles

squelched and cold pressed at her toes; the heel rubbed with each step.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Maya's name on the screen, a single line: "Homework done." A wobble of a heart. Cerys typed back, "Good. I'll be late," then deleted the last word and wrote, "Beans tomorrow." She put the phone away.

Control cleared them for ten; she took what she could.

At the depot gate, Tariq stood with his hand on the latch. His trousers had dried into a stripe of tide mark at the knee. He jerked his chin toward the ambulance bay. "They've set up a decon paddling pool," he said. "We get to wash our boots in a paddling pool."

"Good," Cerys said. "Could do with a rinse."

"Control's lovely today," he said. "Telling us not to do the stupid thing we already didn't do. Flood team want us to put eyes on a flat in Westshore where the loo has started to spray."

"Right," she said. "We'll go." She did not tell him about the bridge. She didn't need to. He knew anyway. He knew in the way he had not asked, and in the look they had shared through the rain when the two figures had not moved.

They stepped through the improvised footbath with the boots half unlaced and water run over the soles to clear the grit. The bay lights flickered once and then settled. Across the road a child in a pushchair leaned forward and pointed at the blue light bar without a sound, and his mother pulled the hood closer around him and pushed on without breaking stride.

Cerys climbed into the cab, checked the oxygen gauge, and shut the door. She set her hands on the wheel. She checked the mirrors. No one on the bridge now.

Chapter 9

A Small Hand

She anchored the torn edge against her thigh and threaded the needle by feel. The black thread was a little thicker than the blanket warranted, but it was what she had in the wallet at the bottom of her bag. She tied a double knot against the eye and set the first stitch close to the frayed line, taking a small bite of wool and drawing the thread through. The point scraped her thumbnail as she adjusted the pull. She breathed in, out, counted to four each way without thinking about it, and set another stitch.

The blanket lay half under Rook and half folded back. It had been part of a stack in the corner under an old sign bracket. She had come back on her way home to check the damp and fix what she could. The edge had torn when someone snagged it on a nail. The make-do repair would stop the tear running. The wool was dense and held a little damp from the floor despite the way she had layered it. She worked with short stitches, not too tight. A tight seam puckered and rubbed skin. She'd learned that on a sheep once, years back, when she was ten and a neighbour let her watch the vet close a cut where wire had bit. Scars stayed. You could shape them so they didn't pull when a body moved.

Rook slept with his head raised on the folded towel and the neck cloth turned to the cool side. The cloths she had pegged over the line still did their job. Drops gathered and ran into the bowl rather than onto his face. Someone had refilled the kettle and its element hummed on the long lead. Far off, in the part of the tunnels that ran under the platforms, a train passed, and the mesh rattled in a low way that marked the weight above.

Cerys adjusted the angle of her knee to bring the torn edge up again. A woman with work-scarred hands sat the far side of the pallet. She had a mug and watched Rook's chest. The older boy in the grey hoodie stood by the low arch. He had his arms folded, chin down, eyes on Cerys's hands. He had watched her hands last time, too, and had not been shy about it. She did not invite him closer and did not tell him to go. Orla had set the distance by where she stood, and the young watched and learned.

Another stitch. Another. She eased the knot along when the thread caught. The ache in the heel of her right palm flared when she pinched the needle hard. She opened and closed her fist once to settle it. She had stopped expecting the ache to go. It flared in cold and when she asked for small steadiness. Old work.

Rook's mouth moved the way sleeping mouths did when a dream changed. His lashes shook once and then lay again. She kept the stitch rhythm even. She could work without looking at the needle and split her attention without losing the line. That had saved lives. It had cost her, too. The cost was always paid. Today she was only sewing.

The plaited girl set a bowl under the drip and glanced at Cerys as she worked. Cerys didn't speak. The bowl was in the right place. When the fold at the base of Rook's neck shifted with a shallow breath that wasn't quite right, Cerys's needle paused. She set her free hand an inch from his ribs and breathed in on four, out on four, not a word said. His breath took the pattern on the second count and held it. The woman on watch gave the smallest nod. They had learned her rhythm.

Orla stood by the column with her braid thick and grey. A drop had found it and darkened one section, a stripe among lighter strands. Her hands were loose at her side. She carried no weight just now. She watched the room with the ledgers in her head. She did not tally aloud. Cerys put another stitch in and felt the rough of the wool under her fingertip.

When the tear had been closed up to the folded point, she drew the thread through to the underside and tied it off with the same care she

would use on a stitch in skin. She cut the end clean with the small scissors from the wallet and rubbed the knot to settle it into the wool. The mend was a clean line. It would hold. She shifted her weight on the cold brick and checked Rook's forehead with the back of her fingers. Warm, not burning. Skin dry. Lips a better colour than they had been in the night after the seizure. She timed two breaths and a pause to count them properly. Twenty-six. She preferred twenty-four for a boy his size, but twenty-six was a safer number than what it had been.

His eyes opened. He didn't startle. He watched where she put the needle back into the seam to tuck the tail. His gaze tracked the thread, then her finger and thumb. He had always watched hands first.

"Hey," she said. Quiet. "You're awake." It may not have been morning above ground. Down here the kettle's light was small, and people held themselves the way they did after sleep.

Rook's throat worked. No sound. His pupils widened a fraction when she shifted the blanket edge she had just mended. He watched her hand with close attention, steady and without fear.

He raised his right hand a little, slow, testing the weight of his wrist against the blanket. She did not think he was reaching for the cloth at his neck this time. His fingers hovered above her sewing hand. She had just set the needle in from the top side to snug the last stitch. She stopped where she was rather than pulling back.

Rook rested his palm on the back of her hand where the bones ran close to the surface. His skin felt cool against her. He did not press. He set the weight of his hand there and left it. She kept the needle steady with the other hand and let him mark his place.

Across the space, Orla's gaze took in the sight and slid away. She moved her head a fraction to look toward the arch and the mesh line. No words. That was how permission looked here: a glance turned aside so the thing could be what it was without an audience.

Cerys swallowed. A lump rose high in her throat, tight for a moment, then eased. She pressed her tongue to the back of her teeth and breathed through it. The thread between her fingers shook, fine and almost not at all. She steadied it with a small adjustment of her grip.

Rook's fingers curled, not tight. He drew them in a little, then released. She didn't move her hand away. She let him be the one to choose. A beat later he settled, his hand still on hers. She watched his chest move while she counted under her breath again. In on four. Out on four. When the breath hit a snag, an old pattern where that dip above the breastbone tugged, he rode through it and did not go grey. The dip eased.

The older boy in the grey hoodie shifted his stance but did not break the line of the arch. His arms uncrossed and crossed again. He had gotten sharper around the eyes since the last time she had seen him. Less sleep. More watching. His gaze flicked once to Orla and back. He didn't come in. Orla hadn't asked him to. The big man sat on a crate by the door, legs wide, forearms caught with silver, and gave no sign he had seen anything.

The kettle clicked off and the element quieted. The sound echoed off brick. Someone poured water into a mug behind a column and stirred something with a spoon until the clink stopped. The smell of tea drifted a little, tannic and familiar.

Rook's hand stayed on hers long enough for Cerys to forget the needle for a beat. Then he took a deeper breath and his fingers tightened once, barely more than a twitch. If it had been an adult it would have been nothing. On a boy who'd fought for air, it was an act. It asked a question without words about whether hands would be taken away. She let it pass unanswered in the language of hands: nothing withdrawn, nothing added.

He let go. His hand slipped and caught the blanket edge she had mended. His thumb hooked into the wool and stayed there. His eyes shut without a flutter. His breath evened.

Cerys did not start sewing again at once. She waited through four of his breaths and then set the needle back into the wool. She pulled the thread through and matched her movement to his breathing to keep from hurrying. The last stitches sat neat and dark against the wool. She tied off and rubbed the knot down again and set the needle away in the case.

"Water?" she asked low, more for the woman than for the boy. The woman shook her head once. "Later," the woman said, just as low. "He turned away before."

Cerys got to her knees and checked the towel under Rook's shoulders again. It had bunched. She slid her hand under his neck and straightened it with the other, then settled the cloth where it kept the airway open. She waited to be sure the change held. No tug above the breastbone. Good. She let go.

Orla stood at her shoulder and did not touch her. "You'll eat," Orla said. Not a question.

"I will," Cerys said. She didn't look up from the boy. "I'll take the time before dark." She was not promising more than that.

A mug came, held out in the stooped man's hands. It was the same plain mug he had used yesterday with a chip on the rim opposite the handle. "Tea," he said. "Hot."

"Thanks," Cerys said. She took it and drank a mouthful and set it on the flat part of the crate behind the pillar where no one's foot would catch it. The heat sat warm in her throat and in her chest. It steadied more than it warmed.

She put her palm above Rook's ribs again. "Breathe here," she said, not quite a whisper. He was asleep, but sometimes the word sank in anyway. His next breath was deeper. A voice a child trusted could move the body to make space where there had been none.

"Before dark?" Orla said.

"I'll go up," Cerys said. "I'll check the stairs."

The older boy shifted and did not speak. The shaved-head boy cut his eyes toward her and then away.

On the way to the stairs she stopped by the pipe and pressed a folded dry cloth against the damp wall where rust had left stains. It would keep the pallet from drifting back. She set her hand to the column the way she always did when she passed it, not touching with a palm this time but resting two fingertips against the old paint for balance while she turned. The watcher at the bend took one look at the token in her fingers and stepped back. She took the stairs slow. The treads were wet and held a film of water that made a shine of its own in the low light. She kept a hand near the brick and placed each foot flat.

Above ground the air tasted of wet concrete and the tail of diesel from a generator somewhere she could not see. She stood a moment in the service yard and checked the fence gap. It was as she had left it. The broken sign on the fence, two bolts gone, leaned and did not move in the wind. She put the token in the pocket with her phone and pressed the notch once, a thing she did now without thinking.

She crossed to Westshore by the back ways, the route that ran behind the row of barbers and nail shops and the place where a woman sold dresses from a rail. The bin that had held ash yesterday had been emptied, but the bottom still held a paste of wet ash and something that smelled old and burned. The pavements bore the mark of yesterday's water, a faint line a hand's breadth above the kerb. The flow had gone, leaving a pale edge on brick and tarmac where water had stood.

At the flat she set the chain when she went in and set her keys in the dish. She set the kettle and pulled the tin of beans from the shelf without thinking about something more complex. She'd texted tomorrow. Tonight would have to do. She was not making a choice for taste. She was making a choice for heat and salt and enough to carry them through an evening without questions she could not answer.

"Beans?" Maya said from the sofa, as if the smell had reached her a breath before the words. She had her knees up under her jumper and a pencil in her hand. A corner of paper stuck out from under the fox magnet on the fridge; the paper's free edge had curled a little and then flattened again where steam reached it in pulses when the kettle boiled.

"Beans," Cerys said. She twisted the ring off the tin and tipped the contents into the pan. The first hiss as they hit the hot metal sounded louder than it was in the small room. She dropped two slices of bread into the toaster and adjusted the slider so they would brown but not blacken. She hated scraping char from bread while a child watched you and tried to say it was fine.

Maya slid off the sofa and sat at the table with her hands folded. "Noah brought cress today," she said. "We had cotton wool and we did seeds. Miss said don't flood them or they go mouldy. I did not flood them. Caitlin did. It smelled."

"Good work," Cerys said. She stirred the beans and then turned the heat down. She had to watch them in this pan; they caught if she took her eyes off them at the wrong moment. "You're on cress duty now. You can show me when it shoots."

Maya put her chin on her hands and watched the pan with interest that was half hunger, half the familiar rhythm of evenings like this. "Harriet fell over," she said. "On the line outside. She cried and I gave her a tissue. Miss said good helping." She sounded out the word, slow and careful, still in the rhythm of the lesson. "Help-ing."

"Nice," Cerys said. The toaster popped and she caught the slices before they fell onto the counter. She set them on the board and spread butter out to the edges with the flat of the knife and the care of someone making something small matter. "Plates," she said. She took two down from the cupboard and set a towel on the sofa for Maya's knees. She tipped the beans onto the toast. The steam fogged the little mirror on the mantel for a second and then cleared.

"Eat up, kiddo." It came out of her mouth before she could stop it. The word had weight on it. Old. It had not lived in this room.

Maya looked at her, a line forming between her brows. "That's not me," she said.

Cerys paused with the plate halfway to the table; heat pressed her palms. She put the plate down in front of her and made her face do the shape of a smile that didn't show any teeth. "It's not," she said. "Maya is you. Eat while it's hot." Her hands had slowed without her permission. The plate made a sound on the towel that was a little louder than it should have been because she set it down a fraction too carefully.

Maya picked up her fork. She watched her mother for a second longer and then looked at the beans. She blew on the first mouthful properly the way she had learned and ate without complaint. Maya ate, but her eyes kept coming back to Cerys between bites.

"What's your list this week?" Cerys said, keeping the steady tone she used on school nights.

"Silent k," Maya said. She ticked items off on her fingers as she said them, which made it sound like she was counting more than she was. "Knife. Knee. Knot. Knit. Knew." She frowned at the last one. "Miss said past tense is hard."

"It is," Cerys said. She dried her hands on a tea towel and sat. "You'll write them after. Two lines and not rushed. And you can tell me about the one with the lace at the end. Is there one?"

"No," Maya said. "We did lace last week." She forked beans and put them onto the corner of the toast so the sauce didn't soak the whole piece at once. "Miss says watch the sauce, or it spreads." She looked at the plate, then at her mother, checking for a reaction.

Cerys glanced at the towel over her knees and the fork and the level of beans left on the plate. She let that hang. "We'll do reading after," she said. "Ten minutes. Then you can pick the picture book." She rinsed the

pan in the sink and left it to soak with the water low to stop steam marking the room more than it had to. "Which one did we leave off?" she asked without thinking. She reached for the thin blue book on the shelf and turned it over. She knew the first pages. The ending would not come when she reached for it.

She set the blue book down. The move was small. Her fingers touched the blue spine, then withdrew; she rubbed her palms once and reached for the yellow. "We'll read the other one," she said. "Treat night." She took a thicker book with a yellow spine and a picture of a boy with a bucket on the cover. Maya's mouth tipped up in a way that meant yes. The yellow one had a cadence that soothed both of them.

They ate. Cerys watched the way Maya's cuffs were rolled to the right place so they didn't drag through sauce and the way she kept the knife flat to butter toast when she asked for a second slice. They read after, on the sofa with the towel still there. Maya's shoulder pressed warm against Cerys's side. The words came out of Cerys's mouth steady. The story had a shape she knew even when she was tired.

When the last page lay open and the boy's bucket was empty and he had found a way to be satisfied with that, they closed it and set it on the low table. Maya leaned over and breathed on the mirror and drew a circle in the fog with her finger before it cleared. Cerys shook her head and wiped the print off with the edge of the towel. "Teeth," she said. "Jumper out for morning. Shoes by the door."

Maya nodded and went. The bathroom tap squeaked in the way it always did unless you turned it hard to the left first. The pipes rang in the wall and then went quiet when the tap was set just so. Cerys wiped the table and put the plates to drain. She looked at the fox magnet and the drawing under it. The edge had curled again. She smoothed it. She did not touch the high cupboard where the biscuit tin sat. She did not have it in her to open it today.

When Maya came back she had toothpaste on her chin and her hair pushed back with both hands. Cerys wiped the chin with a thumb and a tea towel corner. "Bed," she said. "Lights out in ten."

"Mum?" Maya said, with the tone that meant not a big thing but not a small one either.

"Yeah."

"You're not sad?" Maya said. Not accusation. Check.

"I'm working," Cerys said. It was the truth she could give. She set her thumb briefly against Maya's cheek. "Go on."

Maya went. Cerys stood in the doorway of the small bedroom and watched her settle under the thin blue blanket that was hers, not the one she had used on Rook. She stood long enough to hear the first two slow breaths that meant sleep had started to climb, then drew the door in to the block where the latch would catch with a light push.

When it was time to go, she picked up her jacket and slid her feet into her boots. They were still damp at the seams from the flood. The leather had dried unevenly and rubbed at the heel more than it used to. She fastened the chain, opened the door the width of her hand, and slid out into the stairwell. The concrete smelled of laundry powder and a little mildew. On the second landing, someone had left a bag of rubbish. She stepped around it. The stairwell door clicked; cooler air touched her cheeks with traffic and a faint siren from the main road.

On Westshore's main, by the shuttered hairdresser and the charity shop with the furniture that never sold, she saw him, the same older boy from Hearth Street. He stood across the street by the bus stop that served the hospital. He had his hands tucked under his arms. He watched her walk. He didn't smile or nod. He didn't try to hide.

Cerys crossed at the lights. She did not look at him again as she passed. Her head turned enough to watch the road. She felt the pull between looking and not looking and chose not. When she reached the

corner where she would usually turn for the depot, she went one street further and cut left there instead, along a row of garage doors and a skip with a sign that said no plasterboard. She didn't speed up. She kept the pace she could hold if someone called her name.

Two streets on, she reached a different bus stop, the kind with a glass box and an advert for a phone plan. There was no bus due. The screen said twelve minutes. The boy stood under the advert, arms folded the same way. His hood was up now. He wasn't out of breath. He didn't check the timetable or the screen. He stood very still. He watched from under the hood, then looked at her hands. He pressed his thumb into his own palm. He had done that before. He wasn't old enough to hide it; his eyes were wide, the skin under them pinched.

Cerys turned again, down the lane that ran behind the shops toward the school. The hedges on one side were wet to the touch for lack of sun. Her jacket brushed leaves and came away damp. She cut across the car park where a girl on a scooter practiced turns without looking at where she was going. The boy didn't appear where she expected him would. He didn't come out into the open. The skin at the back of her neck prickled anyway. She checked her breath and brought it to her count. In on four. Out on four.

A marked police car sat at the end of the row with the engine on. The officer inside bent his head to his phone. Blue light bars threw a dull reflection onto the shop window whose sign said cards cut while you wait. No one passed on the path. If the police looked up, they would see a woman in a uniform jacket walking back to the depot. They wouldn't see anything that mattered unless they had the right eyes. They didn't.

A train went across somewhere she couldn't see. The iron tang at the seam. Freight, low and heavy, felt as much as heard. She had learned the difference by the way it came through the walls at night. Her palms itched, a crawl under the skin that made her want to run them under cold water and then keep them warm. She flexed her fingers in her pockets until the itch dulled to an ache.

At Southside the bay lights were on. The improvised paddling pool for boots was gone. A wet square marked where it had sat. Tariq stood half in the office door with a paper cup and the clipboard under his arm. His beard trim was sharp at the line and his eyes were less bloodshot than they had been the morning after the flood.

"You hear?" he said. "Weird floods in Northbank. Drains up through the loos. Not just the one. Rumour Control says water went backward in three streets at once."

She grunted. "Rumour Control knows everything." She didn't ask for detail. It would be in the jobs if it became the kind of thing that needed them, and if it was the other sort of thing, she was already in it.

He lifted the clipboard and set it down again. "You're on?"

"On," she said. She stepped up into the bay and ran her eye over the kit because it was what they did before they went anywhere. She checked the oxygen cylinder gauge. It sat in the green. The suction unit's charger light showed red, then flicked to green. She didn't lift the airway roll; she had checked it that morning. Her hands rested on the handles of the trolley for a moment that would pass for nothing to anyone else. The metal was cold through the gloves.

Streetlights already on now. The wall clock over the station door said nineteen twenty-six. She made the numbers in her head. Rook had slept after contact and had taken two sips two hours later yesterday. If he held to that, he would stir again around twenty-one hundred to twenty-one thirty, mouths going dry without you knowing. She had two hours to carry whoever was put in front of her. If the call came for him in between, two quick, one slow, she would go.

She stood with her feet under her, not braced against anything in particular, but with her shoulders set in a way that kept the shake out of her hands. Outside on Southside, people walked faster than they had in the summer when the light held longer. Shop doors were half shut with one chair dragged in and one still out to hold the mark. A man carried a

battered printer down the street with both hands. A kid threw a stone that hit the fence and fell. The tide line on the kerb from yesterday's flood still made a shadow in the streetlights. Doors stayed half shut, a thin siren under the traffic, voices kept low.

"Right," Tariq said. "We'll eat when we can." He didn't ask if she had eaten. He looked at her hands and then at her face and nodded once. "You good?"

"I'm steady," Cerys said. It was the only answer that mattered tonight.

The radio crackled with Control's voice and then another cut across it. Tariq reached in and turned the volume up a notch and then down again when it spiked. They waited for a line they could take. When it came, it was for a chest pain in a block off Old Dock Road, third floor, lift broken. They went because that was what came next. She took the wheel and watched for pools in the road where the drains hadn't cleared and for faces on bridges where faces had no need to be. She kept her breath even and her shoulders set.

Chapter 10

The Ultimatum

She put two fingertips to the brick at the turn while her other hand kept the token visible. The steps were wet enough to shine in the low light. She had come after the Old Dock Road job, when the radio stayed quiet long enough to move without questions. A guard's head lifted. He saw the wood slice and stepped back. She went down, testing each tread the way she had learned, flat foot, weight centered, hand near the wall not on the rail. At the last turn the air cooled and the old coal smell met her. Someone had set the kettle again; a blue light showed under a chipped metal casing, steady.

The mesh before the platform had a faint rattle from a train somewhere above them. Kaelen stood with one palm against the post where the mesh was tied, not leaning, just marking his place. The silver under his forearms caught the light where the skin was thin. His boots showed white at the scuffed toes. Orla stood a step behind him, her braid heavy down her back, hands loose at her sides. No one else spoke.

Cerys crossed the open space toward the cleared corner. Rook lay where she had left him earlier, head raised a little on the towel, blanket tucked to his ribs, the drip line still pegged off on the cord they had stretched between the pipe bracket and the old bolt. His mouth was open just enough to show the pink of his tongue. His breath came even, a touch fast, but not the rattle or the pause she had timed two nights before. The work-scarred woman sat opposite with a mug, watching his chest. The older boy in the grey hoodie kept to the low arch, his arms folded, eyes sharp and dark with lack of sleep. The big man sat on a crate by the door and watched the bend in the stairs, his hands on his knees.

Kaelen did not greet her. He moved his hand off the post and stepped out from the mesh. "You made him live," he said. His voice carried without lift. "They won't stop. Not because you tell them to. Not because you hide him in brick."

Cerys stopped within arm's reach of Rook's pallet. She could see the fine sweat at his hairline and the way his fingers rested half-curved on the mended blanket. The needle case sat shut where she had left it in the crate, the black thread coiled inside.

"We are past hiding," Kaelen said. "A child's breath stops in a place where all can see it, where there are phones and news vans. Then they print what they see. They say the words they would not say before. Silver at the wrists. Iron in the bones. They say it because they must, because the picture runs under their names and the risk is on their desks and not on ours."

Orla's mouth thinned. She did not move. Cerys looked at Kaelen. "He is a child," she said. "Not a message."

"He is both." Kaelen's gaze cut past her to the boy and came back. "Children have always paid for the failures of those who built the wrong bridges and wrote the wrong laws. You know that. Your work shows you that every night."

"I don't leave them in the road to teach a lesson," Cerys said.

Kaelen took a pace to his left, then two to the right, his boots marking a half-arc as if he were measuring distance between bodies and walls. "You don't," he said. "You take the one you can carry. You call it triage and you live with the rest. You count breaths. Count what one breath buys. You hate that, but the shape doesn't change."

Orla spoke then. "There will be no child given in my station." She did not raise her voice. "Not to your cause, not to theirs."

Kaelen's jaw flexed once against his cheek. "You draw careful lines and mark them with thread," he said. "You are a coward in old skin."

No one reached for him. No one told him to swallow the word. The work-scarred woman's head turned a fraction, then came back to Rook. The boy in the grey hoodie did not move.

Cerys stepped forward until her knees met the pallet's edge and put her hand flat on the wood near the blanket. She did not touch the boy. She set her hand to the pallet as she would to a trolley at base, to a bed rail in resus, a small weight to tell the room this was the point.

Kaelen watched her hand. He turned his face toward Orla without looking away from Cerys. "Humans choose their own first," he said. "It is not a judgment. It is a fact. If a choice is pressed, you will choose the child you carry home over the child you keep in the ground. No one will blame you for that."

Cerys kept her hand on the pallet. "Don't test what I will do," she said. "You won't like it."

He showed teeth. His gaze didn't change. "You don't know yet," he said. "You will." He angled his body in that half-circle again, as if checking the line from the mesh to the low arch to the white-painted door and back. He had done this before. He knew how many steps it was to put his back against brick and to have room to lift his arms. "Soon," he said. "Before the week turns. Before your phones go quiet. Before the drains settle. Before Saturday's market. I won't say which hour. You have what you need to answer."

Orla said, "No."

Kaelen's eyes flicked to her, then back to Cerys. "You can hold your corner here," he said. "Outside, you don't hold the bridges. I do." He nodded once, as if concluding a trade, and stepped back toward the mesh. Two younger men, pale, thin, the silver at their forearms a dull seam, fell into place at his back. Neither of them looked at the pallet as they passed. Boots on wet stone, then the bend, then nothing.

The kettle clicked. No one moved to pour. The air had the faint dry tang of the element heating and cooling. Cerys let her hand lift from the

pallet and put her fingers over the boy's blanket where the wool caught at her skin. Rook's breath held its small rhythm. She counted eight beats and then let the counting go.

Orla stepped to her side. "You heard him," she said. "He is honest about the wrong things."

"He will try here?" Cerys asked.

"Not while my word holds." Orla's jaw set. "He will walk lines above and send boys to doors he thinks are yours. He will stand on bridges and say he is taking stock."

"Then we move him," Cerys said. "Not far. Out of the open. One approach only. We set a barrier that slows, even if it doesn't stop."

Orla nodded once. "There is a place," she said. "Behind the column near the arch. It has a blind side. The floor is dry there."

Cerys turned to the woman at watch. "We're going to shift him. Slow. On my mark," she said. "Big enough hands to bear the crate and keep his head even." She glanced at the big man. He stood at once.

They prepared without speech. Cerys slid an arm under the blanket's edge to the towel and snugged it to keep Rook's neck straight. She did not lift. She had the big man take the pallet at the foot with both hands and the work-scarred woman steady the crate at the head. The hooded boy came in to take the peg line and let it drop without pulling the drip onto Rook's face. They moved on Cerys's count. The sleep under Rook's lashes broke for a second, then settled again. When the pallet reached the recess behind the column, Cerys set the towel again and checked the airway. No tug above the breastbone. No mouth pull.

The recess ran as deep as a body's length and left a channel no wider than two people shoulder to shoulder. The damp on the wall stopped a foot from the floor. Someone had painted this section white years ago; the paint that remained flaked in hand-sized pieces.

“Better,” Cerys said. “One way in.” She stepped back into the channel and turned, checking what needed moving to secure the approach. There was an old crate with a broken side, a coil of cord, and a bucket which smelled of bleach.

She pointed to the stair mouth. “I want two there. All night. Rotate every hour. You”, she looked to the big man, “and you,” to the woman. “You know what a crowd is like. You can stand without words. Drop the crate, tie the cord to the post, and wedge the bucket so it trips a foot that isn’t careful. Don’t make it a trap that breaks someone’s leg. We don’t want a scream. We want a stumble and time.”

The big man nodded. He hefted the crate and tested its weight. The woman tied the cord to the iron loop set in brick below the stair bend. The loop left rust on the cord where it rubbed. She wrapped a rag around the loop as she knotted the cord, careful not to lay skin on iron, leaving the rag between cord and iron. She anchored it with a knot made by habit and set the bucket to fall outward, not inward.

Cerys looked to the work-scarred woman. “You stay by him when you’re not on the stair,” she said. “Watch his mouth. If it pulls above the top lip or his lips go pale, you know the code. Two quick, one slow. If it’s not his breath, you don’t use it.”

The woman’s chin dipped. “I know,” she said.

Cerys crouched by the pallet and felt under the chipped paint where the wall’s tile had lifted away from mortar. She worked the edge with two fingernails until the tile moved a fraction and then came free. Behind it the gap went the width of her hand. She took the small torch from her bag, flicked it on to check the bulb, then switched it off and laid it flat inside the cavity. She slid a capped bottle of water in after it and fixed the tile back, pressing until it set in its place. “If you need to move him out of sight even for a minute, that’s there,” she said to the woman. “Don’t tell anyone except the boy at the arch and Orla.”

The older boy in the hoodie watched every movement. She met his eyes and held them a moment. "You know where now," she said. "You don't play with it."

He nodded, short and fierce. "I'm not a kid," he said.

"You are tonight," she said. "It's better to be a kid than a hero." He looked as if he would argue and then didn't. His thumb pressed into his palm again, a habit he had not learned to hide.

Orla touched the column and then pointed toward the low arch. "There is a service passage," she said. "Not the white door. A narrower one behind that. It goes to a ladder with metal rungs. It rises to a maintenance hatch at ground level."

"Metal," Cerys said.

Orla's mouth went flat. "It burns," she said. "For those with silver it burns. For you, it is only a ladder. It is a last resort we keep because sometimes last resorts are all there are."

"Show me," Cerys said.

They went under the arch and into a space where the brick shifted to a tight tile pattern, pale and stained. The passage ran narrow and then turned again. At the far end, a square cut in the ceiling showed the bottom three rungs of a ladder. The first rung had flaked to leave flakes on the floor, grey and dull. No shine. No light from above.

"We don't use this unless the other ways are shut," Orla said. "If we go, he will carry Rook and the other will lift him," she added, nodding toward the big man and the hooded boy.

Cerys counted the steps back to the pallet. One, two, three turns, thirteen paces each turn the long way, nine paces the short. When they reached the recess again, she counted the paces from the pallet to the stair mouth. At a walk: fifteen, then sixteen on the return because she hugged the column. She took the same route at a run and made it in nine. On the way back she measured where the floor dipped and where the old

paint flaked underfoot in bigger pieces, the kind that would skid under a heel.

She went to her bag and stripped it to what could be carried without catching: gauze, tape, small scissors, glucose gel, the little sewing wallet. She handed the spare tape and folded cloths to Orla. "Cache them," she said. "Where you won't show me, so if someone needs to ask, I can say I don't know."

Orla took them and set them in a tin that had once held biscuits, the same kind of tin Cerys kept high in her own kitchen. "I know where I'll put it," Orla said.

Cerys picked up a pen and wrote a single line on the back of her left hand, an M that took only a second to form. She looked at it, then went to the basin where the pipe dribbled and scrubbed the ink off with the side of a damp cloth until the skin looked the same as before. She flexed her hand once; the pull eased. She hung the cloth back on the line. It dripped twice and then held.

"Enough," Orla said. "You go now, for the girl."

Cerys nodded. She checked Rook's mouth once more and set her palm above his ribs. "Breathe here," she said. His next breath was deeper. "If he wakes, water in small sips and only if he doesn't turn away," she said to the work-scarred woman. "If he coughs, turn him and let him clear, then reset the towel."

The woman repeated each instruction in her own words, the way a good handover sounded when it was done right. Cerys listened and let the echo fix the plan.

She went to the stair mouth. The big man had set the crate and the bucket the way she had shown. He stood with his feet spaced, ready to drop the cord and lean his weight if anyone pushed. "If there's a shout that isn't ours," Cerys said, "you let it wash past. You don't reply to strangers."

“I don’t,” he said.

At the last turn the watcher glanced at the token and then at her face, then moved aside. She went up slow, hand near the wall, careful on the slick tread. The service yard above smelled of damp brick and the faint diesel that clung when a generator had run earlier in the day. The fence gap was as she had left it. The sign with two bolts gone still leaned, edges flaking.

She climbed the three flights at Westshore with the overnight bag across her shoulder. Maya opened the door before Cerys’s key turned fully in the lock. The girl had her jumper on with cuffs rolled to the right place, shoes tied, hair half pulled back by a band she had chosen for herself and not asked about. She had put her tooth mug into the sink without rinsing it; toothpaste sat in a white crescent on the porcelain. She had set her small blue blanket on the sofa and then folded it into a square again because that was how it was kept when not in use.

“Bag?” Maya said, eyes bright, a little too bright.

“Sleepover,” Cerys said. “Mrs. Peng said yes.” She slipped the bag down, opened it, and showed the spare underwear, the toothbrush in a plastic cover, the yellow book with the boy and the bucket, and the thin blue one they had not finished last time. “Which book?” she asked.

“Yellow,” Maya said. “Please.” Her voice made the word careful.

Mrs. Peng’s door opened a second after Cerys knocked. The flat smelled of fried egg and tea, the ordinary kind of tea most people drank, not the thick tannin that came from a kettle left on a subpar lead. Her hair sat in a neat bun at the back of her head. She wore a cardigan with one elbow worn thin. Her slippers were plain. “Come,” she said. She looked at the bag, then at Maya’s face, then at Cerys’s hands. “Long?”

“Maybe,” Cerys said.

“My door is open,” Mrs. Peng said. Her eyes held on Cerys’s a heartbeat longer than the words took. “Always.”

“Thank you,” Cerys said.

Maya looked up at her. “Are you going to work?”

“Yes,” Cerys said. She bent and kissed the top of Maya’s head. “Do what Mrs. Peng says. Teeth, toilet, lights when she says. If you wake up, that’s all right. You sleep again.”

Maya nodded. She took the bag and looked at the yellow spine of the book. “Will you come before school?”

“I’ll try,” Cerys said. The girl stepped over the threshold and the bag knocked the frame lightly. Mrs. Peng’s hand touched Maya’s shoulder in a way that meant welcome and guidance. “Go on then,” she said to the child. To Cerys: “Go.”

The door clicked shut. Cerys stood in the hall, put her shoulder to the wall, and breathed twice, slow counts. The plaster felt cool through her jacket. She took her phone out and typed half a message, Going to be out of contact for a bit. Keep our corner if I don’t answer. Then she deleted each word and locked the screen. She stood one more count and then walked down the stairs.

On the pavement, she looked up at their window. The thin curtain made the light inside look softer than it was. She fixed it in her head the way she fixed the position of equipment in a small room, where it was, how to reach it, which hand to use. The street had gone quiet with the late hour; damp air held frying-fat and bus brake dust. She set her jaw and turned toward the back ways.

Westshore held water in the places the drains didn’t reach. A line on the kerb showed where yesterday’s flood had stopped. A pile of damp cardboard leaned against a bin. A scooter rattled over a joint in the footpath where a slab had lifted. The sound marked the rider’s speed and balance; a girl out after bedtime with uncombed hair and a red sweatshirt, watched by no one visible. Cerys crossed to the alley that ran behind the charity shop and the place with the furniture that always stayed in the window.

Outside the off-licence a man stood with his arm out and his palm up. Blood slicked across the heel of his hand where a bottle had broken. A younger man stood beside him and looked at the ground as if the wound were there instead of on the skin he could help. "Do you have a bit of tissue?" the younger one asked the air, not looking at anyone.

Cerys walked over. "Hold it high," she said to the older man, taking his wrist and lifting. She took a clean packet of folded cloth from her pocket and pressed it to the palm with the heel of her other hand. "Press," she said to the younger man. "Hard. Not a dab." He obeyed. The older man hissed and then breathed out. "It'll stop," she said. "You keep pressure for five minutes. Then you check and press again if it's still bleeding. If he feels faint, sit him down. If it won't stop after ten, you call nine-nine-nine and tell them he's on blood thinners if he is. Is he?"

"No," the younger said. "Just lager." He swallowed and managed half a crooked smile at his own small joke, which meant he understood instruction now. She checked the cut's depth with a glance at the edge between the fingers and decided they could manage. "Wash it under the cold tap when the bleeding drops. Don't run hot water and don't pick at it. Wrap it once with something clean. No tape that sticks to the skin. Kitchen towel is not a dressing. If glass remains, don't dig; let A&E; do it." He nodded again, quicker now, fingers steady enough. She stepped back. "Good man," she said, and carried on. Counting steps, counting breaths, counting the gauze, this she knew.

At the corner by the hospital bus stop, a bus rolled in with its lights on and no one at the shelter. The doors opened. No one boarded. No one stepped off. The doors closed and opened again in the same motion, the driver invisible behind the screen. The bus stood a few seconds longer than it needed to and then moved off. The sign on the shelter flickered to a brighter white and then back. The stop display jumped a minute forward, then back. Traffic noise stayed low for the hour. Cerys put her hands in her pockets and kept walking.

She cut behind the nail bar, past the gated entrance to the service yard they used for deliveries, and through to the narrow lane that fed toward the back of the old line. Her breath marked time for her: in on four, out on four. She thought of the alcove and the tile, of the cord tied to the iron loop, of the crate with the broken side, and of the boy in the hoodie who had kept his eyes on her hands. She added one more step to her list, one she had not written down, check the white-painted door that stuck, check it again, and choose fast which way to run if it came to it.

She went on.

By the time she reached the fence at the service yard near Hearth Street, the wind had shifted. She could smell the inside before she saw it, the mix of old coal, damp cloth, and the faint bite from the kettle element when it switched on. The broken sign rested where it had, the two bolts still gone. She slid through the gap without catching her jacket and felt, for a second, the old scrape of metal against fabric that had taught her to fold her elbows in. She put her hand on the brick at the stair mouth and waited for the watcher to see her token. He looked up, saw it, and moved aside.

She took the steps down. Her feet knew the measure of the treads now. Her shoulders set and stayed there. She went toward the place where a boy slept and a line had been drawn that would not hold against a flood, but would hold long enough to change what one set of hands could do.

She found the work-scarred woman at the recess where she should have been, eyes on the blanket, mouth set, body angled so she could move without catching her knee on the crate. The big man stood where she had told him to, at the stair bend with the cord in his hands. Orla watched from the column. Rook's breath counted itself in the small rise under the wool. Cerys let herself take that in, then set her bag down and knelt.

"Tell me," she said.

“He slept,” the woman said. “When he stirred, I turned the cloth. He did not want water. I did not force it. No mouth pull. Colour steady.”

Cerys nodded. She put her palm above the boy’s ribs and made the smallest of circles, not touching him, just marking the space where breath should go. “Here,” she said. His next breath answered, steady and even. She drew her hand back and let the room sit in that steadiness for a count of six.

“Again tomorrow,” Orla said. “He will come to talk. He’ll come soft, then rough. Same hand. He will wait for you to break.”

“I won’t break,” Cerys said. “I might bend enough to get him through a door without a mark.” She looked at Orla and added, “I left the girl with a neighbour. If I don’t get back by morning, she will walk her to school. It is close enough.”

Orla’s mouth softened. “You carry what you can,” she said. “Leave the rest.” It was not advice. At the stair mouth, the air stayed still for one breath.

Cerys stood to ease her knees and rolled her shoulders once to reset the ache that had settled there after the flood and had not left. She took the mug the stooped man held out to her. Tea. Hot enough to matter. She drank and set it in the same safe spot on the crate behind the pillar where a foot would not reach. She checked the peg line and the bowl under the drip and the towel under Rook’s neck again, one after the other, steady and without rush. At the stair she tested the cord with a small pull, checked the rag at the loop, and set the bucket to tip out, not in.

“If they come quiet, you fall back, not forward,” she said to the big man, low. He answered with a nod.

The mesh rattled with another freight above. The vibration ran through the pillars into her hands where they rested on the pallet edge. She lifted them, then placed them down again. She did not let them shake.

“Tell him to breathe,” Orla said, not as an order but as a blessing they could accept. Cerys did.

“Breathe here,” she said.

Rook did.

She stayed.

At the stair mouth, the watcher shifted his weight and settled.

Chapter 11

The Empty Chair

Cerys hit the last turn of the stair with the token already in her hand. She had gone up and back once already; waiting at the flat had wasted the hour. The watcher at the bend was not at his post. The crate they had set for a stumble lay two paces back from where she'd left it. The cord tied to the iron loop sagged, its knot intact but the rag around the rust had slipped. The bucket had tipped and left a pale streak on the floor where water had run and dried. The streak curved in one clean pull.

She went past the post before anyone could say her name. The channel behind the column was empty. The pallet was gone. The wool blanket they had used to wick damp lay folded where someone had put it aside as if the thing itself mattered, not what had been on it. The chair she had sat in earlier lay on its side with a leg pressed into the flaking paint. She took one slow breath and let it go.

"Here." Orla's voice came from the half-light near the arch. Low. Steady. "We are here."

Cerys found the work-scarred woman and the big man on their sides with their wrists tied in front. The woman had turned her face to the floor to keep grit out of her eye. Cerys slid two fingers between wrist and cloth and checked for pulse. Strong. She pressed at the knot until the tension loosened and the weave gave. The woman pulled her hands free and pushed herself up onto one elbow.

"Where?" Cerys said.

Orla touched the column with one knuckle. Chalk showed pale against the old paint: two fast lines, a blunt head and a tower body. The

beak on the block head angled to the right. East. She didn't have to say it again.

"They came soft," Orla said. "Not many. Four, maybe five. Masks. No one raised a voice. They threw a cloth, wide like a sheet, over the boy. Lifted him and took the right-hand path under the arch. They left us air."

Cerys knelt by the big man. He had turned his hands to keep the binding from cutting skin. At his wrists, the knot held. "Breathe," she said to him, because sometimes people forgot when their chest went tight. He drew air in and out as told, slow and even. She worked it until it gave. She slid the cloth loose and let him do the rest. No deformity. Skin intact. Rope burns only.

"They used our own bucket," the woman said. She rubbed the red line the cloth had left around her wrists and looked at Cerys to check what to do next. "They knocked it. He went for it. I moved. Then they tied us. They didn't hit."

Orla's sleeves had marks where hands had gripped and held. She stood without bracing herself on the brick. Her braid was damp along one section where it had brushed the wall. She wasn't winded. She looked as if she had watched something she hated and taken its measure. "They know our lines," she said. "They knew the places to step."

Cerys moved to the channel. The pallet's outline showed in fine grit where its weight had been. On the ground by the line of flaking paint, a faint smear of grey caught her eye. She bent and touched it with the side of her finger. It had the dried look of cloth that had been wet and then pressed to a surface, not blood, not their grey fluid. A thread clung to the edge of the mended blanket she had stitched. Rough weave. She lifted it and let it go. The thread stuck to her skin and then fell.

"Two at the stair," the big man said. He had his hands in front of him now and the feeling back at his fingers. "Two more at the arch. One in the hall. They moved at the same time."

"Four sets. Same beat," he said.

"You saw faces?" Cerys asked.

"Masks," he said. "Black cloth. Eyes dark. They didn't smell of drink."

Orla had taken three steps into the open when she was grabbed. She spread her fingers wide, imitating how they had held her by the upper arms. "They kept me away," she said. "At their length. Not a strike. Not a shove to ground. Held and lifted their arms when I tried to set my foot forward." She let her hands fall. "They will call it careful. They will call it a message only."

Cerys scanned the floor for what else had moved. The small torch still sat behind the loose tile. Its edge lay true where she had pressed it back. The bowl under the drip had filled and needed emptying, but someone had placed a dry cloth to stop the splatter. The drip line she had pegged to the cord sagged where the cord had lost tension; a peg lay on the ground. She picked it up and put it on the crate.

"Time?" she asked.

Orla looked toward the stair. "Less than a minute," she said. "From bucket to gone."

Cerys set her palm above the small hollow where Rook's chest would have lifted under the blanket and the towel, out of habit that no longer had use. Nothing answered. The shape of his small body was gone from the room. She pulled her hand back. Her fingers shook once, then steadied.

"Did he cry out?" she asked.

Orla shook her head. "The cloth," she said. "They covered his face and chest. He hates the cloth. He went still when it touched; I have seen him do it to keep breath from going wrong." She swallowed once and went on. "They moved before he could take the next one."

Cerys stood. She took the chalk mark in fully. Two strokes. A line angling out from the top as if a beak pointed to the right. No one else in the room had chalk on their fingers. She rubbed at the edge with her

thumb; the mark did not smear much. New, but not wet.

The big man had his feet set under him now. He shook his arms to bring the blood back. "We weren't asleep," he said to Cerys, as if he owed her something for that. "We weren't asleep."

"I know," she said. She meant it. They had built a barrier to gain seconds, not to keep an army out. "You're up?" she asked.

"Up," he said. He moved to the stair mouth and took hold of the cord again, not because anyone would come down in the next minute, but because hands had to be on something.

Cerys walked the line from the recess to the arch and then to the column with the chalk, counting paces the way she had before. Nine at a run. Fifteen at a walk. She changed nothing. The room had been measured once and it had not saved him. She didn't say that out loud.

Orla stood with her hand near the column, not touching the chalk. "The beak is east," she said. "Old men in the city used to speak of the rook at the board. It is a square shape that runs straight lines. This is a board to him."

"Kaelen," Cerys said. The name came out low. It fit the line and the mark and the way they had moved.

Orla did not confirm or deny. "The bridges were his word," she said. "He said he held them. The power station is east of them. If he has boys who like to stand in places that give them a view, they stand there."

Cerys crouched where the pallet had been. A glint showed under a strip of wood at the edge of the pallet mark. She slid two fingers underneath and levered it out of damp grit. A round metal badge, thin as a coin, lay there wedged flat. She took a piece of dry cloth from her pocket to touch it. The metal was cold even through the fold. Stamped on its face was a simple shape, a turbine with the letters HPS worn soft by time.

Cerys showed it to Orla without offering it to her. Orla's mouth went in a line. "Old," Orla said. "From when the station ran."

"They left this on purpose," Cerys said.

"They want you to follow," Orla said.

Cerys slid the badge into the pocket with the wooden token. The wood was warm where it had sat against her thigh since she ran. The metal stayed cold. She moved the badge to sit flat so it would not rub. The two shapes knocked lightly as she let her hand fall.

"We can choose the hour," Orla said. "First light. Not before. There will be boys above who think wind and rain hide their feet. First light shows ground."

Cerys looked to the stair, then at the arch, then back at Orla. "First light," she said.

"Under Northring by the culvert," Orla said. "No bridges."

"Back lanes past Old Quay," Cerys said. "Keep to brick."

"If I cannot spare a full hand?" Orla said. Not a test. A fact, because every set of hands here was counted and had somewhere to be.

"I'll go," Cerys said. "With or without a hand."

Orla's chin dipped once. "I will go whether you want me or not," she said.

Cerys didn't argue. There were some fights that cost more than the win bought.

They put the room back to the shape they could manage. The big man reset the crate. The woman re-tied the cord, placing the rag back between skin and rust, and set the bucket to tip outward. The older boy in the grey hoodie came in from the far hall, eyes sharp for something to do, and checked the loose tile by habit. Cerys said nothing to him he didn't already know. She collected the fallen peg and pinned the drip cloth again, so the drops ran into the bowl and not onto bare stone.

"Who walked first?" she asked Orla.

"The one at the stair," Orla said. "He moved his weight and the cord went slack. That was the first step."

"Then they learned the room," Cerys said. "In daylight."

"They watched. They counted," Orla said.

Cerys made a small sound that was not agreement so much as acceptance. "I'll walk home," she said. "I'll be back before the light breaks."

"Go," Orla said.

She checked the recess and the drip line once more and gave Orla a short nod. Cerys stood a last moment in the channel and placed her palm soft above the place where she would have said the word to set a breath. No word now. Then she turned and took the steps up, flat-footed, careful. At the mouth she showed the token to the watcher who had returned to his place. He stepped aside without question. The broken sign above the fence didn't move. The yard smelled of old coal and wet brick.

She took the back ways. Westshore sat quiet at this hour, the sort of quiet that came when shifts changed in the city's underparts and most people were too tired to make more noise than the road took from their tyres. Cerys kept to the side of the pavements where the slabs sat steadier. She counted sets of four as she went. The badge in her pocket touched her leg through the cloth every dozen steps; she shifted it until it lay flat against her thigh and recorded its place by feel so she wouldn't have to check again.

A single fox crossed at the end of the street near the bins, its fur slicked by earlier rain. It stopped and looked across the road toward her without moving nearer or away. She stopped because it had and then took another breath. The small hand on hers. She kept walking. The fox trotted on its original line.

She turned left behind the row of lock-ups and cut under the overhang at the back of the old laundry. The gutters dripped. She stepped

around each small wet patch without watching her feet; she could read where the drips would land by the dark on the ground. Her shoulders carried the same set from the station, and she let them, because the change would come when there was a reason to change and not before.

On the way into her building her fingers found the right key without her looking. Upstairs, she set the chain, then slid it back and set it again because habit worked better than thought when thought was too quick. She opened Maya's door on the slow hinge and let the light from the hall fall a little into the room.

The bed was empty. The thin blue blanket lay folded on the footboard.

She closed the door until it sat on the latch and turned back to the small room they used for everything else. The kettle sat quiet on the side. The mug she had left by the sink was in the same place. She picked it up and put it down again. She took her bag and opened it on the table and looked at what she already had inside: gauze, tape, scissors, the little sewing wallet, glucose gel, two clean cloths, and nothing she didn't want to carry.

She took the wooden token out of her pocket and put it on the table to the left of the bag, near where she could pick it up without looking. Then she took the badge out and set it down on the right. The badge caught the lamplight on one edge and went dull when she touched it with a fingertip. Cold metal. Warm wood. No more meaning than that. She put both back where they had been.

Her hands went to the drawer where she kept the first-aid tin and then stopped. The tin was stocked. She didn't need more. She left it as it was. She looked at the clock and worked out what first light meant in minutes and how long it would take to get from her door to the yard and from the yard down the stairs and from there to the place where Orla would be with whoever she could spare. Westshore, Old Quay, then the waterfront.

She drank a mouthful of water from the tap and set the glass by the sink, where she would see it on her way back if she made it home first. At the door, the stair was quiet. She turned her head toward Maya's door and let that be enough. On the doorframe, her fingertips rested a moment, then lifted.

The room had not changed. That was the point. She didn't try to tidy anything that did not already need it. She picked up her bag and set the strap so it would not catch on her coat and then sat on the edge of the sofa for a count of ten breaths, because steady mattered more than speed now. On the eighth breath, her shoulders eased without her asking them to. On the tenth, she stood.

She checked the corridor once more and then went back to stand by Maya's door. She let herself stay there for one more breath. Then she went to the living room and stood at the threshold. Fingertips to the frame, a count to three. She turned away and set the bag next to the door with the strap doubled so it could be lifted without catching. The badge was cold under her thumb once through the cloth, then she let it be. She closed her eyes for one count and then opened them again.

She would move at first light. There were no more words in it than that.

Chapter 12

What Remains

She slid the framed photo onto the table and turned the lamp on. The shade cut the light into a tight circle on the wood. The rest of the room stayed dim. She set her phone face up beside the frame and unlocked it with a thumb. On the other side of the frame she placed the glossy holiday picture she had taken from the kitchen drawer. The red coat, the carved deer. She did not think about the ache behind her eyes that used to come with that photo. There was no point digging at an old seam.

She moved the frame and the glossy print until they sat straight under the lamp. The fox magnet on the fridge held Maya's drawing of their tree a little crooked, but not enough to fix. The flat was quiet, the pre-dawn stillness before the first bus and the rumble in the pipes. No cars turned at the junction. She rested two fingers on the top edge of the frame to stop it from sliding on the varnish that had gone sticky from years of cups and steam.

She said the facts out loud, steady and low. "Maya Vaughan. Seven." Her voice sounded the way it did when she gave a handover through a mask and a screen. Clean. Not clipped. No room for extras.

She leaned closer to the framed picture. It was a school day morning from last term, jumper cuffs rolled twice to keep them clear of sauce or paint, curls pulled back on one side with a clip shaped like a star. The ear on the clip side showed clear. Not flat to the head; the top lifted slightly away, a small rim along the curve before it met scalp again. Right side. Left side hid in curls. She tapped the glass very lightly near the ear and spoke the words. "Right ear lifts at the rim." Then, "Left is under curls."

In the holiday picture, the red coat looked brighter than it had in her memory. The carved deer's antlers seemed too big for the little body; she knew that much, even if the place was a blank. Maya's smile in that photo lifted more on the left. The corner was higher. Teeth showed with a gap that had closed since then. "Smile pulls higher on the left," she said. "Shows teeth." In the framed photo on the right, the smile pulled more even now, but the left still rose a touch. She tracked it with one fingertip above the glass without leaving a mark.

On the phone she brought up a short clip from spring. Maya on the pavement in front of their building with a scooter. The camera shook a little where Cerys's hand had followed. Maya had fallen two days later, light gravel rash at the right knee and a small crescent scar left under the kneecap. Barely there unless light hit it a certain way. They had held a pack of peas to it. Maya had demanded the blue ice pack from the freezer with the dinosaur on it and then decided peas were better. "Crescent scar right knee," Cerys said. "Under the kneecap." She pressed the heel of her hand against the edge of the table and held the words in place for two breaths. In on four. Out on four.

The lamp flickered once. A stutter, then steady. She lifted her chin and tightened her jaw. She did not look up at the ceiling to see if the shade moved. She kept her eyes on the photos.

She said the details again. Ear. Smile. Scar. She made them a list; it kept things steady. On the third repetition, she slowed to name hair and fingers. "Brown curls. Right thumb has a small pale line on the pad from the cupboard hinge last winter." She touched her own right thumb at the place. The line had been thin and had faded almost to nothing on Maya's skin. It had been a lesson about hinges, slow and without shouting. The line on her thumb had been a lesson too, of a sort.

On the table, a grocery pad sat under a chipped blue bowl. She tore a strip from the top and found a pen that still wrote. She printed, block letters, dark enough to read without squinting: MAYA VAUGHAN. She folded the strip twice and slipped it into her bra. The paper sat against the

skin under her left collarbone where it would not shift when she moved. She pressed her palm flat there for a second and counted one, two.

She picked up the holiday picture and the frame and held them both. The glass felt cool. The glossy print tried to slip and she pinned it with a thumb. The phone lay face up, screen gone dark, and showed a faint ghost of her face and the lamp when the angle caught it. She set the photos down carefully and turned the phone back on.

At the top of her screen, the last message from Mrs. Peng was still there. Earlier the night before, when she'd said she might not get back by morning and could the little one sleep there, the old woman had said: My door is open. Always. Fried egg smell still clung to the air from that moment. It stayed near the edges of the room with the detergent and damp wool, outside the lamp's circle.

Cerys took the phone and her keys and crossed to the door. She left the chain set, slid it back, then set it again. Habit made the movement clean. She eased the door open to the latch and stepped into the hall. The bulb there burned a hard white. Someone downstairs had replaced it recently with a cheap one that made the paint look greyer than it was. She stood in front of Mrs. Peng's door and typed: Here. I'll be quick. A minute. Please. After a pause that felt longer than it was, a hinge squeaked. The door opened the width of the chain and then wider. Slippers showed and a thin robe. Mrs. Peng had dust in the corner of one eye and did not wipe it. She just stood aside.

"Thank you," Cerys whispered. She did not step on the raised stitch in the hall runner. She did not bump the small table with the jade plant. The flat smelled of tea and the last of the fried egg, and the stale sweet of biscuits in a tin.

Maya lay on the sofa with the yellow book tucked under her arm and a knitted throw folded beneath her calves. She'd kicked it half off in her sleep and Mrs. Peng had folded it rather than pull it up to tug. The child had her mouth slightly open. Her breath lifted her chest a small amount

and let it fall again. No snore. No catch at the top. Cerys felt the count set itself, one, two, three, four. Her throat tightened once, then eased. She stepped close and knelt to bring her phone level with the child's face and chest. She pressed record with her thumb. The phone light stayed off; she had set that deliberately. In the dark screen, she could see the shadow line of her own hand next to the child's cheek. Ten seconds. Then five more. Then she stopped.

She did not touch Maya's hair. She wanted to. She had learned what touching did to light sleepers and to old women who watched over them and to her own chest after. She kept her hands at her sides.

At the doorway, she leaned towards the cushion and spoke without much sound. "I'll come back," she said. "Even if I don't know the door." She had not planned the words. They were not for anyone else to hear.

Mrs. Peng's eyebrows raised a little and then settled. "Go on," she said, still quiet. There was no judgment in it, only the steadiness of a person who had had to do things too.

Back in her flat, Cerys set the chain and returned to the table. She slid the glossy picture under the clips at the back of the frame and pushed the frame stand into its notch. She let the weight of the frame sit in her hands a beat longer than needed, then set it down. The pressure of the clips left a faint half-moon on the back card. She pressed the heels of her hands to the edge of the table and leaned in. The glass had to be clean. She rubbed a sleeve across one corner and lifted a smear. On the fridge, the fox magnet held. She did not look long at it because if she looked long she would start to check that the paper below it was straight, and then she would lose minutes, and minutes had been counted already.

She turned the lamp off and let the room go to the grey that came through the window. It was nearly time.

She sat again and pressed the red button on the voice memo app. The waveform showed her words in small blocks. "Her name is Maya Vaughan. She is seven years old. She is your daughter." She let air out

slowly through her nose and continued. She listed the food. "Beans on toast, buttered first." The fear. "Spiders in the bath, if they move fast." The route to school. "Right at the gate, cross at the zebra with the island, keep the railing to the left, the lollipop woman's name is Jan." The neighbour. "Mrs. Peng, flat three B, cardigan worn thin at the left elbow, slippers, pink with a bow." Not everything mattered; enough did.

She gave the kind of anchors she would give on scene if she had to hand someone to a stranger and not think about them for an hour. "The bench at South Park under the big beech that drips even after the rain stops. The fox magnet on the fridge. The drawing she made of 'our tree' with the swing and two stick people underneath. One is tall. One is small. The tall one has a line across the chest. That is a seatbelt." She heard the last part and kept going. "She eats slow when she is thinking. She rolls her cuffs. She will say she is not tired and then she will fall asleep with a book under her arm."

Her voice stayed steady. She kept it in the tone she used with a registrar who had no time and who needed facts without weight. "If you are panicking," she said, and she heard how that sounded but left it, "get paper, write her name, put it against your skin. Front door chain set. Kettle off. Shoes by the door. Phone charged enough." She checked the charge in the top corner and it read eighty-one per cent. She kept going. "You chose this; remember that choice if nothing else. You love her. Remember you love her." She ended it there.

She tapped Stop. The waveform saved as a block and she named it "Maya, If." She set an alarm for three-fifteen in the afternoon and toggled the playback setting to run the memo when the alarm went off. She checked that twice, then left it.

She opened the cupboard above the sink and pressed a small square of yellow paper to the inside of the door. "Maya is yours," she wrote in block letters. The ink skipped on the O. She went over it once. She shut the door and opened it again to see if the note stayed. It did.

She breathed once, twice. On the second breath she put the phone in her pocket, faced the door, and reached into her coat for the wooden token and the metal badge. The token was warm; the badge felt cold. She closed her fist around both and then let them drop into the pocket beside the phone, the shapes arranged so they would not rub and make noise when she moved. She lifted her bag by the doubled strap and set it on her shoulder. Gauze. Tape. Small scissors. Glucose gel. Sewing wallet. Two clean cloths. Nothing else.

She turned the chain, opened the door, and stepped out. The corridor smelled of old paint and the morning damp that crept up concrete. She shut the door and pressed her fingertips to the frame for a count of three. Then she went down the stairs.

The Westshore street was damp and still. A fox crossed behind the skips at the end of the road without breaking stride. She kept to the steadier slabs where the council had relaid them two summers ago after someone had tripped and sued. A bus at the far junction hummed at idle; she didn't look to see if the sign flickered. She took the back way past the old laundry and under the overhang where the gutters dripped in the same places as always. She put her hand to the brick once to steady on the patch she knew ran slick when it had rained earlier in the night. It had. They'd agreed on the culvert under Northring at first light.

At the culvert under Northring, Orla stood with one hand on the brick and the other wrapped around a stick made from a length of old broom handle with the end sanded smooth. The braid down Orla's back was thick and had a darker streak where it had taken damp the night before. She had no bag. Her coat had been mended at the elbow with neat stitches. She did not wave. She stepped back to give Cerys room to come in out of the road's edge.

"First light," Orla said. It was not a question.

"First light," Cerys said. The sky had that grey that came before the yellow. Gulls called a thin sound that carried from the docks. A smell of

diesel sat low over the canal and the old iron of the culvert mouth put a taste in her mouth she did not enjoy.

“We’ll take Old Quay after the culvert,” Orla said.

Orla nodded once at Cerys’s bag. “Enough?”

“Enough to stop a bleed,” Cerys said. “Enough to draw breath steady if it drops.” She did not list more. There was nothing more to say that would help them here.

They did not go up onto the overpass. They went down along the brick beside the water. The canal wall was damp and left dark streaks that would dry by noon if the sky allowed it. They passed the yard behind Old Quay, the broken sign still leaning where it had leaned. There were new muddy footprints near the fence gap where youths had cut through on their way to places they would not name. Orla pointed to the ground near the culvert opening that ran under a low industrial block. “They stand here,” she said. “When they watch.”

The scuff marks on the brick step showed recent. Not paint from bikes. Not the wide smooth smear of a pallet skid. Shoes with little pattern to the sole. The toe marks faced east. On a brick at ankle height, a faint white smudge showed a corner. Not a full rook. A half mark where the chalk had run out or where someone had wiped it quick with a thumb. The line angled just enough to show a direction. Cerys touched the edge of the smudge; it did not smear now. She did not say Kaelen’s name. The word sat between them whether they spoke it or not.

“Under Northring to the culvert, then east,” Orla said. “No bridges.”

“No bridges,” Cerys said. She set her pace and Orla matched it. Where the path narrowed, Orla lifted her stick and stepped onto the firmest part. Her feet found the small ridges where brick had been laid uneven and she avoided the slick black lines of algae that formed near the constant damp. Cerys went behind her. They did not talk. Breath had to be saved for later.

At the corner by the scrapyard, a man in a high-vis jacket sat on a step with his palm wrapped in a rag that had gone grey. He kept his hand up and away from his body out of habit. His face was white at the mouth and he watched them without asking.

“What happened?” Cerys said, already stepping closer because it cost nothing to look.

“Cut it on a burr,” he said, showing her the rag without unwrapping fully. “Don’t think it needs stitches. It’s just,” He didn’t finish it. The rag had stuck.

“Hold,” she said. He held still. She took a clean cloth and a small strip of tape from her bag. She peeled the rag back as far as it would go without tearing the clot away with it. The cut was shallow and long, more a slice than a gouge. It had bled enough to matter to him and not enough to need theatre. She pressed the clean cloth down, firm and even, and watched the way his jaw unclenched at having someone else’s hand on the job. “You keep this up for five minutes,” she said. “Proper pressure. Then you look. If it bleeds again, you press again. No hot water. No kitchen towel. Keep it clean, keep pressure on. Wash gently once it stops. If it starts spurting, you call nine-nine-nine. You’re not on blood thinners?”

He shook his head. “Just an idiot.”

“No,” she said. “Just working.” She taped the cloth in place in two strips, not tight enough to cut flow. “Go inside when you can. Raise it a bit. If it throbs, take paracetamol. No aspirin.”

“Cheers,” he said, sounding unused to it.

She nodded. She stood and moved on. Orla had waited with her shoulders square to the canal so they did not become two women with their backs turned at the same time.

They kept to brick and took the alleys that ran parallel to the road so their heads would not show against the skyline if anyone watched from a bridge. Twice they paused for cars to pass on adjoining streets, the

rumble dull through wet tarmac. Once they stood in the shallow mouth of a service door while a pair of boys went past carrying a takeaway sign between them. The boys did not look left or right. They did not see two older women in coats and a stick because they did not care to see unless seeing meant trouble for them.

At a run of graffiti along a wall that had been white once, someone had painted over half a rook shape in black. It was only a shape. It had no beak. It meant nothing by itself. Cerys let her eyes pass over it without stopping. Orla did the same. They were moving. She tasted the iron again when the wind shifted from the river. The docks were close.

They reached the back of a yard where a row of pigeons sat along a gutter. The birds stayed where they were and watched, blank-eyed. Cerys ignored them. A man sleeping rough lay under a piece of blue tarp tucked behind a stack of pallets. His breath was audible; a wheeze on the out-breath. Not a stridor. Not the wet of something drown-like. He had his hands inside his coat. A bottle lay three feet from him with nothing in it. He was not dead. She watched long enough to meet her own rule, check, do not invent emergencies when the clock is running, and moved on. Orla glanced once and then forward.

“Under the overbridge at South Dock,” Orla said. “There is a spillway where boys meet to throw stone into water and think it makes a mark.”

They took that line. The spillway was slick. Orla tested it with the end of her stick and then kept well back; there was no need to show that she could balance on it when she did not need to. On the brick at knee height, there was a new scuff that showed where someone had slid and caught themselves. A scrape in the mortar where a boot had kicked hard to get purchase. Cerys crouched and placed two fingers into the scrape. Grit came away under her fingertips. Fresh. Not rain-soaked grit that would paste to her finger. She rubbed it off against the leg of her jeans and stood.

They passed the low arch that had been blocked years ago with chain and a padlock that had gone red and flaked from weather. Rust marked the brick below the shackle. Orla kept herself on the other side of the path to avoid it. Cerys felt the tingle she always felt when she saw that much rust and knew what it did to the Others. She kept to her own side out of respect rather than out of need.

They crossed a patch where the pavement had been dug up and tarmac poured back cheap. Puddles from last night's flood still sat there. She saw her face and Orla's in one for a second before their step broke it. No meaning. Just water.

They came to a break in the long wall where a narrow set of steps ran down to a lower path. The steps were slick, with a black sheen where algae grew. Orla stopped. "I will go first," she said.

"I know," Cerys said. Orla's foot placement was methodical. The stick went down to the next step before her foot did, testing. She spoke no warnings; the risks were visible. At the bottom, the path widened again and the water lay on the left beyond a narrow lip. The river was out there, beyond the last warehouses.

The smell of oil thickened. Burnt smell came with it. Not smoke. The residue of old fires that had blackened stone and left it that way. The power station district did that. Some places in Haleston kept their damage long after anyone who had done the damage had left.

On a small square of brick near a drain, there was half a chalk line shaped like the bottom of a rook. It could have been nothing. It could have been some child making a mark. It could also have been what it looked like in half, left by a hand that had run out of chalk or that had pressed too hard and snapped the stick. Orla did not reach to touch it. She nodded at it as if acknowledging a sign that could be read but did not need to be read aloud.

"You know he'll talk first," Orla said without stopping her feet. "Then he will stand and it will be a test of who breaks first. Soft, then rough."

“Then we won’t break,” Cerys said. She kept her tone even. She adjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder without looking down.

On the far side of an old mill with its windows bricked in, a woman walked a dog with a plastic cone on its head. The dog did not pull. The woman held the lead with two hands, braced for a pull. She looked at Cerys’s hands and then away. She could not have seen anything in them except the way the fingers stayed close. Cerys registered the angle and kept moving.

The path kinked right and brought them out onto a strip of broken ground with weeds growing in the cracks of old concrete. In the distance, the chimneys of the power station stood blunt and dark against the cloud. No steam. No heat. Just big stacks that did not go away. The square bulk of the turbine hall stood squat behind a fence that had been cut and repaired in patches. The river ran along the far side, a flat grey under the morning light.

“Here,” Orla said, pointing with her stick to the shadow line of an entrance road that had been blocked by concrete barrels. “We go along the inside, keep the fence between, then cross at the gap where the boys have pulled it before.”

They went into the strip of nettles and long grass that had grown where maintenance had stopped years ago. Cerys kept her trousers off the worst of it. Orla lifted her coat hem with one hand and moved the stick through the lower leaves. Litter there was old, pressed into the soil.

At the gap in the fence, the wire had been cut in rough squares and bent back, then bent forward again. Someone had tried to make it look fixed without replacing panels. The edges had rusted. Orla stopped a half pace back and tilted her chin at it. “You first,” she said.

Cerys looked to either side. No watchers on the fence line she could see. No movement in the small clumps of trees that had taken root in the pulled-up ground. The river beyond made a quiet sound as wind ran across it in strips. That was all. She slid through the gap and kept her coat

clear of the metal with one hand. Orla came through behind her, careful to keep the stick away from the wire.

They came up on a broken line of posts that had once held a chain across the road. The chain lay in a heap off to the side, brown with rust. Orla kept distance. Cerys walked between posts. The concrete here felt sound. She could feel it in the feedback through the heels of her boots; it did not give under the ball of her foot. She kept her weight centred. Her hands stayed free.

A thin young man with a rucksack hurried across the far end of the road, head down, hood up, his pace too fast for this hour. He did not look left or right. He was not theirs. Cerys let him go. Orla watched him until he disappeared around the corner of a low building with broken windows.

“We will not go in by the door that faces the river,” Orla said. “They like to watch water.”

“We go inside along the side where the windows are blocked?” Cerys said.

“Yes. There is a narrow way there.” Orla walked as if she had measured it before. She probably had. She had years of measuring places like this so that when a choice had to be made it was not made blind.

They passed a stack of pallets. These had been left in place so long they had sunk a little. Mushrooms had grown up through the slats near the base. That told Cerys the damp held here. It did not tell her anything she did not already know, but it was a detail to tuck away for later when she would need to judge if a floor would hold.

They paused in the lee of a corrugated wall and looked ahead. The turbine hall doorway was open and dark. No one stood in it. No sound came out of it that wasn't wind coming over the river and into the broken spaces. They were not far now. The chimneys stood to her left. The sky remained grey, the sun not yet up.

“You told him not to test what you would do,” Orla said. Her voice did not hold judgment. It carried a steady weight. “He will test you with what you said.”

“I know,” Cerys said. She kept her eyes on the door. “We set our feet, then we see what he has in his hands.”

“The cost is always paid,” Orla said, as if she had to be the one to say the line aloud so Cerys would not have to be.

Cerys did not answer. She looked at her hands. She flexed her fingers once and let them rest at her sides. The burn that came with the work had not started. It would not start until she asked for it. She did not know how much there was left to ask for. That was not a question for now. She could feel the paper under her collarbone through the shirt when she breathed. She did not put her hand there. She didn’t have to. She knew the exact place. She had set it there.

They moved again, not fast, not slow. She counted their paces without letting it look like counting. Nine to the corner. Twelve to the turn. A pause to listen. The small scraping sound of something loose shifting in the wind somewhere above. No voices. They went on.

At the angle where wall met wall, a small rook shape had been drawn in chalk at shin height. The beak tilted to the right. East again, even here, at a place where east had no meaning because they were already as far east as they could go without stepping into the river. The mark had been wiped once, not fully erased. Someone’s back-of-hand had done it in a hurry, because they had heard a noise, because they had not wanted to be seen leaving marks for those who might come behind.

Orla set her stick down and looked at Cerys. “We go in and we do not shout.”

“I never shout,” Cerys said. It was a small joke without a smile. Orla let the corner of her mouth lift a fraction. They shared a brief ease, then it passed.

They stepped forward as the wind shifted again, carrying a sharper tang of old steel that caught at the back of the throat. The doorway stood open. They crossed the last of the open ground and kept their shoulders loose and their hands empty.

Orla angled herself toward the fence line. “I hold here. You go when you choose.”

The chimneys stood behind and above, blunt against the grey sky.

She did not think of anything except the space in front of her feet and the breath she would need for whatever came next. She stood at the threshold and listened. A loose panel clicked once somewhere inside. She flexed her hands once. The burn hadn’t started. Not yet.

Chapter 13

The Trail

Same morning, the fence-line still between them, she stepped back from the open doorway of the turbine hall and put her palm flat to the wall. Cold, rough concrete. No draft from inside, only the click of a loose panel when wind crossed the gap by the river. Orla stood two paces off, angled toward the fence line, the broom-handle stick held down and out so it would not give a silhouette if someone watched from within.

"Not here," Cerys said. Quiet. She kept her eyes on the dark and edged along the wall until the doorway fell out of line. Orla matched her without question, step for step, coat hem lifted to avoid snagging on twisted wire along the base of the concrete.

They took the narrow way that ran beside a low blockhouse. The ground there had cracked in squares where weeds pushed. Diesel smell from the river drifted in and out. A faint drip ticked from a broken pipe. They reached a low service bridge that ran across a culvert mouth a little back from the main hall. Keys hung from strings tied to the underside of the bridge in a loose row. They knocked against one another when the air moved, a dry metal clink that carried further than a voice would have.

On the wall beneath, a rook in chalk faced east. The mark had been made with a blunt stick that left fat lines. Someone had rubbed the left edge with the heel of a hand and left a smear.

Cerys looked at the keys, then at the chalk. Her mouth tasted of old iron and cold. "Noise trap," she said. "Watch line."

Orla reached up and took one of the keys between finger and thumb. It came free with a small jerk. She weighed it once in her palm and threw

it into the canal without wind-up. The small splash broke the flat water and closed again. "No door those fit will help you," she said. "If he hangs a key he has his hand on the other side."

Cerys nodded. They moved on.

A yard opened ahead where the fence kinked. A car sat on three rims, the body blackened. The front was gone back to bare structure. On the bonnet a shape had been swept in ash: two firm strokes for a tower, one blunt for a head, a short angled line for a beak. The lines were clean where a hand had passed. Cerys read the direction and chose the route that kept them to brick and shadow instead of open ground.

She counted the angles without saying the numbers. She measured it: six slow paces to the corner of the low blockhouse, nine faster across the open strip if they had to run it; one door still chained with slack enough for a hand to pass through, another scraped clean where the chain had been.

"Hold," she said, hand low. Orla stood quiet while Cerys leaned and checked the corner with a sideways look so her shoulder did not cross the line and present a target. Nothing moved. The gulls made thin noise over the river. Far back, a siren rose and fell and then fell away.

A dog padded out from behind a skip and stopped with one paw lifted. Grey and brown, ribs just there under the coat. It watched them, nose working, and fell in behind when they moved again, three paces back and to the left. It followed as far as the waterline and then turned off toward the bins with its head low, more interested in a smell on the concrete than in two women keeping close to walls.

Near a drain, a strip of coarse cloth lay twisted. Cerys crouched. Her jeans took damp at the knees. She lifted the cloth with two fingers. Not just cloth. A wide sheet sewn with hand loops at the edges. Heavy weave, stiff with old water. Two of the loops had fresher fray.

She folded it flat and slid it into the big pocket inside her coat. It bulked there against the HPS badge and the wooden token. She moved

the token higher so the metal would not rub and click. The weight of all three was a countable thing.

"They had it ready," Orla said. Not shock, only assessment.

"They practiced," Cerys said. "Lift. Carry. No voice." She pictured the bucket tipping back at Hearth Street, the crate, the slack cord on the iron ring. Less than a minute, Orla had said, from bucket to gone.

They passed a bench bolted to a strip of cracked concrete. An older man sat there with a flask beside him and a wool cap pulled low. He looked at Orla, tipping two fingers off the brim. Orla tipped back and did not slow. He said nothing. He watched them go, steady and intent.

More of the station showed as they moved. Bricked windows, some punched back out again with holes that had not been cleaned. Catwalks speckled with brown where the paint had given way and the iron beneath had been left to weather. A door with a chain that had been rehung too fast, the links crossed in a way that would bind if pulled. A second door with a plate where someone had slid a bolt back and forth until the marks shone in dull streaks.

Cerys set each piece where it belonged in her head: cover here, drop there, a line that would take a body quickly if the footing went wrong. She set the space into steps: approach, stabilise, move, handover. There was no handover here. There was only the next point and then the next.

They came back to the long wall that ran along the turbine hall. The open doorway sat around the angle a dozen paces on. Orla stopped and set the end of her stick on the ground, pushing down hard enough to see if it would slide. It didn't. She looked at Cerys. "We hold here," she said. "I keep them from your back."

"I go in alone," Cerys said. "Fewer for them to count. He knows my hands. He speaks to them." She felt the paper under her collarbone and left it there.

"We do not let them shut a door behind you," Orla said. "If they try, I take the right line and cut their feet from under with the stick. Not their heads. I do not want blood that draws more."

"Three knocks on the rail," Cerys said, pointing with two fingers at the bent guard that ran along the low edge of the inner mesh. "If I need out and they won't hear with ears, I'll make them hear with metal. Light taps to test; hard strikes to call withdrawal." Orla set the stick's tip to the rail and gave three light taps, close and even. The sound was a hard tap felt in the bone. Orla lowered the stick. It stayed local.

"Three," Orla said.

Cerys slid the small bag forward on her shoulder and opened the zip with her fingers quiet on the metal. Gauze. Tape. Small scissors. Glucose gel in the side pocket. The sewing wallet where it always lived. Two clean cloths. She ran a thumb along the wooden token's notch and then over the flat of the HPS badge. The token was warm. The badge was not. She settled them together so they would not scrape and cause a noise that would carry where she couldn't see.

"If I don't come out," Cerys said, "you take the boy if you can and you keep him down. Away from iron. If you cannot take him you keep others from making him into a message."

"I will," Orla said. She looked at Cerys without blinking for the space of one breath and one more. She didn't ask anything. She accepted the terms.

They stood looking at one another for a beat that ran long enough to mark the line between plan and doing. Cerys lifted her chin once. Orla did not nod, but the set of her hands changed on the stick, tighter for the first grip, looser for the second.

Cerys bent, pushed the mesh where it had been cut, and slipped through. The wire scratched the back of her coat and caught a thread. She was inside the line.

The air in the hall held damp and the taste of old fires. Her boots met concrete. The scratch tugged still at the back of her coat as she kept to the wall, not to the open floor where sound would carry. Catwalks ran above in runs that went nowhere now, their stairs blocked at the second turn with panels and chain. Something loose ticked high up, a regular small click. Not a person. A strap or a strip of metal catching in the wind.

The grate flexed under a light test from the ball of her foot; she moved off it. The drop beneath was not deep, but it would be enough to break an ankle if the grid gave way. She stayed with solid slabs and the seam of the wall at her back. Her hand brushed concrete once for balance and then lifted away. She did not want dust to mark where her hand had been.

A cough reached her. Small. Thin. The kind of cough that did not move much air. She stopped. It came again, the sound pulled tight, raw at the end. She turned her head just enough to set the direction.

She found the room by sound more than sight. It sat behind a half wall, a control space with its glass broken out and a door that no longer shut. The cough came from inside it. She went down two low steps and into a patch of lighter grey.

Rook lay on a pallet in the corner, head turned to the side, mouth parted. His skin had the grey look he got when his chest pulled wrong and his mouth went dry. The silver marks at his wrists sat under the skin without shine. His breathing ran shallow and quick. The muscles at the sides of his neck worked with each breath. The cough came again and he flinched away from it without waking.

"Don't," a voice said from the far side. Calm. Measured. "Don't touch him yet."

She knew the voice. Kaelen stepped closer a hand-width into the light and then stopped. Arms folded. Cheeks hollow. His eyes the same fixed look as before, focused past her to the line behind. He spoke in the tone of a person who had said the same thing to many people and wanted the

words to sit in the same order each time.

Two young men stood at the doorway behind her, one on either side. They had pulled their hoods up, faces bare, forearms pale where silver showed under the skin in dull seams. They watched her but did not step in to bar her path. One shifted his weight and the catwalk above gave a small clatter.

Cerys went to her knees at the pallet and put two fingers to Rook's wrist. The skin there was cool and dry. The pulse she found was thin and slow. Not gone. Not strong enough. With her other hand above his ribs, not touching, she waited for the lift. Shallow. Too quick. His lips were the colour they had gone when the seizure had taken him days ago. She looked at his mouth and then at his nose. There was a small pull just above the breastbone. She counted two breaths with her hand, then lifted her head.

She looked up at Kaelen. He had not moved further in, but he had not stepped back either. Behind him, low mechanical noise came and went with air moving through broken ducts. A light metal panel rattled in time with the wind.

"Step away now," she said. "If you want him to live."

Kaelen's mouth flicked at one corner but he did not smile. "You told me not to test you," he said. "But you came. So here we are."

"I'm not here for you," Cerys said. "I'm here for him." She kept her voice flat. She did not raise it. She did not need the sound to travel.

He tilted his chin, not a full nod. "And what will you pay this time?"

She didn't answer that. She moved her hand over Rook's ribs again until her palm hovered half a hand above. "Breathe here," she said, low, just enough sound to mark a cadence. The next breath lengthened by a fraction, then fell back to thin. Not good enough. She looked at Kaelen again.

"Your men come at my back and I take your legs," Orla had said outside. Cerys heard the words clear in her head. She drew one breath in, one out, counted to four, and set her knees for balance in case someone grabbed.

"Do it loud and we'll see who comes running; they crowd to stories here," Kaelen said, voice still level.

"I don't play to them," Cerys said. "I keep breath going." She pressed two fingers again into the hollow by Rook's wrist, found the thin beat where it was, and held her place.

Kaelen stepped forward into the full strip of grey light. His arms stayed folded. The silver on his forearms lay dull under the skin. He didn't look at the boy. He looked at Cerys. His boot edged a strip of grit and stopped. "Then show me the price."

She did not move yet. The burn had not started in her hands. It would if she asked for it. She kept her palm above Rook's ribs and watched the rise and fall for one more count to fix the cadence in her head. The two young men at the doorway shifted their weight again. They still didn't step in.

Outside, beyond the wall, she held the line of the rail in mind. Three hard strikes if it came to that. Cerys let out a held breath and set her feet. She looked at Kaelen without dropping her eyes. "Step back," she said. "Now."

He didn't. He only moved his weight to his other foot and watched her hands. A cold prickle at her nape.

She placed her palm flat against Rook's sternum.

Rook's next breath lifted shallow against her palm. She pressed her fingers down on his wrist to feel the pulse and it missed a beat, then stumbled into the next. His lips looked too pale. There was a trace of moisture at the inner corner of his left eye. He was not crying. His face had relaxed into the slack of small sleep that had gone wrong.

She kept her hand still and didn't give the burn yet. Not while Kaelen stood square in the strip of grey, centred and watching. She needed him to move or for one of the boys to make a choice that would give her space for what came after. She couldn't do what she had to do with arms reaching in at the edge of her sight.

"Do you remember the flood?" Kaelen asked. He didn't look at the boy. He kept his eyes on Cerys. "Old Quay. The cars stuck. The watchers on the bridge. Not yours. Others. Who ran, who stood. Who waded into water that stank of oil."

"I don't need you to count me," Cerys said. "Move back." She heard her own tone and knew the men at the door heard it too. Calm. No room for anything else in it.

Kaelen let the corner of his mouth move again and stepped one pace to the side, not back. It gave her a hand-width more space and changed nothing.

"Your choice at Hearth Street," he said. "To make the boy breathe. You paid then. You'll pay more now. I want them to hear what you pay."

Cerys kept her hand where it was. She could taste copper without the heat yet, because she knew what was coming, not because anything had started. "You're not hearing anything," she said. "You're watching a child die or live."

The boy at the left of the doorway shifted again, a small tilt in. Kaelen didn't look at him, but the boy's head dipped and his weight went back out. Cerys kept her eyes on Kaelen's face to hold his focus and spoke under her breath to the air that Rook could catch. "Breathe here. Slow." She gave the count. The next breath took the first part of the count and then slid back to where it had been.

"You think you set the terms," Kaelen said. "You set nothing. The city set them," he added, and there was an edge there for the first time, thin enough that most ears would miss it.

"Then you don't need me," Cerys said. "Let me go."

He didn't answer. He looked down at her hand on the boy's chest and then back up at her face. "Do it," he said. "And then we'll see what is left of you."

She didn't answer him. Letting the breath out, she drew another. She felt the paper under her skin with the edge of her ribs and the line of her bra and kept her hand where it was. She moved her other hand to the boy's cheek and didn't touch, only held it there to give him warmth without weight. "Rook," she said, not loud. "Listen. Here."

The cough came again, smaller. A wet rasp at the end. She turned his head a fraction with two fingers at his jaw and cleared a string of spit from the corner of his mouth with the clean cloth in her sleeve pocket. She didn't need a lot to go wrong in an airway to lose him. She kept his neck straight and his head still.

Kaelen stepped into her sightline again. "You said you wouldn't be owned," he said. "This is the only way to own anything here. To show them what it costs to make a child live under iron."

"Step back," she said again. She didn't raise her voice. She let the words sit in the air between them and then took another breath and let her weight come into her knees. She held it there so when she had to keep her hands on the boy she wouldn't tip her balance and give any of these men the chance to pull her off him.

Outside, metal knocked once on the rail and then stayed quiet. Not the signal. A check. She pictured Orla at the fence line with the stick set to stop a run toward the door if it came.

Rook's pulse stuttered again under her fingers. The burn hadn't started. It would have to now.

She looked at Kaelen, not at his men. "Fine," she said. "You want to see? Step back so I can do it and not drown him with your shadow over his face."

He held the line a second longer than was wise and then moved one pace over and two paces back. It wasn't much. It was enough.

Cerys put her left palm flat and centred her right above it at the top of his sternum. She let the weight of her hands be a measure rather than a force. She set her breath in and out, in and out, once, twice.

Kaelen did not move. The two young men at the door did not move. Low mechanical noise moved through catwalk metal and broken ducting. Cerys kept her hands still and fixed the count that would be needed.

She did not look away.

She did not speak again.

Chapter 14

The Final Cost

She kept two fingers on the boy's wrist and watched his mouth. The air in the control room tasted of old fires and river damp. A loose metal strip clicked somewhere above with each crosswind that found a gap in the hall. Rook's lips were pale. The pull at the base of his throat came and went too fast. She kept the count where it needed to be. His pulse stuttered under the skin.

Kaelen stood across from her with his arms folded, the light from the doorway cutting his face in two planes. His eyes stayed on her hands rather than the boy. The two younger men at the door kept their bodies turned inward without blocking the way, as if they had been told to stand and not do more.

"The city doesn't listen unless there's a body," Kaelen said. His voice was flat, trained. "They built this place, filled it with iron, left us to rot under it. They look away until someone makes them look."

"He is not the payment," Cerys said. She kept her voice low so it would not change the room. "He is a child." She set the word down as if it had weight. Rook breathed shallow and quick. She held her palm above his ribs to fix the rhythm. "I'm here to keep him breathing."

Kaelen's jaw shifted. "Years of hiding. Boys watching water because they can't walk under sky. Old women tending damp rooms. Young ones carried down with their breath in strips. We bury them without names because names bring questions and questions bring police." He opened one hand to the hall. "And out there? They keep their engines running. The river takes what they leak."

"He is a child," she said again. The word fitted in her mouth without tremor. Rook's pulse stumbled. She did not move her fingers from his wrist.

Kaelen stepped one pace closer in a way that measured her. She did not stand. His boots scraped grit. He raised one arm and swept it at the rusted runs above, at the bricked windows punched back out, at the chain on a door rehung in a cross that would bind. "This is their church," he said. "The human church of iron. They built it and prayed here with smoke."

She met his eyes. "I don't worship here. I never will."

Something shifted at the doorway. The boy on the left moved his weight, glanced at Kaelen, glanced at Cerys's hands, then down at the floor. The other pressed his knuckles to the metal edge and looked past her to the road his eyes had learned to watch.

Kaelen drew breath through his nose and let it out. He nodded once as if accepting a price he did not believe and levying one at the same time. "Then show me what your mercy buys." He stepped back two paces. Not much. Enough.

She moved her left hand to centre over the sternum and placed her right hand above it, setting her stance so her weight would not tip if someone tried to take hold of her arm. With two fingers at the jaw, she turned Rook's head a fraction and kept it midline so his airway would stay open. "Breathe here," she said to the rise under her palm. "Slow."

The next breath started deeper, then slid away. The pull at the base of the throat showed again.

She did not look up. "Now," she said to something she could not see. The heat came in with the next breath she took. It ran through the tendons of her palms and into her wrists, hard and clean, as if a white line had been drawn under the skin and lit. The light it threw was not a beam. It flared once and left a residue at the edges of her sight. The air carried a wet-metal tang and the damp that rose from the river wall, hot metal and

rain.

Rook's chest lifted under her left palm and then lifted again, higher. His mouth opened on nothing that made sound. His back arched once, then slackened. His fingers flexed and eased. His lips did not hold at grey. They took a trace of colour and kept it. The small pull above the breastbone softened and went back to the shape it should have been in a sleeping child. His pulse lined up under her fingers, not fast, not gone, present in a way she could work with. Colour returned under a nail in two seconds.

The price arrived with the heat. Her vision narrowed at the edges and then steadied. A ledger inside her did its work. She did not watch it; she felt the blanks open where something had been. A face at a kitchen table under a lamp. A gap-toothed grin. A frame held in one hand until the glass slipped under a thumb. She reached for an image of a small body in a red coat beside antlers carved too smooth and could not hold it. The features unhooked from each other, then from the outline that held them. The copper at the back of her tongue intensified. She knew she had put the picture behind the clips on the back of the frame. She could say coat, antlers, a smile that lifted more on one side. The name that went with the picture did not lift. It sat behind her breastbone with the paper she had placed there. When she tried to bring it up and give it sound, her throat refused and the air came out on a breath only.

A deeper vibration moved through the catwalks above. It ran along the lengths of metal that hung there without pause and made dust fall in a fine sheet from a ridge. The two young men at the doorway reached back for the rail, their faces gone slack, and held it without looking. Kaelen made a small noise that was not a word, stepped back as if he had missed his footing, and went to one knee with his hand splayed against the floor. His mouth opened and shut. No word came. Slowly, he lifted his head. He looked at her hands. Then his gaze went to the boy's chest, lifting and settling. He did not look at the men at the door.

Cerys held her palms where they were until the heat receded into ache. She kept two fingers at the wrist and counted ten breaths in her head because ten felt like enough to declare a change without lying about it. Each breath came steady. No catch at the top. No wet rattle. His colour kept its small gain. The silver lines at his wrists, which had sat under the skin like threads set too close to the surface, dulled and lay back. Not gone. Lower down. Capillary refill at the nail bed returned to two seconds.

She lifted her hands away a fraction at a time so that nothing she did would startle him if his body chose that moment to fight. When her hands left him, they shook. The tendons across the backs of her hands stood out and then let go. Every joint in her fingers ached with the memory of heat. She sucked copper from the back of her mouth and tasted sweat that had cooled too fast along her hairline.

"Breathe here," she said again, the same cadence as before but without weight. He took the breath where she set it. She listened to the next three and did not change anything.

Kaelen pushed once against the floor and tried to stand; his legs shook and he sank back to one knee. Fingers spread, he stared at his hands as if they had not done what he told them to do. The two young men at the door looked at him and then back at the boy and did not step into the room. One glanced at the other and looked away.

The white edges in her vision pulled back. The internal ledger stayed dark except for the hole where the face should have been. She took one breath in for four, out for four, then again. If she moved too fast she would fall. She pressed the heel of her left hand into the concrete for one count and used it to push herself to sit. The old wool of the coat at her shoulder caught on a splinter along the broken frame of the control window. She did not look for the thread; she did not move her shoulder to save it.

The click above her head went on because the river wind still crossed the gap. She could smell oil and cold water over stone. For a long count there was only the click above and the small breaths.

The doorframe filled with a thick grey braid and a stick held low. Orla stepped in with two older ones behind her, a man with a soft belly and a woman with a square jaw and a scarf tied tight around her head. Orla's gaze swept once across Rook, Cerys, Kaelen, and the two at the door. She did not ask questions.

"You're up," Orla said to Cerys, not as a demand. She set the stick against the wall with the end down and came to the pallet. Her hand did not touch Cerys without warning. She slid her palm under Cerys's elbow and let Cerys meet the lift. The move took them both to the same height without pulling.

Rook's lashes lay clean on his cheek. His mouth was closed. The breath was there and there again and there again, the small rise that told a body the work was being done without help.

Orla put both hands under the boy's shoulders and hips and lifted with her legs. Rook came up with her in a way that made his weight a counted thing, nothing more. "He breathes," she said. Not a question. She looked once at Cerys and then at the doorway. "We go."

Kaelen shifted as if to rise and reach across them and stopped halfway. His legs shook once as if the muscle had reached the end of a long hold. He looked down at his own hands and turned them palm up and palm down as if he wanted to find something on the surface of his skin that would explain the ground under him. A word started in his throat and stopped. The boy on the left began to say his name, then closed his mouth.

Cerys moved her hand to her collarbone and pressed the place where the folded paper sat. She knew the shape of the letters on it. She knew the names she had written in block capitals. She could not bring the face to her mind that the letters belonged to. She could not bring the name to her

mouth. "M, " she said, and air came and nothing else. Her throat tightened. She swallowed and the swallow hurt.

Orla's eyes met hers. There was no question in them. There was a ledger and it had been paid and they both knew the line that had been crossed to pay it. Orla nodded, once, enough.

The older man shifted to give Orla space and the scarfed woman moved in to brace Rook's head without touching his skin to the cold metal of the doorframe as they turned him out. The two young men by the door stepped aside without being told. Their feet found the places to stand because they knew them. They kept their eyes on the floor and the boy and did not look at Kaelen.

Kaelen stayed where he was. He did not try to take the boy from Orla's arms. He did not speak a name or a plan. He stared at the grit at his feet as if it might have changed shape. When he raised his head the strip of light from the doorway cut his face again and showed the place under his eyes where he had not slept.

Cerys steadied herself on the edge of the door with her fingers only, not her full grip, so she would have something left for the stairs. Sweat made a cool line at the base of her neck under the shirt. She could feel the edge of the paper against her skin. She did not take it out. Not here. Not with the boy in Orla's arms and the metal runs of the hall pushing cold up through the concrete.

They moved together across the hall. Orla kept Rook's head turned just enough to keep his airway open, her forearm under his shoulders, the other arm across his small hips, the coat pulled in to keep the wool from brushing his bare wrist where the silver lay. The older man went ahead with the stick to test the ground. The woman walked backward with her hands out to warn if someone moved too fast.

Behind them, Kaelen made no sound. The two who had come with him did not move until they were sure the others had passed. Then they stepped to either side of the door as if they were still a guard, only there

was no one to guard now.

The doorway out of the control room had a raised sill where the old metal had once sat. Orla took it with the toe of her boot and lifted over; the boy did not jolt. Cerys watched his mouth. No catch. She took the sill second and put her heel down carefully so the ache in her hands would not steal her balance from her feet.

The turbine hall lay in front of them. The open space lifted the sound of their steps and set it down again on the concrete without echo. The catwalks above were quiet now except for the same loose panel that moved with the wind and clicked once when the gust came over the water and into the gap on the river side. The smell of oil sat low to the ground.

They did not go through the river-facing door. Orla had said earlier, boys who like views stand there watching water. They kept to the side where windows had been bricked in and some punched back out. A strip of morning sat in one of the holes and showed the yard and the broken line of pallets outside in a thin grey.

At the cut in the mesh where Cerys had slipped in, Orla handed the boy to the scarfed woman without making a shape of it and pushed the wires up and out with the stick so the loops would not catch his clothing. The older man took the corner of the wool and kept it from brushing rust. Cerys went through last, shoulders turned so her coat would not scrape more threads on the cut ends. The wire rubbed her back again. She did not reach behind to free it.

Cold air on the sweat on her hands.

Outside, the morning was full enough that colour had begun to return to the concrete and the grass at the fence line. The river ran grey. Orla adjusted the boy once against her chest and looked at the yard to set her feet where they had already planned to set them.

"Old path," she said. "No bridges."

Chapter 15

The Ledger

Orla set Rook down on the pallet. Cerys put two fingers to the thin skin at his wrist. Warm. The pulse ran steady. Not fast, not gone. She laid the heel of her hand above his ribs without touching and counted the rise and fall to ten. No pull at the throat. No work from the neck. The blue towel under his shoulders kept his airway in line and away from the damp.

Orla watched from the corner. She had kept her braid wrapped once around her throat against the wet on the air and now let it down. Her stick leaned against the brick. The big man stood farther back at the mouth of the recess with his arms folded and his eyes on the boy. The work-scarred woman had a dry cloth ready and held it the way a person held thread, fingers long and certain. No one spoke until Cerys moved her hand away.

Orla nodded as if ticking off what needed ticking. "Down," she said, low. "No iron near."

"Breaths are in," Cerys said. She had to say it to fix it. She kept her voice flat and did not let it crack.

"We'll keep him there," Orla said. She did not look at Cerys, but at the boy. "We'll keep him fed. We'll change the cloths. We'll keep off the platforms. I'll put the girl with the plait on him at the half hours and the big man by the mouth. No one will cross your door. Not again."

The older man who had gone ahead with the stick at the power station stood now beside the far column. He had a cap in his hands and a line worn thin across its brim. His eyes flicked to Cerys's hands once and then away. The scarfed woman adjusted the wool just to the boy's ribs

and tucked it with care so the edge would not scratch his skin. The drip line still ran between the peg and the bolt head above. Drops gathered and fell into a bowl instead of onto his face.

"They ran," Orla said. "Your man's boys. East at first, then south where there are bins, then along Old Dock. A girl brought me word at the top of the steps." She tipped her chin towards the stair. "She said two went along the fence where the mushrooms grow through the slats, one went to the keys by the bridge and put his hand up asking if anyone wanted to watch. No one did."

Cerys kept her eyes on Rook's lips. Pinked. She pressed lightly on his fingernail and watched the colour come back in two seconds. "And him?"

"Gone," Orla said. She lifted the end of the stick and set it down without weight. "Not clean gone. He went in a line, his steps placed without aim. Someone had his elbow and then let it go, and he kept going. A boy in a hood came down by South Dock and said he saw him look at his own hands and turn them over. They say his marks were pale."

"Pale," Cerys said. She did not push at it. She tried the word on her tongue the way she tried a swab on a wound edge to see if it held.

"Not out, but paler," Orla said. "He looked clean, the boy said. Those were his words. I don't hang a story on a boy's word, but if it's true, he won't be able to stand and speak for the rest the way he has. If he hasn't got the marks in him the same as before, they'll watch him and not hear him. You know how they are with that."

Cerys did. She had seen how the faces changed when they looked at each other's forearms and at their throats. She glanced at the back wall where she had fixed the drip line and watched a drop fatten and fall. The bowl rang a little.

Orla's gaze moved to Cerys's hands. "Let me see," she said, not as an order. Cerys lifted her palms. In the low light the lines that crossed the heels of her hands looked the same as always, worn in by years of lifting, by handles, by gloves. When she flexed her fingers the skin at the heel of

her right thumb caught the light and showed two fine bright threads under the surface. Not long. Not deep. They showed again when she turned her hand. It was not shine on sweat. It was in the skin.

Orla looked once, then up at Cerys's face. She nodded once. "The ledger is marked. Go home."

Cerys did not ask what it meant to Orla. She already knew what it meant to herself. The weight in her chest did not lift and would not. She set two fingers again to Rook's wrist and counted five breaths. The boy kept his sleep, as if sleep could be counted the same way as breath. He did not open his eyes. He did not flinch.

"I'll sit an hour," the work-scarred woman said softly from her post. "Then the girl with the plait. Then him." She tipped her chin at the big man. "We won't crowd him. We won't speak over him."

Orla turned the stick in her hand and then set its end back to the floor. "We won't. And we don't go to your door." She added, "Your term stands, even now."

Cerys reached into her pocket and found the wooden token by the notch. Warm from her skin. The notch sat under her thumb in the way it had each time she had taken it out at the stair mouth. She held it a second. "Keep it," Orla said.

"No," Cerys said. Her voice came out low and steady. "I'm done." She looked for a place it would not roll or be taken for use. There was a flat stone set into the wall at shoulder height, worn by years into a ledge that did not tilt. She set the token there, face up. The carved line caught the light and made a small shape against the brick. The bark-smell that had seemed to live in the wood did not reach her now. She did not pick it up again.

Orla watched her hand a moment and then looked back to the boy. "We won't come to your door. If his breaths go wrong, we use your knock. Not at night."

Cerys did not answer that. She touched Rook's shoulder once through the wool to steady herself, not him. "Breathe here," she said, because her mouth knew the cadence even if his body did not need the cue. He breathed where it would have been. She straightened. The ache in her palms sat under the skin the way a bruise sits under the eye.

Orla stepped aside for her in the narrow strip between pallet and wall and came with her as far as the column. "What did it take?" she asked, as she always asked, the ledger question.

Cerys pressed the flat of her hand under her collarbone. Paper. She felt it against her skin. She kept her eyes on the brick by Orla's shoulder. She opened her mouth and only breath came. "My, " She swallowed. The swallow hurt. "I can't bring her face." She did not say the name. The name sat written on the paper. Her mouth would not fetch it. "I can't. It's not there."

Orla inclined her head. Not a bow. Not pity. Just the count of it. "We keep ours in the ground," she said. "The cost is always paid." She put a hand out, palm up, not touching. "No bargain is fair."

"I know," Cerys said. She looked at her hands again. The fine bright threads under the skin did not blaze. They just were. She flexed and the threads showed and then did not when she turned her hands another way. She closed her fingers, opened them. She could still tie a dressing. She could still cut tape. She could still carry weight in those hands. She curled her hand and the ache in the tendons stayed.

"Go," Orla said. She did not say thank you. She did not say sorry. She said the thing that would move Cerys in the direction she needed to move.

Cerys stepped out from the recess. The big man shifted to give her space. The older boy in the grey hoodie stood by the low arch. His eyes dropped from her face to her hands and then away. He looked thinner than he had in the yard days before, as if the same days had run longer through him than through anyone else. He tipped his head without words. The girl with the plait stood near the bowl with the drip line and

poured the gathered water into another bowl, hands careful not to splash. The kettle on the long lead was not on. Someone had left the cup she had used earlier on a crate. A chip on its rim made a small notch against the brick.

She walked with Orla as far as the turn where the old paint would rub your sleeve if you moved wrong. The watcher at the bend stepped back without being told. You did not need a token for that now. She took the stairs at a pace that did not waste strength. Old concrete. Damp set in it. Her boots remembered which steps could take weight and which had moved a fraction when you put your foot down the last time. At the mouth of the stair the guard with the mended cap looked sideways down the alley and then back. "Clear," he said.

"Keep it so," Orla said. She did not touch Cerys on the shoulder or the arm. "Go home. Eat."

Cerys nodded. She did not promise food. She stepped into grey daylight. She kept off the rails of the fence and the heap of rusted chain in the corner of the yard. The broken sign that had swayed on one chain did not move. There was no wind down there. At the end of the service yard, water stood dull in the cracked dip the boys used as a mark when they threw stones.

On the street, the air had the bite of iron and diesel and the old damp of brick that never had a chance to dry. She walked with her hands free and her eyes on the line ahead. She did not look back.

Cold air moved over her hands when the door opened.

The flat opened as it had always opened. Turn key, chain, latch. The chain came free and settled against the door without a sound because she had oiled it weeks ago for that purpose. She set it again from inside by habit and put the keys in the bowl by the sink. The fox magnet held the

drawing of their tree against the fridge. The edge had curled again from kettle steam and she set it flat with two fingers, pressing from the centre to the corner to chase the air. The note inside the cupboard door read the same as it had. She did not open the door to touch it. She could see the ink skip on the O in her head without looking.

She went through to the bedroom and sat down on the bed. Someone, herself, had moved the framed photo here from the table so that when she lay down the face would be at hand without a walk. She could not recall doing it. She picked the frame up. The glass felt cold. The stand on the back had a little play in it; if you pressed too far it bent and the hinge would take it and not break. She turned the frame over once and then back, holding it by the sides with her hands in a way that left no marks.

The child in the picture had brown curls, a hair clip shaped like a star on the right where the rim of the ear lifted a touch. The smile pulled higher on the left. She ran her thumb along the curve of that cheek on the glass. If you were someone else, maybe that would be enough to pull a feeling into your chest or a memory into your head. She waited. Nothing came. The lines on her palms sat the way they always had and the two fine threads showed when she moved her thumb and then again did not when she flexed. The glass did not warm under her skin.

She set the photo back. Aligned it with the edge of the table so the base sat flush. She stood and opened the wardrobe. No reason came. She closed it again. The room had the smell of washed cotton and stale tea. The little white fan sat on the chair. It did not hum. She put two fingers to the top of the bedhead the way she put two fingers to a pulse, then took them away. She looked at the clock on her phone. The digits flipped to 15:15 and the alarm she had set chimed.

She silenced it and opened the voice memo without thinking about the steps. The title read what she had named it: Maya, If. She pressed play. Her own voice filled the room, even and calm, the voice you used when you gave a handover in a corridor that smelled of disinfectant and rubber and stale coffee. "Her name is Maya Vaughan. She is seven years

old. She is your daughter. You love her." A pause. You always paused to let the receiver catch the first line. "She is with Mrs. Peng in flat three-B. Favourite food: beans on toast, buttered first. Fear: spiders in the bath if they move fast. School route: right at the gate, cross at the zebra with an island, keep the railing to the left. Lollipop woman's name is Jan."

The voice went on. "Bench at South Park under the big beech; it drips after rain. Fox magnet on the fridge; drawing of our tree with two people. Tall one has a seatbelt line across the chest. If you are panicking: get paper, write her name, put it against your skin. Front door chain set. Kettle off. Shoes by the door. Phone charged enough."

She listened to the end and the little click that meant the recording had stopped. She looked at the phone screen. From within her own body, she could not tell the voice had been hers. The cadence was hers. The facts were hers. It could have been anyone. She locked the phone and put it face down. The room went quiet except for a car somewhere and a thin scrape where a branch outside touched the glass and then fell away.

She sat on the bed and picked up the photo again. The child looked out and did not look at her. "Maya Vaughan," she said. She made the name clean. She made it careful. She set it with the breath the way she set a pulse count on scene. She waited for a signal you could not put a finger on. "Maya Vaughan," she said again. Her chest stayed still except for air in and air out. There was no heat behind the name. There was no picture widening to include a sound or a street or a hand in hers. There was a list of facts on a page she had written for herself and now she read them.

She placed the photo back by the table edge and the mark in the varnish where a mug had sat too long and left a ring. She could have pressed a finger into the ring and felt the grit of it if it were still wet. It was dry. She stood and smoothed the duvet with a palm. Two smooths. Then she stopped. She was not tired and would not sleep. She did not try. The alarm had done what it needed to do: it had entered the facts into the front of her head, the way you bring a triage tag to the top of a stack when the patient is moving.

Her phone rang. The screen lit with Mrs. Peng's name. She picked up at the first sound.

"Cerys?" Mrs. Peng's voice was tight, pulled thin. "It's, Cerys, it's Maya. Maya Vaughan. She fell. She, she was playing and then she was on the carpet and she didn't wake up. I called nine-nine-nine. They said, "

"Is she breathing?" Cerys said. "Now." She had not stood up yet and then she was on her feet and walking for the door. "Is she breathing?"

"Yes," Mrs. Peng said. "She's breathing. It's fast. Her skin is cold. I put a blanket, "

"If you can, feel for a pulse at her wrist. If you can't, don't waste time," Cerys said. "On her side. Keep her on her side. Don't put anything in her mouth. Check there's nothing in her mouth. Look at her lips. Are they pink?"

"They're, yes, they're pink. Pale but, yes."

"Count her breaths for me," Cerys said. She had the phone between shoulder and ear and the chain in her hand. "Start now." She lifted the chain free, pocketed the phone, pulled her coat off the hook, found her keys with her other hand without looking. "One. Two."

"One," Mrs. Peng said into the phone. Her voice steadied when it had a job. "Two. Three. Four."

"Good," Cerys said. "Stop at thirty. Don't move her unless she stops breathing or starts to vomit. Keep the door unlocked. The crew will be there. Tell them the time she collapsed, any allergies, any medicines."

"Thirty," Mrs. Peng said. "It was fast. Should I, "

"She's awake?"

"No. Not yet."

"Does her chest pull at the base of the throat when she breathes?" Cerys said. She was at the stairs. The neighbours' rubbish sat on the landing in a tied blue bag. The smell was sharp and not new. She stepped

past it and put one hand on the wall to keep her balance as she took the steps two at a time. "Look at her neck."

"No pull," Mrs. Peng said. "Just fast. The ambulance, the man on the phone said they're about eight minutes out. He said tell you that."

"I'm going to the hospital," Cerys said. "Haleston Hospital." She did not say she loved the child. She did not say anything that would lodge wrong in the throat. "Unlock. Sit near her head. If she tries to get up, speak softly. Use her name. Keep her on her side."

"Go," Mrs. Peng said, as she had said before in a different corridor at a different hour. "I'll go with her till you come."

Cerys ended the call and took the last flight fast, counting under her breath the way she had counted breath on the pallet and at the roadside and in kitchens that smelled of toast and cats. Four in, four out. She hit the street and set her feet to the line she knew would take her quickest without crossings that would slow her. Westshore lanes, cut behind the laundry, back of the Co-op, then the main. Her jaw set and stayed set. A bus rolled past with a display that worked as it should. She did not look at it again. She did not think of the flood. She did not think of a boy's hand on hers in the tunnels. She did not think of the paper under her skin. She counted and moved.

She took the steps at the entrance and moved through the automatic doors. Warm air and disinfectant filled the corridor; a board with black arrows stood ahead. At Haleston Hospital they sent her through the doors on the right. A nurse at the desk asked her name and the child's name and hustled her along before the printer had finished the wristband. "Second bay on the left," the nurse said. "We've got her on the monitor. She's breathing."

Cerys stepped into the bay. The bed was set higher than a sofa at home and the rails were up. The lights made everything look bare. Maya lay on the bed with a small clip on her finger and a line tucked into the bend of her elbow with tape that had been smoothed at the edges by someone who knew to do that so it would not lift. Her hair spread on the pillow. Her mouth was closed. Her chest rose and fell. The monitor wrote its green line and numbers that read within tolerances they liked to see when a child was asleep, not when a child had collapsed on a rug.

A man in a blue shirt with a plastic badge over his pocket stood at the foot of the bed. He had the look of a consultant on a day with an extra body in the corridor. Tired around the eyes. Orderly hands. He looked at Cerys's face and then at the board at the bed's end. "Mum?" he said, to confirm role rather than to soften the blow of anything. "I'm Harris." He did not put his hand out. "She came in about twelve minutes ago. Witnessed collapse, fast breathing, cool to touch. Blood pressure was low. It's coming up with fluids. Oxygen saturations are okay now. Blood sugar is normal. ECG is clean." The pump clicked once. "She's not waking yet, but her pupils are equal and reactive. We're watching."

Cerys nodded. The words slotted into the places in her head where they went. She could stand with those numbers under her. "Did she hit her head?"

"No head strike reported," Harris said. "No sign on palpation. No bruise. No vomit." He hesitated a fraction. Not for theatrics, but to order his next sentence. "We saw a pattern on the arm. A rash of sorts. It's...odd." He glanced at the nurse who stood by the pump adjusting a rate. "Would you mind looking? Sometimes parents see things change over time that we don't know to expect."

The nurse pulled the blanket back to mid forearm. Cerys stepped closer. Her hands had started to shake only now. Not in the tunnels. Not on the street. Now, with the bed rail under her fingers and the bright strip of hospital light across the little arm, the tremor ran fine along her fingers.

The skin showed its usual small marks, a faint scrape from a swing last week, a cluster of light freckles. Over that lay a network a shade too bright to be a vein. Thin lines, not raised, lay under the skin and ran from the wrist upward. They did not pulse. They did not shift. They lay there and caught the light the way a steel thread catches your eye when it has been laid under a layer of cloth. They were not blue. They were not red. They were the colour she had learned to watch for in other rooms. The nurse's hand hovered above them and then stopped, as if she had thought to touch and then thought better. The same fine bright threads that had lain under her palm ran here beneath the child's thin skin.

Cerys did not breathe for the count of one. Then she did, because her body knew the drill. In for four. Out for four. She did not put her thumb on the lines. She did not reach. She heard Orla say, under a hundred other noises and under the thump of her own heart in her chest, The cost is always paid.

Harris watched her face. "Do you know what that is?" he asked. He waited one beat and then another. He did not add, We don't. He did not add, We've called someone. He did not push. He asked the question and stood with it.

Cerys gripped the rail. The metal's knurl caught her skin. She looked at her child's arm and then at her own palm where the threads had shown under the skin by the heel of the thumb when she flexed in the tunnels. They were not there now in this light. She did not look for them. She looked at the arm on the bed. "I, " She could not bring anything up through her throat but air.

She knew, though. It sat there as clean as anything she had ever known in the back of an ambulance with a monitor writing lines and a life at stake. She had put her hands on a boy's chest and told his body where to breathe and given heat until the room went hard at the edges and the copper rose in her mouth. It had not taken only what it had always taken, not this time. She had made a trade she had not read in full, and what should have sat under her skin lay now under the child's. It was not just a

blank where a face should be. It was written on the body of the child whose name was on the paper under her skin.

"The Iron Sickness," she said, and the words had no weight in the air because she had said them without a voice, only with breath. Harris's eyes flicked to hers and then to the lines and back again. He did not repeat the words. He did not put them into a record he could not explain. His expression stayed blank for a second. He looked at the monitor and the pump. "We'll keep watching," he said.

The nurse looked at the monitor and then at the arm and then at Cerys and did not ask anything. They had their work to do. They did not have names for this in a place that ran on codes and counts. A small child lay breathing, numbers ticked into ranges that held for now, a bag dripped clear fluid into a vein, and a woman held a bed rail hard enough that her knuckles blanched.

Cerys's vision went narrow at the edges. White there, then grey, then steady again. She dropped her chin and breathed once to the count. Her fingers did not let go. The rail bit a little into her palm. She stayed still. She did not move her other hand to touch the lines on the little arm. She understood, in a way that left no space for anything else, how it had happened. She had saved the boy she had promised to save. The ledger had taken from the only ledger that would give any more. The land remembers, Orla had said. She tasted copper again, phantom taste, with nothing in her mouth to cause it.

Harris said her name. Not the child's. Hers. "Ms Vaughan. We're going to keep her here. We'll run tests. We'll get a line to dermatology, and we'll keep an eye on her blood pressure and urine output." He spoke the way you speak when you keep a family in the place where they can do the most good by not moving. "You can stay here."

She nodded. She could not have made a shape with her mouth that would have formed Yes without a crack in it, and she would not let the crack out. She swallowed and felt the paper press against the skin under

her bra. She could not pull the name out of herself in any way that made it belong to a face in her head. That did not change what was in the bed and what the bed held.

Her hand tightened on the rail. She fixed the count she would use if the breathing changed, if the numbers on the monitor shifted to a place where you moved from watch to act. Four in. Four out. Her jaw set. The horror sat where it sat. The rail bit her palm. It would not move. She did not say anything to it. She stood and did not let go of the rail.

The numbers held for the next count and the count after. The silver lines on the arm did not fade. She watched the rise and fall of the small chest and waited for the thing she could do that would not make a new mark she could not pay.