

KEEP THE LIGHT OFF



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Keep the Light Off

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Chapter 1

Wrong House Light

Gullmouth

The lamp in the front window was on. She stopped half a step from the kerb. The glow showed through the thin curtain and made the glass reflect her own face back, hair damp from spray, borrowed tote digging into her shoulder, a falter around the mouth she tamped down by pressing her lips together. The rest of the terrace sat dark in a row, a neat blind strip, except for her window lit.

She hadn't left it like that.

Wind came up the street from the seafront and pushed grit along the gutter. The salt smell was the usual, the kind that clung to coats and cupboards here until clothes were washed somewhere inland. She moved to the gate. The latch lifted with its same sticky catch. She looked once over her shoulder at the gap between houses. No one in the cut-through. No movement on the pavement. A car several doors down flashed as it locked, then the quiet again.

Door. Key. Quiet.

She fitted the key she carried into the lock and turned it slow, the way you do when you want your own house not to notice you. The hinge whined anyway; the paint had shifted with the damp. Inside, the narrow hall held the same wool smell. Cold on the tiles. Her mother's coat on the hook by habit, though two years had passed since anyone wore it. She shut the door to the night and set the tote down by the shoe bowl.

The lamp on the side table gave the living room a soft orange. She stood in the doorway and counted the objects that should have been as

she left them. Cushion same, rug corner still up where the skirting board caught a thread. The mug on the windowsill, clean and turned upside down to stop dust. A blank rectangle where the television had once been. She had never replaced it; the quiet suited her better. Nothing else stood wrong, just that light.

She leaned back to touch the key hook by the door without looking. Cold metal, yes. She slid her fingers along the row. The spare was not there. Only the empty shine of the hook itself, the dust-free mark where its ring had hung for years. A faint smear of dust dragged below the wood, as if a hand had missed the hook. Her hand stayed there, the tips pressing her own knuckle marks into the wood. For a second all she could hear was the small hum of the lamp.

She checked the bowl by the shoes, then the ledge by the radiator where things landed to warm and get remembered. Nothing. She went to the sideboard and pulled the top drawer an inch too far so it knocked and bit her thumb. Batteries. Old receipts. A torch. She took the torch. It was heavy and honest in the hand. She clicked it on and off once and the beam shook, then steadied. The lamp looked cheap under it, shade with a scalloped edge gone dark along the top where smoke had touched it once in this house's other life.

Someone had come in. Not a neighbour, not by mistake. The spare key was missing, the light was on. It felt deliberate in its smallness, the sort of message people send when they know you count things.

She crossed the little room and turned the lamp off. The room went dark again. She stood a moment longer, listening for the small shifts of the old building as the wind pushed and eased. Nothing else.

The phone vibrated in her pocket. A local number she didn't know. The shape of the digits said the town, and that was worse than withheld. Her mouth dried. She let it buzz once more, then answered.

'Elin.'

She didn't reply.

‘Don’t hang up,’ he said. Calm, almost conversational. She knew the cadence; it took work to hear the person and not the years around the harbour you didn’t ask for.

‘Who’s this.’ Not a question. A line drawn short.

‘Say it plain,’ he said, as if that joke belonged to them. Her jaw set. ‘We both know. Your brother’s with me.’

She kept the phone close so the wind wouldn’t carry. ‘Where.’

‘Safe, if you can keep to time. You’re tidy with time. There’s a book I need. You know the one.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t.’ Her fingers curled into the edge of the windowsill where the mug ring would sit if she let it. She kept her voice level. ‘What book.’

‘The keeper’s ledger. From Breakwater.’ A breath, not a laugh. ‘Don’t pretend you’ve not heard the phrase. It comes with your house like damp.’

The word ledger dropped in with a weight she had always avoided naming. She hadn’t seen any ledger. The only thing that came to mind was the envelope in the tin, To the Keeper. Her mother hadn’t been a keeper. Her father had carried that language and it had been turned against him. She said nothing.

‘Midnight,’ he said. ‘High water. Bring it down to the causeway gate. And Elin, keep the light off.’

She let that stand between them. She pictured the lighthouse lens sitting cold, the causeway under a moon that would not show if clouds had their way. ‘If I have it,’ she said, ‘I bring it. If I don’t, you don’t get to hurt him anyway.’

‘You think this is your line to draw. It isn’t. You bring it. No calls to anyone who wears a badge. No fuss. If that light shows at any point tonight, the clock changes for your brother. I can be generous with a lot of things. Not this.’

‘Give me proof,’ she said.

‘You’ll have it if you stay with me on this call a bit longer,’ he said, almost amused. ‘But we’re not at that step yet. First we’re at agreement. Do we have it.’

She stared at the lamp off now, the ceiling stain where a leak had been, the absence shaped into a kind of presence. She swallowed. ‘Fine.’

‘Say it.’

‘Midnight. Causeway gate. I bring the ledger.’ The word tasted like iron beside her tongue. ‘And I keep the light off.’

‘Good. Thank you.’ A pause. ‘He’s all right. He wants this done as much as I do. He ran his mouth where he shouldn’t, and now he needs you to put the story back tidy. You’re good at tidy.’

‘If you touch him,’ She kept the rest down. The old lessons about what threats do when you can’t deliver on them.

‘Elin. We’re not at that step either,’ he said. ‘Don’t wander. Midnight. Keep your pockets quiet. See you at the gate.’

The line clicked off.

She stood with the dead phone in her hand and only the house pressed around her. She turned the torch on and walked through the small rooms again, slow. The back door latch was down and the bolt was across. The sash at the sink was shut. The bedroom looked like a room where a person worked nights and slept via habit, half-unpacked boxes, a coat laid over a chair, a pile of folded t-shirts her mother had kept washing as if they’d be needed forever. Nothing else had been moved. The lamp, the key. Enough.

She went back to the hall. She set the torch by the tote and took a breath that did nothing useful. She looked at the key hook again as if it might have changed since she glanced last. It hadn’t. She opened the cupboard under the stairs with its tumble of Hoover and ironing board and Christmas paper she never used. She crouched and ran her hand

along the skirting for the safe her father never had money to keep. Old houses kept their secrets in wood, not metal. She found nothing except dust and a forgotten pencil.

In the kitchen she filled the kettle and turned it on and turned it off again. The small domestic sounds felt obscene against a clock she had not asked for. She took the phone and opened the call log. The number he used sat at the top and looked as if it belonged to a takeaway or a laundry. She set it to favourites. It would not help but there was something about naming a line that felt like control.

She tightened the hood of her coat and collected what she needed because that was how to start when starting didn't matter. Keys, phone, charger, torch, purse, scarf. She wrote the word midnight on the back of an old receipt and put it in her pocket. She lifted the tote. She left the lamp off and the hall dark. The door closed with more sound than she wanted.

Street. Wind. Move.

She turned back into the house three minutes later because information sat where it sat and if there was a trail to the book, it started here. The tide table had lived on the side of the fridge since her mother had brought one home each January and circled birthdays on it. The last one was still there under a postcard of Tenby. She peeled the magnet back. The paper came free with a little tear and a faint smell of fridge. October. Today's date. A ring drawn around the second high water. HW: 00:04. Her mother had circled midnight in blue biro and written Aelwyd next to it in a hand that leaned forward, nothing like Elin's sparser print. Fire. Home. The chapel words that threaded through a life whether you wanted them to or not.

She folded the sheet into quarters and ran a thumb along the edge to make the crease sure. Then she took the little metal tin from the shelf above the kettle, the one that had once held barley sugar. Under old buttons lay a bundle with string round it. She did not keep keepsakes. Her mother had done that for the town. She untied the string. Three envelopes slid out. One for her, already read and kept for reasons she did not review. One with Kit's name on it in the same leaning hand, thick, unopened, the edge a little softened where fingers had traced. And one addressed not to a person but to a role: To the Keeper.

She held it a second longer than she needed to. The house was quiet except for the hum of an appliance and the occasional sound of wind finding the soffit board that wanted fixing.

She broke the edge and tipped the contents into her palm. A single sheet of lined paper and a smaller scrap torn from something older. She set them flat on the table and smoothed the corners.

The first read:

If anything happens and nobody asks a question because nobody ever does, leave the book where he left it. It stays there, no arguments. If you have to go there because someone is forcing something, do not move it farther than you must. No trades. No burning things. Keep the light off unless lives are paid for in it. If it's you reading this and I'm gone, forgive me for not saying it out loud. I didn't know which thing would break if I did.

The smaller scrap said in a different, quicker hand:

Loose board at the scullery step, inside the keeper's house. Wrapping intact. Do not add your notes.

Her mother's letter to the keeper. Not to a person in particular. To the job. To the act of holding something while the weather and the town tried to nudge it away. The kitchen light under the cupboard made a thin pool on the table. She studied the strokes, the way a letter shakes when written standing up. The words did not tell her what the book said. They

told her where to put her hand.

She picked up the tide table and folded it again. The edges of the sheets made a heavier weight in her coat pocket than their size deserved. She looked at the envelope to Kit and put it back in the tin. She took the tin with her. The lid clicked on with a small metal answer.

On the phone, she found Kit among the first four names. She tapped. It rang once. Twice. The voicemail cut in with him doing a better version of a joke than he could manage live when he was tired or cornered. She listened to it through, as if that could turn into proof he was all right past the recorded timestamp. She ended the call and typed his name and a single word, Where, and didn't send it. Her thumb hovered. She locked the screen.

She opened the messages and scrolled to a thread she hadn't touched since late summer. Lena Gorse. A draft sat at the bottom of the pile, not sent. She read it in a glance. It had said Sorry about Tuesday, and then nothing. She began a new one and typed: Need a key tonight. Urgent. Are you at the boathouse or the bar. Then she deleted the second clause and left it as: Need a key tonight. Urgent. She stopped and deleted Urgent. The text read Need a key tonight. She did not hit send. The blue held on her skin; she locked the screen. The draft stayed.

She pressed two fingertips to the letter on the table and then folded it into quarters and slid it in her pocket behind the tide table. She took the torch and placed it on top of the tote as if to teach herself to reach for it first. She set herself a line (22:11): one hour to secure access, keys or a way round keys. Another hour to get out and down. The last hour for the walk and the causeway and whatever had to happen at the gate if she had nothing to hand but stubbornness.

She stood at the sink and looked out at the yard's square of dark where a fox sometimes cut across at night. The old water butt glowed softly from a neighbour's lamp beyond the wall. She switched the under-cupboard light off and the kitchen went back to itself.

She locked the front door, then unlocked it because doors cannot be trusted twice and people cannot be trusted once. She locked it again and pulled the handle to test it. The metal was cool and reassuring. A small act. A kept promise to wood and hinge.

Street. Pavement. The salt. She checked the time. The tide table in her pocket weighed more than paper.

She unlocked the phone. Her thumb hovered over 9. She locked it and kept walking.

She pulled her hood up and started toward the square and the road that fell toward The Dunlin. The wind had settled one direction now, down the line of the houses and through the open end of the street. She kept her chin down and her pace set for walking not running. She stopped once to turn the phone to silent. Then she thought better and put it back to ring. Night pressed warmer when a sound could break it on purpose.

She passed the museum, shuttered, windows boarded for storm season. The sign hung a little off-true because a lorry had caught it last month. She would fix it on Wednesday when the day shift remembered the tape and asked her politely to borrow the tall steps. She imagined walking in now to check the back door for the fifth time and shook her head at herself. Time was a straight thing tonight, not a circle to pace in.

The square opened up with its wet paving and strung lights that someone had left up past summer because taking them down in the wind was worse. Warm air slipped out as someone left The Dunlin, beer and cleaner in it. She went in.

The Dunlin

The air inside was warm with bodies and a little sour with old beer at the joint where the lino met the floorboards. The room held a quiet more

honest than empty. Half the tables taken by people already steady on their seats. The usual mutter. Glass clink. The new girl behind the bar worked two pints and an orange juice in a rhythm that said she had learned on a Thursday when nobody had the patience for errors.

‘Evening, Elin,’ said the barman from the darker end, where he liked to stand and pretend he didn’t run the place. He wiped his hands on a towel that had seen better years.

‘Evening,’ she said, moving to the corner where Kit sometimes stashed his bag during a shift. The shelf under the coat hooks was empty. She put her tote on the chair and leaned both hands on the back of it. To the barman: ‘You seen Kit.’

‘Not since five,’ he said. ‘He did an hour helping with the deliveries and bugged off. Said he had someone to meet.’

‘Someone.’ She kept her tone flat.

‘Tall fella came in twenty past. Didn’t get a drink. You know him? Nose’s had a set on it at some point.’ He mimed an angled break, grin gone when Elin didn’t give him any permission for it. ‘Harbour boots. That ring any bells.’

She turned her head enough for a nod, then back to the bag hook. ‘Where’d they go.’

‘Didn’t say. Out the side door. He put a hand on Kit’s shoulder. Too much pressure. You want me to make calls.’ He watched her hands, as if the grip she had on the chair told him more than her face did.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not yet. If you see him, tell him I was here.’

‘No trouble?’

‘Nothing that talking won’t handle.’ The words came smoother than truth. She let them be anyway.

Her phone rang. She looked at the number and felt that same push in the chest as on the step outside the house. She lifted it and walked toward

the corridor by the toilets where sound went quiet and her words could fall without hitting ears.

‘Go on,’ she said into the phone.

‘Still with me,’ Cal said. A fruit machine chimed near his end, then the dull thud of a door. ‘Midnight. We’re not moving that. I want to make sure you heard me about the light.’

‘I heard you.’

‘Keep it dark. If I see that lens sweep even once, we do this the rough way. And everybody in town gets to carry that for you. You don’t want that. I don’t want that either. Let the off-season be the off-season.’

‘You want the ledger and you’re threatening strangers with rocks and a dark channel to get it,’ she said. ‘Say what you mean.’

‘What it costs is what it costs,’ he said. ‘You’re clear on the place. The causeway gate. On the dot. Don’t be clever about sneaking round high. High water shuts the causeway. Don’t try it.’

‘Proof,’ she said. ‘Give me proof of him.’

‘Hold the line.’

The call cut. A new message flashed. Voice note. She tapped it and lifted it to her ear. Kit’s voice arrived thinner than usual, breath scraping a little partway in. Her grip tightened. Breath caught. The words were plain enough: ‘El. I’m here. Don’t, ’ and then a small rustle, as if his mouth had shifted away and someone had brought it back to the phone with a hand less gentle than it could have been. ‘Just do the book thing. Please. He’ll let me go after. I’m fine. It’s fine.’ The note ended on the empty room sound that comes from a phone in no pocket.

She pressed her hand against the door frame in the corridor and kept her head down. The barman walked by to kick a stuck hinge on the fire door and did not look up the corridor because he knew when not to. She pressed the call back and put the phone in place.

‘More time,’ she said when he answered. ‘You’ll have it tomorrow if you give me until two.’

‘Midnight,’ he said. ‘You’re already on my clock. Don’t rubbish me with this. The more you talk the worse your odds get.’

‘If you hurt him,’ she said, and then because the threat was empty she changed it. ‘If you hurt him, you’ll never get what you want, because I will put it under a tide you can’t touch.’

‘You won’t,’ he said. ‘You don’t waste things. You keep them intact for someone else. That’s you. I’m relying on it. Midnight.’

She ended the call herself. It felt like dragging a door shut against a draught you could not quite find.

Ledger, then. Before high.

She went back to the bar and stood against the wall. The room looked too ordinary beneath her eyes for a second, two people arguing about something on a sports channel neither had watched, a woman rubbing her temples with both hands and then letting them fall, a delivery crate left by a radiator with an orange rolling in slow circles inside it when someone brushed past. She found the barman again and shook her head at his unasked question. He lifted a glass and set it down only half filled.

‘If he rings me looking for you,’ he said, ‘do I put him off.’

No good answer existed. ‘Tell him not to wait for me,’ she said, then gripped the edge of the bar to apologise for the line. He peeked past her shoulder as if he thought Kit might stroll in anyway and make her a liar.

She stepped away from the bar and back to the coat hooks and lifted her tote. Her mind went through the question of the key and stopped at the same place it had been earlier. The lighthouse compound was locked. She wasn’t going to kick a door with tide coming. There were keys on the headland in the wrong hands, and there were keys in the right hands at the boathouse. Lena would have both keys and a view on the weather. Lena would also have an opinion on lies, and Elin had run out of easy

ones. She would ask Lena for access and keys only, no mention of Cal. She could do the right thing and ask, or she could do the wrong thing and take. Tonight there was not much room between those.

Keys and route first. The last hour belonged to the causeway and the man who knew it better than anyone. She had walked that thing at night before and had given herself a private old-fashioned scolding after. Don't be stupid. Don't show off. Don't steal time from the sea and expect change back.

She made a decision while her hand was still on the hook. 'I'm going to the boathouse,' she said, not to the air but to the line inside herself that needed to hear the thing out loud.

She did not explain to the barman. She did not ask if Lena was on at the bar tonight, because if she was not, Elin would find her at the boathouse, and if she was, Elin would have to ask here under three or four pairs of eyes. She pulled up her hood and went to the door.

The smokers under the lean-to glanced up and down the street like gulls that don't want to admit they are waiting. The wind had turned sharp. The sea was speaking its piece louder, a shiver through the paving from the slipway not far off. She headed toward it, hands in pockets, letter and tide table held in the heat she made with her own palms.

On the corner, she stopped and looked back at the pub. It sat with its windows fogged at the edges and its sign now steady. She could have stepped back in and ordered tea and claimed a seat by the window and done nothing until midnight, and the town would have closed around her and made the doing nothing feel almost bearable. She swallowed and turned into the wind.

The road that led to the boathouse dipped into a shadow out of the square, then opened past the fish-and-chip shop's back door where it always smelled of oil and vinegar and winter hunger. The slipway beyond was black as tarmac wet can manage. The boathouse sat against it, neat and certain with its doors shut and the little side door for feet business. A

light over that door normally glowed a safe, dull yellow. It was off tonight. Good. Or bad. She couldn't decide which.

Keys would be inside on a board with a chain. She pictured the ring on Lena's belt when she worked the bar, the metal clink at her back when she turned. She pictured those keys in her own hand. What does it cost.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Not a call. A message dropped from the same unknown number as before. One word: On time.

She looked at it and laughed, a small hard sound that made her cough. 'Do it now or don't,' she said under her breath, to the version of herself that wanted to sit on a wall and weigh another hour.

The wind cut along the slip and her eyes watered and the taste of salt got into her mouth more than felt fair. She reached the boathouse gate. The chain sat through and locked, the padlock faced away from the road like it always did. She could climb it and drop. She could walk round and knock on the crew door. She could message Lena and put the phone in her pocket open to a risk that didn't belong to anyone else yet.

She put her hand on the gate and felt the cold through the glove. She squeezed once and let go.

'Lena,' she said into the phone, not a call, but the draft thread open now with the old apology gone. She typed the words that had already sat there unsent, and added one more: Please.

She looked at what she'd written and deleted the please. Then she hit send.

The message went and left the little tick marks behind it. A head torch beam swung past and paused on the gate. She pressed back into the shadow of the boards and kept still until it moved on. Fine rain began, light enough to show on the screen. A second tick appeared. The typing bubble blinked once, then stilled.

Chapter 2

Borrowed Coat

RNLI Boathouse The wind shifted across the slip so it held her hood straight, a thin, steady push. The side-door light was still off. The chain at the gate was cold when she touched it. Salt whitened the links. A minute passed. She listened for the sea more than for feet.

A blue head torch swung in and lit the ground. Boots on the tarmac, quick. Lena's shape came into the dim and halted at the gate with her breath running warm in the air.

'You,' Lena said. Not surprise. A check. 'All right?'

'Need a look at tide times,' Elin said. 'The proper sheet. Two minutes.'

A small tilt of the torch beam took Elin's face in. Lena unlocked the outer chain and pushed the gate enough for one person. 'Come on then. Quick. The spray's starting to blow over.'

Elin slipped through. The gate closed. The chain went back. The beam moved along the wall, then to the office door. Lena keyed it and they went inside.

The office was narrow, warm on one side where a heater sat on low. Wet rope smell. A noticeboard with the crew rota and a laminated tide print-out pinned under a thumb tack with a chip in it. Lena shut the door to keep the wind down.

'There,' Lena said, catching the edge of the sheet and sliding it free. 'Local. Updated last week. HW 00:04. Near enough midnight. You don't need me to tell you the causeway's poor near top.'

Elin stood close enough to read without taking it. HW: 00:04. A line of notes on the bottom in small print about off-season swells. 'I saw the table at home,' she said. 'Wanted to check it wasn't off.'

'It isn't off.' Lena pinned it back. 'What's urgent?'

'Timing,' Elin said, too fast. She lifted a shoulder. 'Just work. They shut us in summer; now they want everything opened in the dark.'

Lena's mouth pulled, not a smile. 'Mm.' She ran fingers along a ring of keys clipped to her belt, then took her hand away. 'You asking for access to somewhere while you're here or just timing.'

'Is Breakwater still caged?' Elin asked. Casual. 'Council padlock?'

'Council padlock, not ours,' Lena said. 'They left us a courtesy spare after last winter's lock fiasco. Side door. Not the gate. Compound's locked. Why.'

Elin kept her face steady. 'Heard kids had been out there this week. Just wondered who to tell if I saw scuffs.'

'Tell me, I'll tell them.' Lena looked at the wet shoulders of Elin's coat. 'You're soaked. Take this. Keep it close if I'm on call. I've got a spare in the locker.' Her radio cracked once on her shoulder; she tapped the lapel and half-checked a pocket, then left it when the ping died. She shrugged out of her own coat, heavy and salt-dried, and dropped it on a chair. 'You're colder than you look.'

'I'm fine.' But the heat in the room met her skin and made the cold more honest. She put a hand into the coat as if to move it off the chair and found the pocket open. A small hard shape inside. Her breath held. Her fingers closed around it without meaning to. Tagged plastic knocked lightly on her knuckle: BWL SD written with a marker that had bled into the white. The tag's corner was worn where a nail had pressed it often. She pressed the pocket flat.

She pulled her hand out. 'Your spare's where?'

Lena nodded at a metal locker. 'Top shelf. I only need it if I get called. You'll bring that back tomorrow if you don't come by later.'

'Later?'

'If you want to talk properly, yes. Otherwise tell me now why tonight.'

Elin picked up the coat and folded it over her arm so the pockets hung against her side. 'Just timing.'

Lena watched her. The heater's fan made a small, regular hum. 'You want to say that again like it's true.'

Elin let out a breath. 'Not tonight.' She nodded at the tide sheet. 'Thanks. That's what I needed.'

Lena pushed a beanie onto her head. 'I'm on at the bar for ten. Before that, I'll look in the arcade and the taxi rank. If I see Kit, do you want him sent or sat on.'

'Sent,' Elin said. 'Tell him I was at The Dunlin. Tell him I'm still moving.'

'He in something.'

'He's always in something,' Elin said. The safe answer.

Lena held the door, then paused. 'Ten minutes at yours before I go on?'

'Tea,' Elin said. 'Ten minutes.'

They went out. Lena locked the door and then the gate. The wind caught the loose edge of her hood and snapped it once. She gave Elin a flat look that was almost a warning and almost something else. 'Keep off the stones after eleven. Say it plain, don't be clever.'

Elin dipped her head. 'Noted.'

The chain lifted and dropped into place behind her. She walked back along the slip, the coat over her arm, the tag pressing its print into the inside of her elbow.

Street. Cold. Move.

Elin's Kitchen They stood in the narrow kitchen with their shoulders almost touching if either moved wrong. The light under the cupboard hummed. The kettle took time in its old way and then clicked, steam moving up and then along.

'Sugar or what?' Elin asked.

'No. Thanks.' Lena sat at the table, fingers spread on the wiped surface.

Elin set mugs down. She watched the steam come off the dark. 'So. Kit.'

'You've seen him?' Lena asked, a quickness in it. 'Tonight?'

'No. I asked at the bar. He left earlier. Tall man walked him out the side door.' She didn't look to see if that landed. 'If you hear him, send him my way. I'll do the same. Anything I get.'

Lena nodded, but her line stayed on the first track. 'Why tonight. Why the tide times. What are you doing.'

Elin looked at the back door and the little bolt that sat straight. Then the hook where the spare key was not. Not tonight. She drank some tea that did not taste of anything. 'Weather turns hard after midnight,' she said. 'A job gets worse if I'm late to it.'

'What job.'

'Nothing that needs a report.' She held Lena's eyes, then looked down to break the line. 'I won't drag you into it. Or your crew. That's not what this is.'

'If it touches water, it touches us.' Lena sat back. 'We do this every winter. People think the tide makes room if they ask. It doesn't.'

Elin set her mug down. 'I know that better than most.'

A few seconds passed between them. The kettle clicked as its metal shifted cooling. Outside in the lane a bin lid spun half a turn on its hinge and stopped.

'You're cold,' Lena said. 'Put that coat on.'

Elin lifted the borrowed coat from the chair and slid her arms in. It held a dry weight that her own didn't. Warmer. The collar caught some of her hair. The tag in the pocket touched her palm as she moved. She kept her hands visible on the table.

'We'll share anything on Kit,' Lena said, shifting back to the earlier line. 'If I see him, or if anyone says, I'll text. You do the same. If he's in trouble,'

'He's in something. I'm paying for it.' Elin's voice went low. 'I'll text.'

She opened her mouth. Closed it.

She reached for her phone on the counter and unlocked it with her thumb. The thread with Lena sat open from earlier. She typed: There's a key in your coat pocket. I didn't mean, and then held her thumb on the backspace until the screen went bare. She locked it and put it down by the kettle.

Lena paused before answering. 'We should call it in if it's properly off,' she said. 'Police if it's land. Us if it's water. Or both. Get a number at least. You don't have to carry it alone.'

'Not tonight. It'll tangle and it'll slow, and it'll land in the wrong place first and take a week to land where it should. You know how that goes.' She bit down on a back tooth.

Lena's look said too much and not enough. 'Sometimes you call anyway.'

Elin didn't answer that. She folded her hands around her mug so she had something to do with them. 'I'll keep your name clean in it. And the

station. That I can say.'

'Big promise to make without telling me what it is.'

'It's the one I've got.'

Lena finished her tea and set the mug down carefully. 'Right. I've got to go on. Twenty minutes. We say we check in at half eleven. Text either way. If I don't hear, I'll do a loop by the side door at The Dunlin. Two minutes only. I won't wait past that.'

'Half eleven,' Elin said. 'Two minutes.'

Lena stood and went to the hall. She looked once at the lamp in the front room, off and where it should be. She hesitated. 'Weather's up already. Squalls cutting across. Don't go near the causeway after eleven-fifteen if you've got any sense.'

'I don't have any,' Elin said, but the edge of it was tired, not brave.

Lena put a hand on the door and then on the frame. 'Say it plain if you need me to stand in a doorway or tell a simple lie. I can do that.'

'Not tonight,' Elin said. 'But thank you.'

The door clicked. The air cooled fast. Elin looked at the coat on her shoulders and did not take it off. She crossed to the hook where the spare key had sat and opened her palm toward it and closed it again empty. She took her museum keys from the bowl by the shoes. Torch. Phone. Charger. Purse.

Street. Lock. Go.

Museum The shutters out front held. She went round the back into the yard where the bins were kept and the staff door sat below a light with a dead fly inside it. The lock turned clean. She stepped into the stale warm of closed rooms and pushed the door to with her foot. The alarm

was off for winter; the new system had not been fitted yet. She didn't put main lights on. The battery torch gave her a tight circle good enough for walking.

The back room held the things that didn't fit in the glass yet, spare panels; boxes; a net with a break in it; a drawer of brass furniture for boats that had long since stopped needing brass. She went to the shelves with ring binders and old folders. The one she wanted had a sticker that had gone to the colour of old milk. Breakwater Light. She took it to the worktop and opened it. A dry paper smell lifted. The cover felt tacky under her thumb.

A photocopied plan lay on top. Ink had bled on the lines. The keeper's house footprint in black lines, measurements written small along walls. She traced the hallway with a finger, found where the scullery sat past the back door and rose a little at one side to leave a step. Loose board at the scullery step. The letter had said that. She took a pen from behind her ear and drew a small cross on the margin next to a sketch of the step, then copied the rough relationship of rooms onto the back of a receipt from The Dunlin. Keep it simple: gate, side door, main doorway, scullery line, internal stair, the suggestion of where the step lifted.

Under the plan was a sleeve with photos printed years ago, the kind with a gloss that shone in a torch beam. One showed the compound wall from a little out on the causeway, a small maintenance wicket built into the seaward length, metal thinner than the main gate. She hadn't known that existed. She drew a second mark on her sketch. If the main side-door was blocked, the wicket might be there still. If it was rusted shut, she'd lose time. If it wasn't, she'd gain it.

She set the plan back and took out the tide table from her pocket and the receipt map. She held the numbers against the shove she felt on the air outside and did the sums. The safe minutes were fewer in this wind. Water would push across the causeway earlier. She wrote a time next to the map: 23:20 abort. She added a second number and crossed it out and changed it to 23:15.

Her phone lit briefly with the lock screen. She opened messages and found Tamsin. You up later? Keep your phone near. Might ask you to check something. She sent it before she could soften it. A dot appeared. Then two. Then nothing yet.

She opened Lena's thread. Typed: Could use your eyes. Deleted it. Locked the phone.

She closed the folder and put it back where it had sat for years. She took the net from the chair and folded it neater because the habit of leaving a room right was a thing she could control. The torch beam lit the bin bag by the door. She tied it into a knot without thinking. When she stepped back into the yard the wind pushed the bin smell into her mouth. She swallowed and moved on.

Door. Steps. Wind up.

Map. Key. Tide sheet.

Causeway Road The road out to the headland rose a little then fell toward the black cut where water lay. She still had museum dust in her throat when the wind hit. Spray ran across the tarmac in threads when a gust came clean. The harbour arm light flashed steady for shipping; she matched her breathing to the count. She zipped the borrowed coat up to her throat and put her left hand in the pocket where the tag sat. The plastic was cold and flat. BWL SD. The letters were fine, someone else's quick hand. She didn't have to wonder whose. She did anyway.

The phone buzzed inside her other pocket. She took it out and saw the same local number with a small triangle beside it. Voice note. She held it to her ear and stepped into the lee of a wall out of the wind for the length of it.

Kit's voice came thin, strained. 'El. I'm, ' A scrape. 'I'm all right. Just keep to time, yeah? Don't fight it. Don't talk to, ' Another small scrape as someone moved the phone back into place with the pad of a thumb that didn't belong to him. 'Please. Do it now. Don't drag it.' The note cut with a little click and a hollow after-sound.

She bit down on a back tooth. She listened again. Behind his voice: a tick that came regular and then a low-whirr fan that could only be cheap and close. She pictured the small tin heater in a caravan, the pilot click when it catches and the steady push of air. She'd sat in a dozen vans in winter with a cup of tea for work and heard that same low whirr in bad weather. Caravan. Likely the park at the town edge. Heaters like that had a plasticky heat smell.

Her messages lit. Tamsin. I'm around. Phone's on. What do you need. Elin typed: Can you swing by the park by the bypass, quiet? Just look for lights on and doors that don't belong. No knock. Just eyes. If you can't, leave it. She sent it. Three dots. Tamsin: Give me ten. I'll do a loop. You owe me chips.

Another text slid in under it from the same local number. 75 mins. Then a second: On the gate at 00:00.

She blinked at the numbers. The wind took her hood edge and slapped it against her jaw. She took her receipt map and flattened it against the stone wall. She checked her watch. A gust lifted the corner; she pressed it flat with her left hand. The key tag on her palm clicked once on the stone.

She opened Lena's thread and typed: Meet me at the causeway? Bring, She backspaced the whole thing and left the screen black. Her breath ran rough while she held still. She sent: Running early. Check-in cancelled. Then she put the phone away.

The letter to the keeper sat behind the tide table in her inner pocket. She touched it through the coat; the fold had weight. She thought of her mother's hand writing do not add notes.

The boathouse was back off to her right. She didn't turn her head. She kept along the rail. She could call the station. She didn't.

The causeway gate came up with its chain and padlock and the council sign that told people, politely, not to be stupid. The first stones beyond the bars shone wet and dark. She put the borrowed coat tighter around herself. She kept the tagged key deep in her pocket. It wouldn't help on the gate.

'Do it now or don't,' she said, so low the words would not travel.

23:10. No later.

She set a boot on the lowest bar and caught the top rail. Spray lifted across the metal.

The wind pressed. A thin sheet ran off her sleeves. She tested the give and pulled up.

Metal. Cold. Over.

Chapter 3

Causeway

Breakwater Causeway The spray came flatter now, sheets that crossed the tarmac and ran off fast. Elin held the top rail and dropped down on the far side of the landward gate. Metal under her palms left cold in the lines of her skin. She drew the key from the borrowed coat pocket and stood with her shoulder to the bars, the padlock turned rough side toward her the way the council left it.

She tried the key anyway. The tag knocked the steel lightly. *BWL SD*. The cut on the blade was right for a door, not for this, and the angle refused her before the teeth even met the pins. She pushed once, felt the wrong bite through her thumb, and took it back. She looked at the guard wires on the gate's hinge and the way the chain had a pale scrape at one link where someone had swung it high and let it fall.

Wind came up from the left. She tucked the key away and checked the stretch ahead. The first run of stones beyond the gate shone with that wet black that meant move now. She took the torch out of her pocket and set it low, slid it along the ground. The beam hit tops of grit and a line of small rubbish that had settled along the edge: a torn crisp packet; a short length of blue rope; a dead crab no bigger than her palm.

She went. Boots on tarmac that wasn't tarmac at the edge any more, just a thin path where spray kept finding a way across. She counted the harbour arm flashes without meaning to and matched them against the seconds in her head. The sound was not a roar yet. It was a push and a slap and the occasional heavier smack when a wave found a channel that led straight to the road.

Halfway out the path kinked to the right and the compound wall came into the beam. The seaward stretch sat a few metres off with its top caged with wire and a smaller square cut into it that the museum photo had shown years ago. The edge of her torch beam reached it. Steel on steel. A chain lay across that small door now, bright in one spot where the coating hadn't yet dulled. A new padlock hung there with its corners clean.

She breathed through her mouth and tasted salt and colder air. Not in the photo. New this week, or last. Someone had been out here with a chain because people had been out here without one. She let the beam drop and stepped in close to the wall, close enough to smell old metal and new. The chain had stamped letters along one link, a batch mark fresh.

She checked the water again with the torch lowered. The line that floods first, lower bend, landward side, already had a thin skin over it now and then, a skin that formed and wiped away. The seconds were getting short.

'No,' she said, a word to name the stupid thought. The key in her pocket would open the side door on the keeper's house if she could stand in front of it. The landward gate held shut. The small wicket was chained. Pressing on would meet water before she reached the door.

She put her hand flat on the wall for a count and then stepped back. The torch went off. She turned toward the gate and the town behind it and the line of street lights that marked what wasn't going under in the next hour. Her phone buzzed once against her thigh. She didn't take it out until she had walked back to where the path ran straight.

Midnight, the text said. The same local number as before. No punctuation. A deadline set by someone else.

She opened Tamsin's thread and typed: Hold off. Don't loop again yet. I'll call with a time. Stay away from the vans for now. She sent it, then locked the phone and put it face-down in her palm so the wet couldn't play with the screen.

The wind got into her hood as she climbed the landward gate from the compound side. She took the top rail and swung, then dropped to the road and stood a second to let the prickle in her hands ease. She opened Lena's contact, pressed call, watched the word calling come up, and then ended it before it caught. The ring would show in Lena's log. That would cost later. It would cost less than the rest.

Spray came over again. She stepped back from it and started toward the slip. The harbour arm flashed once. Twice. Counting to five, she checked the road ahead. Moving while it was thin, she reached the cut where the wind was worst and kept moving until she had buildings at her back again and a last hard gust pushed against the gate chain behind her.

She stopped a few paces into the lee of the wall by the council sign. The letters didn't need her. She knew what they said. The water was the real limit. The borrowed key in her pocket had weight that drew her posture. She set her jaw and named it in her head. Boathouse. Keys. Do it or go home and tell a story in the morning over tea that would not bring Kit back.

She started down the road toward the slip with her hood up and her hands in the coat pockets holding the cold there to keep her honest. The words from the letter sat under the tide sheet against her ribs, the crease of the fold a line in the fabric.

Gate. Street. Move.

RNLI Boathouse The chain on the gate clinked when she touched it and rattled higher when she shook it just enough to be heard and not enough to look like she meant anything more. A light was on over the slip this time, dull and yellow, the kind that made rain look thicker than it was. The door to the office opened half and a man in a hi-vis looked out with his hood up and his face in shadow.

‘We’re shut,’ he said, not unkind.

‘Left something when I came for tide times earlier,’ she said. ‘Just a glove. I’ll be quick.’ She lifted her empty hand to make it honest enough.

He took a second and then came out with the chain in his hands. ‘Can’t have you in the shed. Office only.’ He glanced past her, then ran the chain through and slotted the padlock without locking it off. He pushed the gate open just enough. ‘Go on then. Two minutes.’

The office held the same heater on low and the same smell of wet rope. Someone had left the radio on the shelf with its volume down to a mutter. Elin stepped in and drew her shoulders in. The wall opposite held the noticeboard, the rota, and a beige metal box with a glass front and a latch. Keys hung neat on hooks inside with tags tied through the rings. She didn’t go to it yet. She went to the edge of the desk and picked up the rag there and set it down again to check her hands were clean.

‘What is it you’ve lost?’ the man asked, taking his hood back with one hand and shaking water off it. He had salt at the seam of his beard. No curiosity past what he needed to know.

‘Glove,’ she said, so he would leave it at that. ‘Black. Might be on the chair.’

He looked at the chair nearest the heater and then at the one by the door. ‘Not here.’

‘Then tape,’ she said. ‘My torch has a crack in the casing. Just something to seal it so it doesn’t take on water when I go home.’

He nodded at the bench where a roll sat with the end folded back on itself. He picked it up, peeled, tore a strip. His radio crackled and he tilted his head as if to listen. She stood quiet. The radio went flat again. He put the roll down and tapped the bench with two fingers in a way that meant done. ‘We’re locking up. Mind yourself.’

She wrapped the tape around the torch’s hairline crack, smoothing it with her thumb. The movement was slow enough to look like

concentration and slow enough to give her eyes time to go to the cabinet. Some of the tags were clear through the glass. Two letters she knew stood out in marker on white. BWL. She took the torch in both hands so she didn't reach for anything yet.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. A hatless head and then the rest of Lena came in under the door frame. She had a beanie in her hand and a short run of breath in her throat from a half trot to get there. A radio sat clipped off on her shoulder with its antenna angled toward the door.

'Elin,' Lena said. A check, not a surprise. Her eyes went to Elin's coat and then to the rag and tape. 'You cancelled check-in.' Her hand went to the key ring at her belt, a habit, then left it there.

'Had to move,' Elin said. She held up the torch with the strip of tape. 'This thing splits in the cold.'

'There's a spare in the drawer,' the crewman said, usefulness in it. He pulled the top drawer, found a cheap plastic torch with a rubber ring around its head, and set it on the desk as an offer. Lena looked to him, took in his nod, then returned to Elin.

'You could have said,' Lena said. The words were level; the look was a degree too steady. 'Ten minutes ago you rang me.'

'I hit it by accident,' Elin said. She let it ride a second. 'Didn't connect.'

A shout carried in from the slip and rattled along the wall before it turned into words. The kind of noise people make when something rolls where it shouldn't. The crewman was out of the office before either of them spoke, his shoulders already set to the turn.

Lena's radio cracked, then cleared. She looked at the door, then at Elin. 'Stay here,' she said, and went toward it. The wind hit the door as she went through and pulled it the last inch from her hand. The sound of the shout moved along the concrete, then nearer, then away, someone laughing to make it sound fine when it wasn't.

Elin stood very still and listened to make sure the steps did not double back. Then she set the taped torch down, put her hand on the latch of the cabinet, and lifted. The latch snagged and gave a small squeal. She palmed the glass to muffle it. No glance over her shoulder. She didn't need to. She knew the length of time a person needs to get from the slip to the office and back if nothing bigger is happening.

The ring she needed sat to the right under BWL written in the same hand as the tag she carried. There were two keys on it. One her own tag matched: BWL SD. The other was a stubby utility key with a triangle head, the sort that opens meters and panels, stamped with a dull number. No gate key. Not here. Not ever. She closed her fingers around the ring and lifted it from its hook, her breath held. The weight was small. A small tremor touched her grip; she pressed her thumb in until it steadied. It still changed the way her arm felt.

She slid it into the inside of the borrowed coat where the lining had a pocket sewn low, right above the seam. The metal made a low sound on the fabric as it settled. She'd put them back before first light. Her fingers pressed the ring deeper in the pocket.

Cabinet shut, the latch lowered on the rubber, palm on the glass to steady it. She stepped back to where the taped torch sat and picked it up again.

One breath at the edge of the desk. The heater hummed, the cheap clock ticked loose, and water tapped the window frame from the right angle of the rain. She looked over at the peg rail. A spare jacket hung there, orange, crew size, with the station name printed small at the shoulder. The borrowed coat on her back held the stolen ring. If she walked out wearing it, anyone could trace it back to her.

She moved to the peg rail, took the borrowed coat off in one smooth lift, and hung it with its pockets turned to the wall. The tag inside ticked once against the peg when it turned. She took the orange jacket from the peg and put it on. Her hand went into the borrowed coat pocket and

found the ring. She moved it into the jacket's inside pocket, pushed flat. The single BWL key from the borrowed pocket followed, into the jacket's side pocket. The tide sheet and the letter went across with them. The text to Tamsin with a time could wait for the gate.

Lena came back into the office with rain sliding on her face and a look she was keeping under her control. 'Kids with a trolley,' she said. 'Nothing.' She wiped her cheek with the back of her wrist and then did it again when the first pass didn't do much.

'Tape worked,' Elin said, lifting the torch. Her voice stayed even because she made it. 'I'll get out of your way.'

Lena's eyes went to the peg rail. The borrowed coat sat there on its peg. Her gaze stayed a fraction and then moved to the door. Elin held still. She nodded once. 'Go on then. Don't go near the stones.'

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. The sound carried in the small room even though she had the volume down. A call, not a text. She didn't check the screen. She pressed the side button through the fabric to let it ride quiet. The ring went on, short, then stopped on its own.

'You all right?' Lena asked, and the question held three other ones in it.

'I'm on time,' Elin said. It was the wrong answer to every one of those and the only one that would get her to the door.

She stepped out. The corridor was colder. The crewman stood halfway along it, looking out toward the slip with his chin lifted, listening for something only he knew to listen for. He didn't turn as she went by. The gate chain made the same small clink when she lifted it and slipped through the gap.

Outside, the wind pushed hard. She went past the bins and the line of wet concrete and the mark where trolleys had rolled earlier and turned away from the light so her eyes would go back to the dark they had to read, and kept on. She felt the ring rest against the lining of her coat when

she moved. It stayed put. She kept to the right side of the road where the setts were flat and the puddles shallower. The harbour arm flashed. She timed her feet to it without wanting to and then made herself stop doing that. The causeway would be worse by now than when she had turned back. She wasn't going to win anything by running at water.

Slip. Street. Wind along the shopfronts.

Causeway Gate , Landward The sign shone wet in the torch beam. The bottom edge of the first long run out was gone under a low sheet and the next one took spray that lifted and threw itself farther than before. The chain at the gate had a dark line of grit on the bottom link where the water had touched it, then run back.

She stood with her back to the gate and the town at her shoulders and pulled the tide sheet from her pocket. The plastic was slick in her hands. HW 00:04. That was the number. The wind had moved the line up ten minutes for anything that wasn't a ship with a deep belly, and she wasn't a ship. Earliest on the drop with this in her face, she marked it in her head, half past if the wind eased, later if it didn't. She let the sheet fall back into her pocket and held it there a second to seat it.

She took out her phone. Hold one hour, she wrote to Tamsin. Then do one slow pass. Call me first if anything looks wrong. She sent it and watched for the small delivered mark. Three dots came and went. Then: Copy. Near the bypass.

Her thumb opened Lena's thread without asking her for permission. She typed: There's something I need to tell you. The cursor blinked. She backspaced until the field was clean and the time she'd wasted doing that had passed. She locked the screen and put the phone away.

The water moved across the black again, and for a second she saw the shape of the small wicket in her head with the chain across it and the new

padlock at the centre. On the other side of that: the side door into the scullery. Under the scullery step: what she had to put her hand on, not any other piece of paper. The key ring in her coat was a way to that, not a guarantee. She pictured the handle of the side door, the way it would turn if nothing had rusted where she couldn't see. The letter in her inner pocket said leave the book where he left it. She pressed her knuckles against it through the fabric without taking it out.

Her phone lit her coat from the inside. A text from the same number.

No light. Once and it changes.

Her ribs tightened. No reply. She didn't pocket the phone yet either. She lifted it a little and saw the clock turn itself a minute forward. Kit's voice from the note came back, thin with breath: 'don't talk to, '. She set two alarms with her thumb: 00:20, 00:35. She named them as she made them. Walk. Window.

She put the phone away. The gate rattled when a gust hit square. She put her hands around the cold of the top rail and closed them until her fingers steadied. Then she let go and turned for home.

Her lane took her two corners and a small climb. Water ran along the gutter where leaves sat in a soft wedge. The garden of the corner house that always had a light on was dark tonight and the gap where the curtain never quite met showed nothing behind it. She looked away from that and to the number on her own door. She got the key out before she reached it so she wouldn't stand and fumble on the step.

Inside the narrow hall she did not put the main light on. She stood and let her eyes adjust to the under-cupboard glow from the kitchen that she had left on low in case she came in quick. The smell of her own place, damp coats; stainless steel; old detergent, came back to her slower than usual.

She took her coat off and hung it on the hook that had never held anything important until tonight. The ring she had taken sat in her hand with the BWL tag hanging straight. She turned and set it on the hook

where the spare cottage key had been missing since the lamp had been found on. The empty mark on the paint at the bottom edge of that space looked smaller when something hung there. It wasn't. Her mouth made a line she had to let ease. The gap stayed, only hidden.

She went into the kitchen. The kettle stood where she'd left it earlier. She put water in it and then took it back out and set it on the side without switching it on. The tide sheet on the table had a crease turned the wrong way; she smoothed it with her palm and folded it again with the letter behind it. She took the letter half out and checked the first line without reading it properly. To the Keeper. She slid it back in and pressed the fold flat.

She sat at the table with her phone on the wood and a mug that was not full beside it. She didn't open any thread. The house made its night sounds, the little click in the heating pipes though the heating wasn't on; a car turning in the street outside and stopping three doors down; the bin lid two houses over moving a fraction on its hinge.

She checked the alarms again because she had to and because it felt like an act you could count. 00:20. 00:35. She moved the phone to the edge of the table and set it face-down. Then she stood, crossed to the hall, and put her hand on the light switch and left it where it was.

Her chest hurt on the high breathing after the walk and then settled. She did not take her boots off. No water in the laces to swell them. She leaned forward and put her fingers on the split in the torch casing and felt the tape she'd put there in the boathouse. It held.

She went back to the table and sat again and put her hands around nothing and kept them there. When the first alarm went she would stand, take the ring and the letter and the tide sheet, and go. She didn't tell herself any other story.

She looked along the hall at the hook. The ring hung where her mother's spare had belonged. Keys are proof, her mother had once said without saying it quite like that. Who holds them says who gets to speak

first. Elin watched the metal catch what glow there was in the kitchen and dull when a small draught moved the air.

The clock on her phone ticked over to the next minute, then the next. She waited with the light off.

Chapter 4

Signal

Cottage Kitchen The phone lit before the kettle had finished settling. It was not the alarm she had named Walk. It took her thumb to bring the screen up. Same local number. The hum of the under-cupboard light felt too loud for a second.

She answered and didn't say hello.

'We move it up,' the voice said. Cal. Flat and sure. 'Weather's lifting the tops. Half an hour earlier.'

Elin looked at the tide table under her hand. HW 00:04 circled in her mother's ink. The pen mark she had added at 00:20 for the drop, little line there. 'Earlier than midnight,' she said.

'Twenty-three thirty on the gate.' He spoke flat, precise. 'No fuss. No calls.'

'You can't have it,' she said, voice steady. 'Not at twenty-three thirty.'

'You're not listening,' he said. A brightness under the dull. 'We don't talk preferences. We talk timing. Twenty-three thirty.'

'You want me at the gate,' she said. 'You'll have me at the gate. But we do it on the drop.'

'Don't teach me the tide,' he said. The sound of him moving; the scrape of a chair on lino, or a boot across a rubber mat. 'Keep the light off. You flash it, he pays.'

Her knuckles pressed the paper flat, the edge of it cool where the damp in the air didn't quite get to. 'You moved the time,' she said. 'Give me proof he's there now.'

A breath across the line. Then: 'Twenty-three thirty. You don't set the clock.'

'Listen,' she said, and the word carried more than it could do. 'You have one ask. I'm holding to it. I won't risk that water for you. If you hurt him, the book goes under a tide you cannot touch.'

He laughed once. Not long. 'You still think this is a negotiation. It's timing. Keep your pockets quiet. The more you talk, the worse your odds get.'

'I need more time.'

'Twenty-three forty? No. 23:30 on the gate.'

Then the line went dead.

She held the phone away. The heat in her hand eased. The kettle clicked again, an aftersound. She set the phone on the table and looked at the minutes. 23:18.

She took the pen from the side of the tide sheet and drew a small circle around half past the hour on a margin where there wasn't ink already. She wrote one word next to it in small letters: meet. Then she put a cross at 23:28 and wrote abort. The plastic cover slid under the pressure.

She lifted the tide table edges and folded them tight enough that the plastic creaked. The edge of the barley sugar tin nudged her wrist. She moved it aside and took a breath that didn't come as deep as she wanted it to.

She unlocked the phone and opened Tamsin's thread.

23:35 call me. Don't knock. If I don't answer, wait 30 secs and call again.

She sent it. The three dots came and went. Then: On it.

Reset 00:20 to 23:27. Added 00:35, Window. Vibrate. The screen light felt too bright under the kitchen's low glow; she pressed the side

button twice and let the dark come back into the room.

She put the phone down and turned to the chair by the door. The orange RNLI jacket hung where she'd left it. On the hook by the door, the BWL ring she'd hung earlier dulled in the light. She stepped to it and didn't take it down yet.

Do the thing you can do.

She went to the drawer that held the tea towels and took a square of clean cotton she kept for polishing the kettle when she remembered. She set it on the table. The hymnbook sat on the shelf above the cooker, that thin brown one with the corner rubbed down that her mother had kept near the radio for carols and funerals. She took it down, felt the weight in her hand. She laid it on the cotton and put two folded flyers under it from the museum's summer opening, old and glossy. She folded the cotton over top and around, tight, and ran a strip of tape along one edge to hold it. She turned the package and pressed the corners so it presented the way something kept careful might.

She lifted it and balanced it in her palm. Weight enough to read as a book if someone took it from her hand in a hurry. The tape made a small click when she pressed it down further. She dropped the package into the blue tote she used for the market. It went to the bottom with a solid thud.

She went to the sideboard and picked up her torch. The tape on its hairline crack was still smooth and closed. She pressed a thumb along it and the seal held. The batteries were fine; she didn't switch it on. She set it down again and looked at the kit list in her head. Keys, charger, coat, cash. She didn't take the charger. No time to stand near a wall.

She put her hand into the orange jacket. Inside pocket left: the single key with the plastic tag she had moved from the borrowed coat. BWL SD. Inside pocket right: empty. The RNLI ring hung on the hook. She looked at it and marked that she'd have to take it with her if there was any chance of returning it before someone wrote anything down that stuck. She closed her fist around the single key and felt the edge of its cut.

She opened Lena's thread and typed: I'm going to fix the thing I did.

She looked at the words a second. Then she backspaced each letter slowly until the field was blank and the cursor sat in the empty box. She locked the phone.

'Say it plain,' she said, low. 'Not tonight.'

She put the tide sheet back into her inside pocket. She slid the small scrap with the words about the loose board behind it, the paper against paper so she could feel both through the fabric. Then she took the scrap out again and slipped it into the barley sugar tin. She left the main letter under the tide sheet for now. She would decide in ten minutes whether to carry it.

The kettle sat there with water in it and a light sheen on its steel. She didn't switch it on. She set her palm on the cool of it. The steel was cool. She left it.

She took the tote by one strap so it looked like any other bag someone might carry along the street. She put the torch in the tote but not all the way down. She did not want to be seen rummaging. The decoy sat at the bottom.

She walked to the hall and took the BWL ring from the hook. The hook looked wrong again without anything on it. The small dust smear below it caught the low light and showed the same mark as before, softer now.

She put the orange jacket on and pulled the zip up until it covered her throat. Inside left, she moved the single BWL SD key into the smaller pocket and pushed it down so it sat under the seam. The ring stayed on the right. Separate. If one went, the other might not.

Door. Lock. Turn.

She stood in the hall with the door open and looked back once at the lamp in the front window that had no business being on any night this week. It was dark now. She left the house with the light off and pulled the

door until the latch caught. The sound of it was sharper tonight.

The Dunlin Side Door The alley by the pub was wet and cold. It numbed her wrists. The smokers' lean-to glistened with old varnish; the air held stale smoke. She put the tote down on the bench under the lean-to and checked it looked casual there, the strap looped and the cloth-wrapped book not obvious at the top. The lean-to would be seen by anyone coming to the side door for air or a shortcut round to the taxi rank.

She turned to go when the side door pushed open and Lena stepped out with her beanie in her hand and the other hand at her belt without thinking, fingers finding the absence of a weight that should be there.

'Elin,' she said. Not a question. A warning. Her eyes went to the tote on the bench, then to Elin's jacket, then to Elin's face. 'We did a lock check.' She kept her voice under the noise of the pub's low music. 'The BWL ring. Off the hook. Do you want to talk about that now or in the morning when there's paperwork attached?'

Elin didn't move her feet. She brought her hand up and the ring lay across her palm, the tags turned in so the letters were not obvious until you looked. 'I was going to bring it back before first light,' she said.

'You took it,' Lena said, not letting it pass as an accident. 'From the cabinet.'

'The latch squealed when I lifted it,' Elin said. 'I closed it quiet. Nobody was in the room. I took it. I'm bringing it back.' She heard the quiet in her own voice. Not apology. A recording.

Lena held out her hand. The ring went into it and didn't make a sound against her skin. She closed her fingers and then opened them again to look at the tags. 'Triangle and side-door,' she said. 'You kept this

in your house for, ' She looked at the sky, pulled a breath in and let it out. 'Why the rush?'

Elin could have said timing. Could have said weather. She said, 'Because someone moved the time.' She didn't say who.

Lena took that in. Her jaw set. The nick on her knuckle looked white again where her skin was pulled across it. 'So you let me walk into my office and see a peg without a ring and you kept walking.'

'Kids with a trolley,' Elin said. A poor deflection. 'You were busy.'

'Don't,' Lena said. 'Don't lay your quiet choice on a shout from the slip.' She opened the door and let it sit just off the latch so the sound of the room didn't swing out too hard. 'Say it plain or say nothing. Don't use me.'

'I'm not using you,' Elin said. She heard it and knew how it sounded with the ring between them. 'I needed a look at the waterline and a way to be faster if I caught a minute. I put it back. I'm putting it back. You won't have my name on this past now.'

'Past now isn't the point,' Lena said. 'If a ring goes off a hook, that's a write-up. If it comes back without an incident, that's still a write-up. I'm not putting a hand on your shoulder and saying it's fine.' She breathed once through her nose. 'There's a reason the gate is Council, not us. If it's land, you keep it on land. If it's water, you call us. You want me to say 'I didn't see anything' when someone asks me in the morning? I won't.'

Elin felt for the single BWL key in her inside left. Still there, under the seam. The ring was gone from her right; she let the absence show in the way her shoulder dropped an inch. 'I'm not asking you to lie,' she said. 'I'm asking you to leave me alone for the next half hour.'

'You want me to pretend you're not about to do something stupid with a tide running,' Lena said. 'And you want me to keep my mouth shut while you do it.'

Elin looked past Lena into the corridor where the picture of the lifeboat hung with the glass cleaned better than most pubs would bother with. She looked at the way the light from the bar made a square on the floor and stayed off the skirting. She looked back to Lena. 'Don't follow me,' she said. 'Don't wait by the alley. Don't come to the gate. If you want to help me, send Kit my way when you see him. That's all I'll take from you tonight.'

'You already took,' Lena said, and she didn't make it dramatic. She lifted the ring slightly. 'And you brought it back. That's the only good bit. You turn the light on tonight and it is not because of me. You do it in your own name.'

'Keep the light off,' Elin said. It came out low. The words had weight from the letter and the call and the years between. 'I know.'

'Do you?' Lena asked. 'Because it isn't a story you can tidy later with a coat on a chair and a laugh about it.'

Elin swallowed. The air tasted like old smoke and sea in a way that made her want clean water and couldn't have it. 'I know the cost,' she said.

'Do it now or don't,' Lena said, same words Elin had said to herself at the gate. A challenge and a mercy when someone else says them.

They kept the door near shut. Winter habit. A short laugh rose from the bar and cut off.

Lena put the BWL ring into her pocket. 'I won't cover for you,' she said. 'Not tonight. Not like that.'

'I know,' Elin said.

'And if someone asks me what I saw,' Lena said, 'I'll tell them. You at the gate at twenty past. You in the office with tape. You in the corridor when I told you to stay. I won't blur it.'

'I know,' Elin said again. The words didn't get her anything. They kept the shape of the space between them true.

She touched the seam above the single key without taking it out. Then she took the tote strap over her shoulder and stepped back from the door. Her boots made that wet sound rubber makes on paving when water sits thin.

‘Stay off the stones,’ Lena said, softer.

Elin nodded, a small thing. ‘Tell Kit,’ she said. ‘Tell him I’m still moving.’

‘If I see him,’ Lena said.

Elin turned and walked the half length of the alley to the street and did not look back. The key weight at her left settled every five steps and reminded her of its shape.

Cottage Kitchen She cut back past the taxi rank and along the lane.

Grit from the alley sat on her cuff; her jacket smelled of smoke and salt.

She was back at her table with the kettle still not on and the wind coming through the gap at the sash. The house was colder than before. She opened the barley sugar tin with her thumbnail on a habit that had been there before the letter ever lay in it.

She took the letter out and held it to the under-cupboard light at an angle. The folds held their shape. At the bottom margin, where the pen line from her mother’s last sentence ended in a little dot, there was a faint pencil mark she hadn’t read before. Third from riser. It was faint enough she could tell it had been added with whatever was near, not with care. She turned the paper and saw the line darker at one edge where the paper was rougher. Third from riser. Her breath steadied.

She set the letter down and took the receipt-map from under the tide sheet. She laid it beside and traced with a finger where the scullery line

would be, the run of boards that met the raised step. The riser would be the vertical face. Third from that, counting from the inner edge, not the wall, because that was the way you would write it if you were telling someone who would stand where the work had been done. Third. She counted with her finger on the paper. The little cross she'd put there earlier was a touch off; she moved her nail and put a new one. Not a neat cross. A pressure that marked the place.

She folded the letter back up and looked at it again, then shook her head and left it open. She didn't need to lift it to her nose to know it still smelled like the drawer it had lived in for years. She did not have the time to think about that.

She took two pieces of junk mail, cheap card with adverts, from the sideboard and tore one short strip of tape to hold them flat. She slid the bundle under the back lining of the orange jacket and tested the carry. It sat against her spine. It wouldn't ride like that well, not on the run, but for the length of a causeway it would sit if she moved with her elbows a touch wider and her back a touch flatter. If she found the real ledger, it would ride there; under a quick search she would hold her elbows a touch wider and keep her back flatter. She took the bundle out and left it on the table. She didn't want tape against her skin yet.

She looked at the torch. Kept it. She looked at the small roll of tape on the torch's casing and pressed the end down. She took the triangle-head utility idea and set it aside; she didn't have the triangle now that the ring had gone. She adjusted for the missing triangle key and cut that option.

She checked the inside pockets by feel: left, single BWL SD key; right, nothing now. She took the tide table and folded it again to the date and slid it into the right pocket. She took the 'To the Keeper' letter and the scrap both and held them. She turned back to the barley sugar tin and put them inside, then set the tin behind the bread bin, out of sight if you leaned over the worktop. She hesitated and then took only the scrap out again and slipped it under the flap of her left pocket behind the seam. She didn't want to be caught with the letter on her if someone put a hand into

her jacket without asking. The scrap was small enough to hide inside a hand if she needed to put it into a mouth and make it gone. The thought stayed.

She opened Tamsin's thread and typed Aelwyd and set it there without sending, the field a single word ready to go if she hit it with a thumb. She turned the phone in her palm and that word held as a little bright block to the side of the black.

She traced the route on the receipt-map with her finger. Through the gate if she could, along the wall's lee, wicket chained, side door along the seaward face. Scullery step. Third from riser. Boards creak less at the ends; keep to the edge. Skirt the main stair; the centre of that step would complain. Hands flat. Don't move more than you have to. Leave the book where he left it unless you have to move it.

She folded the receipt and slid it with the tide sheet into her inside pocket. She checked the torch one last time. She didn't switch it on. She zipped the jacket and kept her hands free.

The worktop was cold. She left the kettle. She switched off the under-cupboard light. The room held only street light.

She went to the hall, pulled the door in, and turned the latch. She stepped out and pulled the door in. The latch took. She didn't try it twice.

The Street and The Dunlin Lean-to Out again within a minute.

Her phone vibrated as she went past the corner house with the dark gap in the curtain that had been bothering her since the wrong lamp. She opened the thread with the local number and typed Gate's shut. Water high. Need drop.

She sent it. She didn't put please. The typing bubbles didn't appear. She walked another ten paces and the reply came: 23:30. Gate. Dark.

She put the phone away and didn't put it face-down because she was walking and the word didn't matter. She lifted the other handset from the inside pocket where it had sat dead for a year. A cheap one with a scratched back. She pressed the power and it booted slow. No SIM registered; Wi-Fi later if needed. She put it back into her inside pocket and left it asleep there.

She reached the lean-to by the side door and kept moving. The tote sat where she had set it. A boy with a thin jacket and no sense stepped out for a breath and then in again, not seeing her, not seeing the bag. The door thudded. The music cut for a second then returned. She kept walking and resisted the turn of her head.

Her phone buzzed with a new message. She opened Tamsin's thread.

Copy on 23:35. Where?

She typed: Bag by Dunlin lean-to. If it goes, note time only. Don't go near it.

A pause. Then: Seen. Watching.

She opened the social icon she never used for anything she didn't need. She set a status on a private list that was three names and one she'd never cut because the habit was the habit and people don't change as fast as they think. She tagged The Dunlin. She set the video to two seconds of the smokers' lean-to wood and the sound of the bar. She posted it and shut the app. If it changed nothing, fine. If it gave her a minute, good.

She crossed the road toward the slip road mouth. The harbour arm blinked at the edge of her vision. She did not count it. Not yet. She kept her shoulders down and her hands out of sight.

She wrote to the station number she had for parcel drops that used to go wrong: Mo on? She added nothing else. The reply came a moment later.

On till 5. , Mo

She didn't send thanks. She didn't need another line in anybody's log. She put the phone away, the primary one that had Cal's number on it, and left the backup cold.

She cut along the wall past the arcade dark and the chip shop neon dark. The wind came broadside at the corner by the taxi rank and pushed her coat hard against her. Spray hung in a fine sheet, then fell.

She saw the shape of the gate at the end of the road. The council sign shone wet. The chain held where it had. The grit mark at the bottom link looked a shade wider than earlier. She didn't go to it yet. She stepped into the lee of the wall and took one breath and then another and let her shoulders drop. She lifted the tote strap off her head and put it so it would be easy to catch if a hand came from an angle.

Her phone vibrated: Walk-up. 23:27.

She went forward. Not fast. Not slow. Enough to be a person going somewhere who belonged to the night and not a person running at it.

Slip Road Mouth The gate took shape as she neared. No men at the post. No torches beyond. Wind pushed harbour noise through the steel. A low vibration.

She put her palm over the top bar the way she had done earlier and felt the cold come off it. She kept the torch down. She kept the light off. She took her hand back and wiped it on her jacket, a small act that didn't do much and felt like it did.

Her heart did the small hard run that comes on the walk before the work. She named the bits of the plan again and watched the water move at the first run out. It wasn't a run any more. It was a sheet and then not a sheet and then a sheet again. It would be different in fifteen minutes and the same in other ways.

She could stand there and think about the ledger and the way the paper would feel through wrapping and which way the string would run under her fingers and what it would cost to pick it up. Or she could look for places that looked like places where people had made mistakes and use that.

She looked at the welds on the gate and the fresh scrape on the chain and the way the council padlock had its ugly side to her. She looked at the mortar at the base of the wall where people put their feet when they decide the warning only applies to other people. She did the count she had told herself she wouldn't do and matched the harbour arm light to the seconds in her head for one cycle and then stopped again.

Her phone gave a small sound. The alarm she had moved. Walk-up. She slipped the phone to silent with a finger through the jacket and didn't pull it out.

She put her hand into the inside left of her jacket and pressed the single BWL key between forefinger and thumb. The metal was cold and smelled of oil. She sat the key in her palm and then pressed it back into the seam. She was not taking it out under street light.

She stood up straight. She shifted her weight onto the ball of her foot and off again to feel the setts under the water at the edge where the road goes from street to causeway. She didn't lean. She didn't cross. She didn't speak.

Behind her, two voices broke off laughter and then tried to pick it up again. Not for her. For something else that had nothing to do with any of the hours between now and morning. She pictured the decoy sitting in the tote by the lean-to and someone grabbing it. If it went, it went. It wasn't the thing that would hold anyone safe.

She turned her head slightly and looked back toward the town. The windows showed small squares of light. Light from the bar marked the path. The museum bulked in the dark, shuttered for the season.

She put her hand back on the top rail and waited for the next gust. When it came and rattled the chain a fraction, she did not jump. She held. Then she let go. She had time.

She took a half-step closer to the gate and turned herself to put one shoulder to the metal and make herself smaller against it. 'Do it now or don't,' she said, no breath in it to travel. She put both hands on the bar and set her boot on the lower strut. Fingers closed on cold metal. She shifted her weight upward. The chain gave a small click.

Chapter 5

Breakwater

Breakwater Gate The wind eased for a count. Not calm, not soft; just less. The chain lifted and set down without a rattle. She watched the wash over the first run, there, thin, and then gone. That was the space.

Twenty-eight past.

Boot on the lower strut, she took the top bar with both hands. Cold metal burned quick into her fingers. She shifted up and over. A sleeve brushed the wet sign; the water on it felt gritty. She dropped to the causeway with her weight held soft and low, let the knees take it, and stayed there a breath while the gust passed her shoulder. The harbour arm blinked once to the left. She did not count the next one.

Wall. Lee. Move.

Torch dark, her hand on the stone where the lichen bit skin. The water spread across the tarmac in a thin sheet and then pulled back. It left a line of white salt along the aggregate. She placed her foot on the darker runs where the grip held better and went. The coat pressed to her back, the seam of the inside pocket a steady pressure against the key she had not given back. BWL SD; no triangle key, so the gate would stay the council's. Gate chain ahead, the ugly side of the council padlock turned out toward the road. No men at the post. No lights beyond the run of iron.

She would be cut off if she got the pace wrong. There would be no second try. She went anyway.

At the bend the water crept further over the edge stones and then slid clean again. She stepped at the top of the pullback and felt the setts under a thin film. To slip here would be stupid. She did not slip. Three long

paces, then hand to the wall to brace for the next push. The gust came and passed. She went again.

The compound wall on her right rose dark and wet. The maintenance wicket was a bright knot of chain to her eye even in the low light. New. Someone had fixed that since the photograph had been taken. No help to her tonight. She kept moving. Along the wall it was quieter. On her left, black water. She looked once at it and then not again. Open water at night was for other people until it wasn't. Not tonight.

The keeper's side door sat in the shadow of the seaward face, a step up from the scullery level, soft paint scuffed where old boots had caught. She found the key in the inside pocket by touch and pressed it between her fingers so it would not ring against anything if she missed. The lock took the key with a tight bite. She turned. It resisted the way locks do when the wind pushes at a door from a different angle than the day they were fitted. She turned harder. It gave with a small dull sound. She caught the handle before it hit the frame.

Inside, the air was cooler than outside; it stayed still and cold. She set the door closed behind her without the latch seating. She needed the hinge free to come back out with less fight. The scullery smelled of damp stone and soap. She kept the torch at her leg and let only the spill show where her toes would go. Dust had settled undisturbed here. No one had been through with shoes like hers in the last days. That did not mean no one had been through at all.

The step ran across the room, a rise not even a hand's width, boards set tight a long time ago. Third from riser. She counted from the inner edge, the way the hand on the scrap had wanted her to. Riser, first board, second, third. She put her fingertips to the seam on that third and felt the lip that should not be there if a man with both hands on a hammer had finished it the way he would have liked to when he first set it.

She pressed down at the back edge and lifted the front with the other hand. It did not come easy but it came. A skitter of white dust fell into the

dark space below. She breathed out, slow. Underneath, the top of a wrap. Oilcloth, dark, with the small sheen of old wax. A twine cross lay along it with a flake where a seal had once sat and was gone from friction. She eased her fingers under the cloth and drew the package up carefully, kept off the edges to avoid a scrape. The weight was right. That was not paper cut to size for a trick.

She did not switch on the torch. She eased the top wrap back a finger-width to check what could be checked without waking the whole house. The inside board of the cover showed a shallow impressed mark from a tool set down too hard once: the lighthouse name in a small circle. Page edges were thicker than ordinary books and had fragile tag tabs at intervals with faint numbers. No handwriting yet; no ink. She did not press further. Not here. Not now.

She slid the wrap closed again and took the weight against her body. The carry she had rehearsed at the kitchen table would hold if she held herself the right way. She unzipped the jacket lining a thumb-width and fed the wrapped ledger up the spine of her jacket until it sat flat between fabric and back. It pressed cold through the cloth. She widened her elbows a little and drew her shoulders flat, the way she had told herself. The jacket changed shape in a way someone who knew her would read. No one who knew her should be out here tonight. She closed the jacket.

The cavity under the board was wide enough that the absence would read if someone sensible looked. She took two thin sheets torn from a mildewed leaflet under the scullery sink and slipped them into the space so they lay flat to one side. She took an old rag from the scullery sink, stiff with grease along one edge, and set it as a loose roll to one corner to throw a small shape. Someone in a hurry and in bad light might see mass where there would be none.

She set the board down. It did not sit right the first time. She lifted, brushed grit from the lip with the flat of her hand, and set it again. The seam closed. She pressed along it with two fingers in a slow line to bed dust into the join. Then she shifted a scuff from one board edge into the

other so the floor looked unchanged.

The torch stayed down. Her breath came steady and quiet. The water outside hit a different rhythm and then found the first one again. She waited for one count. No stair complaint. No shift of door. She stepped back once.

She wanted to open it. She wanted to take the ledger out and see a date. She wanted, more than that, to see a name in a margin, her father's or the man who thought he owned it. She let it go. The ledger was on her. That was the only new thing that mattered now.

She turned to the door, caught the handle with a sleeve so skin would not squeak on cold iron, and eased it open a fraction. Wind pressed the outside in. She slipped through and nursed the door back to the jamb. The key turned; the lock took. She did not pocket the key yet. She held it in her hand and let the teeth sit along her palm in case she needed it again fast.

Compound Edge The sky brightened a shade with a smear that was not dawn, just cloud thinning over a brighter patch. A light showed where light should not. Upper window of the cottage, the front left. A soft glow that fell across the curtain in a way that meant a lamp was set near the sill. Not hers. Not for her. Her breath stopped once. Elbows set wider against the weight at her spine.

She caught the wall with her shoulder and held still. The tide took the causeway for a breath and gave it back; it was not the tide she was listening to. That upper room had not shown anything when she came in. Whoever was in there had not been in the scullery. The step would have answered, and the dust would have read a boot. There was the possibility of two. Or they were careful. Or they had a key of their own.

She edged back along the wall until she was in the deeper shadow and counted the steps of the cottage with the count in her head. She stood there and let the wind show her the gaps and the houses show her what they could hide. A board above settled. Soft. The way old wood does when

a person puts weight on it carefully enough to avoid a shout. There were hands in the house. Not hers. The ledger pressed cold along her spine; with that weight, she took the only option: out, not up. She looked at the side door and saw a detail she had not read coming in: a metal pail under the scullery bench with a wire handle half bent out of shape.

She went back the few steps, turned the key in the side-door lock, and added the pail inside the jamb so the door would catch it and scrape if someone opened it in a hurry. The wire she twisted once more over the latch tongue to give it a stiffer throw. She closed it and turned the key again. It would make seconds, not minutes. Seconds were enough to make a way out if someone followed her at the same time and with the same idea.

She took the key back out of the lock, put it to the seam of her inside pocket, and pressed it down under the fold where it would not be seen if someone's hand went in for a grab. She stood a second longer and listened. No stair groan. No latch tick. That was all she would get.

Her phone sat under the jacket, the bulk of the ledger against her spine making the shape different. She got the phone out by feel, tipping the corner of the screen to her palm so the light would be hidden. The draft sat on Tamsin's thread: Aelwyd. She sent it. Aelwyd sent, Tamsin would be on the tote. Watcher confirmed; decoy likely live. No commentary. No location. The word was a hinge and they had only built two hinges between them for nights like this.

She put the phone back and looked at the water line. The thin wash on the first run thinned more and then came back heavy. She could make the gate in two steps across the wash if she went with the moment the water peeled back and if the wind stayed where it was for three breaths. It never did exactly what was asked, but sometimes it didn't contradict in the first minute.

She looked down and saw a boot mark she had not made. The print sat half on the bannering of the scullery step, half on the lower stone.

Lugged, deeper in the heel than hers ran, with a small nick at the outside edge. Fresh grit sat along the impression. She tweaked her boot through the edge of it and rubbed the two together until the print blurred to a double stand.

Between the door and the step, a small brass piece lay in the dust, set down and nudged. She crouched, picked it between finger and thumb. The weight was right for a small stamp, the kind pressed into an ink pad and onto a page to mark something official without flourish. The top had the lighthouse initials punched into it and the shaft showed skin-slick where hands had turned it often. It might have sat on a desk upstairs once. It might have fallen a long time ago or a week ago. It had not been there when she slid her hand into that space under the board. She pocketed it. A brass stamp did not write names. It held a place. It would still be a sharp little truth if something else went wrong later.

Her phone pulsed once. She closed her hand over it to hide the light and did not open the thread. Cal's number. Not answered. Not now.

She set her shoulder to the wall and went. Two long strides, water higher than it had been coming in, the thin sheet reached her laces and wicked into her socks. The coat pulled against the ledger. She kept her elbows a touch wider. She stepped onto the drier strip and put her hand back up to the top of the wall and breathed out through her nose with a sound she did not hear.

Landward Gate The gate chain made the small click again as the gust moved it in the half inch it had found earlier. She took the top bar, hauled herself over, and landed on the setts in the lee of the council sign. Water wicked through her laces; breath quick. A shape moved far out along the compound edge, low and swift, no torch, a person, not big against the wall, heading for the cottage at a pace that said they knew the path or did not care about their ankles.

She did not stand to check them twice. Away from the slip mouth, she went for speed. Her boots hit where the darker line told her not to. She

corrected. She moved.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket hard enough to make the ledger shift against her spine. She took the risk and looked. The message from Tamsin was plain. Bag gone 23:33.

She had asked for the time only. She'd told Tamsin to send it anyway.

She turned right at the first corner past the arcade instead of left for her lane. The road there took more wind; it bought her not being where anyone expected. She cut past the shuttered museum. The sign hung off-true the way it had hung since a lorry kissed it last month; she placed that in her head as something she still intended to fix. Not tonight. The yard gate was closed and would make noise if someone came through after her; she did not cross the yard. She took the alley by the bins and went soft on her feet. The smell changed to old fryer and wet cardboard and a metal tang near her mouth.

She reached the lane from the far end where the bricks turned wrong and had not been cleaned because no one owned that section. She stood there in the dark off to one side and waited with the count, to see if anyone else wanted to share her breath. Feet did not come. A door at the other end of the lane opened and shut three seconds apart, and an ordinary life happened behind it. She went.

Her key scraped once. She checked herself and set the blade of it quieter into the lock. The door gave. She did not put the light on. She shut it behind her and set the latch and the bolt without letting them snap.

She stood in the kitchen. The under-cupboard light had been left off. She did not touch it. The tide table on the fridge was right where it had been with the circle around 00:04 and the word in her mother's hand beside it. Her breath fogged once in front of her as the jacket gave up the cold onto her skin. She unzipped the lining seam she had opened in the scullery and eased the oilcloth parcel up and out, keeping the weight held with both hands so it wouldn't fall and complain. The ledger sat on the table a second, not long enough to leave a mark.

She took a butter knife from the jar and went to the base of the kitchen units. The kickboard there had a small gap at the corner from the time she had knocked it vacuuming too close and thought she would fix it at some point. She slid the knife in and lifted. The board popped. The sound was small and wrong and perfect. Under, there was the batten the kickboard hung on and the floor behind. Space enough for a parcel that lay flat if you turned it right. She did. She slid the ledger in and felt wood take weight. She pushed until the oilcloth edge kissed the back board and stopped.

She set the kickboard in its clips and pressed along the line to seat it. Her wrist trembled once. She rubbed her thumb along the seam and picked dust from the skirting with the edge of her nail and pressed that into the line, and when she looked again it looked like it had always done. She stood there with her hand flat on the floor piece long enough to feel the cold come up through her palm. Then she stood up and breathed.

Her phone showed two messages on the lock screen. The local number. Where. Two minutes later: Gate. You're late.

She didn't touch them. She opened Tamsin's thread instead. When. She typed it as a word and let it sit a second to respect the ten seconds of delay they had agreed years back and never written down. The reply came. 00:20 or next drop. She wrote: Station later if clean. No details. No names.

At the sink, she ran her hands under the cold for a second because they were filthy. She dried them on the tea towel and set the tea towel back on the oven handle exactly the way it had been crooked before she left. Someone who knew her would see a straighter towel and know she had been thinking about being seen.

She took the tide table from her pocket and propped it on the bread bin where the barley sugar tin sat hidden behind. She drew the blunt pencil from the drawer that picks up everything and loses it again. She put a dot at 00:50 and wrote the word Walk small under it, wash running

late on slack. She put a second dot beside and wrote Train small and then rubbed the word out with the side of her thumb until it left only a dirty line no one else would read.

She picked up the single key with BWL SD stamped into the rub-worn plastic and placed it for one second on the empty hook where the cottage spare should hang. She took it off the hook and put it back into her pocket under the seam where the lining caught it and made it hold.

She opened Lena's thread. She wrote: I have your, She backspaced to blank. She wrote: Whose key is that. She deleted that too. She closed the thread and set the phone face-down on the table and left it there. Not tonight.

She took the brass stamp from her pocket and set it on the counter edge where the light would not catch it if someone looked in at the window from the lane.

The phone lit again without making a sound because she had told it to be quiet. Gate. Final. She turned the phone over and then set it back face-down again without answering.

She checked the chain on the back door. The bolt ran clean. She set it. She put her hand on the latch of the front door and did not open it. She stood still long enough to feel the heartbeat in her hands find a slower pace. She looked at the clock on the cooker and read the minute. Not midnight yet. She put the kettle on and then tipped the water out.

Her jacket felt wrong without the ledger against her spine. She put a hand against the place where it had sat and pressed her palm flat a breath longer.

She looked at the bread bin and the barley sugar tin behind it. She left them. She went back to the tide table. She put a line through the circle at 00:04 and drew a small square by 01:15.

Outside, a car went past the lane mouth too quick for the hour and braked a touch late for the corner. The brake lights picked the edge of her curtain in a slice and then left. The lane stayed as it had been all night.

She set a 01:15 alarm and wrote Station small beside the square.

Chapter 6

Demands

Elin's Cottage The phone lit before the minute turned. Not an alarm. The same local number.

Under the cupboard light stayed off; she drew the phone in close so the screen wouldn't show at the lane window. A new voice note sat in the thread. She pressed play without lifting the volume.

A man's breath near a microphone. Cal. 'Say it plain,' he said, as if to someone beside him. A scrape. Then Kit's voice, close, as if the phone was at his lip. Not weak, not free. 'Elin,' he said, quick, with a shape to it she knew; the syllable landed short like it did when he was trying not to cough. A tick and a low whirr sat under the sound; she knew it from the last message, heater noise from a caravan. Cal's voice again, too near: 'Tell her the word.' A tiny pause and then Kit: 'Aelwyd.' The breath on the mic clipped out. Cal said, 'There. Live. Next note is after you do what's asked.' The recording ended with a dull knock, not a door; wood against something.

She closed the phone into her palm and breathed through her nose to keep it quiet. The heater whirr could be anywhere, but it wasn't. Bypass. Vans. She glanced at the fridge. The circle around 00:04 sat there with her mother's leaning hand beside it. The square she had drawn by 01:15 was under a pencil smear.

The phone vibrated. She answered on the first tone, no greeting.

'New place,' Cal said. The breath on the line had that outside sound, the air moving around it. 'Ferry steps. Midnight. No fuss. Keep the light off.'

‘You moved it again.’ She kept her voice low. The house felt smaller with the kickboard pressed back under the units and what lay behind it. Her hand was flat on the table without her deciding.

‘You moved first,’ he said. A smile in it. ‘Late at the gate. Don’t do that again. You’re burning your own minutes. Steps at twelve. Dark, or he pays.’

‘If you want anything at the steps, you show me he’s breathing. Not a recording. I want him at the rail, in the light by the bollard, and he says one word we’ve agreed.’

‘No. You’ll get what I give you, the way I give it. You don’t set the clock.’ He let that sit.

She pinched the bridge of her nose with two fingers. They were cold from the door latch earlier. ‘Then you get less. Say it plain.’

A soft click as if he had changed hands on the phone. ‘You’ll come. You’re not calling anyone. If I see blue lights or those orange jackets because you wanted to feel better about yourself,’

‘You said steps at twelve,’ she cut in. ‘I’ll be there. Keep the line open when I am, or I walk.’

A dry breath on his side. He kept the pause. ‘You walk and the sea decides. We’re done.’

‘One more thing,’ she said. She turned to the sink and let the tap run one second to mask the words. ‘If you’re thinking of the post at the top of the steps, I won’t go below it until I see him. I’m not stupid. I see him and I hear the word. Then we talk.’

‘Hear yourself,’ he said, amused. ‘Steps. Midnight. Dark. Keep the light off.’

The line went dead. The screen showed his number and the minute. Not yet midnight.

She set the phone face□down and felt the seam of the jacket pocket under her thumb. The BWL SD key sat underneath, lodged in the fold where she'd pushed it to keep it from showing shape. She breathed once with her hand flat on the wood.

Tide sheet. She took it off the fridge and folded it to tonight's column. She put a dot beside 00:00 as if that was on the RNLI sheet and not his word. She did not write his name anywhere.

Her thumbs hovered over Tamsin's thread. Ten seconds. She typed: 'Ferry steps 00:00. Dark. Heater noise in note. Park watch now? 00:15 ring me regardless.' She watched the count in her head. Then sent. The small Delivered dot landed.

Reply at once: 'Seen. Looping bypass. Don't be the only one there.'

She typed and erased 'I am.' Then: 'No blue. He tied it to harm. Two dots if tail suspected.' She waited ten seconds. Sent.

'Copy. Two dots if tail.' Three seconds later: 'Bring nothing obvious.'

She looked at the kickboard again. The knife she'd used to pop it lay in the jar with the others, blade down. The oilcloth behind the unit stayed in place; she kept her hands off the kickboard.

She pulled the orange jacket zip a notch, slid a finger under the lining and touched empty space where the ledger had been. Empty was the right weight now. There was a second when her muscles braced for weight that wasn't there. She eased the zip back.

Phone again. Not Cal. Mo's number sat quiet on the screen with the last message, 'On till 5. , Mo'. She left it untouched.

She turned the torch in her hand and pressed the tape edge. Still holding. She didn't need it for the steps, the lamps ran dull along the quay, but checking steadied her. She put the torch in her pocket, bottom end down so it wouldn't roll.

She tapped a corner of the tide sheet flat with the pad of her thumb and slid it into the inside right. Left pocket: BWL SD key under the seam.

Phone in the chest pocket where she could feel it vibrate.

Front hall. She stopped by the hook where the spare had once hung. Empty now.

She kept the main light off. Latch. Bolt. A slow press so the wood made no sound.

Door.

Street.

Wind.

She turned her collar up and kept along the wall where the stucco had been patched badly last year. The lane fed her into the street that ran down to the quay. She stayed to the dark side. The Dunlin's side door was propped for air; the smokers' lean-to held three men deep and one boy with a hood up. No one looked twice. The tote was gone from under the bench; that other piece of her night had been lifted and carried. Good. Let them tell a wrong story between themselves for once.

She kept her hands still when a car went past and picked out her sleeve with its brake lights. Red washed thin against the orange. It moved on. The street was quiet again.

Back Lane by The Dunlin Tamsin came out of the shadow at the bin corner with her hood up and her hair pushed under it. Her cheeks were marked by wind. She placed her steps on the wet boards in the lane where it dipped; she landed quiet and close.

'You want to tell me the thing now?' Tamsin said, low.

'Some of it,' Elin said. She stood with her back against the old brick and let the cold come through her coat until it met her skin and steadied her. 'He has Kit. He moved the meet to the steps at twelve. He sent a live

note. Heater noise. It matches your first loop.'

Tamsin's eyes went to the street mouth and then back. 'You found the book?'

Elin nodded once. 'Got it out. Didn't open it there. Didn't open it here. It's not in my bag if anyone thinks they got lucky.'

'All right.' Tamsin's mouth drew into a line. She checked the street mouth again and set her shoulders. 'He wants the book at the steps?'

'He wants leverage. He wants me scared enough to hand him what will let him put the story back tidy. I'm not opening anything for him in the street.' She swallowed. 'He said dark. I keep the light off and I get him breathing. He repeats it.'

'We could call it in to just one person,' Tamsin said. 'Friend at the desk. No lights. A look from a car round the corner. If he's lying about the steps, they could,'

'No.' Elin shook her head once. 'He said any blue and he cuts straight to harm. He's not guessing; he's built nights on that threat. We keep it small. You don't stand in a shadow on the quay and think you can be the one to save it. You watch the park. You keep your feet under you. If you see him, you call me first. Then again after thirty seconds if I don't take it.'

Tamsin's mouth twitched, not a smile. 'You always did like handing out jobs when it was your mess.'

'Do you want me to be polite right now?' Elin said. The wind cut down the lane and lifted the smell of fryer fat behind them. 'Please. Do the park now. If he's in a van, the heater will give him away on a still. It's not still, but you can still read it if you pick the gaps.'

Tamsin looked at her a beat, then nodded. 'Status codes. Same as old?'

'Add one,' Elin said. "'Seen' is eyes on, no approach. Blank in two minutes means I'm not typing for a good reason, and you hold. Two dots

means tail suspected. Ten seconds before you send anything.'

'Two dots for tail. Ten seconds.' Tamsin lifted a hand, palm out, then dropped it. 'What did you do with the ring?'

'Gave it back. She'll write me up. She should.'

Tamsin's jaw worked. 'Tell her the rest.'

'After.'

'There might not be an after that has you and her in it,' Tamsin said. No anger to it. Just the line set down. 'That the hard talk you've owed two years?'

Elin kept her gaze on the thin strip of light from the pub door. 'I need her to be angry and not busy. That's me taking care of her the way I can right now.'

Tamsin looked at her, then away. She didn't push it. Elin reached into the inside pocket and took out the small brass stamp, heavy for its size. 'Take this. Don't show it unless you have to. If someone who matters in that world needs proving I'm not making it up, show them this and say it was where it shouldn't be. Don't leave it on anyone's table.'

Tamsin slid it into her pocket and closed her hand over it. 'He asks for the book, you say no and what? You think he'll bring Kit anyway because you asked nice and kept the light off?'

'He wants me to be the one to carry the wrong story. I'm not. I'll buy minutes. If the steps are dirty, I move.'

'Move where?'

'Station,' Elin said. 'Mo's on. Rear two carriages quiet. If I have to open it anywhere, it won't be in my kitchen under that light. It'll be moving.'

Tamsin weighed that. The pub door thumped closed behind someone, then opened for someone else. Wind hit the sweat at her temple and cooled it. '00:15. I ring.'

‘You ring. Then again after thirty seconds if I don’t take it. Don’t stand by the steps. Don’t try to be clever.’

‘Sod off.’ But there was no heat in it. She stepped in once and set her hand around Elin’s arm, just for a second, skin through coat. ‘Bring him back breathing.’

Elin answered without letting her mouth go soft. ‘That’s the point.’

Tamsin was already moving towards the bypass path when her message landed with two dots. Tail suspected. She looked back once; Elin shook her head and pointed away. Go. Tamsin peeled left and was gone into the wind and sodium pools.

Elin turned her face to the street and the quay. The lamps along the rail made dull halos in rain that had started to slant. Her phone was heavy for a thing that weighed almost nothing.

On the move between lane and quay she called Mo. She stayed along the quay wall; beyond the sheds, the station lights showed. He picked up on the second ring with the sound of doors on his side, the light click of something metal and a muted platform voice from the radio he kept low.

‘Hi Mo.’

‘Evening, Elin.’ The sound of a thermos cap being turned. He knew her voice from two words. ‘You all right?’

‘Need some times.’ She didn’t pad it with anything. ‘Last eastbound tonight. Toward Cardiff. If I miss it, when’s the next? And if someone wanted a quiet place to sit on that train, which end is less chatty?’

He didn’t ask why. That was worth something. ‘We’ve got one-fifteen,’ he said. ‘Not the last train on earth, but last that’ll get you clean through the tunnel without waiting at God□knows□o’clock. Doors are tight. Driver’s a stickler, which is what you want when you’re under

the river. Rear two carriages are usually quiet at this hour. Guard sits forward.’ A small pause and a click from the thermos cap. ‘Bay on arrival at Cardiff’s usual. You can switch to Newport there easy enough if you need to buy ten minutes looking like you’re doing something ordinary.’

‘So rear two. Guard forward. Bay at Cardiff. Switch possible to Newport. one-fifteen,’ she repeated, more to seat it in the part of her head that organised other people’s mess.

‘That’s it.’ He cleared his throat, quiet. ‘If you’re going to be a minute late to the door and you need a favour, you tell me now and not when you’re on the platform looking for a miracle. I can buy a minute. Not a story.’

She looked at the time on the phone screen and past it to the steps that ran down from the rail to the water. The lamps made flat circles on the stone. ‘Might need you if the street goes wrong. Not now. I’m heading to the steps first. If it smells off, I’ll be in your world.’

‘Right.’ A beat. ‘Do you need me to put anyone out?’

‘No.’ She pictured a cleaner carriage and Mo doing what he could to make it true, moving a bloke on, telling someone to smoke somewhere else. ‘No names on this. Just the minute if you see trouble.’

‘Quiet it is, then.’ He was a man who could make quiet and had chosen to, most nights. ‘You keep your feet. Ring if you need the minute.’

‘Cheers.’ She cut before he could be kind.

She thumbed a message to Tamsin: ‘one-fifteen. rear two. quiet end.’ ‘Seen.’

She put the phone away and took the tide sheet out against the shelter of a shuttered bait shop. She put a dot beside the small square she had drawn for Station at 01:15 and added a second dot above it, Mo. She didn’t write his name. She folded the paper along the lines until the night’s column sat in the neatest quarter and slid it into her inside pocket again.

She checked the seam of the left side. The BWL SD key settled against the fabric. It pressed a shape she had learned by feel and couldn't see from outside. She thought of what it had opened and didn't let the thought go far.

The water by the steps moved with the wind on it and the last creep of the tide towards slack. The causeway was gone. The harbour arm blinked slow and ordinary. She did not count.

She walked on.

The Dunlin Side Door She turned off the quay toward the side lane, checked pockets by touch, phone on vibrate, key under the seam, and set her breath steady. Lena stepped out as Elin drew level with the lean-to. She didn't wear a coat; she didn't shiver. The beanie was on her head but pushed back off her brow as if it had been dragging her thoughts down. She had her bar apron on over jeans, and she still looked like she could take a boat out in that and bring it home. Her gaze landed on Elin and then went to Elin's hands. Empty.

'We did a check.' Lena said it like she had been waiting for Elin to try and walk past without speaking and wanted to make the choice for her. 'Cabinet latch had a mark. The ring went off the peg earlier. I logged it. I put it back. I'll write it up.'

Elin nodded once. 'You should write it up. I put it back. I'm not asking you to lie about it.'

'That'd be new,' Lena said, softly. She watched Elin's face and waited. 'Where are you going?'

'Steps.' She wasn't going to say where and not name the why. She picked the hard line. 'He has Kit.'

Lena closed her mouth and opened it again, as if she had to find a place to put that and there wasn't one that wasn't a part of her body. 'What?'

'You asked me twice already tonight, Why the rush. That's my answer now. He has Kit. He sent me a note with him in it. I keep the light off and I get him breathing at the rail. That's the condition.'

Lena's jaw shifted under her skin. She looked away just long enough to pull the bar door partly shut with two fingers so the heat wouldn't bleed out. She looked back. 'And you think he'll keep his word.'

'I think he enjoys the part where he gets to make me choose which thing I lose. I'm trying to make it cost him something too.'

'And in the middle of that, you took a ring that doesn't belong to you.'

'I put it back.' Elin didn't add sorry because it would have been a lie twice. 'I needed to move. I didn't take your name with it.'

Lena's gaze went to Elin's coat. The spare RNLI jacket had her station name small at the shoulder. Lena's hand moved as if to touch the seam at Elin's chest pocket and stopped halfway. 'The ring is back. What else is not?'

'Not here,' Elin said.

Lena took that in and set it down. 'I won't cover. I'm not asking you what else you took because I don't want to stand here and have you lie. But I'll say this for the last time tonight. If that light shows because of you, you own it.'

'I know what it costs,' Elin said. She meant more than one thing. The steps were twenty paces away. She could hear the water, not the tide as a whole, just the slap at the lower stone.

'You don't get to keep both,' Lena said, voice quiet. 'Whatever both is in your head right now. You don't get to be the one who breaks rules that keep people breathing and also the one who wants to be held anyway.'

Elin looked at her. The wind took a line of hair out from under Lena's beanie and it stuck against her cheek. Elin didn't reach up. 'I know.'

'Give me the key you still have,' Lena said. 'I won't stop you going to the steps. I can't make you do anything. But give me the key.'

Elin put her hand in her pocket and set her fingers against the folded fabric over the key and did not move it. 'No.'

'After midnight, I'll bring it back.'

'No. Not later.'

For a second neither of them looked like themselves. Lena's mouth made the start of a word and then shut again on it. She breathed in through her nose. She let it out slow. 'All right. Then there's nothing else.'

'There is,' Elin said, even though every cell of her told her to shut up, to save the words for when she needed them to stop a hand, to buy a minute at the station, to do anything but spend them now. 'After. I'll say it plain. It won't fix now but I'll say it.'

'After is a story people tell themselves to feel brave,' Lena said. She didn't make it cruel. It landed anyway. 'No messages tonight. No calls. I'm on early. If anyone asks me, I say what I saw. Steps at twelve is not me. I won't be the person at the edge of the light for you.'

'Good,' Elin said. 'Stay off the stones.' Dry humour, fast, because she could not hold the pressure in any other place for another second. Then she stepped away.

'Elin.' Lena's voice stopped her three paces on. 'If he's really got Kit,' She didn't finish the sentence. There was nothing to put after it that would not be a lie. 'Don't let him choose the only story that gets told. Not again.'

Elin didn't turn. 'That's the point,' she said. Then she went for the steps.

Ferry Steps The stone was dark with a film of water and fine grit. Someone had dropped a takeaway tray halfway down and left it there to catch rain until a gull found it in the morning. The rail was cold under her palm. There was a tide line on the bottom step where weed had sat last week and dried pale, then got wet again. The bollard by the top threw a dull orange ring onto the ground without helping anyone.

She stood above the first riser and did not go down. The phone vibrated once against her chest pocket. She didn't take it out. She looked left and right along the rail. The harbour arm blinked slow and ordinary. The water below her moved under wind and tide.

A car turned at the far end by the fish sheds and put its lights across the steps. The beam ran up and over her, then moved on.

The phone vibrated again. She took it out and held it low, angling the light into her jacket. Cal. She didn't answer. She stood where she had said she would, top rail, and watched for a man to bring a boy to a light and say one word that meant more than it should.

Her other hand went into her pocket and found the seam over the key. Not for this. Not now.

The street stayed still. She set her feet against the grit and waited for someone else to move first.

The phone lit in her hand. A new voice note slid into the thread. She let it sit there a second without touching it. Then she pressed play and brought the speaker to her ear, so no one on the steps would hear anything they weren't meant to.

Wind, and a man breathing. Then, thin under it, that same tick and low whirr.

'Say it,' Cal said.

A beat. Then a voice that reached for air before it spoke. 'Elin, ' A cough, cut off. Cal again, lower: 'One minute.' The recording clicked out.

She closed her eyes. She didn't move. The sound came through the bone under her ear and into her chest. The light stayed off.

She opened her eyes and looked at the glow by the bollard and the empty strip of rail where a body should show. Her knuckles pressed the inside pocket where the folded sheet held the 01:15 square.

She breathed once, slow, and did not take a step down. She set a one□minute timer on silent and eased back from the top riser into the dark edge by the bollard. The rail stayed empty.

Chapter 7

Keep the Light Off

Ferry Steps The timer ran out. The phone stayed dark in her hand. The rail below threw a dull orange line onto wet stone. No one came up the steps. No one set a hand to the bollard and said the word.

A car turned by the sheds and sent light across her chest, then went. The water made a different sound when the gusts hit it, flat, then choppy, then flat again. She stayed above the first riser. She had said she would not go down.

The wind shifted and brought the station. Not the train. The boathouse. Pagers went off in a ragged run under coat fabric, and the office light at the RNLI flicked on. A door thumped. Boots on boards. Someone shouted something she could not make out, then she caught the shape of it. Overdue, Potter, off the headland. No contact.

She lifted the phone, kept the screen buried in her jacket, and typed with her thumb. Top post. Bring him to rail now. One word.

She sent it and watched the water. A minute went by without an answer.

The boathouse yard took bodies at a run. Orange flashed in the gap under the half-shut door and then again along the slip as someone pulled the roller door. An engine coughed and caught, then settled rough. Another set of pagers went somewhere behind her along the street. She could smell diesel from the tracks. An announcement hissed and cut.

Cal's reply came late. Wait. Not your call.

She set her jaw and let the wind cool the heat in her face. The letter she had read under her mother's cupboard light sat at the back of her head with its lines set down in a hand she knew. Keep the light off unless lives are at stake. No trades. No burning. Leave it where he left it. She let the words line up, then put them against Cal's threat until her stomach went tight, the same tightness from standing too near the low wall on a bad night.

She set a new timer. Five minutes. When it ended, she would stop letting him tell her what was allowed. She looked at the tide sheet folded to tonight's column and put her nail against the numbers. 00:04 high. The run would go late in weather. If she went, she would go on the first safe pullback, hugging the wall.

Her phone shook once in her palm, Tamsin at 00:15. She let it run. Thirty seconds later it buzzed again and she kept her eyes on the rail. Then the text: Tamsin: Seen nothing. Heaters off. Next park.

She tapped back: Copy. Two dots if tail.

The reply took five, then came clean: Clear. No tail. Moving.

Behind her, a door opened at The Dunlin and two men came out under the lean-to. Their talk was flat and ordinary. One coughed. The sound of the lifeboat engine deepened as more men climbed aboard. The slip water shivered with it. She kept her eyes on the rail.

Another buzz. Mo: Last is five late upstream. Call it 01:20. Rear still quiet.

She didn't type thanks. She pressed the message flat with her thumb and put the phone back against her chest where she could feel it next to her ribs.

The timer turned through a minute and then another. Rain came in a line and then stopped, clean. She leaned into the bollard and let the cold of the metal take the shake out of her hands.

Two minutes to go. She checked the left seam over the stolen lighthouse key and felt the hard edge of it under the fold where she had buried it to keep it from printing. The tide sheet sat in the right pocket. She took it out, flattened the corner, and drew a small dot beside 00:30, then another at 00:38. Walk. Window. Not RNLI numbers, hers. She folded the paper back down the old crease.

The timer ended. She did not look for him. She did not move down a step. She turned from the rail and took the quay toward the gate with the wind in her face and the smell of salt and diesel and a little hot metal in it.

Quay to Landward Gate Her boots took the darker edge of the setts where there was less shine. The harbour arm blinked; she didn't count. The sound from the RNLI slip got thinner as she left it behind, then came back brighter when the wind shifted again. A crewman shouted a name into the yard. She didn't pick out whose.

Her phone lit without vibrating. Cal. She took the call and held the speaker tight to her ear so the wind wouldn't carry it.

'Don't be clever,' he said. No greeting. The outside sound on his line, the same as before. 'If that light shows, he pays straight away. Not a story for later. Straight away.'

She kept walking. 'Bring him to the rail. One word. Then we talk.'

'No.' A soft scrape on the line. 'You don't set any of this. Ten minutes. Keep it dark for ten minutes from now. If that lamp turns before that, I put a hand on him where he'll carry it. You'll hear it next time.'

She let the breath out through her nose. The gate rose ahead with its Council sign and the chain that had thrown grit at her last time. 'You want anything from me, you put him in light.'

‘Hear yourself,’ he said, calm. ‘You want to feel like you did the brave thing and saved a stranger so you don’t have to feel the other thing. Keep it dark for ten. Then we’ll see.’

She looked past the gate to the bend where the causeway slid under the water first. The wash at the wall edge was white where it grabbed. The boathouse engine note lifted, then held. ‘Move the meet,’ she said. ‘Cardiff. Rear bay. In public. You bring him and you breathe. You keep playing in the dark and it stays dark.’

He laughed once. ‘Cardiff suits you. Trains. Timetables. You like a clock. You keep the light off for ten and you might get to count something that means anything. Or you turn it and we change it all. Your call.’

‘Say it plain,’ she said.

‘Ten,’ he said. ‘Dark. Then you listen.’

‘No,’ she said, and cut the line. She didn’t let him have the last word.

She set a timer for ten, 10:00 on the screen, and slid the phone back under her jacket where she could feel the thud. She stood in the lee of the wall by the gate, where the wind lifted off her shoulders enough to let her think, and took the tide sheet out again. She put her nail on the numbers and moved the 00:38 dot a hair to the right because the wash was running long. She could make it if she read the gaps. Five minutes passed. Then his ten. After that, her gaps.

She didn’t say the word lives out loud. She let the boathouse tell her what it meant tonight. Somewhere out there a small boat was not where someone needed it to be. Somewhere in town her brother was where he should not be. There weren’t good choices left. There was a clock and the way she set herself against it.

She typed Tamsin: Pivot likely. Light on drop. Watch for watchers. Station if clean.

Tamsin: Copy. Ready.

A gust hit hard enough to rattle the chain against the post. She put her palm to the top bar and kept it there until it stopped moving. She pressed the seam over the key and felt the oil on it, old and clean. She checked the timer. Seven minutes.

She watched the water at the bend, the run out and back, the thin moment between them where the road's darker strip showed. Then she stood still in the lee and looked at nothing until time passed, because looking at anything made it move too slow.

When the phone buzzed, she didn't take the call. Cal's name on the screen again. She let it die. She set her shoulder against the wall and counted two breaths and then two more.

The timer ended with a small, strict sound. She turned the phone flat in her palm and killed the new call before it formed. She said it to herself with her mouth closed. Do it now or don't. She counted three breaths and pushed away from the wall.

She climbed the gate.

Causeway The top bar was slick, but her hands knew its width. She placed her boot on the lower strut and lifted and dropped into the shadow where the wall met the setts. No torch. Hand on wet stone. She waited through a stub of wind that sent spray over and then moved when it ebbed.

The bend took the water first. She timed the step with the pullback and kept her weight over the edge where there was more grip. The jacket dragged against the wind. Without the ledger up her spine it sat closer to her back. She kept her elbows in. The scuffed patch at her left knee took the shine and gave it back; she ignored it and stayed on the darker run.

The small wicket in the seaward stretch was still chained new and useless. She slid past it. The wall gave her lee for five strides, then took it away, then gave it back. In the run of the gusts she heard the lifeboat engine lift and hold, as if whoever was at the helm had put it at a steady they could live with for a minute.

At the keeper's side door she took the key out inside the jacket so it wouldn't throw any light back, fitted it by touch, and turned twice. The first gave with the same dull sound as before; the second seat was clean and quieter now that she had moved grit off it earlier. She caught the handle so it wouldn't jump.

Inside, the pail scraped against the jamb where she had wedged it, and she caught it with her boot to keep it from falling. She shut the door behind her, left the latch off so it wouldn't stick her later, and lowered the pail to the floor next to the step. She kept the torch down and off and let the scullery smell come up, cold stone, old soap, damp. No light from upstairs this time. No soft shift of a board. Only wind through the gap where the loose frame met the inner door.

She slid her palm along the inner wall and found the short passage to the base of the tower. The door there stood on the catch. The catch had never taken well; salt worked into everything out here. She eased it with her elbow and stepped in.

The metal stair up was cold through her soles. She put her hand to the rail and kept her step near the wall where it didn't creak. She only counted enough to know how far she had to go without making a ritual of it.

At the lantern level, a shallow cupboard stood open where it hadn't been last time she came here as a cleaner with a rota and a caption to wipe. The plastic cover that should have covered the main switch hung on one screw. Under it sat a cracked plastic block with a big red lever left mid-way, a torn strip of tape stuck beside it years ago.

She paused and listened. Sounds stayed outside the glass: sea on stone, wind on panes. She set two fingers to the lever and lifted it cleanly up. Nothing for a second. Then a hum she felt in the bones of her hands. The bulb warmed. The lens took light. Hand. Lever. Light. The first sweep went out over the water in a slow arc. A faint whirr came from the drive, and a dry hint of ozone sat at the back of her throat.

She didn't let herself watch the second one. She went to the hatch and looked down through the stair and then up to the glass. She saw her shoulder and the dark line of her jacket and the thin white of her scar and nothing else. She stepped back. Her phone shook in her pocket.

You lit it. Clock changed.

Another. Cardiff Central. Rear bay. You and your book.

A third before she could move her thumb. One minute late, one mark.

She tasted old dust. Her fingers tightened on the hatch rim. She lifted her head and watched the third sweep leave the room and the walls around her and pass over the water. She wiped her hand on her jacket and went back down the stair, putting her feet where she'd put them ten seconds ago. The rail hummed under her palm.

Scullery again. She hooked the pail up and left it where it would not catch anyone now. She sleeved the handle and opened the side door. A gust pulled at it; she held the edge with her forearm and her shoulder and then let it close behind her. The key turned clean. She put it back under the seam.

Outside, the beam moved across spray and cast a stripe along the harbour arm. From the wall she could just see the lifeboat's running lights in the cut between the headland and the first marker. On the sweep, the boat took the line a little sharper and the engine note rose a notch. Two shapes on deck set their feet wider. Someone would be cursing. Someone would be counting. That was their world. She gave them the light and left them to it.

Her phone pulsed. Tamsin: White box van East Pitch. Heater tick. No approach. Seen.

She typed: Hold. No approach. Two dots if tail.

She got Seen back. Then nothing, which was right.

The wind had swung a degree colder. She didn't feel her face until a slant of rain hit it, sharp and grainy. She stepped away from the wall, waited through a pull of water, then took the first three strides hard to get rhythm and went for the bend on the pullback. The wash reached her laces and then receded. She kept to the lee where the wall still made a lee. The far gate came up quicker than she thought it would; that meant she'd judged it, not any change in the road.

At the gate she climbed and dropped to the town side and didn't look back at the beam doing its sweep. She ran her hand over the chain and felt where the grit had polished to clean again tonight.

She moved back along the quay with the light making new shapes on the sheds and the slip and the steps where she had stood. The boathouse door stood open; bodies took the narrow gap without breaking stride. She didn't slow.

Her phone made the small sound she'd set for Mo.

Can ask guard to hold rear a breath at Central. No promises.

She typed: Thank you. Then deleted it and sent: Seen. Rear.

She went straight up her lane. She did not look at The Dunlin side door. If Lena was there, she would be working the door with an elbow so the heat didn't go, because that was who she was. Elin kept her eyes on the line of her own door and the blank square of the front room window that had once been wrong. She used her key and pushed the door in with her shoulder to keep the latch quiet and then shut it and set the bolt.

The kitchen light stayed off. She went to the units, crouched, and slid the butter knife out of the jar. The kickboard had a looseness now that her palm knew. She set the knife, twisted, and felt the give. She pulled the

board free and set it down on its long edge with the smear of dust still on it from last time. She slid her hand into the space and found the oilcloth's edge where it touched the back board.

The weight came out steady. She set it on the table and didn't look at the edge where the old wax had flaked. She unzipped the jacket lining and fed the parcel up her spine. The weight lay flat and wrong in a way that now felt right. She widened her elbows to take it, zipped, and rolled her shoulders once. The jacket settled. She placed the kickboard back, pressed the seam with her palm until the cold found her skin. She rubbed dust onto the line with a finger.

She looked at her phone. She opened Lena's thread and typed: Light on. My call. Not you.

She stared at the words. She waited ten seconds. She sent it. The small Delivered dot landed.

She saw the write-up sheet on a morning desk and set her palm flat on the table.

She put the butter knife back blade down. She took the tide sheet off the bread bin and folded it to the 01:20. She put a dot above it for Mo. She did not write his name. She slid the paper into her pocket and stood still for a second longer than she meant to.

Front door. Latch. Bolt.

Street.

She pulled the door until it met the frame and caught. She kept the light off.

Outside, the beam swung again across the harbour arm. It crossed the street and moved on. She walked toward the station without looking back at the steps and without thinking about the write-up that would sit on a desk in the morning with her name in it.

The wind came off the water and pushed straight down the road. She leaned into it and kept moving. The ledger lay against her spine and

weighted each step. She did not run. She did not slow. The light was on.
That was done. The rest would cost what it cost.

Chapter 8

Night Train Southbound

Gullmouth Station The platform lights made a flat, cold strip along the edge. The wind pushed through the open side toward the tracks and lifted the loose edge of a poster against its frame. She kept to the shadow of the shelter, checked the rear end of the platform, and saw Mo's hi-vis at the far end by the bay. He had his thermos tucked under his arm and his other hand on the radio. He looked up, saw her, and dipped his chin once, practised.

Her phone buzzed in her palm. Mo: Rear. Sixty. Can hold a breath.

She typed under the shelter where it blocked the light, thumbs square on the glass. Seen.

The beam went across the harbour arm behind the station roof. She did not look at it. The tide would do what it did with or without anyone seeing. She had put that light on and the cost would come.

She glanced at the board out of habit, not because she needed it. Late service, five behind. She counted the people at the far end, two men with paint on their sleeves from a night job somewhere and a girl with a backpack who kept her head down. No one for the rear. Good.

Her phone buzzed on the other thread. Tamsin: Seen earlier. East Pitch van still there. Heater ticked, then went quiet. No approach. Holding.

She lifted her phone close to her jacket and typed. Two dots if you pick up any tail. Ten count before you send. Loop West Pitch and back. No doors.

Seen, Tamsin wrote. Two dots if tail. Ten count.

The train's headlight came round the bend and lit the rails. She watched the front go past and kept walking along the yellow line toward the rear until she could step into the lee of the last carriage body. Diesel hung in the cold. Mo's radio hissed somewhere, then died. He lifted his hand once, small, and the rear doors stayed dark while the others pinged open and took their people. She could see in through the glass. Two passengers, one man asleep with a bag between his boots; one woman three rows up looking at nothing. Seats free near the vestibule where the door window would give her a clean reflection. A black dome camera by the vestibule covered the aisle. This corner sat outside its angle.

The chime for close went, and the doors along the platform started to shut. Mo's minute held. The rear door at her hip stayed put. She stepped in. The rubber lip caught and then slipped. She was inside with the smell of old heat and cleaner. Mo's hand came down. Door. Beep. Seal.

She took the end pair next to the vestibule and set her bagless self in the corner, jacket zipped high. The ledger lay along her back where she'd fed it earlier. The sweep of the light was faint across the glass here, weak and crooked; she ignored it. She let her shoulders drop until the jacket hid the ledger's line and then looked at the carriage in reflection: the sleeping man; the woman up three rows; no one else.

Her thumbs went to the phone. She set the brightness low. She killed the flash and the click. She checked the clock and set a timer for arrival + ten. Not the one he'd said at the steps because there had been no time then. The one that would matter at Central when he tried to hold the door on her. Arrival + ten. Her clock, not his.

Mo again. Patchy two out of town. Better through to Central. Back half stays quiet unless Cardiff Blues have a late one. Not tonight.

Seen, she typed. Rear. Ten at bay if you can.

He sent back: A breath, not a story.

She tucked the phone into the inside pocket under the seam, then took it back out because the seam pressed exactly on the lighthouse key and reminded her what else she carried that was not hers. She kept the phone in her hands. If Cal's number lit, she'd answer before ring two if that bought a minute. The call would not set her moves. The train slid. The platform fell back.

She looked at the vestibule window and the head□end door beyond it, then back to her own reflection. Scar white against the glass. Salt stiff in her hair. Cleaners knew what stuck on glass and how to take it off. She would leave nothing that needed wiping.

Her thumbs moved before her breath steadied. Lena's thread: She opened it and wrote: Scans. Conditions. Will send. Wait ten before you open. Hold release unless, She let it sit there with the cursor blinking under the words. She closed the thread. The screen stayed warm under her palm.

She put the handset under the jacket hem and slid the oilcloth parcel down enough to get her fingers to the knot. Twine. Old, rough. The knot had been set and reset. She worried at it with her nail until it gave. She kept the cloth folded small to keep the smell in, dust, wax, a hint of oil that had migrated into it from years against stone. She turned her shoulder so the fold stayed low under the camera's angle. She didn't look around. She didn't need to. The sleeping man snored once and swallowed it. The woman up three rows had her head bent; a bead on her earring caught the carriage light and didn't move.

The book inside was the same dark leather she had seen for a flash at the lighthouse when she'd let herself look. The tags stuck from the edges in a tight row, each one with a faint number in pencil in a hand that was not her mother's. She did not go for the front. She took a tagged one a third in and eased the page open just enough to get the camera's rectangle to focus.

The ink sat a deep brown in places and black in others. The hand was tidy but quick in the way of a person who was trained to mark what mattered, not to write a sentence for a story. She brought the phone down so close it would only catch the paper and her fingers.

Entry: Date. Hour. Tide state. Weather: squall, onshore. Lamp off per decommission. Note: small craft at outer crib. No lights. Sound of chain on rock. Numbers stencilled, repaint fresh. Crew three. One at bow, two midships. No registered call sign.

Margin: Called Harbour Office, no pick up. Logged with switchboard at 02:13, ref no. 4961. Advised to stand by, instructed not to engage.

She photographed, then moved left and caught the margin stamp. The lighthouse roundel had picked up dirt along the edge over years, press uneven. She took it again and counted four seconds to keep her hands quiet.

Next tag. The name she had not let herself look for took a second to show because it sat collapsed into the rest of the words. Rushmer, written fast, not in a way to make a point. It was part of a line because that was all it was then. Rushmer on deck mid point, hand to foot of chain; black hull late repaint; small flame seen under hand for heat. Repeat, Rushmer. She brought the phone closer and took it twice.

Dates and weather lined up where they should to match what the town remembered. Nights when bins blew into the road and the post box at the top of her mother's street leaned at an angle until someone came and reset it. She thought of men in coats by the bar at The Dunlin who liked to talk about the Great Storm and the smaller one that came when she was away and didn't have a name. Their shrugs. The way they had said her father's name when they thought she couldn't hear them.

She kept taking pictures. Not all. The ones where the ink turned heavy on names or numbers or a phone call logged and then logged again because no one came. R. March at the bottom of each page in the same angled hand. Keeper on watch. She moved to the last tagged tab and

found the thing she had not known whether to expect. Handover planned: 10:00 Harbour Office. Ledger and copies to council rep. That line was in the tidy hand. Below it sat something else, done later with the stub of a pencil because the lead had left a shine that ink didn't. Postponed. Phone, no answer. Told will call. No call.

She took those two with the margin and then the number that followed, which was a direct line to a council extension that would not pick up at this hour. In daylight, staff there might not remember any of this, even if someone stood at the counter long enough.

She moved back two pages and found another name that made her palm go cold. A block G with a square inner corner from a worn stencil she had seen on the stern at the quay. The vessel's name sat there, unchanged by years. Martha G. The date and the tide made sense. The note about a crate lifted into the dark made sense. The rest of it was what it cost.

She set the phone down in her lap for one count. She could not let the sound in. The book did not make sound; it was her head that did. She brought the phone up again, because this would need to be clean. She took a set of the Martha G lines and the matching tide calls that matched Kit's shorthand for nights they thought were just weather. She took the stamp and the initials and the line for call ref.

Then she started renaming. Not Ledger1, 2, 3. Not anything that made them easy. She used the date and the time and three letters she would remember the meaning of without anyone else being able to guess. She sorted them into an album and then pulled them out and zipped them into one file with a name that looked like a bill. She put the zip into a draft, then took it out and placed it in a scheduled email to Lena from the other account she kept for things that should not be on her phone with her usual name on it.

Schedule send. She tapped it and chose arrival + ten. She set the cancel to sit where she could see it. The tape on his wrists in the photo

had a rough edge. She set the cancel bar where she could kill it with one press if she was still above ground and not held. Not irrevocable. Not yet. Enough.

She looked at the ledger again and held a page between two fingers so the air wouldn't move it when the train went through a crosswind. Rhys March's hand did not change across years on the page. It got a little tighter when the dates came to the end, when the handover note sat there with no outcome. Not large. Nothing dramatic. Just enough of a lean to make a person who loved him go still in a plastic seat. Her thumb flattened on the margin until the paper warmed. Air caught behind her teeth.

She could hear Kit saying there was a heater. She could hear his breath trying to make that word Cal wanted sit clean in his mouth. She watched her hands keep working anyway. She drew the edge of the oilcloth down for one more tagged page, took what she needed from it, and closed the book to a hand's□span so you would not know what it was if you were not supposed to. She breathed through her nose and let it out slowly so the glass didn't fog.

Her thumb went back to Lena's thread before she thought about it. She reopened it. Light on. My call. Not you. That had gone. Now she wrote: Zip scheduled for arrival + ten. Hold ten. If no check□in at arrival + ten, forward to addresses below. Do not change anything. Do not send to station. If I cancel, delete the copy and say nothing. Her hand paused after the last word because she had made a small story out of a night and would owe for that. No attachment. She listed two addresses she trusted in a different way to trust, Tamsin's old one and a private one she kept for letters. She held the send and let herself feel the weight of it for a full count of five. She thought of Lena saying she would write it up. She thought of her saying she would not be at the steps. She thought of being held and of being held accountable not being the same thing.

Then she sent it.

The phone put the line through it and made the small delivered tick. She put the phone flat on her knee and set her palm over it and let the heat come back into her fingers. She opened mail again and queued a second scheduled send to her private address with Tamsin BCC, same minute, same cancel. Subject: Say it plain. The check□in time in the body matched the minute she had given Lena. It mirrored the Lena send in case the first failed. She locked the screen.

The carriage pulled through lights that were not meant to be pretty, units loading, a stacked yard with the top line of fencing catching the sodium. The sleeping man shifted and tucked his chin. The woman up three rows tilted her head toward the aisle and then looked back down at her knees. Elin did not look for anyone else. She would sense any change in the carriage.

The timer ticked past one of her marks and sat quiet. She did not need a sound. She set another one for the minute she had told Lena. She moved the ledger back up her spine and faced the black of the vestibule door.

At the next small platform, two people got off from further up. No one got on at the rear. She watched the dark glass and thought of the van with the heater, the tick sounding hollow. She thought of two dots on her screen. The van could be nothing. It could be everything. She lifted the phone and wrote to Tamsin again: If tail two dots. If no tail, Seen and keep moving. Do not try to be clever.

Seen, Tamsin wrote. Not clever. Looping.

The train rocked through a bend. The outside went to warehouses and then to a retail box with the lights still on. Somewhere beyond that would be the river and the flats and then the city. She checked the cancel bar. It sat on the screen, plain. She left it alone.

He boarded at the next low halt, no announcement, using the last doors. She saw the gleam of the glass first and then the slick of wet on his shoulder where the rain had hit. Rain beaded his shoulder; he shook the

wet from his cuff at the step. He sat himself one row down across the glass from the end and turned so the aisle on his side of the carriage was in his eye and the other door was under his hands if he wanted it that way. He did not look at her first. He took a beat before looking at her.

She didn't move. The ledger on her back pressed harder. The cloth at her neck had taken on the smell of the oil. She was not going to carry this down a platform past him. The clock had to include that.

He set his phone face up on his knee. The screen was dark. He lifted it without putting his thumb on it and the screen woke under his face. He leaned with the set of someone used to kit bags and long rides and had had to learn not to let his back give him away when there was weight on it.

He said her name quietly, not to make a point. 'Elin.'

She kept her hands open on her knees, nothing in them. 'Cardiff.' She didn't make a question out of it.

He angled his phone so only she could see it. The picture was tight and harsh under one ugly light. Kit, eyes open, mouth set wrong. Wrists bound with tape in front, not behind. A panel with a grill behind him that could have been a heater if you didn't need it to be something else. The timestamp had today's numbers. She didn't need to say it out loud. It would not change.

He tapped the screen and then let it go dark. He looked past her at the rear door, measuring. 'You changed the clock,' he said. Easy. 'My time again.'

'You bring him to the rail at Cardiff,' she said. 'One word. Then we talk.'

'You and your words,' he said. 'You don't set it. Newport if you want it clean.'

She let her eyes move from his shoulder to his face to the door and back so he could see what she would choose if she had to. 'Rear bay.'

Cardiff. Doors hold a breath. You want a later stop, you show him breathing under an ordinary lamp first, and you say the word you made him say.'

He didn't answer that. He slid his phone face□down and rested his wrist on the seat back, loose. 'Delete it. Now.'

'Not on me,' she said. 'Not the book. Not here.'

He lifted the word. 'No?'

'You said it plain, one minute late, one mark,' she said. 'You like a clock too. Fine. There's a clock on me now as well. If your hand goes hard before we're done, you'll hear it after. Not from me.'

'Who?'

She did not shrug because she didn't have the spare muscle for it and because he would read a shrug like he read tides. 'No blue. No orange. You said that. Not them.'

The train crossed a short stretch where the rails made a different hum.

'You tell anyone on this train anything, '

'And you walk,' she said. They had done this dance all night. 'Say it plain.'

'If I see a vest or a badge clock you, we step off. Hard. Keep your head down.'

'Forward one,' she said. 'Quieter. One minute. Between stops.'

'Between stops. One minute,' he said. 'We stay where I can see both doors.'

'Here until Cardiff.'

He set one shoulder toward the aisle; she stayed in place.

'Still with the conditions.' He didn't unlock his phone this time. He put it face□down.

He leaned back then and closed his eyes. No slack reached his jaw. It was not sleep.

She kept her hands where they were on her knees and counted one of the seconds she had promised herself for humans and one for the clock. Then she moved the phone, small, and slid the oilcloth package toward the gap at the seat base. It was tight enough that if the train braked it wouldn't slide out and easy enough to hook with two fingers if she needed to make it move fast. She kept her arm straight and made it ordinary. The cloth lay in the dark pocket under the seat. She put her heel by it.

Her phone lit under her palm. Lena: Received. Say exact time. Do not miss it.

She typed without looking like she was typing. Arrival + 10. If no cancel, send to T + private. Delete local. Do not call. Do not come.

Across the glass, Cal stood. He set two fingers to the rear door rail, tested it, looked up the carriage, then sat again.

Seen appeared. Then: 10 on the minute. No excuses.

She put the phone into the inside pocket and set the edge of it against the seam. The seam covered the lighthouse key. Whose key is that? Not here. Not yet.

The train took a piece of the city where the lights got closer together and the gaps between units got smaller. Cal sat with his eyes not closed and watched nothing. He moved his wrist in time with the join in the rails.

Elin eased her thigh away from the seat and took the phone out one more time because Mo was part of the clock too. Rear. Cardiff. Stagger port side if bay. Ten count. She pressed send on the coded ask and let the phone sit open in her hand as if she was checking the weather.

Mo: Port rear a breath. Guard thinks he's on a break. You've got ten if no one shouts.

She sent back: Quiet. Then put the phone away and set her hand on her knee and left it there.

The woman up three rows stood with a yawn and moved forward to the next carriage, bored, nothing else. The sleeping man's breath went deep and steady and did not change. The carriage stayed quiet for them.

The arrival + ten timer turned on the screen and stayed armed. She tapped the edge of it and it went back to waiting.

Her chest went tight and then not. She had made a choice and then made a second one, and there was a cost for each and some of it did not belong to her. She let that sit without trying to make it feel better. Her mother had said some truths tidy and some do not. This one did not.

She breathed once more and looked at the glass. Cardiff Central next. The signs were not the big ones yet. Rear bay boards showed down the platform. The carriage trembled as the points lined.

Cal stood. He didn't make a show of it. He looked down the aisle toward the other carriages. He looked back at the rear door and at her. He set his palm to the rail by the door, testing.

She put her heel a fraction harder against the oilcloth under the seat and let her other hand find the grab at the end of the armrest. Do it now or don't. The beam from the lighthouse would be sweeping somewhere behind concrete and glass. The lifeboat would be a shape moving through that stripe. She did not close her eyes.

'Between stops,' he said again, not looking at her. 'Then we see what you think you've got.'

'Cardiff,' she said.

He didn't nod. The signal on the phone would be good for a few minutes yet. The scheduled send sat with its cancel bar under her thumb if she wanted it. She didn't touch it.

She looked at her own hand against her knee and kept it still. The train slowed. She heard a whistle far up the train. The guard on his

timing. The platform numbers moved past the window. The approach to Central would change what was possible.

She did not send anything else. She did not ask for help. She put her hand under the seat and found the cloth with two fingers and kept them there while the doors did their two tones and held a fraction before opening.

The carriage lights wavered under a dimmer setting for the platform and then steadied. She looked at Cal's shoulder, then at the door, then down. She did not look at anyone else. She did not look at what the light did on the glass.

The train eased into the platform. The signs were close now, and the metal along the edges held a faint greasy shine, kept in working order. She felt the ledger under her boot and kept it there. The port□rear door indicator blinked once. When the doors opened she would have one beat to choose what to do with the ledger and the files. After that, choices would close. There would be cost.

She rose and set her palm to the door rail.

Chapter 9

Between Stops

The train checked. A soft drag on the brakes; the carriage lights held steady. The port-side door indicator blinked once, then stayed red. She kept her palm on the rail and did not look at him.

No release. No ping. Someone's whistle up-train and then nothing.

She shifted her weight to her heel. The cloth under the seat pressed against the sole of her boot. The carriage hummed on the brake.

'Signal,' he said, not as a question.

She didn't answer. The platform boards were there through the glass, numbers stacked above a bay that mattered. Cardiff. Her minute sat in that bay, tight to the clock. The door stayed locked. She marked the timing shift by a notch.

He looked at the indicator and back at her. 'Your time, not mine.'

She kept her jaw easy. 'Say it plain.'

'You call ahead, you get cute with doors, the whole thing goes sticky. Now look. Red. That's you.'

He enjoyed the turn in a quiet way. His hand rested on the rear door rail, loose. The set break at his nose showed clean under the lamp. He didn't push. He didn't need to. The hold did it for him.

She let her eyes go to the clock above the concourse. If they were held three minutes, arrival slid to twenty-three or four. She had set the send on arrival + ten. 01:15 was the old board; arrival +10 ran now. The minute counted down beside the cancel bar. The cancel control was live. Backstop sat green on a second thread. If she saw the next window, it

would mean she was still moving. It would mean other costs had been paid.

She opened Mo's thread by face without looking like she did. Held at red in the bay. Can you still give me port a breath? Ten-count if no one shouts.

A beat. The radio hissed somewhere in her memory instead of her ear. Then: Breath. Not a story. Guard's got a brew on. Don't make me earn a report.

Seen, she typed. She didn't thank him. She set the phone flat on her knee and watched the door light.

He leaned a fraction, enough to make his voice carry across the gap without anyone else hearing. 'We can move this right now. You want to walk me into light, you'll bring more eyes. We'll change the stop, and you'll carry that.'

'Cardiff.'

'Cardiff says you. Newport says me. You're late and you know it.'

He wasn't wrong about late. She let that sit and didn't give him more to use. Outside, a trolley rattled somewhere, then cut off. The carriage behind them vented, one of those air things they did when the driver touched something on the desk.

She breathed once and moved her heel. Not to lose the ledger, just to remind her foot it could move when it needed. The cloth under there was a weight she could change. She did not want the weight on her spine again with him this close and this bored. There was a bin in the vestibule with a liner and a lip. Behind the lip was a space made for nothing in particular. On the whistle up-train she let a knuckle find the liner's edge. The frame gave a fraction. The dome's angle covered faces at chest height, not the lip.

She shifted her seat, small. From the corner, she gained a clean angle on both doors and the black dome. Cal's gaze flicked. She let him see her

angle and then let him see her not be troubled by him seeing it.

Her other thread buzzed once. Tamsin.

Seen +, Elin wrote, hotter. Ten count. Hold.

Plus, Tamsin wrote back. Holding.

He looked past her, not at her phone, not at her face. The bright of the platform ran a line along the window edge. He said, half amused, 'Get yourself on the edges and you think I won't see you use them, is it?'

She said nothing. There was nothing to say that wasn't a story. The door light clicked out and in again and then went dark. Up-train, a whistle. Footsteps on concrete. Diesel in the air.

'Five late and you still trying to count a minute,' he said. 'You're not the only one who can read numbers.'

The door indicator went green. It stayed held one beat, two, the breath Mo had promised her. She put her palm firmer on the rail.

'Between stops,' he said, to have the last word of the hold. 'We'll say it then.'

She did not give him that. 'Cardiff. Rail. Lamp. One word.'

The chime sounded, clean. The door blinked. The lock withdrew with a sound she had waited for. She didn't look back toward the city. She did not think of the beam behind concrete and glass or the boat that had turned on it. She kept her weight over her heel and her hand on the rail and stepped as the door opened.

'Doors,' she said. 'Then rail. Then lamp. Then word.' An announcement tone sounded; platform lights came up through the glass.

The rear doors opened on Platform 4 bay; the station air was cold. She stepped with the crowd's small move and then let the small move stop. He came with her because he had to or show his hand. She didn't give him the line to take the lead. The vestibule gave her one side of it. The bin sat where she had seen it a hundred times because cleaners knew bins by feel.

She put her hip to the door pillar to cover and bent. Not enough to make a show. Enough to pick a shoe lace that did not need picking and touch the bin liner at the corner with the back of her fingers. Plastic. Cool. The liner had a ring under the lip. She got two fingers under it and lifted a fraction. The frame edge pressed her knuckle. The liner squeaked, small. Down the platform, a throat cleared. His head turned toward the carriage. She went still. When his focus slid to the man pretending sleep, she took the weight of the liner and held it up just enough to slide the oilcloth flat between the bin frame and the liner back, above the lip where someone casual wouldn't see and where the dome camera's angle was worse. Her foot kept pressure on the liner so it didn't crack against the frame.

She eased the ring back. The liner settled without a sound. She kept the drop small so the bin wouldn't rustle. She wiped the hand she'd used on her other sleeve and looked at the door glass so the camera would catch nothing but her face. The ledger was no longer under her boot. In.

Her phone sat warm in the inside pocket. She brought it up so it looked like checking time and wrote a note to herself in a draft she used for shopping and kit lists. RB-P. L:bin/port, +lip. No other words. She closed it and didn't save formally. The draft stayed anyway; a stray thumb press stored it.

He was there in the vestibule with her now, shoulder angled toward the aisle, hand near the door rail without gripping. People passed on the platform on their own business. The woman from three rows moved down the platform without looking at either of them. The sleeping man took his pretend off with a small cough and watched the boards instead.

‘A minute,’ he said. ‘Then we see what you think you have.’

She didn’t look at the bin. She let her eyes pass over his shoulder and settle on the bay sign. ‘Cardiff. Rail. Lamp.’

He gave a small glance at the clock high in the hall. ‘And then?’

‘Then you talk. Clean. Not like this. Not in the dark.’

His mouth moved, not a smile. ‘Cardiff suits you. Big clock. People. Announcements over the PA.’

‘Say it plain,’ she said. ‘Cardiff. Then you’re behind me, not in front of me. One word from him, in light, and you stop trying to walk me into corners.’

‘You walk yourself into corners fine as it is,’ he said. His fingers tapped the rail once, and were still. ‘Fine. Cardiff. Then my clock.’ His fingers flexed near the door rail.

‘No,’ she said, because she could only say it clean once and have it mean anything. ‘Cardiff. Then what costs you costs you. You bring him to the rail now and maybe you feel something other than being right.’

He almost laughed, and then he didn’t. ‘If you wanted him on a rail you wouldn’t have lit that lamp.’

The words pressed in her chest. She had turned the light on. The lifeboat would have used it and the boat would have turned and the town would have an after from that. She had made a choice and she was not going to spend the night apologising for it in small pieces he could pocket. She set her shoulders so the jacket sat right now the ledger was not on her back. The orange was there; she let it be.

The station PA spoke two words that didn’t matter and cut off. She checked the send window against the station clock’s minute, arrival plus ten, and tipped the screen so he saw the minute. ‘Arrival plus ten,’ she said. ‘That’s the breath I’m on.’

‘You love a clock,’ he said.

‘So do you,’ she said. ‘You’re the one who started this keeping time to harm.’

He didn’t deny it. The platform smell was metal and old coffee and something damp that stations had even on dry nights. The indicator for their door flashed its small blink for close and then went dead. They would open again when the driver or the guard said. Mo had promised a breath in that margin. A brew on, he’d said. Ten seconds only if no one shouted.

She let the moment pass in her body without giving it words. They had a corridor and a camera and a bay. People in orange were at work on the other end of the platform. Not those orange. A different kind. She kept her head down like he had told her and made that serve her for now.

He watched the hall’s big second hand and adjusted nothing.

The rear door pinged shut. The platform slid one pace in the window, then stopped again.

‘Announce it then,’ he said after a moment.

She looked at the numbers on the bay sign because it steadied her. She could tell anyone in this bay where to stand so the camera fussed less. She had learned things you shouldn’t need to learn to live your life. Tonight they were the only things that felt like they worked to scale.

‘Doors,’ she said. ‘Then rail. Then lamp. Then word.’

Port-side rear held a beat. She took it. She didn’t run. She let herself be first off that door by a half-step and went toward the brighter run of the platform where the Platform 4 bay number sat on a mast with a lamp, kept in order. He came along her left, a hand that wasn’t quite on her elbow. Not a touch. The idea of a touch. He stepped into her path, shoulder turned, angling her toward the dull end. She took a small

counter-step back under the mast lamp and held the spot.

‘Down here,’ he said. ‘Away from your clock.’ He meant the duller end, the bit without the lamp, the place where cleaners on a later shift sometimes stacked their stuff.

‘No,’ she said quietly. She didn’t need to raise her voice. He would hear a no spoken plain. ‘Here.’ She put her heel on the line of light from the mast and set herself just inside it so if someone looked by habit they would see a person in light and keep walking. ‘Bring him. One word. Then we talk.’

He didn’t bring anyone. He didn’t have anyone to bring to this platform at this minute and they both knew it. He watched her and the mast and the way people stepped around them.

‘You always loved your father’s rules,’ he said. He had kept it for years and not used it. ‘Lamp on, lamp off. Call logged, call not picked up. Lines underlined. I watched him write them, the stamp mark with the shaved edge. You think I wasn’t there? Nights you were off in Swansea or wherever you ran to to pretend you didn’t know this place.’

Her thumb pressed the phone’s edge. Breath caught. Heel on the lamp-line, set. The chip on the stamp’s edge was real; she had run a thumb over it.

He was careful with it. He didn’t say anything you could take to a desk and lay down and have it turn into a form. He aimed it at a person and expected it to do the work there.

Her jaw went tight and then she let it go. The ledger was paper and dates and a stamp worn a little on one edge. It had carried what it could carry. He could try to turn it on her. She had known he’d try. She had not known if it would work. It would work only if she let it. She set her heel where it was and did not move.

‘Rail. Lamp. One word,’ she said, softer.

‘Elin,’ he said, using her name in a way that had bought him half the town over years, easy. ‘Your old man wrote a lot of words and then he walked out on the wrong night and thought it set him right. It didn’t. None of us came out clean. You want to stand under that light and think it means something, you’re late.’

She felt the urge to put a hand on the mast and see if it was warm, to touch something that had nothing to do with him. She didn’t. She looked at the big clock. It was closer now. The minute she had set with Lena’s thread was rolling across the face. A run of seconds and then the thing would either go or it wouldn’t, and what happened after would be different. She could cancel in one press. The cancel sat there ready under her thumb when she woke the screen. She didn’t wake it yet.

He watched the clock, measuring. ‘What’s at ten, then?’ he asked, almost idle.

‘Not for you,’ she said.

He smiled with nothing in it. ‘If you miss it talking to me, that’s you. You made that clock, not me.’

‘Miss your ten and we go east,’ he said.

‘Your ten hits him. No,’ she said.

He moved, just a fraction, to the edge of the light. He knew his angles and how to be seen as neither trouble nor not-trouble. You didn’t get to his age in this town doing the thing he did without learning how to lean like that.

‘Bring him,’ she said.

‘Between stops,’ he said. He was done pretending to do it here. He would take the next movement. He would put it on Newport because he preferred that ground.

She drew a breath for the minute and let it out. She stepped a half-pace sideways and opened Lena’s thread. One word: Here. She sent it. On her screen, the cancel bar greyed, then came back. CHECK-IN

CONFIRMED. WINDOW CLEARED. NEXT WINDOW: 02:00. Safe for now. Not off.

Cal watched her send it and let her see him thinking while she did. 'You talk to anyone on your own time, we move, fine. But if that light turns inside your pocket at the wrong minute, we're done. That's your choice to be done, not mine,' he said.

'You keep making it sound like I have a choice,' she said.

He glanced at the clock and then at her thumb on the phone.

She did not walk to the dull end. She moved with the next little shove of the crowd when the doors pinged again. She stepped back toward the rear doors at the second chime and held the rail in her hand in the way that made her strongest in small fights. He came with her because he was not going to let her go into a carriage without him when she had something he wanted inside it. He glanced once at the end of the platform for anyone. No one did. The sound changed under the carriage as the weight shifted on the bogies.

She entered first. He entered after, left hand on the rail, right hand free. The vestibule was theirs again for now. The bin with the ledger behind its liner sat to her right. The camera dome faced down, angle set to cover the vestibule.

The doors closed; the tone did its two notes; the bay slid back. The clock above the hall did not stop. The cancel control dropped out; next window sat queued; her thumb rested on the edge.

He said it mild, offhand. 'Newport next.'

'Cardiff,' she said, though they were already moving away from it. He heard what she meant. The lamp. The word. The cost.

The carriage took the points with a clatter that came up through her boots. She didn't look at him. She looked at the door glass and her own face there, steady enough to pass. Steady enough to be counted and to keep counting.

She held the rail until the city lights fell away and the dark run between stations filled the windows.

He waited. He could wait. He had made a life out of holding a line longer than anyone else could be bothered to. She had learned the hard way how to wait back without breaking. The beam out on the water wouldn't touch them here. Nothing would, except what they did with a minute.

He said, very quiet, 'Between stops, then. Say what you think you have.'

She didn't look at the bin. 'A book, signed where it should be signed, with a number and a name you know. You show me him under a lamp and say the word you made him say. Then we talk about what the book costs both of us.'

'Costs you,' he said.

'Both of us,' she said, and let the next seconds go under the carriage noise.

He gave a flat smile, and they were in the run between stations. A brief clatter under the floor.

Chapter 10

Trade

Cardiff's air thinned out of the vestibule. The carriage took the points and the floor shivered up through her boots. Cal stood with his palm on the rear rail and watched the head□end door, keeping himself where he could touch either handle without moving far. The bin was to her right with the liner neat on its ring. The ledger lay flat behind the lip, weight set, not on her.

He said, quiet, 'Newport next.'

She kept her gaze on the door glass. Her face there looked like someone holding a breath without showing it. 'Newport,' she said. 'Rail. Lamp. One word.'

He did not look out at the platform signs falling away. He looked at her hand. He said, 'Cancel your clock.'

The phone in her pocket sat warm against the seam where the lighthouse key pressed. She woke the dark screen for a second, checked the next window that was waiting. 02:00 sat there with its bar under her thumb. Letting it sleep again, she said, 'Proof. Then I cancel.'

'You miss your minute, we go east in a way you don't like.' His eyes cut to the head□end door and back. He was already placing himself at Newport. He always lived one stop ahead of you.

She nodded once and didn't give him more to work on. She took the edge of the rail with two fingers, not gripping it like a fight, just marking her spot in the narrow space where a camera could see her if someone ever looked. The carriage hummed over an older stretch of track.

She thumbed Mo's thread by face, kept it low on the screen, typed: Off. No more holds. Thanks, and sent it. A few seconds later: That's me done. Safe night if you can make it one. , M. She tapped Seen and tucked the phone away. That was the small help finished.

He watched that too. The watchfulness didn't blink or fidget. You could feel him collecting small shifts and laying them together like he knew how they added up.

'Say it plain,' she said, because he liked to smear time with talk. 'Newport. Proof. Then talk.'

He set his shoulder against the hinge so his hand was nearer the head□end rail. 'You still think you can write the order of things. We'll see.'

The city slid out to a darker run. A warehouse went by with the kind of security lights no one checks unless the board shouts. The late hour pushed the carriage toward empty. The sleeping man was gone; he'd slipped off at the bay. They had the rear corner to themselves and the feeling of the day thinning to its end.

She lifted her chin toward the bin but did not let her eyes follow. The ledger's weight stayed where it was. She could feel the way it steadied the choice by being not on her.

'You break that light again,' he said softly, 'you unwrite a lot of the clock you love.'

'Keep the light off,' she said, hearing the letter in her mother's hand, and then, because it mattered to say it, 'unless lives. Like tonight.'

He had no answer for that that wouldn't give something away. He looked at her mouth, then dropped his gaze to her hands. The skin across his knuckles was roughened, old grit rubbed shiny in two places. He had lifted things that weren't his.

The phone vibrated, a small single buzz against the seam. She made no show of it. She brought it up the way someone checks the time. One

glance: NEXT WINDOW: 02:00. She didn't wake any thread. She put it away.

'Between stops you have something to say,' he said.

'Not without proof,' she said.

He smiled like it cost nothing. The lights between units went black for a run, then the carriage took a curve and there were more small lamps, closer together.

She pretended to adjust the zip on the jacket. Inside the fold of the seam, her thumb found the phone controls without looking at them. She slid the recorder on with one press. The dot winked once and went to a low state. The dome camera took faces at chest height and above; it would not catch the icon's light. She kept her hand low and her body easy so he would not read the intention in a stiffness.

'You keep saying you watched him write things,' she said. 'What dates?'

He gave the shrug he used when he wanted to look like a man who did not care about dates. 'Nights with weather. Nights the headland doesn't let you pretend you're a town girl. You remember the way it hits the wall when the wind's wrong. You smell chain when it rides rock.'

'On the nights in that book,' she said. 'You were out there.'

'People were out there,' he said. 'You love a name. You always did. It's easier to love a name than to love what's in front of you, isn't it?' He leaned in half an inch, enough to keep his voice from carrying. 'Names don't bleed.'

She did not flinch. 'Martha G,' she said, making the G square in her mouth.

‘Old paint, new money,’ he said before he could stop himself. ‘You think names buy truth. Prove they match.’ He breathed once through his nose. ‘You won’t make it stick to a page and get to lie down after. Paper doesn’t carry cost. People do.’

‘The switchboard log. Ref numbers,’ she said.

‘You think you’re the only one who’s rung a desk,’ he said. ‘You think you’re the only one who knows which ones log and which ones don’t pick up. There’s always someone who can say the right line into the right ear and then tired people go home. You put this on a desk and I lose a name and a route.’

He was giving her too much because he wanted to hear himself say he was right. His hands were still, but his mouth liked to outline the map when he felt ahead. The recorder took his voice in low. She kept her shoulders level.

He shifted. The dome caught the tilt of his head. His eyes fixed on the edge of her phone where a faint light showed under the seam as the train bumped. He moved on it fast.

His hand came across fast but not wild. A lifter’s hand. He took the phone out of her fingers and snapped his hand down to the rail, pinning it. A twist. The screen went full white and then black with a spidery bloom. White. Black. Crack. He did it again harder and you could hear something give inside like a small bone breaking. He still didn’t look at anyone else because there was no one else to look at.

‘You’re not clever,’ he said. ‘You don’t get to turn me into a radio for your friends.’ He held the dead phone and pressed the side button and watched it do nothing. A small satisfaction, measured out. He set it on the rubber edge at the base of the rail and put weight on it with his palm until the glass made one last soft dry crack.

Her mouth was a line. The pressure that had lived under her breastbone since the Dunlin lane went down a notch. There was something clean in the loss. It made the next bit simpler. She set her grip

on the rail and let one breath go. She slid the backup handset from the inner pocket into her palm and kept it low.

‘You broke the thing that keeps the cancel under my thumb,’ she said. ‘That doesn’t end the clock.’

‘You say that now. Prove it.’

‘It goes whether I touch it or not,’ she said. ‘Mirrored. If I go quiet, it moves. If I speak on the minute, it holds.’ She let the truth sit where he could pick it up and feel how it cut either way. ‘You don’t get to win both halves.’

His mouth dropped the shape of a smile and then didn’t keep it. He dropped the dead phone into the bin liner as if to show her where things went when he was done. The liner didn’t rustle loud enough to matter. He didn’t look at the bin lip. He didn’t know what else sat above the ring. The ring held; the liner cupped the broken phone. The weight above the lip stayed put.

‘You keep calling today a clock,’ he said, voice tighter now. ‘Now you don’t get to mute it, you look like someone who wants to be the one who had to do it. That’s what you want. You want to be the right person at the cost place.’

‘Say it plain,’ she said. ‘Newport. Proof.’

‘No face on a rail for you,’ he said. ‘You get a line, not a face. You get a voice and a proof of life under a lamp where you can’t touch it.’

She kept her jaw soft, because clenched read like fight. ‘If it reads, we can talk about a handover. If it doesn’t, no.’

‘You don’t get to put the lamp on a thing and make it true,’ he said. ‘You should know that better than anyone.’ His eyes went cold as if something had snapped internally too.

The carriage took a small rise and fell flat again. The dark around the windows was deeper now. She could feel time scraping. The minute hand wasn’t kind to anyone tonight.

She used the edge of a thumbnail to work at the clear tape on the torch crack in her pocket, a nothing movement that kept her from setting a fist. The tape held. Some things did.

The train tracked past sheds and then a run of light industry that looked asleep, the way machines sleep when someone's cut them clean for the night. Signal patches came and went. The GWR Wi-Fi was thin and slow to give a page. She kept the backup handset under the fold of the jacket, let the captive page load without showing on the glass. The network gave her a grudging line of bars.

A message landed from Tamsin two words long: Seen +.

She typed: Say it plain.

Ten long seconds, then: East Pitch. White box van. Heater tick earlier. Now doors. He's here. Cold. Breathing. Wrists taped. Not staying to type. Calling amb now.

Her head went light for a second below the hairline and then settled back. Her fingers eased on the handset. She read it once more and made herself see what it said and not what she wanted it to say. Breathing was not afterwards. It was now. It was enough to change what she owed to whom and still not enough to make the rest go away.

Call. No police, she wrote. Give as little as you can. Keep him off any desk tonight. I'll carry the rest.

Tamsin: Copy. No names. Phone me if you can. He's grey. Cutting tape.

She typed: I'm moving. Hold photo evidence back until I ask.

Seen, Tamsin wrote.

She opened Lena's thread on the web client, the one that didn't ping the other backups. Fingers cold over the screen, she typed: Found. East Pitch. Breathing. Amb called. Hold 02:00 unless I miss. No calls.

The typing bubble came and went and then: Holding. Do not miss it.

She closed it without typing anything that softened it, because softness would come across as need and need would read as weakness and she had no room for that now. She touched the inside seam of the jacket where the lighthouse key sat and left it alone.

Cal's eyes had been on her hands through most of that. He watched quiet the way men who lifted watched quiet, they watched the wrong hand to catch the right one. He had not learned how to read her yet; he thought he had.

'Look at me when we talk,' he said.

She did.

'Do this tidy and I'll see your brother looked after till morning,' he said. 'Warm. Fed. No marks.'

The run into Newport started with a clatter that she knew from years ago, when she sat on slow services with bin bags against her knees and thought about leaving. Announcement noise came and then fell out. The platform lamps showed as small pauses between the darks. The carriage eased under a roof that had a different shinier paint to the one at Central.

'Newport's mine,' he said with soft derision as if to put her in her place.

'Then you know where the mast lamps are,' she said. She didn't let herself smile.

They stood in the vestibule as the train slowed, teamed in a way that felt like a lie, two bodies that must not touch but touched the same rails and made the same allowances so no one else got a look they could use.

'Say it again,' he said, as if he needed the words to test for cracks.

‘Rail. Lamp. One word,’ she said. ‘Minimum. Not negotiable.’

He didn’t nod. He let the moment drop between them like another weight. The doors pinged. The indicator went green.

Newport had a colder draught than Cardiff. The platform held a smell of wet iron and stale pasties. She had kept that lamp in mind since the clatter started. She stepped out and angled toward a lamp where the CCTV dome was visible and pocked with old dust. She kept him to her left where she could see him and the doors both.

The backup handset came awake to the station Wi-Fi without arguing. She tapped through, then drew three files on to the screen to check they were as she’d queued them. She didn’t open them. She did not need to. The send was set to 02:00 with the addresses she had written on a paper square last hour: Lena, the letters inbox, her private, Tamsin blind. She added one more: an old friend’s archive she didn’t use unless a thing went bad. It would sit unread until morning.

‘What are you doing,’ he said, not as a question.

‘Taking my hand off it,’ she said. In account controls she checked the two-step was on for the throwaway. She changed the password to a string that meant nothing to her fingers and logged out. The login prompt now wanted a six-digit code from the authenticator that lived on a handset she wouldn’t use again. She held the last of the backup codes a second too long, tore it, and slid both halves into the drain at the mast. Fold. Tear. Drop.

‘Little tricks,’ he said, voice low now, meaner for it. ‘You think that buys you clean.’

‘It buys me time you can’t take with your hands,’ she said.

He came a half-step nearer, staying inside the camera's cone. He put his hand on the rail inches from her wrist, shoulder crowding. The skin over his knuckles blanched. 'You called a lamp on me and you think a dome buys you anything.' He kept his other hand in his pocket and set his jaw like he could still choose not to break anything.

'Proof now,' she said. 'Or the send goes. No trade without it.'

'You think you'll like what proof looks like if I put it where you can see it,' he said, not a threat you could call a threat, just a thing that had weight.

Her phone shook once. The image took a second to resolve because the light at the mast stuttered and the Wi-Fi, enough to matter, was still thin. The photo was a blur of a gloved hand near a pale wrist with a printed band and a number, a strip across the skin. No face. A strip and a glove and the edge of a quilted silver blanket.

Tamsin's line: With them. Will hold phone close. No police at scene. Going north.

North could mean the hospital up the road or any one of a dozen things. It meant not here. It meant not dead yet. It was not a finish, but it changed where she stood.

She felt the phone wanting her thumb. She put the handset face-down on her palm and didn't give it anything.

'Cancel,' he said. The word came out like metal. 'Do it now.'

'Withdraw from the town,' she said. 'You want cancel, show me that. Tonight. No more quiet lifts. You leave people alone who are not playing your game.'

'You're asking for something you can't measure,' he said. 'You want a quit on me you can't prove.'

'You made me judge things with less than a face,' she said. 'Live with it.'

He looked up once at the concourse clock and then to the board down the platform. His head was already turning toward the next door chime. 'You bring your rules here and you stand under a lamp and think that makes you safe. You think that camera means the same thing to me as it does to you?'

The doors pinged for the next leg. The chime sounded again; the doors began to slide. He stepped in. She followed as the edge touched her heel and swung clear. He took two steps and put his palm to the rail. You could see in his back the choice he had made to stay moving. He didn't want to be seen by anyone who could name the angle of his face later. He wanted the corridor again where the edges favoured the man who kept his weight right.

She moved with him, not because he led her anywhere but because letting him go alone with the ledger still on the train was the kind of loss she could not afford. She could feel the deadman minute gather itself. A different kind of hum rose as the train readied to set off.

'Between stops,' he said without looking back, as if admitting it cost him nothing because he still got to decide where the walls were.

She stepped up behind him into the vestibule and stood where she had stood before, on the brighter run. She held the rail and kept her elbows where they made sense if someone viewed the tape later. The bin liner didn't move. The lip held.

The platform slid. The tremor came up through the soles of her boots, clean and new. They were on the next piece of track.

'Cardiff,' she said, not meaning the city this time, 'then Newport. Now the line. You know what's next.'

'You love a clock and a map,' he said. 'Let's see how much you love a small room in the middle of a long one.'

She didn't look out of the window as the last of the platform lamps fell away. The phone on her palm thrummed once and then settled. 02:00

drew in. She had taken her hand off it and that was its own kind of steadiness. The ledger sat where she had put it. The light out on the headland back home would be turning its sweep. It would hit the harbour arm. It would turn again, she stopped herself naming where it would hit next, because that was not what she needed to carry into this carriage.

Do it now or don't. She put her shoulder blades back to settle the jacket. The seam over the lighthouse key lay flat. A small click in her ear, a thin pull under her jaw. The doors sighed closed behind them and the train ran on toward the place where the river cut a line under the world.

Chapter 11

Crisis

The glass went black. The carriage took the tunnel and the sound changed, deeper, a steady hum that pressed through the floor. Damp crept in under the door seals. The air tasted of iron and old water. Elin set her palm to the rear rail, not for balance, for truth. Cold, solid. There.

Cal shifted closer without touching. The window showed only her face and his shoulder, both flattened to the pane by the dark. No lights outside now to count. Nothing to mark time except the joints and the big seconds that lived in her head.

‘You think a lamp and a clock make it clean,’ he said. Quiet. The voice he used when he wanted you to hear yourself.

She kept her eyes on the door glass. Her mouth didn’t move. She let him see the profile that read as someone who would not be walked.

The carriage floor drummed through her boots. A scatter of grit rolled in the vestibule edge. The dome camera above them held its angle, catching faces at chest height, a blank bubble that gave nothing back.

He angled until she could smell wet wool and something petrol-sour off his jacket. ‘You got lucky on your little van,’ he said. ‘That doesn’t mean a thing ends. You know that?’

She didn’t give him the shape of an answer he could use. She swallowed once. The seam across her throat felt hot.

‘You put a hand on a clock with numbers that aren’t yours,’ he said. ‘People who like me take that personal. People you don’t know. People who don’t need a lamp to see their way. Paramedics don’t stand on necks.

Friends do. Do you understand me?’

He used the word friends as a tool. The black outside the window made his shoulder big and the space smaller. She put two fingers to the rail and shifted her feet a fraction until his body sat between her and the head□end door. Small move. Big effect. He would have to go through her to go forward; he could not slide past without showing intention.

Her backup handset sat warm against her ribs. She shifted the jacket fold and brought it up. One press. Two. The signal badge sagged to one dot, then none. She tried anyway. The call button was a colour and a circle that meant hope more than function. It spun once, twice, and fell back to grey. She let the phone sleep and felt the stupid heat of it against skin. In here, signals died.

Cal watched the wrong hand, as men who lifted always did. He watched the one that did nothing and missed the one that set the ground. ‘You’ve got another one of those,’ he said, without effort. ‘You’ll think of another trick.’

She rolled her shoulders back so the jacket lay flat. The stash stayed at her side under the bin lip in the rear vestibule. He hadn’t clocked it; his eyes stayed on faces and hands, not fittings.

‘You know what happens at two if you miss your little check-in?’ His tone went almost conversational. You could have missed the edge if you hadn’t learned to hear it young.

She didn’t look at him. She let the numbers tick in her head. At Newport she had taken the hand off it because that was the point. Two□step on. Password gone to nonsense. Codes torn and gone into the drain. She had built her own trap and walked into it. Past reversal now. If she had to pay for that, she would pay. There was steadiness in having nothing left to undo.

‘You’re not listening,’ he said.

‘I am,’ she said. It came out clean. One beat. No decoration.

‘Then hear this. You lit a fuse under your brother,’ he said. ‘That’s you. Not me. You and your lamp and your love of a clock. The minute hand will cut him if you let it. You know it. That’s what you wanted. To be the one who had to, so you could live full of it. You like being right when it costs someone else.’

Her hands were steady on the rail. The steadiness was not a gift. It had taken years. She breathed through the nose and let the damp air sting. She could punch or she could count. Counting kept people alive. She’d learned that on slips, on stairs, on bad nights in kitchens and worse nights in rooms where men thought the telling was the doing.

‘Say it plain,’ she said, not loud. ‘What do you want now.’

He smiled with only one side of his mouth. The healed break at the nose made his face read a little wrong when he did. ‘Want? Want is easy. I want my book. I want my routes. I want you not to have a clock that can hurt me.’ He tipped his head, close enough that his breath touched her cheek, then spoke steady: ‘And I want you back on the stones where you belong. Breakwater. Before dawn.’

Her chest tightened. She moved her foot until the heel found the seam where vestibule rubber met metal. A line she could feel. He liked to own the room by saying where and when. Place, time. It made people smaller for him. She could use that. Let him keep naming the ground and then make him pay for it, because places had cameras and edges and costs he could not always lift.

The carriage took a longer joint and the shudder came up through her knees. The light in the saloon flickered once, greenish, and then steadied. In the black outside, there was nothing. Just their faces and the smear of a reflection from farther up.

Her phone woke itself to tell her something she already knew, no bars, and went dark. She put it away.

‘I see you thinking,’ he said. ‘I’m telling you, it won’t save him.’

‘I heard you,’ she said.

‘No, you heard about your clock. Hear me,’ he said, softer. ‘You walked out once when your dad didn’t. You’ll walk out again and tell yourself it was for the greater good. It’ll be easier this time. You’ll be better at it.’

She let that one sit. She didn’t put her father in his mouth with a defence he could use. He would like that. He would like to feel he had reached something old in her with his thumb.

A tremor ran through the carriage. The sound shifted as the tunnel barrel widened. She pictured the map in her head, a run under river, then the bite of air that came up from the English side. She sat inside the seconds and counted the joints by feel.

‘Breakwater,’ he said again. ‘Say it back, so I hear you’ve understood the cost.’

She looked at the glass and at her mouth in it, a firm line not the soft one of twenty, when she thought staying last fixed anything. She would not give him a line he could cut into her later. She kept hold of the rail and didn’t speak.

He moved in closer then, enough that if someone had opened the head□end door and looked back they would have thought they were touching. He wasn’t touching. He was good at making you feel he was.

The tunnel pulled at her ears, a small pop under the jaw. The hum deepened and then light, pale, weak, came up in a line along the ceiling; the air thinned. The pressure changed. Elin breathed and kept her eyes soft.

‘We’re not done,’ he said, certain he decided when things finished.

‘No,’ she said.

He tilted his head, pleased she had given him something to carry to the next piece.

The carriage rolled on. No windows showed a landscape. Only black. The hum was constant. The seconds stretched and held.

She felt the change in sound a breath before the announcement scraped through from the saloon. Not words she could make out, just the strain of the system. Out of the tunnel; the saloon lights steadied.

She moved when the track told her to, small and unfussy, past him along the carriage edge to the toilet where the door sat with its red/green eye. She pressed the button and let the lock click. The space inside was not clean. It was enough.

She braced her foot against the base and took the backup handset up under the fold. Screen on. Browser tab where she'd left it. Local scheduler page, already authenticated; last confirm LOCK. It showed 02:00, queued. A toggle under it read LOCK. She pressed. It asked again. She pressed again. The page spun. The toggle showed LOCK. If it cached, it would lock when the bars came back.

That was it. Her control ended.

She opened settings and scrolled. The cached session sat there. She cleared it. This couldn't stop it. It only cut her out for good.

She held the sink and let her head hang for a moment. The hum through the floor steadied her hands. The smell in the cubicle was its own thing, chemical sweet over an old stain that would never clean. She washed her hands because she wanted clean somewhere, then shook water off her fingertips. The warmth in her chest had moved to a low-level tremor. Not fear. Not only. A body telling you this mattered.

The door thumped. Hard enough that the lock shook. She didn't lift her head.

‘Open it,’ Cal said, not raising his voice because he didn’t need to. He could put everything he needed into the shape of the word. ‘Open it or I break something the second we stop.’

She checked the Wi-Fi badge: one bar, then two. She opened the voice recorder on the backup and hit record.

‘Tamsin. It’s Elin. Two things. One: if I miss and it sends, forward to the letters address and the council extension on the page I gave you. Do not call the station until morning. Two: Kit, if you’re able, keep his name away from any desk until I ask for it. If I don’t ask, keep him off it until someone else makes you. Say I asked you. That’s it.’

She sent it. The dot turned and turned. The bar dropped. Then rose. Delivered. She deleted the file and held her thumb on the app until it gave her the little shake and the ask. Delete. Yes. She went into the recently deleted and cut it again. No ghosts. No souvenirs.

‘Open the door,’ he said again, closer. The second thump put a fine rattle through the wall.

She dried her hands on her jeans and opened.

Cal stood far enough from the swing to not get clipped if she tried something. He had weight in the balls of his feet. The light from the saloon above put a hard line across his forehead. He looked at her hands first. Empty. Then at her face. He swore once and shifted half a step back.

‘You’re going to cancel now,’ he said.

‘No,’ she said.

He breathed through his nose. ‘Then you’re going to get off at the next stop, and you’re going to not make me angry about it.’ He tilted his head. ‘Do you understand me?’

She kept her shoulders where they were. ‘Say it plain,’ she said back, not quite a dare, more a correction.

He showed teeth. 'Plain enough for you? We get off. You shut up. You give me what I want. You keep your brother breathing. You don't and I'll break something you won't fix.'

The announcement stuttered and caught: 'Doors will open on the left... left.' She felt the slow of the train in her knees before the sound admitted it. The tunnel's hold thinned. Air came in colder under the door where the seals weren't new.

He moved his hand toward the rail. She didn't flinch. It was an old game. Men put their hands near things and waited to see if you would give them the courtesy of noticing. She gave him nothing.

'We'll do it your way,' she said, and his eyes narrowed because he heard the weight on the we and knew it wasn't a give.

The chime sounded. She turned and set her palm to the door rail.

Her gut pulled tight; breath paused for a count. It hit low and mean. To keep her word she had shut something off. Not large. A small piece, the part that kept hope for clean endings. She let it go. She had other things to carry.

The train took a last rattle and lined up for the platform.

Patchway was a thin shape at that hour. Lamps the colour of old tea. A few posters slick with damp. The platform edge scraped white in the door glass. The nameboard at mid-platform had a corner peeled up. The door indicator blinked irregularly. The lock came, then the open.

She stepped first and set her heel on the paint line, turned under the mast lamp so the dome camera could see them if anyone ever looked back. Cal came off her left shoulder, close enough to crowd her steps. He moved fast, left hand to the jacket front. A clean wrench downward, a wire-rip motion. His fingers found the weight stitched into the hem,

flyers, folded hard and taped, so the jacket read as book. Paper crackled. Not what he wanted.

He swore once, flat.

His right hand went in quick to the inner-left seam where the fabric bulged a fraction. She had known it would and kept her body angled to block a step back into the vestibule. But the seam over the lighthouse key was a tell. He felt plastic, a tag with letters, and the turn of a key under his fingers. He hooked it and pulled.

‘No,’ she said. It came out before she chose it.

He held the key up under the lamp so she could see the letters she had read a dozen times, a hundred in her head. BWL SD. He put it in his pocket without showing the pocket because that was part of how he did things. ‘Thank you,’ he said, and dipped his chin once.

Staying on the lamp line, she didn’t go after his pocket. The train doors stood open behind; she kept one heel on the paint and didn’t give ground.

He looked down the platform. Nothing but a man with a small suitcase moving toward the middle to find a shelter and fail. Cal turned the other way, toward the end and the short set of steps that made the car park when the station ran out. He made it a few strides. Turned and called, not loud. ‘Breakwater before dawn. Keep your light games for yourself.’

Her backup vibrated once. A text from him: BREAKWATER. BEFORE DAWN. No punctuation. He liked to pretend the line itself was enough.

She didn’t answer. Not long. She took three steps after him, because she would not leave completely, then stopped at the lip where platform became slope and slope became a place with low light. She stayed where the lamp and dome could see. Not with his key in play. She stayed in the cone; distance was safety, not surrender.

He moved down into the car park without looking back. He passed under a light that strobed, unsteady. A car turned in the far corner, too far to read a plate. He walked past it and out of sight at the exit.

She steadied a hand on the mast. Cold, not clean.

The train doors sighed. Behind her, the carriage settled and went still. She didn't turn to watch it go.

The backup handset woke to two bars. Tamsin's name at the top of the thread.

Seen. En route. Obs first. Grey but talking one word at a time. They're not asking names yet. No police.

Elin's jaw loosened a fraction. One word at a time meant a mouth that worked. It meant breath. It was not afterwards. That was all the mercy she had that minute.

She typed: Hold photos. Stay with him if they'll let you. Don't say my name. Don't say his unless you have to. I'll call you from home.

Home wrote itself under her thumbs. She looked at the word and let it stand. She ate the small heat it put in her throat.

Copy, Tamsin wrote. Where are you.

Patchway. Going back. Before dawn, she typed. She didn't type the rest.

She looked down the steps again at the darker dark that meant the car park. She could have gone after him. She could have put herself into the space where he chose the angles. She didn't. She kept her ground on the platform under the lamp and the dome.

Her thumb went cold and then warmed the glass again. She opened the only other thread that mattered.

It rang twice and then the voice she knew, with a tiredness under it, came on. 'If you're ringing to ask me to look the other way again, '

‘I’m not,’ Elin said. She walked two paces so the sound of her own breath wouldn’t crowd the line. ‘I need a lift. No more lies. Cal took the Breakwater side door key. He’s going to the stones. Before dawn.’

Lena didn’t speak for a beat. You could hear her weighing what the words cost and what they asked. ‘Are you with him.’

‘No. Patchway. He’s ahead. He’s got the key. The book’s secure, but,’ She cut herself before she said more than she needed. ‘I need home. I need the headland. I need you to drive me. And I know what I’m asking you to put yourself in.’

‘No RNLI on this,’ Lena said. ‘You say those words to me first.’

‘No RNLI on this,’ Elin said. The cold backed off a little because saying it pulled its own cost. ‘Personal. If you say no I will take a bus or a train and I will do it alone. I am asking you so I don’t do it alone.’

Lena let out a breath that clicked her throat. ‘Conditions. You don’t lie to me in the car. You don’t run when we get near. If I say we don’t go closer because it reads wrong to me, we don’t. If I say we call someone, we call someone. You say it plain if you’ve lit anything else that will blow up at two.’

‘It’s locked,’ Elin said, naming the thing in her pocket without dressing it. ‘It goes at two. I can’t stop it. I took my hand off. I don’t want you near it when it hits.’

‘What does it cost,’ Lena said.

‘Me,’ Elin said. ‘Not you.’

There was a quiet while Lena adjusted to that not being a joke. Then: ‘Give me fifteen. I’m leaving now. Message me the exact pick up. Not the car park. Not anywhere with one way in.’

‘Top of the steps. Roadside. Under the bus flag.’

‘Seen. Ten out, I’ll text. Don’t go down there, Elin.’

‘I’m not going down there,’ Elin said.

The call ended on nothing. No goodbye. You didn't waste air on words that weren't actionable. Elin put the phone under her chin and zipped the jacket a little higher. She watched the road. Ebb at forty.

She looked along the empty platform. There were three gull feathers caught in a whirl on the concrete where the wind had pushed them down to live nowhere. She thought about the light turned on back home when it wasn't her doing. The wrong house light. That first small wrongness that had started there and gone on until now. It had joined the older wrong things in town.

Her phone lit again. Not Lena. Cal. A single message. BEFORE DAWN. GATE.

She typed nothing. She held the mast with one hand and watched the road at the top of the steps where headlights could cut across if they were the right ones. She listened to the night tick under a different clock.

A bus went past without stopping. Two teenagers under a hood shared one set of earphones and didn't notice her, or pretended not to. A fox moved across the far side of the road with a mouth full of something that looked like someone's chip box. A brake hissed near the corner.

Her phone buzzed. Lena: Five. Blue Ford. No lights until you see me.

She straightened her back and felt her shoulder blades find the line they needed. She put her hands in her pockets. The left was a hollow where a key had been. The right held nothing worth naming. She watched the corner. She counted the seconds out of a habit that had saved more than it had cost, even if tonight it threatened to cost her.

Headlights swung. She stayed one pace back from the kerb until she saw the shape, the plate too familiar to be anyone else's, the driver's shoulders in the way they sat when she was working and trying not to call it that.

The car rolled in with no drama. No horn. Lena's face behind the glass held itself still the way it did with teenagers on a rib in weather. Elin

opened the passenger door. The interior smelled of wet rope even though there was none. Lena's hand on the wheel had a new nick across the knuckle. The ring of keys at her hip was not there. She had left it on purpose somewhere that wasn't this car.

'You could still say no,' Elin said as she got in.

'You said it plain,' Lena said, putting the car into gear. 'We're going home.'

They pulled away from the station. The platform fell behind. The mast light kept shining for nobody. The road opened out. She closed her hand around nothing. They drove west.

Chapter 12

Return

Patchway After Cal walked off the steps, the door light still showed green. One step back in, fingers on the lip. Elin lifted the left-hand bin liner and felt the oilcloth just under it. Still there. She slid the parcel flat under her jacket and was on the platform again before the doors sighed.

Gullmouth The phone lit. Not a name, just the vibration that meant a line had opened somewhere not far from the sea. Elin asked Lena to drop her at the corner and wait for ten. Lena nodded once, eyes on the empty road, the blue Ford idling quiet. Elin crossed to the terrace with the old railings and went up the three steps to her mother's door.

Inside, last night's cold stayed in the air. She did not touch the wall switch. She moved by touch through the hall. Coat pegs. Sideboard. Drawer that stuck until you lifted it as you pulled.

She set the oilcloth parcel on the sideboard, went to her knees, and popped the kickboard. She slid the parcel into the gap and pressed the board in until the seam sat clean. She eased it back a finger's width, took two leaves she had marked, folded them twice, and slid them into her inner-left seam pocket. Then she pushed the board home hard with the heel of her hand.

She took the torch out of her pocket. Tape over the cracked casing still held. It felt right in her hand, the weight steady. She put it down, took the first-aid tin from under the sideboard and opened it. A roll of crepe bandage lay coiled against old plasters that would lift in an hour. Bandage. She put it with the torch on the sideboard and checked her pockets, keys, old receipt map, the little scrap from the envelope about the scullery board, backup handset.

The phone buzzed again and settled into a call. 'Elin,' Tamsin said. Voices moved somewhere behind her, footsteps in rubber soles, a wheel on linoleum.

'Say it plain.'

'He's talking. Not in full runs. One word, then another. They've got him warm. Left wrist looks off, films in a bit. Colour's coming back with the heaters. Ribs are tender. Tape marks. No coughing blood, no belly pain. Obs, then up for an X-ray. They said non-life-threatening. I made them say the words.'

The next breath came easier, not all the way.

'Cost?' Elin asked.

'He's sore as hell and showing his bones. He'll hate the blanket. But he'll keep breathing if they keep the warm on. I'll send you the wrist write-up number when they give it. No police. The crew aren't fishing for names, which is a miracle at this hour.'

Elin held the phone to her ear and looked at the two objects on the sideboard. She didn't try to fill the space.

'Thank you,' she said. 'Listen. If something lands in your inbox at two, you hold it. Do not post. You forward one copy to the letters address and the council extension on that page I gave you last month only if I go quiet and you don't get my green. No station. No night calls. Morning for that. If I manage a green, you keep it and wait. Say it back to me.'

'Hold at two if it hits. No post. Forward to letters and that extension only if you go dark, otherwise wait for your green. No station. No night calls. Morning if it comes to it. That it?'

'That's it. And, he'll want me to walk into a corner. I won't. If you don't hear from me after dawn, do not come to the stones.'

'You won't stop me if I need to,' Tamsin said, not hard, just sure. Then her voice shaded. 'He's got lines on his wrists like someone wanted to remember they had hands. I'm not sending the photo. You don't need

that in your head now.'

'No.' Elin steadied her throat with a swallow. 'You're doing enough. Tell him, don't tell him anything. Just be there.'

'Already am. Go do your bit. Message when you can. I'm on low.'

The line clicked to an end. Elin placed the phone down on the wood and leaned her hip into the sideboard until wood met her weight.

She opened the messages and tapped Mo's name. Thanks again for the hold at Central. It counted. Stay warm. She sent it. It went and marked seen. The reply came a minute later.

Always the rails. Safe, if you can make it one. , M

She marked that and let it close. Then Lena's thread.

Non-life-threatening. Wrist likely fractured. Ribs bruised. Warmed. Obs then films. No police.

Lena's dots blinked and held, then came back with a place and time: Lay-by at the old services on the headland road. Eight minutes. No lights. No mistakes.

Seen, Elin wrote. Ten minutes out.

She picked up the torch and bandage. She looked at the unsent column. There were drafts from when she was young enough to think holding words counted for something. A line: I took it. Another: I'm sorry about the boat. A few more. She deleted three. Left one aimed at Lena with a single sentence and no apology. If I don't make the call, you get to write me down how you want.

She slid the torch into her pocket, coil of bandage into the other. She stood under the hook by the door and looked at the empty space where the spare key had once hung. Not tonight.

She turned the lock with the keys she carried, pulled the door, tested it, then pocketed the ring. Street. Cold. Salt was in the wind; she tasted it and named nothing else.

Service Stop The lay-by lamps hummed with a dull yellow. The kiosk shutter was down; the notice about card-only lay under a greasy smear from last night. Chip papers lay in a corner with a bottle that hadn't broken. Lena had the bonnet up, not for the engine. It was a place to put hands and not look too direct when you wanted the person opposite to listen.

'What exactly and how bad,' she said, as Elin came up.

'Breathing. Left wrist, films soon. Ribs. Tape marks. Cold. He's angry enough to come back, which I'm going to let him do on his own time.'

Lena's shoulders loosened a fraction. 'Good.' She shifted her grip on the bonnet. 'Now say the rest. No holes.'

Elin stood on the oil-stained tarmac and looked at the strip of road that would take them to the headland. 'I took the ring,' she said. 'The boathouse one with the Breakwater keys. I took it and I kept the side-door key back. I used it to go in. Lifted the scullery board and took the ledger. I didn't read it then. I got it home and hid it, then I took it onto the train and read enough. I scanned what mattered. I set a timer to send. Tonight I changed the lock on it and tore the codes. It goes at two. I can't stop it. He took the side-door key off me at Patchway. He's going to the stones before dawn. He wants the book. He won't get it there.'

Lena looked at her, then past her to the road. 'All right,' she said. 'Rules. No splitting without a signal. No turning the light off. No lies. If I say stop, we stop. If I say call, we call. Repeat it.'

'No splitting without a signal. No turning the light off. No lies. If you say stop, we stop. If you say call, we call.'

'Good.' Lena shut the bonnet with a soft thud and leaned her elbows on it. 'The book. Say what's in it, and I won't have to ask again when we're standing in wind.'

‘Switchboard references. A call the night the weather turned. Lines underlined. “Rushmer” on two pages. The name “Martha G” written with a square inner corner to the G. Notes about a handover to Harbour that gets postponed and never taken. My father’s sign-off on the nights that counted. The stamp with the shaved edge you told me he described. It’s not all there, but enough is there.’

Lena’s jaw pressed. Her grip on the bonnet edge tightened, then eased. She looked at the empty road to the headland. ‘He’ll want the scullery because it’s where you went in. He’ll walk through a door he thinks he owns because of the key in his pocket. He’ll look down before he looks up. We use that.’

Elin let out a breath. ‘We set a wedge at the jamb, a way we can pull it as he takes the step. We hold him to the boards long enough to call eyes in the morning. We don’t play hero. We don’t get righteous at the edge.’

‘Say the signals,’ Lena said.

‘You, one buzz in, two buzzes hold, blank if you can’t say it. Me, “Lamp” and then your name. If it’s wrong, I won’t say your name.’

Lena reached into the back seat and pulled out the coat Elin had worn a few hours ago and left on a peg. The coat held a smell of rope and Robert’s lemon cleaner, and something warmer beneath. ‘You left it on my peg. I brought it. Put it back on.’

Elin slid her arms into the sleeves without looking up. The fit sat familiar over her own thin one. She zipped it and lifted the collar to where her jaw could rest for a second.

‘One more,’ Lena said, hand held out. Not asking. Palm up. ‘Whose key is that?’

‘I don’t have your ring. I have mine. Take it.’ Elin took her own house keys from her pocket. The ring was cheap and scuffed; the front door key had a nick near the shoulder. She turned them once in her fingers. Then she put the ring into Lena’s hand. ‘If you have to lock up after me, do it.

Don't leave a light on for me in there.'

Lena weighed the ring with her palm. 'You can still take this back,' she said.

'Not tonight.'

Lena tucked the keys into her jacket, not at the hip where a ring usually lived, deeper where it would not catch. She reached into the glovebox and took out a small laminated tide sheet. The plastic edge was cracked and mended with clear tape. She checked the times, her mouth working without sound as she counted.

'Ebb's honest down there right now,' she said. 'Onshore's eased a touch. We'll have water to the ankle in the first bend and then less. If it jumps, we go to the wall and wait it out on the higher run. We don't get romantic with it. Crossing at twenty-four past. Abort at twenty-seven past. We do not be clever.'

'Twenty-four. Abort at twenty-seven,' Elin repeated. Thirty-six to two. 'Do it now or don't.'

'Let's go.'

They closed the bonnet and got in. They pulled out. Behind them the service stop hummed on, empty.

Only one draft left for Lena.

Road They kept the lights off for the last run, just the dash glow soft on their knuckles. The wind shifted twice, a small veer then back. The sea on the right thinned over the flats with the ebb.

'Gate. Stones. Before dawn,' Elin said. 'He sets it so he can hear the words in his own mouth. He wants to own the place and the clock. He'll be at the landward gate and then out across without a torch because he

wants that to read like he knows it better than anyone else. He'll go for the scullery not the front because he thinks front doors are for people who belong.'

'We use that,' Lena said.

Elin kept the coat collar close to her jaw. 'There's one more thing you need to hear from me while you can choose to drive away. I turned the light on. I took the lever. I brought it up. He said not to. He said he'd put the cost on Kit. I did it anyway. The boat turned on the beacon and took a sharper line. That's in the world now. If you think I made it worse, say it, and I'll carry that too.'

Lena's hands tightened once and then softened on the wheel. 'I would have done the same with the calls you had. I wouldn't have done it if the boat wasn't out. But it was. We keep it on now. No more games. No questions there. Clean, from here.'

Elin nodded. That was what the body had needed to hear. Clean. From here.

'Say the trap again,' Lena said.

'He opens the side door. He takes one step in on his own belief, that one's on him. I give him the line he wants to hear long enough to pull him two steps and not three. You hit the wedge at the jamb. We keep him to the scullery. We call eyes when the clock gives us the right minute.'

'Signal.'

'Your buzz in, my "Lamp Lena". If you don't hear your name, you don't move. If you hear it, you do exactly what you're already ready to do. If I don't speak, '

'we don't improvise.' Lena looked at her. 'We don't do that thing where you run and I have to pick pieces up.'

'No improv.' Elin took the backup handset out and turned it face-down on her lap. The glass had a scuff from where it had kissed the rail in the train when she braced herself. She touched the corner with a

knuckle and then slid the phone into the inner-left seam pocket of Lena's coat. It bumped against something that wasn't a ring. She slid two folded pages into the same pocket and pressed the seam flat. 'That's your coat now,' she said. 'What pages are left, live there and not on me.'

Lena let one breath out and patted the pocket once, more an acknowledgement than anything else. 'Good. If we get separated, where do you go.'

'Fence corner by the old beacon post. If it's not clean, the ferry steps top rail. One buzz, I move. Two, I hold. Blank, I count ten and stay cold. If you see a triangle in the air with a torch it isn't me.'

'Seen,' Lena said.

The phone gave a small haptic. Tamsin.

Obs done. Films in twenty. Wrist looks like a clean crack up near the thumb end. Splint first. Ribs are bruised not broken unless something hides. He's swearing when he's not trying to be funny. Not your funny. I'm sitting on his left where he can lean. Still no police.

Elin let the air out of her chest slow. She typed: Good. Hold photos. Hold names. If a message lands, do not move it until morning unless I go quiet. Green later.

Seen, came back. Go do it then.

Lena put the tide sheet to the dash and tapped the minute with a finger. 'Twenty-four. Abort at twenty-seven. No clever.'

Elin smiled without showing teeth. 'You like to be in charge as much as I do.'

'And yet,' Lena said, and cut the lights as they came round the last bend. The road narrowed and the low rail of the causeway wall showed dark and wet.

They turned onto the approach and killed the engine. The beacon cut across the outer air and kept its sweep, steady. It lit the wall dull where it

reached and left the rest dark.

‘Ready?’ Lena said.

‘Ready.’

They got out. Door. Road. Gate.

Causeway Cold salt on the tongue; the engine tick faded; the beacon swept. The chain at the landward gate wore grit where hands had touched it all winter. No one had bothered to wipe it. The council padlock had its rough side outward, same as before. The water at the first bend lay thin, a film. The wind had backed half a point; it would give them the lee they needed.

Lena checked the time and tipped her chin. Elin took the top bar and put her belly to metal and swung. The gate gave the tiny click that meant nothing if you didn’t know it. She went down on the seaward side with her boots set to take the slick. Lena came after with less clatter than Elin could have managed if her bones had been better years ago.

They moved with the wall. Water reached their laces and pulled away. They waited three breaths on the bend and then crossed the run when they felt the draw. The beacon kept its sweep; they didn’t look at it. The surface of the stones showed black where the weed kept its hold. Elin put her hand to the wall twice where her footing needed steadier contact.

At the kink before the straight the causeway lifted a little. The water wide of them drained away and didn’t fight to come back yet. They moved. Lena counted. Elin matched the count with her jaw. The far wall came up from a low suggestion into a place you could lean your shoulder. The compound line came up and the narrow yard behind the keeper’s house took shape. The scullery door sat where it always had sat, wooden and tight unless you knew its way. That door would not open for them

tonight. It would open for the key in Cal's pocket.

Lena peeled off to the left under the mast that had held a lamp once and still caught spill from the beacon. Elin took the right, keeping to the lee of the cottage, to where the scullery step held the board she had lifted and reset with careful hands. The air back here was a little warmed by stone that kept a trace of the day's heat. The smell of the place always made her think of soap, old salt, and iron.

Lena caught her eye and lifted her hand. Elin nodded back. On the wall near the corner, a waist-high wicket made of boards and a rusted triangle barrel sat shut. Not the seaward wicket the council chained, an inner yard wicket.

Lena pulled a small triangle key from her inside pocket, the kind used on dull boxes and yard gates. 'Not RNLI. My triangle,' she said, low. 'Inner wicket only.' She set it to the barrel and turned once. A soft clack. The wicket swung on squeaky hinges, not far, just enough. She eased it back and left it almost closed; you leave a door as it sits if you want it to read as normal in the dark.

She came back to the mast line and set herself under it so her body read as part of the post until you looked close. Elin pulled a folded cotton from her jacket and set a shape on the scullery step. Tight wrap. The corner rubbed just enough. It would read as careful and used and worth a reach.

She took the flathead from Lena, it had come out of the Ford's glovebox, and slid it under the sill, handle side out so you could pull it in a hurry. She set a drop-in wedge at the hinge line on the outside so the first inward swing jammed steel to wood. There was still a nail head on the frame from where she had once rigged a pail; she had unhooked it last time. She didn't put it back tonight. You used a trap someone had already seen once only if you wanted to be the one taught a lesson.

She looked at the stone seam near the corner and slid the little scrap, third from riser, deep into it until only the dirty edge showed if you knew

to look. Keep it off her if hands went through pockets, only she'd know to look. Not a ledger page, not anything that would give him what he wanted, but not on her now either. Not tonight. The pocket is safer than any seam. The rest of what mattered had already moved across to Lena's inside pocket and out of Elin's reach. She felt lighter and worse for it.

She took her phone and sent Tamsin a single word: Green. Then she put the phone away and put her hand flat on the scullery jamb where the grained wood made old marks in her skin.

Wind shifted, one turn from the south, quick and thin, and the sound of the wash came different for a second. Lena, shadowed against the post, moved half a length to keep the light line and the sightline. Elin slid her shoulder an inch to take the new blow on the right. These were the moves you made when you had waited on slips and learned to count the weather, not ignore it.

Footsteps came along the wall, even tempo. Heel then midfoot, weight on the right's outer edge. Lugged soles with a nick at the outside. She had smudged that print once before. The chain at the far gate gave a small complaint. Metal on metal twice, then still.

Elin set her heel on the scullery step and let her hand come off the jamb and hover the space of one finger. She did not look at Lena but she felt Lena settle, one shoulder to the mast, hand low and out of sight where the wedge sat. The beacon swept past.

Steps stopped on the other side of the wicket. The triangle barrel showed the mark of a key. The scullery door beyond it sat dark. Elin let her mouth soften. She would not show him teeth first.

'Do it now or don't,' she said to no one, and then she went still.

The key turned.

The latch shifted a clean beat and air moved as the seal broke, a sound you only caught if doors were your job.

She didn't move yet. She had learned the cost of moving too soon. She let him take the step. The trap would need his weight.

The beacon kept its arc. Inside the scullery, a breath of cold came out that smelled of damp stone. The hand on the door wore a scar over the knuckle. The rest of him filled the edge of the space.

Ready, she thought, and lifted her chin the smallest amount. Under the mast, Lena's head inclined once. Yes.

Weight came onto the hinge. Cold air moved past her hand. Now.

Chapter 13

Keeper's House

Breakwater Light Cold air moved. The handle lifted a fraction as the seal gave. The wood made that soft parting sound she knew from doors that had held salt for years. The hinge took weight. Smoke was not in the air yet; only damp and iron and soap.

She let the swing come and slipped through behind it into the narrow scullery slot, back to the cool wall. Door. Hinge. Wait. The rim lock sat at her left shoulder; the latch tongue showed a clean edge of bright where it had polished itself against its keep over winters.

Inside, the room had the look of a place that had been breathed in recently. A chair under the peg rail had its legs splayed a way she would not have left them. On the skirting by the inner door a black scuff ran a hand's length at a low angle, fresh on old paint. The angle was wrong for his nicked lug; it dragged inward, not out. Damp stone smell held under the soap. She fixed the two small wrongs and added them to tonight's list: someone else had been in here since she had gone and come back with the ledger. Not just Cal.

Outside, Lena's shape held in the mast's shadow. One buzz in the seam of the night. 'Lamp Lena,' she breathed. Then Lena's voice low and close. 'Wash is climbing the lower steps. It's early.'

So. The minute she thought she had tightened again. Not a full tide turn. Cross-run pushed by the backed wind. The sort that made a path look clean until it wasn't.

Elin reached with one hand and pushed the folded cotton shape a hand's breadth inward, the corner turned to show the kind of care that

meant “something” if you were hungry for signs. Two steps. Not one. Make him commit his boots to the boards. She’d set the wedge on the hinge line outside to jam on the first inward swing.

With the outside hand she rolled the flathead’s taped handle over the threshold with her sole and let it lie behind the swing. It had been holding the wedge off the hinge; clear now, it would bite when she took the door back. She checked that the chair’s weight would go where she wanted it when she dragged it. The old floorboards would take it; they always had.

The key turned that small bit further. Metal on metal, not loud. Then the latch eased. Cold air pushed in against her cheek.

She thumbed the coat pocket for the backup and typed a single word to Tamsin without opening the rest of the thread. Now. No signal here; it would sit queued. Face down again. She tucked the handset back into the deep seam where it had lived since the road.

She counted once in her head. Seven minutes for the locked clock and the beam to force a call.

Right hand over the rim latch, left covering the turn on the old lock, one of those stubby keys fixed into the plate like the maker had assumed hands would always be right there. He would be inside the swing before he saw her. That was the point. Do it now or don’t.

Steps at the threshold. The lugged tread with the outside nick. Heel then mid-foot. He paused. The breath went smaller in her chest but steady. The hinge took weight.

‘Ready,’ she said in the smallest shape of air and lifted her chin a fraction that Lena would see if she was looking and no one else would.

The hand with the scar over the knuckle pushed. The door came in and his shoulder with it. He leaned into the dark of the scullery, not thinking the space held anyone but him and an object he wanted.

He stepped twice onto the boards. He bent toward the cotton.

Elin took the swing back hard, slammed the door to, dropped the latch and twisted the turn. Clean throw into the keep. The latch seated. She put her weight through the handle and let the wood meet her frame.

A small run of breath from him. A half laugh. He turned enough to show the healed break in his nose in the dark, the line that made him look like someone who had been hit once and made peace with what that did to a face.

‘You,’ he said, like it was funny they had fetched this close after the night they had sat facing both doors in a moving room.

She didn’t answer. She felt the door’s push under her shoulder and the give in the hinges where brass had room after years of winter. The wood wanted to live another season. It could, if she asked it the right way.

He moved tight and fast. Metal scraped. His hand came up with a small red smoke canister with a ring pull. He hooked the ring and yanked, then set the base down hard on the tiles. A short pop. A hiss. Thick white smoke lifted and ran along the scullery, then rose toward her face.

‘No,’ Lena said outside, and the word cut off as she shifted her weight to brace the hinge. A scuff. A dull clack as something small slid where it shouldn’t. A sharp, held breath in the dark. ‘Ah. Foot.’

Elin tasted the smoke and kept her mouth shut as much as she could and still drag air. The canister rattled under the tiles and hissed. Cal’s breath was even. He moved his shoulder into the door. The wood took it and held.

‘You turned it on,’ he said, close to the seam. He made the word soft like he was being generous. ‘You told me you’d keep off the light. Then you did it anyway. Told me too. Ask her about the light.’

‘Say it plain,’ she said, and set her heels a little wider on the boards.

He smiled in the smoke. She couldn’t see it but she knew it from the sound his breath made.

He drove his shoulder into the lock side and the rim latch shuddered against its keep. The frame groaned. The old screws held a second and then eased a fraction under the pull. The light outside put a thin stripe on the inner door through the crack that had come to life.

Elin bent and hauled the chair across, ribs tight with the smoke. The chair legs jumped once over a board seam and then bit. She threw it up under the handle and stamped it down so the rung would take her weight through the lever, doubling the force. The door took that too and held.

Outside, Lena moved wrong on the wedge and had to hop it off. 'Watch it,' she said to herself and then 'Christ,' as the pain took her up the calf. 'It's in on the outer. The wash is licking the step. We've got less than we liked.'

Elin set her mouth soft even as smoke stung her eyes. She pulled the backup handset up, wiped it on her sleeve, and brought its face alive enough to read the clock through the smear. She counted to the minute that mattered. She tucked the phone back into the seam and set her hands again.

Cal drove again. This time he put his head into it. The sound made the wood complain in a way doors make when they have had enough but will try anyway. The keep plate spat a bright thread of screw head and leaned.

'You broke your clock,' he said into the seam, over the canister's hiss. 'You thought you were clever. Then you told her anyway. Thought that would make you clean. Did you tell her about my key when you were at it, or did you keep that part for later.'

'Lena,' Elin said without looking away from the seam.

'Here,' Lena said, and her voice was two inches lower in the throat. 'Left foot's a mess. I'm with you.'

Cal shifted his hands on the door and gave a small laugh into the hinge. 'She's with you until you cost her what you always cost people.'

Tick, tick.'

The smoke was at her eyes now and clawed at the back of her nose. She set her mouth as if she was a person standing and counting and not thinking about the burn under her ribs.

He slammed his shoulder once more and brought his boot up into the lower panel like he meant to kick the wood into pieces. The old board split in a small clean line down the grain. The rim latch spat itself out of the keep and the door jumped in against the chair.

Air moved as if a fish had pushed a fin into the room through a net. The chair shifted a hand's breadth. The door jumped again. It bit and almost held. She went for the turn, blinked through the smoke, and missed the slot. Old wood took the hit and did not like it. The handle moved in her hands. The turn bit the meat of her palm. She put her shoulder down and used her weight, but the screw that had leaned chose then. It tore out of what held it like a tooth that had been loose for a week.

The latch let go.

The door blew an arm's length. He was quick. He pulled himself through the smoke and the crack, shoulder first, then hip. He ducked under her arm and was past her into the line of the yard before she had the chair out of her way.

He was gone two steps and then turned with the key bright in his hand and the scar on his knuckle catching the spill from the beacon. He showed her the tag with the letters pressed into the plastic. BWL SD. He might as well have held it up to a camera.

'Whose key is that,' she said. Not a question.

'Mine tonight,' he said. He put it into the outer face of the lock and turned it and pulled the door to. Clean. The outside cylinder turned; the inside turn knocked under his lock and did nothing. The snick of a job well done. The sound found the old parts of her that could admire a door that closed right. The keep caught on the last screw. It would hold, for

now.

The lock set its tongue. The barrel turned back. The key left the lock and went into his jacket. The beam took him in a stripe and left him.

‘Before dawn,’ he called. ‘Gate.’ Then he took the line of the wall at a half-run. Wash made a sound against his boots like another person in the yard trying to take his foot. He broke left into the blind bit of the compound where the wall dipped.

Silence came in a shape that had smoke inside it and the old house’s breath. The canister vented once and went to a low, ugly hiss. The scullery had that new broken look rooms get when a person puts themselves into a piece of it.

Elin stood with her hand where the handle had been and looked at the wood that was no longer flush with the frame. The rim latch hung wrong on one screw. The chair lay on its side. The little folded cotton thing sat on the boards with a black mark from the canister.

‘We don’t run the stair blind into smoke and a person we didn’t count,’ she said. The inner door stood open on the kitchen and the hall beyond. She looked up into the dark. There was no light now, only the memory of one from before. ‘Not until we can take air.’

Lena’s voice came thin. ‘Water’s licking the second step now. Not the tide, the wash. Another line of it and we’re paddling.’ She drew her breath. ‘Foot’s not right.’

Elin bent, took the flathead from the boards where she’d rolled it, and the bandage from her pocket, and wrapped a turn around her hand. Two layers. The sticky part clung to itself from the damp she had brought with her. She set the bandage and put the screwdriver’s end to the lowest scullery windowpane.

‘You break that and they can make it criminal,’ Lena said. Not a stop, just the fact.

‘They can write me down after,’ Elin said. ‘There’s a beam on and people out. We keep it on, and if he’s touched it upstairs we bring it back up. That’s the call.’

She put her shoulder square to the wall and struck the pane at its corner where it would travel across the lead. The glass went with a sound like a cheap cup breaking. She pulled shards out with the bandage round her hand and let them fall onto a swept patch of floor. The frame opened to cold and the breath of the yard. Smoke rolled out and the fresh air pushed in. She took two slow breaths and felt her throat ease just enough to not be stupid if she moved.

Lena came to the outer face of the window, a shape more than a person. She had her shoulder to the jamb and was keeping her bad foot off as best she could. She kept weight off the left. She hissed when she turned to look along the yard.

‘We’re seen now if anyone looks,’ Lena said.

‘Good,’ Elin said. She set her jaw.

She put the flathead into her pocket where she could grab it for hinges or for anything else a door might ask of her. She set the chair upright, not for use but because leaving it wrong made a noise in her head she didn’t need.

‘You should bandage that,’ she said to Lena, nodding at the ankle that was swelling over the top of her boot already.

‘In a minute,’ Lena said. ‘We go up first and then we do things that are tidy.’ Her mouth eased a little at the corner, which was more than a smile because it didn’t ask anyone to feel better.

Elin looked down. A shard had taken a thin line off the base of her thumb. It wasn’t the kind of cut that would slow a door, so she let it be.

‘What does it cost,’ Lena asked, keeping her voice low so the night would not hear the shape of it.

‘Me,’ Elin said. Not her. Not the crew. Not tonight.

Lena nodded once, eyes on Elin's face like she was reading tide height there. She reached in and took the backup handset from Elin when Elin offered it.

'I'll take the buzz,' Lena said. 'If I can't say, I'll leave it blank.'

'Lamp Lena and then your name if it's me,' Elin said.

'And if it isn't,' Lena said.

'I won't use your name.'

They didn't touch hands. They had never been that sort, not when the thing they needed was happening. It wasn't lack. It was the kind of care that left you able.

The canister vented one more time and went dead. The smoke thinned. Air moved. Out in the yard a run of water slapped the lower riser and went quiet again. The beam swung and threw a long strip of white along the inner wall and then was gone. It had been doing that all night. It would keep doing it until a hand made it stop.

Elin stepped into the kitchen and through to the hall. The house had that old breathing sound in it you heard when the wind was on a new line. She put her palm to the banister. The wood was cold and smoothed by other hands. Up there the stair turned on itself and then cut into the tower. The door to the tower was shut, as it should be. The handle was of that cheap plated kind someone had bought in a year when no one had money for proper things, and it had a little wobble at the spindle.

She looked once back at the scullery. Lena was a shadow at the window, one foot on the stone, the other lifted. Behind, Lena braced on the sill and kept the left off the ground; a small hiss came when she shifted.

'We'll be seen,' Lena said, again, not as a warning but as a fact to be held between them.

'Good,' Elin said.

The wash climbing. They moved.

She put her foot on the first stair and let the wood take her weight. Then the next. The smoke thinned a little more with each step. She didn't look at the cut on her hand. She didn't look at the phone in Lena's pocket. She kept her eyes on the line of the door at the top, and on the thought of the red lever that would be where she left it.

Outside, another wash climbed and slid down the steps, and the sound came through the house like a small warning you could either take or refuse.

She took the next stair.

The hallway narrowed into the tower foot. The air was colder there. She put her hand to the cheap plated handle and felt the wobble. She took the flathead out of her pocket and set it between the plate and the wood and eased the screw half a turn so the spin would not betray her when she opened.

The beam swung again over the house and traced the stair in a thin line for a heartbeat. She saw the skin along Lena's brow in that slice as a pale shape by the window. Then the line moved on and the house was itself again.

Elin closed her hand on the tower door's handle and breathed once through her mouth.

She turned the handle and pushed.

The door moved. The tower's cold came down the stair like something honest.

'Go,' Lena said from below, not a push but a permission.

Elin went into the tower below the lantern and felt the change in floor under her feet. The beam's low whirr was a comfort because it meant the choice she had made had not been undone yet.

Behind, smoke diluted, glass ticked on the scullery floor as it cooled, and the sound of water put another small truth into the stone. They were not getting more time.

Elin closed her hand on the first cold iron of the spiral and put her weight onto the first tread.

Chapter 14

Say It Plain

Breakwater Light The iron was cold through her palm. She climbed, breath steady in the tight throat of the stair, the smoke thinning with each tread. The tower felt older than the house; the stone held a night chill that went past her jacket. At the lantern level the door to the gallery had a plastic cover hanging on one screw. The block with the red lever sat where she had left it hours ago, up.

Her hand went to it. The lever held under her palm, weight firm with current in the cable. The hum was there, low and steady. The bulb held warm; the glass took light. The drive turned and the lens sent a clean stripe across the water and back.

‘On,’ she said.

She took a breath that didn’t carry smoke, then turned and went back down. At the stair head she paused. The light’s whirr sat behind the stone. No one else moved above. The house below had settled into its list of small noises, glass ticking where it had cooled, water slapping the lower riser, the old wood taking air again now the window stood open.

In the hall she found Lena’s shape by the scullery window, braced on the jamb, keeping the left foot off as much as she could. The bandage around Elin’s hand had held enough to keep the cut clean. The scullery still smelled of damp stone and the last of the canister’s sour smoke drifted out and the night moved in through the hole.

‘We call it,’ Elin said.

Lena already had her phone out. The screen lit her jaw. ‘You speak,’ she said.

Elin took the phone. She dialled and asked for Coastguard. It rang once and picked.

‘Coastguard. What is your emergency.’

‘Breakwater Light,’ she said. ‘Gullmouth. Two persons inside the keeper’s cottage. One with a foot injury. We had smoke in the scullery from a canister. We’re visible, beacon’s on. Outer steps are taking wash earlier than expected. Door is damaged. We’re secure for now. We need extraction when you can get a boat near the wall.’ She kept her voice even. ‘I’m stating this: we entered without permission. I forced a scullery window to vent the smoke. I will make a full statement on that.’

There was a pause that held keys tapping. ‘Names.’

‘Elin March,’ she said. ‘I work nights at the museum. The other is Lena Gorse.’

Lena leaned in. ‘Lena Gorse. RNLI Gullmouth volunteer helm. Station ID’, she gave the letters and numbers, ‘foot injury, left. Not on duty. We are visible under the beam.’

‘Copy,’ the voice said. ‘We have your position. Keep the light steady. We are tasking from your station and flagging Coastguard ops. Any other persons on scene.’

‘One male departed the yard on foot. He used a key to lock us in from the outside. He will be on the causeway or already off it,’ Elin said. ‘He may be towards the landward gate. No torch.’

‘Copy. Keep clear of the outer steps. We will liaise with RNLI Gullmouth and HMCG. Stay by a window or door with sightlines. We have your numbers. We may call you back.’

‘We’ll be here,’ Elin said. ‘Thank you.’ She ended the call and let her mouth soften. Formal words had settled the throb she hadn’t admitted in her chest.

‘Do Tamsin,’ Lena said. Her hand had white at the knuckles where she held the jamb.

Elin opened the messages. She typed without clearing old threads. Beacon on by choice. Visible. Hold anything that lands. Morning as planned. Green.

She sent it. A moment, then the taut little buzz that said it had moved. The window's edge felt colder against her wrist now the adrenalin had dropped a shade. She set the phone on the sill for a beat and looked out. The beam swung past and laid a white bar on the yard wall before moving on. The wash on the outer steps had gone from lick to hand's breadth. Early. She had cut minutes too close. With the sweep on and the call made, the minute widened. That balance would not last. It never did.

'Sit,' she said to Lena.

'I can stand until they take eyes on the yard,' Lena said. 'Bandage in a minute will do.'

Elin bent and worked the crepe around the ankle anyway. The boot had lifted the skin into a puff above the leather. She wound enough to give it a wall against the next movement. Lena hissed when she tucked the end in and let it hold.

Elin moved the chair out of the way. She picked up the flathead and laid it on the counter. The scullery floor showed the smear where the chair had jumped when the lower panel split. She crouched and swept the glass shards she had missed into a neat little pile with the edge of her hand. A clean room wasn't needed; space to move without cutting herself again was.

The phone vibrated once. Tamsin: Seen. Holding. He's sleeping. Morning.

Elin typed one word. Good. Sent.

The beam came back. She watched it sweep and heard the hum and the slight, honest tick of the gear. She set her torch to a steady cone and stood it on the sill so the light threw a soft shape into the night. Then she picked up an old baking tray from under the sink and leaned it against

stone at an angle. When the beam took it, a small bar of bright bounced into the yard. Anyone coming by the mast would see the glint without needing a torch. A simple thing. Enough.

Lena shifted and sucked a breath through her teeth. ‘Statement later,’ she said. ‘No trimming.’

‘Say it plain,’ Elin said. ‘I’ll say I took the key. I used it. I took the ledger. I scanned parts. I set a timed send. The light stayed on because I left the lever up.’ She turned her hand over. The bandage had browned once at the cut but held. ‘What does it cost.’

‘Not the crew,’ Lena said. ‘Keep me out of your ledger. Put my name on the part where I helped you not die.’

Elin glanced at her. The corner of Lena’s mouth moved, not a smile, just a change in the line that meant the world was still outside them. Wind moved across their faces and carried the last of the smoke away.

They waited. Water found the second step and then went away again. The clock on the backup handset she had passed to Lena showed a minute over two. The phone rested in Lena’s pocket; when she shifted, the tiny weight moved under the coat. Elin worked through the ordinary check and stopped before it turned into a list. Keys were elsewhere. Two pages sat where they should, inner-left seam. Torch in her hand. Flathead on the counter. Bandage in place. Coat on. She breathed once and didn’t count.

The sound came first. A low engine note. Not a fishing boat. Closer to the station sound she had come to know from winter nights waiting for scrubbing work to end and fresh air to come in. The note grew and settled. A light reached the far side of the yard and glanced off the mast.

Elin lifted the torch and put two soft pulses into the yard, then left the beam steady in the window. A voice carried, words she could not pick, and then a second voice nearer with more command to it. Something metal rattled, line on a rail. In her throat a small piece of something let go. Not relief. Not yet. Just a small easing.

‘Ready,’ she said. She set the baking tray flatter so it would show less and not blind anyone in the next sweep.

‘Ready,’ Lena said. ‘Keep your hands polite.’

‘Polite,’ Elin said back. She picked up the screwdriver for nothing other than to know where it was and then set it down again. She wiped her hand on her sleeve and went to the inner door.

*** From the tower slit the causeway showed its thin under-run, a change of shade more than a line. Elin held herself against the stone and looked along the wall towards the landward bend. The beam caught a shape moving fast with the draw, no torch, head down, shoulders set to the wind. Heel then mid-foot in the same pattern she had marked on the scullery step earlier. The nick on the outer of the lug left a fainter shadow each time the foot landed on a wet patch. He was on the wrong side of luck and still believed he had time.

She moved to the yard and put the torch beam out through the window, off to the side so it would not blind anyone on the boat. She painted the wall either side of the moving shape with light, in short pulses, without fixing the beam on him.

‘There,’ she called, not shouting, throwing the word to where she knew the sound would carry. ‘After the bend. No torch.’

‘Seen,’ came from the water. The boat’s searchlight moved slow to that run and widened.

He kept going. The sea at the low part had that look it gets when a run doubles back on what it did last hour. He didn’t slow. He had a hand in his jacket at one point, then out again. Elin’s stomach went harder. The key. He would think that small piece of brass would make him a door when the water was saying it would not let him use one.

A line snaked out from the boat and landed near him. He looked at it and pushed it with his foot so it slid away with the wash. He did not look at the boat.

‘Take it,’ she called. She made herself put nothing else on it.

He didn’t. He kept the same pace, shoulders tighter. The next wave dragged at him more than the last. The boat held a little out and set for another throw. The second line came cleaner. It struck across him and slipped down to his waist. He shrugged it off with an angry, efficient movement that said he still thought he was the person who could choose.

The wash at the bend went up a finger and then another. The run came over his boot tops and under him. He lost one step. He put his hand to the wall and tried to find purchase on old stone under slime and sea. The next run took both feet. He went into the pull; the run caught his shins and dragged him forward. He disappeared into a darker part of the water and then came back up by the outer face of the compound where the wall dipped. His head was turned away. He spat and drew a breath, quick and shallow, then went under again before he could take a second.

‘Coil,’ Lena said, low. She had found an old length of line behind the kitchen rail, stiff with salt. She pushed it to Elin. ‘Throw it to me.’

Elin took it with both hands and gave it a quick roll to bring the circle back into it. She threw past the wicket gap so it would land on the run and come to him rather than at him. The rope splashed and moved with the pull, went towards him, bumped his forearm.

He lifted his head once. In the beam spill she saw the planes of his face clean for a second, the healed break across the nose, the hand with the scar across the knuckle. He looked at the line. He looked at her. He turned his shoulder into the run, set to go through, not across.

A small thing fell out of his jacket. The plastic tag caught a piece of light. BWL SD. It went into the water and flicked once as it tapped stone and then washed onto the lower step, caught against a bolt head that had rusted to a little orange ring. Elin registered it and kept her hands on the rest of what needed doing. The line she had thrown went slack and then tight and then slack again as the run surged and eased.

The boat moved closer on a line that kept it out of the drag that ran along the wall. A crewman stood near the bow with another heaving line ready. The line went and fell short. He reeled in and set again. The light tracked the patch where Cal's head had been. The next wave gave them nothing to aim at. He was under the run on the outer face; the pull fixed the distance and pace beyond reach.

Elin watched the place where he had been, then the place the water pulled to, then the place beyond the wall that they could not see. She did not move her feet. She put her free hand to the stone and felt the old grit at the mortar. The torch beam shook once. She stilled it. No one on the water said his name. No one on the water said anything except the words they had to say to do their job.

The heaving line sagged into the eddy beyond the wall and drifted; the searchlight held on empty water.

'Keep your light steady,' a voice came from the boat. 'Stay in sight. We have you.'

'We have you,' Elin said back, to Lena. She kept the torch steady in the window. The rope at her feet lay pointed at the place where it had been useful and then wasn't. The key on the lower step tapped once in a little wash, then settled in the shadow of the bolt again.

The searchlight went off the causeway and onto the outer face where the run turned eddy near the head. The boat's engine note changed as it manoeuvred and then held. Another throw went. Another sweep. The run held its line. He was not there to take help anymore.

Elin folded the coil. Her hands were steady. The heat that had been at the back of her eyes had gone to her jaw. She swallowed and the motion hurt.

'Back,' someone called from the mast. 'Hold there. We're coming up the steps.'

Elin put the torch at her feet and reached down through the wicket. The key was where she had thought it would be. Cold on her fingertips. She nudged it with a knuckle until she could pinch it and bring it through. The tag showed a little scuff across one letter. She shut her hand on it. Her chest went tight once and then eased. He would not be the one to turn it in a door again. She held it out to where Lena could see it.

‘We return it,’ she said.

‘We return it,’ Lena said.

They stood back from the window to let the next thing happen.

*** They brought them off under the beam. The boat came close enough for a line to touch the jamb and rattle, and then hands were there to take elbows and jackets and draw them through the scullery window. Elin kept herself small and useful and did what was asked. Lena got her weight over the rail with a hiss and then a breath. A blanket found her shoulders. Elin felt it pass down the back of her arms where the damp had settled and did not push it away.

On the water, the searchlight still tracked past the point where the wall dipped. The helmsman kept the boat where the wash would not turn and slap back over the bow. No one said, ‘Is he, ’. No one said anything except, ‘Step down,’ and, ‘Mind your left,’ and, ‘Hold here.’

At the slip it was quieter. The boathouse roller door was up and the fluorescent hummed. A man she knew by sight from the bar on Mondays stood with a clipboard and a radio. He looked at Lena’s foot and then at Elin’s hand and said, ‘Sit,’ and she did because that was what was meant by it. The key was still in her palm. She put it on her knee. The plastic was rough from where it had hit the bolt head.

‘Names for the log,’ the clipboard man said. He didn’t look up from the page when he spoke because there was a rhythm to this work and he was in it.

Elin said her name. Lena said hers and added, 'Not on duty.' She gave the station identifier again. Her mouth kept its careful line. A crewman with a small torch bent to her boot and cut the lace. The leather eased and the skin above returned to a shape that looked more human. Lena closed her eyes for a second. Then she opened them and put her hand out for the cup someone had put by her knee.

'Coastguard ops want a statement,' the clipboard man said, still writing. 'We can do initial here and full later. You'll both get calls. You,' he said to Elin without looking at her, 'said some things on the phone. We'll take that now while it's in your throat and then again when you've slept.'

Elin nodded. 'I will say it now,' she said. She looked for a flat surface and found the desk that held the laminated tide sheet. She stood by it because standing made her feel more honest. 'I took a key from this station earlier in the night,' she said. 'A ring with Breakwater access. I returned the ring when asked. I kept the side-door key. Later, the man who locked us in took that key from me. He had it on the causeway. It fell when he lost his footing. I recovered it at the lower step. It is here.' She put her hand flat and then opened her fingers so the tag showed. 'I used the key earlier tonight to enter the keeper's house and remove a book. I intend to surrender the book and scans to those who need to see them. The book goes to daylight. Names and dates. I brought the light up earlier and kept it on. I broke a scullery window to vent smoke. I called Coastguard. I will give this key back where it belongs.'

The man's pen moved. He did not lift his head. 'Name of the male.'

'Cal Rushmer,' Elin said. 'He left the yard after locking the door. He refused two lines on the causeway. He was last seen in the run against the outer face near the dip in the wall. He went out of sight. He did not take a line from me when I threw one from the wicket.'

Someone near the roller door took a breath, the kind people take when a name sits on their tongue already and gets up on its own. She

didn't look to see who. She kept her eyes on the key.

'We have your number,' the man said. 'Coastguard ops will call you both. Thank you for being plain.' He finally looked up at Lena's foot and then at Elin's hand. 'You need that cleaned.'

'Later,' Elin said, because there were things that could wait. 'I need to return this,' she said, holding up the plastic tag. 'May I hang it back.'

He nodded once. 'Go on.'

The beige metal cabinet by the office door had kept its glass clean; the latches clicked when she opened it. Hooks ran in two neat rows. BWL hung there on a small printed tab above a hook with nothing on it. She set the key on the hook and let the ring sit. The small sound of metal on metal went through her palm.

'Where did you find it,' the man with the clipboard asked, now watching.

'Lower step,' she said. 'Caught on a bolt head when the wash dropped for a second.' She gave the bolt's position with her hand in the air. Her fingers held that shape for a beat and then let it go. She closed the cabinet. The latch settled.

Lena had a blanket on her lap and someone had passed her a second for her shoulders. She looked smaller under the orange light and more herself at the same time. Elin went back and sat beside her on the bench. They didn't touch hands. There was a point to that.

Her phone, Lena's, still, buzzed. Tamsin. Outside. Waiting.

'Go,' Lena said. 'Then home.'

Elin stood. 'I'll come back when they ask,' she said to the clipboard man.

'They'll ask,' he said.

Outside, the air on the slip smelled of diesel and salt. The boat's engine note had changed to a different work. The beam up the headland

kept its calm sweep. Tamsin stood by the gate with her hood up and her hands in her pockets. Her hair had squashed under the fabric and come out in little curls by her ears. She watched Elin walk toward her and did not go to meet her. Elin crossed the last distance herself.

‘He’s sleeping,’ Tamsin said. ‘Left wrist splinted. Films later. Ribs tender but no holes that anyone can find. No police. They’re not asking names yet. I told them as much as I had to and not more. You look grey.’

Elin nodded. ‘Later,’ she said. She reached into the inner-left seam of the coat and took out the two folded pages. Her fingers were steady. ‘These go to you. You can hold them with the stamp and what landed at two. In the morning you send to the letters address and the council extension if I’m dark. If I’m not, you wait until I say. Don’t post in the night. No station.’

Tamsin took the pages without opening them and tucked them into the inside of her jacket. She kept her hand there for a second as if to make a pocket with her palm. ‘I’ll hold. You’re not dark,’ she said. ‘That helps.’

‘Keep it small at the hospital tonight,’ Elin said. ‘Tell him I’m coming. Tell him...’ She stopped because there wasn’t a clean word for any of it that wouldn’t make it worse.

‘I’ll tell him you’re coming after you sleep,’ Tamsin said. ‘And that I’m not taking pictures until I’m told to. Go home. Eat something that isn’t air.’

‘Lena,’ Elin said. ‘Later. At the lay-by. No lights.’

‘I don’t need to be in the car for that,’ Tamsin said. The corner of her mouth moved once. ‘Go.’

Elin walked back through the roller door. She put the phone next to Lena so she wouldn’t forget whose it was and touched the back of the bench with her fingertips to mark the shape of it in her head. ‘Hospital then home,’ she said.

‘Home first,’ Lena said. ‘You’re walking.’

Elin nodded. 'I will meet you later. I'll send a time.'

Lena's eyes stayed on Elin's face. She did not say anything that offered to make the next part easier. It would not be. That was the point. She looked at Elin's face again and then at the cut lace. 'Home first, no. Hospital.'

Lena pressed the backup into her palm. 'Take this, call me from the hospital.'

Elin stepped out into the cold and went straight to the hospital.

*** The hospital at that hour had a clean bright that made her feel every bit of salt on her skin. Tamsin got them past the first desk without names, just the wristband number from earlier and a look that said she would stand there until someone made room. Kit lay on a bed that had a plastic edge with a measurement strip in blue. The blanket was thin and held heat to him anyway. His face had colour back that had not been there in the van. The splint ran from the base of his fingers to halfway up his forearm. Someone had drawn a short arrow on it in pen.

He opened his eyes when she stood at the end of the bed. He did not move more than that because he had learned that breath and movement were currency and he needed both.

'You're here,' he said. The words were scratchy and a little slow and perfect for what they needed to do. 'You look...' He didn't finish because there was no point.

'You are breathing,' Elin said. 'That will do for now.' She kept her hands fixed to the bed rail. She worried them once and let go. 'There are things that will come at us,' she said. 'We will not do them on the back foot and we will not do them on anyone else's timetable. If someone from anywhere wants a paper, we speak to someone we trust first.'

'Tamsin,' he said.

'Tamsin,' she said. 'Or me. Preferably both.' She breathed out. 'Money. We do not take the next easy thing because it pays today. We find

a way that doesn't look good now but is clean in six months.'

He blinked. 'I can do that,' he said, which was not a promise but a line in a direction.

'Sleep,' she said. 'I'll come back when they take pictures of your bones.'

He closed his eyes. The lines at his mouth eased enough for her to see the boy who had been there in a world that had not yet taught him shorthand for bad nights. She held the rail another second and then let go.

In the corridor the door hissed. Outside by the sliding door she sent Lena a message. Late afternoon. Lay-by. No lights. Then she added another and did not delete it. Say it plain. I want to try. She pressed send. It went. A reply came back: Keys on your hook. Door on the latch.

She tucked the phone away and walked. The air outside held the before□dawn cold. She put her hands in her pockets and felt the absence of the old weight of her keys there. It made her feel lighter and a little off-balance. She went home.

*** The terrace was dark in the right way. Windows held their own night. No wrong light. She pushed the door and stepped inside. She left the switch alone. The hall kept a little sea in it that her mother had never managed to scrub out of the walls. On the sideboard the torch sat where she had dropped it in the rush earlier. The first-aid tin lay open; the crepe's cardboard core peeped out now she had used half of it. She shut the tin.

She went to the kitchen and knelt. The kickboard popped under her fingers. The oilcloth parcel sat where she had left it. She did not touch it. It had already left her hands in every way that mattered. The scans had gone. The two pages had gone to Tamsin. The only choice left was to let it keep being what it was and stop pretending she controlled any of it anymore.

She pushed the board back until the seam sat clean. Then she eased it back that one finger's width her mother had always left so a thing could be pried up if you needed it. Small mercies in the matter of maintenance.

She stood and looked at the lamp by the sink. It had a stain on the shade she had never got off. Her hand went to the switch and then stopped. Not yet.

In the hall the hook by the door held a ring. Not brass and bare the way the spare had been, but her own cheap ring. The front door key had a nick near the shoulder where it had always caught the old lock. She touched it with one knuckle. She set her hand down by her side. She didn't take it.

The coat went on the chair by the table. Not on the back of it like a person about to go again, but folded over the seat the way a thing lives somewhere for a while when no one is running. A corner of flyer□tape scratched her wrist. She sat and picked at the seam with her nail until she found the bit she had made this afternoon when she built the weight into the hem. She pulled the tape and eased the flyers out. The paper came free with a soft tear of glue. She smoothed each one on the table, the little museum print catching the thin light. She stacked them and set them with the tide sheet. She didn't throw them away. She had made them for a reason. She would not pretend she hadn't.

The phone lit her face when she unlocked it. Threads sat where she had left them. Old unsent drafts lived below the new one she had sent. She deleted each of the old ones without reading, left the one that said what she meant. The phone vibrated once. Lena. Late afternoon works. Keep the light off. It sat there, words that used to mean one thing and now meant a door closed to give two people a room to work in.

Elin opened the drawer by the cooker and took out the pencil she used for the meter. She put the tide sheet on the table and underlined the 02:00 window. She put today's date beside it. She capped the pencil and set it back. The action took a second. It put a line under the night in a way

nothing else would.

She filled the kettle and set it on. Steam made a line on the cold window and then ran down. The click came and she did not pour. A mug went beside it and she left both as they were. A small practice in delay that didn't carry any drama with it. The room sat with her and didn't require an answer.

She checked the time once and put the phone face down. The screen went black and stayed there. At the hook the keys stayed where they were. She left them. She brought her hand to the lamp.

The switch moved under her thumb. The room went dark.

She sat. The house held its quiet. The beam she had left running was too far and too slow to touch her here, but the knowledge of it working where she had left it made her shoulders drop the smallest amount. None of this made a clean end. It wasn't supposed to.

She waited for the next hour to make itself.