A SHADOWED BELIEF

Who decides which version of you survives?

POLLYANNA BRUCE

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Revised and expanded edition.

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PART ONE: THE RUNAWAY

CHAPTER 1

Past the Bridge

The night I ran away, my mother put an umbrella by the door.

It was yellow, with a crooked handle and a price sticker she had never bothered to remove. She knew I hated yellow. She knew the lock on my bedroom window was broken, because she had asked Victor to repair it twice. Most of all, she knew I had been packing.

I stood on the stairs with my trainers in one hand and my bag in the other, looking at that umbrella. A sensible person would have taken it. A frightened person would have gone back upstairs.

I stepped over it.

In my bag, between spare socks and a bottle of shampoo, was a prospectus from the adult college. I had folded it to the page about writing and communications. Taking it felt more presumptuous than taking the money I had earned. Ruth had seen the application form last month and said we should discuss it when I was stronger. When I asked what stronger would look like, she said I always wanted definitions for things everyone else understood.

I had not filled it in. I had carried it in my work bag for three weeks, rubbing one corner soft with my thumb. Tonight I packed it because I wanted somewhere to arrive, not only somewhere to leave. It was possible that nobody would let me stay with them. Possible that freedom would turn out to involve a cold waiting room and a job I lost by missing Saturday's shift. The prospectus was a small, unreasonable promise that there could be something after that.

Behind the sitting-room door, Victor was speaking quietly on the telephone. He had been speaking quietly for weeks. When I asked who called so late, Ruth told me it was work, and when I asked what work, she said I was old enough to understand that other people had responsibilities.

I was twenty-one. I understood responsibilities. I had a job at the supermarket, three hundred and twelve pounds in a savings account, and a pair of white trainers that had cost me two Saturday shifts. I did not understand why the bank sometimes sent letters addressed to Miss Alton and sometimes to somebody whose name had been scratched out before I saw the envelope.

That afternoon, Ruth had caught me trying to photograph one.

She had taken my phone without raising her voice. Victor had stood beside the kitchen door, not blocking it exactly. Just standing in the only place through which I could leave.

We needed to discuss my behaviour, he said.

They had always needed to discuss my behaviour. My missing appointments. My unsuitable friends. My habit of asking what kind of accident I had been in and why every picture of me before my nineteenth birthday looked as if it had been printed yesterday.

I pulled the front door shut so gently that the latch hardly sounded. Rain struck my bare ankles. Under my borrowed jacket I wore the shorts and cropped top I had chosen before dinner, when leaving still meant going to the pub with Nina rather than leaving everything.

By the end of the street my right shoelace had come loose. I stopped under a bus shelter, tied it, tucked the knot inside the shoe, and kept walking.

I could have gone to Nina's. She would have made tea, lent me something dry and said her mother would understand. But Nina's mother knew Ruth through the local fundraising committee, and kindness travelled quickly between people who believed they were doing the right thing.

The bridge was the one place nobody had ever told me to go.

It crossed the Lorne where the river narrowed between a builders' yard and the back of the old cinema. On warm evenings people sat on the stone steps underneath, drinking from cans and laughing at things that were probably not funny. Tonight there was nobody except a man sheltering beside the middle pier.

I noticed his boots first. Clean, black, wrong for the muddy path. Then his face, turned towards the pavement before I made a sound.

He was younger than I had expected from the coat. Mid-twenties, perhaps. A pale curved scar crossed his left cheek, shaped almost like a letter somebody had begun and regretted.

"You shouldn't be here," he said.

I stopped beyond his reach. "It's a public bridge."

"I meant in the rain."

"You're in it too."

He looked up at the stone overhead. "Technically, I'm under it."

I wanted to smile. That annoyed me more than the warning.

"I'm waiting for someone," I said.

"No, you're not."

The rain made a hard, steady sound on the river. Above us a bus went over the bridge, its windows bright enough to turn every passenger into a separate square of warmth.

"You don't know me."

"Michael Fenton," he said, as if giving me a name would make that less true.

"I didn't ask."

"I know. I'm doing this badly."

He took a step backwards. Not towards me. Away. It was the first useful thing he had done.

"If someone comes looking for you," he said, "don't agree to get into their car. Not even if they say your parents sent them."

My bag slipped on my shoulder. I tightened my grip on the strap.

"Who sent you?"

"No one."

"That's what people say when someone has."

He looked beyond me towards the steps. There was a white van beside the cinema loading door. I had passed it without noticing whether anyone was inside.

"Did you bring your phone?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Can you call someone you trust?"

"I don't need rescuing."

"Good. Call them anyway."

I did not tell him about Ruth taking it. The shame of that was ridiculous. I was a grown woman. A mother taking her grown daughter's telephone should have made the mother ashamed, not the daughter. Yet I stood there trying to invent a believable explanation.

Michael watched my face and stopped asking.

"You used to sing when you were scared," he said.

The words were quiet. He might have been speaking to himself.

I had been humming on the walk down. Three notes, a pause, three notes. A stupid little tune that came into my head whenever a room went silent and someone expected me to fill it.

"Lots of people sing."

"You hated the last verse. You said it was dishonest."

"What song?"

For the first time he seemed less afraid of whoever might be watching than of answering me.

"I shouldn't have said that."

"What song, Michael?"

He rubbed the edge of the scar, then let his hand fall.

"Your name was Elizabeth."

I heard a bicycle bell from the pavement above us. Someone laughed. Ordinary sounds, carried down through rain. I concentrated on them because his words had opened a hole in the middle of everything else.

"My name is Jessie Alton."

"I know what they call you."

"You can stop talking now."

"Please listen."

"No."

I backed towards the steps. He stayed where he was, both hands visible, and somehow that frightened me more than if he had followed. He knew a name he should not know. Or he had guessed one that meant nothing and frightened me into making it mean something.

I turned and climbed.

Halfway up, a woman in a waterproof coat was coming down. She smiled when she saw me. The sort of smile people used when they had already decided you needed help.

"Jessie? Your mother is worried."

I tried to move past her.

Something pinched high on my arm. I thought I had caught it against the wall. I tried to pull past her, but she caught my arm, and another person appeared behind her on the steps. I kept struggling while she talked. By the time I reached the rail, my legs had started to soften. Then my knee folded.

Michael shouted my name from below.

Not Elizabeth.

Jessie.

CHAPTER 2

Smoke in the Rain

For a long time afterwards, I remembered the field as a place I had reached by myself.

There was concrete under my hands and grass beyond it, flattened by rain. A light moved between the trees. Smoke rose from a metal drum, carrying a smell sharper than wood. I knew there should have been a reason for me to be there. I kept searching for it and finding only the bridge.

Someone said, "She's coming round."

I lifted my head.

The world moved slowly, a fraction behind my eyes. My palms were scraped. One knee was bleeding through a tear in my shorts. I had lost my bag. The jacket hung off one shoulder, heavy with water.

"Michael?"

A man crouched in front of me. He was not Michael. He wore blue gloves and smelled of mint.

"Stay where you are, love. You've had a fright."

"Where's my bag?"

"We'll sort all that."

I tried to stand. My legs would not take the order. The man caught my elbow before I fell, then pressed down rather than helping me up.

Behind him, beside the drum, a woman held a clear plastic sack. There was something white inside. I thought it was one of my shoes and looked down to check. Both shoes were still on my feet.

"I want to go home," I said.

The words came out before I considered them. I did not want to go home. I wanted to be anywhere with a door I could open myself, and home was the last word my mouth could find for that.

"We know," the man said.

He turned his head. "That's on record, yes?"

The woman answered too softly for me to hear.

There was a lighter on the concrete by the man's boot. Red plastic, a nick near the top. My father had one like it. No: Victor had one like it. The correction passed through my mind without explanation.

I reached towards it because it was familiar. The man moved it away.

"Let's not do that again."

"Do what?"

"It's all right. Nobody's blaming you."

I looked at the drum. A sheet of paper lifted in the heat, blackened at one edge, and fell back inside. There was writing on it. I tried to focus on the letters and could not.

The man produced a blanket. It smelled of a cupboard, warm dust and something sweet. I wanted my own jacket pulled straight. Instead the blanket came around my shoulders, and a second pair of hands lifted my feet from the concrete.

Somewhere a motor was running.

"Don't," I said.

"You're cold."

"Don't take me."

My voice was thin and slow. It seemed to belong to somebody on the other side of a wall.

They carried me. I remember the edge of a van door, a light above it, the sound of rain stopping when I was moved inside. I remember trying to count the windows and discovering there were none on my side.

The woman spoke near my ear.

"You've asked for help, Jessie. That's a good thing. You can let us help now."

I had not asked her for help. I was certain of that then. Later I would be asked to be certain so often that certainty itself began to feel like something suspicious.

The next clear thing was a ceiling tile.

One corner had a brown stain shaped like a country on a map. Beside it a strip light hummed. I lay on my back, trying to work out why looking at that stain made me want to cry.

My clothes were gone.

I was wearing a blue cotton nightdress, too large across the shoulders. A gauze dressing covered my knee. There was a cup of water on a table and a plastic wristband that read ALTON, J. Underneath, in smaller print, was a number.

JA04.

I tried to sit up. A wire tugged at my finger. Something beeped.

"There you are."

A woman came through the doorway carrying folded towels. She had round cheeks, grey at the roots of her dark hair and a smile that stayed in place while she looked at the monitor rather than at me.

Her badge said DOROTHY BELL. Below it, SENIOR NURSE.

"Everyone calls me Dot," she said. "How are we feeling?"

"Where am I?"

"Harrow House."

I knew the name. There was a turning for it on the northern road, behind trees and a stone wall. Ruth had once driven past and said rich people went there to recover from themselves.

"Why?"

"We'll go through everything when you're feeling stronger."

"I'm feeling strong enough to ask."

The smile became a little more careful.

"You were found outside in a distressed condition. You needed somewhere safe."

"I was under the bridge."

"Before that, perhaps."

"Where are my clothes?"

She put the towels on a shelf. There were four other piles, all exactly the same height.

"Damaged beyond use, I'm afraid."

"Damaged how?"

"Burned."

I looked at my arms. Bruises, a red mark near the top of the left one, small cuts on my hands. No burns.

"I wasn't in a fire."

"No one's going to make you talk about it before you're ready."

"I am talking about it. I'm saying it didn't happen."

Dot pulled the blanket straight. The movement pinned my hands briefly beneath it. Not enough for me to accuse her of holding me down. Enough for her to remind me that she could.

"We've kept what information we can," she said. "There'll be time."

I asked for a telephone.

She said it would be arranged.

I asked what day it was.

Friday, she said. The nineteenth of October.

One night. Only one night missing. I tried to fit everything I remembered inside it: rain, a stranger, the field, smoke, the hands carrying me. There was a gap between each piece. I could not tell whether the gaps were minutes or hours.

Dot held out a small paper cup.

"For the headache."

"I haven't said I've got a headache."

"Most people do."

I looked at the cup and then at the door.

She had left it open. Beyond it, someone was waiting in a chair, reading a newspaper with one eye on my room.

CHAPTER 3

A Door That Opened Inwards

I did not take the tablets.

It was a small thing, refusing a paper cup, but Dot seemed to regard it as the beginning of an argument I had arrived too late to understand.

"You don't have to make this difficult," she said.

"Then tell me what they are."

She named a painkiller. I recognised the name. That should have helped, but the cup held two different shapes.

"And the other one?"

"Something to help you settle."

"I don't want to settle. I want to ring someone."

Dot took the cup away. She wrote on a clipboard with her body angled so that I could not see the page.

I had been labelled difficult before. At school, apparently, although I could not remember a single teacher saying it. At home, when I asked why my childhood things were kept in a locked box. At work, when the manager changed my shifts after Ruth telephoned him about my health.

The supermarket was a thought I could use.

"I'm supposed to be at work at ten," I said. "You need to let them know."

"Your family will have taken care of that."

"My family didn't bring me here."

She did not answer that. She checked the dressing on my knee instead.

When she left, I took the clip off my finger and swung my legs over the side of the bed. The room tilted, but not far enough to stop me. A bag hung on the back of the door. I opened it

expecting my belongings and found a second nightdress, clean underwear in a sealed packet and slippers with foam soles.

No phone. No bank card. No keys.

The chair outside was empty now. I stepped into the corridor.

There were windows at one end, white-painted doors at the other, and a noticeboard covered in cheerful paper. WELCOME TO THE LARCH WARD. THIS IS YOUR SPACE. Beside the words a photograph showed people making a cake.

I followed the windows.

A woman in a cardigan was sitting at a table under one of them, picking the loose skin beside her thumbnail. She looked up as I passed, then looked away before I could ask a question.

Beyond her was a door marked EXIT. I pushed the bar.

Nothing happened.

I pushed again, harder.

An alarm gave one short note above my head.

"That's enough, Jessie."

Dot stood at the other end of the corridor. The newspaper reader had returned with her. He was bigger when he was standing.

"It's an exit," I said.

"For staff use."

"Then why does it say exit?"

The woman in the cardigan made a tiny sound that might have been a laugh. Dot looked at her, and she put both hands flat on the table.

"Come away from the door."

"I'm leaving."

"You've only just arrived."

"I didn't agree to arrive."

The man moved between me and the corridor. I could smell his aftershave. I stepped sideways, trying to get round him, and he caught my wrist.

My body reacted before I had decided what to do. I pulled, hard. He pulled harder. My knee gave way, and suddenly I was on the floor with my elbow underneath me and Dot telling somebody to bring the chair.

I remember saying no several times. I remember the woman at the table standing up.

"She's hurt her knee," she said. "Let her sit down."

"Catherine," Dot said. "Please don't interfere."

The man released one wrist and held the other until I stopped pulling. Dot crouched near my face, still smiling, although there was nothing left in the smile that belonged to kindness.

"I need you to understand that we have responsibilities," she said.

It was Victor's word. I hated hearing it here.

They put me in a wheeled chair. I had imagined a wheelchair as something that helped you move. This one helped them move me.

Back in my room, Dot closed the door and stood beside it.

"You frightened people."

"He hurt me."

"Nobody wants to hurt you."

I looked at the red marks around my wrist. "That doesn't seem to be preventing it."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she sat in the chair by the bed, as if we had finally reached the part of the morning she had planned.

"There are procedures," she said. "People who explain these things. You'll meet Dr Quinn. She'll answer your questions."

"Will she unlock the door?"

"If that's appropriate."

"Who decides whether it's appropriate?"

She folded her hands. A plain gold ring sat tightly on one finger.

"First, we help you feel better."

I wanted to shout until someone outside heard. But the windows were sealed, the grounds were wide, and the door had opened inwards only because someone else had chosen to let it.

I asked for paper.

Dot looked surprised.

"And a pen," I said. "So I can write down the procedures."

She brought a short pencil with no rubber and three sheets headed DAILY REFLECTION.

At the top of the first I wrote my name. Jessie Alton. The date. Friday, 19 October 2029. Then I wrote where I had been found, as they had described it, and where I remembered being.

When I reached the man's name, I stopped.

Michael Fenton. Scar on left cheek. Said Elizabeth.

I read the last word several times. It did not become familiar. It did not become less frightening either.

At lunchtime a tray arrived with soup, bread and another paper cup. I asked the nurse to leave the cup on the tray. She checked with Dot before agreeing.

From the bed I could see the strip of corridor whenever the door opened. Catherine passed once with a pile of magazines. She did not look in. On her way back, she paused just long enough to touch the doorframe twice.

I could not tell whether it was a message or a nervous habit.

I wrote that down too.

CHAPTER 4

Things Catherine Knew

Catherine's full name was printed on the ward timetable beside mine.

FIELDING, C. MORNING WALK, 11:30. ALTON, J. ORIENTATION, 14:00.

Until then, I had thought names belonged to people. Here they belonged to slots.

Dot brought me a cardigan after lunch. It was brown, with one button missing. She said someone had donated it and I could keep it for as long as I needed.

"Thank you," I said, because being angry did not make me warm.

She seemed pleased by that. She wrote something on her clipboard.

Catherine was waiting in the corridor. In daylight she looked older than I had first thought, perhaps thirty-eight, with a narrow face and dark hair cut unevenly at the shoulders. There were pale lines on one forearm. She saw me notice and pulled her sleeve down, and I hated myself for looking as if I had been handed a right to know everything about her.

"I'm Catherine," she said.

"I heard. Yesterday. Or this morning."

"This morning."

"It feels like yesterday."

"That happens."

Dot walked ahead, opened a door with her badge and let us through into a small enclosed courtyard. The walls had been painted a colour someone might have described as reassuring. Rain had darkened it into something closer to old dishwater.

There were two benches, a square of grass and a raised planter containing rosemary. At the far corner, under a security camera, a drain had been blocked with leaves.

Dot stayed by the door. "Five minutes. No difficulty, please."

Catherine chose the bench nearest the rosemary. I followed her, limping slightly.

"She thinks I'm going to run," I said.

"Are you?"

"Not through a wall."

"Good. It makes the paperwork untidy."

I laughed before I meant to. Catherine did not seem particularly pleased with herself. She just looked at my knee.

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes."

"Tell the afternoon nurse. The one with the plait. She'll actually look."

"Why did you touch my door?"

She glanced towards Dot. "To see whether you'd look up."

"Why?"

"You were writing. I wanted to know whether you could still hear the corridor. Sometimes they give people enough medication that they don't."

I looked at the rosemary, its leaves trembling under drops of water.

"What is this place?"

"A private clinic."

"Is that the same as a hospital?"

"It's meant to be."

"I didn't try to hurt myself. Whatever they're saying, I didn't."

"I know."

I turned towards her. "How?"

"I'm psychic."

She said it with such a straight face that for a moment I believed she expected me to believe her.

Then she pointed at my wristband.

"They've printed a programme code where the admitting doctor's details should be. Dot hasn't asked you one useful question about your knee. And she checked your answers against the folder before she spoke to you."

"That could mean anything."

"Yes," Catherine said. "It could. Don't believe me because I'm telling you something you'd like to hear."

No one had said that to me at home. Ruth had always offered certainty and expected gratitude for it.

"Did you see Michael Fenton?"

Catherine's fingers moved once against her sleeve.

"Who?"

"A man. Scar here." I touched my cheek. "He was with me at the bridge."

"No."

The answer came too quickly, but I could not tell whether it was a lie or fear of another question.

Dot called that we had two minutes left.

"Do they let you phone people?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

"Can I use yours?"

"I haven't got one."

"Nobody?"

"Staff have them. Patients have allocated calls."

"Allocated by whom?"

She gave me a look that made the answer unnecessary.

I rubbed the rough edge of the wristband. It had been fastened so tightly that a finger would not fit underneath.

"I can't remember how I got here."

"You don't have to solve everything today."

"They might change it by tomorrow."

She stopped looking at the courtyard and looked properly at me.

"What have you written down?"

I told her. Bridge. Field. Clothes. Michael. I did not say Elizabeth. The name still felt like something I might make worse by speaking it.

"Keep what you know separate from what you're told," she said. "And from what you think happened. Three columns, if that helps."

"Why?"

"Because they'll put them together for you otherwise."

Dot had begun moving towards us. Catherine stood, and I stood with her.

As we passed the planter, she broke off a tiny piece of rosemary and pressed it into my hand. It smelled of kitchens and warm potatoes. A real smell, not the sweet cupboard smell of the blanket in the van.

"You're allowed that," she said when I looked worried. "It's a plant, not a weapon."

Dot took it from me at the door anyway.

"Let's avoid collecting things," she said.

The afternoon nurse with the plait came to look at my knee. Her name was Sarah. She cleaned it gently, said there was no sign of a burn, and stopped talking when Dot entered.

I waited until they left before writing a second page.

What I know: Sarah says no burn on knee. Catherine sees code on wristband.

What I was told: clothes burned. Came here for help.

What I think: Catherine knows more about Michael than she said.

At the bottom I added a fourth heading. Questions.

It took up the rest of the page.

CHAPTER 5

A Familiar Voice

The telephone was cream-coloured and screwed to a desk.

I had expected a mobile brought to my room, or perhaps a handset on a trolley. Instead Dot took me to a little office near the ward entrance, told me to sit and placed a laminated card beside the phone.

CALLS SUPPORT CONNECTION. KEEP YOUR CONVERSATION POSITIVE.

There was no number pad on my side of the desk.

"Who would you like to speak to?" she asked.

"Nina."

"Family first, I think."

"You asked who I'd like."

She opened a notebook. "Your mother's been ringing."

"Then let her wait."

Dot looked at me over the top of her glasses. She had not worn them before. Behind the lenses she seemed more ordinary, a woman who might complain about the price of stamps. I almost let that soften me.

"You might find this less upsetting if you didn't approach every conversation as a disagreement."

"And you might find it easier to answer a question if you didn't approach every question as a symptom."

I wished I had said it more calmly. I could hear my own breathing, too fast, and watched her write before I had finished.

"We'll call Ruth," she said.

I knew then that refusing would mean no call at all.

She dialled. I watched her finger cover the last digits. When someone answered, she spoke first, giving my name and hers

and describing me as settled enough to talk. Then she passed me the handset and sat back in her chair.

"Jessie?"

Ruth sounded tired. It was the voice she used when she wanted me to imagine the work I had caused her.

"Where's my phone?"

"Safe."

"Can you bring it?"

"You're not to worry about that now. Are they looking after you?"

"Why am I here?"

Silence. Not the silence of a dropped line. I could hear something moving at her end, a cup against a saucer.

"You were terribly upset last night."

"I left. That's different."

"You weren't yourself."

"How would you know? You didn't speak to me."

"Victor saw you on the stairs."

I looked at Dot. She was studying the notebook, but her pen had stopped.

"Then why didn't he come after me?"

"We thought you needed space."

"And then you sent someone to the bridge?"

"What bridge?"

The answer came quickly enough to make me feel foolish. Perhaps she genuinely did not know. Perhaps that was what frightened me. I could not put any answer in a place where it would stay.

"A woman knew my name," I said. "She said you were worried."

"We were worried. We are worried. That doesn't mean we sent anyone."

"Can you come and get me?"

I hated asking. Leaving had been the one decision I had made without her permission. Now I was offering to undo it if she would only open another door.

"Dr Quinn says you need to stay for observation."

"You've spoken to her?"

"Of course. Someone had to."

"Before I got here or after?"

Dot put a finger on the laminated card.

Ruth sighed. "This is precisely what happens. You get an idea in your head and turn everybody into an enemy."

"Everybody isn't locking me in a room."

"Darling, you're safe."

She had called me darling a thousand times. At least I thought she had. I tried to remember the first and found an image of her leaning over a breakfast table, light on a watch face. No sound. No date. Was that a memory, or merely what a mother looked like in my head?

"Tell me something," I said. "What was the name of my first school?"

"What?"

"My first school."

"Don't do this now."

"You know the answer. Just say it."

Dot reached for the handset. I pulled it towards my chest.

Ruth said a school's name. St Anne's. There was one on the other side of Bellweather; I had passed it on a bus. I could not remember attending it. I could not remember attending anywhere else either.

"Who was my teacher?"

"That's enough," Dot said.

Ruth was still talking when the handset left my hand. I heard her say I needed rest. Then the receiver went down, neatly, as

though a conversation were something you could close without anyone being left inside it.

I stood up.

"I want a copy of whatever lets you keep me here."

"Dr Quinn will discuss your care."

"In writing."

She walked me back to the ward. This time I did not try the exit. I looked for other things instead: a door marked STAFF, a red fire panel, a shelf of visitors' badges, the seam where two old corridors had been joined by a newer one.

At my room, Dot asked if I would prefer lunch with the group tomorrow.

"What happens if I say no?"

"You can eat in your room."

"Then yes," I said.

It was the first choice she had offered where either answer might be allowed. I wanted to understand why.

When she left, I wrote down Ruth's answers before I could begin improving them in my head. Beside St Anne's I put a question mark, not a cross. I did not know it was wrong. That distinction mattered, even though wrong would have been easier to bear.

Underneath I wrote: She knows Dr Quinn. She won't come.

For a while I sat holding the pencil against the paper without moving it. I had walked out of a house because it did not feel like home. Now its occupants were the only people I knew how to ask for help, and neither of them was coming.

CHAPTER 6

Dr Quinn's Version

Dr Quinn did not wear a white coat.

She wore a grey jacket, a dark skirt and low shoes that made no noise on the corridor floor. Her hair was pulled back. There were lines at the corners of her eyes, but none of the uncertainty I had seen in Sarah's face when she examined my knee.

She introduced herself as Dr Helena Quinn and offered her hand.

I looked at it without taking it.

"That's all right," she said. "Come through."

Her consulting room had a real plant by the window and two chairs of equal height. I noticed both things because someone must have chosen them. There was no desk between us. A box of tissues sat on a low table, placed closer to my chair than hers.

"Would you like the door open?"

"Would you let me leave through it?"

"We're discussing what you need first."

"Then the door doesn't matter."

She left it open anyway.

I sat with the paper folded in my hand. Three sheets already covered in writing. I had considered leaving them behind, then imagined Dot straightening the bed and finding them.

Quinn noticed but did not ask for them.

"Tell me what you understand about last night."

"I left home. A man spoke to me at the bridge. Someone stopped me on the steps. I remember a field, or somewhere near a field. Then here."

"You remember feeling frightened?"

"I'm frightened now."

"Yes. That's understandable."

The agreement surprised me. Dot had treated fear as something I was doing to inconvenience her. Quinn let it exist, and for a moment I wanted to let her help.

"Why haven't I been allowed to see anyone independent?" I asked.

"You've been here less than a day."

"That's an answer about time."

She smiled slightly. "You listen carefully."

"When people won't answer, there's not much else to do."

She asked about the man at the bridge. I gave his name. Her expression did not change. That might have meant nothing; she had the kind of face that could refuse to change professionally.

"What did he say?"

"That I should call someone I trusted."

"Did you?"

"I didn't have a phone."

"What else?"

I touched the fold in my paper. "He called me Elizabeth."

Quinn leaned back. For the first time, her eyes moved away from my face.

"And what did you feel when he said that?"

"That he was dangerous."

"Because he knew you?"

"Because he acted like he knew me. That's different."

"It is."

She waited. The quiet was deliberate. I knew it was deliberate and still felt compelled to fill it.

"Is he here?"

"I can't discuss another person's care."

"Then he is another person in your care?"

"I didn't say that."

She rose and went to a cabinet. I expected a folder. She took out a plain envelope instead.

Inside was a photograph of me sitting at a table in a pale room. I wore a dark jumper. My hair was shorter. Someone had placed a glass of water in front of me, and I was smiling at a person outside the frame.

I could not remember the jumper. That was the first thing I thought, and it was so small beside everything else that I almost laughed.

"When was this?"

"An earlier visit."

"Here?"

"You have been supported by our programme before."

"What programme?"

"We call it the Mirror Initiative. It works with the stories people hold about themselves after distressing experiences."

"That sounds like a book club."

"In some respects, stories are involved. In others, it's considerably more specialised."

She laid the photograph on the table. I picked it up. There was a mark near the base of the woman's left thumb, a little diagonal scar like mine. I had noticed mine while washing dishes months ago. Ruth said I had caught it on a broken cup as a child.

The woman was me. Or someone had worked hard to make her me.

"Why don't I remember it?"

"Memory doesn't behave like a recording. Stress, medication, sleep, suggestion-many things affect what remains accessible."

"Including things you do?"

"Treatment can affect memory, yes. We monitor that carefully."

"Can I have the photograph?"

"Not today."

I held it a little longer before putting it down.

"You tell me I've been here before, then won't give me the thing that proves it."

"I'd like to avoid overwhelming you."

"You're managing how much I can know."

"I'm managing your care."

The plant beside the window had a yellow leaf. I stared at it until I could speak without my voice shaking.

"What did I agree to?"

"We'll look at that together."

"Today?"

"First, a short assessment. Nothing invasive. You can tell me when you need a break."

It was not an answer, but it contained something useful. Permission to stop, spoken aloud.

"Can I write that down?"

"Of course."

I unfolded the paper, found a clear space and wrote her words exactly. She watched me do it. I wanted her to know there would be a record outside whichever folder she kept.

She rang a bell on the table, and Sarah appeared in the doorway. There had been no one visible there a moment earlier.

"Show Jessie the assessment room," Quinn said. "I'll join you shortly."

As I stood, I glanced once more at the photograph. In its corner, just visible beneath Quinn's hand, was a printed code.

It began with an E.

CHAPTER 7

The Exercise

The assessment room had no plant.

It had a broad glass panel opposite a chair, a small camera above the panel and a table with headphones arranged around a box of tissues. There was nothing on the walls except a clock. The chair was comfortable enough to make refusing it seem unreasonable.

Sarah asked whether I needed water.

"I need the toilet."

She took me there. It was a small bathroom halfway down the corridor, clean, without a lock on the inside. When I asked why, she said it was for safety.

"Whose?"

She looked tired. "I don't make those decisions."

"Who does?"

"Jessie, please."

She stood outside while I washed my hands. I stared into the bathroom mirror, making ordinary faces to prove I could still make them. Angry. Frightened. Ridiculous. The woman in the glass obeyed.

Back in the assessment room, Quinn had arrived. She asked Sarah to wait outside.

"We begin with some basic recall," she said. "Your name, your age, where you live."

I answered. Jessie Alton. Twenty-one. Twenty-four Cresswell Road.

"Who lives with you?"

"Ruth and Victor."

"Your parents?"

"That's what they say."

"What would you say?"

I looked at my reflection in the broad panel. It was dimmer than the bathroom mirror, like a window after dark.

"I don't know."

Quinn wrote something. Her pen made an unusually loud sound on the paper.

She asked about work. I told her the supermarket's name, my manager, how many days I worked. She asked about my last birthday. I remembered a cake with white icing and a necklace Ruth had put in a box. I did not wear the necklace. It had a little silver letter J on it, and every time I touched it I felt as though someone had fastened a label around my neck.

"And the birthday before that?"

I pictured the same cake. Was it the same birthday, or had Ruth bought two alike? I could not tell.

"We don't need to force anything," Quinn said.

Then she asked the same question in another way.

"Where were you on the fourth of February last year?"

I knew the date before she said it. My birthday. That much was mine. But the room I imagined had no windows, no people, only a cake seen close up.

"I don't remember."

"And two years ago?"

"I said I don't remember."

She put her pen down. "Sometimes you can approach a memory through feeling rather than fact. Close your eyes."

"I'd rather keep them open."

"Then listen."

The headphones were unnecessary; a speaker somewhere above the panel played three notes. The tune from the bridge. My fingers tightened on the paper so quickly that it crackled.

"You recognise it," Quinn said.

"Where did you get that?"

"It was used in your earlier sessions."

"What sessions?"

"What do you remember when you hear it?"

I wanted to stand. Instead I watched my face in the glass because it seemed safer to watch something than let something happen inside me.

The image moved.

Not much. Just the corners of my mouth. A small smile formed before I had decided to smile at all.

I stopped breathing.

"What do you see?" Quinn asked.

I lifted my left hand. In the glass, the other woman lifted hers too. Almost at the same time. Almost was the part I could not stop seeing.

"Is that a screen?"

"What makes you ask?"

"She smiled."

"Sometimes our expressions become visible before we're conscious of them."

I scratched the base of my thumb. The scar was there, on my skin. In the glass it looked blurred, then suddenly clear.

"I want to stop."

Quinn waited a beat too long.

"We've barely begun."

I held up the paper. "You said I could."

The sound stopped. My reflection brightened slightly, as if somebody had changed the light behind it. Quinn stood and opened the door.

"We'll return to it when you're ready."

I rose slowly. My legs were steadier than they had been that morning, but something inside me had become much less steady. If the glass was showing me something that was not

happening, Quinn knew. If my mind was doing it, Quinn knew that too. In either case she had asked what I saw and then refused to tell me what she had seen.

Sarah walked me back. I stopped at the bathroom.

"Again?"

"Please."

This time I did not make faces. I stood very still, then raised one finger, then two, then scratched the scar. The mirror followed without hesitation.

When I came out, Sarah was watching the corridor clock.

"Was that glass in there a screen?"

"It's equipment."

"What kind?"

"Dr Quinn explains the assessments."

She sounded ashamed. I wanted to know whether shame made her useful or merely easier to be angry with.

In my room I wrote: The bathroom mirror works. The assessment mirror doesn't always.

Then I crossed out doesn't work and replaced it with showed something different.

That was what I knew. Everything else had to wait.