

WRITTEN IN HER VEINS

The future was written here.

POLLYANNA BRUCE

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Revised and expanded edition.

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PROLOGUE

The woman at the table

The girl arrived with seawater in her shoes and no pulse on the monitor.

Dr Malik had already reached for the emergency trolley when she sat up.

"Please don't shock me," she said. "Last time it stopped the clock."

Above the theatre door, the second hand juddered. It advanced twice, retreated once, then hung at twelve. Malik checked the leads. There was a heart beating beneath the girl's ribs. He could feel it through his fingers. The monitor showed a straight green line.

Under her skin, something moved.

He had seen bruises spreading and veins collapsing. He had never seen letters. They travelled from the inside of her wrist towards the elbow, luminous and precise, a sentence written where no pen could reach.

THE FUTURE WAS WRITTEN HERE.

"Can you see those?" he asked the woman beside him.

She wore a grey cardigan, a visitor's badge with its name rubbed away, and the calm expression of someone who had endured the same emergency too often. Her left wrist carried a pale crescent scar.

"The pattern, yes," she said. "Not the words. Only she can read those."

The girl turned her head. "Where's Lewis?"

"Outside," said the woman. "For the moment."

Malik reached for the wall telephone. There was no dial tone. He noticed that the red stain on his cuff had vanished. It returned when he looked away and looked back.

"What is happening?"

"What date is it?" the woman asked.

"The twelfth of March."

"And the year?"

"2038."

For the first time, her composure broke. She looked at the door as though something large had just arrived on the other side.

"Then we haven't much time."

The girl's fingers closed around Malik's wrist.

"Don't let her make me forget," she whispered.

He looked down. A second sentence had formed beneath the first.

THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME YOU HAVE ASKED.

PART ONE: THE WRITTEN FUTURE

CHAPTER 1

Eight missing minutes

Chelsea Bently was nineteen, late for a Sunday media workshop and certain that somebody had eaten the last of her cereal.

The extra session had been her idea. She needed equipment for a student documentary, and Nora had opened the room for anyone willing to spend a Sunday working. Chelsea had imagined gratitude would make getting out of bed easier. On 5 November, gratitude had failed.

The empty box stood in the cupboard with the careful innocence of an object put back by a guilty man. Her father had done the same thing with milk, bread and, once, a packet of batteries. An empty container, apparently, postponed the obligation to replace its contents.

"Dad."

He sat on the sofa in yesterday's shirt. The television was replaying an episode of *EastEnders*. On the screen, somebody shouted about a betrayal. In the flat, nobody had the energy.

"Dad, did you finish it?"

"Finish what?"

She held up the box.

"I'll get some later."

"You said that yesterday."

He glanced at the kitchen clock. "Yesterday was a busy day."

It had not been. Chelsea had returned from her Saturday shift at the café to find him in the same chair, holding the same glass. She had not counted how much he drank. Counting would have meant accepting responsibility for what came after the number.

She put the box down, too carefully.

"There's toast," he said.

"There's bread. Toast involves somebody doing something."

His face tightened. For a moment she thought he might get up. Instead he turned the volume down, which was the nearest they usually came to a conversation.

"I'm going to be late," she said.

"Text when you get there, Chels."

He always said that. He had not always said it. When she was younger, he had made pancakes, checked her spelling and danced with her in the kitchen to embarrass her mother. After Amelia died, his concern had narrowed to arrivals. Let me know when you're there. Let me know when you're home. As though knowing her location could prevent whatever had happened to his wife.

Chelsea pulled on her coat. The clock read 07:03.

At the door, she realised she had forgotten her college pass. She went back to the kitchen.

The clock read 07:11.

Her father was standing beside the sink. A plate lay broken at his feet.

"You were on the sofa," she said.

He looked at her, then at the clock.

"I got up."

"Just now?"

His hand was shaking. He put it in his pocket.

"You said you were late."

Chelsea found her pass under a supermarket receipt. Outside, the stairwell smelled of somebody else's breakfast. She hurried down three flights and tried to remember the walk from the front door to the kitchen. There should have been footsteps, a thought about her missing pass, perhaps a glance at her phone.

There was nothing.

At the bus stop, Lewis Mercer was leaning against the shelter with a coffee in each hand. One was for her. He looked pleased to have predicted something as manageable as thirst.

"You look like you've murdered somebody," he said.

"Only in a responsible, imaginary way."

"Good. I can't afford bail."

Lewis was twenty-three, doing a technical media course after abandoning two jobs and a different college. He had a crooked smile, a knack for fixing equipment that its owners had given up on, and an ability to turn concern into a joke just before it became embarrassing. Chelsea liked him. She had spent several months making that sound like an inconvenience.

He gave her the coffee. His thumb was grazed.

"What happened?"

"Fight with a cupboard. Cupboard won on points."

"You need a hobby that doesn't involve losing."

"I've got college."

The bus appeared at the corner. On the shelter glass, somebody had scratched a sentence beneath an advertisement for a holiday neither of them could afford.

TIME DOESN'T HEAL. IT LOOPS.

Chelsea moved closer. The grooves looked new. There was pale plastic dust in the lower curve of the last letter.

"Chels?"

Lewis was watching her over the lid of his cup.

"Have you seen that before?"

His smile disappeared.

"It's just graffiti."

The bus driver opened the doors. Chelsea boarded, found a seat and looked back through the window. Lewis was still on the pavement. He touched the scratched sentence with the thumb he claimed to have injured on a cupboard.

Then he climbed aboard.

The bus lurched at the first junction. Coffee splashed through the opening in her lid and landed on her coat. Lewis produced a tissue before she could start swearing.

"You came prepared."

"I know the driver. His relationship with corners is complicated."

She dabbed at the stain. An elderly man across the aisle held a bunch of chrysanthemums wrapped in supermarket cellophane. Every time the bus braked, he steadied them with both hands. Chelsea wondered who they were for. Somebody waiting at home, perhaps. Somebody who would be pleased he had remembered.

"You had a bad night?" Lewis asked.

She could tell him about her father. About the plate on the floor. About eight minutes disappearing from a journey of twelve steps. The more she considered saying it aloud, the less reasonable it sounded.

"I need a job that pays enough to move out."

"The café hiring more people?"

"The café thinks paying me for the hours I already do is generous."

He looked at her college bag. "What about your documentary? The housing one. You could enter it for the student prize."

"I haven't finished the interviews."

"I'll help with the sound."

"You haven't heard it. The sound's fine."

"Then I'll stand nearby looking useful."

It was precisely the sort of offer that made it difficult to keep liking him in a manageable way. She looked out of the window so he would not see the change in her expression.

The man with the flowers pressed the stop button. Before getting up, he counted the stems. Once, then again.

There were six on his lap. In the reflection of the window, Chelsea could see seven.

She turned sharply towards the glass. The bus jolted, the man rose, and the extra flower vanished into the movement.

"What?" Lewis asked.

"Nothing."

It was the first lie she told him that morning, and the only one she intended.

CHAPTER 2

The broadcast

Nora Keane believed journalism began with learning to ask a question you did not already know the answer to.

Chelsea believed it began with being allowed near the college's one working camera. They were both disappointed at the Sunday workshop.

"You've all filmed an interview," Nora told the class. "Now you'll check whether anything the person told you was true."

A groan went round the media room.

"Yes," Nora said. "Facts. A terrible intrusion into the creative process."

She switched on the television to show a local news segment. The screen flickered through an advertisement, a weather map and a field of white interference. Lewis, who had come in to repair the sound desk, reached behind it to check the cable.

The interference cleared.

Chelsea saw a woman standing in rain beside an excavation site. She wore a dark blue coat and held a microphone. Her hair was shorter than Chelsea's. A fine scar crossed her eyebrow.

It was her face.

Not somebody who looked like her. Her. The slight asymmetry in her mouth, the freckle under her left eye, the expression she made when she was concentrating and trying not to look frightened.

"The cabinet was recovered beneath the former Rutherford facility," the woman said. "Claims that the timber is prehistoric remain disputed. Experts now believe the samples were contaminated."

Chelsea's coffee tipped against her notebook.

Below the woman, a caption read CHELSEA BENTLY. The date in the corner was 12 MARCH 2038.

Ten years ahead.

"Could somebody turn that up?" Chelsea asked.

Her own older voice continued.

"Authorities have urged residents to remain indoors while the restoration procedure is completed."

Behind her, two workers wheeled a tall wooden cabinet across a concrete floor. For an instant its door swung open. The camera image stretched, like an elastic band pulled too far.

The woman looked away from the interviewer and directly into the lens.

"Lewis," she said. "Don't give him the key."

The picture snapped back to the local news. A councillor was discussing parking charges.

Nobody laughed. Nora reached for the remote, replayed the recording and found only the councillor.

"What did you see?" Chelsea asked the room.

One student said a coat. Another said a tall wooden box. Two insisted there had been no change at all. Nobody except Lewis had heard his name.

"There was somebody who looked like you," Nora said carefully. "Let's establish what happened before we decide what it means."

"It was me."

"I saw your face. I didn't see the caption."

Chelsea turned to Lewis. He had both hands braced against the sound desk.

"You heard it."

"I heard enough."

"Enough for what?"

He pulled the power cable out of the television.

For one more second, the screen stayed lit.

The cabinet stood in an empty room. A hand pressed against its door from the inside.

Then everything went dark.

Nora took Chelsea into her office and offered water, practical kindness, the name of the student support officer. Chelsea almost accepted the suggestion that a technical fault had somehow become a shared mistake. Almost.

Nora's office wall held a photograph of two young women in graduation gowns. One was Nora. Chelsea pointed at the other.

"Your sister?"

Nora followed her finger. Her expression changed.

"I don't know."

She took the photograph down. The two women had their arms around each other. Their faces were similar enough for the question to have been ordinary.

"I've had that for years," Nora said. "Why don't I know who that is?"

Chelsea looked towards the closed door.

Outside, Lewis was making a telephone call in a voice she had never heard him use.

"It started," he said. "And she saw the date."

Nora opened the office door while the call was still going. Lewis ended it before she reached the corridor. He offered an excuse about a damaged microphone and walked away with it in his hand.

Nora did not follow him. She returned to the office, put the graduation photograph flat on her desk and made herself look at it.

"I know my sister," she said. "I know I have a sister. But I can't make the feeling attach to the person in that picture."

Chelsea sat opposite her. Nora had taught them that emotion was not evidence. Watching her face now, Chelsea understood that evidence did not make emotion expendable either.

"Should I call someone?"

"In a moment. First I want to write down exactly what I can remember."

They returned to the media room together. Nora asked each student to make a separate note before discussing the screen with anyone else. She collected the notes without reading them aloud.

One student wrote that the woman had been speaking at a hospital. Another wrote that there were white cliffs behind her. Chelsea had seen a concrete excavation, and now she could no longer be absolutely sure how much coastline there had been.

That frightened her differently from the face. A recording should settle what had happened. Instead the recording settled something that had not.

Nora checked the sound desk's second recorder. It had captured a low hum and the ordinary rustle of the class. At the moment when the woman had said Lewis's name, a burst of interference filled both channels.

"Someone could have played another source into the television," Nora said. "That would explain some things. It wouldn't explain all of them."

She saved the files to two separate drives.

"I'm not telling you to believe it was nothing, Chelsea. I'm telling you not to hand somebody the right to explain it just because you're scared."

Later, Chelsea would remember that as the most useful thing anybody had said before they reached the coast.

CHAPTER 3

The drawer

Lewis was gone by the time Chelsea left Nora's office.

He sent a message an hour later: Family thing. Sorry. I'll explain.

She replied: Explain now.

The message remained unread.

At home, her father had bought cereal. The bag stood on the counter beside milk and a bunch of daffodils, a collection of small repairs which made her more uneasy than the empty box had.

"Who died?" she asked.

He winced.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean - "

"I know."

For once the television was off. He looked almost sober.

"Did something happen at college?"

"Why?"

"You didn't text."

She had not. She told him about the broadcast while putting the milk away. By keeping her back turned, she could say the impossible words without watching him decide she was unwell.

When she mentioned the cabinet, a glass struck the sink.

"Dad?"

"Stay away from it."

"It's on television. How am I supposed to stay away from television?"

He took her wrist. Not hard, but abruptly enough to frighten her. He pushed her sleeve back, studying the skin.

"Have you noticed anything?"

"Let go."

He released her immediately.

"Sorry."

"What would I have noticed?"

He looked at the daffodils. "Sometimes stress can - "

"Don't do that. Don't start a sentence you can't finish."

His mouth trembled. It made him look older than the drinking did.

"Your mother kept a roomful of things she shouldn't have brought home. I should have cleared it."

Amelia's study was really the small spare bedroom. Chelsea had slept there as a child whenever she was ill, on a mattress beside the desk, while her mother worked. After the funeral, David had shut the door and put a bookcase in front of it. He claimed there was nowhere else for the bookcase to go.

Chelsea moved it that evening.

Her father did not help. He did not stop her either.

Dust softened everything inside. On the desk sat a mug with WORLD'S BEST MUM printed on it. The handle had been repaired with yellowed glue. Chelsea remembered choosing it in a shop. She could not remember Amelia receiving it.

There were notebooks, old payslips and a small radio. She tried the desk drawers. The bottom one caught on something. Under the edge of the desk, her fingertips found a key secured with tape.

Inside the drawer lay a photograph and a sealed envelope.

Amelia stood beside a tall oak cabinet. She looked younger than Chelsea's memories of her, tired and furious. A man in a suit had been cut from the photograph; only his hand remained, resting on the cabinet's top.

On the back, Amelia had written: Hollow Point. Do not let Voss make you think it is a gift.

The envelope was addressed to Chelsea, in handwriting that deteriorated across her name.

She opened it carefully.

My love,

If you have found this because the clocks have started slipping, tell your father. Make him read the whole letter. He will say he cannot remember. That is not an excuse, although some of it is true.

The cabinet does not tell the future. It keeps the futures we refuse.

They will show you me. They will tell you they can bring me back. Ask where the other people go.

I'm sorry.

Mum.

Chelsea read it three times. On the fourth, the page began to blur.

She thought she was crying. Then she realised the light was coming from her arm.

Beneath the skin of her wrist, thin blue lines branched into shapes. She could see each letter, small and perfectly formed.

DO NOT LET HIM FINISH THE SENTENCE.

Her father stood in the doorway.

"What is it saying?" he asked.

The question was worse than surprise would have been.

He did not move closer. Chelsea was grateful for that and angry that there should be anything to be grateful for.

The letter lay open in her lap. Her mother's signature was familiar from school forms and birthday cards, but the words above it belonged to a person Chelsea had never been allowed to know.

She remembered Amelia returning from work once with a box of damaged laboratory goggles. They had spent an afternoon turning the elastic straps into a rescue harness for a stuffed rabbit. Amelia had explained how to check a knot by pulling it

from both sides. Chelsea had wanted to skip the checking and start the rescue.

"The exciting part only works if the boring part works," her mother had told her.

The woman who said that had built something which wrote through her daughter's skin.

Chelsea could not make the two people agree.

"Did she know this would happen?" she asked.

Her father looked at the letter.

"She was afraid of something happening."

"That's different."

"Yes."

The glow withdrew beneath her wrist as though the letters had been rubbed off the underside of her skin. Nothing remained but the fine blue branching of ordinary veins. She pressed two fingers over her pulse. It was fast, but it was hers.

For as long as she could remember, the flat had contained rooms she was not supposed to enter, questions she was not supposed to finish and a dead woman whose possessions were safer than her story. Chelsea looked at the newly opened drawer and understood that her father had not kept the past behind a door. He had kept her there with it.

CHAPTER 4

The man who remembered badly

David Bently sat on the floor of his dead wife's study because Chelsea would not let him return to the sofa.

"Start at the beginning," she said.

He rubbed his palms over his knees.

"I don't have the beginning."

"Then start with what you have."

He had a name. Elias Voss. He had an address, the same one on the photograph. He had the memory of Amelia coming home with blood on her cuff and claiming she had scratched herself on a door. He had a hospital corridor where the fluorescent lights made a low, persistent noise.

He could not tell Chelsea the date.

"It was when you were little," he said. "Four."

"Fifteen years ago?"

"Yes. No. There are pieces that don't fit."

"Did Mum work at Rutherford?"

He nodded.

"And the cabinet?"

"An instrument. That's what she called it. Later she stopped calling it anything."

Chelsea put the letter between them.

"What happened to her?"

"A fire."

"That's what you've always said. I want to know what happened."

"A fire at the facility. They gave me a report."

"Did you see her?"

He looked down.

The funeral returned to Chelsea in fragments: a coat too hot for the room, a neighbour holding her hand, an empty space she had understood without having a word for it. The coffin had been closed.

"Did you identify her body?"

"They said there wasn't - "

He stopped. His face had gone grey.

"Dad?"

"I know what you're thinking. But she didn't come back. Whatever else they did, she didn't come back."

She took the notebook closest to her. Most of it contained graphs she did not understand. Between two pages, she found a folded drawing. A house, three people and a tall blue rectangle. Above the rectangle, a child's uneven letters read MUM'S DOOR.

Chelsea recognised her own old way of making a capital M. She did not recognise the drawing.

"Was I there?"

Her father made a sound like somebody being struck.

"I tried to keep you out of it."

"That isn't an answer."

"It's the only one I can get hold of."

She was angry enough to want to disbelieve him. Then he pulled up his sleeve.

A pale crescent scar lay inside his wrist.

"Sometimes I wake up with a memory of you drowning," he said. "Sometimes it's a memory of carrying you into a hospital. Sometimes you're standing in the kitchen asking for cereal, and I'm certain that I've already watched you die. I know those memories can't all be right."

The room seemed to move away from Chelsea.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I wanted one of us to have a life that wasn't built around it."

"You think this has been a life?"

He accepted that without defending himself. It took some of the force out of her anger and left her with something harder to use.

His phone rang.

The number was unknown. He watched it until the ringing stopped. A message arrived a moment later.

David. We both know what the first symptoms mean. Keep her at home. I will come tomorrow. E.V.

Chelsea photographed the message, the letter and the notebook pages. Her father watched her work.

"You won't stay," he said.

"No."

"Then don't go alone."

She opened Lewis's chat.

He had finally replied.

I'm outside. You deserve an explanation. Please bring the photograph.

Before she went downstairs, Chelsea found the kitchen clock lying face down beside the sink. Its battery had been removed.

"You took it apart?" she asked.

Her father nodded.

"Was it broken?"

"I thought if it stopped, I could stop listening to it."

There were things she might have said about needing help. She had said them before, carefully, angrily, in tears. They had usually ended with promises made after midnight and forgotten by breakfast. She wanted the notebooks to be something different. She wanted a problem which, once named, would consent to being solved.

David put the battery back on the counter.

"I don't want you to think the drinking was something they made me do," he said. "Whatever else has happened, I did that."

She looked at him. It was the first time he had named it without waiting for her to accuse him.

"Then do something about it."

"I need to get through tonight."

"And tomorrow you'll need to get through tomorrow."

He leaned against the cupboard.

"I know."

She did not hug him. She did not tell him it was all right. On her way out, she moved the daffodils into a jug of water because they were going to die in the bag, and because anger did not make her want every living thing in the room to suffer.

CHAPTER 5

Lewis's terms

Lewis waited beside the bins in the courtyard, which made his request to be taken seriously difficult to honour.

Chelsea held the photograph under the security light.

"You knew her."

"I knew who she was."

"You called somebody after the broadcast."

"Yes."

"Who?"

He breathed out slowly.

"Voss."

She started to turn away. He stepped aside rather than blocking her.

"If you go back upstairs, I won't follow you. But he's coming here, and there's something you need to know first."

"Everything you say needs to start with why you lied."

Lewis nodded. He seemed grateful to be given a sentence he could use.

"My brother died when I was fifteen. Ben. He was eleven. There was a fire in the flat above ours. I got out. He didn't."

Chelsea knew he had a brother. He had mentioned Ben once, in the past tense, and changed the subject so completely that she had understood not to ask again.

"Voss found me last year," Lewis said. "He said there was research that could help people who'd suffered a particular kind of loss. He knew things about Ben nobody should have known."

"What things?"

"The tune he whistled when he was nervous. The name he gave his rabbit. What I said to him that night."

He looked towards the light above the door.

"I thought it was a scam. Then he showed me a recording. Ben at our kitchen table. Not an old recording. He was talking about a football match that happened after he died."

"Did you check it?"

"I wanted it to be true. That's not the same as checking."

Voss had asked him to enrol at the college, take the technical course and watch a student whose mother's research was important to his project. Chelsea Bently. He had said the girl was in danger. He had said Lewis could help her and Ben at the same time.

"I wasn't meant to get close," Lewis said.

"So the coffees, the messages - "

"At first I was looking for a reason to talk to you. After that I was looking for reasons to keep talking."

"That doesn't make it better."

"I know."

She studied him. He looked tired, frightened and very young. It was infuriating to discover that the person who had deceived her could still be those things.

"The graffiti," she said.

He held up his grazed thumb.

"I woke up this morning with the words in my head. I thought if I left them somewhere I'd stop dreaming them."

"What else do you dream?"

"You. A glass wall. Sometimes I'm old. Sometimes you tell me not to open a door, and I do it anyway."

He took a folded sheet from his pocket. A road map, marked in red.

"Hollow Point. He gave me the address as an emergency meeting place. He's moved equipment back into the old facility.

There's a recovery wing underground. It's supposed to be abandoned, but it isn't."

Chelsea did not take the map yet.

"And this is another instruction? Get me there?"

"He told me to keep you here."

"Convenient."

"Yes. That's the problem with lying. You can tell the truth afterwards and it still sounds useful."

For the first time that evening, she almost smiled.

She took his phone. He unlocked it and let her read his messages with Voss. There were reports about her timetable, her mood, her father's drinking. The last instruction was clear.

Do not allow her to approach the cabinet before I arrive. The key is with you for safekeeping, not for use.

"What key?" she asked.

Lewis reached inside his shirt. On a chain hung a flat metal disc scored with concentric circles.

She remembered the broadcast. Don't give him the key.

"You should keep that out of his hands," she said.

"I intend to."

"And Lewis? If you're doing this because you think I'll forgive you - "

"I'm doing it because he made me part of something, and I should have asked what it was."

Upstairs, her father appeared at the window. He watched them, his face a pale square behind the glass.

Chelsea lifted her phone and texted him.

I'm leaving in the morning. Read Mum's notebooks. Photograph everything. Don't answer the door to Voss.

After a moment, he held up his own phone in reply.

I will.

CHAPTER 6

Evidence

Nora met them at the college before it opened. She had been awake most of the night.

"Her name is Tamsin," she said, before Chelsea could apologise for the early call. "She's my younger sister. She lives in Bristol. I rang her at two in the morning and asked whether she existed. She was understandably annoyed."

Lewis put the sound-room recording on Nora's desk.

"She remembers you?" Chelsea asked.

"Perfectly. I have emails, birthday cards, a photograph of us on a beach when I was nine. But yesterday, for eleven minutes, she was a stranger."

Nora had written the length of the gap on a sheet of paper. Beside it were other observations: clock stall, pressure in ears, smell of hot metal.

"I called a doctor," she said. "I'm following that up. But the symptoms started when your future face appeared on a disconnected television, so I'm also following this up."

Chelsea showed her Amelia's letter.

Nora read it, then read it again.

"This is not permission to disappear into an abandoned building," she said.

"Would you come with us?"

"I have no useful qualifications for that. I do have a car and a strong objection to two students investigating it without anybody knowing where they've gone."

Lewis looked away at the word students. Chelsea did not correct it.

They made copies of everything. Nora emailed a package to Tamsin and asked her to save it without opening the video. She printed the letter, the photograph and a timeline. She wrote down the morning's date: 6 November 2028.

The broadcast had shown 12 March 2038. Nearly ten years and four months ahead.

"Actual dates," Nora said. "If we're frightened, we may start remembering things in the wrong order. We need something we can check."

Lewis explained Voss and Ben. Nora asked to see the messages. She asked about payments, addresses and whether anyone else had spoken to him. Her questions were ordinary enough to make the story feel briefly manageable.

"What did Voss say he could do?"

"Restore a lost interval."

"Did he say he could bring your brother back?"

Lewis hesitated.

"Not in those words."

"Then remember that distinction."

They left at eight. On the motorway, Chelsea's phone lost seventeen minutes and then recovered them. Nora's dashboard clock stayed steady. Nora pulled into a service station and made Chelsea eat a sandwich.

"You can't refuse breakfast because reality is behaving badly," she said. "It will still be behaving badly on an empty stomach."

Lewis paid for three teas. He left one untouched.

"Ben drank it with six sugars," he said, looking at the cup. "Mum used to say his teeth would fall out before secondary school."

Chelsea felt the old urge to comfort him. She let the silence remain instead. He did not need a version of events where what he had done became understandable enough to disappear.

Near Dover, the road narrowed. The sea appeared between buildings, grey and active. For a moment Chelsea saw a wave standing still, its crest suspended like broken glass. She closed her eyes. When she opened them, the water moved normally.

The facility lay beyond the village, at the end of a lane bordered by bare hedges. Its sign had lost several letters. A newer notice advertised a forthcoming redevelopment. No contractor's name appeared.

Nora stopped outside the gate.

A security camera turned towards them.

"Abandoned," she said. "Of course."

Lewis held up the metal disc. The gate clicked open.

Chelsea's wrist began to burn.

Under her skin, the letters formed a fresh instruction.

ONE OF YOU HAS ALREADY BEEN HERE TODAY.

Nora stayed in the driver's seat for a moment, looking at the open gate.

"Before we go in, I need to say something. Nobody earns my trust by being more frightened than I am. If a person tells us we must act quickly and can't explain why, we wait until they can."

Lewis touched the chain beneath his collar.

"And if waiting is the dangerous bit?"

"Then they can explain that first."

Chelsea looked at the building. A high window had been replaced with new glass. Behind it stood a row of narrow white objects. She could not tell whether they were blinds, shelving or the backs of people wearing coats.

She took out her phone and tried to send their location to her father. The progress indicator turned without finishing.

Nora took a folded paper from the glove compartment and wrote the time, registration number and address on it. She tucked it beneath the windscreen wiper, facing inwards.

"If we come back to the car and that says anything else, we don't get in without checking."

Lewis stared at her.

"You've thought about this."

"I teach students who edit recordings to make interviews more interesting. I've thought about unreliable evidence for years. I hadn't expected the car to contribute."

Chelsea almost laughed. It was good to discover there was still a small space in her for that.

They crossed the courtyard together. The camera followed them. At the entrance, Nora wedged a stone against the door before letting it close.

The stone remained visible for three steps into reception. On the fourth, Chelsea glanced back.

It was on the other side of the glass.

She did not mention it until Nora asked where it had gone. Both women had seen the same thing. For the moment, that was better than seeing different ones.

CHAPTER 7

Hollow Point

The reception hall smelled of wet plaster and fresh coffee.

That was what unsettled Chelsea most. Not the peeling paint or the long marks down the walls, but the mug on a recently cleaned desk. Someone had eaten a sandwich there. Half the wrapper remained in a bin.

"Keep the entrance behind us," Nora said.

She photographed the gate, their route and a fire plan attached to the wall. The floor below reception was marked STORAGE. A rectangle beneath it had been covered with a white sticker.

Lewis touched the edge of the sticker. "Recovery wing."

"You saw that on a plan?"

"Voss said - "

He stopped himself.

Chelsea walked towards the lift. Its doors were open. A maintenance sign hung from the controls, but the button for the lower floor glowed blue.

On the wall beside it stood a monitor.

The screen showed the three of them in the hall. Nora had her camera raised. Lewis was looking at the lift. Chelsea stood beneath the monitor.

Then the Chelsea on the screen turned left.

A timestamp appeared: 10:42.

Nora checked her watch. 10:39.

"We don't follow her," she said.

They waited. On the screen, Chelsea walked through a side door. Lewis followed. Nora remained in the hall, calling after

them without sound. The image broke into thin horizontal bands.

Behind the side door, something knocked twice.

Lewis took a step towards it.

"No," Chelsea said.

The second hand on Nora's watch continued to move. Forty seconds passed. Then another forty. The image disappeared. Nothing had forced them to follow it.

Chelsea let out a breath she had been holding too long.

"It's not fixed," she said.

"Or that wasn't the future," Nora replied.

A woman's voice came from the reception speaker.

"Good. You waited."

Lewis lifted his head.

"Who's there?"

"Take the stairs. The lift knows the wrong arrival."

"That isn't an answer."

"No. It's an instruction. You can check it first."

Nora pushed a wheeled chair into the lift and tapped the lower-floor button with a pen. The doors closed. There was no mechanical sound, no cable vibration. Ten seconds later, they opened again.

The chair was rusted. Its seat had split along the seam. A thick layer of dust coated its arms.

Nora stepped back.

"Stairs," she said.

The stairwell door was wedged open with a brick. They descended one floor, then another. Chelsea counted the landings because she wanted to know if the building cheated. At the third, the air grew warmer.

The woman waiting there had grey hair pinned loosely behind her head and a cardigan the colour of dust. She might have been seventy. She carried a bunch of ordinary keys.

"Chelsea," she said.

"How do you know my name?"

"I have the advantage of having met you."

Lewis stared at her.

"In a dream," he said.

"It wasn't a dream."

Nora raised her phone. "Your name?"

The woman hesitated.

"Ada."

"Surname?"

"Not a useful one."

"Then you can start by explaining the chair."

Ada looked towards the stairwell.

"The lift crossed an interval already stored in the cabinet. It carried the chair through eighteen years of neglect. We haven't eighteen years to undo that, so we'll use the stairs."

Chelsea pushed her sleeve up.

"And this?"

Ada looked at the blue branching lines. She did not attempt to read them.

"The cabinet has started using you to address its records. It knows your blood because your mother taught it."

"Where is my mother?"

The old woman's face changed. The change was small, but Chelsea recognised the effort behind it.

"Dead," Ada said. "I won't begin by lying to you about that."

CHAPTER 8

The cabinet

They passed a door marked TREATMENT A, a locked records room and a row of observation windows with their blinds lowered. Somewhere a pipe knocked in irregular bursts. Chelsea counted the knocks and found the same rhythm repeating in her pulse.

"What is this place?" Nora asked.

"A laboratory," Ada said. "And the space the laboratory taught an instrument to imagine. Some rooms are real. Some are retained from earlier attempts."

"Attempts at what?"

"Changing a decision after somebody has suffered its consequences."

They reached a circular chamber. The cabinet stood behind glass, tall enough that Chelsea would have needed a chair to reach its top. Its wood was black in places and polished in others, as though many people had rested their hands there. The carved circles were not decoration. Thin metal channels ran inside them, disappearing into the frame.

A new electrical cable led from the wall to the cabinet's base.

"So it's a machine," Lewis said.

"Partly. Your mother built the interface. Nobody at Rutherford built what it connects to."

"What connects to it?"

"An anomaly beneath the cliff. We found it before we understood what it did. Understanding arrived rather late."

Chelsea remembered her future report. Claims that the timber is prehistoric remain disputed.

"It's not ten thousand years old?"

"The wood isn't. Some samples came back older than they should have been because they had spent centuries in retained intervals. Voss preferred the oldest result. It sounded more impressive."

Nora wrote that down.

Ada put her palm against the glass. A mechanism clicked and the chamber opened.

"Don't touch the handle," she said.

Inside the cabinet, a pale membrane stretched between the side walls. It looked like glass until it moved. Beyond it, Chelsea could see a kitchen with yellow curtains.

Her childhood kitchen.

Amelia stood at the sink. She wore a striped apron Chelsea had forgotten entirely. There was flour on her cheek. She looked up and smiled.

"There you are."

Chelsea moved before deciding to. Lewis caught her sleeve, not her wrist, and held on.

"Ask her something," he said.

Amelia dried her hands.

"You're late, sweetheart."

"What happened to you?" Chelsea asked.

"I'm here. You can come in."

"What happened at the laboratory?"

The smile remained unchanged.

"You're late, sweetheart."

Chelsea felt the invitation as a pressure behind her eyes. There were things she could ask: why her mother had not come home, whether she had been in pain, whether she had known that the kitchen dancing would become something Chelsea could barely remember.

Instead she said, "What did you call Dad when he burned the pancakes?"

Amelia's face blurred.

Ada stepped between Chelsea and the cabinet. She closed its door.

The pressure vanished.

Chelsea folded against the wall and began to shake.

"A stored scene," Ada said. "Not a living person. It can repeat. It can't know what the scene didn't contain."

"You let me see it."

"I wanted you to test an answer before Voss gave you one."

"You could have told me."

Ada did not defend herself.

Nora crouched beside Chelsea. "Look at me. The room is here. The floor is here. You don't need to answer anything else yet."

Lewis stood near the cabinet, staring at the seam of its closed door.

"Did he show you Ben like that?" Chelsea asked.

He nodded.

For the first time she understood the size of the trap. It did not need to offer a believable scientific explanation. It needed to offer one person, alive, in a room you could almost enter.

From the corridor came a man's voice.

"Ada has always been selective with demonstrations."

Elias Voss stepped into the chamber carrying a leather folder. He wore a coat suited to a board meeting, not an abandoned laboratory. His hair was white, his face carefully rested.

"Chelsea," he said. "You look very much like your mother."

CHAPTER 9

The offer

Voss set his folder on a workbench and took off his gloves. He did each thing slowly enough to imply that everybody else was rushing.

"You must have questions," he said.

"We can start with why you're recruiting people to spy on me."

"Your mother entrusted me with a responsibility."

"Her letter says the opposite."

"Your mother was frightened when she wrote it."

Chelsea looked at Ada. The older woman had moved between the cabinet and Voss. Neither seemed surprised by the other's presence.

"Is everyone here planning to tell me what my mother meant?" Chelsea asked. "Because I'd rather see what she actually wrote."

Nora held up her phone.

"And hear answers we can keep."

Voss looked at her as though a chair had spoken.

"This is a private facility."

"It has a redevelopment notice and no working reception. Your gate let us in."

"That doesn't confer access rights."

"Then escort us out. With an explanation for the future footage, the altered chair and whatever is happening to her arm."

He glanced at Chelsea's wrist. It was a doctor's glance, measuring a symptom, and she hated it more than his smile.

"A dormant interface has reactivated," he said. "We disturbed the field during a controlled excavation. The resulting effects extend beyond this building. I would prefer you not to leave before we have stabilised it."

"You mean we can't leave," Lewis said.

"I mean it may be unsafe."

Ada folded her arms. "He means the external doors are already on a retained interval. We can leave, but we won't arrive when we intend."

Voss's mouth tightened.

"Alarmist language helps nobody."

Chelsea wanted to test the doors. Nora wanted to test the doors too. They retraced their route, with Voss following and Ada bringing up the rear. At reception, the coffee was still warm.

Outside the glass entrance, snow lay across the courtyard.

It had been raining when they arrived. Now the gate was half buried. A blue sign at the lane read PROPERTY OF RUTHERFORD FOUNDATION, 2031.

Nora pressed her hand against the glass.

"If I walk through that?"

"You would enter a stored interval," Ada said. "It contains three days of February 2031. People caught in it have difficulty finding the exit because they can't remember entering."

"And if we break the glass?"

"The glass isn't the boundary."

Voss watched their disappointment without appearing to enjoy it. Chelsea had expected a villain to enjoy it. His restraint was more troubling. He looked like a man whose preferred solution had been vindicated.

"We can open a reliable exit," he said. "With Chelsea's cooperation."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Complete the registration your mother began."