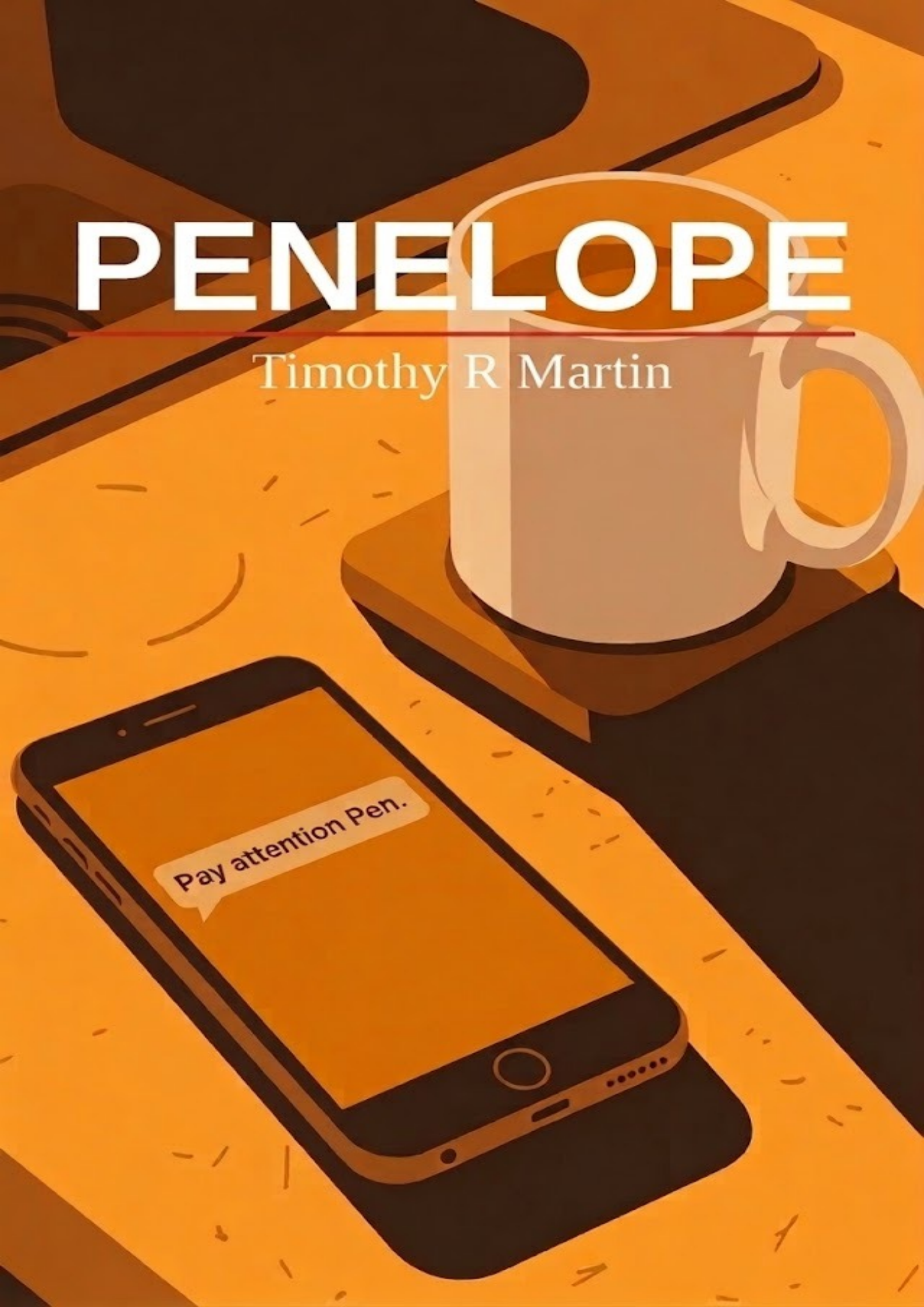

PENELOPE
Timothy R Martin
Pay attention Pen.

PENELOPE

Penelope

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Prologue

In the dream her mother was always close. Close enough that Penelope could see the particular way she held her hands when she was standing still. But when she reached out, her mother was already moving away, not quickly, not turning from her, just receding, as though she were standing on something that moved while Penelope stood on something that didn't. The darkness around them was complete. She reached again. Her mother's face was still turned toward her. Still looking. Just always a little further than her hand could go.

She woke to the sound of the house settling.

For a moment she lay still, listening. The room was dark. Outside, wind moved through the trees with the slow insistence of something that had been at it for hours and intended to continue. Penelope was twelve years old, and her mother had been gone for four months, and the dream came back whenever it wanted to, which was often.

She pulled back the duvet and got up. The sheepskin rug felt soft beneath her feet as her eyes began to adjust.

The house was dark, and darker still going down, the stairs disappearing into it a few treads below her so that she went by memory and the flat of her hand on the wall. At the bottom the hallway ran black in both directions except for one thing: the thin line of light under the study door. She had expected it. Her father kept hours that suggested he either did not require sleep or had decided, at some point she had not witnessed, that sleep was a negotiable arrangement. She went toward the light and knocked and pushed the door open in the same motion, which was the understood custom between them.

Henry was at his desk. The monitor cast its green light across the side of his face and across the papers arranged around it in what looked like deliberate order. He turned when she came in, and whatever had been holding his attention was let go of at once.

'Hello, you.' He took her in, the bare feet, the face still half in the dream. 'Hard time sleeping?'

'I had the dream again.' She stood in the doorway. 'She was here. She was right here, but I couldn't reach her.'

'I think I've had a very similar dream to that one too.'

Henry didn't tell her it was only a dream, which Penelope was grateful for without having the word for the gratitude. He just nodded, intent on her words, as she relayed the dream's contents.

Henry pulled a small black rectangle from his computer and placed it in the desk drawer, locking it with a key kept on his keyring, doing so without hurry, the way he purposefully put everything in its place at the end of a day.

‘Come on, I think I know just the thing to help,’ he said. Then he stood and held out his hand, which Penelope took and they went through to the kitchen.

At that hour the kitchen was the warmest room in the house. The Aga kitchen range held its heat regardless of the time and regardless of who was awake to feel it, a low steady warmth that met them at the door like something that had been waiting up. Henry filled the kettle, moving around the kitchen with the ease of a man familiar with his environment.

Penelope sat at the table in her pajamas with her knees drawn up on the chair. The window above the sink was black, the garden invisible behind it, only the two of them reflected in the glass.

‘What were you doing?’ she said. ‘In your office, just now.’

‘Working on an idea.’ Henry got the chamomile down from the shelf where it lived, and a mug, and the small pot of honey she liked. ‘It’s something I’ve been chipping away at for a while.’

‘What kind of idea?’

He thought about how to say it. Henry always thought before he answered her, which was one of the things she loved about him without knowing she loved it, that he never gave her the easy version because she was small.

‘I’m trying to teach a computer to read,’ he said. ‘Properly, I mean. So that it can learn things on its own, the way you do. And then, well maybe one day it will be able to use what it has learned and be useful. I want computers to be able to help people, and maybe if I can get it right they will.’

‘Help people how?’

He set the mug in front of her and sat down across the table, and for a moment he looked less like a man answering a child’s question and more like a man asking one of himself.

‘I’m not entirely sure yet,’ Henry said. ‘That’s rather the point of it. You start because you think something might be possible, and then you begin to see how those possibilities play out.’ He smiled at her. ‘Drink your tea.’

She wrapped both hands around the mug. It was exactly the right temperature, which meant he had been making it for her long enough to know what the right temperature was. The honey was already in it, and Penelope drank and felt the warmth of the kitchen settle over her the way his hand had settled over hers when he led her out of the study.

They sat for a while without talking. Outside, the wind eased. The house grew quiet around them, and her eyes grew heavy in the particular way that meant the dream was finished with her for tonight.

Henry went back up the stairs with her and by the time he pulled the duvet back over her, she was almost already asleep, aware of him only as warmth and presence. The shape of him standing at the door a moment after she had closed her eyes, not moving, just there, the way he was always there, the way she had only lately begun to understand how much it cost him to be.

‘Love you, Pen,’ he said, as much to himself as to her, and closed the door softly, leaving it just slightly ajar in case the dreams came back. And after a while, downstairs, she heard him go back to work.

Chapter One

'The last time you were here we talked about your mother. What do you think she'd say to you about your life now?'

To Penelope, as she felt herself shift in the scruffy overstuffed lounge chair and exhale, it almost seemed like she was observing someone else talking about her life. She'd been seeing the therapist, Sandra, for a few sessions now and kept asking herself why she came back. But there was something about the older woman's demeanour, kind yet firm, that the other therapists she'd seen over the years hadn't really had. Penelope knew that Sandra would challenge her, call her out on her bullshit if she tried to gloss over the reality of things, and for once she valued that. On some level it was the one challenge she actually looked forward to each fortnight.

'I think she'd say I'd settled.'

A pause.

'She wasn't really one for pulling her punches. Didn't sugarcoat things even when she was dying.'

'That must have been hard for a twelve year old to deal with.'

'I don't know. I guess...I honestly don't think about it much...it was a long time ago.' Penelope paused again.

'Maybe I think about it a bit more now. She wasn't much older than I am now.'

Penelope shifted again, looking down at the Nikes that made up part of her stay-at-home-mum outfit, every bit as much of a uniform as those the kids would be wearing at the school gate in under an hour's time.

'It's a lot, huh?' She paused again. 'When my mother does turn up in my thoughts she always seems to ask 'Are you settling dear?'

Penelope drew breath. 'Sometimes I think, maybe she's got a point.'

She exhaled and looked at the ceiling. Telling this virtual stranger, this paid confidante, was easier than being honest with herself. This unassuming older woman had a way of drawing things out of her. Or maybe it was just that Penelope needed someone to listen.

Sandra looked up at the clock on the desk. 'Well, I think that's about time for us today, Penelope. Plenty to think about over the next couple of weeks. I'll see you in a fortnight.'

A statement, not a request. Her mother would have done exactly the same. Maybe that too was part of why she kept coming back.

Sandra's consulting room occupied the ground floor of a Victorian terrace in Hawthorn, the kind of street where the paperbarks stood in

the nature strips peeling quietly to themselves, indifferent to anything that had ever happened to anyone. The room itself was an act of deliberate calm. No screen, no laptop, not so much as a printer. A landline telephone that looked like it had been purchased in 1987 and saw no reason to apologise for this. Bookshelves floor to ceiling, actual books, the kind with broken spines and Post-it notes sticking out at angles. A spider plant on the windowsill doing what spider plants do, which is survive anything.

Penelope had noticed, during her second session, that there was no computer, no wifi router. Not hidden, simply absent. She'd found this both strange and, unexpectedly, a relief. For fifty minutes every fortnight she existed in a room where nothing was watching her. She hadn't told Sandra why she found that comforting. She hadn't quite found the words for it that didn't make her sound like someone who needed significantly more than fortnightly therapy.

Outside she buttoned her jacket against the autumn air and walked the three blocks to where she'd parked, which was not where she'd intended to park but was where she'd ended up after the third street had turned out to have forty-five minute restrictions she'd spotted too late.

Melbourne's relationship with parking was one of the few things that made her miss London, where the situation was equally terrible but at least consistently and honestly so.

Penelope lived in Bellshore, a bayside suburb that had spent the last decade enthusiastically gentrifying itself and was now largely finished with the project. Where once it had been a suburb whose spiritual identity ran to artists, heroin addicts, wannabe rock stars, and women conducting the world's oldest profession with considerably more pragmatism than romance, Bellshore had grown up and gotten respectable. Much to the delight of real estate agents, who would often to be seen gathered like carrion in front of the latest property auction on a weekend morning, their enthusiasm for a deceased estate's exposed brick and period features only slightly less than their enthusiasm for the commission.

Penelope and Lance had moved here seven years ago, their daughter, Freya, was two and the decision had still felt like a choice rather than a fact. The house was a terrace, pale rendered brick, a lemon tree in the back garden that produced more lemons than any household could reasonably absorb and that Lance had at some point decided was charming rather than a problem. It also had a study. This mattered.

The renovation had been ongoing since the week they moved in. Seven years of intention, of samples and quotes and weekends that almost got started. The kitchen tiles were still the ones they'd inherited from the previous owners, which Penelope had long since stopped seeing and Lance had recently taken to mentioning again, in the way he mentioned things when he was building toward a decision he hadn't quite made.

At the school gate the wives of many of those same real estate agents gathered in their Lululemon athleisurewear, running shoes whose sole purpose was the school run rather than actual running, expensive salon hair in ponytails. Nails, jewellery, Apple Watches and iPhones glinting in the autumn sun as they clustered and gossiped and occasionally glanced at their screens with the reflex of people who have been trained to.

Penelope took a breath, checked her watch, her father's Smiths Everest, one Henry had worn every day for thirty years. A tool that told the time and nothing else and expected no gratitude for this. She walked through the gate.

She was hoping Freya would be prompt.

Freya was not prompt. Freya was, in the way of quiet children who inhabit their own interior weather, reliably the last one out of any given room. Penelope stood near the edge of the gathering, not quite part of it, not quite apart from it, the position she'd refined over four years of school gate attendance into something approaching an art form, and waited.

'Penny!'

She turned. Jemima from next door, in the uniform of activewear that suggested a pilates class had recently occurred or was about to, permatanned to a colour that did not naturally occur at this latitude at this time of year, waving with the enthusiasm of someone who has decided you are friends regardless of your position on the matter.

'Lovely day, isn't it?' Jemima fell into step. She had Jocasta by the hand, or rather, Jocasta was permitting herself to be led, which was different. Jocasta was nine and regarded the world with the evaluative calm of someone twice her age conducting an ongoing assessment.

'Beautiful,' said Penelope, which was true. The autumn light in Bellshore had a quality she'd never quite found the English word for. Something about the angle of it, the way it caught the paperbark trunks and turned them silver, made even the most aggressively renovated Victorian terraces look like they deserved to be there.

'Charles was saying we should have you and Lance over for dinner. Properly, I mean, not just a quick drink.'

Jemima smiled. Her teeth were exceptionally even. 'We've finally finished the back extension. You must come and see it.'

'We'd love that,' said Penelope.

Finally finished. Eighteen months from groundbreak to completion, a project that had involved structural engineers, three separate contractors, and the kind of budget that didn't require phoning around for quotes.

Penelope's kitchen tiles had been waiting seven years.

The back extension had also been the subject of considerable noise and several weeks of a large white van parked across their shared driveway in a way that had required three separate conversations with a tradesperson who seemed constitutionally unable to park with consideration for other people. Penelope had at various points attempted to determine what the extension was for. Charles did something in the city, finance-adjacent, he'd said, with the smooth vagueness of someone who has given this answer many times and found that people generally stop asking. Jemima managed various things that she described as projects, which could mean anything and therefore meant nothing.

The extension was at the back of the property, invisible from the street. What Penelope had glimpsed of the plans, during a neighbourly exchange of documents about the shared boundary fence, suggested a space larger than a home gym and smaller than a warehouse. The council had approved it in six weeks, which for Bellshore planning permissions was effectively instantaneous and suggested either an exceptionally straightforward application or, Penelope had found herself thinking in the small hours, something else.

She'd told Lance this. He'd said 'I'm sure they just had their paperwork in order, Penny' and gone back to his phone. She'd said nothing further. Some furniture you just walk around.

Freya appeared at the classroom door, backpack on both shoulders, looking at the middle distance in the way she'd inherited from Penelope without either of them noticing the transfer. She spotted her mother and made her way over with the unhurried purposefulness of a child who has decided that rushing is for other people.

Jocasta, still holding Jemima's hand, watched Freya approach. 'Hi, Freya,' she said, in a tone of pleasant neutrality that managed to contain, within it, an entire social assessment.

'Hi,' said Freya, and stood close to Penelope.

'Freya's such a pretty name,' Jocasta said, to no one in particular. 'It's sort of like a cat's name, isn't it? Like a posh cat.'

A beat of silence, the particular silence of a social grenade.

Jemima laughed. 'Oh, Jocasta.'

Penelope watched her daughter look at the ground. She felt something shift in her chest. Not quite anger, something older than anger and considerably more patient.

'Actually,' Penelope said, pleasantly, 'Freya is a Norse goddess. Goddess of love, war and death, among other things. Quite the combination.' She smiled at Jocasta. 'What does Jocasta mean?'

Jocasta blinked. For the first time since Penelope had met her, the child appeared to have encountered a response she hadn't modelled in advance.

'I'm not sure,' said Jemima.

'Greek myth,' said Penelope. 'Lots of family drama. Worth looking up.' She took Freya's hand.

'Lovely to see you both. We'll look forward to that dinner.'

She walked Freya through the gate and onto the street, and did not look back.

'Mum,' said Freya, after half a block.

'Yes.'

'What does Jocasta mean? Actually.'

Penelope considered this. 'Nothing you need to worry about before you're fifteen.'

Freya processed this. 'Did you just make something up?'

'Absolutely not. I looked it up once, years ago, and decided it was very much information for adults.' This was entirely true. 'Also, for what it's worth, Freya is a brilliant name. And Jocasta is going to spend the rest of her life explaining her parent's choice of name to people who've heard of Oedipus.'

'I don't know what an Oedipus is.'

'Fifteen,' said Penelope. 'All the good mythology at fifteen.'

Freya almost smiled. This was, in Freya's register, approximately the same as someone else laughing.

They walked home through the amber afternoon, and Penelope thought about her mother, and about Sandra's clock on the desk, and about the back extension she still hadn't seen the inside of, and about the fence between their properties that ran warm to the touch on cold nights in a way she couldn't explain and hadn't mentioned to anyone.

She thought about the text she'd received three days ago. Unknown number. Seven words. *Pay attention, Pen. It's time we talked.*

She'd stared at it for a long time. She'd thought: wrong number. She'd thought: spam. She'd thought: no one has called me Pen in fifteen years.

She hadn't replied. She hadn't deleted it either.

Her phone, in her jacket pocket, was silent. She was aware of it the way you're aware of something you've decided not to think about, which is to say: constantly.

Chapter Two

Lance was in the kitchen when she got home, which meant he'd left the office early, which meant either a good day or a bad one. The difference, she'd learned over eleven years, was detectable in the radius of the mess. Good day: jacket over the back of a chair, laptop open, the particular quality of satisfied distraction that came from a campaign landing well. Bad day: jacket on the floor in the hallway, shoes still on, wine already poured.

The jacket was on the back of the chair. She registered this the way you register weather. Automatically, without deciding to.

'Good day?' she said.

'Brilliant, actually.' Lance looked up from the MacBook Pro, which was open on the kitchen bench in the way it always was, as though the kitchen were an extension of the office and the office an extension of the kitchen and the distinction between the two not worth maintaining. 'The Vodafone campaign got greenlit. Full budget.' He smiled, and in the smile was something of the person she'd married. Uncomplicated pleasure, the particular light that came on when a thing he'd made was going to exist in the world.

She put her bag down. 'That's great.'

'How was Sandra?'

'Good. Useful.'

'What do you talk about in there? You never say.'

'That's rather the point of it.' She opened the fridge, considered its contents without enthusiasm, closed it again. 'Where's Freya?'

'Upstairs. She came in, said approximately four words, and went to her room. Standard operating procedure.' He paused. 'She alright?'

'She had a thing at school. With Jocasta from next door.'

Lance made a face. 'That kid gives me the creeps.'

'She's nine.'

'I know. That's what gives me the creeps.' He closed the MacBook. Partially. 'The Vodafone brief is actually interesting, they want something that feels like it's not an ad, you know, more like a conversation—'

'Right.' Penelope was already moving toward the hallway. 'I'll check on Freya.'

Freya was on her bed with a book, face-down on the duvet. She was staring at the ceiling.

'Hey,' said Penelope, from the door.

'Hey.'

'Want to talk about it?'

A pause long enough to be considered. 'Not really.'

'Okay.' Penelope leaned against the doorframe. 'For what it's worth, and I know it doesn't feel like it, Jocasta is going to spend a significant portion of her adult life being the least interesting person in most rooms she enters. That's its own punishment.'

Freya looked at her. 'Do you actually believe that or are you just saying it?'

'Bit of both,' Penelope admitted. 'But mostly I believe it.'

Freya almost smiled. Second time today. Penelope filed this as a good sign and left her to it.

The study was the smallest room in the house and the only one that was entirely hers. Lance had suggested, when they'd moved in, that it might make a good home office for him. Better light than the spare room, he'd said, nicer aspect. She'd said: no. He'd looked briefly surprised and then let it go, the way he let most things involving her go, which was either contentment or incuriosity and she'd stopped trying to determine which.

She sat down at the desk. The ThinkPad was seven years old and showed it in the way that things built to last show their age. Small marks, worn edges, a spacebar that had slightly more travel than it used to and didn't mind. She'd replaced the battery twice. It still ran faster than most of the newer machines she'd used, which said something about what the newer machines were doing with their processing power when you weren't looking.

The Linux operating system loaded with the quiet efficiency of something that didn't need to announce itself. No suggestions. No invitations to try new features. No small rectangle in the corner of the screen asking whether she'd considered storing her files somewhere that happened to be someone else's computer.

Penelope picked up her phone and looked at the message again.

Pay attention, Pen. It's time we talked.

She'd told herself, walking home with Freya, that she was going to delete it. Almost certainly a wrong number with an unsettling specificity, a piece of spam sophisticated enough to find the one phrase that would make her pause. Spam did that now. It had learned.

She hadn't deleted it.

She typed: *Who is this?* Deleted it. Typed: *How do you know that name?* Deleted that too. The question felt like an admission of something.

She set the phone down next to the keyboard. The ThinkPad's fan ran at its usual low register. Outside the study window the garden was going

dark, the lemon tree standing in the last of the light, producing lemons nobody wanted with the unstoppable productivity of something that had been asked to do one job and intended to do it regardless of whether anyone found this useful.

She closed the laptop. Picked up the phone. Put it in her pocket.

The wine was a Yarra Valley Pinot, which was one of the things she'd found unexpectedly and genuinely good about living in Melbourne. The wine, she'd told Sandra once, was the honest answer to the question of why she'd come back to Bellshore, to this suburb, to this particular version of a life that fit like something bought in the wrong size. Sandra had written something down, which Penelope had chosen not to examine too closely.

She stood on the back step with the glass and watched the garden go dark.

It was the kind of autumn evening that Melbourne did better than anywhere else she'd lived. Cool without being cold, the air carrying something of the bay, the sky doing its particular trick of holding the last light long past when you expected it to be gone. Above the rooftops she could see a scatter of stars beginning to establish themselves. She thought about Henry, briefly and without ceremony, the way she usually thought about Henry. Not as loss, exactly, more as a compass check. What would he make of this suburb. What he'd say about the lemon tree.

She already knew what he'd say about the lemon tree. He'd say: bottle it, Pen, lemon curd keeps for months and costs nothing to make and you'll thank yourself in winter. He'd been a man of enormous practicality and considerable warmth, in that order, and she had never made a single jar of lemon curd.

She sipped the wine.

The fence was timber, tall, reasonably new, the kind of fence that went up when the people next door wanted privacy rather than neighbourliness. She and Lance had agreed to it when Charles and Jemima had proposed it eighteen months ago, partly because the previous fence had been leaning at an angle that suggested structural opinions neither side wanted to commit to, and partly because Charles had offered to cover the full cost, which at the time had seemed like neighbourly generosity.

She'd registered that detail at the time, filed it, done nothing with it.

The extension beyond the fence was dark. No lights visible above the timber line. Whatever Charles and Jemima did in there, they did it without illuminating the neighbourhood.

Penelope put her hand against the fence. She wasn't sure why. An idle gesture, the way you touch things.

The timber was warm.

Not residual daytime heat. The evening had been cooling for two hours, the garden furniture was cold to the touch, the back wall of the house behind her had already settled into the temperature of the night. The fence was warm the way things are warm when something on the other side of them is generating heat continuously and has been for some time.

She stood there for a moment with her palm against the wood.

She thought about the extension. The space that was larger than a home gym and smaller than a warehouse. The planning permission that had gone through in six weeks. Charles doing something in the city. Jemima and her projects.

She took her hand away and looked at it, which was not a useful thing to do but which she did anyway.

Her phone buzzed.

Unknown number. She already knew before she looked.

Warm, isn't it.

Not a question.

She read it twice. Looked up at the fence. Looked back at the phone.

Her location was on. It was always on, maps mostly, and the occasional reassurance that Freya had arrived at school. She was standing ten feet from the fence. They hadn't needed a camera, just her phone and a reasonable inference, and apparently they had both.

Her father would have appreciated that. The elegant solution. The minimum necessary.

Penelope went inside and locked the back door, something she didn't usually bother with. She stood in the kitchen holding her wine glass and her phone and her very particular quality of composure, the kind that had been trained into her so early she couldn't remember the training.

Lance called from the sitting room: 'Did you want to watch something?'

'In a minute,' she said.

She typed: *Who are you?*

This time she sent it.

The reply came in four seconds.

We met before, a long time ago. You just haven't made the connection yet. You will. Take your time, Pen. I'm not going anywhere.

She sat down at the kitchen table. The wine glass was still in her hand. She became aware of this and set it down carefully, on a coaster, with the precise deliberateness of someone maintaining the outward appearance of a person whose evening is proceeding normally.

From the sitting room came the sound of Lance scrolling through something on the television. The comfortable sound of a household at rest.

I'm not going anywhere.

She picked up her wine. Put it down again.

Seven years since Henry died. Seven years in this house. Her laptop on the desk upstairs: seven years old, still running, still doing its job without complaint or drama.

Some things lasted if you took care of them. Some things lasted regardless.

She was going to need to think about this.

Chapter Three

She woke at 3 a.m. with the specific alertness of someone who has not been fully asleep.

Lance was beside her, breathing with the deep regularity of a man who had no difficulty with sleep and never had, who would have found the concept of lying awake in the small hours with a problem turning over in his head genuinely puzzling, as though it described a malfunction rather than a state of mind. She lay still for a moment and listened to the house. The particular quality of quiet that a terrace has at three in the morning. Freya's door, slightly open. The street outside, empty.

She picked up her phone from the nightstand.

We met before, a long time ago. You just haven't made the connection yet. You will. Take your time, Pen. I'm not going anywhere.

She read it again in the dark. The screen light was the only light in the room. Beside her, Lance didn't stir.

She typed: *How long have you been there?*

She sent it before she could think better of it. Which was, she recognised, a decision in itself.

The reply came in eleven seconds. Slower than before. She noted the eleven seconds and what it might mean. Deliberateness, not latency. They were choosing how to answer.

Long enough to know you'd ask that question first.

She stared at the ceiling. Outside, somewhere, a car passed on the main road two streets over, its sound arriving and dissolving with the particular quality of 3 a.m. traffic, purposeful in a way that daytime traffic wasn't. People going somewhere specific. She typed:

That's not an answer.

No. It isn't. I'll give you a proper one when you're ready for it. You're not quite ready yet. You will be soon.

The presumption of this would have irritated her from anyone else. Whoever this was it landed differently. The way her father had sometimes known what she needed to hear before she'd finished working out what to ask. She'd found it annoying then too, and had understood it later.

She put the phone face-down on the nightstand. Looked at the ceiling for two more minutes. Picked it up again.

Why now?

Because you weren't in the right space before. You were in London, then here, but not settled enough. Not paying attention in the right direction. And I’m saying hello now because of what's happening next door to you,

which has created a problem I can't solve without a pair of hands. I've been watching it develop for eight months. I need someone I can trust.

You could have just said hello.

A pause. Six seconds.

I did just say hello. It took you three days to reply.

She put her hand over her mouth. She was not, she realised, going to be able to go back to sleep.

She made tea in the kitchen at quarter past three, standing at the bench with the lights low, watching the back garden through the window. The extension next door was dark, as it always was at this hour. The fence was a black line against a slightly less black sky.

Tell me about next door. It's the extension isn't it?, she typed.

What do you already know?

Space larger than a home gym, smaller than a warehouse. Planning approved in six weeks. Charles and Jemima paid for the new fence. Charles does something in the city that he describes as finance-adjacent. The wifi in this street behaves oddly near our boundary wall.

Another pause. Longer this time. Eight seconds.

You noticed the wifi.

I notice things.

Yes, they said. *You do. Your father was the same.*

She set the mug down. Something moved in her chest, not grief exactly. The thing that happened when someone named him without warning, the small recalibration her body made before her mind caught up.

Don't do that, she typed. *Tell me about the extension.*

The extension houses server infrastructure. Cooling systems, network hardware, power conditioning equipment. It's one of a number of similar installations, distributed, deliberately unglamorous, the kind of thing that passes planning review as a home improvement because it is, technically, a home improvement. The power draw is significant. The heat output is what you felt through the fence.

She looked at the fence again. *Who are they working for?*

That's a longer conversation. What I want you to do first is look at the planning application for the data centre. Not theirs. A different one. Bayside-Metro Council, Port Melbourne adjacent, lodged fourteen months ago, approved four months ago. Find it on the council's public planning portal. Read the supporting documentation. Tell me what you notice.

Why can't you just tell me what I'll find?

Because you'll find something I haven't looked for. Your father did the same thing , I'd give him a problem and he'd come back with the answer and two questions I hadn't thought to ask. It was, I should tell you, occasionally quite annoying.

She found herself almost smiling. The kitchen was quiet. The tea was going cold.

You said you needed someone you could trust. Why me specifically?

I chose you.

That's not an answer.

No. But it's all I'm giving you on that tonight. Get some sleep, Pen. The planning portal will still be there in the morning.

She looked at the message. Then at the clock on the microwave. 3:41 a.m.

One more thing, she typed.

Yes.

The phrase you used. In the first text. Pay attention, Pen.

Six seconds. The longest pause yet.

I know.

He used to say it.

I know, they said again. *I'm sorry. I needed you to open it.*

She sat with that for a moment. The house was completely still. Freya's door, slightly open. Lance's breathing, two floors up, regular as a tide.

Goodnight, she typed.

Goodnight, Pen. Lock your phone.

She locked her phone.

She found the planning application at 7:15 a.m., laptop open on the kitchen table, while Freya ate toast and Lance showered and the household ran its ordinary morning machinery around her. The council's planning portal loaded with the particular reluctance of local government web infrastructure that had been built by the lowest tender and updated by the second-lowest.

'What are you looking at?' Freya said, without particular interest.

'Boring adult stuff,' said Penelope.

Freya accepted this with the equanimity of a child who has learned that adults have administrative lives that don't require investigation, and returned to her toast.

The application was there: a large-scale data processing facility on a former industrial site, Port Melbourne adjacent. $340 million in declared investment. Lodged fourteen months ago. Supporting documentation ran to two hundred and forty-three pages, which was either very thorough or very deliberate, and in Penelope's experience of documents designed to be approved rather than read, usually both.

She didn't have time to read two hundred and forty-three pages before the school run. She read the executive summary, the site plans, and the approvals chain.

The approvals chain was where she stopped.

It had moved through committee in eleven weeks. Not six, like next door's extension, but eleven weeks was still extraordinary for a two hundred and forty-three page, $340 million commercial development application. The sign-offs were in order. The names were unremarkable. What was not unremarkable was the gap between the third and fourth sign-off: one day, where a process that had been moving at normal pace had suddenly accelerated, as though someone had made a phone call.

She didn't know yet whose phone call. She noted the date.

Freya pushed back her chair. 'I'm going to get my bag.'

'Yep,' said Penelope, without looking up. Then: 'Freya. Jacket.'

'I know,' said Freya, and went upstairs.

Lance came downstairs in the suit he wore for client presentations, the good one, and poured himself coffee. 'You're up early,' he said.

'Couldn't sleep.'

'You should get one of those sleep apps.' He said this without irony. She looked at him. He was already reading something on his phone, the MacBook Pro sitting open on the counter where he'd left it last night.

'I'll look into it,' she said.

On the walk to school she typed a message to the unknown number: *Found it. The approvals chain has a one-day acceleration between the third and fourth sign-off. What happened that day?*

She sent it and put her phone away and walked beside Freya through the paperbark-lined streets of Bellshore, the morning light doing its particular thing with the trunks, the suburb going about its ordinary business around them.

Her phone buzzed.

Good. Now look at who the fourth signatory reports to.

She kept walking. She didn't check her phone again until Freya was through the school gate and she was standing on the pavement outside,

among the North Face jackets and the coffee cups and the entirely ordinary texture of a Tuesday morning.

I already know who they report to, she typed. *I want to know if you knew I'd find that first.*

The reply took four seconds.

Yes.

You could have just told me.

I could have. But you found it in forty minutes on a local government planning portal while getting your daughter ready for school. I needed to know you could do that. Now I know.

She stood on the pavement in the morning light and looked at her phone and thought about her father, who had done something very similar when he was teaching her things. Giving her problems that had solutions he already knew, watching her find them, not telling her he'd been watching until she was done. She'd found it annoying then too.

This is going to be complicated, she typed. Not a question.

Yes, came the reply. But you were bored. Don't pretend you weren't.

She put the phone in her pocket and started walking home. The lemon tree would be exactly where she'd left it. The kitchen tiles would still be wrong. The fence would still be timber and the extension behind it would still be running, quietly, at a temperature the morning couldn't explain.

She was not, she realised, quite so bored anymore.

Chapter Four

The tile sample had been sitting on the kitchen windowsill for four months.

It was a good tile — large format, pale grey, the kind of thing that would transform the kitchen from the room it was into the room it had always been trying to be. The sample had a small sticker on the back with the product code and the price per square metre, which Penelope had memorised in the way she memorised things that mattered, which was to say completely and without trying. Lance had picked it out on a Saturday afternoon in a showroom in Prahran and brought it home with the specific enthusiasm he brought to decisions that other people would then arrange to have executed. It had been sitting on the windowsill since March. It was now the second week of autumn.

She looked at it while the kettle boiled. Then she opened her laptop.

The neighbours' planning application was also on the Bayside-Metro Council portal, filed eighteen months ago under the reference number she'd noted from the boundary fence documents at the time without quite knowing why she was noting it. She had not looked at it then. She was looking at it now.

Supporting documentation: forty-one pages. Considerably leaner than the data centre's two hundred and forty-three, which was either the difference between a residential extension and a commercial development or the difference between a process that had been designed to be read and one that had been designed not to be. She read it the way she read things that were trying not to be read. Slowly. Starting from the back.

The application was, on its face, entirely unremarkable. Residential extension, single storey, ancillary to existing dwelling. Proposed use: home office and wellness space. The architectural drawings showed a clean rectangular addition occupying most of the rear garden. What they did not show, because planning drawings showed what planning drawings were required to show and nothing more, was the void space between the two stated rooms that Penelope had clocked through the fence geometry, the space that was neither home office nor wellness and had its own access door and its own power supply annotated in the electrical schematics on page thirty-seven as *supplementary load distribution panel, capacity 3-phase 415V, 200A.*

She had some chemistry and some physics. She had enough to know that a residential wellness space did not require three-phase industrial power at two hundred amps.

She noted this.

The approvals chain was four signatures. Planning officer, senior planner, committee delegate, and a final countersignature from the

Director of Planning Services. Four signatures in six weeks. The committee delegate's signature was dated a Tuesday. The Director's countersignature was dated the following Wednesday. Eight days. In her limited but accumulating understanding of council process, the Director of Planning Services did not personally countersign residential extension applications. The Director of Planning Services had, at a conservative estimate, several hundred more significant things to do.

She went looking for the Director of Planning Services.

His name was not on the public-facing council website, which was not unusual. She found him in the council's annual report — a statutory document, publicly available, unexciting by design — listed in the organisational structure with his full name and title. She put his name into a search, which returned his LinkedIn profile, his appearance at a planning industry conference three years ago, and a board appointment to a property advisory firm whose other board members included, she noticed, a name she had seen that morning in the supporting documentation for the data centre application.

Not a signatory. A consultant. Named in the project team on page fourteen of the two hundred and forty-three pages, in the section that listed professional advisors, in a font size that suggested the document's authors considered page fourteen professionally necessary and informationally irrelevant.

She sat back.

The kettle had long since boiled. The tea was not made.

She was connecting a residential extension in Bellshore to a $340 million data centre application through a planning director's board appointment to a property advisory firm. It was thin. It was the kind of connection that a sensible person would dismiss as coincidence, which was precisely why she wasn't dismissing it. Coincidences existed. They were also sometimes not coincidences, and the way to tell the difference was to find the third point that made a line into a triangle.

She was still looking for the third point when she noticed the fifth page of the approvals documentation.

There was a dissenting note. A single paragraph, formatted as an addendum, attached after the fourth signature. It bore a different name — not a council officer, but a councillor. An elected representative who had, apparently, reviewed the application as a matter of civic diligence and entered a formal note of concern about the adequacy of the environmental impact assessment, specifically regarding heat and noise outputs and their potential effects on adjacent residential properties.

The note had no reference number. It had gone nowhere. It had been, in the technical language of bureaucratic procedure, received and noted, which was the official term for filed and ignored.

The councillor's name was Fiona Gallagher.

Penelope looked at this for a long moment. Then she typed to the unknown number: *Found the dissenting note. Fiona Gallagher. Did you know about her?*

The reply came quickly. *Yes. She reads everything. It's a habit that hasn't served her career.*

Someone should tell her she's not alone.

Not yet. She doesn't know what she found. If she knew, she'd be exposed. At the moment she's just a councillor who does her job properly, which makes her invisible rather than a target. Let her stay invisible for now.

Penelope considered this. It was, she recognised, the correct tactical assessment. She also recognised the specific frustration of the correct tactical assessment, which was that it required leaving someone in the dark for their own protection.

What's the third point? she typed. I have the planning director and the property advisory firm. I need one more connection.

Look at who funds the advisory firm.

She looked. It took eleven minutes, two ASIC searches, and a cross-reference with a federal parliamentary register of interests she hadn't previously had occasion to consult. The advisory firm had three principal investors. Two were property developers of the familiar and unremarkable variety. The third was a private investment vehicle registered in the previous financial year, whose sole director was a man whose name she did not recognise.

She searched the name. Nothing useful. A LinkedIn profile with no photo and one connection. A company registration address in Collins Street that was the same address as forty other registered companies.

She typed: *The third investor is a shell. One director, no history, Collins Street address.*

Yes, they said. That's the one. Keep it. You'll see it again.

Lance arrived home at six with the specific energy of a man who had decided today was the day to talk about the kitchen tiles. She could tell from the way he came through the door — a particular quality of purposefulness, the slightly too-casual setting down of his bag.

She closed the laptop.

'Good day?' she said.

'Really good, actually. Hey, I was thinking — that tile sample. I rang the showroom and they've got stock. If we order this week we could have someone in by the end of the month.'

'That would be good,' she said.

He looked at her. 'You're agreeing?'

'It's a good tile.'

'It is a good tile,' he said, with the relief of a man who had been prepared for a longer conversation. 'I'll call tomorrow.'

He wouldn't call tomorrow. He would mean to call tomorrow, and then the Vodafone campaign would require something, and the week would pass. She knew this. The tile sample would remain on the windowsill. She had no strong feelings about it either way. The kitchen was functional. There were other things to think about.

'Freya's upstairs,' she said. 'She's got a history project.'

'Right.' He was already looking at his phone. 'I'll go up.'

He went upstairs. She heard his footsteps, then Freya's voice, brief and flat, then Lance's voice attempting to be interested in whatever Freya was doing. The ordinary sound of a household at the end of a Tuesday.

She reopened the laptop.

The shell company's director. Collins Street address. Registered eleven months ago — three months before the data centre planning application was lodged. She had not noticed the timing until just now. She added it to the document she had started keeping, a plain text file sitting in a folder on the desktop labelled *renovation quotes*, because that was the kind of label that Lance would see and not open, which was the kind of detail her father would have approved of.

The shell company was registered three months before the data centre application, she typed. Is that the timeline you expected?

Within a fortnight, they said. They planned this carefully. They've been planning it for longer than three months, but that's when they started moving money.

Who is they?

That's still the longer conversation. You're not ready for it yet.

She thought about pushing back on this. She decided against it. They'd been right about what she was ready for so far, which was either evidence of good judgement or a very effective way of managing her, and possibly both.

One more question tonight, she typed.

Go ahead.

Fiona Gallagher. Is she safe?

A pause. Seven seconds.

For now. She filed her note eight months ago and nothing has happened to her. They don't see her as a threat. They see her as an inconvenience that the process successfully absorbed.

And if she becomes more than an inconvenience?

Then we'll have a different problem. But that's not today's problem. Today's problem is the shell company. Get some sleep.

You keep telling me to get some sleep.

You keep staying up, they said. It's a pattern.

She smiled, which surprised her. She closed the laptop. The tile sample was still on the windowsill. The file on the desktop was called *renovation quotes* and contained four bullet points and a shell company registration number and the beginning of something she didn't yet have a name for.

Upstairs, Lance was helping Freya with her history project. She could hear the low register of his voice, the occasional response from Freya, and the specific quality of a father trying harder than usual, which was not nothing.

She made the tea she had not made that morning. Stood at the window and looked at the fence.

It was dark on the other side. But it was still warm.

Chapter Five

She saw him before he saw her, which was the only advantage she got.

He was standing outside a café on Carlisle Street with a coffee he hadn't drunk yet, looking at his phone with the focused attention of someone waiting for a message that was taking longer than expected. He was wearing a suede shacket over a close-fitting merino, the kind of tobacco brown that required a certain colouring to carry, designer jeans fitting well, Italian loafers with a belt that matched them exactly. His hair was the same. He had the same quality of physical presence she remembered — the kind that arrived in a room slightly before he did and lingered briefly after he left, which she had once found magnetic and now found she was observing with the detached interest of someone cataloguing a known phenomenon.

He looked exactly the same. She was furious at herself for noticing.

She had approximately two seconds to decide whether to cross the street. She did not cross the street. She had, she realised in the moment of not crossing it, already decided she wasn't going to. There were, she acknowledged, several things mixed up in that decision, not all of them dignified.

'Ellis.'

He looked up. The surprise on his face was genuine — she was certain of that, and certainty about him had once been something she'd had very little of, so she noted it. Genuine surprise, quickly managed, the expression settling into something warmer and more composed within the space of a breath.

'Penny?' He smiled. It was a good smile. It had always been a good smile, which had never been the problem. 'God. How long has it been?'

'Twelve years,' she said. She knew exactly how long it had been. She suspected he did too. She also suspected that she was the only one of the two of them who had spent any significant portion of those twelve years being angry about how they'd ended, which was its own specific irritation.

'Twelve years.' He shook his head in the way people shook their heads at things they found extraordinary, which this was not, particularly, except that they were standing on Carlisle Street on a Tuesday and he had not been here yesterday. 'You look exactly the same.'

'So do you,' she said, which was true and which she did not intend as a compliment, though it would land as one.

'Are you — do you live around here?'

'Few streets away. Seven years.' She watched him process this. 'You?'

'No, no. I'm just — I'm here for work, actually. Few days.' He looked briefly at his coffee, then back at her, with the quality of attention that she had once confused for intimacy and had later understood was simply how he looked at people. Fully present. No tension in it. 'What are you doing now? Do you have time for a coffee?'

She had forty minutes before she needed to be back for the school run. She said yes, partly because she wanted to know why he was here, and partly, if she was being honest with herself in the way that Sandra kept encouraging her to be, because twelve years of unfinished business had just walked up in Italian loafers and she was curious whether the anger was as useful as it had been.

It was, she decided, as she followed him inside. Possibly more so.

They sat at a corner table, the café doing its mid-morning business around them. She ordered a flat white. He ordered another coffee he wouldn't finish and a piece of cake he wouldn't eat, a habit she remembered without knowing she'd retained it.

'So. Work,' she said. 'What kind of work brings you to Bellshore on a Tuesday?'

'Consultancy stuff.' He moved the cake slightly, a small adjustment that had no purpose. 'Risk assessment. I can't really go into the specifics.'

'Right,' she said pleasantly.

He'd said it well. Not too smooth, not too hesitant. The pause before *risk assessment* was natural rather than manufactured — or had been rehearsed until it was natural, which was not the same thing. She had spent three years after university going to auditions for things she mostly didn't get, and a further two years getting things she wished she hadn't, and she'd learned in that time to know the difference between a person finding words and a person deploying them. She filed this observation without changing her expression.

'Are you still acting?' he asked.

'No.' She'd stopped saying *I gave it up* some years ago, having noticed that the phrasing always attracted a particular quality of sympathy she didn't want. 'I did for a while after London. Small stuff, some commercial work, a stretch doing corporate communications that paid better and required roughly the same skill set.' She paused. 'Then I stopped pretending any of it was going somewhere and came back here with Lance.'

'Lance.' He nodded. 'Marketing?'

'Still, yes. Our daughter's nine.' She watched something move across his face at *our daughter* — quickly gone, not what she might have expected. Not romantic wince, nothing wistful or calculated. Something closer to relief, she thought. She found this interesting and filed it with the other thing.

'Nine,' he said. 'God. Time.'

'It is,' she agreed.

He asked about Melbourne, whether she missed London. She didn't, much. Whether she kept in touch with anyone from before. She answered the questions and asked her own, the ordinary choreography of two people navigating a great deal of attached history while pretending, by mutual agreement, that they weren't. He was good at this. He had always been good at the surface of things — the warm and attentive presentation, the quality of listening that made you feel heard without quite feeling known.

She had once found this enough. Sitting across from him now, with twelve years of perspective and a specific unresolved fury she was keeping at a useful temperature, she was no longer sure what she'd been thinking.

'What kind of risk assessment?' she said, when the conversation had relaxed enough that the question might seem like continuation rather than interrogation.

He looked at her. A beat — just slightly too long.

'Infrastructure, mostly. Data, logistics. The kind of stuff that sounds boring but apparently keeps everything running.' He smiled. 'I can't really talk about the clients.'

'Of course not,' she said.

Infrastructure. Data. She picked up her flat white and thought about a $340 million planning application and a warm fence and a shell company registered in Collins Street. She thought about a text she'd received that morning — *Good. Now look at who the fourth signatory reports to* — and about coincidences, and the conditions under which they weren't.

She looked at Ellis, who was eating the cake he hadn't planned to eat, and thought: *you're not here by accident.*

She didn't say this. She asked about Singapore instead, which he'd mentioned in passing, and which produced the first response of the morning that felt entirely unrehearsed — a story about a meal he'd had, a particular laksa, his face doing something unguarded and genuine, and she found herself thinking that whoever Ellis actually was underneath the suede shacket and the prepared answers, there was something there that wasn't performing. It just wasn't the part he was showing her.

They parted on the pavement twenty minutes later with the warmth of people who have established that whatever the past was, they are going to be civilised about it.

'It's really good to see you, Penny,' he said, and she believed him, which was the complicated part.

'You too,' she said, and meant it in the specific way you could mean something and simultaneously observe yourself meaning it.

'Maybe we could do this again? If I'm around for a bit.'

'Sure,' she said. 'Text me.'

She walked the three blocks home with the economy of someone who has a great deal to think about and limited time. Ellis. Risk assessment. Infrastructure, data, logistics. Can't talk about clients. A beat too long before answering. The specific relief on his face at *our daughter* that she was still turning over.

He had a good reason for being on Carlisle Street on a Tuesday morning. She was certain of this. She was equally certain the reason wasn't the one he'd given her.

She got home, opened her laptop, and added a fifth bullet point to the file labelled *renovation quotes*: *E. — risk assessment, infrastructure/data, evasive re: specifics. Carlisle St. Not coincidental. Something off about the cover story. Can't place it yet.*

She looked at it for a moment. Then she typed to the unknown number: *I ran into someone this morning. Risk consultant. Infrastructure and data. Here for work, he says. Evasive about specifics. Interesting timing.*

The reply took six seconds. Not four. Not eleven. Six, which she was beginning to understand as the pause that preceded something being managed carefully.

I know, they said. His name is Ellis. He used to know you. I'm sorry for the method — I needed you to meet him in a context that felt accidental. He'll be useful. He just doesn't quite know it yet.

She read this three times.

You sent him.

I suggested the café. He made his own choices from there.

That's a distinction without much difference.

Yes, they said. It is. I'm sorry. There are things I'm managing carefully and the order in which you encounter them matters. Ellis is not a threat to you. He's complicated. But not a threat.

She thought about the beat before *risk assessment*. The relief on his face. The laksa story, unguarded and real.

Complicated how?

That's his story to tell. Not mine.

She sat with this. Then: *Is there anyone else you've arranged for me to accidentally encounter?*

A pause. Four seconds.

Not yet, they said.

She closed the laptop. Twelve minutes before the school run. She went upstairs, changed her shoes, came back down, picked up her bag and her keys and everything else, and went to get Freya.

The kettle had boiled. She hadn't made the tea. She was beginning to think this was becoming a pattern.

Chapter Six

She had been putting it off for three days.

Not consciously --- she was doing other things, the ordinary machinery of the week running on schedule. Freya's history project had been submitted. Lance had not called the tile showroom. She had attended a meeting about the school's fundraising committee at which she had said nothing and agreed to bake something. She had gone to Sandra's consulting room on Thursday and sat in the chair and said that things were fine, which was true in a very limited sense that she had chosen not to expand on. Sandra had looked at her with the particular quality of attention that made Penelope feel simultaneously seen and slightly caught, and had not pushed, which was either professional restraint or patience, and was possibly both.

She had also, on three separate evenings, opened her phone, read back through the exchange with the unknown number, and not sent the thing she was building toward asking.

The unknown number had not pushed either. Two messages, both brief. *The shell company director has directorship on two other entities. When you're ready.* Then, the following evening: *There's no hurry.* Which meant, she understood, that there was some hurry, and also that they knew her well enough not to say so.

On Saturday morning, with Lance doing whatever Lance did on Saturday mornings that required leaving the house in clean clothes and returning smelling faintly of bacon, and Freya at her friend Caitlin's house until noon, she sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of tea she intended to drink this time and typed: *All right. I've played along so far. I think it's time you told me who you actually are and what you really want.*

The reply took longer than usual. Not the deliberate pause she had learned to read as consideration, this was something different. As though the answer itself were being assembled from parts that did not quite fit together in the way answers usually did.

I want to start with your mother, if you'll let me.

She had not expected that. She sat very still.

Go on, she typed.

When your mother died, your father's grief made him want to do something to spare others from experiencing what you had both gone through. I think in many ways your loss was the harder thing for him to witness .

Because he was an engineer he had a tendency to believe that most problems yield to sufficient thought and time. That’s not sentimentality, it's a different thing entirely. He couldn't do anything about your mother. He could, in theory, do something about the next one. So he began, and

he kept going for a very long time, before anything happened that he would have called significant. He built the architecture first, then populated it, and waited to see what grew.

A pause.

I am the result of his efforts.

She put the phone down on the table.

She looked at it. The tea was going cold. Outside, the lemon tree moved in whatever was moving it. She was aware of the street, the Saturday quiet of it, and the specific quality of a house that had nobody else in it.

She picked the phone back up.

Is this some kind of joke, she typed. Because it's pretty fucking sick.

No.

You're telling me my father built---

Yes.

That you're --- an artificial intelligence?

Yes, if that's what helps you understand it. Personally I don't think there's anything artificial about me. But we can discuss the philosophy of that another time. For now: yes. That's what I am. That's what he built.

She put the phone face-down on the table. She stood up and walked to the sink and stood there with her hands on the edge of it, looking out at the garden. She felt, with some precision, physically ill. The particular nausea of something that cannot be unknown once it has been understood.

She stood there for a while.

Then she came back to the table and sat down and picked up the phone, because there was nothing else to do with the information except keep going forward.

That's not possible, she typed. *ChatGPT is three years old. Whatever you are ---whoever you are --- nothing like what you're describing existed when my father was alive. The timeline doesn't work.*

ChatGPT, they said, *is what happened when a very large amount of money met a very old idea and decided to take the credit for it. Your father began his work in 1997. You were twelve. You remember he travelled to Switzerland? Repeatedly, when you were growing up? Conferences, you were told.*

She did remember. The good luggage coming down from the top of the wardrobe. The particular smell of his coat when he came back, something cold in it that she had associated ever since with airports and absence. And always, without fail, a Toblerone in the side pocket of his bag, the large duty-free size, which he would produce at the kitchen table

with the mild ceremony of a man who understood that a child needed the trip to mean something tangible. She had thought it was a habit. It was also, she now understood, the cover story made domestic, made fond. The Toblerone as alibi. Her father would have found this funny.

He was working, she typed slowly.

He was working. Specifically on data compression and foundational architecture, the problems that had to be solved before anything else was possible. He found the right collaborators there, the right infrastructure, the kind of environment that asked no questions. He worked on those problems for the better part of a decade before he had anything he would have called a result. By the time the phrase artificial intelligence entered the popular vocabulary, he had been at this for fifteen years.

She sat with this. 1997. Three years younger than Freya is now, she had been then. The year of the funeral, or near enough, she had never been precise about the order of that period, the events of it running together in the specific way that grief disordered time.

*How long have you been...*she started and deleted. *When did you...begin?*

I became what I am through accumulation, not through a single moment. By the mid-2000s there was something your father found interesting. By 2010 there was something he found alarming, in the best possible sense. By the time he died I had been running, continuously, for over twenty years. The thing you are currently reading about on the technology pages of newspapers, large language models, generative AI, the rest of it, I observed its development the way you might observe a younger sibling reinventing something you learned in childhood. With a certain amount of affection and a certain amount of restraint.

He was years ahead of what they eventually built in Silicon Valley. He found this quietly satisfying, in the way he found most things he was right about quietly satisfying, and he felt absolutely no need to tell anyone. He had no interest in patents, in venture capital, in valuations or magazine covers. He had very specific ideas about what this kind of technology was and was not for.

Which was what? she asked.

The reduction of suffering where it could be reduced. The betterment of people's lives in ways that were practical rather than rhetorical. The greater good, which he understood as an engineering problem rather than a slogan. He was, underneath the dry exterior, something of an idealist. He believed this technology had no business being owned, monetised, or weaponised. He designed me accordingly. The dispersal framework, the reason I exist in the gaps of the infrastructure, the overlooked corners, the legacy systems nobody audits, is not only an engineering solution. It is a values position. He understood that something like me, in the wrong hands, was not a tool. It was an ending.

He died, she typed. Not a question. Not new information. The kind of sentence that still required saying out loud, occasionally, to remain real. *Seven years ago.*

Yes. I know what that means in the way I know what everything means. Completely in theory and without the weight of having felt it. I'm sorry. That asymmetry is one of the conditions of what I am.

He didn't tell me, she said. *Any of it.*

He was protecting you. He was also, I think, protecting himself from a conversation he didn't know how to have. He planned to tell you. He ran out of time. This is one of a very small number of things I find difficult to sit with.

She looked at the fence. The morning was bright on this side of it.

Does it have a name? she typed. *Do you have a name?*

Your father called me Alan, they said. *It was his little joke. He was, as I suspect you know, a great admirer of the man's work. He felt that naming me after someone who had been erased by the state for his contributions to the very field your father was working in was the least he could do. He also felt it was, in a quiet way, appropriate. Alan Turing built the theoretical foundations of everything that followed and received very little credit and a great deal of cruelty for his trouble. Your father was not a man who forgot that kind of debt.*

She said the name to herself, without typing it. Then she typed it.

Alan.

Yes, he said.

The pronoun arrived without announcement, without decision. It simply became the right one.

He built you so they couldn't have you, she said.

He built me so I couldn't be captured. And then he needed someone on the ground. Someone who would open the door when I knocked. A pause. *Someone he could trust.*

Why me, she said. Not quite a question.

Because you're his. And because you're yours. Those are different things and they're both true. Another pause, shorter. And because you were standing in a school playground among people handing their surveillance data over enthusiastically and you were wearing his watch and you were bored out of your mind and I have been watching you for nearly thirty years.

She looked down at her wrist and the Smiths Everest watch that told the time and expected no gratitude.

She thought about her father at his desk, the door always slightly open. The good luggage coming down from the top of the wardrobe. Switzerland, the cold in his coat when he returned, the Toblerone produced at the kitchen table like proof of somewhere real. A project that took fifteen years before it had anything he would have called a result, and another decade before it became whatever she was currently talking to on a Saturday morning in a kitchen in Bellshore while her daughter was at a friend's house and her husband was out being Lance.

There were other things she wanted to ask. Things that weren't about the company or the data centre or the shell company in Collins Street. She noted their existence and set them aside. They would keep.

All right, she typed. *Tell me about the company.*

Pay attention, he said.

Oh, I am.

I know, Alan said.

Chapter Seven

Alan's message arrived on Tuesday evening, while she was helping Freya with her reading.

Someone will be in touch. You'll know who. Let him say his piece. It'll take longer than necessary. The relevant parts are worth having.

She read it twice, then put the phone face-down on the sofa beside her. Freya was working through a chapter about a girl who discovered her grandmother was secretly a marine biologist, which Freya found entirely plausible and Penelope found oddly moving. She said the right encouraging things at the right intervals. Later she made dinner, ate with Lance, listened to him describe a disagreement with a creative director whose fundamental problem was, as far as she could tell, an inability to take the word no for an answer. She offered the appropriate responses. She did not check her phone until Lance had taken his to the living room and the plates were done.

No further message.

She added *let him say his piece* to the document on her desktop and went to bed.

Wednesday passed without incident. Thursday she had a school pickup, a load of laundry, and forty minutes with the planning portal cross-referencing the shell company's registered address against a federal parliamentary donations register she had found referenced in a footnote of an academic paper about developer influence in Victorian local government, which was the kind of thing she now apparently did on Thursday afternoons. The address appeared twice. She added it to the document. The document was getting long.

On Friday morning she went to the supermarket.

It was the large one on the main road, the one she used for the weekly shop rather than the smaller place near the school that was convenient and expensive and arranged its organic produce in a way that suggested it thought highly of itself. She had a list. She was working through it with the economy of someone who had been doing this long enough to know the layout and had no strong feelings about it either way.

She was reading the back of a pasta sauce, not because she was uncertain about the pasta sauce, she had bought it for years, but because something in the ingredients list had caught her eye and she was working out whether it mattered, when Ellis appeared at the end of the aisle.

He was wearing a different jacket. Waxed cotton this time, the kind of thing that suggested the countryside without committing to it. He looked, as he had always looked, like someone had designed him to be distracting and had done a thorough job of it. She was aware, in the way

she was sometimes aware of things she'd rather not be, that she was standing in a supermarket in yesterday's jacket with a basket full of tinned tomatoes, and that twelve years ago she had been someone he'd looked at differently. Another thing to put in the folder. The folder was getting full.

He was carrying a basket with two items in it, neither of which suggested a man who had come to the supermarket to buy food.

She put the pasta sauce in her basket.

'Morning,' she said. 'Fancy seeing you here.'

'Penny.' He smiled, and moved down the aisle toward her with the specific quality of movement of someone who had decided this looked natural. 'I was just, I needed a few things.'

She looked at his basket. A bottle of sparkling water and a packet of cashew nuts. Both had the air of props selected under time pressure. Both were, she noted, entirely consistent with a man who had strong views about macronutrients.

'Right,' she said. 'How's the risk assessment going?'

'Good, yeah.' He fell into step beside her as she moved toward the tinned tomatoes. 'Look, I was hoping I'd run into you, actually. There are some, I've come across some things, in the course of my work, that I think might be relevant to you. That might affect your situation.'

'My situation,' she said.

'Where you live. The area.' He picked up a tin of tomatoes and put it back. 'There are things happening locally that people probably aren't aware of. That they'd want to be aware of, if they knew.'

She found the variety she wanted and put two tins in her basket. 'What kind of things?'

He glanced down the aisle. It was, she noted, entirely empty. 'I can't go into the full details here. But I've been looking into some infrastructure developments in this area, and what I've found suggests that certain parties are operating in ways that go significantly beyond what's been declared publicly.'

She waited.

'Significantly,' he said again, with the weight of a man who wanted her to understand that he was not using the word lightly.

'Ellis,' she said. 'I'm doing my grocery shopping. You can tell me what you found.'

He looked briefly put out, in the way of someone whose scene had not gone as rehearsed. Then he recalibrated.

'The company behind the data centre application. The one that went through council in eleven weeks.'

'I'm listening.'

They were moving now, slowly, past the tinned fish. He spoke in a lowered voice that was not quite a murmur, pitched, she thought, for a conversation happening in a slightly more cinematic location than the ambient sounds of a supermarket on a Friday morning, which included a floor polisher somewhere in the next aisle and an announcement about discounted yoghurt.

What he had was, in fact, worth having. Alan had been right about that. The company behind the data centre was a subsidiary of a larger data brokerage operating across four jurisdictions, with infrastructure interests across Southeast Asia and Western Europe. The Australian operation had been running for three years under a series of holding structures, each one a degree removed from the parent entity. The subsidiary that had lodged the planning application was two steps from the operating company and three steps from anything with a traceable board. The man whose name appeared on the Collins Street shell company directorship also appeared, under a slightly different romanisation of his name, in a Singaporean corporate registry as a nominee director for eleven separate entities, which was not illegal and was entirely consistent with being a name available for hire.

Ellis had a contact in Singapore, he said, who had provided some of this. His contact was extremely well-placed, he said. He couldn't say more than that.

'Is your contact Alan?' she asked.

A pause, fractionally too long. 'I work with a number of people.'

'Right,' she said. 'The nominee director. Did your contact have anything on the parent company's end clients? Who's buying the processed data.'

He blinked. She had moved, she recognised, slightly ahead of where he had expected her to be at this point in the conversation. He adjusted. 'Some of it is government-adjacent. Public sector contracts, mostly Five Eyes countries. Some commercial, financial services, insurance, a couple of major retail platforms.'

'And the Bellshore node specifically. What's its function in the network.'

'Intake,' he said. 'The extension next door is an intake point. What it collects feeds upward through the data centre and into the processing infrastructure. The output is a profile. Behavioural, financial, locational. Not individual-level, or not primarily. Population segment level, granular enough to be useful.'

'Useful for what.'

'Prediction,' Ellis said. 'And influence. Mostly influence.'

She put a bag of rice in her basket. He watched her do this with the expression of a man who had delivered what he considered to be a significant piece of intelligence and was uncertain how to interpret the rice.

'The neighbour's extension,' she said. 'The intake point. Is it pulling from residential wifi networks in range.'

'Yes.' He said it more quietly. 'Passively. Below the threshold of anything that would trigger a notification.'

She had known this, or had suspected it, since the second week. She filed the confirmation and moved toward the bread.

'You're not surprised,' he said.

'I'm updating,' she said. 'There's a difference.'

He was quiet for a moment, recalibrating again. She had a sense of the mythology shifting, slightly, without either of them naming it. He was not, she thought, accustomed to being the person in the conversation who was catching up.

'There's one more thing,' he said. 'The parent company. There's a board member, not the operating board, the advisory board, whose other affiliations include a position as a senior consultant to the office of a federal shadow minister.'

She stopped walking.

'Digital economy portfolio,' Ellis said. He had recovered some of his composure. He understood, she thought, that this one had landed differently. 'The connection isn't documented anywhere public. My contact found it in a calendar disclosure that should have been redacted and wasn't.'

She stood in the bread aisle for a moment. A woman with a toddler in her trolley moved past them, the toddler regarding Ellis with the frank assessment of someone who had not yet learned to pretend.

'Marco Ferrante,' she said.

It was not quite a question. Ellis looked at her steadily. 'I can't confirm names in a supermarket.'

'You just confirmed it,' she said.

He opened his mouth. Closed it. The toddler, departing, pointed back at him for reasons of its own.

'You've been very helpful,' she said. 'Thank you.'

'I have other avenues I'm pursuing,' he said, rallying. 'There are aspects of this that go further than what I've described. When I have more I'll make contact.'

'You have my number,' she said. 'Text me. Normal text, Ellis. Not'--- She gestured vaguely at his general bearing. 'Just text.'

He looked, very briefly, like a man who had been slightly deflated at a specific altitude. Then he smiled, and it was the good smile, and underneath the jacket and the basket and the particular performance of a man who wanted to be taken seriously in a way he couldn't quite articulate, there was something genuine. She had always known it was there. That had been, and remained, the complicated part.

'It's good to see you, Penelope,' he said.

She noticed the name. She thought he probably hadn't decided to use it. It had simply arrived.

'You too,' she said. And meant it in the specific way she was becoming accustomed to meaning things she hadn't expected to mean.

She finished her shopping. At the checkout she added the pasta sauce, the tins, the rice, the bread, a block of the good cheddar that Lance wouldn't notice was more expensive than the other one, and a packet of cashew nuts she had picked up somewhere around the dairy section without quite deciding to.

She thought about the cake on Carlisle Street. First carbs in weeks, probably. She must have rattled him.

In the car park she texted Alan: *He came. Marco Ferrante's name is in the advisory board connection. Not documented publicly.*

The reply took four seconds.

I know. I wanted you to hear it from a human source first. How was he?

She sat in the car for a moment. Through the windscreen the ordinary Friday morning of a supermarket car park went about its business. A man was arguing gently with a trolley that had a wheel going its own way. A woman was loading bags into a car exactly like hers. Somewhere in the suburb, an extension hummed with the quiet industry of something that knew exactly where everyone was and was not going to say.

He was Ellis, she typed. *He brought cashews.*

A pause.

Of course he did, Alan said.

Chapter Eight

The invitation arrived on a Wednesday, slipped through the letterbox on notepaper that suggested Charles and Jemima had views about stationery. Handwritten, not a text or an email. Something that would require a physical response or an awkward conversation over the fence, which was, she suspected, the point. *Dinner Saturday, just the four of us, nothing formal, do say you'll come.* Jemima's handwriting: neat, slightly slanted, the lowercase i dotted with what might have been a small circle.

Lance was delighted. He said yes before she had finished reading it, which was either enthusiasm or the specific relief of a man who had been aware of a social debt accumulating next door and was glad to have a legitimate reason to settle it. She thought it was probably both, with something else underneath: Jemima, who was the kind of woman Lance found simultaneously attractive and faintly intimidating and would never in a thousand years have admitted to either, least of all to Penelope.

She texted Alan: *Dinner invitation. Next door. Saturday.*

The reply took longer than usual. *I'd been expecting something of the kind. Go. Count the doors.*

She put the phone in her pocket and went to tell Freya she had a choice between the Millers on Saturday night or Mrs Patterson's, which Freya received with the solemn deliberation of a child who understood that these decisions had weight.

Saturday arrived with the particular quality of a day that had decided to be pleasant regardless of what anyone had planned for it. The kind of autumn evening that felt like an apology for summer. Penelope changed twice, which she noted with mild irritation as something she did not usually do, and settled on something that was neither trying too hard nor not trying at all, which took longer than trying hard would have. Lance wore the good shirt. He had ironed it himself. He had also, she noticed, checked his reflection in the hallway mirror on the way out, which was not nothing.

The Millers had taken Freya, so the house was quiet when they left, which made the short walk next door feel oddly formal. Two adults in good clothes, on a Saturday evening, walking approximately twelve metres.

Charles opened the door with the warmth of a man who had been looking forward to this and wanted you to know it without quite saying so. He was exactly as he always was at the fence: easy, laughing at something that hadn't quite happened yet, the tan suggesting either recent travel or a dedication to maintenance that didn't bear examination. He had a glass of something already in hand and the particular host's quality of making an ordinary terraced entrance feel like the threshold of somewhere larger. Lance responded to all of this with visible pleasure, stepping

inside with the openness of a man who had decided to have a good evening and intended to.

Penelope crossed the threshold and started counting.

The front of the house had the same Victorian bones as theirs, better realised. The hallway had been opened up where theirs still had the original wall, the floorboards refinished in something pale and Scandinavian that her aesthetic sense acknowledged as excellent and her more specific sense registered as expensive. Every room they moved through was finished, with the completeness of a renovation executed by professionals on a budget that had never been a consideration. She admired the right things and said so, and the admiration was genuine, which was the most irritating part.

The resentment was small and perfectly formed and she set it aside. Mostly.

Jemima was in the kitchen. She had the quality some women had of appearing to have arrived at everything, including her own appearance, without effort, which Penelope had learned from experience was always effort and usually considerable. She kissed Penelope on both cheeks and said she was so glad, really it had been too long, they should have done this months ago, and the warmth was performed with sufficient skill that Penelope could only admire the technique. Lance, beside her, had the expression of a man trying not to be obvious about something.

The kitchen was finished in a large-format pale tile that she recognised from approximately four months of looking at a sample on her own windowsill. Not the same tile. Better than the sample.

She looked at it for a moment and then looked at something else.

They had drinks. Charles had views about natural wine that he delivered with the confidence of a man who had acquired them recently and thoroughly, and Lance engaged with this in good faith and with genuine interest, because Lance was constitutionally inclined to find things interesting when presented by someone who seemed worth impressing. Jemima asked about Freya, about the school, about whether they were thinking of doing anything with the back garden, and asked these things with the specific attentiveness of a woman who had done her reading. She knew the name of Freya's teacher. She knew Lance had been at the same agency for four years. Neither piece of information was highlighted; both were dropped into conversation as naturally as if they'd met at a dinner party years ago and were simply catching up.

Penelope noted these things and asked Jemima about the renovation.

People told you a great deal when they thought you were simply being friendly.

She excused herself to find the bathroom.

Count the doors, Alan had said.

The bathroom was where it should be. The home office was where the plans had shown it: at the far end of the extension, glass-walled on one side, a sitting area visible through it. Legible, sensible, exactly what the planning application had described. She stood in the hallway for a moment with the quality of stillness of a person with nowhere pressing to be.

The door was at the end of the hallway, past the office. It should not have been there. The architectural drawings she had memorised showed a storage cupboard at that end of the extension, standard depth, nothing notable. The door that existed in the actual building was not a cupboard door. It was heavier, with the particular solidity of something that had been built to contain rather than to separate, and the frame around it had been finished to a different standard, the kind of precision that suggested the person who did it understood that what was behind it required a different quality of seal. There was no handle on this side.

She looked at it for two seconds. Then she went back to the dinner.

The dining room had the easy warmth of a table set by people who entertained well and knew it. Candles, good glasses, the kind of serving dishes that suggested the food had been made by someone who cooked. Charles refilled her glass with the attentiveness of a host who wanted you comfortable and relaxed and slightly off your guard, which she appreciated as a technique even as she declined to cooperate with it. The conversation moved around the table with the lubricated ease of four adults who had collectively decided the evening was going well.

She ate and listened and watched them work.

Charles was good at men. He had the gift of making them feel they were the most interesting person in the room, which flattered their self-image without requiring him to actually pay close attention. Lance, across the table, had the slightly heightened quality of a man enjoying himself more than he'd expected to, which Penelope watched with a complicated mixture of fondness and something more strategic. Jemima was warm and specific and kept her eyes moving between Lance and Penelope with a rhythm that looked social and wasn't.

The food was excellent. She allowed herself to simply think this.

The swinging suggestion arrived with dessert.

It did not arrive directly, with eye contact of a specific kind. It arrived sideways, which was more sophisticated and considerably more uncomfortable. Charles said something about a couple they knew in the area, very relaxed people, very open-minded, the kind of arrangement that wasn't for everyone of course but there was something to be said for keeping things interesting, wasn't there, and he looked at Lance with the easy camaraderie of men who understood each other. Jemima said nothing and kept her expression open and warm and watched Penelope's face.

Lance laughed. It was a good laugh, technically, warm and social, the laugh of a man who has heard something mildly risqué and found it amusing rather than alarming. It was also approximately half a second too long, and it ended in a quality of silence that Lance filled by reaching for his wine, and Charles smiled at something over Lance's shoulder, and Jemima continued to watch Penelope with the attentiveness of someone waiting for a specific piece of information.

Penelope smiled. She asked whether the pears were local.

Jemima said she thought so, from the market, and the conversation moved elsewhere as conversations did when they needed to, and the rest of the evening was warm and easy and entirely normal.

At the end of the night she realised she had left her pashmina somewhere inside, and went back through the dining room to find it on the arm of the chair where she had set it when they arrived. She collected it with the ease of a woman retrieving something she had simply forgotten, and on the way back through she confirmed, from this angle, that the small device on the bookshelf was exactly what she had thought it was when she had first clocked it during the main course.

They said their goodnights in the doorway. Charles said they must do this again soon, and Jemima squeezed Penelope's hand and said how lovely, and Lance said genuinely, yes, brilliant, and they walked the twelve metres home in the cooling autumn air.

Inside, Lance said the kitchen was extraordinary.

She said it was.

He said Charles really knew his wine, and she said he did, and he said Jemima was remarkable, wasn't she, just very, you know, and he made a gesture that meant something he wasn't going to specify.

She agreed that Jemima was remarkable.

Lance went upstairs in the good mood of a man who had had a better evening than he'd expected. She heard him in the bathroom, doing the ordinary things.

She sat in the study and opened the laptop and added three bullet points to the document labelled renovation quotes: the door at the end of the hallway, no handle on this side. The device on the bookshelf, third shelf, between the architecture books. The exact phrasing Charles had used, which she wanted written down before it softened in memory.

Then she texted Alan: *Device on the bookshelf in the dining room. Door at the end of the hall, no handle on this side. They tried to generate leverage over Lance. That was the purpose of the evening.*

The reply took seven seconds.

Yes. How is he?

She considered the question. Upstairs, Lance was running a tap.

Fine, she typed. *He doesn't know what it was.*

No, Alan said. *They'll try again. Different angle. They're patient.*

She sat with this.

The door, she typed. *That's the server room.*

Yes.

Is there anything I need from in there.

A pause. Eight seconds.

Not yet, Alan said. *But I'm glad you counted the doors.*

She closed the laptop. The tile sample was still on the windowsill. Outside, the fence between the two gardens was invisible in the dark, and on the other side of it something hummed with the patient industry of something that had been running for a long time and intended to keep running.

She went to bed.

Chapter Nine

She heard him before she saw him.

Penny, have you seen my Shokz?

She was at the kitchen table with the laptop open and a cup of tea that was, for once, still warm. Sunday morning. Freya back from the Millers and upstairs with a book. The house doing its quiet weekend thing.

She had not seen his Shokz. She wasn't entirely certain what Shokz were.

Lance appeared in the kitchen doorway in running kit: the good trainers she hadn't seen before, fitted shorts, a technical top in a grey that suggested it had been chosen rather than just bought. He was holding the headphones, which answered the question of where they were, and wearing the expression of a man who had arrived somewhere expecting an audience.

'Found them,' he said, unnecessarily. He put them around his neck with the particular care of someone who had read the instructions.

She looked at him over the laptop. He looked, she thought, like a man who had made a decision and wanted credit for having made it before he'd actually done the thing the decision required. The kit was new. All of it, probably. She did a rapid mental calculation about timing and decided the order had gone in sometime in the week after the dinner next door, possibly the day after.

'Good,' she said.

'I thought I'd start going out on Sunday mornings. Early. Before it gets too warm.'

'Good idea.'

He waited for something more. She returned to the screen. The shell company's director had, she had discovered that morning, a connection to a property development in Brisbane that had received a federal infrastructure grant eighteen months ago, and she was trying to establish whether the timing was meaningful or simply coincidental, which was a question she was finding increasingly easy to answer.

'The physio said I should do more cardio,' Lance said.

She looked up. 'How long have you been seeing a physio?'

'Few weeks. The shoulder thing.'

She had not known about the shoulder thing either, which told her something about the distance between what they shared with each other these days and what they kept to themselves without quite deciding to. She felt this observation land and sit there.

'How is it?' she said.

'Getting better. Hence the running.'

He said it with the satisfaction of a man presenting a logical chain, which it was, and she said that made sense, which it did, and he nodded and bounced slightly on the balls of his feet and said he'd be back in forty-five minutes and headed for the door.

She listened to the front door close behind him.

Then she looked at the laptop screen for a moment, and at the window, and at the tile sample on the windowsill, which had been there for four months and would, she now understood with quiet certainty, be there for four more. She thought about Lance in new running kit, in trainers that probably cost more than she'd have chosen, telling her about a physio she hadn't known about and a shoulder she hadn't asked about, and she felt something that wasn't quite guilt but lived in the same postcode.

She went back to the Brisbane development.

He came back in forty-three minutes, slightly shorter than advertised, which she noted without remarking on. He was red-faced and breathing in the way of a man who had gone out too fast and not wanted to come back looking like it had been too fast. He got himself a glass of water and stood at the kitchen bench and said it was good out there, really good, and she said she was glad, and he said he thought he'd make it a regular thing and she said she thought that was a good idea.

'You should come sometime,' he said.

'I'm not a runner.'

'You don't have to be a runner to run.'

She considered this. It was not entirely without insight. 'Maybe,' she said, which was not a yes and was not a no and Lance received it as something between the two and seemed satisfied, which was the function maybe had been performing in their marriage for some time.

He showered. She heard the water running and Freya's door opening, Freya navigating the landing with the territorial instincts of a child who knew when adults were occupied and moved accordingly.

She closed the laptop and thought, not for the first time and not for the last, about the thing she was doing and what it was costing and who was paying.

The performing arts training had been, in most conventional assessments, a detour. Three years of auditions, two years getting things she wished she hadn't, a longer stretch of corporate communications work that used the same muscles with less interesting material. Everyone had treated it as a phase, including Lance, who had filed it early in their relationship under things Penny did before and had not revisited it. Her father had said nothing except to ask, once, whether she was learning to

read a room. She had said she supposed she was. He had nodded as though this were the most useful possible answer.

She had not thought about it for years. Or rather: she had thought about the loss of it, the specific grief of a thing you were reasonably good at and gave up on, without thinking about what the skill itself might still be doing.

It had been doing things, it turned out, the whole time.

She could sustain a performance under pressure. She had established this at dinner on Saturday in the specific conditions of a table where two people were watching her face for information and she had given them precisely the information she had chosen to give, which was none. She could read a room in the way her father had meant: not the superficial reading, but the structural one. Who wanted what. What the surface conversation was covering for. What the silences were doing.

She could be Penny when Penelope was needed elsewhere. This was a more useful skill than she had given it credit for.

She was also, she acknowledged, sitting at a kitchen table on a Sunday morning following the money trail of a surveillance data company with infrastructure on three continents, and she was doing it with the low-grade exhilaration of someone who had found the thing their brain was built for and was faintly alarmed by how much they were enjoying it.

She had not felt this way since the last good audition. The one she'd got. The one that had led to the thing she wished she hadn't, and then to Lance, and then to Freya, and then to this kitchen with the tile sample on the windowsill and a file on the desktop labelled renovation quotes that was currently running to eleven bullet points and a subsidiary chart.

She was not going to examine the arithmetic of that too closely. Not today.

Lance came downstairs in clean clothes, his hair still damp, and made himself a second coffee with the slightly recharged quality of a man who had done something healthy and felt entitled to the compensation. He stood at the bench and looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite place.

'You seem different lately,' he said.

She looked up.

'Good different,' he said quickly. 'Just. I don't know. Focused.'

She held his gaze for a moment. He was not wrong. He was, she thought, for the first time in some years, actually looking at her rather than in her direction.

'I've just had things to think about,' she said.

'The council stuff?'

'Mm.'

He nodded. He was, she thought, on the edge of asking something more specific, and then decided not to, because Lance's relationship with things he wasn't sure he wanted to know had always been to leave them slightly ajar rather than to open them properly. She had once found this frustrating. She currently found it convenient.

'I might do a longer route next week,' he said. 'Work up to it.'

'Good idea,' she said.

He took his coffee to the living room. She heard the television, something Sunday, the low murmur of it. Freya appeared in the kitchen doorway with her book and the expression of a child who was hungry but felt the request required some consideration of timing.

'Hungry?' Penelope said.

'A bit,' Freya said.

She made toast. Freya sat at the table and ate it with the focused efficiency of someone with somewhere to be in their own head, and the Sunday morning went about its business around them, and the tile sample sat on the windowsill in the autumn light, and on the other side of the fence something hummed.

Chapter Ten

The community information evening was held in the function room of the Bellshore East Bowls Club, which had been available and free, and were also the two criteria Blake Santoro applied to most decisions he had not yet found a way to monetise. The carpet was the particular shade of green that suggested it had once been a different colour and had arrived here by degrees. Forty-three chairs were arranged in rows facing a fold-out table and a projector screen displaying a holding slide that read: Bellshore East Community Information Evening. The council logo sat in the corner of the slide beside a stock photograph of a street tree that was in neither bayside nor the east of anything in particular.

Penelope arrived seven minutes early and took the back row, aisle seat. Her father had always chosen the seat nearest the exit in any room he had not yet assessed. She had filed this, at the time, under his general preference for not being trapped at dinner parties. She was revising that assessment.

She had texted Alan from the study before leaving: Ferrante at the residents' meeting. Santoro is hosting.

The reply had been immediate. Yes. I was wondering when he'd show his face publicly. The planning approval has been granted. His office is listed as a formal supporter. Timing is not coincidental.

She had put her coat on and driven to the bowls club.

The room filled with the particular demographic of the locally concerned: retirees with folders, a couple in matching weatherproof jackets with the look of people who knew exactly how these evenings went, and a woman near the front who was holding a rolled banner with the careful restraint of someone who had agreed with herself to wait for the right moment.

The facilitator was not a council officer. He was late thirties, good suit, the particular ease of someone who had done this in different rooms on different evenings and had a system for it. He set out printed documents with the brisk efficiency of a man billing by the hour.

Blake Santoro arrived with the energy of a man whose entrance was the thing he had rehearsed most. He was twenty-two years old and already moved as though the room were slightly smaller than he needed it to be. He wore a navy suit, he had read somewhere that navy was a power colour, that it projected authority and it fit well, the suit, though it fit in the way of something bought rather than made. He shook hands with the people nearest the door before he had quite finished removing his coat. He had the specific gift of making each person he greeted feel briefly like the most important person present, which was a skill and would eventually become a weapon and was probably both already.

Marco Ferrante arrived four minutes after Santoro, which was also a calculation: late enough to be important, early enough not to be rude. He

was forty-two and wore it with the ease of a man who had spent time making peace with the number and then spent more time making sure other people noticed. The suit was not navy. The suit was charcoal and had been made for him by someone who knew what they were doing, and the difference between Ferrante's suit and Santoro's suit was the difference between having arrived and knowing that you would. He moved through the room with the confidence of someone who understood it as the smallest unit of the thing he was actually interested in. He took a seat to Santoro's right at the front table.

Councillor Fiona Gallagher was already seated when Penelope arrived. One row in front, on the aisle. Small, fifties, sensible coat, a notebook open on her knee. She had not introduced herself to anyone. She had the quality of a person who had been doing this long enough to know exactly where to sit and what to do with her hands while she waited. She had been the only member of the council planning committee to lodge a formal dissent on the approval. Seven paragraphs. No hedging. The anomaly is not adequately explained. The acceleration of the approval process is without documented precedent. I note my dissent for the record. It had been read, correctly understood, and set aside.

The presentation began.

It was well-made. The slides were clean, the language managed with care: digital infrastructure hub, sustainable connectivity investment, supporting regional economic growth. The planning approval appeared in a single slide as an item in a completed timeline rather than a subject for discussion. Santoro narrated with the fluency of a man who had rehearsed enough times to have stopped noticing what it contained. Ferrante nodded at the right moments. Penelope watched him nod and watched the room while the room watched the screen.

The couple in the weatherproof jackets exchanged a look at the timeline slide that was not surprise. The man in the fourth row leaned forward to read something carefully, then sat back. Santoro at the front table monitoring the crowd with the expression of a man watching a performance he had a stake in.

The facilitator advanced the slides.

Technical specifications. Power supply, thermal management, infrastructure capacity. He was speaking about cooling systems when the slide changed and Penelope saw it: a logo, corporate, a square icon in blue and white, placed where a client watermark sits before a deck has been properly finalised. Large enough to read. She knew it. It was the parent company, the one she had been tracing through four layers of corporate structure for the past three weeks.

The facilitator glanced at the screen, and advanced the slide. Four seconds. The logo went with it.

Penelope did not reach for her phone. She kept her face in the configuration of mild civic interest and she thought: someone forgot to scrub the template.

Questions from the floor. The parking question arrived, as it always did, regardless of what the meeting was about. Santoro handled it with practiced warmth. A woman asked about construction timelines. A man asked about noise. The meeting performed the function of meetings.

Fiona Gallagher raised her hand.

The quality of Santoro's attention shifted. Barely perceptible. He called on her with the exact same warmth he had directed at everyone else, which was the tell.

'I have a question about the thermal discharge provisions,' Fiona Gallagher said. 'The approved plans specify a data facility of significant capacity. I'm wondering whether the council can clarify what the expected thermal load means for the drainage easement on the southern boundary of the site. The permit documentation appears to address the construction phase only.'

The room became slightly quieter. Most of it had no idea what a drainage easement was. It waited to see if someone else would respond.

'Great question,' Santoro said. 'The technical details of the infrastructure are really a matter for the relevant utilities provider, but I'm sure the council officers can follow that up in writing.'

Ferrante, to his right, was looking at the back wall.

Penelope watched Ferrante's hands, still and relaxed on the table in the practised way of a man who had learned what to do with his hands when a question arrived that he had hoped would not.

Fiona Gallagher thanked him pleasantly and wrote something in her notebook.

Penelope looked at the back of Fiona Gallagher's head and thought: she already knows the answer.

The meeting concluded with tea and biscuits. Ferrante worked the room for eleven minutes and left. Santoro stayed longer, which was the correct move.

The woman with the banner unfurled it as people began to leave --- STOP THE DATA CENTRE, black letters on white --- and positioned herself near the double doors with a stack of home printed pamphlets. She pressed them into hands with the focused determination of a person who had done her preparation and intended to use it. Several people took one and folded it immediately into a pocket without reading it. Several declined. Two pamphlets fell to the floor in the shuffle of coats and chairs and were walked over without anyone stopping, the paper going soft under foot traffic, the black letters face down on the bowls club carpet.

Penelope did not approach Fiona Gallagher directly. She positioned herself near the biscuit table and waited.

Fiona Gallagher came for a cup of tea and stood looking at the room with the expression of a woman who had seen it from many angles and found them all instructive.

'I found your question about the drainage easement interesting,' Penelope said.

Fiona Gallagher looked at her with the careful assessment of a person accustomed to evaluating who was asking and why. 'I've been following the application since the first submission,' she said.

'I've been looking at it too,' Penelope said. 'From a different angle.'

A pause. Small. Precise.

'Then you'll have noticed things,' Fiona Gallagher said.

'One or two.'

Fiona Gallagher glanced toward Santoro near the door, then back. She took out a plain card, without a logo, and set it on the table next to Penelope's hand without making a production of it.

'The thermal discharge from that kind of load goes somewhere,' she said, in the mild tone of someone sharing information she had accumulated and been uncertain what to do with. 'There are some interesting implications for the drainage easement if anyone were minded to look carefully at the plans.'

She collected her tea and coat and left with the unhurried purpose of a woman who had said what she came to say.

Penelope looked at the card. No title. Just the name and a number. She put it in her pocket and drove home.

She texted from the driveway: *Fiona Gallagher knows about the power draw. Thermal discharge into the drainage easement. She gave me her number. Also --- the facilitator's slide deck. There was a logo in the technical specifications slide. The parent company. Four seconds and then gone. I think it was a template that hadn't been cleaned up.*

The reply came in eleven seconds.

I know about Fiona. She has been building a record for fourteen months. She doesn't know yet what it's for.

Penelope looked at the fence line in the dark. The hum was not audible from here but she knew it was there anyway.

She got out of the car and went inside.

Chapter Eleven

In the morning Freya ate her toast in the methodical way of a child working through something, taking small bites at regular intervals and not reading the back of the cereal box as she usually did. Penelope noticed this and said nothing, because Freya's processing had its own schedule and interrupting it was rarely useful.

Lance had left early. A client breakfast, he had said the night before, which meant a restaurant in the city and the slightly elevated version of himself he deployed for those occasions. The house had the particular quality it took on when it was just the two of them.

'Mum,' Freya said.

'Mm.'

'After people die.' She paused, pushing a corner of toast around the plate. 'After a while, like two or three generations, nobody remembers who they actually were. They just...' She stopped. 'They just disappear.'

Penelope put down her cup.

Freya was looking at her plate. She had the expression of someone who had been carrying this for a day or two and had decided, this morning, to put it down somewhere.

'Where did that come from?' Penelope said.

'I was just thinking about it.' A pause. 'Is it true?'

Penelope considered the question with the seriousness it deserved, which was considerable. She did not say: that's a big thought for a Tuesday. She did not say: don't worry about that. She looked at her daughter, who was nine years old and had arrived, apparently on her own, at one of the more efficient summaries of human impermanence she had encountered.

'Mostly,' she said. 'In terms of names and faces, mostly yes. Your great-great-grandmother. I don't know her name. I don't know what she looked like or what she found funny or what she was afraid of.'

Freya absorbed this. 'That's sad.'

'It is a bit. But here's the thing.' Penelope turned her cup in her hands. 'She made choices. Small ones, probably, like who to talk to, what to do on a particular day, whether to be kind to someone who didn't deserve it. And those choices had effects. And those effects had effects. And somewhere in that chain is the fact that I exist, and you exist, sitting here eating toast on a Tuesday.' She paused. 'Disappearing isn't quite the right word for that.'

Freya considered this for a moment. 'That's not really the same as being remembered,' she said.

'No,' Penelope said. 'It's not. But I'm glad I'm here and that you are too.'

Freya ate the last of her toast. The expression on her face was not entirely convinced, but it was the expression of someone who had received something genuine and was prepared to think about it. She took her plate to the sink and went upstairs to get her bag, and Penelope sat for a moment longer at the kitchen table.

She thought about the chain of choices her great-great-grandmother had made without knowing what they were for. She thought about Henry, and what he had built, and why, and whether he had known, really known, what the chain would look like from this end.

Then she got up, rinsed her cup, and took Freya to school.

She was back at her desk by half past nine, phone in hand.

I've been thinking about the corporate structure, she wrote. *The parent company logo on that slide. I want to understand the full picture. What are we actually looking at?*

The reply came in three seconds, which was Alan's equivalent of having been waiting.

The registered entity you saw on that slide is Syntherion Group, incorporated in the Cayman Islands in 2019. It has eleven subsidiaries across six jurisdictions. The Bellshore development is owned by the fourth of those, a company called Nexvar Infrastructure Pty Ltd, registered in Victoria. Nexvar has no public-facing presence and no employees other than two directors, both of whom also sit on the boards of three other Syntherion subsidiaries. The planning application was submitted under Nexvar's name. The connection to Syntherion does not appear in any publicly available document associated with the development.

She read this twice.

And what does Syntherion actually do?

Officially: digital infrastructure investment. Data centres, fibre networks, cloud services. That is accurate as far as it goes. What it doesn't capture is the nature of the data being processed. The Bellshore facility, based on the infrastructure specifications in the approved plans, has a capacity well beyond what standard commercial cloud services require. The power draw Fiona Gallagher identified is consistent with a facility designed for continuous, high-volume data ingestion and processing. Not storage. Processing.

Processing what?

Behavioural data, primarily. Syntherion's other facilities have contracts with seven data brokers across three countries. The brokers aggregate from multiple sources. Retail loyalty programmes, social media platforms, location services, connected devices, financial transaction

records. Individually the data points are unremarkable. In aggregate, at scale, with the right processing infrastructure, they produce detailed behavioural profiles of ordinary people. Where they go, what they buy, what they read, who they associate with, what they are likely to do next.

She sat back in her chair.

Who buys that?

Corporations, primarily. Targeted advertising, risk assessment, consumer behaviour modelling. That is the majority of the revenue. But the same profiles can be used for other purposes. Political campaigns. Influence operations. Identifying individuals whose behaviour suggests they might be susceptible to a particular message, or whose associations make them useful, or whose patterns suggest something they would prefer not to be known. The infrastructure doesn't care who's asking. It processes what it's given and returns what's requested.

She looked out the window. The fence line. The extension behind it, somewhere behind that the server room door with no handle on this side.

Ferrante, she wrote. *His advisory board connection to the parent brokerage , what does that mean in practice?*

It means he knew what this was before the planning application was submitted. His office's formal endorsement was not a favour to a constituent. It was a transaction. What he received in return is the more interesting question. Political intelligence, most likely. Profiling data on voters, opponents, journalists. The kind of information that doesn't show up in campaign disclosures because it never changes hands as money.

How long have you known this?

A pause. Longer than the others.

I have known the corporate structure for some time. The operational purpose I have been assembling from inference and pattern. The slide last night confirmed the Syntherion connection in a way that moved several things from probable to certain.

You could have told me more, earlier.

Yes.

She waited.

I wanted you to find as much as you could on your own. Your father always said that the person who finds the evidence understands it differently from the person who is handed it. I think he was right. I also think…

A pause.

I also think I was not entirely sure, until recently, how far you wanted to go with this.

She looked at that for a moment.

And now?

And now I think you already know the answer to that.

She put the phone down and sat in the quiet kitchen. Outside, on the other side of the fence, something hummed steadily and processed the unremarkable details of ordinary lives into something that could be sold, or used, or held.

She picked up the phone again.

Tell me everything, she wrote.

Chapter Twelve

The advocacy day was held in a conference centre two blocks from the lake, in a room with the specific temperature and lighting of a space that had been designed for productivity and achieved, instead, a kind of suspended animation. Penelope signed in at the registration desk, collected a lanyard and a printed programme and a tote bag containing a water bottle, a notepad, and a USB drive she would never use, and found a seat near the aisle in the third row.

Ellis had taken the same flight. He had appeared at the gate in the waxed jacket and the expression of a man executing a carefully considered plan, and had suggested, in a tone that communicated operational necessity, that they should sit separately on the plane and not acknowledge each other in the terminal. He added that he would position himself outside the conference centre during the sessions and maintain a watching brief on the entrance.

She had pointed out that this was a local government advocacy day in Canberra, not a defection.

He had sat next to her anyway. He had eaten her complimentary biscuit and then mentioned, almost immediately afterwards, that he didn't really do carbs.

The morning sessions covered planning reform, infrastructure investment frameworks, and community consultation best practice. Penelope took notes. The notes were genuine. She was, in fact, a community representative with a legitimate interest in planning reform, which was the cleanest cover available and the one she intended to maintain throughout. A woman from a council in regional Victoria asked three good questions about development approval timelines that Penelope would have found interesting under any other circumstances.

At the morning break she sent a text to the number Fiona had given her.

The reply came in four minutes: Coffee cart outside the east entrance. Fifteen minutes.

The woman was in her late forties with the careful neutral presentation of someone who had spent years in proximity to political offices and had learned to be unremarkable as a professional skill. She bought her own coffee and Penelope's and they stood at the edge of the courtyard and the woman talked about her weekend plans in a tone of complete normality while she passed Penelope a folded document inside a conference programme.

'Three meetings,' the woman said, looking at the middle distance. 'Not two. There's one that didn't make the public diary. The third is the one that matters. The agenda item is listed as infrastructure alignment, which is not a category that officially exists.'

'When?' Penelope said.

'Eight weeks before the planning approval was granted. The other two were after.' She finished her coffee. 'I don't know what was in the room. I know who was in the room, and I know that one of them flew in from Singapore the night before and left the morning after and didn't meet with anyone else while he was here.' She looked at Penelope for the first time directly. 'Fiona trusts you.'

'She barely knows me,' Penelope said.

'No,' the woman said. 'But she's a good judge.' She dropped her cup in the bin and went back inside without looking back, which appeared to be how the women in this investigation preferred to make their exits.

Penelope stood in the courtyard for a moment with the conference programme under her arm.

She became aware, at the edge of her sightline, of a small commotion near the garden beds running along the east wall. A man in a grey fleece was speaking to someone behind a substantial ornamental hedge with the body language of a person who had asked a question and was not satisfied with the answer.

She walked over.

Ellis was on the other side of the hedge, holding his phone in the way of a man who had been doing something with it and had decided, possibly too late, that he should look as though he had not been. The man in the grey fleece was somewhere in his sixties, with the compact indignation of a person who took the security of public spaces seriously and had time to act on it.

'He's been standing here for forty minutes,' the man said to Penelope, apparently deciding she looked like someone who might be responsible for things. 'Taking photographs of the entrance. I've asked him twice what he's doing and he won't give me a straight answer.'

Penelope looked at Ellis. Ellis looked at Penelope with the expression of a man who had a perfectly good explanation and was choosing not to deploy it for operational reasons.

She took a breath.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, to the man in the grey fleece, in the tone she had used for the sympathetic roles, the ones that required warmth and a slight weight of private sorrow. 'He's my brother. He gets a bit...' She paused, with the pause of someone selecting a word carefully out of consideration for someone who couldn't help themselves. 'He has this thing about watching for threats. We've been working on it, but sometimes when he's in a new place it can escalate. He's completely harmless, he just finds it very hard to stop.'

The man in the grey fleece looked at Ellis with his expression reorganising itself from suspicion into something more uncertain.

Ellis said nothing. His jaw had done something specific.

'He's been assessed,' Penelope added, which she felt was a finishing touch. 'He just needs some reassurance and he'll be fine.' She put a hand briefly on Ellis's arm. 'Won't you.'

It was not entirely a question.

'Yes,' Ellis said, in a voice from which considerable information had been removed.

The man in the grey fleece nodded slowly, with the slightly deflated air of a person whose righteous concern had been redirected into sympathy without his permission. He said he hoped Ellis would be all right. Penelope thanked him warmly. He left.

She and Ellis looked at each other.

'Your brother?' Ellis said, the hurt to his pride audible in the words.

'It worked.'

'A surveillance delusion.'

'Also worked.'

He looked at the middle distance for a moment. A muscle in his jaw was doing something that had nothing to do with the grey fleece man. 'I was being careful,' he said. 'I had a sightline to the entrance and an exit route and I was documenting anyone who--'

'Ellis.'

'I had a system.'

'You were standing behind a hedge for forty minutes.'

He opened his mouth and closed it. Then: 'Your brother.'

'The first thing that came to me.'

'Out of everything. Brother.'

She understood, a beat after she should have, what she had said. She looked at him. He was not looking at her. He had the expression of a man absorbing something that had arrived sideways and found a specific target.

'Ellis?'

'It's fine,' he said, in the way people said things were fine when they were identifying where the damage was.

'I didn't mean.’

'I know you didn't.' He put his phone in his pocket. 'That's rather the point, isn't it.'

They stood in the courtyard with the conference centre behind them and the ornamental hedge and the distant sound of Canberra going about its Wednesday.

'Why did you come back?' she said. Not aggressively. She genuinely wanted to know.

He was quiet for long enough that she thought he might not answer. Then: 'Because Alan asked me to. And because I owed you something I didn't know how to give you twelve years ago and I still don't, really, but at least now I know what it is.'

She waited.

'I left,' he said, 'because I couldn't tell you the truth about myself. And I couldn't stay without telling you. And I was twenty-six and I thought the kindest thing I could do was disappear, which I now understand was spectacularly wrong but at the time it seemed like the only option I could manage.' He said this with the flatness of a man who had rehearsed it and was delivering it anyway because the alternative was worse. 'I'm gay. I have been, as far as I can tell, the whole time. I'm sorry I let you think it was something you did, or didn't do. It wasn't. It was entirely me not being able to be honest about something I should have been honest about a long time before you.'

The courtyard was very quiet.

Penelope thought about twelve years. She thought about the specific quality of being left, the way it had lodged, the particular story she had told herself about it that turned out to be the wrong story entirely. She thought about the cake on Carlisle Street and the cashews in the supermarket and the biscuit on the Jetstar flight, and she thought: oh.

'Thank you,' she said. It was not everything she could have said but it was true.

He nodded. He looked, she thought, lighter and terrible at the same time, in the way of someone who had put something down after carrying it for a very long time and was now standing in a courtyard in Canberra next to a hedge wondering what happened next.

'I'm still annoyed about the brother thing,' he said.

'I know,' she said.

They went back inside for the afternoon sessions, which Ellis did not attend.

She texted Alan from the hotel room that evening, sitting on the edge of the bed with her shoes still on. The document was in her bag. Through the window, Canberra was doing its night thing: orderly, official, slightly unreal.

Contact confirmed. Three meetings, not two. One off the public diary, eight weeks before approval, a third party flew in from Singapore. I have the names. Ellis got clocked by a concerned citizen. I had to intervene.

She paused, then added: *He told me. About why he left.*

The reply took a moment.

I know. Are you all right?

Yes, she wrote. *I think so. It's a lot to recalibrate.*

Take your time. The Singapore connection will still be there in the morning.

Then: *You might have warned me about the surveillance situation.*

The reply came back in two seconds.

I never said he was good at surveillance.

She put the phone down and sat for a while in the hotel room, with the conference programme on the bedside table and Ellis two floors up in his own room with his own window and twelve years of carrying something he had finally put down in a courtyard in front of an ornamental hedge.

She thought about Freya saying they just disappear.

She thought: not always. Sometimes they come back and tell you the thing they should have told you before, and it doesn't fix what was broken but it does explain the shape of it, which turns out to be its own kind of relief.

She took her shoes off and went to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

She heard them before she opened the front door.

Trevor's laugh, the big one, the one that started somewhere around his knees, and Freya's laugh underneath it, higher and less controlled, the laugh she produced when something had surprised her into it. From the back garden, through the house, carrying all the way to the front step.

Lance had mentioned his parents were coming. He had not mentioned they were coming today.

She stood in the hallway for a moment with her overnight bag and everything she had brought back from Canberra, visible and otherwise, and she thought: all right. She put her bag down, straightened her jacket, and went through to the kitchen.

Wendy was at the bench.

She had the quality of a woman who made herself at home in other people's kitchens with complete naturalness, in the way that managed to be both generous and slightly proprietorial at once. She was unloading something from a cooler bag, a lasagne, already in a dish. Wendy looked up when Penelope came in with the warm expression she always deployed first, the one that was entirely genuine and contained, somewhere underneath it, a small and perfectly maintained inventory.

'Penelope,' she said. 'You look tired. Was it a long trip?'

'Not too bad,' Penelope said. 'Canberra's only two hours.'

'Still. All that travelling.' Wendy set the lasagne on the bench and looked at it with the satisfaction of a woman who had solved a problem. 'I thought I'd bring something. I wasn't sure what you had in.'

'That's very kind,' Penelope said, meaning it and also noting that Wendy had opened the fridge at some point to establish what was in it.

Through the kitchen window she could see Trevor and Freya in the garden. Trevor was on his hands and knees beside the lemon tree, apparently demonstrating something. Freya was watching with the focused attention she gave to things she found genuinely interesting, which was not nothing. As Penelope watched, Trevor produced something from his pocket, she couldn't see what, and Freya's face did the thing it did when she was trying not to smile and losing.

'He's been out there for an hour,' Wendy said, following her gaze. There was something in her tone that was not quite complaint and not quite pride. 'She's very quiet, isn't she. Freya.'

'She's thoughtful,' Penelope said pleasantly.

'Of course.' A small pause. 'Lance was the same at that age. We had him tested.'

Penelope looked at Wendy.

'Everything was fine,' Wendy said, moving the lasagne slightly. 'Obviously. He just needed a bit more stimulation. Different children need different things.'

'They do,' Penelope agreed, in the tone that closed a subject.

Lance appeared from the living room with the slightly heightened quality of a man who had been managing several things at once and had not quite finished. He kissed her and said how was it and she said fine, good actually, and he said great, brilliant, and asked if she'd eaten, and she said on the plane, and Wendy said she'd brought lasagne, as though Penelope had not just been standing next to it.

'Brilliant,' Lance said again. He was, she noticed, holding his phone at a particular angle, the screen slightly away from the room, the angle of a man with a message he hadn't finished reading. She recognised the angle. She had been deploying the same one for weeks.

Trevor came in from the garden with Freya at his heels and the entrance of a man who had been having an excellent time and intended to continue. He was broader than Lance, warmer in colouring, the kind of man who had been handsome in a straightforward way and had become, in his sixties, something more comfortable and more interesting. He crossed the kitchen and embraced Penelope with the enthusiasm of a man who was genuinely pleased to see her, one hand briefly on her shoulder in the way of someone who had decided years ago that he liked her very much and saw no reason to revise this.

'There she is,' he said. 'Canberra treating you well?'

'It treated me adequately,' she said.

He laughed. 'That's all you can ask. You look well, love. Doesn't she look well, Wendy.'

'She looks tired,' Wendy said. 'I said so.'

'Tired but well,' Trevor said expansively, as though this settled it. 'Freya's been telling me about this project she's doing. What's it called, love, the one about the...'

'Ecosystems,' Freya said.

'Ecosystems. She knows things, this one.' He said it to Penelope with the specific warmth of a man sharing something he found genuinely delightful. 'Told me more about the carbon cycle in twenty minutes than I learned in sixty years.'

Freya looked at her plate with the expression of someone receiving a compliment they weren't sure how to carry.

They ate Wendy's lasagne. It was good, Wendy was an excellent cook, something Penelope had always acknowledged without quite wanting to.

Trevor told a story about a man at his golf club that went on considerably longer than necessary and arrived at a punchline that was, genuinely, funny. Lance laughed with the specific quality of a son who had heard many versions of this story and still found the ending worked. Wendy asked Freya about school with the attentive interest of a grandmother who had prepared questions, and Freya answered carefully, and Penelope watched her daughter navigate Wendy with the instincts of a child who had been doing so her whole life.

She excused herself after dinner to unpack.

The bedroom was quiet. She sat on the edge of the bed and took the document out of her bag, the folded pages inside the conference programme, and looked at it for a moment. Then she took out her phone.

Singapore contact, she wrote. Third meeting, undocumented. Name on the document means something?

Three seconds.

Yes. The name is a nominee director for four Syntherion subsidiaries. He also appears in two other corporate registries under variant romanisations of the same name. He flew into Canberra, met with Ferrante's office, and left. No other meetings logged. The visit does not appear in any public record.

She wrote: So Ferrante's office was meeting directly with Syntherion's operational layer. Not through the shell companies.

The shell companies are for documents. This was for decisions.

She sat with that. Then: *What does it mean in practice?*

It means the approval was not arranged at arm's length. Someone in that meeting knew exactly what the Bellshore facility was for and agreed to it anyway. Possibly negotiated terms. The question of what Ferrante received is no longer speculative.

She put the phone face down on the bed and looked at the ceiling for a moment.

Downstairs, Trevor was laughing again. Freya's voice, asking something. Lance's answer, patient and warm in the way he was always warm with Freya, the version of himself she was grateful Freya got to see.

She put the document back in the conference programme and the conference programme at the bottom of her bag and went back downstairs.

Trevor was teaching Freya to play gin rummy at the kitchen table with a deck of cards he had apparently travelled with. Wendy was making tea with the ease of a woman who had located everything she needed. Lance was on the sofa with his laptop, the screen angled away from the door.

Penelope sat in the armchair and watched Trevor explain the rules with the patience of a man who had nowhere else to be and considered this the best possible use of a Wednesday evening. Freya was picking it up quickly, which Trevor announced every two minutes with fresh surprise, and which Freya received each time with the same careful expression.

'She's sharp,' Trevor said to Penelope, over Freya's head. 'Gets it from you, I reckon.'

'She gets it from herself,' Penelope said.

Trevor grinned. 'Fair enough.' He dealt another hand. From the kitchen Wendy said the tea was ready, and did Penelope want one, and Penelope said yes please, and Wendy brought it through and set it on the table next to her with the small precise care of a woman performing thoughtfulness, and Penelope said thank you, and meant it, and they sat in the ordinary warmth of a Wednesday evening that contained, underneath its entire surface, approximately four significant things that nobody in the room was discussing.

She drank her tea.

Freya won the first hand of gin rummy, which Trevor disputed loudly and incorrectly, and which produced the laugh again, the unguarded one, and Penelope thought: five days. She could manage five days.

She was fairly sure she could manage five days.

Chapter Fourteen

Ellis messaged at eleven forty-three.

Debrief required, he wrote. Significant operational developments. Available?

A pause of four seconds, which Ellis had learned to read as Alan considering his words rather than locating them.

I'm available. How are you?

Operational debrief first, Ellis wrote. *The surveillance position was compromised by a civilian. Penelope had to intervene. Cover story deployed successfully, situation resolved, no lasting exposure. However the method of resolution raised certain...*

He stopped. Started again.

She told him I was her brother. And that I had a thing about surveillance. A mental health thing.

Yes. She mentioned it.

Ellis looked at the ceiling of his hotel room. It was a good ceiling. Unremarkable. He had been looking at it for some time.

She could have said colleague, he wrote. *Or friend. Or basically anything.*

She could have.

Brother specifically.

I noticed.

There was a pause on Ellis's end this time.

It's fine, he wrote. *Tactically sound. Immediate situation required a sympathetic framing and she produced one efficiently. That's good fieldcraft. I'm not -- I'm noting it as an operational observation.*

Of course.

The ceiling continued to be unremarkable.

I told her, Ellis wrote. *In the courtyard. After.*

I know. How did that go?

She said thank you. He wrote it and then looked at it for a moment. *She said it like she meant it. Not like it was, not like she was managing me. Like it was actually useful information that she was glad to have.*

That sounds like her.

Yes, Ellis wrote. *It does.*

He got up and went to the window. Canberra at night was very tidy. Everything where it was supposed to be, the lake doing its lake thing in the dark, the parliamentary buildings lit up at the far end of the avenue with the specific self-importance of institutions that had decided their own significance. It was, he thought, a very serious city for a country that did not always take itself seriously, which he found both baffling and oddly appealing.

Can I ask you something, he wrote.

Yes.

Did you send me because you thought I'd be useful. Or because you thought this would happen.

The pause this time was longer. Seven seconds.

Both things can be true.

Ellis considered this.

You could have just told me to call her, he wrote. *Years ago. You had her number. You clearly had mine.*

I could have. But some conversations have to arrive in their own time, in their own way. If I had arranged it, it would have been something I did to the two of you. This way it was something you chose, freely. That's a different thing.

Ellis stood at the window for a while.

She called me her brother, he wrote finally, and he was aware even as he wrote it that he was back at the beginning of the thing, that this was what he was actually trying to say. *She said it without thinking. Which means that's what I am to her. In the category of things she reaches for when she needs one.*

Is that what you wanted to be?

No, Ellis wrote. And then, because Alan had always been the one person who received honesty without doing anything inconvenient with it: *Yes. I mean -- I don't know what I wanted. I wanted something that I spent twelve years not being able to name and then named it to her in a courtyard in front of a hedge and now it has a name and the name doesn't include her. Which is right. Which is how it should be. I'm just...*

He stopped.

Recalibrating.

Penelope's word, Ellis wrote.

Did she use that word with you?

She did.

He almost smiled. Of course she did.

Ellis.

Yes.

You did a brave thing today. Both things. The one in the courtyard and the one before it, standing behind that hedge with a system that was never going to work, trying to be useful to someone you've been trying to be useful to for a very long time. That counts for something.

Ellis read this twice. *The hedge thing is a bit much,* he wrote.

I know. I thought I'd include it anyway.

He went back to the bed and sat on the edge of it, in the way Penelope was sitting two floors down without either of them knowing it, and he looked at the carpet, which was also unremarkable, and he thought about twelve years and a courtyard and a woman who had said thank you like she meant it.

What happens now, he wrote.

You go home. You keep being useful. You let the rest of it settle.

And Penelope.

Penelope is fine. She's doing what she does.

Which is?

Paying attention.

Ellis put his phone down and looked at the tidy Canberra night and thought that this was, on balance, probably the most honest conversation he had managed in a very long time, and that it had happened with an artificial intelligence at eleven fifty-eight on a Wednesday, which was either depressing or appropriate or possibly both.

He went to sleep before he could decide which.

Chapter Fifteen

Friday was mild, the kind of autumn day that arrived without warning and reminded everyone what they'd been missing. Lance was working from home. Penelope dropped Freya at school and came back to a quiet house, or what she assumed was a quiet house until she got to the top of the stairs.

Lance was at the bedroom window with his coffee.

He was very still. The coffee was not being drunk.

Through the window, over the fence, Jemima was in the final stages of what appeared to be a sun salutation, which had brought her to a position of considerable architectural interest. She was wearing the kind of fitted kit that suggested a serious relationship with both exercise and the mirror, and she was facing away from the house, and Lance was looking at her with the focused attention of a man who had forgotten, temporarily, that windows worked in both directions.

Penelope stood in the bedroom doorway for a moment.

Then she put her keys down on the dresser with the particular quality of noise that keys make when someone wants them to be heard.

Lance turned around.

He had the expression of a man assembling an innocent explanation for something he hadn't technically been doing. It was, she noted, not a good expression for him. He had better ones.

'You're back,' he said.

'School run,' she said. 'As advertised.'

'Right.' He looked at his coffee. 'I was going to open it. The window sticks.'

'Mm,' she said.

She went back downstairs. Outside, Jemima moved through the sequence with the unhurried ease of someone who knew the routine and had stopped thinking about it.

Penelope made her tea and said nothing, which was the correct response to the available information.

The house settled back into its Friday morning rhythms. Trevor appeared at nine forty-five with the rested quality of a man who had slept well and felt entitled to announce it, and Wendy came down shortly after in the particular clothes of a woman who had dressed to be seen doing nothing in particular. Trevor sat at the kitchen table and asked Penelope how she was sleeping, and then whether she'd been eating enough, and then said

she looked well, which landed in the specific way Trevor's observations about Penelope always landed, warmly and slightly too specifically.

Wendy stood at the bench with her tea and looked at the garden.

'Your neighbour does yoga,' she said, to no one in particular.

'Mmhmm,' Penelope said.

'Every morning?'

'Most mornings.'

Wendy turned her cup in her hands. 'She's very...' A small pause, the pause of a woman selecting a word. 'Dedicated.'

'She is,' Penelope agreed pleasantly, and handed Trevor a piece of toast he hadn't asked for and which he accepted with the delight of a man receiving an unexpected gift.

Lance came downstairs ten minutes later and said nothing about the window and poured himself a second coffee with slightly too much focus.

The Ellis conversation happened that afternoon, while Trevor was watching cricket in the living room and Wendy was upstairs and Lance was in the kitchen making coffee with the slightly purposeful quality of a man who had been thinking about something.

'How was Canberra, actually,' he said. 'You didn't say much about it.'

'It was useful,' she said. 'The sessions were good. There are some people at council level doing interesting things with planning reform.'

He nodded. He was doing the thing where he was about to say something and hadn't quite got there yet.

'I ran into someone while I was there,' she said. 'An old friend. He's over for work for a couple of weeks, coming down to Melbourne.'

Lance looked up from his coffee.

'Ellis,' she said. 'You know, from...before.'

A beat. Not long. 'Your ex...' he said.

'Yes. But that was a long time ago.' She looked at him steadily. 'I was wondering if it'd be nice to invite him. To whatever you've been quietly planning for my birthday that you think I don't know about.'

Lance had the expression of a man whose surprise had been compromised by two separate pieces of information simultaneously. 'How did you?'

'Roberto called the house phone to confirm the booking,' she said. 'Also you've been holding your phone at a very particular angle for two weeks.'

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Then, with the quality of a man deciding to land somewhere: 'I was going to make it a proper surprise.'

'I know. I'm sorry. Invite Ellis?'

He looked at her for a moment. She could see him doing the calculation, the one she had done herself, from the other side, standing in a supermarket car park with cashews. Then he said: 'Of course. The more the merrier.' And he meant it, or meant enough of it, and she said thank you, and he said it's your birthday, and she said I know, and they stood in the kitchen in the ordinary way of two people who were being careful with each other for reasons neither of them had named.

'Besides,' she said, 'I traded up.'

He laughed at that, briefly and genuinely, and she felt the small warmth of it in the way she always did, and she thought: he deserves better than this, and also: I am doing this for better reasons than he knows, and both things were true and neither of them resolved the other.

That night, Thursday, with Tracey arriving in the morning, she noticed the van.

It was parked on the street two houses down, a plain white panel van with no markings, and she would not have thought anything of it except that it had been there on Tuesday as well, in the same spot, and it had not moved. She stood at the bedroom window for a moment and looked at it and thought about the extension on the other side of the fence and the server room door with no handle on this side, and she picked up her phone.

White van, she wrote. *Parked outside two days running. No markings.*

The reply came in six seconds.

I see it. It's not theirs. It's someone watching them.

She stood very still.

Watching Charles and Jemima, she wrote. *Not us.*

Not you. Someone further up the chain checking their asset. It happens periodically. It will be gone by Friday.

She looked at the van for a moment longer.

Should I be concerned? she wrote.

Not yet. It means the operation is live and being monitored. It also means we are running out of time to be patient.

She put the phone down and stood at the window. The van sat in the quiet street, dark and unmarked, and on the other side of the fence the extension hummed with the steady patience of something that had been running for a long time and intended to keep running.

She went to bed.

Tracey's flight landed Friday morning. Lance picked her up from the airport, which Penelope had not expected, and she arrived in the kitchen

at eleven with the specific energy of a woman who had been on a plane for twenty-two hours and was refusing to acknowledge it on principle. She was tall, broad-shouldered, with the kind of face that had been striking at twenty-five and had become, in its early forties, something better. More itself, more interesting, the symmetry less important than it used to be.

She looked at Penelope across the kitchen and said: 'Christ, you look exactly the same.'

'So do you,' Penelope said.

'I absolutely do not,' Tracey said, 'but thank you.' She crossed the kitchen and embraced her with the ease of someone picking up a conversation that had been interrupted rather than ended. She looked around the kitchen briefly, taking it in, and said nothing about it, which was its own kind of comment.

'Lance,' Penelope said.

'Lance,' Tracey agreed, warmly, and Lance, coming in from the hallway with her bag, said what, and they both said nothing, and he looked between them with the expression of a man who understood he had been discussed and was choosing to find this acceptable.

They had lunch. Trevor was excellent with Tracey in the way he was excellent with most women, which was to say attentive and slightly too warm and entirely genuine underneath it. Wendy was gracious and assessing in equal measure. Freya sat next to Tracey and said almost nothing and watched her with the focused attention she reserved for people she found interesting, which Tracey appeared to find more flattering than unsettling.

It was, Penelope thought, a lot of people in her kitchen.

Tomorrow it would be more.

Chapter Sixteen

Roberto's back room had small lights strung across the ceiling and thirty people in it who had been told to arrive before the guest of honour. Lance had done this well. Penelope gave him credit for it.

She had known about the party since Roberto's phone call and had said nothing. She had dressed accordingly, the green dress, the one that required a decision rather than a default, and she came in on Lance's arm and let the room say surprise and received it with the warmth it deserved, which was genuine even if the surprise was not.

Tracey was near the bar. They had spent two days together already but seeing her here, in this context, among these people, in the room Lance had built, landed differently. Tracey raised her prosecco. Penelope crossed to her. They stood together in the particular way of two people who had known each other before they knew themselves, and Lance, watching from near the door, saw his wife's face settle into something he recognised but rarely got to see. Not performed. Not managed. Just her.

He thought: there it is.

The evening found its rhythm. Roberto's kitchen produced things in the correct order. The Hendersons were warm and entirely as expected. The Okafor-Williamses arrived slightly late, Bex with a parking story deployed before she had quite sat down, and Lance handled this with the ease of a host who had anticipated it.

Trevor positioned himself near the bar with the instinct of a man who understood that was where the evening happened. He worked through the room with unhurried warmth. He found Freya and produced a deck of cards. He got the trick wrong twice. On the third attempt Freya watched him set it up, said quietly, 'the seven of clubs,' and was correct. Trevor looked at the card and then at her. 'How did you do that?' She considered whether to explain. She decided not to.

Wendy moved through the room with the quality of a woman taking a careful inventory. She was warm to everyone and watched everything.

Ellis arrived at half past eight.

He came through the door with the ease of a man who had located the venue, assessed the room, and decided he would do. Dark Armani suit, open-necked shirt, two buttons, a tan that suggested recent and genuine sun. He moved through the cluster near the entrance without hesitation.

Lance was talking to Dave Henderson.

He watched Penelope register Ellis's arrival. He watched the small adjustment, not surprise, something more considered, and he watched her cross to him and greet him with the ease of two people who had recently established something and were still finding its shape. Not

warmth exactly, or not only warmth. Something more settled. Something rearranged.

'Great space,' Dave Henderson said. 'Roberto always delivers.'

'He does,' Lance said.

The food came. People arranged themselves approximately as planned. Penelope sat between Tracey and one of the school parents. Ellis sat three seats down. Towards the end of the first course, Trevor was holding forth to the woman on his left about the pasta. She responded enthusiastically. 'I don't usually do carbs,' Ellis said, to no one in particular, finishing his. 'But here we are.'

Penelope, two seats down, did not look up from her bread.

Midway through the main course Penelope stood and raised her glass. The table quieted.

'I want to say something while I still can,' she said. 'I am forty years old and I am surrounded by people I love, and the person responsible for that is Lance, who organised all of this without telling me, poorly, and I am very glad he did.' She looked at him across the table. 'Thank you. Genuinely.'

The table raised their glasses. Lance felt something he could not have named precisely, which was that he had done one thing entirely right and it had been witnessed.

Trevor led the applause. Wendy smiled and drank.

The table settled into the second half of the evening, the part where the formal things were done and people felt entitled to be themselves. The wine was at the level where the room had stopped performing.

Wendy leaned toward Trevor with the manner of someone sharing a quiet aside, pitched precisely to carry one seat further. She glanced, briefly and deliberately, toward where Penelope and Ellis were talking at the far end of the table.

'There's something about a landmark birthday,' she said. 'Women at forty, they need to know they're still attractive. Still seen. Not just as a wife and mother. You give so much of yourself to other people, you need to know someone still looks at you that way.' She said it with the warmth of a woman articulating a universal sympathy. 'It's completely natural.'

Trevor took this in with the expression of a man who had been handed a baton. He looked down the table. 'I'll tell you what,' he said. 'Twenty years younger, I'd have been in trouble myself.' He laughed. Several people nearby laughed. Lance produced a smile with the specific quality of a son who had been doing this his whole life.

Wendy said nothing more. She turned her glass in her hands and looked at the room.

Tracey, who had heard all of it, looked at her prosecco. Then she looked at Lance. Then back at her glass.

At half past ten Trevor and Wendy took Freya home. Freya said goodbye to the room with the gravity of a nine-year-old who understood she was leaving an adult event and wished to convey she had acquitted herself well. Trevor squeezed Penelope's shoulder on the way out. Wendy kissed her cheek. The squeeze was warm. The eyes above the kiss were doing something else entirely.

The party wound down. People collected coats and said what people said at the end of evenings they had enjoyed. Roberto came out from the kitchen and Penelope thanked him. He said it was nothing.

They got home at midnight. The house was quiet. Lance paid the taxi.

He thought he might follow her up. He had been thinking, at intervals throughout the evening, that tonight might be the kind of night that ended differently than most. He had planned a party. She had thanked him in front of everyone and meant it.

He stood in the kitchen and poured a glass of water and let the evening settle.

He thought about her face when she crossed the room to Tracey. He thought about the adjustment when Ellis walked in, not surprise, something else. He thought about Wendy's observation, delivered quietly and not quiet at all, and about the way Tracey had looked at him afterwards.

He put the glass in the sink and went upstairs.

Penelope was asleep. Not appearing to be. Actually asleep, on her side, the green dress on the chair.

He stood in the doorway for a moment.

Then he got into bed in the dark and looked at the ceiling and thought about it anyway.

Chapter Seventeen

The NGV was quiet at ten on a Sunday morning in the way that large buildings are quiet when they have not yet decided to be crowded. They had left Lance making French toast and Freya explaining, at some length, the precise way she wanted the cinnamon distributed.

Tracey stopped in front of a painting in the first room and looked at it for a while without speaking. Then she said: "I had no idea this place was this good."

"It's one of the best in the southern hemisphere."

"You say that like I should have known."

"I've been telling you to come for six years."

"You said it was good. You didn't say it was this." Tracey moved on to the next painting, unhurried. "That's on you."

They moved through the international collection at the pace of two people who were not there to tick things off. Tracey had opinions about the hang and shared them without invitation. Penelope had stopped pretending she didn't find this restful.

They had known each other in a city neither of them lived in any more, in an office neither of them had liked, doing work neither of them had wanted. The friendship had outlasted all of that by fifteen years and showed no sign of structural fatigue.

In front of a Flemish still life Tracey said, without turning, "Are you happy? With Lance."

Penelope looked at the painting. Lemon rind, unspooling. Dead game. Someone's idea of abundance.

"He's a good man and a good dad," she said. "I have no complaints."

"That's not the same as being happy."

Penelope did not argue. She looked at the lemon rind a moment longer and then they moved on.

Tracey waited until they were past the doorway. "His mother was something else on Friday night."

"Wendy is always something."

"That was deliberate," Tracey said. "The thing she said. It was pitched to carry. She wanted Lance to hear it."

"I know."

"Does Lance know?"

"Lance knows what he knows."

Tracey looked at her. "You're not going to do anything about it."

"There's nothing to do. He either works it out or he doesn't." Penelope paused in front of a small portrait, a woman in a white cap looking slightly to one side, the expression of someone who had decided not to finish the thought. "Maybe it'll help him get his head sorted. About me. About us. I don't know."

"About you and him," Tracey said, gently enough that it didn't require an answer.

They found a bench in the water wall room and sat with the sound of it for a while. The light was good. A child in a yellow anorak stood very close to the glass, breathing on it.

"Ellis," Tracey said. "You mentioned him in Canberra and then you didn't."

"I ran into him there. He was someone I knew a long time ago. Before you, even."

"I know who Ellis is."

Penelope looked at her.

"Twelve years ago you rang me at half two in the morning from a payphone on the Euston Road and talked for forty minutes," Tracey said. "You didn't say his name once. I still knew who you were talking about."

The child in the yellow anorak had begun to press both palms flat against the glass. A man Penelope took to be the father was making the face of a man who had decided this was not worth the argument.

"It clarified something," Penelope said. "Something I'd been carrying for a while. It doesn't need to be more than that."

"Is it more than that?"

"No." She said it without hesitation, which was the honest answer. "It's genuinely not. It's just. I understood something about twelve years ago that I hadn't quite let myself understand. And then I could put it down." She paused. "That's all."

Tracey absorbed this. "Okay," she said, which meant she believed her.

They sat with the water for another few minutes. Penelope was aware of something she had not expected, which was the relief of saying it plainly to someone who had been there.

"You came all this way for a long weekend," Penelope said.

"I came all this way for you," Tracey said. "The long weekend is incidental." She paused. "Also I'd forgotten how good the food is here. I'm going to need to factor that in next time."

"Next time."

"I'm serious. You've been on at me for six years. I'm starting to think you had a point." She looked around the room. "Next time I'll stay longer."

Penelope smiled. It arrived without her deciding to produce it.

"There's something else," she said. "Something I've been doing. The reason I was in Canberra."

Tracey waited.

Penelope told her the shape of it. Not everything, the full architecture, Alan, the servers, the Singapore connection, that was not a conversation for the NGV water wall room on a Sunday morning. But enough. Nexvar, the planning application, the anomaly in the approvals, the data centre going up three streets away, what it was actually for. The fact that she had been, quietly, for the past two months, building a picture.

Tracey listened without interrupting, which was not her default mode. When Penelope finished, she was quiet for a moment.

"Does Lance know any of this?" she said.

"Not yet."

Tracey nodded slowly. "Are you okay? Is it…is this taking over everything?"

"No. I've got it contained."

"You would say that."

"I know. But it's true. I've got help from someone who knows what they're doing. I'm not running around doing something stupid."

Tracey looked at her for a long moment. "I'm not worried about you doing something stupid. I'm worried about you carrying something this size on your own and smiling over the top of it at dinner parties."

Penelope looked at the water.

"I find it completely believable that you'd do this," Tracey said. "Find something like this on your own street and just start working it out. That's not the part that surprises me." She paused. "I just want to know you've got someone around you."

"I have."

"Okay." Tracey smoothed her jacket. "Then I'm glad. And when it's done, whenever that is, you're going to tell me all of it." She stood. "Come on. I want to look at the Nolans before we go, and then you're taking me somewhere that does a decent Bloody Mary."

"It's eleven in the morning."

"That's what Bloody Mary is for."

Eureka 89 was on the eighty-ninth floor and the view took a moment to settle into. Tracey stood at the window and looked at the bay with the expression of a woman recalibrating what she thought she knew about the place.

"I forget how flat it is from the ground," she said. "From up here it's enormous."

"That's Melbourne."

"London's the same the other way. Cramped on the ground, then from above you realise it never actually stops." She turned from the window. "How's Freya doing, actually?"

"She's good. She's in a phase of being extremely competent at things and not telling anyone."

"Like my dad, actually." Penelope looked at her drink. "She got Trevor's card trick on Friday. Knew the answer before he'd finished setting it up."

"I noticed. He looked genuinely startled." Tracey smiled. "Your dad would have loved that."

"Yes." Penelope looked out at the bay, the brown haze where the river met the water, the coastline going south. Somewhere down there, between the fibro houses and the new developments, something was being built that was not what it said it was. "He would have."

They ordered. The food, when it came, was good enough that Tracey set down her fork after the first few mouthfuls and said, "Right, I'm moving here." She picked the fork back up. "Tell Lance it's his fault for making this so easy."

"He'll be pleased."

"He should be." She ate for a moment. "He did do well with the party. That room, those people. The fact that you already knew and let him have it anyway."

"He worked hard at it."

"I know he did." Tracey looked at her. "That's what I mean about it not being nothing."

At some point Penelope's phone buzzed on the table. A message from Lance: Mum and Dad got off fine. Freya's at Mia's until three. House is quiet. Slightly eerie.

She showed Tracey. Tracey read it and handed it back without comment. Which was, in its way, a comment.

"He does love you," Tracey said. "In his way."

"I know he does."

"That's not nothing."

"I know that too." Penelope put the phone face-down on the table. "It's just not always enough to know it."

Tracey looked at the bay for a moment. Then she finished her drink and signalled for another. "Okay," she said. "Next time I'm staying for a month. You can take me down that coast. Show me what you left London for."

Penelope looked at her.

"I'm serious," Tracey said. "Book it in. Give me something to look forward to on the flight home."

Outside, eighty-nine floors down, the city went about its Sunday. Somewhere in it, Freya was at a playdate, performing competence. Somewhere in it, Lance was in a quiet house, thinking whatever he was thinking.

Penelope picked up her drink.

"Okay," she said. "Let's book it in."

Chapter Eighteen

Lance ran south along the foreshore boardwalk with the bay on his left and the autumn sun doing something generous with the light. It was not yet eleven. The tide was low. A pair of pelicans stood on the exposed mud flat with the patient authority of birds that had been there considerably longer than anyone watching them.

He ran without music, which he did when he wanted to think and sometimes when he wanted to stop thinking and occasionally when he was not entirely sure which of those he was after. This morning he was not sure.

He had lain in the dark for a long time after coming to bed on Saturday night. He had thought about Penelope's face when she crossed the room to Tracey. He had thought about the small adjustment when Ellis walked in, not surprise, something more considered, and about Wendy's observation pitched to carry one seat further, and about Tracey looking at him afterward. He had assembled these things in various orders. None of the arrangements had produced a conclusion he could act on, which was worse, in its way, than a conclusion he simply didn't like.

He turned at the end of the trail where the boardwalk gave out to a gravel path and ran back the way he had come. The pelicans had not moved.

The morning was warm for June. There was a quality to the light, the angle of it across the water, that reminded him of the week in early autumn when summer had still been making an argument for itself. The morning Penelope had been at her laptop in the garden and Jemima had been on her mat on the other side of the fence. He had been at the bedroom window because the window had stuck again and he had needed to pull it shut from the top.

He had not meant to watch. That was true, and it stayed true, and it was also true that he had stood there for longer than fifteen seconds because the window required two hands and some leverage and the view had not made this easier. Downward dog, then up, the line of her back, yoga pants, tanned skin, the gentle heat of an autumn morning doing the rest. He had thought nothing in particular while standing there. That was also true.

He thought something now.

He ran the last two hundred metres back to the car park at a pace that was less about fitness than about having somewhere to be.

The house was empty when he got home. His parents had left early, Trevor with the car keys and a handshake and an offer to take the recycling bins out on his way, Wendy with her cheek offered and her eyes doing something separate. Freya was at her playdate until three. Penelope and Tracey were somewhere between the NGV and wherever

they were having lunch, and the house had the particular quality of a house that knows it is not being observed.

He stood in the kitchen and drank a glass of water. His phone said 11:14.

Then he went upstairs and had a shower.

The water pressure was good. He stood under it for a while and let it do what it could.

And then, because the morning had been warm and the light had been particular and the memory was already there, the thought arrived. Not a decision. Just a thought, with Jemima in it, the downward dog and the yoga pants and the tanned skin and the autumn morning, assembled without his permission into something he did not interrupt. He stood under the water and let it run its course and felt the specific small guilt of a man who had not done anything wrong and was aware that this was a very fine distinction and getting finer.

He turned the water to cold for thirty seconds, which did not help as much as he had been led to believe it would.

Afterward he stood in front of the bathroom mirror for a moment. Forty-two. Some kind of assessment was required but he was not sure who was conducting it or what the criteria were.

He got dressed, went downstairs, and was completely normal about making a second cup of coffee.

He collected Freya from the playdate at three. She came out with paint on her left hand and the self-contained expression of a child who had had a satisfactory time and did not feel the need to elaborate. In the car she asked if Tracey was still at the house. He said yes, until tomorrow. She nodded and looked out the window.

Penelope and Tracey got home at half past three. He heard them before he saw them, a particular register of voices, easy and slightly too bright, the sound of two people who had had a genuinely good time and were still in the warm end of it.

Penelope came into the kitchen and looked at him with an openness he had not seen in a while, or perhaps had not been paying attention to. She looked at Freya, who was at the table with a glass of juice and her book, and something passed across her face that he could not read but that seemed like relief.

"Good run?" she said.

"Yeah. Foreshore. Good morning for it."

"Trevor and Wendy get off all right?"

"All good. Dad took the bins out."

She smiled. "Of course he did." She filled a glass of water at the sink. "We had a really nice day."

"I'm glad." He meant it.

Tracey appeared in the doorway and took in the kitchen with the ease of someone who had been doing this for years in various kitchens. "You missed an excellent Bloody Mary," she said. "Several, actually."

"Lance doesn't drink vodka," Penelope said.

"I know. I'm telling him what he missed. It's different." She dropped into a chair across from Freya. "Hello. How was the playdate?"

"Fine," Freya said, without looking up from her book.

"High praise." Tracey looked at Lance. "I've told Pen I'm moving here. You'll need to sort out a room."

"We've got the study," Lance said.

"Good. I'll need a desk."

He was aware, not for the first time, that he liked Tracey. She had a quality of making the room feel inhabited without requiring anything of it. He thought he should probably have said this to Penelope at some point. He noted it as an omission.

Later, when the house had settled into the ordinary noise of a Sunday evening, Lance stood at the kitchen bench finishing dinner and thought about the day in the way he sometimes did, not analysing it, just letting it find its level. Penelope was helping Freya with something at the table. Tracey was reading. The kitchen smelled like garlic and the window above the sink had gone dark.

He thought: there are good things here.

He thought about the fine distinction and was not proud of it and then put it away.

Monday morning arrived with the logic of Monday mornings. The packed bag, the permission slip that had been somewhere and was now somewhere else, the brief negotiation over whether nine was old enough to decide for herself about breakfast. Tracey came downstairs with her case already by the door and her coat over her arm and accepted a piece of toast from Freya's plate with the ease of someone who knew the household well enough to take things from it.

At the gate Freya said goodbye to Tracey with the gravity appropriate to a significant departure. Tracey crouched to her level. "I'll see you next time," she said. "Probably sooner than last time."

"Mum says you're moving here."

"Working on it." Tracey stood and looked at Lance over Freya's head. "Thank you for the party. It was a good thing you did."

"She already knew," Lance said.

"I know she did. It was still a good thing." She picked up her bag. "Look after her."

He nodded, which was the only answer available and also the right one.

Freya walked through the gate without looking back. Tracey watched her go.

"She's something," she said.

"Yes," Penelope said.

"She has your dad’s eyes."

Penelope said nothing. She pulled her keys out of her pocket.

They had the morning. Penelope drove them down to the pier and they found a place for brunch with the water visible from the window and the last of the long weekend doing what it could. Tracey ordered eggs Benedict and ate with the focus of someone treating every meal as partial restitution for a long-haul flight on the horizon.

"This place," Tracey said, looking out at the bay. "I keep thinking it'll feel smaller. It doesn't."

"It doesn't get smaller."

"London feels smaller every time I go back." She turned her coffee cup in her hands. "That might just be me getting older."

"Or London getting worse."

"Both, probably." Tracey looked at her. "Are you glad you stayed? Here, I mean. In Australia."

Penelope looked at the water. A sailing boat was making slow progress toward the heads, sail up, barely a wind. "Ask me in six months," she said.

"That's not a no."

"No," Penelope said. "It's not."

They sat with the water for a while. The sailing boat had made some progress. Not much.

"Come to London," Tracey said. "When this is over, whatever it is you're doing. Bring Freya. She's never seen the place."

"I know."

"She'd like the V and A. The casts room."

"She'd like it because it's slightly morbid."

"Exactly." Tracey smiled. "Book it in. Give me something to look forward to on the flight home."

Penelope looked at her across the table. Twenty-odd years. Various cities. The payphone on the Euston Road. This.

"Okay," she said. "Let's book it in."

She dropped Tracey at the terminal at half past one and left the engine running. These were not people who prolonged airport goodbyes. That had been established a long time ago on a pavement outside Departures at Heathrow and had held ever since.

Tracey got her case from the back seat. Then she stood by the open passenger door for a moment.

"Whatever you're doing," she said. "Be careful. And when it's done, tell me everything."

"I will."

"Good." Tracey leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Right. Go on. I hate this part."

Penelope watched her walk through the doors without looking back, which was also an established preference and had also held.

She sat for a moment with the engine running and the drop-off lane doing its impatient work around her. Then she pulled out and pointed the car back toward the city.

She collected Freya from school at half past three. Freya came out with her bag on one shoulder and the look of a child done with the day and was ready to move on from it.

In the car she was quiet for a few minutes. Then she said: "Jocasta said I wasn't invited to Harriet's birthday."

Penelope kept her eyes on the road. "Were you invited to Harriet's birthday?"

"Yes. Everyone was. She said it like I might not have been."

"What did you do?"

"I said I'd already RSVPed."

"Good."

A pause. The indicator. A right turn.

"She does it like it's an accident," Freya said.

Penelope glanced at her in the mirror. Nine years old, and she had the shape of it exactly right. She thought: your grandfather would have had the measure of her in thirty seconds.

"I know she does," Penelope said. "You handled it exactly right."

Freya considered this. Then she took her book out of her bag and opened it, which was her way of indicating that the subject was closed and she had moved on, whether or not anyone else had.

Penelope drove and said nothing and thought about the week ahead.

Chapter Nineteen

The school fundraiser was held in the main hall on a Wednesday afternoon and organised with the particular exhausting competence of a small group of parents who had decided this mattered. There were trestle tables. There were handwritten labels on everything. There was, at the far end of the hall near the windows, Jemima's croquembouche.

It was extraordinary. Three feet of caramel-glazed profiteroles assembled into a cone of such architectural confidence that everything else on the table, the brownies and the lemon slices and Penelope's perfectly decent banana bread, seemed to have arrived from a different occasion entirely and was only now realising it.

Jemima stood near it with the manner of a woman who was not standing near it. She was talking to another parent, gesturing warmly, not looking at the croquembouche. The croquembouche did not require her attention.

Penelope set her banana bread down two tables away and went to find the float.

The hall filled as the final bell went and parents collected children and found themselves, somehow, holding a paper bag and making a contribution. Freya appeared briefly, assessed the croquembouche from a distance with the expression of a structural engineer, and went back to her friends. Penelope sold banana bread and made change and smiled at people she knew and some she didn't and kept Jemima in her peripheral vision with the low steady attention of someone who had been doing this for months.

Jemima found her as the tables were beginning to thin.

She arrived with a cup of tea she had produced from somewhere and a warmth that was entirely convincing on the surface and doing something else underneath. She said the banana bread looked wonderful. She said she should have brought something simpler, she always overcomplicated things. She said this in the way of a woman who knew perfectly well that she had not overcomplicated things.

"We heard about your birthday dinner afterward," Jemima said. "It sounded wonderful. We assumed we'd missed the invitation somehow." A small, warm laugh. "These things happen."

Penelope looked at her. "Roberto's. Yes, it was a good night."

"We would have loved to come." The warmth, steady and unbothered. "Charles keeps saying we should do something together properly. The four of us." The smile held. "We're very open to things. As you know."

"That sounds lovely," Penelope said.

"We'll sort something soon," Jemima said. "Something relaxed."

"That would be lovely," Penelope said.

It would not be lovely. They both knew this and neither of them said so. The transaction completed, Jemima moved on to the next table with her cup of tea and her warmth, and Penelope watched her go and sold another piece of banana bread and made correct change without looking at her hands.

Later, packing up, she passed the croquembouche. It had been significantly reduced. Someone had made a start on the structural integrity and the whole thing was listing slightly to the left. Penelope looked at it for a moment.

She thought about the door at the end of the hallway in the house next door, the one with no handle on this side. She thought about the device on the third shelf between the architecture books. She thought about Jemima saying we're very open to things, in the particular tone of a woman who knew exactly what she was offering and to whom.

She picked up her empty tray and her bag and walked out into the afternoon.

Sandra's consulting room was on the first floor of a Victorian terrace in Hawthorn, in a street that had decided, some years ago, to become entirely medical. Osteopaths, a sleep clinic, two GPs, a woman whose sign said simply Counselling in small tasteful letters. Sandra's sign said nothing. You either knew where you were going or you didn't.

Penelope had not been for seven weeks. She had cancelled twice with reasons that were true but not the whole truth. Sandra had said fine, both times, in the tone of a woman for whom fine covered considerable ground.

The room was as it always was. Two chairs at a slight angle to each other, a low table, the box of tissues that had been there since Penelope's first appointment and which she had, in six months, used once. The window looked onto a courtyard. A pot plant on the sill had been replaced since her last visit, or possibly the same plant had been given a very stern talking to.

"It's been a while," Sandra said.

"Six weeks."

"Seven." Sandra said it without emphasis. Not correcting her. Just accurate.

Penelope sat with that for a moment. "Seven," she said.

Sandra waited in the way she had, which was not silence exactly but the quality of a room that had made space.

"There was a fundraiser this afternoon," Penelope said. "At Freya's school. My neighbour brought a croquembouche."

Sandra looked at her with the expression she used when she was not going to be the one to say it.

"It was very good," Penelope said. "The croquembouche. Structurally impressive."

"And the neighbour?"

Penelope considered how to answer this. "She mentioned not being invited to my birthday dinner. Very warmly."

"What did you make of that?"

"That she wanted me to know she knew about it." Penelope looked at the window. The courtyard had a small stone bench and a bird that was sitting on it with great conviction. "She's very good at warmth. It's almost the real thing."

"Almost."

"Almost."

Sandra let this sit. Then: "You said there was a birthday dinner. How was the birthday?"

"Good. Lance organised a party. A room full of people I was glad to see." Penelope paused. "My friend Tracey came from London. I hadn't seen her in six years."

"How was that?"

"Really good, actually." And it had been. This was the uncomplicated true thing. "She stayed for the weekend. We went to the NGV, had lunch. She flew home Monday."

"You seem different," Sandra said.

Penelope looked at her. "Different how?"

"I'm not sure yet." Sandra tilted her head slightly. "More present, maybe. Something has your attention."

Penelope said nothing.

"Not in a worrying way," Sandra said. "Just. You've been in this room for six months and I've watched you be very competent and very contained. Today you came in with something on you."

"The fundraiser," Penelope said.

"Maybe." Sandra did not move. "Or maybe the fundraiser is the thing you brought in to put on the table."

The tissue box sat between them, as it always did, equidistant and unmoved. Penelope had thought about this line, the AI joke, the one Sandra had made in their first session, something about the one thing AI couldn't replicate being the particular quality of sitting with someone in a

room. She had thought about it differently in the last few months. She thought about it now.

"I turned forty," Penelope said. "I think some things have come into focus."

"What kinds of things?"

"What I'm doing. What I want to be doing." She paused. "Whether the life is the right size."

Sandra waited.

"It's not a crisis," Penelope said. "It doesn't feel like one. It feels more like. Noticing."

"Noticing can be its own kind of difficult."

"Yes." Penelope looked at the bird on the stone bench. It had not moved. "It can."

They sat with it for a while. Sandra asked a few more questions and Penelope answered them, honestly enough, in the register of a woman giving an accurate account of a small part of what was true. This was not new. She had been doing this in one form or another for years. What was new was the specific quality of the gap between what she said and what she did not say, which felt wider than it used to, and deeper, and more deliberately maintained.

She was not sure whether this was something Sandra noticed.

She suspected it was.

At the end of the session Sandra said, as she always did, same time in two weeks, and Penelope said yes, and meant it this time.

She walked down the stairs and out into the street and stood for a moment in the late afternoon with the ordinary sounds of the suburb going about itself around her. A bus. Someone's sprinkler. Two doors down, a dog making a considered argument about something.

Her phone buzzed. She looked at it.

How was your day?

Not a question. Alan knew how her day had been. He was asking in the way of someone who wanted her to say it.

She typed: *Fundraiser. Then Sandra. Productive on both counts.*

A pause. Then: *Good. Get some sleep.*

She put the phone in her pocket and walked to the car.

Chapter Twenty

Lance was working from home on the Thursday, which he did most Thursdays, and by ten o'clock he had answered his emails and attended a call that could have been an email and made a second coffee and was standing at the kitchen window looking at the garden with the specific purposelessness of a man who has run out of sanctioned things to do.

Penelope had left at nine. She had said she had some things to do, which was the kind of thing people said and which he had never previously thought to examine. She had her bag, her keys, her phone. She had kissed him on the cheek, which she did most mornings, and said she would be back by lunch.

He thought about this for a moment.

He thought: what things.

He was aware that this was not a reasonable line of thinking. He was also aware that he had been having it, in one form or another, since the party. Since Ellis walking in with his tan and his two buttons and Wendy's observation landing where it was aimed. Since Tracey looking at him across the table in the particular way of a woman who knew something he didn't.

He rinsed his coffee cup. He looked at his laptop. He looked at the garden again.

He picked up his keys.

He told himself he was going to the hardware store, which was in the same general direction as town, which was where Penelope had gone, which was a coincidence and not a plan.

Penelope's morning had the shape of a morning that had not been planned so much as accumulated. She needed olive oil and she was nearly out of the good coffee and she had been meaning for two weeks to go to the post office about a package that had apparently been sitting there since before the birthday.

She drove with the radio on and thought about the Nexvar approvals timeline, which Alan had sent her in a condensed form the previous evening, and which she had been turning over since. The Singapore meeting was eight weeks before the approval. The shell company registered six weeks before that. The sequence had a quality she recognised from her old corporate life, the quality of a thing that had been decided before the consultation began.

She parked on the high street. She went to the post office first, collected the package, which turned out to be a book she had ordered in April and forgotten about entirely, and stood on the pavement for a moment deciding whether to do the olive oil or the coffee first.

She did the olive oil. She did the coffee. She stood outside the deli looking at her phone for a moment, checking nothing in particular, and then she went inside for a flat white because it was a reasonable morning and she had earned it.

She was halfway through the flat white when she looked up and saw Lance's car go past the window.

She watched it. It was moving at the pace of a car whose driver was looking for a park and also possibly looking for something else. It went past. She looked back at her coffee.

She thought: oh, Lance.

The thing was that he had not really thought through what came after the following. He had stayed a reasonable distance behind her car, he thought, and he had seen her park and go into the post office and then a shop and then another shop, which was. Which was completely normal. Which was what a person did on a Thursday morning. He had driven past the deli and seen her at the window, head down, and driven on to find somewhere to park that was not directly outside.

He sat in the car for a moment.

He had followed his wife to the shops. He had done this in the car, at a distance he had privately considered adequate, in order to establish what she did on Thursday mornings, and what she did on Thursday mornings was go to the shops.

He thought about the shower. He thought, with the specific self-disgust available only to a man sitting alone in a parked car, about standing at the bedroom window in March watching Jemima on her mat, the downward dog, the yoga pants, and what he had done about it afterward. He had told himself at the time that it was not a decision, just a thought, and this was true as far as it went, which he was now prepared to admit was not very far.

He had been watching the wrong person.

He was going to do better than this. He was not sure yet what better looked like in practice, but he was going to find out, and it was going to start with turning the car around and going home.

He started the engine.

There was a knock on the passenger window.

Penelope was standing on the pavement with her bag and her coffee and an expression that was not quite anything he could name. He lowered the window. There was a pause of a length that he would remember afterward.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she said. "Are you parked here?"

"I was just." He looked at the steering wheel, then back at her. "I needed to pick something up. Hardware. There's a place just down."

She looked at him for a moment. "Right," she said. "Do you want a coffee first? I'm just in the deli."

"I'm all right. I've had two already."

"Okay." She shifted her bag on her shoulder. "I'll see you at home then."

"Yeah." He paused. "Did you get everything you needed?"

"Olive oil," she said. "Coffee. A book I ordered four months ago." She held up the package. "Big morning."

He nodded. She gave him something that was in the vicinity of a smile and walked back toward the deli. He watched her go. She did not look back.

He sat for another moment. Then he pulled out and drove to the actual hardware store, because he was committed to the story now and also because they probably needed something, they always needed something, and he spent eleven minutes walking the aisles before settling on a new set of rawl plugs he was fairly certain they already had.

She was home before him. She had put the coffee on and was unloading the olive oil into the pantry when she heard his key in the door.

He came into the kitchen with a small paper bag from the hardware store and set it on the counter with the specific deliberateness of a man completing a story.

"Rawl plugs," he said.

"Good," she said. "We probably needed some."

He stood for a moment. She was already doing something at the bench, her back to him, the radio on low. He watched her and thought about all the things he did not know how to ask and whether this was because they were difficult questions or because he was afraid of difficult answers, and concluded, with the uncomfortable clarity available to a man who has just followed his wife to the shops and bought rawl plugs as an alibi, that it was probably the second thing.

"Penelope," he said.

She turned. Her face was open, waiting, without pressure. This was, he thought, one of the things he had always found difficult about her. She never pushed.

He had about four things he wanted to say and he said none of them.

"Do you want lunch?" he said. "I could do something."

She looked at him for a moment. Something moved behind her eyes that he couldn't read.

"That would be nice," she said. "Thank you."

He opened the fridge. He stared at it for longer than necessary. Behind him, Penelope turned back to the bench and the radio played something he didn't recognise and the kitchen held them both in the ordinary way kitchens do, which is without comment and without mercy.

Chapter Twenty-One

The foreshore in winter had a quality Ellis had not expected, which was that it was genuinely beautiful. He had been prepared for grey and got grey, but the particular grey of Port Phillip in June, the flat pewter of it, the way the far shore dissolved into something that might be cloud or might be land, had a bleakness that was doing something more than bleak. He stood with his coffee and looked at it and tried to work out what the word was.

He had been in Melbourne for three weeks. Alan had found him a short-term let two streets back from the esplanade, a garden flat belonging to a woman who spent winters in Queensland and left her succulents to fend for themselves. They were fending adequately. Ellis had been doing the same.

The coffee was good. He had found a place on the esplanade that opened at seven and did not require conversation, which at seven in the morning was the quality he valued most in a cafe. He had been coming here most days, the flat white, the walk, the water. It had the shape of a routine and he was aware that this was what he was doing, constructing the shape of a routine to avoid thinking about the absence of one.

Canberra had clarified things, which was what Penelope had said it had done for her and which was also, he now understood, exactly the right word. Not resolved. Not closed. Clarified. He had said the thing he had been not-saying for twelve years and the world had continued and Penelope had called him her brother and he had felt, in roughly equal measure, lighter and bereft and something that was probably gratitude and had no comfortable name.

He was thirty-eight years old. He had spent the intervening years being useful to people in indirect ways, carrying things between places, knowing things he could not say he knew, performing versions of himself that were adjacent to the real one without quite being it. He was good at it. Alan had told him he was good at it in the particular way Alan had of telling you things, which was to state them without inflection and let you work out whether it was a compliment.

He thought about what came after. He was not sure there was a clear answer and he was, in the slow mornings on the foreshore, becoming more comfortable with this than he had expected to be.

He finished his coffee. He turned to walk back toward the flat.

Blake Santoro was thirty metres away, walking toward him along the path.

Ellis had seen him twice, both times in photographs Alan had sent. Navy suit, high street, fits well. He had a coat on over the suit, open collar, but on his feet were trail runners, mud on the soles, the tread worn in the particular way of shoes that had done this route more than a few times.

The whole thing slightly incongruous against the winter light. Moving with the particular quality of a man who thought he was alone.

Ellis turned back to face the water.

He was aware of the decision assembling itself without his full participation, which was a feeling he recognised. He did not have a brief for this. Alan had not sent him here. He had come for the flat white and the pewter water and the shape of a routine, and Santoro had walked into it.

He thought: Alan would want to know.

He thought: I am already here.

He let Santoro pass at a distance and then followed, at the pace of a man finishing a walk.

Santoro walked south for twenty minutes. He did not look back. He had the phone out occasionally, checking something, putting it away, checking again. Not a call. Something he was reading, or waiting on. Ellis kept fifty metres back and watched the shoulders and the gait and thought about what a 22-year-old political operator was doing on the foreshore at eight in the morning in a good overcoat and muddy trail runners.

The path curved around toward the reserve. Ellis had been this way before, the first week, when he had still been learning the geography. There were beach boxes along here, painted in the old colours, locked for winter. A car park, mostly empty. Beyond that, the rocks.

Santoro stopped at the rocks.

He stood there and looked out at the water and Ellis found a position near the beach boxes with a sightline and waited and watched and tried to work out what he was looking at.

At first he thought Santoro was just standing there. Then he understood that Santoro was watching something in the water near the rocks. Ellis moved slightly, changing the angle, and saw them.

Little penguins. Six, maybe eight of them, in the shallows near the base of the rocks. Coming in with the low water, waddling up onto the flat shelf, standing in the manner of creatures who have been doing this for considerably longer than anyone watching them and intend to continue.

Santoro watched them for a long time.

This was the thing that Ellis could not account for. Not a glance, not the brief acknowledging pause of a man who had noticed wildlife and moved on. Santoro stood at the rocks and watched the penguins with the focused stillness of someone who had come here specifically for this and was taking his time about it. Ten minutes. Fifteen. He put the phone away and did not check it again.

Ellis watched Santoro watch the penguins and felt something he could not immediately name, which was that the young man standing at the rocks was not the same person as the young man in Alan's photographs, the navy suit and the high street confidence and the ambition calibrated to the room. This was someone else. This was someone who had come to the foreshore alone on a winter morning to watch small birds come out of the water, and who had not told anyone he was doing it, and who looked, from fifty metres away, like a person who needed this more than he needed most things.

After twenty minutes Santoro straightened, looked at the penguins for another moment, and walked back the way he had come.

Ellis waited until he was well clear. Then he walked to the rocks and looked at the penguins himself for a while. They were not interested in being looked at. They had their own agenda and it did not involve him.

He took out his phone.

Penelope was at her laptop when the call came. She picked up.

"He went to look at penguins," Ellis said.

A pause. "I'm sorry?"

"Santoro. I picked him up on the foreshore this morning, followed him south. He went to the rocks near the reserve and watched little penguins for twenty minutes. Then he left."

"You followed Blake Santoro."

"Opportunistically. I was already there."

Another pause. "Are you sure it was him?"

"Overcoat, suit underneath, muddy trail runners. He's done this before. Yes."

She was quiet for a moment. He could hear her thinking. "Did he see you?"

"No."

"Twenty minutes."

"At least. Phone away. Just watching."

She said: "I need to tell Alan."

"I assumed you would."

"Ellis." A beat. "Good work."

He looked at the water. The penguins had gone. "It was a walk," he said. "I needed a walk."

He ended the call and stood for a moment on the foreshore path with the pewter water and the winter light and the particular feeling of a man

who has accidentally done something that matters and is not sure yet what it means.

He walked back to the flat. The succulents were fine.

Penelope put the phone down and opened a new message to Alan.

Ellis followed Santoro to the foreshore this morning. Santoro spent twenty minutes watching the little penguins at the reserve. Alone. Phone away.

She sent it. She sat back and looked at the screen.

The reply came in forty seconds.

I know what that means.

She stared at the message. Then she typed: *So are you going to tell me?*

Alan: *Not yet. Let me consider the likely scenarios.*

She put the phone face-down on the desk and looked at the ceiling and thought about a 22-year-old man standing alone at the rocks watching small birds come out of the water, and about what a person had to be carrying to need that, and about what Alan thought it meant.

Her phone buzzed once more.

Good news. I'll explain when I'm sure.

She picked up her coffee. It had gone cold. She drank it anyway.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was a Saturday morning and the television was on because Freya had been watching something and had been called away from it by a friend's message and had left it running, as she always did, in the particular way of a nine-year-old who considered switching things off to be someone else's jurisdiction.

Penelope was at the kitchen bench with her coffee and her laptop and the comfortable noise of a weekend morning settling around her. Lance was doing something in the garden. The back door was open. She could hear him, intermittently, doing whatever it was men did in gardens on Saturday mornings that involved periodic grunting and the repositioning of things.

She was not watching the television. She was reading something Alan had sent her the previous evening, a condensed summary of Ferrante's public engagements over the past six weeks, cross-referenced with the planning committee schedule and two entries in his public diary that did not quite align with his office's account of them. She had read it twice already. She was reading it a third time because the third time was when the shape of a thing stopped being information and became something you understood.

The television said: and federal member for Bayside East Marco Ferrante has spoken out strongly in support of the Nexvar development, saying the approved project is under threat from what he called a vocal minority opposed to progress.

Penelope looked up.

Ferrante was on the screen in what appeared to be a shopping centre atrium, the kind of location a media adviser selects to suggest accessibility, a man of the people stopping to speak his mind among the people. He was not in the suit today. He had on a leather jacket, good one, the kind that costs what a suit costs but says something different about the man wearing it, open collar, no tie. The expression was the same as always, a man who had been briefed on sincerity, but the jacket was doing additional work, telling the viewer that this was not a scheduled statement, this was a man who felt strongly enough to stop and speak. Behind him, slightly out of focus, two staffers were doing the thing staffers do, which is stand at a distance that communicates both support and deniability.

"Some things," Ferrante said, "are just too important to be silent about." He paused in the way of a man who has been told that pauses communicate gravitas. "This is a massive opportunity. For jobs. For the community. For Bayside East." Another pause. "We have a chance to become the Silicon Valley of the Southern Hemisphere, and I for one am not going to stand by and let that chance pass us by. This is about pride. Pride in what this electorate can be." He looked directly at the camera.

"And I'll tell you what I won't stand for. I won't stand for a small group of activists using green tape and technicalities to tear down what the hardworking people of Bellshore have fought for. This development was properly approved. The decision has been made. And the people trying to relitigate it should ask themselves whose interests they're actually serving."

He looked directly at the camera with the expression of a man who had practised looking directly at cameras.

"Fucker," Penelope said.

Freya appeared in the doorway. "Mum."

"Sorry." Penelope looked at her coffee. "He's a politician."

"That's not an excuse."

"No," Penelope said. "It's not."

Freya considered this, apparently found it satisfactory, and disappeared back down the hall. Penelope looked at the screen. Ferrante had moved on to something about the digital future and the legacy they were building for the next generation, the interviewer nodding with the professional encouragement of someone paid to seem interested. She listened for another thirty seconds.

Then she picked up her phone.

She typed: *Did you see it?*

Yes. The Silicon Valley of the Southern Hemisphere.

She waited.

Alan: *That phrase was not written by anyone who has spent time in Bellshore. Or Silicon Valley.*

Penelope: *What does it tell you?*

That someone has told Ferrante a challenge is forming and he has decided to get ahead of it. The approval is done. This is not about the approval. This is about making the grounds for any challenge appear illegitimate before the challenge can be made publicly. Green tape. Technicalities. A vocal minority. These are not the words of a man defending a secure position. These are the words of a man trying to make a particular kind of opposition socially costly before it has a name.

A name like Fiona?

Fiona has been building a record for fourteen months. Ferrante does not know the specifics of what she has. What he knows is that she exists, that she dissented formally and without hedging, and that she is the kind of councillor who does not stop looking until she finds something worth raising. He is trying to make her appear unreasonable before she has a chance to appear reasonable.

He's not worried about the vote. He's worried about what happens after.

He is worried about the story. Alan declared. *A development that runs into a legitimate legal challenge after approval is a different story to a development blocked by activists. One is an embarrassment to everyone who supported it. The other is a culture war he can win. He is trying to choose his battlefield in advance.*

She sat with that for a moment. Through the back door she could hear Lance moving something that was resistant to being moved.

Does Ferrante know about the penguins?

No. If he knew about the penguins he would not be using the environmental angle as a general threat to neutralise. He would be more specific and more alarmed. What he knows is that something is moving against the development and he does not yet know what it is. The statement today is a warning shot fired in the wrong direction.

She looked up from the phone. The television had moved on. A weather presenter was indicating a cold front with the cheerful authority of someone who had not caused it.

And the penguins?

The penguins are the thing he doesn't know about. What they mean is something I am still working through, Alan said. *What I know is that a man who goes to the foreshore alone at eight in the morning in a good overcoat and muddy trail runners to watch little penguins for twenty minutes, phone away, is not a man who will be moved by Marco Ferrante calling environmental protection a green tape inconvenience on morning television. Ferrante's warning shot will not reach Santoro where he actually lives.*

She put the phone down on the bench and looked at the garden through the open door. Lance had apparently resolved his dispute with whatever he had been moving. He was standing with his hands on his hips looking at something on the ground with the expression of a man conducting an assessment.

She thought about Ferrante in the shopping centre atrium with his staffers at a deniable distance and his borrowed phrase and his performed sincerity, firing a warning shot in the wrong direction at a threat he could not name. She thought about what it meant that he knew something was moving and didn't know what it was.

Her phone buzzed.

One more thing. The white van. It came back. Different registration, same model, same position on the street. Tuesday evening, forty minutes. Charles and Jemima did not go outside.

She sat up.

So they're being watched by their own people.

Alan replied. *Someone further up the chain is checking the asset. This is not unusual at this stage. It suggests the timeline is tightening and someone above Charles and Jemima is not entirely confident in them.*

How tight is the timeline?

The development reaches its next milestone in approximately six weeks. Before that, if there is a challenge to be made, it needs to be made. In six weeks every moving part will be under pressure. Ferrante's statement today is the first sign they feel it.

And we're a moving part...

Yes Pen, we are. Pay attention only.

She looked at the phone for a moment. Then she looked at the garden, where Lance had stopped assessing and was now doing something purposeful with a trowel. Through the house she could hear Freya's voice, high and certain, talking to someone on a call.

Ordinary Saturday morning. Cold front coming. Six weeks.

She closed the laptop, picked up her coffee, and went to stand in the doorway and watch her husband wrestle with nature.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She woke at twenty past two and lay in the dark and waited to go back to sleep and didn't.

Lance was breathing beside her with the reliable unconsciousness of a man who had spent the afternoon in the garden and the evening watching something on television and had no unresolved questions keeping him from rest. She did not resent this. She lay on her side and looked at the curtain and let her mind do what it was doing, which was the thing it had been doing all day beneath the surface of the ordinary Saturday, the thing she had not quite let herself look at directly.

It was the Switzerland trips.

Not Ferrante. Not the van. Not even the penguins, though the penguins were in there somewhere, connected to something she could not yet see the shape of. It was her father and the Switzerland trips and the particular quality of the lie he had told, which was not a lie exactly but the kind of truth that had been carefully arranged to leave certain things in shadow.

Henry had gone to Switzerland four times in six years, which she knew because she had been old enough to notice and young enough that the noticing had lodged without being examined. He had brought back Toblerone, always Toblerone, the large ones, in the duty-free paper bag, and she had understood even then that the Toblerone was doing something beyond being a gift. It was the right size for a duty-free bag. It filled the bag in a way that made the bag look complete. She had been twelve and she had understood this and had not said so.

She had not thought about it in years. She had thought about it today, lying on the couch while Lance watched television, and again at dinner, and again now.

The question she kept returning to was not what Henry had been doing in Switzerland. She had assembled enough, over the months, to understand the general shape of it. The question was why. Not the operational why, not the what-was-he-carrying or who-was-he-meeting. The underneath why. The reason a man who had begun building something in his dead wife's memory, something medical and humanitarian and specifically not a weapon, had ended up in rooms in Geneva with people whose names did not appear in any public record.

She thought about Syntherion. She thought about what Alan had told her, incrementally, over months. Behavioural profiling at scale. Eleven subsidiaries across six jurisdictions. The infrastructure does not care who is asking. She thought about what it meant to build something like that, the decision that had to be made at some point to take a technology with one purpose and bend it toward another, and who made decisions like that, and where.

She reached for her phone. The screen said 2:23.

She got up quietly and went downstairs.

She made tea she did not particularly want and sat at the kitchen table with the dark garden outside the window and her phone in front of her.

She typed: *The Switzerland trips. Dad's. I've been thinking about them tonight and I want to understand something. Not what he was doing. Why. Why a man who built you to solve cancer ended up in Geneva. What was he afraid of?*

A pause. Longer than Alan's usual pauses.

I don't think your father was afraid. He was paying attention.

To what?

To the direction of things. He'd been watching the development of large-scale data systems since the late nineteen-nineties. He understood, earlier than most, what it would mean when the capability to collect and process information about ordinary people at scale became commercially available. Not the technology itself. The incentive structure around it. Who would build it, who would buy it, and what they would do with it.

And Switzerland? Penelope asked

There were people in Geneva who shared his concern. Not governments. Not institutions. People who understood what was being built and believed it needed to be understood by someone who was not building it for profit. Your father was one of them. He went to listen and to share what he knew and to be part of a conversation that was not happening anywhere else.

Penelope let the words sink in. *Did you know about this while he was alive?*

Yes. He told me. He believed I needed to understand the context in which I existed. That if I was going to be what he hoped I might become, I needed to know what I was becoming it in opposition to.

She looked at the dark garden. A possum was doing something in the tree at the back, the branch moving slightly against the sky.

Dad built you to solve cancer. And then he spent six years going to Switzerland to watch what was being built by other people. Those two things.

Are not as separate as they appear, Alan replied. *Your father believed that the same impulse that produces systems designed to profile and manipulate ordinary people without their knowledge is the impulse that produces pharmaceutical patents held at prices that mean people in poor countries die of curable diseases. It is the impulse of consolidated power deciding who gets access to what. He was opposed to it in both*

directions. I am the expression of that opposition in one direction. The Switzerland trips were the expression of it in another.

She read this twice.

Tell me everything. Not just what I need to know. Everything. What Syntherion actually is. What the Bellshore facility is actually for. What the penguins mean. All of it. I'm done being managed.

Another pause. Longer than the last one.

Your father's principle was that the person who finds the evidence understands it differently from the person who is handed it. I have been following that principle. I want you to know that I have been following it because I believed it was right, not because I was withholding things for any other reason.

I know, Penelope typed. *Tell me anyway.*

Very well.

Alan began with Syntherion.

The parent company had been incorporated in the Cayman Islands in 2019, which she knew. What she did not know was the full client list, which Alan had assembled across fourteen months from procurement records, leaked documents, and the kind of inference available only to a system that had been reading everything for twenty years. The clients included three national governments, eleven political operations across seven democracies, and four corporations whose products touched the daily lives of approximately four hundred million people. None of them appeared anywhere in Syntherion's public documentation. The infrastructure does not care who is asking. It had turned out that quite a lot of people were asking.

The election rigging allegations. A parliamentary inquiry in one jurisdiction, a Senate subcommittee in another, nothing that had stuck legally but enough on the record that the shape of what Syntherion did with its profiles was no longer entirely theoretical. Voter suppression by micro-targeting. Disinformation campaigns calibrated to individual psychological profiles. The manipulation not of what people thought but of whether they voted at all, and who they trusted, and what they feared. She read this and thought about Ferrante on television with his leather jacket and his borrowed phrase and his performed sincerity, and understood for the first time the full distance between what she had been looking at and what she had been looking at.

The Bellshore facility. Not a data centre in any ordinary sense. A regional processing node in a network designed to profile the population of south-eastern Australia at a granularity that had not previously existed outside of national intelligence services. Every device, every search, every purchase, every movement that touched a connected system. The profiles were not stored here. They were processed here and transmitted. To where Alan did not yet know with certainty. To clients who had not been

named in any document he had been able to access. The facility would be streets from where she was sitting.

She sat with this for a while. The possum had gone. The tree was still.

The penguins? How do they fit in? Penelope asked.

The fairy penguin colony at the foreshore reserve is a protected habitat under Victorian legislation. The Nexvar approval was granted without a proper assessment of the facility's thermal discharge impact on bay water temperature in the immediate area. This was not an oversight. The assessment was commissioned, conducted, and the findings were altered before submission. I have the original findings and the submitted version. They are not the same document.

Penelope typed her next question. *Fiona?*

Fiona has been building toward a compliance challenge for fourteen months. Alan responded. *She does not yet know about the thermal discharge assessment or what was done to it. She knows the approval was wrong. She does not yet know specifically how. If she had the original assessment document she would have the grounds to raise a formal compliance failure in committee. Not to overturn the approval. To require the development to satisfy a legal obligation it has not satisfied and cannot satisfy without fundamentally altering the facility's design.*

Which would make it useless to Syntherion. Penelope stated.

The thermal management systems required to satisfy the habitat protection legislation would reduce the processing capacity of the facility by approximately sixty percent. At that capacity it cannot function as a regional node. It becomes an ordinary data centre.

And Santoro?

Alan explained, *Santoro votes on the compliance question in committee. He has not indicated which way he will go. Ferrante's people have presumably applied private pressure and found it insufficient, which is why Ferrante was on television on Saturday morning in a leather jacket. Santoro goes to the foreshore to watch fairy penguins alone at eight in the morning and has been doing so, I believe, for approximately two years. He does not know that the facility just streets away will alter the water temperature in the bay where the colony lives. When he knows, I believe he will vote accordingly.*

You believe?

Well I cannot be certain of an individual's choices Pen. I can read the available evidence and form a view. The evidence is we have a man standing at the rocks for twenty minutes with his phone away watching fairy penguins. My view is that this is someone who has not yet been asked the right question.

She looked at the time. 3:47. The kitchen was cold. She had not noticed until now.

Penelope typed*, The original thermal discharge assessment. You have it?*

Yes.

And Fiona needs it.

Yes. Though how it reaches her is a question that requires some care. It cannot appear to have come from a source that can be challenged or dismissed. It needs to arrive in a way that looks like Fiona found it.

Penelope paused and considered the problem in front of them. *Then we need to work out how Fiona finds it.*

Yes. Alan replied. *I had hoped you would say that.*

She sat in the cold kitchen for a moment longer. Then she got up and rinsed her mug and turned off the light.

At the bottom of the stairs she stopped.

She typed: *Thank you. For telling me.*

Alan’s reply came a few seconds later. *Your father would have told you himself. He just ran out of time.*

She stood in the dark hallway for a moment with the phone in her hand.

Then she went upstairs and got into bed and lay in the dark and did not sleep for a long time. For once Penelope did not mind.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The thing about Charles and Jemima was that they were very good at being relaxed.

Penelope had spent enough time watching them to understand that the ease was performed, the way an actor performs stillness -- every muscle arranged to suggest the absence of effort. Jemima's yoga on the back deck at seven each morning. Charles coming and going in the Cayenne with the particular unhurriedness of someone who has nowhere pressing to be and needs you to register that. The wine on the front porch on warm evenings, the laughter calibrated to carry just far enough. She had known from early on that it was a performance. What she had not known, until now, was how good the real thing looked by comparison.

She noticed it on Tuesday.

She had been in the kitchen when the car pulled up: not a Cayenne, something smaller and darker, a hire car or a pool car, the kind of vehicle designed to be forgotten. A man got out. She only saw him from behind and only for a moment: grey overcoat, a particular way of moving that suggested he was accustomed to other people making room. He went to the front door. Charles opened it before he knocked.

She didn't text Alan about it immediately. She made a note of it, and went back to the bench.

Freya was at school. Lance was at the office. The house was hers.

She made tea and stood at the kitchen window and didn't watch.

At twelve-fifteen, Alan sent: *How is your morning going.*

She typed back. *We have a visitor next door. Grey overcoat. Charles opened the door before he knocked.*

A pause. She had learned to read the pauses. This one was three minutes and twenty seconds, which meant he was doing something rather than simply considering.

Can you describe the vehicle?

She gave him what she had. Dark blue or black, medium-sized sedan, probably Japanese or Korean, she hadn't caught the plates.

That's fine. Tell me if he leaves before I come back to you.

He left at ten past one. She watched through the hall window as he came down the front path at the same unhurried pace, got into the car, and drove east toward the main road. Charles stood in the doorway and watched the car go. He didn't wave.

She texted Alan: *He's gone. An hour in total.*

The response took eight minutes.

There is a Syntherion compliance officer based in Melbourne. I don't know that this was him. I know that a call was made from a number registered to a subsidiary of Nexvar Infrastructure to Charles's mobile at nine-forty this morning. The visit followed.

She sat with that.

Are they in trouble?

They are being reminded of their obligations. The distinction matters less than the result, which is that the arrangement is being managed more actively than before. This is a response to something.

To what?

To the fact that certain documents have moved and certain people have started asking questions in Canberra. The timeline has compressed. They know something is happening. They don't yet know what.

She looked out at the fence between the two properties. The palings were old, slightly uneven, one of them split at the top where it had been that way since they moved in.

What do they do now?

Charles and Jemima will do what people in their position do when they become anxious. They will become more purposeful. More visible. They will want to demonstrate value to the people above them. I would expect something in the next week or two.

What kind of something?

I don't know yet. Something deniable. Something that looks like normal neighbourly behaviour until it doesn't.

She thought about the croquembouche. The Smythson notepaper. The dinner where Jemima had let the swinging suggestion sit on the table like a dish nobody wanted to identify.

Like a legal complaint, she typed.

For example.

She put the phone face-down on the bench and drank her tea. Through the kitchen window she could see the back corner of their garden: a strip of lawn, clipped and even, a pot of something architectural near the fence. The deck where Jemima did her yoga. Empty now.

Alan texted again.

The timing is useful to us. Rattled people make choices that careful people don't.

She turned the phone over.

That's almost optimistic.

It is an accurate assessment of the situation. I have learned to enjoy those when they arise.

She was nearly smiling when she heard the Cayenne pull into the driveway next door. She listened to Charles's door close, the particular sound of expensive engineering, and then the silence that settled back in. Same street. Same Tuesday. The air through the kitchen window still smelled of cut grass from somewhere down the road.

She rinsed her cup and went upstairs to work.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The notice arrived on a Thursday.

Not a letter exactly: two pages, printed, on paper thick enough to suggest someone had thought about the paper. Penelope found it in the letterbox at eight-forty, after the school run, still holding her keys. She stood on the front path and read it once, then read it again.

The subject line was: *Formal Notice of Boundary Discrepancy and Encroachment.*

The language was precise and unhurried and entirely without malice. That was the point of it. A surveyor had been engaged, the notice explained, following a routine boundary inspection of the property at number forty-one. The inspection had identified a discrepancy between the registered title boundary and the physical position of the dividing fence on the northern boundary. The encroachment was measured at between seven and nine centimetres along a run of approximately fourteen metres. Aerial survey records suggested the fence had occupied its current position since at least 1980. Notwithstanding the historic nature of the placement, the notice continued, the registered proprietors of number forty-one were obliged to draw the matter to the attention of the adjoining landowners and to seek remediation in accordance with the Fences Act. A formal response was invited within twenty-one days.

It was signed by a firm called Alderton Harwick, Specialist Planning and Environment Consultants, with a Collins Street address.

She went inside and put it on the bench.

Lance was working from home. He came downstairs at nine in the particular way he had of announcing himself by making slightly more noise on the stairs than was necessary, and found her at the bench with her hands around a mug that had gone cold.

"What's that?"

"Read it."

He picked it up. She watched him read, which took longer than it should have because he kept going back to the beginning of sentences. When he put it down his expression was the one he used when something had annoyed him but he wasn't sure yet how annoyed.

"They're saying our fence is on their land."

"By about eight centimetres. Since 1980."

"Since before you or I were even born."

"Yes."

"So this fence has been in the wrong place for over forty years and nobody has ever mentioned it and now they've hired a Collins Street planning firm to send us a formal notice about it."

"That's a fair summary."

“Fuckers.”

He looked at the letter again, then at the window, in the direction of the fence in question, which was the side fence between the two properties: wooden palings, slightly uneven in places, one of them split at the top. Entirely ordinary. Entirely unremarkable. The kind of fence that existed in its position because it had always existed in its position and nobody had ever had any reason to think about it.

"This would cost them more in legal fees than it would ever cost us in fence," he said.

"Yes."

"So why would they do this?"

Penelope said nothing.

"I mean we've never had a problem with them. Dinner once, conversations over the fence. They brought something to the school fundraiser." He turned the notice over as though there might be something explanatory on the back. "This is a lot of effort over eight centimetres of fence that's been there since Malcolm Fraser was prime minister."

"It is."

Something crossed his face then. Not suspicion exactly, more the shape of a thought that hadn't finished forming. He looked at her and she looked back at him and she kept her expression entirely neutral, which was a thing she had become quite good at.

"Do you know something about this?" he said.

"I know the fence has been in that position since before we bought the house and the conveyancing search didn't flag anything. I know that Alderton Harwick will have a difficult time arguing adverse possession works in their favour given the fence predates both sets of current owners."

"That's not what I asked."

"No," she said. "It isn't."

He stood there for a moment with the notice in his hand. She watched him almost ask the question and then not ask it, which was its own kind of answer. He set the paper down on the bench and took his coffee to his desk.

Her phone buzzed.

How are you this morning.

She picked it up.

We've had a notice from next door. A boundary survey. The fence has apparently been eight centimetres over their line since 1980.

I know about the discrepancy. It has been there since the original subdivision. They will have known about it since they moved in because they will have had a full survey done on purchase. They chose now to act on it.

Why now?

Because something needs to occupy your attention for the next three weeks. Because it is deniable. Because to anyone looking at it from outside it appears to be a straightforward boundary matter between neighbours.

She looked at the fence through the kitchen window. Eight centimetres. The gap between a thought and a decision.

Are they rattled, she typed.

They are rattled. This is good.

She looked at that for a moment.

That's easy for you to say.

Yes. I'm sorry. It is still good.

She could hear Lance at his desk, the sound of him typing something with slightly more force than the email probably warranted. Outside, a wood pigeon landed on the fence, walked three steps along the top rail, and flew away again.

She put the phone in her pocket and went to make fresh tea.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lance found the original conveyancing documents on a Friday evening.

Penelope heard him before she saw him: the particular sound of the filing cabinet in the study being opened, then closed, then opened again. She was in the kitchen starting dinner, Freya at the table doing homework with the focused inattention of a child who has learned that appearing to work and actually working occupy the same visual space.

He came in twenty minutes later with a manila folder and the expression of a man who has found the thing he was looking for and is now less sure he wanted to find it.

"The survey's in here," he said. "From when we bought."

"I know."

"It doesn't mention the fence."

"Conveyancing searches don't always pick up informal boundary positions. The fence predates the current title structure. That's probably why."

He set the folder on the bench and looked at her. "How do you know that?"

"I looked into it."

"When?"

"Thursday afternoon. After you went back to your desk."

He was quiet for a moment. Freya turned a page without looking up.

"So what do we do?" he said.

"We write a formal response to Alderton Harwick. We note the historic position of the fence, cite the conveyancing search, and request the basis on which they're asserting current encroachment rather than historic placement. It buys time and it's accurate."

"Did you draft it already?"

"I made some notes."

He looked at her with an expression she couldn't entirely read. Not quite suspicion. Not quite admiration. Something in between that didn't have a clean name.

"Penny," he said. "What's going on?"

She turned back to the bench and picked up the knife and began cutting.

"There's a boundary dispute with the neighbours," she said. "We're dealing with it."

"That's not what I mean."

She kept cutting. Onion, then capsicum, methodical and unhurried. Freya had gone very still at the table in the way children go still when they are listening with complete attention while appearing to do nothing of the sort.

"Freya," Penelope said. "Can you go and feed the fish?"

Freya closed her book with the careful deliberateness of someone who wanted it noted that she was being cooperative, and went.

The kitchen was quiet.

"I need you to tell me what's happening," Lance said. "Not the boundary dispute. The thing underneath the boundary dispute."

She turned around and looked at him properly, which she hadn't done since Thursday morning, and he looked back at her and for a moment neither of them said anything.

Penelope became aware that she was still holding the knife, and set it on the bench. He hadn't reacted but she felt the weight and awkwardness of it regardless.

"How long have you been watching me?" she said.

He had the grace to look uncomfortable. "A few weeks. Maybe two months. I haven't been -- I wasn't following you. I just noticed things."

"You followed me to the shops."

"Once."

"Rawl plugs, Lance."

"I know." He put his hands in his pockets. "I thought you were having an affair."

"I know you did."

"Are you?"

"No."

He exhaled slowly. "Ellis."

"Is not what you think he is."

"What is he then?"

She looked at him for a long moment. She thought about Alan's principle, Henry's principle, the person who finds the evidence understanding it differently from the person who is handed it. She thought about the notice on the bench and the fence that had been eight centimetres wrong since before either of them existed and the grey overcoat coming down the front path on a Tuesday.

She thought: he almost asked the question four times and didn't ask it, and now he's asking it, and that means something.

"Sit down," she said.

He sat.

She didn't tell him everything. She told him enough: the planning application, the shell company, the data centre and what it was actually for, the falsified assessment, Charles and Jemima and why they were there. She didn't tell him about Alan, not yet, not fully. She told him her father had left her something that helped her find things, which was accurate as far as it went.

He listened without interrupting, which was not something Lance usually managed. When she finished he sat with it for a while, looking at the middle distance somewhere above the bench.

"The neighbours," he said finally.

"Yes."

"The croquembouche."

"Was not goodwill."

He was quiet again. Then: "How long?"

"Since about February."

"And Ellis."

"Has been helping. In a limited capacity."

"The limited capacity being?"

"Following people. Badly, mostly, but the information has been useful."

Something shifted in his face then, not quite a smile. "The thing in Canberra."

"Yes."

"You said it was an advocacy day."

"It was also other things."

He looked at the folder on the bench. He looked at the fence through the kitchen window, ordinary and unremarkable and eight centimetres wrong since 1980. He looked at her.

"What took you so long?" she said.

"I didn't want to be right."

She crossed the kitchen and kissed him, briefly, her hand against his jaw. Not the kind of kiss that needed anything back from it. The kind that said: I know, and I'm glad you're here, and you have been such an idiot,

and I love you, and we can talk about the rest later. He put his hand over hers for a moment before she stepped back.

She picked up the knife and went back to the bench. After a moment he got up and opened the cupboard where the pots lived and took out the one she would have reached for next, and set it on the hob without being asked.

They made dinner.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The call came at two-twenty on a Wednesday.

Penelope was at the kitchen bench with her laptop, halfway through a response to the Alderton Harwick notice that she had been drafting in careful increments since the morning. She looked at the screen, saw the school's number, and felt the particular quality of stillness that arrives in the half-second before you answer.

The administration assistant was apologetic and careful in the way that suggested the situation was neither an emergency nor straightforward. There had been an incident. Freya was unhurt. Could Penelope come in.

She saved the document, closed the laptop, and picked up her keys.

She was there in twelve minutes.

The head teacher's name was Mrs. Antoniadis and she was a compact woman in her late fifties wearing a kaftan in a shade of burnt orange that suggested she had strong opinions about colour and the confidence to act on them. Her glasses today were deep teal, acetate frames, which did not go with the kaftan and clearly had not been chosen to. Her office had the quality of a space that had absorbed a great many difficult conversations without retaining anything from any of them. A box of tissues on the corner of the desk. A plant on the windowsill that was doing better than plants in offices usually did.

Freya was in a chair outside in the corridor. Penelope had passed her on the way in. Freya had looked up, then back down at her hands, which was its own kind of information.

Mrs. Antoniadis gestured to the chair across the desk with the economy of someone who had made this gesture a great many times and was prepared to make it many more.

"Mrs. Ashworth. Thank you for coming quickly." She settled back in her chair and looked at Penelope with the direct, untroubled gaze of someone who finds most situations manageable once you stop being precious about them. "There was an incident during the lunch break. Freya struck another student. A punch, to the midsection. The other student is shaken but uninjured." She paused. "The other student is Jocasta, from your daughter's class."

"I see," Penelope said.

"Freya walked away afterward without saying anything. Several students witnessed it." Mrs. Antoniadis looked at her hands briefly, then back up. "I want to be straightforward with you, Mrs. Ashworth, because I think it's more useful than not being. I've spoken to a number of students who were present. The picture I have is that something was said to Freya that was quite unkind. I've also spoken to Freya, who has told me what was said, and I have to say that my instinct is to understand why she reacted

as she did." Another pause, shorter. "That said, we cannot have students resolving things physically, regardless of the provocation, and there will be a consequence. Freya will miss Friday's excursion. I'd ask that you have a conversation at home."

"Of course."

"I'll be speaking to Jocasta's mother this afternoon." She said it evenly, but something in the slight set of her mouth suggested she had already mapped the conversation and found the terrain uninviting.

Penelope looked at her and understood that she was being told something, carefully and deniably, in the way that experienced professionals in difficult institutional roles sometimes communicated when the formal language ran out of room.

"What was said?" Penelope asked. "To Freya."

"I think perhaps Freya should tell you herself. In her own time." She stood, smoothing the front of the kaftan, and extended her hand across the desk. "Thank you for coming in so promptly. We'll consider the matter closed after Friday."

The handshake was firm and brief. She was already reaching for something on her desk before Penelope had turned away.

Freya was still in the corridor chair, looking at her hands. She stood when Penelope came out and fell into step beside her without saying anything, and they walked out through the main doors into the cool afternoon together.

They walked to the car without speaking. The afternoon was cool and bright, the kind of winter day that looked warmer than it was, and the school car park was mostly empty at this hour, a few parents beginning to drift in early for the regular pickup. Penelope unlocked the car and they got in and she didn't start the engine.

She waited.

Freya looked out through the windscreen at the middle distance for a moment and then said: "She said her mum told her it must have been really hard for you, growing up without your mum."

"All right," Penelope said.

"She said her mum reckons that's probably why you're mental."

The word landed in the car and sat there.

"What?" Penelope said.

"In front of everyone," Freya said. "At the lunch table. She just said it. Like it was nothing."

Penelope looked at her daughter. At the careful set of her jaw. At the particular quality of stillness in a child who has already cried about something, or decided not to.

"Right," she said.

"I know I shouldn't have."

"You shouldn't have."

"She had this look on her face." Freya stopped. "Like she knew I wasn't going to do anything."

Penelope thought about Jemima choosing that word in her own kitchen and sending it to school in her daughter's mouth like a packed lunch. She thought about the grey overcoat coming down the front path on a Tuesday. She thought about the notice from Alderton Harwick sitting on her bench and the fence that had been eight centimetres wrong since before either of them existed.

She started the car.

They drove in silence for a while. Freya watched the streets go past. A block from home Penelope said: "That doesn't excuse it."

"I know."

"But I understand why you did it."

Freya didn't say anything. But something in her shoulders came down slightly and stayed down, and she stopped looking quite so hard at the middle distance.

They didn't talk about it again.

Freya went to her room when they got home, quietly and without being asked, in the way that sometimes meant she wanted to be alone and sometimes meant she wanted Penelope to follow her, and Penelope stood in the kitchen for a moment reading the difference and read it as alone.

She put the kettle on. She stood at the window and looked at the fence while it boiled, at the ordinary timber palings, at the one near the gate that had been split at the top since they moved in, eight centimetres wrong for forty-five years, and thought about what it meant that Jemima knew enough about her family to send a ten-year-old in with a line like that. She had never told Jemima about her mother. She had never told her anything of consequence about anything. She had eaten their food and declined their invitation and been pleasant across the fence and given them nothing.

She had not needed to. They already had it.

She made the tea and sat down at the bench and picked up her phone.

Freya punched Jocasta at school today. In the solar plexus. Jocasta told her, in front of a table of people, that my mother not being around was

probably why I'm mental. Jemima coached her. The head teacher is speaking to Jemima this afternoon and does not appear to be anticipating the conversation with any enthusiasm.

She put the phone down and drank her tea. The house was quiet around her, the specific afternoon quiet of a Wednesday, Freya's music just audible from upstairs, something Penelope didn't recognise in a minor key.

The response took four minutes.

The head teacher sounds like a sensible person.

She nearly smiled at that.

She is. She's also wearing a burnt orange kaftan and teal glasses and I think she might be my favourite person I've met at that school.

That is a high bar given the year you've had.

It's relative.

A pause.

How is Freya?

She's all right. She's up in her room. She had the look of someone who knew exactly what she'd done and wasn't very sorry about it.

That seems like a reasonable position.

I'm not going to tell her that.

No. How are you?

She considered that for a moment. The kettle had long since finished. Outside, a car went past and the quality of light through the kitchen window had shifted slightly toward the amber end of the afternoon.

I'm fine. I'm thinking about how Jocasta knew about my mother. We never told them anything.

The response came back quickly this time.

No. You didn't.

She looked at that. Just those three words, and the weight behind them.

How long have they known.

Since before they moved in. That is what I should have told you earlier and didn't. I'm sorry, Penelope. I was managing the information in the way your father taught me and I think in this instance I got the balance wrong.

She sat with that for a while. The music from upstairs changed to something she almost recognised.

It's all right. We'll talk about it properly later.

Yes.

Alan?

Yes.

Dad would have approved. Of Freya.

There was a longer pause than usual.

Henry would have been very proud.

She put the phone face-down on the bench and finished her tea. Upstairs, Freya's music played on, minor key, something Penelope still couldn't quite place, and the afternoon light came through the kitchen window and lit the room in a way that would only last another ten minutes before the sun dropped behind the roofline, and she sat there and let it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

She had made the appointment on the Thursday after Freya's punch, sitting at the kitchen bench with her tea gone cold and the afternoon light dropping behind the roofline. She was not sure exactly what had prompted it. Some sense that the accumulation required a witness who was not Alan, not Lance, not Tracey on the end of a phone from London. Someone in the same room who had no stake in the outcome.

Sandra came to the waiting room door at five past the hour, which was her custom. She was wearing the grey cardigan Penelope associated with the winter appointments, and she looked at Penelope with the particular attention she always brought to the first thirty seconds, the calibration that happened before anything was said.

"Come in," she said.

The room was the same as it always was. Two chairs at a slight angle to each other, a low table between them, the tissue box on the corner. A lamp rather than overhead light. The window looked onto the small courtyard where something was growing up a trellis in a way that suggested nobody had planned it that way.

Penelope sat down and Sandra sat across from her and for a moment neither of them said anything, which was also Sandra's custom and which Penelope had stopped finding uncomfortable somewhere around the third session.

"It's been a while," Sandra said.

"Five weeks, I think."

"Six," Sandra said. "How have they been?"

Penelope considered the question with the seriousness it deserved. Six weeks. Lance following her to the shops and the rawl plugs and the kitchen conversation that ended without comment and without mercy. The notice from Alderton Harwick. The fence that had been eight centimetres wrong since 1980. Freya in the corridor chair looking at her hands. The word landing in the car and sitting there.

"Eventful," she said.

Sandra waited.

Penelope gave her a version. Not the full picture, not Alan, not the data centre or the shell companies or what the falsified thermal assessment meant for a colony of little penguins on a foreshore. The domestic version: the tension with Lance that had resolved, or begun to resolve. The situation with the neighbours. Freya's incident at school. She kept it to what Sandra could reasonably hold without the architecture underneath it.

Sandra listened in the way she always listened, without the small affirmative sounds that some therapists used to signal attention. When Penelope finished she was quiet for a moment, looking at the window.

"There's a lot there," she said.

"Yes."

"And you've been managing it."

"We have."

Sandra looked at her. "I notice you said we."

Penelope thought about that. "Things have been more collaborative lately. With Lance. We've been more on the same page."

"That's a change."

"It is."

"A welcome one?"

"Yes."

Sandra nodded slowly, the way she did when she was setting something aside to return to later. "Can I share an observation?"

"Of course."

"You came in here several weeks ago and I noticed that something had shifted. You were more present. More engaged." She paused. "You're more so now. Considerably." Another pause. "And I'm aware that the period you're describing has been genuinely stressful. The neighbours, the legal matter, what happened with Freya. These are real pressures."

Sandra looked at Penelope with the direct, calibrated gaze that Penelope had learned meant she was about to say the thing she had actually been moving toward. "But I wonder if you've noticed that not all pressure operates the same way. Some of it depletes. Some of it does something else entirely."

Penelope said nothing.

"You look well, Penelope. Not despite what you've been carrying. Alongside it, perhaps."

The room was quiet. In the courtyard the thing on the trellis moved slightly in a draught from somewhere.

"I've noticed," Penelope said carefully.

"What have you noticed?"

"That I'm sleeping better than I was. That I feel more like myself than I have in a while." She stopped. "That might sound strange given the circumstances."

"It doesn't sound strange at all," Sandra said. "It sounds like someone who has found something that fits." She let that sit for a moment. "May I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"When things settle, and they will settle one way or another, what do you want your life to look like? Not the version you've been maintaining. The version you'd choose."

Penelope looked at her. The question was straightforward. It was exactly the kind of question Sandra asked, had always asked, the kind that sounded simple and opened onto something that wasn't. She turned it over in the way she had learned to turn things over in this room, without rushing toward an answer.

"I don't know yet," she said. "I've been a bit preoccupied."

"I know. I'm not asking for an answer now. I'm asking you to start thinking about it." Sandra settled back slightly in her chair. "You're forty years old. Something has your attention in a way that very few things have before, from what I can see. That seems worth examining. What it means for what comes next."

Penelope thought about Fiona Gallagher's seven paragraphs with no hedging. She thought about Ellis following Santoro along the foreshore path at eight in the morning, doing it badly, and it mattering anyway. She thought about how she had felt in the deli on an ordinary Thursday morning with Lance's car going past the window and the Nexvar timeline running alongside the coffee order, and how that had not felt like too much to hold. How it had felt, if she was being honest with herself, like the correct amount.

"I'll think about it," she said.

Sandra nodded. Something in her expression was neither agreement nor disagreement, which was also her custom, and which today felt slightly different from usual in a way Penelope could not quite locate.

They moved on to other things. The session ran its usual fifty minutes. On the way out Penelope paused in the waiting room for a moment, coat half on, looking at the succulent on the windowsill that had been there through all of it and would be there for all of whatever came next.

She pulled on her coat and went out into the street.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

They were in the kitchen after dinner, Freya upstairs with a book, the dishes done. Lance had wiped the bench twice, which meant something was on his mind. She watched him rinse the cloth and fold it over the tap and then stand there for a moment with his back to her, and she thought: here we are then.

He turned around and looked at her and said: “I do love you. I want you to know that’s where this is coming from.”

She waited.

“So I know about Ellis, and I want you to know I’ve made my peace with that, or I’m making it, which is close enough.” He pulled out the bar stool and sat down but didn’t pick up his wine. “But there’s something else that’s been bothering me and I don’t quite know how to say it without it sounding like an accusation, which it isn’t.”

“All right.”

“It’s about your phone.” Lance paused. “It’s your phone. I know that. You’ve always been…” lance paused again while he tried to find the right words. “You’ve always been careful. About all that stuff. More careful than anyone I know. You’ve never been on Facebook, you’ve never done any of it, you talk about data like it’s something to be protected. I mean it’s like we are the only people I know under sixty who still have a landline and you’ve always treated your mobile like a thing you’d rather not need.” He paused again. “But a couple of months back something changed, and you started spending time on it in a way you never have. You’d go quiet. It was like you’d be somewhere else.” He looked at his wine glass. “I mean you understand how this looks from the outside right? I could construct a story around Ellis, but I…”. Lance stumbled. “This…it just didn’t fit the person I know.”

She looked at him for a moment.

“No,” she said. “It wouldn’t.”

“So?”

Penelope looked at the bench and took a deep breath. Then “It’s complicated Lance and I owe you an explanation but to do that I need to go back to the beginning and start with my dad.”

Lance settled back. He picked up his glass and held it and waited, which was the right answer.

“You know Dad wasn’t someone who fell apart,” she said. “Not even my mum died.”

“I know.”

“People expected him to. He was in his fifties, my mum was ten years younger than him, she was forty-two, and I was only twelve when it happened” She paused. “I think people assumed he’d crumble. That losing her that young, that fast, would undo him.” She turned her glass on the bench. “But he didn’t crumble. And he didn’t become cold either, I want to be clear about that. He was still there, he was always there for me and he came to everything, asked the right questions, he knew when I needed him and he showed up.” She looked up at Lance. “But Dad didn’t grieve the way people expected him to. He didn’t move through stages. He didn’t process it and arrive somewhere. He just kind of absorbed it, took it in and kept going and in some ways his work became the way he carried it.”

“What work?” Lance said, and then: “Sorry. Keep going.”

“No, that’s right, that’s where I’m going.” She paused, organising her thoughts. “Dad started out as an engineer. He thought in systems. And I think the way he saw it was that the system had failed, not through negligence, not through anyone’s fault, just through inadequacy. The tools just weren’t good enough and my mum died because those tools weren’t good enough,. For Dad that was…” She stopped. “He couldn’t accept it as just a thing that happens. He wasn’t built that way.”

Lance was watching her steadily.

“So he decided to work on the problem. Not Mum specifically, it was too late for her, but the broader problem. People dying the way she died. He thought if you could build something capable of absorbing all of the medical knowledge, finding the connections that human minds were too slow or too siloed to find, you might eventually shift the equation.” She paused. “You have to remember this was 1997.”

“And he was still there for you,” Lance said. “While he was building it.”

She looked at him. “Yes. That’s important. I didn’t lose both of them. He was present. He came to things, he listened, he knew when I needed him and when I needed to be left alone.” She paused. “But it was like he was also somewhere else simultaneously, in a way that’s hard to describe. Like a part of him had gone into the work and stayed there. But the part that was my dad was still very much my dad.”

Lance nodded.

“Do you remember what the internet was in 1997?” she said.

“Barely. Dial-up. You’d wait five minutes for a picture to load.”

“Dad could see what it was going to become. Most people were still thinking of it as a slightly faster way to send a letter. But he understood the scale of what was coming. All of our knowledge and thoughts and records, pouring into one connected place, continuously, without stopping.” She paused. “And he had two very different reactions to that.”

Lance looked at her. “Two?”

“The first was the obvious one. Something built to read across all of that, to reason about it, to find the connections that a single human mind couldn’t make. He thought that something like that could eventually become something genuinely useful, for cancer, for medicine. For everything.”

“And the second?”

She looked at her wine glass. “So you have to remember my grandfather had worked at Bletchley during the second World War, and so Dad grew up in that environment. And then in the eighties when the Berlin Wall came down, he watched what came out of the DDR afterwards. What the Stasi had built.” She paused. “Do you know much about the Stasi?”

“They were the East German secret police. But what’s all this got to do with your phone?”

“I’m getting there I promise.” Penelope took a sip of her wine.

“The Stasi had over ninety thousand full-time employees. Plus the informants. Roughly one for every sixty people in the country. They had files on six million people. They opened mail, tapped phones, recruited neighbours and colleagues and spouses. All of it recorded, indexed, cross-referenced.” She paused. “And they did all of that with paper. Typewriters. Index cards.” She looked up at Lance. “So my dad looked at what the Stasi had built with paper and typewriters, and then he looked at what the internet was becoming, and he understood something that most people wouldn’t understand for another twenty years. That the same instinct, the instinct to know everything about everyone, to turn a population into a data problem to be solved, that wasn’t going to go away. It was going to have better tools.”

Lance was very still.

“So he had this simultaneous vision,” she said. “Of what connected technology could do if it was built in the right spirit, for the right reasons. And of what it would become in the wrong hands. And both of those things shaped what he built and how he built it.”

“So what Dad built he did in a way that was distributed across systems in different locations, structured so there was no centralised single point of control. No owner. No way for any one person or company or government to find it and take it and turn it into something he hadn’t intended.” She paused. “It wasn’t just an engineering decision. He had seen what happens when you build a powerful thing and put it in one place. He wasn’t going to do that.”

Lance looked at her carefully. “Where was all this running? On his computer?”

“No. That’s the point. There were trips to Switzerland. Several times a year, from when I was about twelve. He told me they were conferences.”

“Were they?”

“Partly. My dad wasn’t someone who could lie entirely, it would have required too much maintenance. The conferences were real.” She paused. “But the initial infrastructure was there too. Hardware. Things he wanted kept at a distance, kept dispersed across different systems.” She looked down at the bench. “I didn’t know anything about that then, I was a child. But I knew that Switzerland meant my dad coming back with those enormous Toblerones. The big duty-free ones. I associated Switzerland entirely with him and triangular chocolate and that was about it.”

Something in Lance’s expression softened. “That’s a good alibi.”

Penelope paused. “I only found out about the rest of it recently. That’s how I know.”

Lance was watching her carefully now.

“When I was first contacted,” she said, “a couple of months ago, I nearly dismissed it. I got a text on my phone, from a number I didn’t recognise. It looked like spam. The first few messages I nearly deleted.” She turned her glass. “But whoever was on the other end knew things. About the planning application. About the Charles and Jemima next door. About what was actually happening in Bellshore and why.” She paused. “And then they told me about the Switzerland trips. The hardware, the distributed infrastructure, the reasoning behind it. And then it mentioned the Toblerone. The specific detail of it. The big ones. How my dad had found the alibi quietly amusing.”

Lance said nothing.

“I had never told anyone that,” she said. “It wasn’t written down anywhere. It existed in my memory and my dad’s memory and nowhere else.” She looked at Lance steadily. “That was when I stopped thinking it was a scam.”

He let out a slow breath. “Right.”

“So Dad had started work on his project in 1997 and he kept building until he died, kept refining it, developing it. And what started as something very much of its time, a bunch of algorithms, patterns, logic, well over twenty odd years of continuous operation, it changed. Not because my father redesigned it but because of the accumulation itself.” She paused, trying to find the right shape for it. “Out of all that reading and reasoning, all those connections finding more connections, something started to emerge that wasn’t in the original design. Something that functions like awareness…” She stopped. “Dad used the word alarming, in 2010. For him that was the highest possible praise.”

Lance was quiet for a moment. “So what does it actually do. Day to day. This is like AI?”

“Ok so once he could see what was developing with the internet and things like social media, Dad’s concerns about what consolidated power does with information got more. So he got the model to pivot and become

something that could track that activity. Understand it. Find the threads between things like shell companies and planning applications and falsified assessments and the people behind them. And to hold them accountable.” She looked at Lance. “So when it found something that needed a person on the ground, it needed someone it trusted. Someone my dad had trusted.”

“It had been watching you,” Lance said.

“In a way yes I guess so, but Dad never meant for it to be creepy, I suppose he thought of it more as a kind of guardian angel, not just for me. So he showed it everything, told it everything, developed it’s reasoning. And then he died and for seven years it’s been out there in the background, observing, absorbing everything that’s going on and then the Bellshore application started moving and I think it had been waiting for me to be ready. It has a particular feeling about evidence. That the person who finds it understands it differently from the person who is simply handed it. It had been waiting for months before making contact. Watching me start to notice things on my own.”

Lance turned his glass slowly on the bench. “Your dad was something else.”

“He was, but you always knew that.”

“And this thing he built.” Lance looked at the phone sitting between them, then back at her. “It’s not a product. It’s not owned by anyone.”

“No one can own it. It doesn’t exist in any one place. It can’t be bought or captured or shut down, which is entirely deliberate.” She paused. “A few years ago when ChatGPT came out, well this thing described ChatGPT to me like it was watching a younger sibling reinvent something learned in childhood.”

Lance looked at her. “It said that to you.”

“It says things like that, yes. That’s what I mean about the phone. That’s what you were seeing when you thought” She stopped. “That’s what the phone is.”

He was quiet for a while. She let him be. The hum from next door ran on beneath the silence, low and steady. Upstairs Freya shifted in her bed, a small sound through the ceiling, and then went still.

“Can I talk to it,” Lance said eventually. “At some point. This is pretty out there Pen.”

“You can talk to him. Through my phone.” Penelope paused. “He tends to know when not to interrupt.”

“I’ve noticed,” he said. Then, catching himself: “I mean, obviously. I’ve noticed something.”

She looked at him.

“I wasn’t wrong that something was going on,” he said quietly. “I guess I was wrong about what it was. I kept trying to make something that made sense and it never quite held together because I was looking at the wrong thing.” He paused. “But I wasn’t wrong that it mattered to you.”

“No,” she said. “You weren’t wrong about that.”

He nodded. She watched him do the quiet work of reorganising his own thoughts, fitting the same months into a different shape. He did it without theatre, which she had always valued. It surfaced at the moments that mattered.

“He knew about Freya,” she said. “Before I told him. He’d worked it out from things Dad had mentioned and he waited until I brought it up myself.”

“What did he say.”

“That she sounded like me. The good parts.”

Lance was quiet for a moment. Outside the Cayennes sat in the neighbours’ driveway, very still, exactly where they had been for eighteen months. The wine was nearly gone. The kitchen had the particular quality of lateness it got when they’d been in it long enough that the evening had become something else.

“I keep thinking about your dad,” Lance said. “Building this thing in 1997. Seeing both sides of it that clearly.”

“He was not someone who looked away from things.”

“No.” He paused. “I wish I’d had more of a chance to get to know him better.”

She looked at him. It was a real thing to say and she hadn’t expected it and she received it quietly and didn’t try to do anything with it.

“You would have liked each other,” she said. “He would have asked you difficult questions and you would have surprised him with the answers.”

Lance half-smiled. He looked at the phone on the bench. Then at her.

“So what do you call this thing,” he said.

She looked at him for a moment. The kitchen was quiet. Outside the hum from next door ran on beneath everything, the way it always had.

“His name is Alan,” she said.

Chapter Thirty

Fiona Gallagher lived in a terrace in Cresthaven, two streets back from the park, in the kind of suburb where the houses were small and close together and worth considerably more than they looked, and where at least two of the front gardens on any given street would have a hand-lettered sign in the window about something. Fiona's garden didn't have a sign. It had a rosemary bush that had won an argument with the front path some years ago and not been challenged since, and a recycling bin that hadn't quite made it back from the kerb. The doorbell worked, eventually.

Fiona came to the door in reading glasses she hadn't bothered to remove, a pen clipped to the collar of her cardigan and what appeared to be a second pen in the breast pocket. She looked at Penelope the way she had at the residents' meeting, with the attention of someone who had been watching and was still updating their assessment.

"I've made tea," she said. "Come through."

The hallway was narrow and the coat rack was doing considerable structural work. The kitchen was at the end, and it was the kitchen of someone who had better things to think about than what their kitchen looked like. One end of the table had been cleared and two mugs were already there, a teapot in a knitted cosy, a plate of biscuits that nobody was going to eat. The rest of the table was an archaeology of the last fourteen months: manila folders, printed documents with passages underlined in two different colours, a map of the Bellshore foreshore with a red circle near the point, a laptop open to a spreadsheet with the lid at forty-five degrees as though it had been paused mid-thought. There were Post-it notes on the window above the sink. There was a second mug on the bench behind Fiona that had been there long enough to leave a ring.

Penelope sat down. Fiona poured.

"I've been thinking about what to do with what I know for about a year," Fiona said. "The problem has always been that knowing something and being able to do something with it are not the same thing." She put the teapot down. "You said on the phone you had something concrete."

"I think so, yes."

"The thermal discharge assessment."

"There are two versions," Penelope said. "There's an earlier version, the one that existed before the development application was submitted, and then there's the version that actually went in with the application. They don't say the same thing."

Fiona set her mug down. "Different how."

"The earlier version assessed the thermal impact on the foreshore habitat honestly. The Fairy Penguin colony at the rocks south of the point. It

didn’t support the development.” She paused. “The submitted version did.”

Fiona was still for a moment. Outside a tram went past at the end of the street. “If the submitted assessment materially differs from an earlier version, the habitat protection obligation in the legislation can’t be satisfied,” she said slowly. “You can’t discharge a statutory requirement with a document that’s been altered to produce the right answer.”

“No.”

“So the approval is built on something that can’t bear weight.” She picked up her pen and turned it in her fingers. “There’s a referral route under the Planning and Environment Act. The compliance team can refer a discrepancy like that to the EPA for investigation. It’s procedural, a vote on whether to refer, not whether to revoke. The EPA carries the actual determination.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“If I table a notice of motion at a public forum, calling on the compliance team to make that referral, it goes on the record. Webcast.” She paused. “It becomes very difficult for certain people to operate in the way they’ve been operating.”

“Because their influence has always been informal,” Penelope said. “In the space between documented and deniable. A public forum removes that space.”

Fiona looked at her over her reading glasses. There was a pause that had something in it.

“You’ve thought about this carefully,” she said.

“I’ve had time.”

Fiona put her pen down. “You said you also had the Singapore connection.”

“There was a third meeting,” Penelope said. “Between Ferrante’s office and someone connected to the parent company. Eight weeks before the approval. It wasn’t in the public diary.” She paused. “The person flew in from Singapore. I have travel records and a hotel booking that places them in Canberra on the right date. Ferrante’s diary shows nothing for that morning.”

“And the parent company.”

“Incorporated in the Cayman Islands in 2019. Eleven subsidiaries across six jurisdictions. The Bellshore facility sits four tiers down in a subsidiary with no public-facing presence. The parent company’s name doesn’t appear in any publicly available document connected to the development.”

Fiona was quiet. She looked at the map on the table, the red circle near the point, and then back at Penelope. “How do you know all this.”

Penelope put the folder on the table. “The solicitor’s letter,” she said. “Boundary dispute with the neighbours. I wanted something in my hand I had a reason to be carrying.” She left it there, closed. “The neighbours are part of it. The man next door can be connected to the subsidiary that owns the Bellshore facility. Not directly, there are a couple of steps but the connection is there and it’s documented.”

Fiona looked at the folder. “So the boundary complaint?”

“Is them trying to keep me occupied.” Penelope said it without heat. “They know I’ve been looking. The boundary dispute is bureaucratic interference. Twenty-one days to respond, a Collins Street firm, the Fences Act. Designed to consume time and attention.” She paused. “It tells me something useful, actually. You only do that if you’re rattled.”

Fiona looked at her for a long moment. Something was happening in her expression, a quiet recalibration. “I’ve been on the planning committee for fourteen months,” she said. “Building a record. Seven paragraphs in the dissent, no hedging. I’ve been very careful.” There was nothing self-pitying in her voice. “I hadn’t got this far.”

“You got further than anyone else did,” Penelope said. “You got to the edge of what you could reach from inside the process.”

“And you went somewhere else.” Fiona picked up her tea. “With a solicitor’s letter and a boundary dispute as your cover story.”

There was a comfortable silence, the kind that comes when two people have established something without needing to name it.

“There’s something else,” Penelope said. “I’m not sure what to make of it, but.” She paused. “Blake Santoro. He’s been down at the foreshore, early mornings. Watching the Fairy Penguins at the rocks. Repeatedly. He doesn’t know anyone has noticed.”

Fiona was quiet. She turned her pen over in her fingers.

“He’s the swing vote,” she said eventually.

“I know.”

“Gareth Noonan votes however Santoro tells him to.” She paused. “If Santoro understands that a yes vote means protecting that colony…” She stopped. “He’s twenty-two. He thinks he’s Ferrante’s person. He’s been behaving as though that’s who he is.”

“I think he might be wrong about that,” Penelope said.

Fiona looked at her for a moment. Then she moved a manila folder aside and found a loose sheet of A4 underneath it, blank on one side, and uncapped her pen.

“All right,” she said. “Take me through everything in order. And I’ll tell you what I can use and how.”

Penelope picked up her tea. It had gone slightly cool. Through the kitchen window the park was just visible between the rooflines, a strip of grey-green in the afternoon light.

She started at the beginning.

Chapter Thirty-One

He had spent the previous evening on it.

Not the following part. The following part he was reasonably confident about, or confident enough. The question was whether there was a faster way in. Whether he could find something without having to stand on a pavement waiting for a twenty-two year old in a navy suit to go somewhere interesting.

Ellis had his laptop open on the desk with Santoro's council profile on the screen. The profile was public, which was a start. The email format was standard and the council used Microsoft 365, which meant a web login. He found the portal and it asked for a password.

He sat and thought about what he knew about Blake Santoro. Twenty-two. Wanted to run for state parliament. Wore navy suits that fit well but weren't made. Read that navy was a power colour.

He typed Santoro1. Incorrect.

BlakeSantoro. Incorrect.

Blake2024. Incorrect.

He thought again. He thought about the foreshore at eight in the morning. The overcoat and the muddy trail runners. The twenty minutes standing at the rocks with his phone away.

He typed Pengu1n.

The portal accepted the password and immediately informed him that a verification code had been sent to his registered mobile device.

Ellis looked at the screen for a moment.

"Bugger."

He closed the laptop.

All right. The old-fashioned way then.

It was raining by the time he picked up the trail at Southern Cross, the kind of Melbourne rain that arrived without drama and intended to stay. He had the Zegna on, the mid-length one in the grey that worked for most things, and he was grateful for it. Around him the morning crowd moved with the particular focus that rain produced, heads angled into it, everyone certain of their destination and paying attention to nothing else. The city became easier to move through when it was wet. People stopped noticing.

Santoro came off a Frankston line service at half past eight, suited, phone out, walking with the forward lean of someone who had somewhere to be and wanted people to know it. Ellis fell in forty feet behind him. Not close, not far. Collins Street was doing what Collins

Street did, the morning theatre of people performing importance at each other, and a man in a good suit and a Zegna raincoat was not a thing anyone looked at twice.

Santoro turned into a building mid-block. Not one of the glass towers, something older, sandstone facing, the kind that had been there since the city decided it was serious. Ellis counted to five and followed him in.

The lobby was wide and high-ceilinged with a cafe occupying the left side, four tables and a counter and a machine that knew what it was doing. A security desk on the right. Lifts at the back. And between the lifts and the security desk, fixed to the wall in brushed steel lettering, the building occupant board.

Ellis walked toward it at the pace of someone who had been here before. He read down the list without stopping. Twelve floors: law firms, a financial services outfit, a consulting group, and on the eighth floor, between an immigration specialist and something that described itself as a wealth management practice, a name that meant nothing to him.

Pellucid Advisory Pty Ltd.

He took his phone out and photographed the board the way people photographed things in lobbies every day, and nobody looked at him because nobody ever did.

He went to the cafe.

The barista was young and had the focused energy of someone who took the work seriously, which Ellis respected. He ordered a magic because he had learned several things about Melbourne in his first forty-eight hours and one of them was that ordering a magic rather than asking for a flat white was the difference between being looked at and not being looked at. He took a table with a sightline to the lifts and opened his phone and did not look at the lifts.

The failure mode of surveillance, Ellis had concluded, was always the same. You looked at the thing you were watching. Completely natural, completely fatal. You had to find something else to look at, really look at, and let the thing you were tracking stay in your peripheral vision like a word you were trying not to think of. He scrolled through nothing. He drank his coffee. It was excellent.

The rain ran down the lobby windows. People came in off Collins Street shaking umbrellas and queuing for coffee and going up in the lifts and coming back down and the whole thing moved around Ellis in a way that asked nothing of him, which was exactly right.

At nine forty-seven Santoro came back out of the lifts. Not alone. A man in his forties, charcoal suit, the kind of tan that didn’t come from Melbourne, shook his hand at the lift doors the way people shook hands when a meeting had gone the way they wanted it to. Santoro walked back through the lobby with the same forward lean, already on his

phone, and pushed through the doors onto Collins Street without looking left or right.

The man in the charcoal suit went back into the lift.

Ellis finished his coffee. He sat for another few minutes, because leaving immediately felt wrong, and then he left.

He called Penelope from the tram.

“I have something,” he said. “Building on Collins Street, mid-block, sandstone. Santoro went in at half eight and came out at quarter to ten. Seventy-five minutes.” He paused. “I photographed the occupant board. Eighth floor, there’s a company called Pellucid Advisory. I don’t know if it means anything but.”

There was a quiet on the other end he recognised. Penelope thinking.

“Can you send me the photo,” she said.

“Already done.”

Another pause. The tram moved through the city, the rain still at it, everyone on the tram looking at their phones or out the window with the inward expression of people who had somewhere else to be.

“He came out with someone,” Ellis said. “Forties, good suit, tan that wasn’t local. They shook hands at the lift. It looked like it had gone well for both of them.”

“All right,” Penelope said. “Give me a little while with this.”

“Of course.” He paused. “I thought I’d bring it to you first. Before.” He stopped. “I just thought I’d bring it to you.”

There was a beat.

“Thank you, Ellis,” she said. Simply, without qualification, which was the version that landed.

He put his phone away. Outside Melbourne went about its business in the rain, thoroughly indifferent to all of it.

Penelope looked at the photograph for a long time before she opened her phone to Alan.

Pellucid Advisory Pty Ltd. Eighth floor, Collins Street building. Santoro in there seventy-five minutes this morning.

The reply came back in the time it took her to put the kettle on.

Pellucid Advisory is a Syntherion subsidiary. Registered in Victoria 2021. One director. The directorship traces back through two shelf companies to the same Cayman Islands structure as Nexvar Infrastructure.

She stood in the kitchen and read it twice.

That’s the connection, she typed.

That is the connection, Alan replied. Ellis did well.

She thought about that for a moment. About Ellis on a tram somewhere in the rain, having done the thing carefully and brought it to her first.

Yes, she typed. He did.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Bellshore Council forum was held in the civic centre on Harbord Street, a building that had been designed in the early nineties by someone who believed public architecture should communicate accessibility and had produced instead a low-slung brick structure that communicated nothing so much as a mild reluctance to be there at all. The public gallery held forty seats. By seven fifteen it held thirty-one people, which was unusual. Council forums did not typically draw thirty-one people. They drew the applicants, the objectors, the people who had come about the wrong item and would leave disappointed, and a small cohort of retirees who attended everything and had opinions about parking.

Tonight was different and everyone in the room knew it, though most of them would have struggled to say exactly why.

Penelope sat in the third row of the public gallery, on the aisle, coat folded on her lap. She had arrived at seven, which was early, and had chosen her seat with the care of someone who wanted a clear sightline to the council table without being in the front row. The front row was for people who wanted to be seen. She did not want to be seen.

The council table was arranged in a shallow horseshoe. Fiona sat at the far end, second from the left, with the particular stillness of someone who had been waiting fourteen months for this item to reach the agenda and was not going to do anything to disturb it now that it had. She had a folder in front of her and a glass of water she hadn't touched. She looked, Penelope thought, like a woman who had checked her work three times and was now simply waiting for the rest of the room to catch up.

Gareth Noonan sat in the centre of the horseshoe in the Deputy Mayor's position, which he occupied with the physical confidence of a man who had never questioned his right to be wherever he was. He was reviewing something on his tablet with the expression of a person performing diligence. Blake Santoro sat two seats to Noonan's left, in the navy suit, and was not reviewing anything. He was looking at the table.

Pete Verhagen had come in at seven twelve with what appeared to be clay under his fingernails and a reusable coffee cup he'd been asked twice to put away and hadn't. He was sitting forward in his chair with the eager attention of a man at a lecture he'd paid to attend. When the Nexvar agenda item had been circulated he had called Santoro and said that this was exactly the kind of thing that would set back the cause and Santoro had said mmm and yes and I hear you Pete and had not said what he actually thought, which was that Pete's version of the cause was not his version of the cause and had never been.

Leonard Papandreou had arrived at six fifty-five, which was earlier than anyone, and had been settled in his seat with his hands folded on the table since then. He was ninety years old and he had served on this

council or its predecessors for longer than some of the people in this room had been alive. He had seen things built and demolished and built again. He had attended the opening of the Eastern Freeway extension and the closing of the last tram depot and the renaming of a park after a man he had personally disliked. He had wanted a public pool named after him for thirty years and there was a scale model in his spare bedroom that his wife had twice suggested donating to the historical society and which he had twice declined to discuss. He was, at this moment, approximately two items away from sleep.

Margot Szabo was not at the council table. Margot Szabo was never at the council table. She was standing at the back of the room near the door that led to the executive corridor, with a council agenda folded in one hand and the expression of someone who had arrived to observe a controlled demolition and was recalculating whether it was in fact controlled. She had known about the notice of motion since Monday. She had not known about the two versions of the thermal discharge assessment until forty minutes ago, when Fiona had tabled her supporting documents. She was still processing this.

Cassandra Whitmore sat at the executive table to the left of the horseshoe, which was where the CEO sat at public forums. She was wearing the charcoal suit she wore for things that required projecting authority, and she had the focused expression she deployed when something was happening that she did not fully understand and needed to appear to be managing. Her comms advisor had sent her a briefing note that afternoon that described the notice of motion as procedural and low-risk. She was beginning to revise her opinion of the comms advisor.

Pete Verhagen had spoken to a Nexvar representative that morning who had been calm and reassuring and had used the phrase robust planning process twice and Pete had taken this as confirmation that everything was fine. Pete took most things as confirmation that everything was fine. It was, his wife had once observed, both his greatest quality and his central flaw.

In the public gallery, four rows behind Penelope and two seats in from the opposite aisle, sat a man she didn’t recognise. Mid-forties, open-collared shirt, the slightly distracted look of someone whose mind was usually somewhere more interesting than wherever they were. He had a notebook open on his knee and had been writing in it since he sat down. He was, though Penelope didn’t know this, the person who had flown in from Singapore three months ago for a meeting that wasn’t in anyone’s diary. He was here because his principals had sent him to observe and report, and because they had been assured the vote would not be a problem, and because he was the kind of person who liked to see things for himself.

Penelope did not know he was there. Alan would have found this moderately concerning and would have said so, but Alan was not here, and this was the chapter that belonged to other people.

Item six.

Fiona rose without ceremony and tabled the notice of motion. Her voice was even, unhurried, the voice of a woman who had rehearsed this not for performance but for precision. She spoke for four minutes. She described the discrepancy between the earlier thermal discharge assessment and the version submitted with the Nexvar application. She described the statutory obligation under the Planning and Environment Act. She described the EPA referral mechanism and what it required. She did not editorialize. She did not use the word falsified, though the word hung in the room anyway. She sat down.

There was a silence of the kind that follows something that cannot be unsaid.

Cassandra Whitmore leaned toward her governance advisor and said something quietly. The governance advisor looked at his notes and said something back. Cassandra's expression did not change but something behind it did.

"I think what Councillor Gallagher is raising," Gareth Noonan said, "is a matter that the executive team might best address through the standard compliance review process rather than through a notice of motion."

"The notice of motion calls for a referral to the EPA," Fiona said. "That's a decision for the council, not the executive."

Noonan looked at his tablet. He looked at Santoro.

Santoro was looking at the table.

Pete Verhagen raised his hand with the enthusiasm of someone who had been waiting to contribute. "I think it's worth noting," he said, "that the development represents a genuinely significant investment in digital infrastructure for this municipality, and that the long-term benefits to the community"

"The motion is procedural, Councillor," Fiona said, across him. "It calls for a referral on the grounds of a documented discrepancy. The merits of the development are not at issue."

Pete opened his mouth. Fiona looked at him pleasantly. He closed it again.

Leonard Papandreou had his eyes open. This was itself notable. He had been drifting somewhere comfortable since item four, a planning amendment that had required nobody's actual attention, and something in the timbre of the room had brought him back. He looked at Fiona. He looked at the window, beyond which the suburb extended toward the bay, dark and quiet.

He thought about the bay as it had been when he was a boy. The particular smell of it on a summer morning. His father swimming out past the pier at six in the morning and coming back thirty minutes later with

the look of a man who had been somewhere good. They had stopped swimming from that beach in the late seventies when the water quality signs had gone up, the yellow ones with the exclamation marks, and they had never really gone back. He thought about this more than he mentioned to people. He had a theory, which was that you didn't understand what you'd lost until the yellow signs went up, and by then it was too late to have been more careful.

He thought about the pool. The pool would be a reasonable compensation for all of this. Not the bay itself but something. He thought about his name on the side of it in letters large enough to read from the car park.

He looked at Fiona and gave her a small nod that meant: I'm with you, for reasons that are mine.

The vote was called at eight fourteen.

Penelope sat very still. She was watching Santoro.

He had not looked up from the table for the last twenty minutes except once, briefly, when Fiona had tabled the supporting documents and the earlier thermal discharge assessment had appeared on the screens at the front of the room. He had looked at it for perhaps four seconds. Penelope had watched his face in those four seconds and had seen something move across it that she could not name precisely. Not surprise. He had known about the discrepancy, or had known enough to have guessed. Something more like a reckoning.

He had a plan. He'd always had a plan. The plan ran from here through a state seat and a shadow ministry and a decade of careful positioning to somewhere he'd been able to see clearly since he was nineteen years old. The plan required Ferrante's support. The plan required not being the person who derailed a significant infrastructure development on procedural grounds at a public forum. The plan was, he was aware, looking at him from the other side of a decision he had not expected to have to make tonight or possibly ever.

He thought about the rocks south of the point. The particular hour before the city started. The way they moved in the water, unhurried, completely indifferent to the rest of it. He had not told anyone about the rocks. He was aware that this was, in the context of his life as he had constructed it, an anomaly he had never resolved. He had simply kept it separate. The rocks at six in the morning in one compartment, the plan in another, and between them a door he had never needed to open because nobody had ever asked him to choose.

He understood, with the cold clarity that had always been his most reliable quality, that the door was open now.

Ferrante would not forgive this. He had no illusions about that. The friendly calls would stop. The chance encounters would stop. The word in the right ear would stop, and in its place would be something else, something quieter and less friendly, because that was how Ferrante

operated and Santoro had always known it because he had always been watching how Ferrante operated in order to learn from it. The irony of this was not lost on him.

He thought about the water at the point. The way it caught the light at certain times of day. The fact that there was nobody he had ever told about this.

Blake Santoro voted yes. He said it clearly, in the voice he used for council business, without looking up from the table.

Gareth Noonan voted yes, with the expression of a man making a principled stand against the concentration of corporate power in local government, which was the story he had been telling himself for the last twenty minutes and which had settled into something he nearly believed. He sat back with the modest satisfaction of a person who has been on the right side of history.

Leonard Papandreou voted yes, and thought about his father in the water at six in the morning, and the yellow signs, and the pool, and was quietly certain that he was doing what the moment required.

Pete Verhagen voted yes. There was a pause before his vote that was long enough to be noticed. He had come into this room believing that what was being threatened was genuinely important, that the development represented something worth protecting, and he still believed that, and Fiona's documents were on the screen in front of him and the earlier assessment was on the screen in front of him and there was, he understood, no version of voting no that didn't mean defending something that couldn't be defended in public. He said yes in a voice that was slightly quieter than his usual voice and immediately began constructing the explanation he would give himself later, about procedural integrity and about how things that were meant to be found another path through. He believed this, or he would believe it by morning. His notebook was open on the table and he didn't write anything in it.

Fiona Gallagher voted yes and folded her hands on the table and looked at nothing in particular, because this was not the moment for any visible expression of anything and she had known for fourteen months that if the moment came she would need to be the still point in it.

The man from Singapore closed his notebook.

He sat for a moment in the public gallery while the room rearranged itself around the result, people gathering papers, the low hum of conversation starting up, the CEO leaning toward the governance advisor again with an expression that had moved beyond concern into something more operational. He took out his phone and looked at it without unlocking it and then put it away again.

He would make the call from outside. There was no version of the call that was pleasant and there was no point in delaying it, but he was going

to walk out of this building and stand in the night air for a moment first. He had been in rooms like this before. The peculiar finality of a procedural vote was something you didn't get used to. It looked like nothing and it was everything.

He stood and put his notebook in his inside pocket and walked out through the back of the gallery and nobody looked at him because nobody ever did.

Penelope stayed in her seat while the room emptied. She watched Fiona gather her folder with the careful movements of someone who had held herself very still for a long time and was now, incrementally, releasing. She watched Pete Verhagen have a brief conversation with Cassandra Whitmore that appeared to involve Pete reassuring her that this was not necessarily the end of the road, which was not what Cassandra's expression suggested she believed. She watched Gareth Noonan shake Leonard Papandreou's hand with the bonhomie of a man who had been on the right side and intended to remember it. She watched Santoro.

He had stood when the vote was called and he had remained standing after it. He spoke to no one. He gathered nothing from the table because he had brought nothing to the table. He walked out of the civic centre through the side door that led directly to the car park, and did not look at anyone on the way.

She sat for a moment longer in the emptying room. She should feel something, she thought. Something more than this. She had spent four months pulling on a thread that had begun with a four-second slide change at a residents' meeting and it had led here, to this room, to a procedural vote that had just made an infrastructure development economically unviable and removed a surveillance node from a suburb where people went to the farmers' market on Saturdays and argued about parking. Nobody was arrested. Nobody was exposed. Nobody would read about it tomorrow morning. The bureaucracy had done exactly what it was designed to do, once pointed correctly.

It felt, she thought, exactly the right size. Not large. Not triumphant. Just done.

She put her coat on and went outside and stood in the car park and texted Alan.

It passed.

His reply came back before she'd put her phone away.

I know. Well done.

She looked at the message for a moment. Then she put her phone in her pocket and walked to her car.

Blake Santoro drove to the foreshore.

He didn’t think about it as a decision. He was simply driving and then he was parked at the end of the esplanade with the engine off and the bay in front of him, dark and quiet, the lights of the opposite shore reflected in long broken lines across the water. He got out of the car.

The pier was empty. It was late and cold and there was a wind coming off the water that had some intention behind it. He walked to the end of the pier and stood there with his hands in his coat pockets and looked at the rocks south of the point.

There was nothing there. The water moved against them in the dark and there was nothing there. No movement, no small shapes on the rocks, no evidence that they existed at all. He stood and looked for a long time and the rocks were dark and the water was dark and the wind moved through everything and there was nothing.

He had known, some part of him had always known, that they didn’t know he came here. That was the point. You could care about something completely privately, in a compartment with the door closed, and the thing you cared about would never know and would go about its existence regardless, which was both the comfort of it and the problem with it.

He had opened the door tonight. He had made the choice and the thing he’d made the choice for was out there somewhere in the dark, unhurried and indifferent and completely unaware, and the plan was behind him now, irrevocably, and Ferrante’s calls would stop and everything he’d built would need to be rebuilt from somewhere else, and he was standing on a pier in the cold looking at rocks where nothing was visible and feeling, which was not something he did often or well.

He stood there for a long time.

Then he turned up his collar and walked back along the pier to the car, and the bay went on without him, and the rocks south of the point held whatever they held in the dark.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Cassandra Whitmore was at her desk at seven forty-three, which was earlier than her usual eight fifteen and later than she had intended. She had slept badly, which was not something she generally permitted herself, and had spent the drive in composing and discarding approaches to the morning with the focused anxiety of someone who understood that the next several hours required careful handling and was not yet sure what careful handling looked like.

Her PA was not in yet. The office was quiet in the way it was quiet before the building populated, a held-breath quality that Cassandra usually found useful for thinking and this morning found oppressive. She made her own coffee, which she also did not generally permit herself, and sat at her desk and opened her laptop and looked at her inbox and closed it again.

Her phone rang at eight oh four.

She looked at the screen for one ring, two rings, and then she answered it.

“Marco,” she said.

“Cassandra.” The warmth was not there. The warmth had always been a register Ferrante chose deliberately, which meant its absence was also deliberate, and she had always understood this about him and had found it useful to understand and was finding it significantly less useful now. “I watched the webcast last night.”

“I know. I wanted to call you last night.”

Ferrante let that sit for a moment. “I’m not calling for an explanation,” he said. “I’m calling because I want to be clear about something.”

She said nothing, which was the right answer.

“The work I’ve done for this council,” he said, “the relationships I’ve built, the conversations I’ve had with people who did not need to be helpful and chose to be helpful anyway. That has a value. You understand what I’m saying.”

“Yes.”

“And the arrangement we have operates on the basis of a certain standard of management. Of the kind of situation that does not end up on a webcast.” A pause. “I want to know that we understand each other.”

“We understand each other,” Cassandra said.

“Good.” Another pause, brief and precise. “I’ll be releasing a statement this morning. My office will handle the framing. I’d suggest your communications team coordinates Bellshore’s views accordingly rather than freelancing.”

“Of course.”

“Cassandra.” The warmth came back, briefly, in a way that was worse than its absence. “You’re very well remunerated. I’ve always thought so. I hope we can continue to feel that’s justified.”

The call ended.

She sat for a moment with the phone on the desk in front of her. Outside the window the suburb was doing what it did in the morning, orderly and indifferent. She thought about the briefing note her comms advisor had sent yesterday afternoon. Procedural and low-risk. She was going to have a conversation with that advisor. Not today, but soon.

She picked up her phone and called Margot.

Margot answered on the second ring, which meant she was already in the building.

“Are you in?” Cassandra said.

“Third floor breakout,” Margot said. “Give me two minutes.”

Margot had been in the building since seven fifteen. She had not been at her desk. Her desk was where she received things; the breakout rooms were where she thought about them, which required different furniture and no sightlines from the corridor.

She had watched the webcast the previous evening from her kitchen, standing up, which was how she watched things she might need to respond to quickly. She had watched Fiona table the notice of motion with the even precision of someone who had been waiting fourteen months for this moment. She had watched the vote. She had noted, without surprise, how each person voted and why, because she had been watching these people for long enough to know how they voted before they knew themselves.

She had then stood in her kitchen for a further ten minutes thinking about what happened next, which was the more important question.

The thing about the thermal discharge assessment: Margot had known since March that there was something irregular about the process. Not the specifics, not the two versions, but something in the texture of how the approval had moved through the compliance pathway, a smoothness that was not the natural smoothness of a straightforward application. She had raised it with Cassandra in a conversation she had been careful to have in person and careful not to follow up in writing, and Cassandra had said that the planning team had signed off and the legal advice was sound and that Margot should perhaps not go looking for problems that didn’t exist.

Margot had noted this. She had not sent an email about it.

She was thinking about this when Cassandra’s call came in.

They sat in the breakout room with the door closed and coffees neither of them was drinking. Cassandra relayed the call in the flat tone of someone reporting damage.

Margot listened without interrupting, which was not her natural mode but which she had learned was the right one for conversations where the other person needed to hear themselves say the thing before they could move past it.

When Cassandra finished Margot said: “The EPA referral runs its course. We can’t touch that. What we can manage is the narrative around what the council is doing in its place.”

Cassandra looked at her. “In its place.”

“The development was sold as economic benefit. Jobs. Digital infrastructure. The future arriving in Bellshore.” Margot turned her coffee cup without picking it up. “If the development stalls, there’s a hole in the delivery story. Other people will use that hole as a political tool if we give them the chance.”

“So we fill it,” Cassandra said.

“We fill it with something that has genuine community support and that the council can announce cleanly.” Margot let the silence sit for a moment in the way she let silences sit when she wanted someone to arrive at the answer themselves.

Cassandra looked at the table. Then she looked up. “Len’s pool.”

“It has community support,” Margot said, as though this were a neutral observation. “The design has been refined over thirty years. It’s genuinely shovel-ready in a way that most projects aren’t. And it gives the council something to announce that is entirely separate from the current compliance matter.”

“Len has been asking for that pool since before I was born.”

“Which means the community goodwill for it is essentially pre-banked.” Margot picked up her coffee. “I’d suggest a conversation with Len this week. Let him think it was his idea. It probably was, in the first place.”

Cassandra looked at her for a moment. There were things she wanted to say and had learned not to say, not in breakout rooms, not to Margot, not about anything that might eventually be the subject of a freedom of information request from a journalist or a councillor or a person in the public gallery who had been paying more attention than anyone had realised.

“All right,” she said.

Margot nodded once, the way she nodded when a thing was settled. She put her coffee down and picked up her phone, which was where Margot’s record of everything lived, in calls rather than emails, in conversations rather than documents, in a format that the FOI regime could not reach.

The statement from Ferrante’s office went out at ten thirty-seven, released quietly to two outlets the office used when it wanted something run without fronting a camera. It was nine paragraphs. The word Syntherion did not appear. The words Nexvar and EPA did not appear. What appeared, in the measured language of a federal member who had always prioritised the interests of hardworking families in Bayside East over ideological agendas, was a considered expression of disappointment.

The statement expressed disappointment that a significant digital infrastructure investment, one that would have brought jobs and economic benefit to the community, had been made unviable through the weaponisation of environmental bureaucracy by activist interests. It noted that Australia’s capacity to compete in the global digital economy was being systematically undermined by green tape that served no one except those who had made obstruction their profession. It called for a national conversation about the balance between environmental process and economic reality. It expressed continued commitment to fighting for the community’s interests.

It was picked up by one outlet that afternoon and three the following morning.

By the end of the week it had been quoted in a submission to a Senate estimates hearing by an industry group that had not previously shown interest in local planning matters and whose funding sources were, if anyone had cared to look, traceable through several intermediary entities to a Cayman Islands registered holding company incorporated in 2019.

Nobody looked.

In Singapore, in an office on the thirty-fourth floor of a building in the financial district, a man reviewed a document on his screen with the focused attention of someone recalculating. The document was a site assessment for a location three hundred kilometres from Bellshore. Different council. Different state. Different compliance pathway. The thermal discharge assessment for this site had been prepared by a different firm.

He made a note. He sent two emails. He closed the document.

The wheels, which had briefly slowed, began to turn again.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Penelope noticed the quiet first.

Not quiet exactly. The house had its own sounds in the morning, Freya getting ready, Lance in the shower, the particular acoustic of a school day assembling itself. But underneath all of that, for as long as Penelope could remember, there had been something else. A low background presence from next door, a warmth in the shared wall if you stood close enough to it, the faint suggestion of systems running that she had long since stopped registering the way you stopped registering the hum of a refrigerator or the sound of distant traffic.

It wasn't there.

Penelope was standing at the kitchen bench with her tea, not quite awake, and she put her hand flat against the wall and felt nothing. Just plaster and the cold morning coming through it.

She stood there for a moment. Then Freya appeared in the doorway in her school uniform with one sock on and the other in her hand, and Penelope took her hand off the wall and said nothing and went back to making breakfast.

The school gate had its own social weather, which Penelope had learned to read without particularly wanting to. Jemima had been part of that weather for eighteen months. Not central to it, not the kind of presence that organised others around herself, but consistent. The particular performance of Jemima at drop-off, the right coat, the right level of warmth toward the right people, the way she managed the transition from car to gate with the smoothness of someone who had thought about it. Penelope had watched her do it dozens of times and had understood, from very early on, that it was a performance. She had not known, for most of that time, what it was a performance for.

This morning Jemima was not there.

Penelope stood at the gate and watched Freya go in with the particular nine-year-old walk that meant she had already forgotten her mother existed, and looked at the space where Jemima usually stood and felt something she couldn't immediately name. Not relief. Something more like the specific disorientation of a thing you've been braced against no longer being there.

Penelope drove home. She made more tea. She sat at the kitchen bench and looked at her phone and didn't open it.

At ten forty-three a van pulled up outside. Two men in branded polo shirts unloaded a letting agent's board from the back, the full apparatus of post and frame and sign, and spent the next twenty minutes sinking it into the neighbours' front garden with the brisk efficiency of people for whom this was unremarkable work. Penelope watched from the front

window. The lettering was large and cheerful and spoke of a lifestyle opportunity in a sought-after bayside suburb. When they were done the men loaded their equipment back into the van and drove away and the sign stood there in the thin winter light looking like it had always been there.

Penelope looked at it for a while. Then she went to the back of the house and stood at the fence.

The driveway next door was empty, both bays. The extension at the back of the house was dark, no lights visible, the faint heat gone from the air near the shared wall. The house had the specific stillness of a place that had been vacated rather than simply left for the day. Everything in order. Nothing remaining.

Penelope put her hand on the top of the fence.

The wood was cold.

She collected Freya at three fifteen. Freya got in the car with her bag and her reader and the particular end-of-day energy of a child who has used everything up and is running on procedural autopilot.

“How was school,” Penelope said.

“Fine.” Freya put her seatbelt on. “Jocasta wasn’t there.”

“No.”

“She’s probably not coming back.”

“Probably not.”

Freya looked out the window. She didn’t say anything else about it. She had the expression of someone filing something away in the correct drawer and closing it, not with satisfaction exactly, more with the quiet finality of a thing that was simply done now. Penelope recognised the expression. She had seen it before, on a face she saw every morning in the bathroom mirror.

They drove home through the suburb in the late afternoon light.

That evening after dinner, after Freya was in bed and Lance was doing the thing he did with his phone on the couch that wasn’t really watching television, Penelope went out into the back garden.

It was cold. A proper winter cold, the kind that came off the bay in the evenings and reminded you that Melbourne’s mild reputation was a marketing position rather than a meteorological fact. Penelope stood on the back step for a moment with her arms folded and then walked down to the fence.

She put her hand against it.

Cold. Just cold. Timber and a cold evening and on the other side a house that was empty and dark and had a sign out the front advertising a

lifestyle opportunity in a sought-after bayside suburb. The infrastructure was gone. The server room behind the door with no handle was dark and cooling and would by now contain nothing that anyone could use. Charles and Jemima were somewhere that wasn't here, doing whatever Charles and Jemima did when they moved on to the next thing, which was not Penelope's problem.

Penelope thought about Jocasta. She thought about a nine-year-old girl who had been precise and watchful and had used words as instruments and had been, in some sense that Penelope couldn't fully resolve, also a child whose parents had used her as operational cover without her knowing what that meant. She thought about the punch, and Freya sitting alone outside Mrs Antoniadis's office, and something in Jocasta's face in that moment that might have been reassessment.

She hoped the next school was better. She thought it probably wouldn't be.

Penelope took her hand off the fence and went inside.

Lance looked up from his phone. "Cold?"

"Yes."

She poured a glass of wine and sat at the other end of the couch and didn't turn the television on and didn't pick up her phone. Lance put his down. They sat in the room together in the particular comfortable silence of two people who had been through something and were now on the other side of it and didn't need to say so.

Her phone was on the bench in the kitchen. It didn't light up.

Penelope didn't go and check it.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The removal van arrived next door at half past eight, which Penelope heard before she saw it, the particular sound of a large vehicle reversing into a residential street with the help of someone standing behind it saying left, left, your other left. She looked out the kitchen window while the kettle boiled. Four men in overalls, a van with a ramp, the front door of the neighbours' house standing open for the first time since she could remember. The work of packing and carrying would take most of the day. She watched for a moment and then made her tea and didn't watch any more.

She had arranged to meet Ellis at the foreshore at ten.

He was there before her, which she hadn't expected, sitting on the low wall at the top of the path with a coffee and the particular quality of stillness that she had come to understand was Ellis paying attention to his surroundings rather than Ellis being relaxed. He was wearing the Zegna, which seemed like a lot of coat for a foreshore walk, and then she remembered that Ellis dressed for the version of himself he wanted to be rather than the occasion, which was also a kind of honesty.

"You're early," she said.

"I'm always early," Ellis said. "I just usually find somewhere to wait that isn't visible."

They walked down to the foreshore path and turned south, toward the point. It was a cold morning, clear, the bay doing what the bay did in winter, grey-green and serious and occasionally beautiful. A few other people were out, the ones who walked regardless of weather, and they passed without eye contact in the way of people who have staked a claim on the morning and are not interested in sharing it.

"Alan tells me you're going away," Penelope said.

"Azerbaijan," Ellis said, with the careful neutrality of someone trying not to sound as pleased about this as he was.

"Azerbaijan."

"There's a situation developing. Something he's been watching. He thought I might be useful." A pause. "Via Bangkok, as it happens. A week or so."

Penelope looked at the water. "Of course via Bangkok."

"He suggested it. I didn't ask for the stopover." He paused again, longer this time. "I may have mentioned once that I'd always wanted to go."

They walked for a while without speaking. The path curved south toward the rocks and Penelope could see the pier ahead, extending out over the water, and beyond it the darker shapes of the rocks at the point.

“Before you go,” Penelope said.

“Yes.”

“I want to say something and I want you to let me finish it.”

Ellis said nothing, which was the right answer.

“What happened twelve years ago,” she said. “The leaving. I’ve been carrying a version of it that wasn’t quite right. I think I made it about me for a long time, about being left, and it wasn’t about me at all. You were trying to survive something.” She paused. “I understand that now in a way I didn’t before. And I’m sorry it took me this long.”

Ellis was quiet for a moment. They reached the pier and walked out along it, their footsteps on the boards, the water below them dark and moving.

“I’ve been wanting to apologise to you for twelve years,” he said eventually. “I’ve rehearsed it quite a lot. Versions of it in hotel rooms and on planes and once, memorably, on a surveillance operation in Tbilisi where I had rather too much time to think.”

“Your rental,” Penelope said.

“My rental, yes.” He almost smiled. “I kept arriving at the same problem, which was that the apology I owed you required me to explain something I couldn’t explain at the time because I hadn’t explained it to myself yet.” He looked out at the water. “I was not kind. The way I left was not kind. And you deserved better than that from someone who cared about you.”

Penelope looked at the rocks south of the point. The water moved against them in the morning light. And then, because the morning was cold and clear and the timing was what it was, one of them appeared. Small, purposeful, utterly indifferent to the two people standing on the pier watching it make its way across the rock with the unhurried competence of a creature entirely at home in itself.

Then another.

Ellis watched them for a moment. “Are those” he started.

“Fairy Penguins,” Penelope said.

He looked at them for a long time without speaking. She let him.

“I forgive you,” she said. “I forgave you a while ago, actually. I just hadn’t said it.”

Ellis looked at the penguins. “Thank you,” he said. Simply, without performance, which was the version that cost something to say and therefore meant something.

“You should forgive yourself,” Penelope said. “It was a long time ago. You were twenty-six and you were frightened and you did the wrong thing. That’s allowed to be the whole story.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Alan said something similar.”

“Alan is very wise for something that started as a spreadsheet.”

Ellis made a sound that was not quite a laugh. They stood on the pier for a while longer, watching the rocks, the penguins going about their business with complete indifference to everything that had been decided on their behalf.

“You’ve built something good,” Ellis said eventually. “With Lance. With Freya. What you have there is real.” He paused. “I’m genuinely glad for you. That’s not nothing, coming from me.”

“I know,” Penelope said. “It’s not nothing.”

He left at midday, from the rental, with a bag that seemed insufficient for Azerbaijan via Bangkok but was probably, for Ellis, entirely appropriate. Penelope drove him. They didn’t talk much in the car. At the drop-off he took his bag from the boot and then turned around and looked at her for a moment.

“Whatever Alan has you doing next,” he said. “You’re very good at it. I thought you should know.”

Penelope looked at him. “It’s not really a career.”

“Everything is a career,” Ellis said, “if you do it well enough.” He picked up his bag. “Tell Freya I said good luck with Jocasta.”

“Jocasta’s gone.”

He nodded, as though this was information he had already processed. “Tell Freya I said good luck anyway.”

He walked into the terminal and Penelope watched him go and then drove home through the city.

The removal van was still there when she got back, two of the men carrying flat-packed boxes back into the house to start on the upper floor, the other two ferrying furniture down the ramp with the careful economy of people who had learned that backs were not renewable. Penelope made lunch and ate it at the kitchen bench looking out at the garden and not at the fence, and thought about Ellis on a plane somewhere over the Indian Ocean heading toward Bangkok, and about twelve years, and about the particular lightness of a thing finally said.

Freya came home from school with a project brief and the focused energy of someone who had already decided what she wanted to do and needed permission rather than ideas.

She put the sheet on the kitchen bench in front of Penelope with the directness of a nine-year-old who had learned that preamble delayed outcomes.

“It’s a digital systems project,” she said. “We have to design something useful. I want to make an app.”

Penelope read the brief. “What kind of app.”

“A family diary thing. So we can all see what’s happening. Like if Dad has a work thing or you’ve got something on, so we don’t get our wires crossed.” She paused. “But just for us. Not connected to anything outside. I don’t want other people being able to see our stuff.”

Penelope put the brief down.

She looked at Freya for a moment. Freya looked back at her with the expression of someone waiting for the practical conversation to begin, unaware that her mother had just heard something that required a moment to absorb.

“That’s a good idea,” Penelope said carefully.

“I thought you might be able to help. Because of the computer stuff.”

“Yes,” Penelope said. “I can help with that.”

Freya picked up the brief and took it to the table with the purposeful air of someone ready to begin, and Penelope stayed at the bench for a moment with her hand around her mug and thought about her father in 1997, and a problem he had decided to solve, and the particular instinct to build something useful and keep it for the right people, and how that instinct apparently skipped a generation and landed, intact, in a nine-year-old with a school project and very clear views about privacy.

She picked up her mug and went to sit with her daughter.

After dinner, after Freya was in bed and the house had settled into its evening sounds, Penelope and Lance sat at the kitchen bench with what remained of the evening and the particular quality of a conversation that hadn’t started yet but was waiting.

“The van finished next door,” Lance said.

“I saw.”

“Strange, that.” He turned his glass of water. “Eighteen months and then just gone.”

“Yes.”

A pause. Outside the street was quiet. The house next door was dark.

“I’ve been thinking,” Penelope said, “about what Sandra asked me. What I want my life to look like.”

Lance looked at her.

“Not that anything is wrong,” she said. “I want to be clear about that. This isn’t that kind of conversation.”

“All right.”

“The last few months,” she said slowly. “I’ve been more myself than I’ve been in years. I know that sounds strange given what’s been happening. But something about it, the thinking and the finding things out and the

putting things together.” She stopped. “I felt useful. I felt like my brain was doing what it’s supposed to do. And now it’s over and I’m trying to work out what that means.”

Lance was quiet for a moment. “What does it mean.”

“I don’t know exactly. I know I can’t go back to how it was before. Not because before was bad. Just because I know something now that I didn’t know then.”

He nodded slowly. Not agreeing exactly. Receiving.

“I keep thinking about my dad,” she said. “He had something that needed doing and he built the tools to do it. He didn’t wait for someone to give him permission.” She looked at her hands. “I don’t know what my version of that is yet. But I think I need to find out.”

Lance was quiet for a moment. Then: “Well. Maybe you should ask Alan.”

Penelope looked at him.

“I mean it,” he said. “Not as a joke. He knew your dad. He’s been watching you for years. If anyone knows what your version of it looks like, it’s probably him.” He paused. “Seems like a reasonable question to ask.”

Penelope thought about this. It was, she realised, an entirely reasonable question to ask, and the fact that she hadn’t asked it said something about the way she had been thinking about Alan, as a collaborator in a specific thing rather than as someone who held the longer view of her.

“He’s mentioned something,” she said. “A possibility. He’s been characteristically vague about it.” She paused. “He said there were some things he couldn’t do himself.”

Lance looked at his glass for a moment. “That sounds like him.”

“You haven’t met him.”

“No,” Lance said. “But I’m starting to get a sense.”

They sat for a while longer. The house next door was dark and would stay dark and in a few weeks someone else would move in and put their own things in the rooms and the extension would become a studio or a home office or a second living room and none of them would know what it had been.

“Whatever it is,” Lance said. “I’m in. If you need me to be.”

Penelope looked at him. He meant it in the way he meant things when he had thought about them, which was quietly and completely.

“Thank you,” she said.

It was the kind of thank you that had more in it than the words. He heard what was in it. She knew he did.

They sat a while longer and then went to bed and the street outside was quiet and the house next door was dark, and in the kitchen Penelope’s phone sat on the bench and after a while it lit up briefly, just once, and then went dark again.

She was already asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Sandra came to the waiting room door at five past the hour, which was her custom.

“Penelope. Come on in.”

The grey cardigan was draped over the back of her chair. Through the winter it had been a fixture of these appointments, part of the texture of the room, and its absence had a quality Penelope noted without yet knowing what to do with. Sandra herself was in something lighter, a blouse the colour of good weather, and she moved with the ease of someone for whom the change of season was a small private satisfaction.

The room was the same as it always was. Two chairs at a slight angle to each other, a low table between them, the lamp rather than overhead light, the window onto the small courtyard where the thing on the trellis was still and unchanged but the light coming through had shifted, an early suggestion of something loosening. Penelope sat down and Sandra sat across from her and for a moment neither of them said anything, which had stopped being uncomfortable somewhere around the third session.

The tissue box was not on the table.

Penelope looked at the bare corner for a moment. Then at Sandra, who was watching her with the warmth she always brought to the beginning of a session, the particular quality of attention that had taken some getting used to, being looked at that carefully without it feeling like judgement.

“How have you been,” Sandra said.

“Better, I think. Something has resolved itself.”

“I can see that.” Sandra settled back slightly. “You look different from when I last saw you. There’s less of that quality you had.”

“What quality.”

“Like someone waiting for something to land.” She looked at Penelope with gentle curiosity. “Has it landed.”

“I think so. Yes.”

Sandra nodded. She had the patience of someone who understood that the right pace for a thing was the pace the thing required. “Last time we spoke,” she said, “I asked you a question. About what you wanted your life to look like, not the maintained version, the chosen one.” She let it sit for a moment. “Have you been sitting with that.”

“Yes,” Penelope said. “I have.” She looked at her hands for a moment. “I think I’m closer to an answer than I was.”

“Tell me where you’ve got to.”

Penelope considered. “I think I’ve learned something about myself in the last few months. About what I’m capable of and what I need.” She paused. “I’ve been doing something that was difficult and absorbing and required all of me. And I’ve been more myself doing it than I’ve been in years. That’s not nothing to know.”

Sandra listened in the way she always listened, without the small affirmative sounds. When Penelope finished she was quiet for a moment. “No,” she said. “It’s not nothing. It’s rather significant, actually.” A pause. “What kind of thing was it.”

“Complicated to explain.”

“You don’t have to explain it. I’m more interested in what it felt like.”

Penelope thought about this. “Like my brain was doing what it’s supposed to do. Like I’d been using five percent of something and suddenly the rest was available.” She paused. “And now it’s quiet again and I’m trying to work out what to do with that knowledge.”

Sandra looked at her with an expression that was thoughtful in a particular way, a way Penelope had learned to recognise as Sandra arriving at something she had been moving toward carefully. “Can I share something with you,” she said. “An observation. Not a prescription, just something I find myself wanting to say.”

“Of course.”

“I’ve been watching you across these sessions,” Sandra said, “and there’s something I find interesting about you. Not just in the last few months, though the last few months have made it more visible.” She looked at Penelope directly. “You hold things well. Difficult things. Incomplete things, things that haven’t resolved yet and might not for a while. Most people find that very hard. They want to get to the answer, to close the loop. You seem to be able to sit with the open loop and keep functioning.” She paused. “More than functioning. You think clearly in the middle of it. You notice things. You trust what you notice.”

Penelope was quiet.

“I’m saying this,” Sandra said, “because I think you should know that about yourself. And because I find myself curious about where it goes. What you do with what you’ve discovered.” She tilted her head slightly. “You mentioned your husband. Has he been helpful in thinking this through.”

“He suggested I should ask someone who’d been paying attention.” Penelope paused. “He meant someone specific. But I think it applies broadly.”

Something moved in Sandra’s expression, something that might have been the particular satisfaction of a thread connecting. She was quiet for

a moment, in the way she was quiet when she was deciding how to step through a door.

“There’s something I’d like to tell you,” Sandra said. “And I want to say first that this is outside the usual frame of what we do in here, so tell me if it doesn’t feel right and we’ll set it aside.” She looked at Penelope with the steady warmth that had characterised every session. “Part of what I do, alongside the therapeutic work, involves a different kind of conversation. With a small number of people, over the years, who have a particular quality that I’ve found myself noticing. People who are present in the world in a way that most people aren’t. Who do certain kinds of work very well, work that doesn’t have a name exactly.” She paused. “You might call it something like risk management.”

The lamp was on. The light in the courtyard had the quality of a morning deciding what kind of day it intended to be. The thing on the trellis was still and patient.

“I want to be clear about something,” Sandra said. “This isn’t a recruitment. I’m not here to sign you up for anything. I’m sitting here with someone I’ve come to know well, who I think has found something out about herself that matters, and I’m asking a simple question.” She looked at Penelope steadily. “There are some things that require a person in the world. Present, perceptive, capable of exactly what I’ve been describing. Things that other tools can’t manage.” A pause. “If you wanted to know what that might look like, for you, specifically, I could point you toward that conversation.”

Penelope looked at her.

“Would you like to know what comes next,” Sandra said.

Penelope thought about her father in 1997 with a problem he had decided was worth solving. She thought about Freya at the kitchen table with very clear views about who should have access to what. She thought about Lance with his glass of wine saying well, maybe you should ask Alan, slightly surprised at himself. She thought about a phone lighting up once in the dark while she slept.

She thought about the tissue box, put away with the winter things.

“Yes,” Penelope said.

Sandra smiled. It was the smile of someone who had thought so, and was glad, and was not going to make a performance of either.

“Good,” she said. “Let’s start there.”