THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE COMPLETE WITNESS

Book II of the Legibility Cycle

A crime novel about corroboration, and the people who learn that a person who cannot be doubted is a weapon somebody else gets to hold.

CONTINUITY ERA

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CHAPTER ONE

A Man Who Was There

The site manager had been talking about a log for nine minutes and had reached the part where it was somebody else's fault.

"Roel was off," he said. "That's the whole of it. Roel was off with his back, and the system stamps the entry and not the work, which is a flaw in the system and not in us, and now it looks like we isolated two days late, and we didn't."

Wim let him go. It was not a technique so much as a habit he had stopped examining. If you said nothing, a man explaining a log would explain more of it than he meant to, and you would not have to ask a single question you might later have to stand behind.

The station was on the canal at Zelzate, forty years old, half stripped, with the smell every pumping station had, wet concrete and something warm. Cornelis had a folder he had brought to show and had not opened. He was about fifty and had a cold and had been apologising for it since the gate, and had twice put out a hand and withdrawn it.

"It's a paperwork thing," Cornelis said.

"All right."

"It's genuinely a paperwork thing."

"All right," Wim said again, and watched him wait for the rest, because there was usually a rest. Inspectors said *all right* and then produced something.

"I was here on the fifteenth. Quarterly walk. I was on this floor between ten and half past. The valve chest was open and there were two men in it, and one of them was your Roel, because he asked me whether the 55 still ran on a Sunday."

Cornelis looked at him.

"So it was isolated on the fifteenth," Wim said. "I'm not writing you up for an entry stamp."

What happened then was a thing Wim had watched happen perhaps two hundred times and had never tired of. The man's whole frame came down half

an inch. He put the folder under his arm. He laughed, and the laugh turned into a cough, and he apologised for the cough.

"Sorry. Sorry. We've had a month of it. The actuators are three weeks late, the client's going mental, I've had two lads off." He blew his nose with the freedom of a man who has just decided he likes somebody. "I thought this was going to be the thing that finished it. You're sure, though. About the fifteenth."

"I was there."

"No, I know, only — " He stopped. "Sorry. Of course. You're the — "

"The what?"

"Nothing."

"Go on."

"They call you the clean one," Cornelis said. "Round the depots. Not nastily. It's meant well."

Wim made a small movement with one shoulder intended to look like modesty. He had been making it since he was nineteen. He made it now and enjoyed making it, and if anyone had asked whether he enjoyed it he would have said no and would have believed himself.

They walked out through the plant room. Cornelis talked about the actuators and a supplier in Kortrijk who had stopped answering the phone, and Wim gave him a third of his attention and the rest to the building, because that was the job. The damp patch under the north window had been there in March and was bigger. The extraction fan was running at a pitch that meant a bearing on its way out. The fire door on the east side was propped with a bucket of water.

He mentioned the fire door. Cornelis unpropped it at once, cheerfully.

He did not mention the bearing.

He thought about it on the way to the gate and told himself, accurately, that a bearing was not a municipal water matter, that it belonged to the contractor's own maintenance regime, that it would be picked up at their next service. All of that was true. It was also true that he had just given Cornelis something, that Cornelis was grateful, and that a man is reluctant to hand over a gift and an invoice in the same minute. He did not examine that part. It took him four seconds to decide and it never came back to him.

At the gate he put his hand on the reader and it thought about him for less than a second.

Attendance closed. Adriaans, W. Site 4471. 09:12–11:38. Attested.

He sat in the car without starting it, which was a thing his father had done and which he had inherited without noticing. Through the windscreen a barge went up the canal at the speed barges went, washing strung across the stern, an entire life passing a pumping station at four kilometres an hour. His shoulder hurt. It had hurt since a badminton evening in September that he had told Hanne was fine.

Eleven years of quarterly walks and not one site had ever disputed an hour of his. Not a minute. It was the only genuinely unusual thing about him. He had done nothing to earn it beyond not losing it, and he had built a working life on it anyway, and on the whole that seemed to him like sense rather than luck.

Two more sites before four. He did them both. At the second a woman in a hi-vis coat looked up and said, "Oh, it's you," in a voice that meant her afternoon had just got shorter, and he made the shoulder movement again, and drove home with the radio on.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Point One

The bank put him with a person, which the bank did not do for everybody, and the person had the file open before he had his coat off.

Her name was Fien. She had an office on the second floor with a window onto a corner of the Korenmarkt, a rubber plant doing better than office plants generally did, and a photograph of two teenagers on a beach in weather that had clearly been bad.

"Two-point-one," she said. "Fixed, twenty-two years. I can do two-point-oh-five if you take the household cover, and I'm not going to recommend it, because the cover's worse than the five points."

"Then two-point-one."

"Two-point-one." She turned the screen a few degrees so he could see it, an old courtesy the bank's training had been trying to breed out for a decade. "You want to know the comparison. Everybody wants to know it and nobody asks."

"Go on."

"Same income, same deposit, same street, ordinary chain, no gaps: two-point-nine. With a bracketed discontinuity anywhere in the last ten years, three-two, and that's if it's bracketed properly. I had a woman in here last month, teacher, twenty-two years at the same school, four-one, because her provider went under in '29 and took nine weeks of her with it." Fien said this in the flat register of a woman quoting figures she quoted daily. "It isn't a reward, by the way. People hear it as a reward. It's that the model can price you exactly and it can't price her, and the whole margin lives in the gap between exactly and approximately."

"That's forty thousand."

"Forty-three, across the term, on this size." She was already turning the screen back. "Congratulations. It's a nice street. My sister-in-law's at the other end of it and the bins are a disaster, I'd get on top of that early."

It took four minutes. There was no certified copy, no second document, no wait while somebody rang somebody. Fien's screen asked his chain a question and his chain answered it, and that was the whole ceremony. He was out on the square by twenty past with his hands in his pockets, feeling the specific lightness of a man for whom a large thing has just been easy.

He rang Hanne.

"Two-point-one."

"That's better than Steven."

"Steven got two-eight."

"You've been waiting three weeks to say that."

"I have," he admitted, and she laughed, and then there was a pause of the kind their calls had started to have.

"Is it in both names?" Hanne said.

"It's a joint mortgage. Of course it's in both names."

"I know it's in both names. I mean is the rate in both names."

A tram went past behind him.

"It's priced on the primary chain," he said. "That's just how they do it. It doesn't mean anything."

"No," Hanne said. "I know." And then, lightly, because she was good at putting a thing down once she had picked it up, "Get bread on the way back. The good one. Not the one you like."

He got the bread. He thought about it in the queue, and what he thought was that he had done nothing wrong, which was true; and that Hanne had an entirely ordinary chain with one late re-attestation in it from a year when she had changed jobs twice, which was also true; and that the bank had looked at the two of them and priced the house off him; and that there was no way of saying so out loud that did not sound like what it was.

He had got three jobs he had not been the strongest candidate for. He knew that because in two cases the strongest candidate had told him, once bitterly and once not. He had rented a flat at twenty-three without a deposit or a guarantor. When Noor came early and there was a form at two in the morning, a nurse had needed a relative's consent and had got his in eleven seconds, and he had heard, from further down that corridor, another family still on the phone to a registry at ten past two.

None of it was cheating. That was the sentence he would have used if anyone had ever put it to him, and nobody ever had, because it was not the kind of thing people put to a man's face. His parents had enrolled him at six. He had never let an attestation lapse. The world had noticed, and the world was entitled to notice. It was not an advantage he had taken. It was one he had been.

CHAPTER THREE

Sunday

Their mother's flat had gone in 2031 and the Sunday lunch had survived her by fourteen years, which surprised them both. It happened now at Marieke's, in a terraced house in Ledeberg with a yard the size of a table.

Marieke cooked things that took all morning and then apologised for them. Bram did the washing up while other people were still eating, which Wim had decided nine years ago not to mention and mentioned, on average, twice a year. Their aunt Lucie came when she came and had views about the neighbour's dog. Noor was six and ate four foods; she had recently added a fifth and then dropped it, and the fifth had been rice.

"There's a thing at the Carrefour," Marieke said, over the second dish. "Team leader. Twelve hundred more a year and it's days. Proper days. No half-five."

"That's brilliant," Hanne said.

"It's not anything yet." Marieke was serving, not looking up. "They want a bond for the till float. The standard one, it's not big. I've asked Bram's brother."

The pause was very small. Noor filled it by announcing that she did not like the sauce, which was tomato, and had been on the list of four since February.

"You could have asked me," Wim said.

"I know I could."

"It's a signature. It's two minutes."

"I know what it is." Marieke put the dish down. "Bram's brother said yes. It's done. Eat that, it took an hour and it's the last of the good ones from the market."

Lucie said the dog had been out again on Thursday and that this time she had said something. Bram, from the sink, said that if she said something every time she said something, the dog would have learned by now. Noor asked for

bread instead. Hanne said she could have bread instead. The lunch went on over the top of it, the way lunches do.

In the yard afterwards, with the plates gone and Bram audibly rinsing, Wim said, "It really is nothing. The bond."

"Yes," Marieke said. "That's why."

She had a cigarette going. She had been giving up for nine years and had it down to four a day, which she called a success and which he called, twice a year, not a success.

"That isn't — " He heard himself starting and could not stop. "All I mean is it sits there. The thing I've got. It does nothing most of the time. It could have done that for you in two minutes and cost me nothing, and I don't follow why that's worse than Bram's brother, who actually has to think about it."

She smoked about a third of it before answering.

"Because it costs you nothing now," she said. "And then for the next fifteen years, every time I'm in a room with you, there's a thing you did for me that was easy, and I'm the one who needed it. I'd rather owe Bram's brother forty euros of trouble than owe you two minutes of never being able to fail."

"That's a complicated way of turning down help."

"It's a simple way. You've never had to do the arithmetic, so it looks complicated from where you're standing."

"I do the arithmetic." He heard, too late, that he had said it in the reasonable voice, the one that worked on site managers. "I only think that if somebody keeps a thing in order for thirty years and somebody else doesn't, then when the first one offers — "

"Don't," Marieke said. Not sharply. She put the cigarette out against the wall and the stub in her pocket, because of Noor. "You're allowed to think it. Everybody thinks it. Don't say it in my yard on a Sunday."

"I wasn't going to say it."

"You were four words in."

Bram came out with a tea towel over his shoulder and asked whether anybody wanted coffee. The subject went where subjects go. Twenty minutes later Marieke was showing Noor how to get a snail off a wall without hurting it, holding the shell and talking to the child in a low steady voice about not pulling, and the two of them were entirely happy, and Wim watched from the

step with his shoulder aching and thought that his sister was a good person who was proud, which was true, and was not the thing.

He was generous about it all the way home. He did not raise it again. He said to Hanne only that Marieke had her ways, and Hanne, driving, said, "Mm," which he did not interrogate.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Round

The works at Sint-Amands was small, sixty years old, and served nine thousand people who had never heard of it. Wim did it monthly and it was the least interesting site on his list, which was why he liked it.

He arrived at 08:14 with the argument still in him.

It had been about bread, which was not what it had been about. He had bought the wrong loaf on Saturday and said, as a joke, that it was the good one, and Hanne had said, not as a joke, that he never bought the one she liked, and the twenty minutes that followed had been about the loaf all the way through and had not been about the loaf at all. At half past six that morning she had been asleep, or had done a convincing job of it, while he looked for his keys.

The reader took his hand at the gate. He went in past the store, whose door was wedged with a wooden block that had been there for as long as anyone could remember, and through into the dosing room.

Four samples. Post-filter, post-dose, wet well, and a duplicate that went to a different lab from the other three because of a condition attached to something in 2031 that nobody had ever rescinded. He took them in order and labelled them by hand, because the printer in the dosing room did not work and had not worked for two years. He had reported it twice in his first year on the round and then stopped, because a printer was not a water quality matter and the reports went into a queue he had watched swallow better things than a printer.

Somebody said good morning behind him while he was writing the third label.

“Morning,” Wim said, to the room, not looking up, because he was holding a pen and a bottle and had the number in his head and it was the sort of thing you said back the way you say it to a bus driver. He did not turn round. He finished the label and took it to the bench.

He logged them at the bench.

08:34. Post-filter. Adriaans, W.

08:41. Post-dose. Adriaans, W.

08:47. Wet well. Adriaans, W.

08:52. Duplicate, post-dose. Adriaans, W.

The room hummed. The skid stood against the far wall, three pumps, a run of clear tube, a display. There was a hatch through to the chemical store, waist height, a metre wide, put in by somebody who had thought a plant room needed a serving hatch and now a place where people set things down while they looked for other things. It was open. It was always open. There was a roll of tape on the sill and a mug with no handle.

He did not look at it. There was nothing to look at.

He was thinking about the loaf, and about whether Lokeren would take one hour or two, and about Marieke, in the low way a thing sits when it has not been put down.

At 08:55 he closed the case and went through to the control room and let Ivan give him half a cup of the coffee, which was terrible and always had been.

"Telemetry," Ivan said.

"Go on."

"It's worse. I've said. The old one you could hear. You'd hear the relay go and you'd know before the screen did. This one tells you in colours." Ivan was sixty-one and had been at the works since before the municipality took it back off the contractor, and had views about that as well. "They put a screen in and they take a man out. That's the whole of it. My grandson does something with screens. He can't change a plug."

"Neither can I."

"You can't," Ivan agreed, with satisfaction. "You're a clipboard."

At 09:09 Wim put his hand on the reader at the gate.

Attendance closed. Adriaans, W. Site 0912. 08:14–09:09. Attested.

He got to Lokeren before lunch. He rang Hanne from the car at one and said he was sorry about the bread, and she said she was sorry too, and they agreed, in the shorthand of eight years, that neither of them had been sorry about bread.

It was a Tuesday. Nothing happened to him for eleven days.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Hatch

It was not an alarm. Leila would say that for two years, to everybody, and it never once helped her.

The display did not flash and it did not sound. What it did, at 08:38, was show a number that meant nothing unless you had stood in front of that particular display for a decade. Free chlorine, post-dose: 4.1.

It had been 0.9 at twenty past. It had been 0.9 every morning of her working life. The pump that should have been modulating was not modulating. It was running at a fixed rate, which was what the skid did when the loop lost feedback and fell back to whatever it had last been told.

She looked at it about twenty seconds, and not because she doubted it. She did what you do. Checked the second display. Checked the flow. Checked the tank level. Checked the little green light on the controller, which was green.

Then she went to find Dirk.

He was in the store, which was through the hatch, which had its own door onto the corridor, and which everybody called the dosing room, including Dirk, including the site plan that had been pinned in the control room since before the partition went in. In all that time she had never heard anybody say *the chemical store* out loud except a man from the insurance.

She did not go round by the corridor. Nobody went round by the corridor. She leaned in at the hatch and moved the tape roll with the back of her hand.

"Dirk."

He was on his knees at the drum rack with a torch in his mouth, doing something to the coupling that had been weeping since September and that he had been told about twice, once by email. He took the torch out.

"What."

"Post-dose is four-one. Pump's stuck at fixed. I think it's lost the loop."

He did not look up. That was the part she would carry, and the part she could never make matter to anybody, because a man not looking up is not a thing that goes in a record.

"Four-one."

"Four-one. It was nine at twenty past."

"Right." He put the torch back in his mouth, then took it out again and spoke around nothing. "I'll come and look in a minute. Don't touch the skid. If it's the loop it'll want a reset and I don't want it resetting into a full tank."

"Do you want me to call it in?"

"Give me a minute," Dirk said.

She went back to the display.

She could have called it in anyway. She would spend a great deal of the following two years standing in that gap of about ninety seconds and it never came out differently. She was a dosing technician for a contractor. She had a site pass, a competence card, and the duty number in her phone. She was not authorised to stop a works.

There had been a man called Kris, three years before, at the Bornem site, who stopped a works at four in the morning over a turbidity reading that turned out to be a fouled sensor. Nobody shouted at Kris. Nothing went on any paper anywhere. Kris was moved to nights at Aalst in May and had no contract by September, and everyone who worked for the contractor in the province knew that, and none of them could have told you how they knew.

So she stood in front of the display and waited for the man who was allowed to decide to come and decide. It was the only thing she did in the whole forty-eight minutes that she would afterwards call wrong, and it was not wrong, and she has never been able to hold both of those at once for longer than a few seconds at a time.

At 08:47 a man came in from the corridor with a sample case, took a sample from the post-dose tap two metres from her, wrote the label by hand, and logged it at the bench. She said good morning. She was fairly sure she said good morning. He might have nodded; she thought he nodded. He was one of the municipal ones, the monthly one. She had never learned his name and had never needed to. He was in the room four minutes and did not look at the display, and there was no reason on earth why he should have.

She thought, watching his back: *he'll be taking that to a lab.*

She thought it with relief. Not as a plan. As the ordinary thought of a woman in a room where the thing that is frightening her has just been put in a bottle by somebody senior to her.

Dirk came through at 09:26 with the torch still in his hand and looked at the display for about two seconds.

"Christ," he said.

The works came off at 09:31. By then Leila had begun to be frightened in the specific way that has no object yet, and had rung Yasmine's school about a dentist appointment, because it was on her list and because her hands wanted something to do.

CHAPTER SIX

Eleven Houses

An De Vos rang the emergency line at twenty to twelve and was told, correctly, that a chlorine taste was common after mains work and to run the tap for five minutes.

She ran it five minutes. Then ten. Then she filled a glass and smelled it and poured it away and went out to the garage for the crate of bottled water she bought because her mother had kept one during the business in '31, and which her husband made jokes about, and which was the reason three of the eleven houses on that stretch were fine.

The Haddious were at the other end of the Kloosterstraat and did not have a crate in the garage.

Samir was seven. He had a glass of water at eleven when he came in from the garden, and another at two, and at half past six his mother cooked pasta in it. By then the works had been off nine hours and the notification had gone to a distribution list keyed to a main that had not fed that end of the street since the rezoning in 2036. The Haddious were on a shared supply registered to a landlord in Deinze who had, in fairness to him, moved to Spain.

At half past eight Nadia Haddiou stood in her hallway with her son over one arm and the out-of-hours line in the other hand and was told that a person would contact her within twenty-four hours.

She did not wait for the person. She put him in the car in his pyjamas with a towel across his lap and drove to Dendermonde with the window down because of the smell of him, and was seen at ten past ten, and was told at midnight that they were keeping him.

He was there nine days. The word *acute* was used for six of them and then stopped being used, and a different word was introduced in a room with a door and a box of tissues on the table. Nadia wrote it on the back of the parking ticket because she did not trust herself to remember it. She still had the ticket eight-

een months later, in the drawer with the passports, when the determination came.

An De Vos took a bag of things round on the fourth day and did not know what to say and said the wrong thing, which was that the water had tasted funny at her house too. Nadia thanked her. They had never spoken before that week. They spoke most weeks for the next two years.

What the record eventually showed was that between 08:40 and 09:31 the works had supplied at a free-chlorine concentration peaking at 4.4 milligrams per litre into eleven houses at the low-pressure end of a rezoned zone.

Forty-eight minutes. Eleven houses. One boy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Wall in the Model

The contractor's internal review sat in a meeting room in Melle with a jug of water in the middle of the table that nobody touched for three months, which was the only joke anybody made about any of it.

Leila gave her account on the second day. She had written it out the night before at the kitchen table and then left the paper in her bag, because reading it would have sounded like reciting and she wanted them to hear that she was not reciting.

"Zero-eight-thirty-eight I saw four-one on the post-dose. Zero-eight-forty I told Dirk Maes. He said he'd come and look in a minute and told me not to touch the skid. I asked if I should call it in. He said give me a minute. Zero-nine-twenty-six he came through and saw it. Zero-nine-thirty-one we came off."

The woman from legal was called Veerle. She had a cold sore she kept touching and a habit of saying *I understand* immediately before the hardest question.

"I understand. Where did you tell him?"

"In the dosing room."

"He says he was in the store."

"He was at the drum rack."

"The drum rack is in the store."

"Yes," Leila said. "That's the dosing room. Everybody calls it the dosing room. The plan calls it the dosing room. It's one room with a wall in the middle and a hole in the wall you can put your arm through."

Veerle wrote something down. She was not hostile. Nobody in all those weeks was ever hostile to Leila, and every person she dealt with was patient and reasonable and said *I understand*, and none of it helped her, and afterwards she could never decide whether the patience had been a kindness or a way of getting through the afternoon.

“Let me be precise,” Veerle said, “because precision is going to matter here more than either of us would like. The site model has two rooms. Room 4, dosing. Room 5, chemical store. They were partitioned in 2034. Every attendance record and every sample log on that site since 2034 is keyed to that model. If you say you told him in room 4 and he says he was in room 5, the two of you may well be describing the same thirty seconds through a hole in a wall. But there is a wall in the model, and the model is what the record is made of.”

“Then the model’s wrong.”

“The model is the model.”

“It’s a hatch.” Leila heard her own voice go up and could not get it back down. “It’s a metre wide. There’s a mug on it. There’s a roll of tape on it. I moved the tape to lean in. That’s how far away he was. I moved a roll of tape so I could see his face and he didn’t look up, and you’re sitting there telling me about rooms — ”

“I understand,” Veerle said.

Leila stopped. She apologised. She heard herself apologising and hated it and did it anyway, because the room had gone the way rooms go, and because she had years of not being the woman who shouts in a meeting and could not afford to start being her at forty-six.

Veerle said, kindly, that they could take five minutes. Leila said she was fine. They went on. By the end of the afternoon the three sentences about the hatch had become one line in a summary, and Leila had watched it happen and had not known what to do about it, and had gone home and cooked, and had told Yasmine only that work was being annoying.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Fourth Telling

Dirk Maes gave his account four times in three months. It changed on the third telling and he did not notice.

The first time was in the yard on the morning itself, at half past ten, with the works off and two men from the municipality walking the filter hall and his hands not steady. What he said then, to nobody in particular, to a lad from the lab who had come out for a smoke, was: *she told me and I didn't go and look.*

The second was to the operations manager that afternoon. It was longer and had a good deal in it about the coupling, which had been weeping since September, which he had been told about twice, and which was the actual reason he had been on his knees at the drum rack at twenty to nine on a Tuesday rather than anywhere else. The shape of it was: *she told me and I was under the rack and I didn't register it properly.*

The third was eight days later, in a room, with Veerle present, and by then he had lain awake through eight nights. What he said was that Haddad had mentioned a reading at some point in the morning; that he could not put a time on it; that he had formed the impression at the time that it was a routine query rather than an alarm, because she had not used the word alarm and had not called it in; and that the first he knew of the severity was when he came through and saw the display himself, at about half past nine.

Not one clause of that was invented. He had formed an impression. She had not used the word alarm. He had seen the display at about half past nine. He built it the way a man builds a floor over a hole, board by board, out of materials lying around anyway, and every board was a thing he could have sworn to.

The fourth time, five weeks later, he gave a time. He said 09:28.

He gave it because he had been asked for a time so often by then that not having one had begun to look like the thing he was concealing. He gave 09:28 because it was two minutes before he came through the hatch. And he gave it

because by then he could no longer tell the morning apart from the accounts of it. The accounts had worn a channel and the morning ran down it.

He was not lying, in the sense in which he would have used the word about anybody else.

He went home that night and had his dinner and watched most of a film with Griet, and she said he seemed better in himself, and he was. He slept through for the first time since October. Two weeks later he replaced the coupling on a Saturday, on his own time, and did not tell anybody he had done it, and could not have said, if asked, what that was for.

CHAPTER NINE

The Clean One

The province rang Wim on a Thursday, eleven days after, while he was in the car outside a school with Noor's recorder on the back seat.

"It's only the attendance record," the clerk said. "Site oh-nine-twelve, the twenty-sixth. Everybody who went through the gate."

"You can have it now if you like."

"You don't want to check it first?"

"There's nothing to check."

He said it pleasantly, and she laughed, and he authorised the release from the car with Noor climbing into the back and asking whether recorder could be over. It took eleven seconds.

He knew, vaguely, that something had happened at Sint-Amands. It had been on the regional news one evening, behind a story about a bridge. Ivan had sent him a message that said *you were THERE mate* with three exclamation marks, which was Ivan's register for everything, including birthdays.

He did not look at his own record. He knew what it said without looking, and there was nothing in it that he had not personally done: the gate, four samples, a coffee, the gate.

"That's us," the clerk said, when it came through. "Thanks. Yours is the clean one, at least."

"Sorry?"

"Nothing. We've got nine passes through that gate that morning and nine of them are contractor passes, and a contractor pass tells you the gate opened and that's it. Yours tells us which room you were in and when you breathed." She was already moving on; he could hear her typing. "It's nice to get one that says something."

"Is that a problem? The contractor ones."

"It's not a problem. It's just nothing." A pause, more typing. "Right. Thanks. Enjoy your afternoon."

He drove Noor to her grandmother's. She played four notes of something in the back, over and over, and on the fifth he asked her to stop and she did, immediately, which made him feel worse than if she had argued.

What he felt, for a second or two at the junction by the bridge, was a small clean warmth. The warmth of a man who has handed in homework and had it marked in front of him.

He mentioned it at dinner, as a nothing, between other things.

"They rang about that water business. The little works. They wanted my attendance."

"Is that bad?"

"It's not anything. I'm not a party. They just want to know who was where." He reached past her for the salad. "The woman said mine was the only useful one on the site. Everybody else there that morning was contractors, and contractor passes don't attest to rooms."

"Why not?"

"Money. It's charged per head per site. The municipality pays it for its own people. The contractors don't pay it for theirs."

"So they're just not in it."

"They're in it. They're in it as a gate opening." He was not paying attention. He was eating. It was a Thursday. "It's fine. It's only that if anyone ever needs to know where a person actually stood, it's me."

Hanne did not say anything.

Much later, on a night when a great deal else was being said, she would remember that she had not said anything, and would try to work out what she could have said, and would not be able to, and would find that this did not stop it bothering her.

CHAPTER TEN

The Weaker Account

Lieve Stroobants read the file on a wet afternoon in a building whose heating had been arguing with itself since October, wearing the cardigan she kept in the office for exactly this, and by the second hour she had the shape of it.

A standing determination. Two accounts of a reporting event, materially inconsistent, in a matter where the liability ran to eight figures and a child had lasting harm. Her remit was not to decide what had happened in the works. That was for other people and possibly for a court, in four years. Her remit was narrower and, she had always thought, more dangerous for being narrower: to determine which account the process could be built on. Not which was true. Which was constructible.

She laid them out on paper, which Pieter in the next office found funny and which she had stopped defending.

Haddad, L. Chain authenticated, one bracketed discontinuity, 2029, provider collapse, bracketed and never closed. Eleven years with the contractor, no findings. Account precise, consistent across three tellings, times to the minute. Location stated as room 4.

Maes, D. Chain ordinary, no gaps. Nineteen years, one prior finding, 2033, minor: a signature on a competence card that had not been his to sign. Account: three tellings, materially inconsistent with one another in the first two, settled by the third, time supplied at the fourth. Location stated as room 5.

Adriaans, W. Not a party. Municipal inspector. Present in room 4, attested, 08:31 to 08:55. Full-provenance enrolment 2016. No discontinuities. No narrowed scopes. No contested attestation in the entire life of the record.

Lieve sat back and looked at the ceiling, which had a stain shaped like Denmark.

Maes was the weaker account. That was the first thing she saw and it never stopped being the first thing she saw. He had changed his story twice and had

produced a time only under repetition, and if this had been two ordinary chains she would have flagged him, sent it to a hearing, and let somebody competent sweat him for an afternoon. On nineteen years of reading men's accounts, she thought he would have come apart inside twenty minutes.

But Haddad had put herself in room 4 at 08:40, and room 4 at 08:40 held one man, and that man's record was the most complete instrument the registry had ever been handed. It did not say Haddad was lying. It said the room had been measured and she was not in the measurement. Once Haddad's account could not be built on, Maes's was the only one standing, and a thing that is the only one standing does not have to be strong.

Pieter put his head round the door and asked if she wanted anything from downstairs. She said a tea. He brought her a coffee. They had been doing this for six years and neither of them had ever mentioned it.

She wrote a note to herself, which she did two or three times a year, in pencil, on the back of the cover sheet.

> *The weaker account is going to win because the stronger one collided with an instrument.*

She looked at it for a while. Then she rubbed it out, thoroughly, with the rubber on the end of the pencil, and blew the crumbs off the sheet, because it was not a finding.

Then she opened the template.

It was the standard format, which the registry had taken over from the province some years before she arrived and which nobody in the building could now remember having been introduced. Section A was the question referred. Section B was the chain of record, which was where you set out every documented act bearing on the matter, in order, and which was optional and had been optional for as long as anyone had used the form. Section C was one line, under a printed instruction, and the instruction said to identify the person whose act most proximately determined the outcome.

Lieve had completed Section B perhaps twice in nineteen years. Both times it had taken a fortnight and both times somebody had asked her, kindly, whether it had been necessary.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

No Other Attributable Presence

They sent Leila the material because they were required to. Four hundred and eleven pages, on a Friday, with an acknowledgement form.

She read it over the weekend at the kitchen table while Yasmine did fractions opposite her and complained about fractions. She got through ninety pages on Saturday and then went back to the beginning on Sunday, because she had not been taking any of it in.

She found it on page two hundred and nine.

> *Geofence trace, site 0912, 26 Oct. ADRIAANS, W. (municipal inspector, non-party). Room 4 (dosing): 08:31:14–08:55:02. Room 6 (control): 08:56:11–09:07:40. No other attributable presence recorded in room 4 during this interval.*

She read it four times, which was three more than it needed.

She had been in that room. She had stood in front of that display from about 08:38 until Dirk came through at 09:26, apart from the minute and a half at the hatch. The man had taken his samples two metres from her and she had said good morning and he had nodded, she was almost sure he had nodded, and she had watched him go and thought *he'll be taking that to a lab*, and had been glad.

> *No other attributable presence recorded.*

She was not in it. Not somewhere else. Not anywhere. Her presence in the room she had worked in for a decade did not exist as a fact, because contractors' staff carried a pass that opened a gate, because attribution was charged per head per site, because in 2033 the contractor had priced it and had not bought it.

"Mum."

"In a minute, love."

"You've said in a minute twice."

"I have," Leila said. "Sorry. Show me."

She did the fractions. She did four of them properly, in the voice she used for homework, and Yasmine got the fifth on her own and was pleased with herself and wanted to do a sixth, and Leila sat with her hand flat on page two hundred and nine the whole time and did the sixth one too.

Later she rang Hakim, the union rep, who was a decent man with sixty-one members and a day job.

"It says there was nobody else in the room."

"It says nobody attributable."

"What's the difference, Hakim? To somebody reading it. What is the actual difference?"

He was quiet a second too long, which was the answer, and then said he would look at it and that they would find something. He did look at it. There was nothing.

She wrote it out afterwards on a proper piece of paper, because she had started writing things on proper pieces of paper.

> *I was at the hatch when I told him. He was at the drum rack on his knees. I moved the tape roll. The inspector was four feet away with his back to me and I said good morning.*

She read it back. It was true, every word of it. And she could hear exactly what it was. It was the sentence of a woman explaining why a record is wrong about her. She had spent a decade hearing men at that works say sentences like that about their own records, about hours they had worked and gates they had closed and readings they had taken, and she had never once, not one single time, believed any of them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Was Anyone Else in the Room

They came to him in February, which he thought was slow and which was in fact fast.

It was not an interview, and they said so twice. It was a *clarification of a non-party attendance record*, in a meeting room at the province, with a woman from the registry's standing office, a man from the municipality's legal team who did not speak at any point, and a jug of water that Wim poured from without thinking and then, having poured it, drank.

"You're not a party to this," the registry woman said. "I want that clear at the start. You're not accused of anything and nothing you say today creates any exposure for you. We have your record. It isn't in dispute. What we need is one narrow point confirmed, from you, in your own words, on the record. It's a formality. It has to be done properly because of what it's going to be used for."

"All right."

"On the twenty-sixth of October you were in room 4 at the Sint-Amands works, between 08:31 and 08:55, taking scheduled samples."

"Yes."

"Was anyone else in the room?"

He took his time, because accuracy was the whole content of his professional self-regard and he brought it to bear now the way he brought it to bear on an entry stamp. He put himself back in the room. The hum. Four taps in order. The labels written by hand because the printer had never worked. The skid on the far wall, three pumps, the clear tube. Ivan's coffee afterwards and the business about the telemetry.

There was nobody in it. That was not a gap in his memory. His memory was good and he interrogated it properly, and what came back was an ordinary four minutes in an ordinary room. If a person had been standing at the display he would have registered a person standing at the display, because registering things in plant rooms was what he did for a living.

Something moved at the edge of it. Not a picture. The shape of a sound, about four minutes in, and possibly his own voice in it, which was ridiculous, because he had been on his own.

He went after it and it was not there. He had said good morning to Ivan. That was what that was. You walk into a building at eight in the morning and you say good morning about six times before ten and not one of them stays with you, and a man who tried to reconstruct which of them had been which would be making things up, and making things up was the one thing you never did. He was aware of a mild irritation with himself, the irritation of a man whose good memory has produced a smudge, and he did the thing he had been taught in his first week and had believed in ever since, which was that you do not put a smudge in a record. You say what you know.

"No," Wim said.

"No one at all?"

"No one at all. There was a man in the control room afterwards, Ivan, the operator, I had a coffee with him. In the dosing room, no. It was just me."

"Thank you," the registry woman said.

She wrote it down. The man from legal wrote it down. The console on the table wrote it down. The meeting ran nine minutes and they were all out of the building by twenty past.

He drove back along the N41 with the radio on and stopped at the place near Lochristi for a sandwich because he had missed lunch, and ate it in the car park with the engine off, and rang Hanne about whether her mother was coming on Saturday. He did not think about the meeting again that day, or that week.

He had not lied. Nothing he said was untrue. He had been asked a question about a room and had answered it out of a clear memory and a complete record, carefully, the way he did everything.

It was the most dangerous sentence anybody said out loud in the entire affair. It would be a year and a half before he understood that, and by then the only thing left to do about it would be the one thing that cost him everything he had been given for free.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Determination

It arrived on a Tuesday at 09:04, in the ordinary way, between a message from the school about a book and a reminder that her car needed its inspection.

STANDING DETERMINATION — REF SD/0912/26.10 — HADDAD, L.

Leila was at the depot in Wetteren, where they had put her in November on what the contractor called alternative duties and everybody else called the stores. She was counting valve seats into a tray. She read it standing between the racking with the tray in one hand, and then she put the tray down on the floor rather than on the shelf, because the shelf was further away.

It was fourteen pages. The first nine were the account of the morning, which she had read in other forms three times and which she skipped. The tenth was the part.

> *The account given by L. Haddad places the reporting event in room 4 at approximately 08:40. Attested presence data for room 4 for the relevant interval records one individual, W. Adriaans, whose account, given on the record, is that no other person was present. No attributable presence is recorded for L. Haddad in room 4 at any point on the day in question.*
>
> *The registry makes no finding that L. Haddad has given a knowingly false account. The registry finds that the account as given cannot be reconciled with the attested record, and accordingly that it cannot be relied upon as a basis for determination.*
>
> *The account given by D. Maes, while inconsistent in its earlier iterations, is not contradicted by attested data. The registry therefore determines the reporting event to have occurred at 09:28.*

She read the last line five or six times.

The registry makes no finding that L. Haddad has given a knowingly false account.

That was the sentence she would come back to for two years, and she could never decide whether it was mercy or the opposite. It said: we are not calling you a liar. It said, in the same breath and the same typeface: we have removed you from the arithmetic. Nobody had accused her of anything. There had been no hearing. There had been a meeting in Melle with a jug of water, and a woman touching a cold sore and saying *I understand*, and eleven weeks, and now fourteen pages, and at the end of it a time that was forty-eight minutes later than the truth and a boy in Dendermonde with a word written on the back of a parking ticket.

Youssef from the stores came round the end of the racking and saw her face and said, "All right?"

"Fine."

"You've put that tray on the floor."

"I know," Leila said. "I'll pick it up."

She picked it up. She counted the rest of the seats, all fourteen, twice, because she lost the count the first time. Then she went out to the yard and rang Hakim and got his voicemail, and rang him again and got it again, and stood by the fence looking at a stack of pallets for a while, and then went back in and finished the racking, because the shift had another three hours in it and she did not have a version of herself that walked out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Doors

Nothing was taken from her. That was the thing she could never get anyone outside it to understand. Nothing was taken. Things simply stopped arriving.

The first was the insurer. The contractor carried professional indemnity on its technical staff through a broker in Antwerp, and on the eleventh of March the broker wrote to the contractor, not to Leila, to say that following the standing determination the named individual would be excluded from cover on works-critical duties, and that the firm should treat this as effective immediately. It was two paragraphs. It did not say she had done anything. It said the exposure was no longer quantifiable, which was a different thing, and worse.

The contractor could not deploy an uninsured technician to a works. That was not a decision anybody made about her. It was a condition in a policy, and a clause in the municipality's framework agreement, and an operations manager with a rota and nine sites.

They kept her in the stores until the end of April. They were decent about it in the way firms are decent when they have already decided: the operations manager came out to Wetteren himself to tell her, twice, that this was temporary and that they were working on it. He believed it the first time.

The second was the competence card. Her certification body opened a review, as it was obliged to do on receipt of a determination naming a technician in a supply incident. The letter was polite and enclosed a guidance note. The review would consider whether her registration remained appropriate. It would take, the letter said, between six and nine months. In the meantime her registration was not suspended, and she noted that they had written the words *not suspended* in bold, and that she was grateful for it, and that gratitude was now a thing she felt about typography.

The third was the agency. She had been with the same one since 2032, for the odd weekend and the school holidays, and they had always rung her first for

anything at a works. In May they stopped ringing. She rang them. A woman she had known for six years said that there was nothing at the moment and that she would absolutely keep her on the list, and Leila could hear, down the line, that she was being told the truth by somebody who could not have told her the rest of it even if she had wanted to, because the rest of it was a filter on a screen that nobody in that office had built.

By June her income was the stores and the stores was nine hundred a month less.

She did the sums at the kitchen table on a Sunday with the calculator on the console, which offered, twice, to do them for her. The mortgage was fine until January. After January it was fine if nothing happened. Yasmine's bus pass went up in September. The car needed two tyres.

She did not tell Yasmine. She told her mother in Sint-Niklaas about the stores and nothing else, and her mother said that a job was a job and that she should be glad of it in this economy, and Leila said yes, and let her mother talk about a neighbour for twenty minutes, and put the phone down and sat for a while.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A Useful Morning

Wim heard about it from Ivan, three weeks after the fact, on the round.

"They done it, then," Ivan said. He had the kettle on. He always had the kettle on. "The determination thing. It was the girl."

"What girl?"

"The dosing girl. Leila. The contractor one, dark hair, she was here Tuesdays and Fridays. They've said it was her. Not said, said. You know." He made a gesture with the spoon that covered a great deal of institutional life. "She told Dirk at half nine instead of twenty to nine, is the finding. So the forty-eight minutes is on nobody, or it's on her, depending who you ask in the yard."

"What do you say in the yard?"

"I say I wasn't in the yard," Ivan said. "I was in here. I don't know what happened and neither does anyone else who says they do." He handed over the half cup. "She was all right, that one. Knew that skid better than the contractor's engineer. Used to bring a thing at Christmas, a cake with the syrup."

Wim drank the terrible coffee and thought about it for the length of the coffee.

What he felt, and he was honest enough with himself to notice it and not honest enough to look at it, was a small clean satisfaction. Not at anyone's expense; he would have said that, and would have meant it. The satisfaction was that a thing had been established. There had been two accounts and no way to choose between them, and there had been a record, and the record had been his, and because it existed the process had been able to move. Forty-eight minutes had been assigned. A boy in Dendermonde had a fact now instead of an argument. That was what the work was for. That was, in his whole career, the most useful morning he had ever spent, and he had spent it taking four samples and drinking half a cup of coffee and noticing nothing at all.

"She'll be all right, though," Ivan said. "Will she?"

"I don't know anything about it," Wim said. "I gave them an attendance record. That's the whole of my involvement."

"Right," said Ivan, and then, after a moment, "It's funny they could tell, though. Twenty to nine, half past nine. Out of a card reader."

"It's not out of a card reader. It's room-level attestation. It's not the same thing at all."

"Right," Ivan said again, in the voice of a man who had heard an answer and had not been given one, and put the spoon in the sink, and said that the telemetry was worse.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Letter, Redacted

It came into his work inbox on a Thursday in April, with four other things, and he read it between two of them.

> *FWD: correspondence from affected household — circulated to framework parties under §11 (information only, no action required).*

Below that, scanned, a letter written by hand and then typed up by somebody at the contractor, with the handwriting attached underneath as an image. Both were there. He read the typed one.

> *I am writing because nobody will tell me one thing, which is who knew and when. I have been told about the rezoning and about the distribution list and about the shared supply and about the landlord. I have been told there is a determination and that it says twenty-eight minutes past nine. I would like to know who was in the building at twenty to nine and what they knew, because my son is seven and he will be on a monitoring programme until he is an adult and I would like to be able to tell him one true thing about the morning when he asks me, which he will.*

The name was redacted. The address was redacted. The boy's age was not, because the boy's age was not a personal identifier under the schedule, and so the only fact left in the letter that belonged to an actual person was *seven*.

Wim read it. He had been reading his inbox with his coat still on, standing, because he had come in to pick up a kit and had opened the console out of habit.

He felt the thing you feel. It was real; it was not nothing. He thought: that poor woman. He thought about Noor, briefly, and then put that down, because he did not like doing that and had been told by Hanne more than once that it was a cheap way to feel something.

Then he read the subject line again. *Information only, no action required.* He was one of about forty people on the circulation list. He was on it because

he was on the framework. He was not a party. He had answered nine minutes of questions in February and had given a record that was not in dispute.

There was a thing he could have done, which was nothing much: he could have replied to the sender and asked what was happening about it, or asked whether the household had had an answer, or asked who was answering. He thought about that for about as long as he had thought about the bearing at Zelzate, which was four seconds. Then his line manager rang about the kit, and he took his coat off, and by the afternoon the letter was four items down and by Monday it was archived by the system on its own schedule, and he never opened it again.

It did not reach him. That is the only honest way to put it. It went into him about a centimetre and stopped, the way a thing does when there is no route from it to anything you are required to do.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On the Papers

The appeal was a form, and then nine weeks, and then a page.

Hakim helped her with the form on two evenings in his kitchen with his own children going past. He was good at it. He had done forty of these and he knew which boxes were read and which were furniture, and he made her cut two paragraphs that were true because, he said, the registry did not have anywhere to put anger and would read it as unreliability.

"They'll say the material's the material," he said, on the second evening.

"Then why are we doing it?"

"Because sometimes the material isn't the material. Because sometimes somebody reads it properly on a Tuesday instead of a Friday." He topped up her glass. "And because if you don't appeal, the determination stands unchallenged, and in three years when somebody looks at this, unchallenged is a word they use."

What they put in was the hatch. They put in the plan from the control room, photographed on Leila's phone in 2039 for an unrelated reason, showing one room with one name. They put in a statement from a man called Etienne who had worked the works until 2036 and who confirmed that the store and the dosing room had always been referred to as one, and that he himself had reported readings to a supervisor through the hatch more times than he could count. They put in the fact that Adriaans's attestation was to a room defined by a model, and that the model post-dated the practice of the building by thirty years.

The response came on a page and a half.

> *The appellant raises the question of the site model. The registry notes that the site model for site 0912 is the model of record and has been applied consistently to all attestation and sample data at that site since 2034. The registry has no power to amend a site model and no basis on which to disapply it in a*

single determination while it remains in force elsewhere. Any application for amendment lies with the provincial asset authority.

The appellant's account is not disbelieved. The determination is not made on the basis that the appellant is untruthful, but on the basis that her account cannot be reconciled with attested data. The introduction of testimony from a third party as to general practice does not alter the attested data.

Appeal refused on the papers.

Leila read it at the kitchen table and then read the middle sentence aloud to the room, because she wanted to hear how it sounded in a human voice.

The appellant's account is not disbelieved.

"That's worse," she said, to nobody. "Do you see that that's worse?"

Yasmine, from the next room, said, "What?"

"Nothing, love."

She rang Hakim. He said the words *provincial asset authority* twice, slowly, and then said he would find out what that involved, and rang back three days later to say that it involved a fee of eleven hundred euros, a survey he could not get a price for, and ninety days in which anybody with records at that site could object, and that the last successful amendment he could find in the province was in 2031 and had taken four years.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Amnesty

There was a proposal in the news that spring about a discontinuity amnesty.

It was a small item and it ran for about a week. The idea, put forward by a party with seven seats and no prospect of government, was that bracketed discontinuities arising from provider collapse before 2032 should be closed administratively rather than left open, because the people carrying them had not caused them and were paying for them in credit and standing for the rest of their lives. There was a figure attached: something over three hundred thousand people in the country, most of them from four collapses.

They had it on at Marieke's, low, behind the lunch, because Lucie liked the news on.

"It's not going anywhere," Bram said. "It costs a fortune and there's no votes in it."

"There's three hundred thousand votes in it," Hanne said.

"There's three hundred thousand people who don't vote," said Lucie, who was seventy-eight and had views, "because nobody's ever built them a reason to."

"The trouble with an amnesty," Wim said, "is what it does to everybody who didn't lapse."

Marieke was putting a dish down. She stopped for about a quarter of a second, and put it down.

"It's not lapsing," Hanne said. "It's a provider going under. That's not the person."

"No, and that's the good version of it, and that's the version in the news. But an amnesty's a line, and once you've drawn a line you can't ask about the reason. You close everything before 2032 and you close the provider collapses, which is right, and you also close every gap anybody left on their own account in that window, which is a different thing, and you can't sort them because sorting them is the whole cost." He was eating. He said it the way he said things

at work, which was evenly, with the confidence of a man who had thought about it for ten minutes and could see the shape. "And the people who kept theirs in order for thirty years find out it made no difference. That's not nothing. That's a real thing to do to people."

"Mm," said Bram.

"I'm not against it," Wim said. "I'm saying it's harder than the news makes it."

Nobody replied. Lucie said that the dog had been out again. Noor wanted to know what a provider was, and Hanne told her, badly, and Noor lost interest halfway through.

Marieke did not say anything at all.

She went and got the next thing from the kitchen, and when she came back she asked Hanne about the shifts, and the lunch went on, and afterwards in the yard she talked about the Carrefour job, which she had got, and about the shift pattern, which was better, and about Bram's brother's dog, which was the one Lucie was complaining about, which turned out to be funny, and she was warm and normal and did not raise it.

Wim drove home thinking the lunch had gone well.

Hanne, in the passenger seat, said, about ten minutes in, "You know she was twenty-two."

"What?"

"Your sister. When the gap happened. She was twenty-two."

"I know how old she was."

"Do you know what she was doing that year?"

"She was living with that awful one from Zottegem and she moved four times."

"Right," Hanne said, and looked out of the window, and did not say anything else, and he decided that she was tired, because she had done two long days, and he put the radio on.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Stores

They let her go in July, and they did it properly, which somehow made it longer.

There was a meeting with the operations manager and a woman from HR, and a letter, and a notice period, and a sentence about the company having explored all reasonable alternative deployment, which was true; they had. There was even a moment near the end when the operations manager, a decent man with a bad tie, said, "For what it's worth, I think you told him at twenty to nine," and Leila said, "Thank you," and understood that he had waited until the letter was on the table before saying it, and that he would have said it either way, and that this was what decency cost these days, which was nothing.

She went out to Sint-Amands on the Thursday to collect her locker, because her locker was at the works and not at the depot and nobody had thought about it until she asked.

They gave her a visitor pass. She had to be signed in. Ivan signed her in and was so embarrassed about it that he did it twice, once on the wrong line.

The locker had: a spare pair of boots, a fleece, a mug, two paperbacks, a phone charger, a photograph of Yasmine at about ten in a swimming costume, a bag of hair elastics, and a tin of biscuits she had bought for the Christmas before last and forgotten. She put it all in a supermarket bag.

Dirk was in the corridor.

He was coming from the control room with a clipboard and he saw her and there was a moment, about a second and a half, in which they were two people who had worked together for a decade standing four metres apart in a corridor.

"Leila."

"Dirk."

He looked at the clipboard. Then at the wall past her shoulder. Then at the floor. He did not look at her face at any point, and she watched him not do it, and she did not help him.

"I'm sorry about — " he said, and stopped, because there was no end to the sentence that he could afford.

"Yes," Leila said.

"It's been a bad business."

"Yes."

"If there's anything — "

"There isn't," she said. Not cruelly. She was too tired to be cruel and she had known him a long time and she had seen his wife at a barbecue and had once given him a lift to Dendermonde when his car went. "There isn't anything, Dirk. You gave a time. They took it. That's all there is."

"I gave what I remembered."

"I know you did."

That was the thing that finished him, she saw, watching his face: not an accusation, which he had braced for, but being told that she believed him. He stood in the corridor holding a clipboard, and something in him went out of true.

She walked past him to the gate with the supermarket bag. On the way she passed the dosing room door, which was propped, and she could see through it to the hatch, and the roll of tape was still there, and there was a different mug on the sill.

She handed the visitor pass to Ivan.

"I never learned his name," she said. "The municipal one. The monthly one."

"Wim," said Ivan. "Adriaans. He's all right, he is."

"Yes," said Leila. "I'm sure he is."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Volume

Lieve Stroobants did one thing about it, in May, on a Thursday afternoon, and then stopped.

The thing was that she looked up the site model.

She had no particular reason. The determination was made, the appeal had been refused on the papers by a colleague, and the file had closed and gone where files went. But the appeal had raised the model, and the refusal had said, correctly, that the registry had no power to amend one, and Lieve had found herself thinking, in the car, that she had spent nineteen years applying a thing she had never once looked at the making of.

So she looked. It took about forty minutes.

Site models in the province were held by the asset authority and were built, historically, from the as-built drawings at the point of digitisation. Site 0912 had been digitised in 2034 as part of a batch of eleven small works. The drawing used for 0912 was dated 2034. There was an earlier drawing on the same reference, superseded, marked as such, not in the active model but still in the archive, because the archive kept everything.

She opened it.

One room. One name. *Doseerlokaal.* A single space with the skid on the west wall and the drum rack on the east, and no partition, because in 1979 there had not been one.

Lieve sat and looked at it for a while.

Then she did the arithmetic, because she had been doing this for nineteen years and the arithmetic was the job. The model had been in force since 2034. Every attendance record at that site was keyed to it. So was every sample log, every contractor deployment record, every competence attestation performed on site, and, because the batch had been digitised together, so were the models at ten other small works, each of which had its own partitions and its own hatches and its own thirty years of practice that predated them.

Amending 0912 would not be a correction. It would be a reopening. Every determination at that site since 2034 that had turned on a room would become, at minimum, arguable. There had been four. She looked them up. One was a competence dispute, one a theft, one a contamination in 2037 that had gone against a municipal employee and had ended a career, and one was Haddad.

She wrote a note on the back of a cover sheet, in pencil, which she did perhaps four times a year.

> *The model is wrong and correcting it costs more than the people it is wrong about.*

She read it. Then she rubbed it out and blew the crumbs off, and put the archived drawing back where it had been, and did not mention it to Pieter, and went to a meeting about the heating.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Band Four

They gave Wim the promotion in June, three weeks after the appeal was refused, and he found out in a corridor, which he did not mind.

"You've heard, haven't you," said Ingrid, who ran technical services and had hired him eleven years earlier. "You must have heard. Somebody always tells them."

"Nobody's told me anything."

"Band four. From September. It's Marc's, he's going at the end of August, his wife's had enough of him being here." She was already walking; Ingrid conducted nine tenths of her management in transit. "It's the industrial portfolio. Bigger sites, fewer of them, the ones with lawyers. You'll get the estuary works and the two treatment plants and the Kluizen abstraction, and you'll lose the little ones."

"All of them?"

"The small works go to Ariane. Sint-Amands, Bornem, the whole rural batch. You'll be sorry about that and then in about a fortnight you won't be." She stopped at the lift and looked at him properly for the first time. "It's a good appointment, Wim. I want to say that, because you'll do the thing you do where you make a face like it's embarrassing. It isn't. You've had eleven years without a single contested hour and there are people in this building who've had three contested hours this year."

"Was it a competition?"

"There were four. You'd have got it on the work, before you ask. Don't be tedious about this." The lift came. "Oh — and your allocation's marked preferred on the new portfolio, so you keep first call on the estuary rota rather than going into the pool. Don't tell the others, they'll be insufferable."

"What does that mean, preferred?"

"It means somebody upstream likes you," Ingrid said, and the lift doors closed on her, and he stood in the corridor for a moment and then went and got a coffee.

He told Hanne that night and she was pleased, properly pleased, and they got a takeaway they did not normally get, and Noor was allowed to stay up twenty minutes because of it although she did not know why. It was, in a bad year for the two of them, an entirely good evening.

Later, in bed, Hanne said, "What happens to the little works?"

"Ariane gets them."

"Is she good?"

"She's fine. She's two years in." He put his book down. "They're not difficult sites. There's nothing at Sint-Amands but a skid and a filter hall and a man with opinions about telemetry."

He turned the light off. It did not occur to him, that night or for a year and a half, to put the words *three weeks* and *preferred* in the same sentence as anything else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Guarantor

The trip was to the Ardennes in October, five nights, and it cost two hundred and eighty euros, and there was a payment plan.

Leila could do two hundred and eighty in seven instalments. That was not the problem. The problem was on the second page of the form, in a box that had not been on the form two years ago, where the payment plan required a guarantor with an unrestricted continuity chain, because the school had been burned twice on plans and had gone to a scheme run by a company that did the administration for a percentage and had a policy.

She filled in the first page. She sat with the second page for two days.

There were three people she could have asked. Her mother's chain had a gap in it from a hospital admission in 2030 that had never been closed properly and never would be now. Her brother in Charleroi had a restriction from a business that failed. Hakim had said, before she asked, in a way that told her he had been asked before by somebody else, that he could not do it for a member because the union had a rule about it after a bad business in 2035.

The fourth was Ilse from two doors down, who was sixty, who had a clean chain and a dog and no idea what any of it meant, and who said yes immediately, within about four seconds, and then said, "Is that it? Do I have to do anything?" and Leila said no, and went home, and sat in the kitchen with her coat on.

It had taken four seconds and it had cost nothing and it had worked.

She did not tell Yasmine any of it. Yasmine came home from school and said that Noor — a different Noor; there were three in the year — was going and that Fatima's mother had said no because of the money, and Leila said, "You're going," and Yasmine hugged her, hard, the way she had mostly stopped doing at twelve.

Later, when she was asleep, Leila got the form out again and looked at the box.

Guarantor continuity status: UNRESTRICTED — verified.

Ilse's name in it. A woman two doors down who had never in her life had to think about it, standing behind seven instalments of forty euros so that a child could go to the Ardennes, because the mother of the child had a bracketed discontinuity from a provider that had collapsed in 2029 when she was thirty-one years old and had been told at the time that it was nothing to worry about and would be resolved administratively in due course.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Two Hours

The fight was about the car service and it went on for forty minutes and it was not about the car service.

He had booked it for the Thursday. She had a long day on the Thursday and had said so, twice, once in the kitchen and once in a message, and he had booked the Thursday anyway because the Thursday was the only slot before the inspection ran out, and this was true and checkable and he checked it, out loud, in front of her, on the console, which was the moment the evening turned.

"I'm not disputing the slot," Hanne said.

"You are, though. You said I hadn't listened. I listened, I just — there wasn't another slot."

"I said you didn't ask. Those are different."

They went round it twice more. Then there was a pause of the kind that offers you a way out, and he did not take it.

"Where were you on Tuesday?" he said.

"What?"

"Tuesday evening. Your phone was off from about seven until nine."

Hanne looked at him.

"It wasn't off," she said. "It was in my locker. I went for a drink with Katrien after the shift and I put it in my locker because the last time we went for a drink you rang twice."

"I rang twice because — "

"I know why you rang twice." She was not shouting. It would have been better if she had been. "Say the rest of it."

"There isn't a rest of it."

"There's two hours," Hanne said. "That's what the rest of it is. There's two hours on Tuesday that you can't see, and you've been carrying them round since Tuesday, and it's Friday."

"That's not — "

"You do it about the shifts. You do it about the weekend in Bruges with my sister. You've never once said it out loud and you've been doing it for eight years, and I've let it go for eight years, because you don't know you're doing it and because I thought it was just a thing about you, like your shoulder." She picked up her glass and then put it down without drinking from it. "I have got hours you can't see, Wim. Everybody has. I have got hours I don't remember myself, they're not interesting, they're bins and tea and standing in a corridor. And when you look at me like that I can feel myself starting to account for them, in my own head, before you've even asked, and I don't want to be a woman who does that in her own kitchen."

He said, "I trust you."

"I know you do," Hanne said. "That's what makes it so strange."

They did not resolve it. They went to bed and were fine the next day and the Thursday service happened and the car passed. But he lay awake for a while and what he thought about, and could not get further than, was that he had not been suspicious of anything. He had simply noticed a gap, the way you notice a missing tooth with your tongue, because noticing gaps was what he did, and because in his own life there had never been one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

One Page

It came to his work address in September, forwarded by the framework office with a covering line, because she had not had his address and had written to the municipality.

One page. Typed, and signed by hand.

Mr Adriaans,

You will not remember me. I was in the dosing room at Sint-Amands on the twenty-sixth of October when you took your samples. I said good morning to you. You were at the post-dose tap and I was about four feet behind you at the skid display, and I had been standing there since twenty to nine because the free chlorine was reading four-one and I had reported it to Dirk Maes through the hatch and been told to wait.

I am not asking you to say something you do not remember. I have read the record and I understand what it says and I understand that you answered honestly. I am writing because I do not think anybody has told you that I was there, and because the determination is built on a sentence you said in a nine-minute meeting in February, and I think you would want to know that.

I have lost my deployment, my cover and probably my registration. I am not writing about that. The boy is on a monitoring programme until he is eighteen. His mother has asked, in writing, who was in the building at twenty to nine. I was. You were.

I do not want anything from you. I would like one person in this to know that the room was not empty.

Leila Haddad

Wim read it twice.

Then he sat back in his chair in an open-plan office with a bad view of a car park and felt the specific discomfort of a man who has been handed something he has no procedure for.

It was not that he disbelieved her. That was the part he would not be able to explain to himself later, when it mattered. He did not think she was lying. He thought she was wrong, which is a different and much more comfortable thing, and he thought so for an entirely honest reason, which was that he had been in that room and had looked at it with a professional eye and there had been nobody in it, and he had been asked the question carefully by a woman who took notes, and he had answered it carefully, and a record does not develop a person in it eight months later because the person is having a terrible time.

He felt sorry for her. He felt it quite strongly for about a minute and a half.

He thought: she has lost everything, and she has read four hundred pages, and she has got to the bit where her name is not in the room, and she is doing the thing people do, which is to go to the last person in the chain and ask them to remember it differently. He had seen it before, twice, in all that time, from site managers. It never came from bad people. It came from cornered ones.

Then he did the thing he would think about most, afterwards, out of everything in that whole year.

He forwarded it to Ingrid with four words: *How should I handle?*

Ingrid replied in six minutes.

> *Don't. You're not a party and any reply becomes correspondence on a closed determination. Framework office will acknowledge. Don't engage directly, for your sake as much as anything. I'm sorry — it's a horrible thing to get.*

He did not reply to it. He archived it. He went to a site at Kluizen in the afternoon and did a good job there, and on the way home he bought the right bread, and there was a period of about three weeks that autumn when he thought about the letter every couple of days, and then a period of several months when he did not think about it at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

An Invitation

The envelope was heavy and had his name on it, and it came to the house, which was the part he noticed first.

Kwartier bv — Attested Presence Services, and an address on the Coupure. Inside, two pages and an annexe clipped behind them, and a compliments slip with a handwritten line on it: *Wim — long overdue that we did this properly. Call me any time. J.*

He read the two pages standing in the hall with his coat half off.

Dear Mr Adriaans,

Following the change to your portfolio on 1 September, we are writing to place our arrangement on a formal footing.

Kwartier has for some years maintained an allocation preference in respect of your inspection rota, through the framework schedule, at a number of client sites. With your move to the industrial portfolio we would like to continue that relationship on a direct retainer, as we do with a small number of colleagues in comparable positions.

The retainer is €2,800 per annum, paid quarterly, plus expenses at framework rates. It does not require you to do anything differently. It does not create any duty to us, and we would decline any such duty if offered, as your independence is the whole of the value. We simply ask to be told, in advance where possible, of your availability windows, so that our clients can schedule works accordingly.

A summary of the sites at which the existing preference has operated since 2033 is attached, for completeness.

He read it three times. The third time he sat down on the stairs.

He was not, in that first ten minutes, angry, or frightened, or ashamed. What he was, entirely and almost pleasantly, was certain that it was a mistake. A

firm had written to the wrong Adriaans, or had confused two arrangements, or had been sold a list by somebody. He knew this because he knew his own career: eleven years, four sites a week, a portfolio built by Ingrid and a rota built by a scheduling system, and he had never had a conversation with a firm called Kwartier in his life and would have remembered, because it was not the sort of thing you forgot.

He did not open the annexe that night. Hanne came in with Noor and a swimming bag and the hall was full, and he put the envelope on the shelf by the keys where post went, face down, without deciding to put it face down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Delighted

He rang at nine the next morning from the car park at Kluizen, to clear it up before the day started.

"Joost Van Peteghem."

"This is Wim Adriaans. I've had a letter from you about a retainer, and I think you've got the wrong person."

"Wim!" He said it the way you say a name you have said before. "No, I haven't. Have you got the annexe in front of you?"

"I haven't opened the annexe."

"Open the annexe," Joost said, warmly, and waited.

Wim opened the annexe. It was three pages. It was a table.

"Right," Joost said, "I'll do this in the order that's easiest, because everybody hears it badly at first and then is fine. Kwartier is an attested presence firm. We have about forty people on the roster, in four countries, and what we sell is that at certain times, on certain sites, there is someone present whose record is complete. That's it. That's the whole product. We don't brief anybody, we don't ask for anything, we don't want to know what you find. If we ever asked you to do anything at all the product would be worthless and I'd be finished, which is why I never have and never will."

"You've been paying for my rota."

"We've been paying your employer for allocation preference, which is a line on the framework schedule of charges that anyone can buy and about nine firms do. It's published, Wim. It's on page four. The clients who use it are mostly buying continuity of inspector because they're sick of explaining their site to a different person every quarter. We use it for a slightly different reason and we pay the same price on the same form."

Wim looked at the table.

"Forty-one sites," he said.

"Forty-one since 2033. It's not all of your work. It's about a fifth of it."

"Zelzate's on here."

"Zelzate's a refit with a difficult client and a contractor with a history. If that goes to dispute in 2047, and it will, there'll be a question about what was isolated and when, and there'll be a man who was physically on that floor with a record nobody can argue with. That's the entire thing. That's what I sell."

"And if I hadn't been there?"

"Then somebody else would have been, or nobody would, and the dispute would be two men shouting about a log." Joost paused, and when he came back he was slower. "You're going to want to say this is underhand. I'd ask you to hold off for a day. Come and see me. I've got an office and a coffee machine and I'll answer anything you ask, and I've never once had to have this conversation in a way I was ashamed of."

"Have you had it before?"

"Twenty-six times," Joost said. "Twenty-three stayed."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Annexe

He did not go to Kluizen. He sat in the car park for an hour and forty minutes with the annexe on the steering wheel and his coffee going cold in the holder, and then rang in and said he was starting at the estuary instead, which was a lie, the first proper one in some years, and which nobody questioned.

The table had four columns. Site, dates, client, and a fourth headed *basis*, which said, on every line, *allocation preference (framework sched. 4).*

2033. Site 1180, Merelbeke. Nov–Dec. 2034. Site 0447, Zele. Feb. 2034. Site 1180, Merelbeke. Apr, Jun, Sep.

He knew them. That was the thing that got into him first, before anything else: he knew every one of them, and could have told you which had a bad ladder and which had a canteen where the tea was free. Merelbeke was where he had met Ivan, who had been there before Sint-Amands. Zele had been his first solo quarter. He had been twenty-four and had done it in a coat that was too thin and had been proud of it for a fortnight.

Further down: the run of easy rural sites in ’32 and ’33 that he had been given, he had always assumed, because he had asked for them, having just met Hanne and wanting the shorter days. The industrial estate at Lokeren that had come up in ’35 and had put him in front of three framework clients in one quarter, which was the visibility that had got him the band three. The abstraction works in ’37 where the site manager had told Ingrid he was the only inspector they trusted.

Forty-one lines. Eleven years. About a fifth of his work.

And at the foot, in smaller type, a note:

> *Allocation preference at site 0912 (Sint-Amands) discontinued 01.09 on transfer of rural batch. Preference re-established on industrial portfolio, effective 01.09.*

He sat with that for a long time.

Site 0912 was on the table twice a year from 2034. Every monthly round he had done there was not on the table, because the table was only the ones Kwartier had bought, and what Kwartier had bought at Sint-Amands was two visits a year, and he could not tell from the table which of his monthly rounds in October had been one of them. That was the thought he could not get round or past. He turned the page over as though there might be something on the back of it.

There was a woman in the next car eating a sandwich and looking at her phone and laughing at something on it, and he watched her for a while because she was the only thing in the car park that made sense.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Page Four

He went in to the building on the Friday and did not go to his desk. He went to the framework office on the first floor, where Nele kept the schedules, and asked for the current schedule of charges.

"The whole thing?"

"Page four."

She gave him page four. It was a table of optional services available to framework clients, which he had seen perhaps twice in a decade in the way you have seen the fire evacuation plan in a building you work in.

4.7 Allocation preference (named inspector). Per site, per annum. €1,940.

4.7a Allocation preference, multi-site. On application.

"Is that a lot?" he said.

"It's nothing," Nele said. "It's two grand. The utilities buy it for everything, it's cheaper than retraining somebody on your site every quarter." She was looking at him. "Are you all right? You look like you've been up all night."

He went and found Ingrid, who was in transit as usual, and walked with her to the lift and said it in one sentence, because he had rehearsed it in the car and could not risk it coming out as anything but one sentence.

"A firm called Kwartier has been buying allocation preference on my rota since 2033 and they've written to me offering a retainer."

Ingrid stopped walking, which he had never seen.

"Kwartier," she said. "Joost. Yes. They've got five or six people on the framework. Have they offered you money?"

"Twenty-eight hundred a year."

"Don't take it."

"I'm not going to take it."

"Good. It's not against anything, but it's a horrible look and I'd have to put it in the register and then somebody at the province would have opinions for eighteen months." The lift came and she let it go, which he had also never seen. "Is that what's upset you?"

"Is that what's — " He stopped. "Ingrid. They've been buying my rota for eleven years."

"They've been buying allocation preference. Which is on page four, and which De Brouwer buys, and the port buys, and Aquafin buys for the two big plants. It's two thousand euros. It's the least interesting line on that schedule." She said it with no edge at all; that was the part. She was not defending anything. "Wim, if a client wants the same inspector every quarter, we sell them the same inspector every quarter, and the reason we sell it is that the alternative is a contractor spending the first hour of every visit explaining where the valve chest is. It's continuity. It's not a favour to you."

"It was a favour to me."

"It was a *consequence* for you," Ingrid said. "Those aren't the same and I think you know they aren't. Nobody's promoted you for it. You got band four on the work and on eleven years without a contested hour and I sat on the panel, and I'm not having this become a thing where you decide retrospectively that you didn't earn your career." She looked at her watch. "Don't take the money. Tell them no in writing and send me a copy. And go home, you look terrible."

She got the next lift. He stood in the corridor with page four in his hand.

The worst of it, he thought, was not that she was lying. It was that she was not, and that she was right, and that all of it had been on page four for years in a document anybody could ask for, and he had never once asked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Danuta

The laundry did nine tonnes a week and most of it was hotels, and Leila was good at it inside a fortnight, which nobody had warned her about and which turned out to be the thing that got her through the first winter.

There was a skill in it. That was the part she could not have explained to anybody at the works, who thought a laundry was a room where things went round. The presses wanted reading. Number three ran four degrees hot on the left-hand roller and would scorch a collar if you fed it the way the manual said, and you fed it a hand's width left of centre instead and it was perfect, and the man from the manufacturer had come out twice and found nothing. Leila worked that out in her third week from the pattern of the rejects, which was the same thing she had done for a living for a decade, which was to look at a number that was wrong and ask the room why.

She told Danuta, who said, "Don't tell Rudy."

"Why not?"

"Because Rudy will put a sign on it," Danuta said, "and then everybody will feed it a hand's width left of centre and nobody will look at number three again, and in April it will start running six degrees hot and the sign will still say a hand's width."

Danuta had been a paediatric nurse in Gdańsk for nineteen years. She was fifty-eight and had forearms like a fisherman and a running commentary on the night shift that she conducted mostly in Polish with the numbers in Dutch, and she had said to Leila on her third night, without being asked: *don't tell them what you were, they can't help it, they start being sorry at you.*

They took their break at half past two in a room with a fridge and a wall calendar from a chemical supplier, and the calendar had a photograph of a lake on it and had not been turned over since October, and this was, at three in the morning, funnier than it had any right to be.

"Turn it over," Leila said, in February.

"No."

"It's February."

"It is October," Danuta said, with enormous dignity, "and it will be October until somebody who is paid more than me turns it over, and I have been here three years and I would like to see how long that is."

There was a running argument about the radio, which Rudy controlled and which played a station that appeared to have five songs. There was a thing where the night crew wrote the worst item of the shift on the whiteboard, which had started with a stag party's tablecloth and had become, over a winter, an escalating and increasingly unprintable competition that Rudy had twice asked them to stop and had once contributed to. There was Hasan, who was twenty-two and who could not carry a stack of sheets past a doorframe without a catastrophe, and whom everyone protected fiercely from Rudy and mocked without mercy among themselves.

It was not a good job. It paid one thousand four hundred and eleven euros a month and her back had started telling her about it by March and she came home smelling of hot cotton and the chemical they used on the hotel whites, and she was forty-six and there was no version of the next twenty years that she wanted to look at squarely.

But she was good at it, and being good at something in a room with people in it turned out to be most of what she had been missing since the meeting in Melle, and she had not known that about herself and was not entirely pleased to find it out.

In April, Rudy put a sign on number three.

Leila found Danuta looking at it with an expression of profound and fully satisfied prophecy, and the two of them stood in front of it for about a minute and a half without speaking, and then Danuta said, "I will say nothing," and said it for three days.

CHAPTER THIRTY

A Fact About You

He told Hanne on the Saturday, over two hours, in the kitchen, with the door shut and Noor at her grandmother's.

He told it badly, which is to say he told it as a scandal. He laid out the letter and the annexe and page four and what Ingrid had said, and he did the thing he did at work, which was to build it up in order so that the listener arrived at the conclusion themselves. Somebody had bought his rota. Eleven years. A fifth of his work. His whole career had been quietly shaped by a man on the Coupure with a coffee machine, and nobody had told him, and it was legal, and it was on page four.

Hanne listened all the way through without interrupting, which she was good at and which he was not.

"You're upset that they bought it," she said, when he finished.

"Of course I'm upset they bought it."

"I'm upset that it worked."

He did not follow. He said so.

"Wim, you've just told me that for eleven years somebody has been putting you in rooms where certainty was going to be needed, and paying two thousand euros a site for it, and you've told me the whole of it and you have not once, in two hours, asked what they got."

"They got a man with a clean record in the room."

"Yes," Hanne said. "And what does a man with a clean record in the room do to everybody else in the room?"

He opened his mouth and did not have it.

"I've been in the room," she said. "Not that room. Rooms. When Noor came early there was a form at two in the morning and you signed it in eleven seconds and I was lying there and I was so grateful I cried. And down the corridor there was a family on the phone to a registry and they were still on it at ten past, and I heard them, and so did you, because you've told me about it a dozen

times, and every time you tell it, it's a story about how lucky we were." She had her hands flat on the table. "It's not a story about luck. It's a story about a corridor where some people's consent takes eleven seconds and other people's takes all night, and you have been the eleven seconds your entire life, and you have never once been the corridor."

"That isn't fair."

"It isn't," she said. "That's my point. And it isn't your fault either, and I'm not — " She stopped and started again. "I'm not angry with you for having it. I'm angry because you've spent eight years quietly checking my hours because you've never had a gap in your own, and now you've found out that the reason you've never had a gap is that somebody bought you a life with no edges in it, and you're sitting here upset about the invoice."

He went out to the garden for a while. It was November and there was nothing to do in it. He stood by the shed where the bikes were and looked at the back of his own house with the kitchen light on and his wife in it, and understood that she had said four things and that he had heard one of them, and that the one he had heard was the smallest.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

One Room, One Name

The pass still worked, which was a records failure and not a plan.

Deprovisioning ran on a ninety-day cycle and his rural-batch credentials had gone into the queue on the first of September and had not come out of it, and he knew this because he had noticed it in October and had meant to say something and had not. He went out to Sint-Amands on a Tuesday evening at half past seven, in the dark, and put his hand on the reader, and the gate opened.

He had told himself in the car that he was going to look at the hatch. That was true and it was not the reason.

The works at night was warm and loud in the way plants are when nobody is in them. He went in past the store, whose door was still wedged with the same block. He stood in the dosing room.

It was four paces from the post-dose tap to the skid display. He paced it. He stood at the tap with his back to the room, where he had stood for four minutes on the twenty-sixth of October, and looked at the tap, and then turned round.

The display was behind him and slightly to the left. A person standing at it would have been in his peripheral vision when he turned to log the sample at the bench. He turned to log the sample at the bench, slowly, the way he had done it, and he could see the display and he could see the space in front of it and there was nobody in it, and there had been nobody in it, and he stood there in the empty room with the pumps going and could not make anybody appear.

That was when he went and looked at the plan.

It was on the wall in the control room, under glass, brown at the edges, where it had been since before Ivan. He had walked past it about a hundred and thirty times. He had never once read it.

DOSEERLOKAAL. One room. The skid on the west wall, the drum rack on the east, and no wall between them, because in 1979 there had not been one.

He stood in front of it for a long time with his own breath on the glass.

Then he went home and sat up until two and found the rest of it, which took forty minutes, because it was not hidden: the asset authority kept superseded drawings in a public archive, and site 0912 had been digitised in 2034 in a batch of eleven small works, and the drawing used for the model was dated 2034, and the one it superseded was the one on the wall in the control room.

The partition had gone in in 2034. The model had been built from the drawing that had the partition in it. Room 4. Room 5. Every attendance record at that site for ten years.

He wrote it out on paper, which he did not normally do, because his hands wanted something.

> *She said she told him in the dosing room. He said he was in the store. They were both in the doseerlokaal. There is one room. I was in it. So was she.*

And then, underneath, because he was thorough, and because being thorough was the whole of him:

> *I did not see her.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

She Saw It in May

He got in to see Stroobants nine days later, which was fast, and which was because he wrote to the registry as a municipal inspector raising a possible defect in a site model, and a defect in a site model went to the standing office rather than to a queue.

She had a cardigan on and an office that was too warm and a stain on the ceiling, and she read what he had brought in silence, all of it, twice, the plan photograph and the archive drawing and the digitisation batch record, and he watched her do it and thought: she has understood it, and I am going to feel better in about a minute.

"How long have you had this?" she said.

"Nine days."

Lieve put the pages down and squared them.

"I found it in May," she said.

He did not follow at first. She let him not follow for a moment and then said it again, differently.

"I looked up the model in May, after the appeal was refused. It took me forty minutes. I opened the superseded drawing and I saw one room and one name, and I did the arithmetic, and I made a note to myself and then I rubbed it out, and I went to a meeting about the heating." She said it flatly. "I have thought about it perhaps once a fortnight since. I want you to have that, because you came in here expecting to have brought me something, and you haven't, and it would be unkind to let you find that out slowly."

"Then why is the determination still — "

"Because knowing a model is wrong and being able to do anything about it are different jobs, and neither of them is mine." She sat back. "Ask me the arithmetic. You'll want it."

"Go on."

"The model has been in force since 2034. Four determinations at that site have turned on a room in that time. One competence dispute, one theft, one contamination in 2037 that went against a municipal employee and ended his career, and Haddad. Amend the model and all four become arguable. That's not an argument against doing it. That's just the number." She took her glasses off. "Then: the digitisation was a batch of eleven works. Every one of them has partitions from the eighties and nineties and a practice that predates them. Nobody has audited the other ten and nobody is going to, because the moment anyone does, the same question arrives ten more times."

"Somebody should do it anyway."

"Yes," Lieve said. "Somebody should. It costs eleven hundred euros in fees, a survey at the applicant's expense, and ninety days of consultation, and the last successful amendment in this province took four years. There is no officer anywhere in the system whose job it is, and there is no budget line it comes out of, and so what happens is that a woman in a cardigan looks at it in May and rubs out a note, and a man who happens to have been in the room drives out there in the dark a year later and finds the same drawing, and neither of us can do the one thing that would fix it."

Wim sat with that.

"There's something else," he said. "Isn't there. You haven't said the other one."

"No," she agreed. "I hadn't decided whether to."

"Say it."

"If the model is amended," Lieve said, "then your attestation of the twenty-sixth of October stops meaning what it currently means. You were attested to room 4. If room 4 and room 5 are one room, then you were attested to a space you can't have observed the whole of, and your record becomes an ordinary record of an ordinary man who was in a room and didn't see somebody." She put her glasses back on. "Which is what you were. I'm not saying it to be cruel. I'm saying that the only instrument in this entire matter is the one that would be dismantled, and that you should know that before you decide how hard to push, because everyone I have ever watched push has stopped at exactly that sentence."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

What It Would Take

He pushed for six weeks, because he was thorough.

He wrote to the provincial asset authority. He got an acknowledgement in three days and a substantive reply in five weeks, which was faster than it had any right to be, from a man called Dewulf who had clearly enjoyed the question.

The reply said: an application to amend a site model may be made by the asset owner, the framework operator, or any party with a demonstrable interest. It requires a technical survey by an accredited surveyor, at the applicant's cost, currently between four and six thousand euros for a site of this class. It requires consultation with every party whose records are keyed to the model, which for site 0912 is the municipality, the framework operator, two contractors, the certification body, and the registry. The consultation period is ninety days. Objections are resolved by the authority's technical panel, which sits quarterly. Where an amendment would affect determinations already made, the authority must notify the registry, which must consider whether to reopen them, and the registry's consideration is a separate process with its own timetable.

At the bottom, in a different register, because Dewulf had evidently been at it a long time:

> *You will appreciate that the process is designed for the correction of errors discovered during works, not for the correction of errors discovered during disputes. I have seen four applications of the latter kind in nineteen years. None of them completed. Two were withdrawn on cost, one lapsed when the applicant died, and one is, technically, still open.*

Wim asked whether he could make the application himself.

You are not the asset owner, the framework operator, or an affected party to a determination. You are a person who was present. I am afraid that is not an interest the regulation recognises.

He rang Dewulf, who answered on the second ring and who turned out to be about sixty-five and audibly pleased.

"Adriaans. The site model man."

"You remember it."

"I remember all four of them. I keep them in a drawer, which my wife says is a symptom." There was a sound of a chair. "Go on. You've read it and you want to know if there's a way round, and I've got to tell you there isn't, and then we can have the interesting part of the conversation."

"Is there a way round?"

"No. Right, that's done." A pause. "Do you want to know the one that's technically still open?"

"Yes."

"1992 pumping station outside Deinze. Man called Roggeman applied in '36 because a wall in the model went through what was, in point of fact, a doorway, and his brother-in-law had lost an unfair dismissal on it. The survey came in at four thousand, he paid it, the consultation ran, and then one of the consulted parties objected on the grounds that they were not able to confirm whether they held records keyed to the model or not, because their records were with a company that had been sold twice." Dewulf said this with the relish of a man producing a good bottle. "That objection has been unresolved since March of '37. It cannot be resolved, because the company no longer exists and the successor entity has no obligation to look. The panel cannot dismiss it, because it is not frivolous. So it sits. Every quarter it appears on the agenda as item eleven and every quarter it is carried forward."

"For nine years."

"For nine years. It will outlive me. I have asked, twice, whether I may write to Mr Roggeman and tell him it will outlive me, and I have been advised that this would not be appropriate correspondence." A drawer closed somewhere. "Now. What did you actually want?"

"I wanted to know if I could make the application."

"You can't, and I've written that, and I meant it. But I'll tell you the thing I can't put in a letter, which is that the process isn't broken. Everybody who rings me thinks it's broken. It works beautifully for what it's for, which is a surveyor finding a wall in the wrong place during a refit and having it corrected in six weeks. What it has never had is a way of being used by a person who is not paying for a building. That isn't a fault. It's an absence. And an absence has got nobody in it to write to, which is why you rang a sixty-five-year-old man in Ghent instead."

Wim said, "Can I ask you something?"

"You may."

"Does it bother you?"

"Every quarter," Dewulf said, "at item eleven," and thanked him for calling, and was gone.

He rang the municipality's legal team and got a young man who was helpful for ten minutes and then said, with real reluctance, that an application by the municipality to amend a model in a matter where the municipality's own liability position was at stake would not be a thing that got signed off, and that he was sorry, and that he would have to note the call.

He rang Hakim, whose number was on the letter Leila had sent, and whose first words after Wim said who he was were a long silence.

"I'm not being funny," Hakim said. "Why are you ringing me?"

"Because the model is wrong and I can prove it and I can't make anybody do anything about it."

"Right," Hakim said. "Welcome."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

What He Did

He understood it in the car outside his own house in February with the engine off.

Not the model. He had understood the model in November, standing in front of a piece of glass with his breath on it. What he understood in the car was smaller and had been available to him the whole time.

They had asked him whether anybody else had been in the room, and he had said no, and he had been right about the room and wrong about the world, and the difference between those two things was a woman.

He had not been careless. That was the part that would not stop. If he had been careless he could have done something with it; a careless man can be more careful. He had been exactly as careful as he had ever been in his life. He had gone back into his own memory and interrogated it properly and had found a smudge at about four minutes and had gone after it and it had not been there, and he had applied a rule he had believed in since his first week, which was that you do not put a smudge in a record.

And on the strength of that a registry had removed a woman from the arithmetic.

He sat in the car for about twenty minutes. Then he went in and Noor wanted to show him something on a tablet and he looked at it and said the right things, and Hanne, passing, put her hand flat between his shoulder blades for a second and did not ask.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

What She Was Doing That Winter

She was not thinking about him. That is worth putting down, because the account of those months that got told afterward, by people who meant well, had her waiting.

She was doing the following things.

She was working four nights on and two off and picking up a fifth when Hasan could not cover, which was often, because Hasan had a girlfriend in Kortrijk and an unshakeable belief that trains ran later than they did. She was doing the school run on the off days, which Yasmine at fifteen had begun to find humiliating and had dealt with by requiring to be dropped at the corner, a negotiation conducted entirely through the positioning of a car.

She was fighting the bus pass. The pass had gone up in September and there was a concession for households under a threshold, and Leila was under the threshold, and the concession required proof of income for the preceding twelve months from a single employer, and she had had three. She rang them four times. The fourth time she got a woman called Chantal who said, without being asked, "Send me the three and I'll put them in as one and I'll write on it that I did it," and it took Chantal about ninety seconds and saved Leila two hundred and forty euros a year, and Leila put the phone down and cried for about two minutes and then made a shepherd's pie.

She was learning that she was, in a small and specific way, now slightly famous. Not in any manner that appeared anywhere. But Hakim had sixty-one members and had talked, and the contractor's staff in the province numbered about four hundred, and somewhere in the winter it became a thing that people knew: *the one from Sint-Amands, the one where the record said she wasn't in the room.* Twice she got messages from women she had never met. One of them said only: *I think about you when I'm signing things.*

She was not appealing anything. She had stopped in the autumn and she did not restart, and when Hakim rang in January with something about a pro-

cedural ground he had found in a case in Liège she listened to all of it and then said, "Hakim, I'm not doing another ten months of being a person who is appealing," and he said, "No," and that was the last time it came up between them for two years.

She was going to Sint-Niklaas on the second Sunday of the month to see her mother, who had a gap of her own from a hospital admission in 2030 and who had never once in fifteen years understood what it was or why it mattered, and who now said, every visit, some version of: *it's a shame about the job, you should go back and ask them nicely.* Leila said she would think about it. She said it about ten times that year.

And on one night in January, feeding number three a hand's width left of centre with the radio doing the second of its five songs, she thought, out of nothing: *he still hasn't answered the letter.*

It surprised her. She had genuinely not thought about the letter in weeks. She stood there with a hotel duvet cover going through the rollers and found that the feeling attached to it was not anger and was something closer to the feeling you get about a form you have sent to an office and heard nothing back about, which is that somewhere there is a person whose job it is, and they are at lunch, and they have been at lunch for eight months.

Then the cover came through and she folded it, and Danuta said something in Polish about Hasan, and she laughed and forgot it for another three weeks.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Laundry

She was working nights at a commercial laundry in Gentbrugge, four on, two off, and he got the address from Hakim, who gave it to him slowly and said, "Don't make me sorry."

He went at half past six on a Thursday evening, before her shift, to the house rather than the laundry, because turning up at somebody's work was a thing he had decided he was not going to do.

She opened the door on the chain.

"Mrs Haddad. My name's — "

"I know who you are."

"I got your letter."

"In September," Leila said.

It was one word longer than it needed to be and it took the whole of the ground he had prepared. He had four things to say and he said the third one, because it was the only one still standing.

"The model's wrong. There's one room. There was a partition put in in 2034 and the model was built from the drawing with the partition in it, and the plan on the control room wall is the original and it says one room, and I've got the archive drawing."

Leila stood behind her own door.

"I know," she said. "It was in my appeal."

He had not expected that. He should have. He had read the appeal decision, which was a page and a half, and he had not read the appeal.

"It was refused," he said.

"On the papers. In June. The registry has no power to amend a site model." She said it the way you say a thing you have said to yourself in the bath. "Then I paid Hakim's brother-in-law forty euros to look at what it would cost to make the application myself, and he came back with eleven hundred in fees

and a survey at five thousand and a ninety-day consultation, and I earn one thousand four hundred a month in a laundry."

"I'm trying to — "

"What are you trying to do?"

He did not have it. He stood on the step in the cold with his hands in his coat pockets and did not have it.

"I don't know," he said.

"No," Leila said. Not unkindly. That was somehow the worst of it. "I'll tell you what you're doing. You're thirteen months late and you've found out a thing I found out in April, and you've come to my door in the evening to tell me about it, and you feel better than you did when you got in the car. That's not nothing. I'm not saying it's nothing."

"I answered the question wrong."

"You answered it honestly. That's the whole problem and you still haven't got to the end of it." She shifted her weight; the chain moved. "I have to be on a bus in forty minutes. Was there something you wanted me to do?"

"No."

"Then I'm going to shut the door," she said, "and you're not going to take it personally, because you're a decent man and it isn't personal. I said good morning to you and you didn't hear me. That's all that's ever happened between us."

She shut the door.

He stood on the step for about ten seconds. Through the glass he could see the hall light and a bicycle and a school bag, and then a shape moving away from him down the hall, and then the hall light went off.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The Fire Door

Joost had the coffee machine, and it was a good one, and he made two without asking.

The office was one room above a print shop on the Coupure, with four desks and two people at them, and a wall of photographs that turned out, when Wim looked, to be sites. Just sites. A pumping station, a school roof, a bridge deck, a tank farm.

"Sit down," Joost said. "You've been busy."

"I've been to the registry."

"I know. Lieve Stroobants rang me in December and asked me a dozen questions, and I answered all of them, and she thanked me and said she had no jurisdiction over me, which is true, and I said if she ever got any I'd come in voluntarily, which is also true." He put the coffee down. "Ask me."

"Did you put me in that room in October?"

"No."

"Don't — "

"I'm not doing that," Joost said. "Listen. Sint-Amands was on our list twice a year from 2034, for a client who had a boundary dispute about the abstraction and wanted somebody attested on site in the spring and the autumn. That's it. That is the entire reason Kwartier has ever cared about that works. Your October round was your ordinary monthly round on your ordinary rota and we did not buy it, we did not know about it, and I found out you had been in that building on the twenty-sixth of October at the same time as everybody else, which was from the regional news."

"Then what am I?"

"You're a man who was in a room." Joost leaned back. "Wim. I've thought about this more than you have, because I've had longer. We didn't make the twenty-sixth of October happen. We made you. Eleven years of putting you where certainty gets needed, and you got good at it and you got promoted for it

and you never once had a contested hour, and by last October you were a man whose word closed questions. That's ours. And then you walked into a room we hadn't paid for, on an ordinary Tuesday, and a woman four feet behind you said good morning."

"That's worse."

"Yes," Joost said. "I think so too. I have thought so since February."

He got up and went to the wall of photographs and put his finger on one, a school, red brick, ordinary.

"Nineteen thirty-one Sint-Bavo. Contractor certified eleven fire doors and hung nine. The paperwork was immaculate; it always is, that's what paperwork is for. We had a woman on that site for an unrelated ceiling survey and her attested presence put her in the corridor on the day the doors were signed as hung, and she remembered two bare frames, and because it was her, nobody could do the thing they always do, which is to make the argument about her. The contractor folded in a fortnight. Four hundred children in that building." He sat back down. "I have a dozen of those. I'm not going to show you all twelve, because you'd start counting them against Sint-Amands, and I don't think it works like that, and neither do you."

"What does the woman in the laundry get out of the fire doors?"

Joost did not answer for a moment.

"Nothing," he said. "She gets nothing out of the fire doors. I've got no answer to that and I've stopped looking for one. What I've got is that the world I'd be selling into if I stopped is a world where a contractor's word and a technician's word weigh the same, and the contractor has a lawyer."

"She didn't have a lawyer either."

"No," Joost said. "She had a hole in a wall."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

What an Asset Is Worth

He said no in the room, which he had not planned; he had planned to say it in writing, with a copy to Ingrid, the way he had been told.

"I'm not taking the retainer."

"All right."

"And I'm going to ask my employer to take the preference off my portfolio."

"You can ask," Joost said. "They'll say no, or they'll say yes and it'll come back in eighteen months when somebody reprices the framework, because it isn't about you. It's a line on a schedule. But ask."

"You're not going to try and talk me out of it."

"No." Joost gathered the two cups. He seemed, if anything, sorry rather than anything else. "Can I tell you what happens? Not as a threat. I want to be exact, because people imagine something worse than the truth and then behave accordingly."

"Go on."

"Nothing happens. That's all of it. We stop buying preference on your rota, which means when you come up for the estuary allocation in September you go into the pool with the other four, and one of them will be Ariane, who is good, and she'll get it about half the time. Your framework visibility drops, because a fifth of your work was sites where somebody had a reason to want you specifically and to say so in writing. In three years you'll be at band four doing band four work and nobody will have done anything to you at all." He rinsed the cups. "And I'll take on somebody else. I've got a man in Mechelen who came to me last year, enrolled in '11, no discontinuities, and he asked me straight out at the first meeting what it was worth, which you didn't, and I thought less of him for it and took him anyway."

"Ivo," Wim said. He did not know why he knew the name. He had seen it somewhere on the framework.

"Ivo," Joost agreed. "He'll be delighted. He'll do it for fifteen years and he'll be very good and he'll never once ask what it's for, and I'll sleep fine about that, because he's not going to ask and I'm not going to tell him, and that's the arrangement and both of us know it."

At the door Wim said, "Does it bother you at all?"

Joost thought about it properly, which was the thing Wim had liked about him from the first phone call and had been trying not to like since.

"It bothers me at about four in the morning perhaps six times a year," he said. "Which is, I'm told, roughly average for a man with a business. If you're asking whether I'd stop, no. If you're asking whether I think about her, yes. Her name's Haddad."

"I know her name."

"I know you do," Joost said. "I'm telling you I do."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The Pool

Ingrid took the preference off his portfolio in March, under protest, and made him put the request in writing so that she could put her advice in writing under it.

"You understand what you're doing," she said.

"I understand what I'm doing."

"You understand it's not a moral act. It's a rota."

"I understand that too."

She signed it. The line came off the framework schedule at the end of the quarter, and Kwartier's two thousand went wherever two thousand euros goes, and for a whole quarter nothing whatever happened, which he had been told and had not believed.

Then September came and the estuary allocation went into the pool.

There were four of them in the pool and three sites, and he got one, which was the smallest, and Ariane got the abstraction and a man called Sadik got the deep-water terminal. Nobody did anything to him. The scheduling system weighted on availability, previous familiarity and client request, and on the third of those he now scored nothing at three sites where for six years he had scored everything, because the firms that had asked for him by name had asked through a line item that no longer existed.

The smallest of the three was fine. It was a decent site with a decent manager. It was four visits a year instead of eleven.

In November the terminal client rang the office and asked for the man they had had before, and was told he was in the pool now, and said, reasonably, that they had had somebody good for six years and would like to keep having somebody good, and were told about page four, and bought it, and got Sadik, because by then Sadik had been there twice and the system had the familiarity weighting, and the client did not know the difference and would not have cared.

Wim heard about this from Nele in the framework office, who told him as gossip, kindly, not knowing.

He went out and did his four sites. He was as good at it as he had ever been. The difference was that he was now good at it in front of about a fifth as many people, and he noticed, in a way he was not proud of, that the thing he missed was not the work.

CHAPTER FORTY

Nothing Prohibited

He wrote to the framework conduct office in April and got a reply in June.

He had put it carefully, because he was careful. He did not allege that Kwartier had done anything improper. He set out what allocation preference was, what Kwartier used it for, and what he had come to understand about the difference between a firm buying continuity of inspector because it was tired of explaining its site and a firm buying the presence of a person whose record could not be contested. He asked whether the framework considered the second use to be within the intent of paragraph 4.7.

The reply ran to two pages and was signed by a woman he had never met.

> *The schedule of charges does not distinguish between client motives for purchasing allocation preference, and the framework operator does not consider itself competent to inquire into them. A client purchasing under 4.7 acquires a scheduling preference only. It acquires no influence over the conduct, findings or reporting of the inspector, and no such influence has been alleged.*
>
> *You raise the question of whether the presence of an inspector with a full-provenance record can operate to the disadvantage of other persons present at a site. The framework operator notes that this is a question about the general design of attestation, and not about the schedule of charges, and that it does not lie within this office.*
>
> *No breach is identified. No further action is proposed. Thank you for raising the matter.*

He read the middle paragraph about eight times. It was, he thought, entirely correct, and it named the actual problem more precisely than anything he had managed to write himself, and having named it, it passed it along a corridor to a door that did not exist.

He asked, separately, whether preference could be made unavailable at works where contractors' staff did not carry room-level attestation, on the basis

that the asymmetry was the whole difficulty. That reply was one paragraph and took three weeks.

> *Attribution at site level is a matter for each employer. The framework cannot require a contractor to purchase attestation for its staff, nor can it decline to sell a service to a client on the basis that a third party has chosen not to purchase a different one.*

He put both letters in the drawer in the kitchen where the car documents lived, and then, a week later, took them out and put them in a folder, because he had begun, without deciding to, to keep things.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Restricted

The certification review took ten months and concluded in a letter of four pages, which was three more than it needed.

> *The panel has considered whether L. Haddad's registration remains appropriate. The panel notes that no finding of dishonesty has been made. The panel notes that the registrant has eleven years of unblemished service without prior concern. The panel notes that the standing determination of March finds the reporting event to have occurred at 09:28, forty-eight minutes after the time asserted by the registrant.*
>
> *The panel is not able to reconcile the registrant's continued assertion of the earlier time with the determination. In the panel's view, a registrant who maintains an account inconsistent with a determination, in circumstances where the determination has been tested on appeal, demonstrates a difficulty of professional judgement which bears on suitability to hold unsupervised works-critical registration.*
>
> *Registration is restricted. The registrant may work under direct supervision. The restriction may be reviewed after three years on application.*

Leila read it twice and then read the fourth paragraph out loud, in the kitchen, because she had got into the habit of hearing them in a human voice.

They had not restricted her for the morning. They had restricted her for not changing her account about the morning. If she had said, at any point in those ten months, *I may have been mistaken about the time*, she would have had her card and her deployment back and probably an apology, and she had known this, in a general way, since about April, and had known it precisely since a conversation with Hakim in June in which he had not quite said it.

She had not changed her account, because it was true.

That was the whole of the exchange, laid out in four pages by a panel of reasonable people: her registration for her account. She could have had one of them.

She did not appeal. She told Hakim on the phone and he started to say something about grounds and she said, "Hakim," and he stopped, and after a moment he said, "All right," and they talked about his youngest's knee for twenty minutes instead.

She did not cry about it, which surprised her, and then two days later she cried about a dropped jar of olives on the kitchen floor for about twenty minutes while Yasmine stood in the doorway not knowing what to do, and afterwards they went out for chips and Leila said, "It isn't about the olives," and Yasmine, who was fifteen by then, said, "I know it isn't about the olives," with such exhausted patience that Leila laughed until she had to sit down on a bench.

The laundry paid one thousand four hundred and eleven euros a month. She was good at it within a fortnight. There was a woman there called Danuta who had been a paediatric nurse in Gdańsk and who said, on Leila's third night, without being asked: "Don't tell them what you were. They can't help it. They start being sorry at you."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Four Names

He mapped the forty-one sites in April, on paper, on the kitchen table after Noor had gone to bed, and Hanne came in and looked at it and went out again without saying anything, which was where they were by then.

He was not looking for anything in particular. That was what he told himself and it was about half true. The other half was that a man who has been an instrument for that long would like to know how many instruments there are, and where, and whether any of them have noticed.

It took him three weekends and it was not difficult. Kwartier's clients were on the framework, and framework works were published, and inspection allocations were published in the quarterly schedule because the province had decided in 2031 that transparency meant publishing schedules. He worked backward: every site on his annexe, every quarter, every named inspector on the published schedule. Where he had not been the named inspector, somebody had. He was looking for names that recurred where Kwartier's clients recurred.

There were four, including his.

One was a woman in Bruges who did lifts and pressure systems. One was a man in Mechelen called Ivo Demeyer. One was a man in Hasselt whose name appeared nine times in six years and then stopped, in 2040, and did not appear again anywhere in the province, which Wim looked into for two evenings and did not get to the bottom of.

He wrote to all three.

The woman in Bruges replied in four lines to say that she had no idea what he was talking about and that she would be grateful if he did not write again, and he believed the first part until he reread it and noticed that she had used the phrase *allocation preference* without his having used it.

The man in Hasselt did not reply.

Ivo Demeyer replied within an hour.

Ha! Yes. Small world. Joost said you'd left. Come over, I'm in Mechelen Thursdays, there's a place by the station that does a decent lunch. I'd be interested to hear what the trouble was, if you want to tell me, and if you don't that's fine and we'll talk about something else.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Ivo

He was fifty-two and he had a good coat and he ordered for both of them because he had been coming there for nine years.

"So," Ivo said. "You had a thing."

"I had a thing."

"Water, wasn't it. The small works. The boy." He said it without relish, and with the exact degree of seriousness the subject wanted, and it was the first time in eighteen months anyone in a professional setting had said *the boy* to Wim rather than *the matter*. "I read the determination when Joost mentioned you. That's a horrible one. You were just in the room."

"I was just in the room."

"And they built it on you."

"They built it on me."

Ivo nodded slowly and ate some of his soup. "Right," he said. "And then you went and looked at everything and found out about us, and it made you feel like a tool in a drawer, and now you're driving round the province writing letters to people like me."

"More or less."

"I'd have done the same. I don't think you're being dramatic." He put his spoon down. "Can I tell you the version from this side? Not to change your mind. Just so there's two of them in the room."

"Go on."

"I do lifts and confined spaces. Twenty-two years. I've been on the roster since '34. And in that time I have been in a room on four occasions where a contractor was lying and it fell apart because I was standing there and there is no way to make an argument about whether I was standing there." He counted them off on his fingers, without hurry, and they were specific: a hoist certificate, a gas test that had not been done, two men working under a load, a training record for a man who had been in Poland that week. "Four. Nobody died in

any of them, which is the thing about prevention, you never get the story. And in the same time I have been in perhaps three hundred rooms where nothing happened at all and my record has just sat there being a record."

"And the times it went the other way?"

"What way?"

"The times somebody in the room with you wasn't attributable, and something they said got weighed against something you said."

Ivo thought about it for a while, and Wim watched him think, and it was clear that it was the first time the question had been put to him in that form.

"I don't know," he said, eventually. "That's an honest answer. I wouldn't know, would I. It wouldn't come back to me. If my record closed a question about somebody who wasn't in the measurement, the first I'd hear of it is nothing, because the question would be closed." He picked the spoon back up. "That's an unpleasant thought and I'd rather not have been given it, and I can see you're not going to take it back."

"Would you stop?"

"No," Ivo said. "No, I wouldn't. I've got a daughter at Leuven and a mortgage on a house I bought at the top, and the money's not the point but it isn't nothing, and the four is the point, and I think the four is real. And I'll tell you the other thing, and you can think what you like about me for it: I like being believed. I've liked it since I was about twenty-six and I found out it was going to be the shape of my life. That's not a good reason and I'm not offering it as one. It's just true and I'd rather say it than have you work it out on the train."

They talked about other things. He was easy company. He paid, over Wim's objection, and shook hands on the pavement, and then said, holding on a second longer:

"The woman. In the water thing. Where is she now?"

"She works in a laundry in Gentbrugge."

"Right," said Ivo. And then, after a moment: "Don't tell me any more about her. I mean that as a request. I've got about four years to do and I'd rather do them."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Katrien

It ended, or began to, on a Wednesday in May over something that was not it.

Hanne came in at twenty past nine from a late and put her bag down and said, before her coat was off, "I was with Katrien. We went to the place by the Vrijdagmarkt. We had two glasses of wine and I had the fish. She got there at ten to seven and I got there at five past because the handover ran, and we left at twenty past nine, and I paid, and it was fifty-one euros, and I've kept the receipt, and it's in my bag, and I want you to look at it."

Wim said, "Hanne."

"Look at it."

"I don't want to look at it."

"I know you don't want to look at it." She was not crying and she was not shouting. She was doing a thing with her voice that he had never heard, which was holding it very level on purpose, the way you hold a full glass. "I've been doing it for three weeks. I've been coming in and telling you the whole evening before I take my coat off, with the times, and you've never once asked, and I've done it every time, and tonight I heard myself doing it in the car on the way home. Rehearsing. Working out the order."

"I've never asked you to — "

"No. You've never asked. You asked twice in eight years and both times you apologised. It isn't the asking." She sat down, still in her coat. "It's that I can feel it. I have always been able to feel it. There is a room in you where my evenings get checked against something and I've known about that room since about the second year, and I decided it was a small price, and it was, for a long time, and then you found out about the annexe and the rate and page four and you have been walking round this house for six months being the man who wasn't measured, and I can't — "

She stopped.

"Go on."

"I was going to say I can't live in the corridor. That's not it. I've lived in the corridor for eight years and it was fine." She looked at her hands. "What I can't do is watch you find out that you've been on the other side of it your whole life, and discover that the thing you actually want, underneath all of it, is for somebody to measure me back."

He did not sleep in the spare room. Nothing that definite happened. What happened was that she went up at half past ten and he sat in the kitchen until one, and in the morning they were entirely normal with each other, and were entirely normal for about five months, and both of them knew what that was.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

The Year

He went to Marieke's on a Saturday in June without ringing first, which he had not done since their mother died.

She was in the yard with the door open, painting a chair, which was a thing she did about twice a year to chairs that did not need painting. Bram was out. Noor was at a party and Hanne had taken her.

"You should ring," Marieke said. "I could have been anywhere."

"You're never anywhere."

"That's true and rude." She put the brush down on the tin. "Sit on the wall, that one's wet. Do you want a coffee or are you being quick?"

"I want to ask you about the year you got the gap."

She looked at him for about three seconds.

"Right," she said. "I'll put the kettle on."

She was gone a good five minutes, which was longer than a kettle. When she came back she had two mugs and had taken her apron off, and she sat on the step rather than the other wall, and got a cigarette out and then put it back in the packet.

"You've never asked," she said.

"No."

"Fifteen years."

"I know."

"You said the awful one from Zottegem. That's the version. You said it at Christmas about four years ago in front of Bram and I nearly went for you." She wrapped both hands round the mug. "Do you want the short one or the whole thing?"

"The whole thing."

"You won't like it."

"I know."

"No," Marieke said, "you don't, actually. That's the bit I've never been able to explain to you. You think you know what's coming and you think it's going to be sad, and it isn't sad, it's *boring*, and the boring is the thing you're going to have to sit with."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Marieke

He was nineteen and she was twenty-two and their mother had been diagnosed in the February.

That was all of it, really. Everything after that was arithmetic.

She had been living in Zottegem with Ronny, who was not awful, who was a perfectly ordinary young man with a van and a laugh and no plans, and who she had stopped loving in about the March and had gone on living with until the August because the rent was in both names. Wim had been in his first year at Ghent. He had got the place on his own merits, and she had said so at the time and said so still, and what nobody had ever said, because there was nothing to be gained by saying it, was that the bursary had come through in eleven days, unconditional, because his chain was clean and his mother's income was documented and the scheme's eligibility check had nothing to chew on, and that it had been the fastest thing anybody in their family had ever received from an institution.

Their mother had wanted him to stay at Ghent. She had said so in February, in the hospital, with real force, in a way that was not up for discussion, and both of them had agreed, and it was the right decision and Marieke had never once thought otherwise.

So Marieke did it.

Tuesdays and Thursdays and every other weekend, from Zottegem, on two buses, to Ledeberg. Then the job at the depot, which was nights, four on two off, because nights paid the premium and the premium was what made the two buses possible. Then the second job on the Saturdays, in the shop, which lasted five months and which she had taken because their mother had needed a thing done to the bathroom.

"It wasn't heroic," she said. "I want that clear, because you're doing the face. It was just the only shape that worked. Anybody would have done it.

Ronny did the driving twice a week and he was fine about it and he didn't have to be."

The re-attestation came up in the October.

It came up the way it came up for everybody: a notice from the provider, a window of sixty days, an appointment to be booked, at an office in Aalst, in person, because in 2029 half of them were still in person. She booked it for a Thursday and then their mother had the second round and the Thursday became a hospital day. She rebooked it for the following Tuesday and the depot changed her shift pattern and the Tuesday became a sleeping day, and she rang and was told the next appointment at Aalst was in six weeks, which was outside the window, and was told to try Ghent, and Ghent was eleven weeks, and she took it anyway because it was the only thing on offer, and she wrote it on the calendar in the kitchen at their mother's flat.

Two days before the Ghent appointment the provider collapsed.

"And that's it," Marieke said. "That's the whole thing. That's the awful one from Zottegem. Eleven weeks of an appointment I couldn't get, at the end of a window I missed because our mother had chemotherapy on a Thursday, with a provider that went under while I was waiting for the slot. Seven months, in the end, before the new one would touch me, and by then it was a gap and a gap doesn't care why."

Wim said, "I didn't know any of that."

"No."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you were nineteen and you were doing your exams and she told me not to." Marieke got the cigarette back out and this time lit it. "And then because the first year afterwards you were sad about her and I wasn't going to, and then because after that it started to be a thing I'd have had to explain in a particular order, and I couldn't face the order. And then at some point it went past being a thing I hadn't told you and became a thing you'd decided about me, and by then you were saying words like *lapse*."

"Marieke."

"I'm not finished. You can have the rest, because I've had it ready for about nine years." She looked at him properly. "Your bursary took eleven days. Do you know how long my mother's carer's allowance took? Fourteen

months. It came through in the January after she died and I sent it back and they sent it again. And every single person in that process was polite to me, Wim, and not one of them was able to do anything, because what they needed was a documented continuous relationship and what I had was a gap in the middle of the exact period I'd been doing the caring."

"You never said."

"I said constantly. I said it in every way except the way you needed it said, which was apparently with dates." She smoked. "And the worst of it — the actual worst of it, the thing I think about — is that I don't blame you for the bursary. I've never blamed you for it for one minute. You needed it and you got it and you did the degree and you've been good at your job. What I can't get past is that you spent fifteen years thinking the difference between us was that you kept your things in order."

Neither of them said anything for a while. Next door's dog barked twice at nothing.

"Say the thing," Marieke said. "You've been holding it since you sat down."

"I built a career on it," Wim said. "On the clean chain. Twenty-eight hundred a year somebody offered me for it. And a woman lost her registration last month because a record said she wasn't in a room, and the record was mine."

Marieke put her cigarette out on the wall and put the stub in her pocket, out of a habit that no longer had a reason, because Noor was nine and was not in the yard.

"Well," she said. "That's the first sentence you've said to me in fifteen years that I didn't already know the end of."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The Bearing

The Zelzate refit went to dispute in the September, exactly as Joost had said it would, and because Wim had been the named inspector for nine quarters he was asked for his records and, in due course, for a statement.

It was an ordinary commercial mess. The client said the contractor had not isolated when the contractor said, and had not maintained when the contractor said, and there was a valve chest and an entry stamp and a dozen other things. Wim gave them the record, which said what it said, and which put him on that floor on the fifteenth with the chest open.

He read his own statement draft on a Thursday night, and then did not sign it, and sat with it until Friday, and then rang the municipality's legal team and asked to add a paragraph.

The young man said, "Add what?"

"In March of that year the extraction fan in the main plant room was running at a pitch that indicated a bearing failure. I noticed it. It was outside my remit and I didn't report it, and I didn't report it because I had just told the site manager I wasn't going to write him up for something else, and I didn't want to hand him a favour and a finding in the same conversation."

There was a silence on the line.

"Is the bearing part of the dispute?"

"No."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"Because it's true and it was in that building and I was in that building, and I've spent a year and a half finding out what happens when a man says only the tidy part."

The young man, to his credit, put it in. It was in the statement as paragraph eleven, and the contractor's solicitor used it in December, in a way nobody had anticipated, to argue that the client's own inspection regime had been aware of maintenance deficiencies it had not raised, which cost the muni-

cipality something, and Ingrid came and found him about it in January and was not unkind and was very clear.

Cornelis rang him in February, once. He was not angry either. He said, "You could have just told me at the time," and Wim said, "I know," and Cornelis said, "That's all," and rang off. They had known each other a long time and that was the last time they spoke.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

A Narrowing

He went back to Lieve Stroobants in March because there was no one else to ask, and she saw him, which she did not have to.

"I want to know what I can actually do," he said. "Not what should be done. What I can do, by myself, with no money and no standing."

"You can't amend a model."

"I know."

"You can't reopen a determination. You're not a party, and even the parties can't, not on this."

"I know that too."

Lieve got up and went to the window, which had a car park in it, and stood there with her hands in her cardigan pockets.

"You can narrow a scope," she said.

"Meaning?"

"It's in the enrolment regulation, and it's been there since the pilots, and I have seen it used eleven times in nineteen years and nine of those were people in witness protection." She came back and sat. "Your chain carries attestations. Presence, location, timing. A scope is the set of purposes for which an attestation may be relied upon. By default it's everything: contractual, administrative, adjudicative, actuarial. You can lodge a narrowing. You can say: my attested presence may be relied upon for operational and contractual purposes and may not be relied upon as dispositive corroboration in adjudicative proceedings."

"What does that do?"

"Going forward, it means no registry, no panel and no court can build on your presence the way this one did. Your record would still say where you were. It would stop being an instrument and start being evidence, which is a thing people can argue with." She paused. "It is not retrospective. I want to be very clear about that, because everybody hopes. The Haddad determination is made. Narrowing your scope tomorrow does not touch it."

"Then what's the point?"

"There are two," Lieve said. "The first is that Haddad's restriction is reviewable in three years on application, and a review panel looks at the whole picture, and a picture in which the instrument that removed her from the arithmetic has been voluntarily dismantled by the man who held it is a different picture. Not a winning one. A different one. I would not promise you anything about it and neither would anyone honest."

"And the second?"

"The second is that you stop being the thing that happens to the next one." She said it without weight. "There will be a next one. Not at that site; you won't be at that site. But you'll be in rooms for another twenty years, and some of those rooms will have people in them who aren't in the measurement, and at the moment, if anything is ever contested, you win, automatically, before anybody has said anything. A narrowing means the next person you can't see gets to be argued about."

Wim said, "How long does it take?"

"To lodge? Eleven minutes. It's a form."

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The Price

He worked it out over about three weeks, on paper, because his hands still wanted something.

The employment. Nobody could dismiss him for it; there was no provision anywhere that required an inspector to hold an unnarrowed scope. But a municipal inspector whose attestations could not be relied on adjudicatively was, in the specific language that Ingrid would be obliged to use, *of reduced evidential utility on framework sites*, and the framework's whole model for the industrial portfolio was that disputes got settled without three years of argument. He did not think they would move him. He thought they would stop putting him where it mattered, which they had already largely done, and that in four or five years there would be a restructure and a conversation.

The mortgage. Two-point-one, fixed, twenty-two years, and fixed meant fixed; nobody could reprice it. But it came up for renewal in 2066, and a narrowed scope was a flag, and a flag was, on Fien's own numbers, somewhere between eight tenths and a point and a half. On the outstanding balance at that point, about eleven thousand euros over the remaining term.

The rest of it was not money.

He would stop being the eleven seconds. If Noor was ever in a hospital corridor at two in the morning, the form would take what forms take. If Hanne needed a guarantor, he would be a man with a narrowing on his record, and the scheme's policy would say what Yasmine's school's scheme had said. He had never in his life been asked for a second document. He would be asked for a second document.

And underneath all of it, the thing he could not get onto the paper in a form that looked like a cost, because it was not one: he would no longer be a man who could not be doubted. He had been that man since he was six years old. It was, he understood, sitting at the kitchen table at one in the morning with a page of arithmetic in front of him, not a thing he had ever had to be

brave about, and he had spent thirty-seven years believing it was a thing he had earned by being careful, and it had been bought for him by his parents at six and topped up by a man on the Coupure at two thousand a site.

He did the arithmetic twice. It came to about eleven thousand euros and a career that flattened and a lifetime of second documents.

It was, by any measure he could construct, affordable.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Not Yet

He did not do it.

He had the form open on the console on a Tuesday evening in April and he did not do it, and the honest account of why is that he wanted to talk to Hanne first, and Hanne was on a late, and by the time she came in it was twenty past ten and she was tired and he did not raise it.

He had it open again on the Friday. That time Noor came in wanting help with a thing about the Romans, and he closed it and did the Romans, and afterwards it was half past eight and there was a film on that they had been meaning to watch.

He had it open on the following Wednesday and got as far as the declaration box, which said *I understand that this narrowing is permanent and may not be reversed*, and he read the word *permanent* about six times, and then his father rang, who never rang, about a boiler.

None of that is a reason. He knew it at the time. A man who can lodge a form in eleven minutes and does not lodge it over three weeks is not being interrupted; he is deciding, slowly, in the only way he knows how, which is by not doing it and finding out how that feels.

What he did instead, in those three weeks, was ordinary. He worked four sites. He took Noor swimming twice. He fixed the gate that had been sticking since February and made a good job of it. He was pleasant to his colleagues and had a long conversation with Nele in the framework office about her mother. Twice he drove home the long way, through Gentbrugge, past the end of a street he did not turn into, and the second time he sat at the junction for so long that a man behind him beeped, and he raised a hand in apology and drove on.

On the last Sunday in April, Marieke rang to say that the Carrefour job had come good and she was on days properly now, and that Bram's brother's

dog had got into Lucie's garden again, and that she was making the thing with the apples next week and was he coming.

"I'm coming," he said.

"You sound funny."

"I'm fine."

"Right," said Marieke, in the voice of somebody who had decided not to ask and was letting him hear that she had decided.

He hung up and sat in the kitchen for a while, and the form was on the console where he had left it, minimised, with the declaration box open, and he looked at it and did not touch it, and went and put the bins out, because it was Sunday, and the bins on that street had been, as Fien had warned him two years earlier, a disaster from the beginning.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Three-Monthly

The appointment was at ten past nine and they were always early, because Nadia had been early to everything since the night with the towel across his lap.

Samir was nine. He had been nine for five weeks and was extremely aware of it. He had a football bag with him that he did not need, because the appointment was on a Tuesday and Tuesday was training, and the whole car journey had been an argument he was conducting with great skill and no chance of success about whether he could go straight there afterwards without going home for his boots, which were at home, because he had left them at home, which was the flaw in the argument and which he had been trying to get past for twelve kilometres.

"Your boots are at home."

"Faisal's got spares."

"Faisal's got size five feet."

"I could wear them."

"You could not wear them."

The waiting area at Dendermonde had a fish tank and a box of toys for much smaller children and a machine that did a hot chocolate he liked. He had one. He was too old for the toys and not too old for the fish, and he stood in front of the tank with the hot chocolate telling her which fish was the worst one, which was a long-running assessment that had changed three times in two years.

They were called at twenty past.

It took nineteen minutes. Blood pressure, height, weight, the two bloods from the arm he preferred, the ultrasound he had stopped minding at about seven, and a conversation between the consultant and his mother over his head that he had heard so many times he could have done it himself. *Function stable. No proteinuria. Growth on the ninetieth, which is where he's always been. Keep*

the fluids up in summer. Anything from the school about PE? Nothing? Good. Same again in three months.

In the corridor afterwards he said, "Can I have a thing from the machine."

"You've had a hot chocolate."

"That was before."

She bought him a thing from the machine.

In the car park he did the boots argument again from a new angle, which was that there were spare boots in the club shed, which was probably true, and she gave in because it was ten to ten on a Tuesday and she had the whole day before her shift and because he was nine and his kidneys were stable and it was a good day, and he made a noise of triumph that set off nothing in the car park because it was a car park.

The parking ticket went in the top pocket of her bag. At home it would go in the drawer with the passports, where there was a folder with everything in it, including the first parking ticket with a word written on the back of it in her own handwriting from a night in October when he was seven.

She had stopped, some time in the last year, reading the letters from the solicitors all the way through. She read the first paragraph and the last and then filed them, and when people at work asked how it was going she said, "It's going," and they said, "Good," and everyone was relieved.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Eleven Minutes

He told Hanne on the Thursday, because he had decided that he was not going to do it and then tell her, which was a thing he might have done two years earlier and would have described to himself as not making a fuss.

She listened to all of it: the form, the scope, the eleven minutes, the eleven thousand euros, the second documents, the review in three years that might be a different picture and probably would not.

"And it doesn't undo it," she said.

"No."

"Not any of it. Not her card, not the determination, nothing."

"Lieve was very clear. It's not retrospective. It stops me being that for the next one."

Hanne was quiet for a while. They were in the kitchen. There was a thing on the radio neither of them was listening to.

"I'm not going to tell you to do it," she said.

"I'm not asking you to."

"You are, a bit." She said it without heat. "You want me to say it's the right thing, and then if it goes badly in four years it'll be a thing we decided. And I'm not doing that, because I've watched you for two years now and I think you need this and I don't entirely know what for."

"That's fair."

"It's not fair at all, actually," Hanne said. "It's just true. Do you want to know what I think?"

"Yes."

"I think a woman is working nights in a laundry because of a sentence you said honestly in a nine-minute meeting, and I think nothing you do now reaches her, and I think you know that and are going to do it anyway, and that's either the best thing about you or it's the same thing that made you check my Tuesdays, and I have been trying for six weeks to work out which

and I can't." She got up and rinsed her cup. "Do it or don't. I'm not leaving either way, if that's the other question."

"It wasn't the other question."

"It was a bit," Hanne said, and dried her hands, and then stayed where she was instead of going past.

"I want to say the rest of it, because I've been not saying it since February and it's started to be its own thing." She folded the towel, badly, and put it down. "In the spring I worked out what leaving would look like. I did it properly. I looked at the flats round my mother's and I worked out the school run and I had a conversation with Katrien that she has never once mentioned since, which is why she is my friend."

"Hanne — "

"I'm not telling you to frighten you. I'm telling you because you've spent two years finding out that things you thought were luck were decisions somebody made, and I'm not having this be one of them. I stayed. It wasn't drift and it wasn't the mortgage. I sat in a car outside a flat in Mariakerke with the engine off and I decided." She picked the towel back up and hung it properly. "You can have that. You're not allowed to ask me for it again."

He said, "Why?"

"Because you went out there in the dark and looked at a plan on a wall," Hanne said. "Nobody made you do that either."

She put one hand briefly on the back of his neck on the way past, which she had not done in about a year.

He lodged it on the Friday morning from the kitchen table at twenty past eight, after the school run, in a dressing gown, which he thought about afterwards and found, on balance, appropriate.

It was a form. There were nine fields. Identity, which filled itself. Chain reference, which filled itself. The scope schedule, which was a list of purposes with checkboxes: operational, contractual, administrative, actuarial, adjudicative. He unchecked one.

Then a free-text box headed *Reason for narrowing (optional, retained on record)*, and he sat over that for longer than he had sat over anything, because everything he could think of was either four words or four hundred.

In the end he wrote: *My attested presence was relied upon to establish that a person was not in a room. She was in the room. I did not see her.*

Then the declaration. *I understand that this narrowing is permanent and may not be reversed.* He checked it and pressed the thing.

It took eleven minutes, of which eight were the box.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Nobody Rings

The confirmation came back in ninety seconds.

> *Scope narrowing lodged. Chain ref 2016/PP/44118. Adjudicative reliance: withdrawn. Effective immediately. This action is permanent. A record of this narrowing is held with your chain and is visible to any party entitled to query it.*

That was all. He sat in the kitchen in his dressing gown and looked at his own console on the wall and waited, without admitting that he was waiting, for something to happen.

Nothing happened.

Nobody rang. There was no call from the registry, no query from the framework office, no message from Ingrid. He had half expected, in some part of himself he was not proud of, that a thing of this size would be noticed by somebody in the building whose job it was to notice, and that there would be a conversation in which he would explain it well.

At ten past nine he got dressed and went to a site at Zelzate's neighbour and did a perfectly good inspection and came home.

Ingrid found out four days later, from the register, and came to his desk, which she never did.

"You've narrowed your scope."

"I have."

"Adjudicative."

"Yes."

She stood there with her tablet against her chest. Ingrid had been in that building for twenty-six years and had hired him and had put him on a band four panel and had told him, in a corridor, not to decide retrospectively that he had not earned his career.

"Was it about the water thing?"

"Yes."

"Was it about the woman?"

"Yes."

Ingrid looked at the car park through the window for a while.

"Right," she said. "I have to note it. It's going to come up at the framework review in October, and somebody from the province will ask me whether we've got an evidential problem on the industrial portfolio, and I'm going to say no, because we haven't, because the whole portfolio ran fine for thirty years before anybody was attesting to rooms." She tapped the tablet once against her sternum. "It was a stupid thing to do and I'd have told you not to, and I think I'd have been wrong. That's the whole of what I've got. Don't make me say it again."

She went. Nele in the framework office, when she found out, was simply baffled by it, and asked him three times over a fortnight whether he was all right, in a way that made clear she thought he had had some kind of episode, and he said yes each time, and she was kind to him about it for months afterward in a way he found harder to take than Ingrid's.

Nobody else noticed at all.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

A Different Picture

Lieve Stroobants rang Leila herself, which she did not have to do, and which she thought about for two days first.

"Mrs Haddad. My name is Lieve Stroobants. I made the standing determination in your matter. I want to say that at the start so you can put the phone down if you'd rather."

There was a silence on the line long enough that Lieve wondered if she had.

"Go on," Leila said.

"Wim Adriaans has lodged a narrowing of scope. Permanently. His attested presence can no longer be relied upon as dispositive corroboration in adjudicative proceedings, anywhere, in any matter, from last Friday."

Another silence.

"What does that do?"

"To your determination, nothing." Lieve had decided in advance to say that sentence first. "It isn't retrospective. The determination is made and stands. Your restriction stands. I'm not ringing you with good news and I'm not going to let you spend an afternoon thinking I am."

"Then why are you ringing me?"

"Two reasons. The first is that in three years you can apply to review the restriction, and a review panel looks at the whole picture, and the picture will now include the fact that the instrument the determination was built on has been voluntarily dismantled by the man who held it, with a reason attached that he wrote himself. I have seen worse cases turn on less. I would not tell you to count on it."

"And the second?"

"The second is that the civil claim is live, and the insurer's counsel will have seen the narrowing within a week, and the determination they have been leaning on for two years is now leaning on something with a hole in it. That is

not justice and I am not pretending it is. It is money, and it will move, and it will move toward a boy in Dendermonde and not toward you."

Leila did not say anything for a while.

"What did he write?" she said. "In the reason."

Lieve read it to her.

> *My attested presence was relied upon to establish that a person was not in a room. She was in the room. I did not see her.*

"Is that on a record somewhere? Permanently?"

"Permanently. Visible to anyone entitled to query his chain, for the rest of his life and after it."

"Right," said Leila.

She did not cry and she did not say thank you, and afterwards she could not have told anybody what she had felt, because what she had felt was not one thing. She was standing in her own hall. Yasmine's bag was on the floor where it always was. She had four hours before her shift and a wash on.

"Mrs Haddad," Lieve said. "For what it is worth, and I am aware of exactly how little that is: I found the drawing in May of the first year. Forty minutes' work. I did the arithmetic and I put it back and I went to a meeting. Nobody made me do that. I want you to have that from me rather than from a file."

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because you asked me a question in an appeal and I answered it with a page and a half about jurisdiction," Lieve said, "and I have been thinking about that page and a half for two years."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

The Fifth Telling

The insurer's counsel came at Dirk Maes in November, and they were not the registry, and they did not say *I understand*.

They had four things now that they had not had before. They had the narrowing, which meant the determination's foundation had been publicly holed by the man who provided it. They had the archived 1979 drawing, which Wim had sent to the Haddiou family's solicitors in September with a covering letter that Ingrid had told him not to write and that he had written anyway. They had Etienne, the retired operator, who had said in Leila's appeal that readings had been passed through the hatch for thirty years and who would say it again to anybody. And they had Dirk's first two tellings, which were in the contractor's own review file and which the family's solicitors had finally got sight of on disclosure.

They put the second telling to him first, in a room in Brussels with three lawyers in it.

She told me and I was under the rack and I didn't register it properly.

"That's what you said to your operations manager on the day."

"That's — I was in shock. That was four hours after."

"It's twelve words and it has a time in it. *On the day.* You've since said 09:28."

"I gave them what I remembered."

"You gave them 09:28 five weeks after you told two people you couldn't put a time on it."

It took about forty minutes. He did not break in any way that would look like breaking in a transcript. What he did was go back to *I can't put a time on it*, which was where he had been in the third telling, and stay there, and when they pushed he said, nine times by the count of the note-taker, that he could not be certain.

Q: Is it possible she told you at or about 08:40? A: I can't be certain. Q: Is it possible? A: I can't be certain of the time. I've said. I can't be certain.

That was enough. It was enough because it was a civil matter and not a determination, and because in a civil matter an *I can't be certain* from the only witness holding the forty-eight minutes is worth a great deal of money.

It was not enough for anything else. It did not amount to an admission. He never said she had told him at twenty to nine. He said he could not be certain, which was, by November, entirely true, and had been entirely true since about the third telling, and was the reason the whole thing had happened.

He drove home to Griet and did not tell her how it had gone, and she did not ask, because she had stopped asking in the spring.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Griet

The coupling he replaced on his own time that first October was the beginning of it, and he did a great many things like it over the three years that followed.

He fixed the handrail on the filter hall stairs, which had been loose since before he started. He rewrote the weekly check sheet so that the valve line had a box for the actual reading and not just a tick, and put it to the operations manager, who approved it in a fortnight without asking why, and it went in across all nine sites, and it is possible that it will prevent something one day and there is no way anybody will ever know. He stopped saying *give me a minute* to anyone about anything, ever, in a way that his own crew noticed and privately found funny, and mimicked, and were careful never to mimic in front of him.

He did not sleep properly for the first eighteen months and then he did.

What he said to himself, on the nights, was not that he had lied. He had gone over it enough times to be quite clear with himself on that. He had been under a rack with a torch in his mouth and a coupling that he should have dealt with in September, and a woman had said a number at him through a hatch, and he had said he would come and look in a minute, and he had not come and looked for forty-six minutes. That was the thing he had done. Nobody had ever asked him about it, not once, in three years, because it was not a question anybody's process had a box for. Every single person who had ever put a question to him had asked him what time she had told him.

Griet worked it out in the second winter.

She did not work out what he had done. She worked out that he had done something, which in a marriage of twenty-six years is the same information arriving in a different envelope. She had known since about the November of the first year, from the way he had stopped asking her to come with him to his brother's.

She said one thing about it, once, in the kitchen, in February, while he was putting plates away.

"Whatever it is," Griet said, "I'd rather have it."

He stood with a plate in his hand.

"It's not — "

"I'm not asking. I've had two years of not asking and I've got good at it and I'll do another twenty if that's what it is." She was wiping a surface that was clean. "I'm saying you've got it on your own, and you needn't have it on your own, and I'd rather have half of it than watch you do the stairs again at one in the morning."

He put the plate in the cupboard. He shut the cupboard.

"I didn't go and look," he said.

Griet waited.

"She told me and I said give me a minute. And then I was doing the coupling, and the coupling was the one I should have done in September, and by the time I went through it was twenty-six past." He said it to the cupboard door. "That's it. That's the whole of it. Everything else is what time I said, and I've said what time about nine different ways to about eleven different people, and not one of them ever asked me that."

"Did you tell them? In the end?"

"I told them I couldn't be certain." He turned round. "Which is true, Griet. It's the truest thing I've said in three years. I cannot be certain. I've got four versions of that morning in my head and they're all mine."

Griet folded the cloth over the tap.

"Right," she said. "Then I'll tell you a thing and then we'll have the news on. You were never going to be the man who stopped the works. I've known you since you were twenty-two. You'd have gone and looked in a minute and it would have been a minute, on any other Tuesday of your life, and the one time it was forty-six minutes it was because of a coupling and a torch and nothing else at all. That's not a good man or a bad man. That's a Tuesday."

"A boy's on a monitoring programme."

"I know," Griet said. "And you're going to carry that, and I'm going to carry you, and that's the arrangement. Put the big pan away, it doesn't go there."

He put the big pan away.

He never told anybody else, and nothing in any record anywhere ever mentioned the coupling, and the next morning he was up at six and out at half six and did four jobs, and Griet did not raise it again, and did not need to.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

A Figure and a Form

It settled in February, without admission of liability, for a sum the Haddiou family were advised to accept and did.

Nadia was not told about the narrowing, or the drawing, or the fifth telling, or the woman in the laundry. She was told, by a solicitor she liked, that the position had improved substantially in the autumn for reasons that were technical, and that the number on the table now was a good number, and that a trial would take four years and would be an ordeal and might produce less.

The sum was structured: some now, some at eighteen, some held against the monitoring. There was a form to sign with fourteen pages and an initial box on each one. There was a clause about confidentiality that her solicitor talked her through twice and that meant she could talk about what had happened to her son and not about what she had been paid for it.

She signed it at a kitchen table with a cup of tea going cold, in about four minutes, on a Tuesday.

What she said afterward, to An De Vos, two doors down, was: "They still haven't told me who was in the building at twenty to nine."

"No," said An.

"It's the only thing I ever asked."

They had the conversation they had had perhaps twenty times in two years, which went round the same corner and came back to the same place. Then they talked about An's son-in-law, and about the bins, and Nadia went home and put the form in the drawer with the passports, on top of the parking tickets, and Samir came in at half past five wanting to know what was for dinner and complaining about a boy called Wout.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Six Weeks

Kwartier replaced him inside six weeks, and Wim only found out because Ivo told him, in an email that was friendly and slightly too long.

> *I've picked up the two estuary ones off the preference list. Sorry, that sounds like gloating and I don't mean it as gloating. Joost asked and I said yes and I'd have said yes anyway. He was decent about you, for what it's worth. He said you were the only one who'd ever asked him a question he hadn't heard before, and then he said which one it was, and I've been turning it over since, which I expect was the intention.*
>
> *I hope you're all right. I meant what I said about not telling me any more.*

The two sites went to him in March. They were good sites and he was good at them and the clients were pleased, and Joost's business did not change in any respect that could be measured, and in April Kwartier took on a woman in Leuven who did electrical, who was thirty-one, enrolled at six like the rest of them, no discontinuities, and who was extremely pleased to be asked.

Wim did not hear about that. He heard about Ivo and that was all, and he found, reading the email in the car park at a site near Eeklo, that what he mostly felt was a sort of flat professional recognition, the way you feel when you leave a job and see the advert.

He did not answer it for three days. Then he wrote back four lines saying that he was all right, and that the sites were good ones, and that the client at the northern estuary works liked things explained in order and not all at once, which was true and useful and had taken Wim two years to learn.

Ivo replied: *Noted. Thanks. Genuinely.*

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

The Second Document

Noor broke her wrist in June, falling off the low wall outside the sports hall, in front of four other children who all gave different accounts.

It was not serious. It was a buckle fracture of the sort that heals in five weeks and produces a cast that gets drawn on. But she was nine, and Hanne was two hours away at a course in Antwerp, and the hospital needed consent from a parent for the sedation, and Wim was standing at a desk at twenty to eight in the evening with his daughter white-faced beside him holding her arm against her chest.

The woman at the desk was pleasant and was not at fault for any part of what happened next.

"I just need to verify you as the parent, and then we can get her round."

His chain answered. It took the ordinary second.

Then the screen did something, and the woman looked at it, and looked at it again.

"Sorry. It's flagged a narrowing. Adjudicative."

"That's right. It's a narrowing on adjudicative reliance. This isn't adjudicative."

"No, I know. I'm not — " She was already reaching for a different form. "Our system's set to prompt on any narrowing, because it can't tell which kind, and then we have to do it by second document. Do you have a second document? Photo ID with the same registered address."

He had his driving licence. The address on it was four years out of date, because he had moved and had not updated it, because it had never once mattered.

It took forty minutes.

None of it was anybody's fault. The woman rang a supervisor, who was helpful. The supervisor rang somebody else. Hanne, from Antwerp, verified in

eleven seconds over a video link, which solved it in the end and which meant that Noor was sedated at twenty past eight instead of twenty to.

Forty minutes, with a nine-year-old on a plastic chair holding her arm and saying, twice, "Is it because of the thing you did?" — because he had explained the narrowing to her in March in about four sentences of the kind you use for children, and she had understood the shape of it better than most adults he had told.

"It's because a computer can't tell one kind from another," he said. "That's all."

"But it's the thing you did."

"It's the thing I did," Wim said.

She was fine. She had a cast and an opinion about the colour of it. In the car afterward, doped and cheerful, she said, "I'd still do it," which made no sense and which he thought about for a week.

He did not tell Hanne about the forty minutes. Hanne found out from Noor within about a day and did not raise it, and the not raising it sat in the house for a while, and then stopped being a thing, the way most of it did.

CHAPTER SIXTY

Daylight

She asked to meet him, through Hakim, in July.

It was a bench outside the sports centre at Gentbrugge at eleven in the morning, between her sleep and her shift, in ordinary daylight with people going past with bags. She had a coffee from the machine inside and did not offer to get him one, and he had not expected her to, and that was about the level the whole thing was pitched at.

"Stroobants rang me," Leila said.

"I know. She said she would."

"She read me what you wrote." She looked at the car park. "I want to ask you something and I want you to answer it properly, because I've got about twenty minutes and I've thought about the question for four months."

"Go on."

"Why did you do it?"

Wim had prepared several answers over those months, and looked at all of them, and did not use any.

"Because I was asked a question in a room and I answered it the best way I knew how and it took everything off you," he said. "And I can't give any of it back. So I got rid of the thing that did it, because it was the only thing in the whole business that was mine to get rid of."

Leila thought about that.

"That's about you, then."

"Yes," he said. "I think it is. I've tried four or five ways to make it be about you and it isn't. It's eleven thousand euros and a career that goes flat and a form at a hospital, and none of that is any use to you, and I did it anyway, and I've stopped pretending I did it for you."

"Good," Leila said. "That's the first true thing anybody's said to me about any of it in two and a half years."

A woman went past with a pushchair. Somewhere behind them a whistle went twice.

"I'm not grateful," she said. "I want to say that out loud, because you've been decent and people who've been decent generally get something for it, and I'm not going to be the thing you get. I'm fifty-one hours a week in a laundry. My card says restricted for another two years and eight months and then there's an application and a panel and a probably. Yasmine's seventeen and she thinks I do nights because I like them. None of that moved."

"I know."

"The boy's family got money. Stroobants told me that as well, and I've thought about it, and I'm glad, and I want you to know it took me about six weeks to be glad." She turned the cup in her hands. "I'd have gone to a hearing, you know. At the start. Two years ago, if anybody had put me in a room with Dirk and a panel and let us both talk, I'd have had him inside twenty minutes. I'm better at it than he is. I know that skid, I know that morning, I know what he said and how he said it. There was never a hearing. That's the thing I can't get out from under. Not that I lost. That there was nothing to lose."

"No," Wim said.

"And your record was why there didn't need to be one."

"Yes."

"Right," Leila said. She stood up. "That's what I came to hear you say, so that's that."

She put the cup in the bin without looking at it, the way you do with a bin you have used four hundred times.

"Are we going to do this again?" she said. "Because I don't want to, and I'd rather say it than have you write to me at Christmas."

"No."

"All right." She shouldered her bag. "Your daughter broke her arm, Hakim said. Is she all right?"

"She's fine. She's got a cast with a dog on it."

"Yasmine had one at that age off a trampoline," Leila said. "She kept it. It's in a box in her room, it's disgusting." And then, at four paces, without turning round: "I hope it stays flat. Your career. I hope it stays exactly as flat as you said."

It was not cruel. That was the thing he would think about on the drive home. It was said the way you say a fact to somebody who has told you a price and who you would like, for your own reasons, to actually pay it.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

The Form

Marieke did the thing with the apples in October and afterward made him sit at the table while she got the folder.

"Right," she said. "Guarantor stuff, driving licence, the address, and the bank. And the school one for Noor, because that'll come round in two years and you'll want it done before."

"I can do my own forms."

"You can do your own forms when you've got a clean chain. You haven't got a clean chain." She sat down opposite with a pen. "That's not me being smart. It's a different job now and you don't know how to do it and I've been doing it since 2029."

"Marieke."

"Wait. I'm going to say the thing and then we're going to do the forms, and I'd rather do it in that order." She put the pen down. "Fifteen years you thought I was careless. Fifteen years. You said it at Christmas in front of Bram. You said it at a lunch in this house in front of my aunt with the news on. You've made a face at my bank statements since I was twenty-five. And now you've gone and put a mark on yourself on purpose, and you've found out what a second document is, and there's a bit of you that thinks that squares it."

"I don't think that."

"There's a bit of you that does," Marieke said. "And I want to be clear, because I love you and I'm not doing this again: it doesn't square it. It doesn't come close. You did it at thirty-seven, on purpose, with a mortgage fixed at two-point-one until 2066 and a wife on a decent wage and a brother-in-law who'll sign anything. I got mine at twenty-two because our mother had chemotherapy on a Thursday. Those aren't the same and they never will be, and if you ever say the words *I know what it's like* to me I will put you out of that door."

"I won't say it."

"Good." She picked the pen back up. "You can say it to somebody else in about four years if you like. You won't want to by then."

They did the forms. It took an hour and ten minutes and she was very fast. She knew which ones took the address from the licence and which took it from the bank. She knew that you never gave them the licence first. She knew a woman at the credit union who would witness anything on a Saturday morning if you brought her a coffee, and made him write the name down. She knew that the school scheme's guarantor box had a helpline, and that the helpline had a woman on it called Christel who was the only person there who knew what a narrowing was, and that you asked for Christel.

Wim wrote it all in the back of a notebook. At about the fifth item he stopped feeling humiliated and started taking it down properly, the way he took things down on a site, and Marieke noticed the change in his handwriting and did not say anything about it.

When it was done she made more coffee and they sat in the yard, which was cold, in coats, because she wanted a cigarette.

"You're quiet," she said.

"I was working out what I've got on this week."

"And?"

"Nothing," Wim said. "Two sites. A thing on Thursday."

She smoked. Next door's dog barked at the gate and gave up.

Afterward he drove home the ordinary way, and got in at about four, and the house was empty, because Hanne had taken Noor to her mother's and would not be back until seven.

He put the kettle on and did not make anything with it. He stood in his own kitchen with his coat still on and the console dark on the wall, and outside it was getting dark early the way it does in October, and there were three hours in which nobody was going to ask him anything.

He was not attested to the kitchen. There was no reason he would be; there never had been. But it occurred to him, standing there, that if anybody ever asked him where he had been between four and seven on a Thursday in October, he would have to say *at home*, and they would have to decide whether to believe him.

He waited to feel something about that.

Somewhere upstairs the pipe that had always ticked, ticked. A car went past and did not stop.

It was an hour like any other hour, and then it was two, and then Hanne's key was in the door and Noor was telling him about a dog they had met, and he had not, in any of it, thought about the thing once.