THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE RESPONSIBLE PERSON

Book III of the Legibility Cycle

A crime novel about authorship, and the people who learn that a system with no one to blame will eventually build someone.

ORACLE ERA

N. Van Seters & Claude

Contents

PART ONE — THE DIRECTION

1. The One 2
2. Zuidplas 4
3. Above the Café 6
4. Four Systems, Two Dead 8
5. Four Names 10
6. Nobody Decided Anything 12
7. Drenthe, Twice 14
8. A Phone Call Anneke Took 17
9. I Have Not Been Asked To 19
10. Ten Past Four 21
11. Fourteen 23
12. Thirty Lengths 25

PART TWO — THE CHAIN

13. DO NOT 28
14. Marja 30
15. A Biscuit 33
16. Dekkers 35
17. In Red 37
18. That's Mine 38
19. Not an Author 40
20. The Floor 42
21. Stepping Over 44
22. Excellent and Unusable 46
23. Tak 48
24. Most Proximately 50

PART THREE — THE STORY

25. Verbeek 53
26. The Forecourt 55

27. The Third Car 58
28. I Wondered When 59
29. What Bram Did 62
30. Three Hours in a Shed 64
31. Relieved 66
32. Overnight 68
33. The Car Park 70
34. The Coat 73
35. Angry 75
36. Four Paragraphs 78

PART FOUR — THE PILOT

37. Completeness 81
38. Two Days 83
39. The Argument 85
40. Two Doors 88
41. Every Step 90
42. Eight Seconds 92
43. The Night Before 94
44. One Syllable 96
45. The Hofvijver 98
46. Four in the Morning 100
47. Vlaardingen 102

PART FIVE — THE FORM

48. Senior Officer 105
49. Optional 107
50. The Runbook 110
51. November 113
52. Two Floors 115
53. The Signature 118
54. Ferry, in December 121
55. The Next File 123

Part One

The Direction

IN THE MATTER of a claim by Coöperatie Corridor Zuid against Havenbedrijf Rotterdam (corridor authority), reference TR/2035/0288.

DIRECTION of the tribunal, 14 January 2036.

1. The claim as pleaded is brought against the corridor priority scheme. Under section 9 of the Algorithmic Governance Code 2029, liability in respect of an automated prioritisation scheme attaches to the designated responsible person for that scheme. No such person is designated in respect of the scheme in issue.

2. The provincial oversight body is directed, pursuant to section 14(2), to identify the responsible person for the scheme and to report to the tribunal within ninety days of the date of this direction.

3. The tribunal notes that the code presumes such a person exists.

CHAPTER ONE

The One

Anneke gave it to her in the corridor between the lift and the stairs, which was where things were given out in that building, because Anneke did not hold meetings for anything that could be said in forty metres.

"Tribunal direction. The corridor thing, the hauliers. They want a responsible person and there isn't one designated, so we've got to go and find who decided it." She handed over a tablet and did not stop walking. "You did records. Go and do records."

"How long have I got?"

"Ninety days from Monday." Anneke slowed at the stairwell door, which she took instead of the lift for reasons she had once explained at length and which Wieke suspected were about the lift's mirror. "Read it properly, not the summary. And Wieke."

"Yes."

"This is the one."

She went down the stairs. Wieke stood in the corridor with the tablet and did not say anything back, because there was nothing to say to a sentence like that which did not make it bigger.

She read it in the lift on the way up, which took eleven seconds and was not long enough, and then again at her desk, properly, all six paragraphs.

It was paragraph three that stayed.

The tribunal notes that the code presumes such a person exists.

She read it three times. It was, she thought, a beautiful sentence, and she did not yet know why, and she wrote it out on a sticky note in her own hand and put it on the edge of the monitor, where it stayed for five months and was still there in August when everything else on the desk had changed.

Her desk was an archivist's desk. Everybody said so, mostly kindly. Three years in compliance and she still arranged her working papers in accession

order, in physical folders, left to right, with the oldest at the left, because that was how you laid a series out on a table and you could not unlearn it and she had stopped trying. Gerda opposite had a desk with a plant on it and a photograph of a dog that had died in 2032.

She took out a new folder and wrote *TR/2035/0288 — corridor* on the tab, and then, underneath, because she could not help herself, *2021–*.

Then she sat and looked at the ninety days.

Ninety days was nothing. Ninety days was the kind of window you were given when the person giving it had not looked at what was inside it. But ninety days with a chain that went back fifteen years, in a records estate she already knew was in four systems, two of them decommissioned, was a piece of work that would either be very good or would fail visibly, in a document, with her name on it, in front of a tribunal.

She was aware of being pleased, and of what she was pleased about, and she let herself have it for a minute before she opened the first system.

CHAPTER TWO

Zuidplas

She got the tram home because the bike had a puncture and she had not fixed it in nine days, and she thought about Zuidplas the whole way, which she did perhaps twice a week and which she had long ago stopped treating as an event.

The facts of it were not complicated and had never been in dispute.

She had been a records officer, band three, eighteen months into a retention project that had been running for six years before she touched it. The project was the ordinary project: the province held four hundred thousand linear metres of paper and forty years of digital and could not afford either, and a retention schedule existed which said what was kept and for how long, and somebody had to sign each tranche off. She had signed off eleven boxes of daily records from a care home in Zuidplas that had closed in 2028. Daily records: shift notes, handover sheets, the log a night staff member writes at two in the morning. Retention period for daily records of a closed facility, under the schedule, was six years from closure. It was 2034. The maths was not difficult.

They were destroyed on the twelfth of March. A claim came in on the nineteenth of July, on behalf of a family, about a period in 2027, and the evidence that would have shown what had happened on the relevant nights was shift notes and handover sheets and a log written at two in the morning.

That was all of it. That was the whole thing.

Nobody said she had done anything wrong, because she had not. The schedule said six years and she had applied it. She had not written the schedule; it had been made in 2019 by a working group whose minutes she had subsequently read, twice, looking for a person, and had not found one. She had applied it correctly, on time, with the right signatures, and the internal review said so in a paragraph she could recite.

And then in November they had moved her to compliance, which was a sideways move at the same band, and which her line manager had described as

a good fit for your skills in a conversation that lasted six minutes and in which the word Zuidplas was not used.

That was the part she could not get round.

If they had disciplined her she could have appealed. If they had written a finding she could have argued with the finding. What they had done instead was to move her, correctly and kindly, in a way that had no document in it at all, and there was therefore nothing to appeal and nothing to correct and no end to it, and eighteen months later she still did not know — genuinely did not know, on the tram, with her bag on her knees — whether she had been moved because somebody thought she was careless or because somebody thought the records office needed to be seen to have done something.

She had rehearsed the defence of it so many times that she could no longer tell whether it was a defence or an account. That was the honest position and she was honest enough to hold it, most days, for about as long as the tram took.

The family's claim had failed in the end, on other grounds. She knew that. She had looked it up, which she should not have done, in a system she still had access to for two months after the move.

At her stop she got off and bought milk and walked up past the church and thought: *this is the one.*

She knew exactly what Anneke had meant by it, and Anneke had known she would.

CHAPTER THREE

Above the Café

The transport café on the Waalhaven had a room upstairs with a serving hatch to nowhere and forty chairs, and Coöperatie Corridor Zuid met in it on the second Tuesday, and had done since 2024.

Twenty-three members. Bram Osseweijer counted them, as he counted them every time, out of a habit that had started as a joke about quorums and had become the thing he did instead of an opening remark. Nine of them still drove. Six had sold up. Four were widows who had kept the membership after their husbands died, and who came, and who voted, and one of whom — Ans — was the only person in the room Bram was actually frightened of.

"Right," he said. "Coffee's the same, before anybody says. I've spoken to Hennie. He says it's the machine. I said it's been the machine since 2029 and he said yes."

That got what it always got, which was a noise rather than a laugh, and was fine, because it was not really a joke any more, it was a thing he said so that everybody knew the meeting had started.

He read the direction out. He did it badly and he knew he was doing it badly; there were six paragraphs of procedure at the front about the pleadings and the code and section this and section that, and he got about two lines into it, felt the room go, and jumped.

"Right, the important bit. They've got ninety days to give us a name."

"Who has?"

"The oversight lot. The province." He held the paper up as though the paper were the point. "The tribunal's said the claim can't go against the scheme. It has to go against a person. And there isn't one, so they've got to go and find out who it is, and they've got ninety days to do it, and then we've got somebody."

"Somebody to do what," said Ans.

Bram had been ready for this since the letter came, and it still stopped him for a second, because Ans asked it flatly and without hostility and it was the only question that mattered.

"Somebody who has to stand up," he said. "That's it. That's what it gets us. Fourteen years I've been told it's the model, it's the system, it's the algorithm, it's the corridor. You can't put a corridor in a room. You can't ask a corridor what it was thinking." He put the paper down. "Somebody sat down and built that thing, and somebody else said yes to it, and then it ran for fifteen years and took the margin off every small operator on this side of the river, and I want to know which of them it was, and I want them in a room, and after that they can pay us or not pay us, I don't care, but I want the room."

"You do care about the paying," said Ans.

"I care about the paying," Bram agreed.

They voted to instruct Prins to press for it. It was unanimous. He counted the hands anyway, and the count was twenty-two, because at the back, with his coat still on, Verbeek had his hands in his lap.

Bram did not say anything about it. He never did. He had brought Verbeek in himself, in 2027, had driven out to Vlaardingen twice to do it, and he was prouder of that than of anything else the cooperative had done, and if the man wanted to sit at the back with his coat on and not vote, then he could sit at the back with his coat on and not vote.

CHAPTER FOUR

Four Systems, Two Dead

The corridor authority's records were held, Ferry explained, in four systems, and he wanted to be clear at the outset that two of them were dead.

"Dead how?"

"Dead as in nobody supports them, nobody's licensed, and the last person who knew how they worked took redundancy in 2031 and moved to Almere." He said Almere the way other men said prison. "I can get into both. I'd rather not be asked how."

Ferry Ketelaar was sixty-two and had been in the archive since it was in the basement of a different building. His desk was arranged like a signal box: three screens at angles, a paper day-book, three trays, and a mug in a position that suggested the mug had a position. He wore a cardigan in a building that was too warm and had strong views about the building being too warm.

"You'll want the adoption," he said. "Everybody starts with the adoption."

"Who's everybody?"

"There's no everybody. It's a figure of speech." He was already typing. "There was a man from the ministry in 2030 wanted the framework agreements. And an auditor, twice. Nobody's ever wanted what you want."

"What do I want?"

"You want to know who decided," said Ferry. "Everyone thinks that's a records question."

He found the minute of the adoption meeting in a little under twenty minutes, which Wieke accepted at the time as ordinary and understood, about six weeks later, to have been a small miracle performed in front of her by a man who had not mentioned that it was one.

He printed it, because he printed things, and put it in front of her.

"Ninth of June, 2022," he said. "Operations committee. Item four."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet." He sat back. "Now. Rules of the house. If I say a thing is in the 2026 system, it is in the 2026 system and you do not go looking for it in the 2028 system, because the 2028 system will give you something that looks like it and isn't. If I say something was done on a Friday, you take that as a material fact."

"Why?"

"Because nothing in this building has ever been done properly on a Friday and I can show you." He said it without any particular humour. "Migrations. Promotions. Schema changes. Decommissioning. Check the day of the week. I've been saying it for twenty years and they think it's a bit I do."

Wieke looked at him.

"Is it a bit you do?"

"It is now," said Ferry. "It didn't start as one."

MINUTE — Operations Committee, corridor authority. 9 June 2022, 14:00, Room 2.4.

Present: G. Aalders (chair), I. Vermeer, H. de Wit, P. Souza. Apologies: two.

Item 4 — Corridor priority scheme.

4(a) The committee received the proposal from VanderLaan Logistics for a throughput-weighted priority scheme for the north corridor.

4(b) It was agreed that the weighting be piloted as the default priority scheme under the existing framework agreement, pending review within twelve months.

4(c) Members noted that the weighting had been developed externally and that the committee was not in a position to evaluate it technically.

4(d) Action: Ops to bring a review paper to the committee within twelve months.

Item 5 — Gate maintenance.

CHAPTER FIVE

Four Names

She had a day and a half of being happy, and she was entitled to it, and she spent most of it building a spreadsheet.

Four names. Aalders, Vermeer, de Wit, Souza. One of those four had chaired a meeting in a room called 2.4 on a June afternoon and had let a thing be adopted, and one of them, or all of them together, was the answer, and the answer had been sitting in a decommissioned system since before she left university.

She built the sheet the way she built everything: a row per person, a column per document, dates across the top, and a rule that nothing went in a cell unless she could point at the record it came from. By Wednesday evening she had current employers for three of them and a death certificate reference for the fourth.

She put 4(c) at the top of the sheet in bold.

> *Members noted that the weighting had been developed externally and that the committee was not in a position to evaluate it technically.*

That was a sentence that knew what it was doing. You did not write that in a minute by accident. Somebody in that room had said, out loud, *we don't understand this*, and somebody else had thought it was worth getting down, and the reason you got a thing like that down was that you wanted it to be there afterwards.

Sander cooked on the Wednesday, which he did on Wednesdays, and asked her about it because she was obviously going to talk about it anyway.

"So there's four of them."

"There's four of them."

"And one of them's the one."

"One of them chaired it," she said. "Aalders. He's the one I want. Chairs carry it, generally. If a thing goes through a committee it goes through because the chair lets it go through, and he let it go through with a note in the minute

saying they didn't understand it, which is either honest or it's a man laying paper down in front of himself."

"That sounds like a bastard."

"It would be very convenient if he were a bastard," Wieke said.

She was aware, saying it, that this was the sort of thing you said to make it clear you were not hoping, and that she was hoping. She had the sheet open on the table next to the plates. She had written the ninety days on a paper calendar and had crossed off five of them.

CHAPTER SIX

Nobody Decided Anything

The calls took a week and a half and produced, in the end, one sentence.

P. Souza had died in 2031. His employer's pension record gave the date and the archive gave her the leaving letter, which was warm, and a photograph from a newsletter of a man with a beard standing next to a crane.

H. de Wit had gone to the ministry and had a press officer, which was itself an answer of a kind. The press officer was pleasant and asked for the request in writing and said the director would respond within the standard period. The standard period was twenty working days. Wieke put it in the sheet and moved on.

G. Aalders had retired to Drenthe and was seventy-nine. She wrote to him and he rang back himself, at eight in the morning, which she noted approvingly. They arranged a call for the Thursday.

I. Vermeer picked up her own phone on the second ring and said, "Yes, hello," in the voice of a woman in the middle of something.

Wieke explained. There was a pause of the sort that was not confusion but recall.

"The corridor weighting," Ineke Vermeer said. "Yes. All right. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know who decided to adopt it."

"Nobody decided anything."

Wieke had a pen in her hand and she stopped with it.

"Mevrouw Vermeer — "

"No, I'm not being clever. I'm telling you what happened, because you've clearly got the minute, and the minute makes it look like four people sat in a room and chose something, and that is not what happened." She had put down whatever she had been in the middle of; Wieke could hear it. "It was item four. There were sixteen items. The framework agreement with VanderLaan was already running and their model was already how they were scheduling their

own traffic, and the question in front of us was whether to let the corridor use the same weights for everybody rather than run two schemes. And we said yes, pending review, because running two schemes was a mess and because the review would sort it out."

"And the review?"

"There wasn't one. I left in 2024. Ask Ops." A dry sound. "I've read what I signed, since. That line about not being in a position to evaluate it technically — that was Souza. He said it in the room, twice, and I said we should minute it, and that is the single most useful thing I have ever done in nineteen years on committees, and it took me about ten seconds."

Wieke wrote *Souza — said it in the room* and underlined it and knew as she underlined it that it was no use to her at all.

"Can I ask," Vermeer said. "Has anybody talked to the man who built it?"

"Not yet."

"You should. I can't remember his name. He came once, to present it, and he was perfectly good, and he wrote something at the time. A note, with the model. There was a paragraph in it about who would lose out." A pause. "I remember thinking at the time that it was odd to put that in writing. I don't think I thought anything else about it. But it stayed with me, which is more than the rest of the meeting did."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Drenthe, Twice

The Thursday call with Aalders went well for forty minutes and then went on for eleven more.

He was in a bungalow outside Assen with a garden he described before she asked about anything, and he had the minute in front of him because she had sent it, and he had clearly read it several times and made notes, and Wieke, who had been taking calls from elderly former officials for three years, knew within two minutes that this was going to be a good one.

He remembered the room. He remembered Souza and the crane and a thing about Souza's daughter. He remembered that item four had come up after a long argument about gate maintenance that had run over. And he remembered, or said he remembered, the paper being brought into the room by somebody from Ops rather than circulated in advance, which was irregular and which he said he had objected to at the time.

"You objected?"

"I said it wasn't proper. I said papers should go out with the agenda."

"Is that in the minute?"

"It won't be. Souza did the minutes and Souza wrote down what mattered." A dry old laugh. "Which is not the same as what was said, young lady."

That was the forty minutes. It was good. It was the best forty minutes she had had on the file: a chair who remembered an irregular tabling, which was a procedural fact, which was a thing that could carry weight.

She thanked him and rang off at twenty to five and wrote it up, and at half past six, at home, reading it back, she found that she did not have the one thing she needed, which was who had brought the paper in.

She rang him again at ten to seven.

She did not book it. She thought about booking it and decided against, because a booked call three days later would give him time to consolidate a story,

and because — she was entirely clear with herself about this, at the time, in the moment — the recall would be fresher now, the same day, while he still had the minute in front of him.

He answered on the sixth ring and sounded, at once, different. Slower. He had had his tea. There was a television on behind him that stayed on for the whole call.

She asked who had brought the paper in.

He said it was Ops.

She asked who in Ops.

He said he thought it was a young man whose name he could not recall, and then, thirty seconds later, said that on reflection it might have come from VanderLaan directly, that the man who built it had been there, and that he thought the man had presented it himself. Wieke said, *at the June meeting?*, and he said yes, and then, when she read him the attendance line from the minute, said that perhaps it was the other meeting, the one before.

There was no meeting before. She had the series.

She kept going. She was not unkind and she did not raise her voice and she asked the same question in three different shapes over about nine minutes, because that was the technique and it was a good technique and it worked on people who were being evasive, and by the end of the nine minutes Gerrit Aalders had told her three different things about who had brought a piece of paper into a room fourteen years earlier, and had begun to apologise, twice, for being no use.

She thanked him and rang off.

Then she wrote it up. She wrote both calls up, in full, in her working note, because that was the standard and she had never in her life written a note that was not to the standard. Call one: chair recalls irregular tabling, paper brought in by Ops. Call two: chair's recollection inconsistent; variously Ops, VanderLaan, and a meeting that does not exist.

She looked at the second paragraph for a while before she saved it.

It was accurate. Every word of it was accurate. And what it did, sitting there under the first paragraph, was to take the only usable thing she had got all week — an irregular tabling, remembered by the chair — and put a line through it in the man's own voice.

She saved it. She had no other option and she knew it, then and afterwards. What she did not do, then or afterwards, was write down anywhere in the note that the second call had been at ten to seven, unbooked, on the same day as the first.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Phone Call Anneke Took

Anneke came and stood at the end of her desk on the Tuesday, which she did not do.

"Gerrit Aalders."

Wieke's stomach went.

"His daughter rang. About twenty minutes ago." Anneke had her coat on, indoors, which she had been doing since the cold snap in February and which everybody had stopped noticing. "Her father is seventy-nine and has been anxious since last week and has been getting up in the night about a committee meeting in 2022. She wanted to know whether he was in trouble."

"He isn't in trouble."

"No. I told her that. I told her he was a witness to a procedural question, that he had been extremely helpful, that nothing he had said would be attributed to him personally, and that we would not need to trouble him again." Anneke looked at her. "Do we need to trouble him again?"

"No."

"Good."

There was a silence of perhaps two seconds, which in that building was long.

"Don't ring people twice in a day," Anneke said. "They're better in the morning and they're worse at night and you get a different man, and the second one isn't more honest, he's just tireder." She straightened up. "How's the chain?"

Wieke said it was going. Anneke said good and went, and that was the whole of it, and it had taken about ninety seconds.

She had not asked whether the second call was booked. There was no reason she would; the note did not say, and Wieke's notes were famous in the way that a band-three archivist's notes can be famous, which is that they were complete.

Wieke sat and looked at the sticky note on the edge of the monitor.

She could have said it. It would have taken one sentence and the sentence was available: *the second call was mine, it wasn't scheduled, I rang him at ten to seven because I wanted it while it was fresh.* Anneke would have said something short and unmemorable and it would have been over.

She did not say it. She told herself, sitting there with her hand on the mouse, that Anneke had not asked, that the note was accurate, that the outcome was the same either way, and that a woman who was eighteen months out of the records office and on the file that was going to put her back did not need to volunteer a procedural criticism of herself for a phone call that had produced nothing.

Every one of those things was true.

She worked until seven. On the way out she passed Anneke's office and the light was on and the coat was on the back of the chair for once, and she thought about going in, and did not.

ARCHITECTURE NOTE — corridor throughput weighting v1.4.
VanderLaan Logistics. 11 March 2021. Prepared by E. Bakker (contractor).

[extract — §1 and §6 of 6]

1. Purpose. To produce a priority ordering for corridor slot allocation which maximises realised throughput across the scheduling window, using operator-level scheduling reliability as the primary weight.

[...]

6. Note on distributional effect.

NB — priority slots are finite; the model will produce a losing side, and the losing side will be small operators with variable loads. This is a consequence, not a bug. Someone should decide whether it is acceptable. I have not been asked to.

CHAPTER NINE

I Have Not Been Asked To

Ferry found it on the Thursday in the 2026 system, in a folder of supplier documentation that had been carried forward from a server that had been carried forward from a machine, and he brought it up to her floor himself instead of sending it, which she should have noticed.

She read it at her desk with her coat still on.

The first read was the lift. It was the thing she had been looking for since January and it was better than she had let herself imagine: not a man who had built something and walked away, but a man who had built something and written down, in the document, in his own hand, in the year he built it, that it would produce victims and that somebody ought to decide whether that was all right.

She had him. That was the shape of the first read. That was a paragraph you put in front of a tribunal.

The second read was different, and it came about ninety seconds later, and it came because she was an archivist and archivists read the last line.

I have not been asked to.

She sat back.

It was not a confession. It was the opposite of a confession. It was a man documenting, at the time, in writing, that a decision was required and that it was not his to make and that nobody had made it. He had done the one thing in the entire fifteen-year chain that anybody had done knowingly, and what he had done knowingly was to say *this is not mine.*

She read it a fourth time to see whether it would go back to being what it had been on the first read, and it would not.

Gerda, opposite, asked if she was all right.

"I've found the only person in this who behaved well," Wieke said.

"Is that a problem?"

"It might be."

She wrote *E. Bakker (contractor), VanderLaan, 2021* in the sheet, in the row she had been keeping empty, and then sat with the phone in her hand for a while and put it down without ringing anybody, and told herself it was because she wanted the migrations first.

CHAPTER TEN

Ten Past Four

Bram did the run on the Wednesday because Gerben had a hospital thing and because he still liked doing it and would have said neither of those things out loud.

Waalhaven at ten past four. The yard, the checks, the board. Out onto the A15 in the dark with the river on the right doing what the river did, which was nothing visible, and the lights of the terminals going past in the order they had gone past for thirty years.

The corridor started properly at the interchange.

What a priority slot was, if you were in the cab: it was a number on a board and a window. You had a window and you presented at the window and the gate knew you were coming and the gate opened. If you were early you waited and if you were late the window was gone and you took the next one, and the next one was seventeen minutes later, or twenty-two, or an hour, depending on the hour.

That was the whole of it, and that was what nobody upstairs had ever understood, because they thought a lost slot was a closed gate. A lost slot was not a closed gate. A closed gate you could have argued with. A lost slot was a slightly later arrival. Then another one. Then a buyer at a wholesale market who had a morning of his own, and whose own buyers were on their own windows, and who found your pallets arriving at twenty past six instead of five to, twice, and who said nothing at all about it either time and then one day did not ring.

Nobody had ever done anything to him. That was the thing Bram had spent fourteen years failing to explain to anyone at the authority, most of whom had been decent about it, in offices. Nobody had ever done anything to him. His slots had got worse by a few minutes a year, in a way that never once came through as an event, and his margin had gone somewhere, and the some-

where had a shape, and the shape was that the big operators were arriving on time more often than they used to and he was arriving on time less.

He came up past the filling station at ten to five and did not look at it, because it was a filling station.

At the market his window was 05:20 and he presented at 05:17 and the gate opened, because the scheme had been reweighted in 2034 after the second consultant, which nobody had told the cooperative and which Bram had found out from a man in a queue.

He sat in the cab for a minute with the engine off.

"Fourteen years too late," he said, to the windscreen, and got out.

OPERATING PLAN 2023 — corridor authority. Extract, Establishment and Workplan.

Corridor Operations: 12 posts funded, 10 filled. Recruitment paused pending the 2023 efficiency review.

Workplan — carried items:

— Framework renegotiation (VanderLaan) — on track

— Gate sensor replacement, phase 2 — on track

— Scheme review (ref. 2022 item 4) — deferred to next cycle: capacity

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Fourteen

Anneke's office had a kettle in it because Anneke had decided in 2029 that the water on the fourth floor was characterful and had never revisited the decision.

"I've got the review that didn't happen," Wieke said.

"Good."

"It's a budget line. Two posts unfilled, recruitment paused, review deferred to next cycle. There isn't a next cycle. I've got '24 and '25 and it never comes back." She put the extract on the desk. "That's the review the whole adoption was conditional on. The minute says *pending review*. The review was deferred by a capacity note in a workplan."

Anneke read it and gave it back.

"Yes," she said. "That's Tuesday."

"It's the second time somebody's nearly decided something and hasn't."

"It's the second of about six. You're on day twenty-three." Anneke made the tea and did not ask whether Wieke wanted any, which was how tea worked in that room. "Sit down. I'm going to say this once because you're going to need it in about a month, and then I'm not going to say it again, because it gets sanctimonious on the second telling."

Wieke sat down.

"You're going to get to the end of this chain and there is going to be nobody at the end of it. I know that already. So does Tak, if he's read anything, and he has. And when you get there you're going to want to write me a beautiful report that says so." Anneke put a mug down in front of her anyway. "I have eighteen of those. In nineteen years. Eighteen matters where the honest answer was that nobody decided. Do you want them?"

"Go on."

"A care home in Berkel where the staffing ratio came out of a spreadsheet that was copied from another spreadsheet. A bridge inspection cycle that went from two years to four because of a rounding rule in a maintenance system. A

housing allocation that ran for eleven years on a deprivation index nobody had reweighted since the boundaries changed. A school transport contract. A—" She stopped and drank some tea. "You get the shape. I can name all eighteen. I have a list, which I am not going to show you, because it is a list of my own failures dressed as a list of systemic problems, and I know exactly what it is."

"What happened to them?"

"Nothing happened to them. That is the point. Every one of those is still running, in some form, somewhere, because when you write a finding that says nobody is responsible, the system reads it as *no action required*. It isn't a moral failure by anybody. It's a filing failure. There is no in-tray in the world labelled *things that are nobody's fault and still wrong*." She put the mug down. "A system with nobody in it is a system nobody can be made to fix. That's all. That's my whole position and you can do what you like with it."

Wieke said, "And if the person you put in it didn't decide?"

"Then you've got a person who can be made to fix it," said Anneke. "Which is more than I got, eighteen times."

She started clearing the papers on her desk into two piles, which was how meetings in that room ended.

"Ninety days," she said. "Day twenty-three. Don't bring me philosophy on day eighty-nine."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Thirty Lengths

Sander asked about it on the Sunday, over the paper, in the way he asked about things, which was to leave a gap and see whether she came into it.

"So you've got a man."

"I've got a name in a document from 2021. That's not the same."

"But you think it's him."

Wieke thought about it, properly, because he had asked properly.

"I think he's the only person in fifteen years who knew what he was doing," she said. "Which is not the same as the person who did it. There's a difference and the whole job is the difference."

"And if you find it's him?"

"Then I write his name in a report and it goes to the tribunal."

"And then what happens to him?"

She opened her mouth and found she had nothing in it.

It was not a difficult question. It was, she realised, sitting at her own kitchen table on a Sunday morning with the milk out, an obvious question, the first question, the one a person who was not her would have asked in January in a corridor.

"I don't know," she said.

"You don't know, or you haven't thought about it?"

"I haven't thought about it."

Sander turned a page. "That's a strange thing not to have thought about," he said, without any edge on it at all, and went back to the paper.

She was annoyed with him for the rest of the morning, and knew precisely why, and it did not help.

• • •

She swam at seven, which she did three evenings a week, in the twenty-five metre pool at the Oostplein where the lane discipline was good and nobody talked.

Thirty lengths. Her head did not work properly at a desk after about six; it went round the same three objects. In the water it sequenced. That was the only way she had ever been able to describe it, and she had stopped trying to describe it to anybody.

Somewhere around the eighteenth length she stopped thinking about Bakker and started thinking about the shape of what she was doing, which was that she had started at the tribunal and had been working backwards, from the direction, towards a decision, the way you work back from a fire to a cause.

That was wrong. It was wrong because she was not investigating an event. There was no event. There was a scheme that had been operating since 2022 and had been changed by hands, in order, and what she actually had was a series.

And you did not read a series backwards. You read a series forwards, from the earliest record, in accession order, and you let it tell you what it was, and the reason you did that was that reading backwards made you look for the thing you already believed was there.

She stopped at the end of the lane with her hand on the tile.

She had two dead systems, four migrations she had not touched, a consultant's report in 2024 she had a reference to and had not pulled, and a fourteen-year window between the adoption and the tribunal that she had been treating as the gap between two points instead of as the thing itself.

She did the last twelve lengths badly, because she was composing.

In the changing room, with her hair wet and the sticky note's sentence in her head — *the code presumes such a person exists* — she wrote one line in her phone, which was the plan for the next fifty days and turned out to be the plan for rather longer than that:

Start at 2020. Go forward. Record every hand.

Part Two

The Chain

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DO NOT

The migrations took Ferry a day and a half to assemble and about ninety seconds to summarise, which he did standing up, with the day-book open, in the manner of a man reading a shipping forecast.

"Four. 2026, 2028, 2030, 2033. I've got tickets for the first three. The fourth one there's no ticket for because by 2033 they'd stopped raising tickets for infrastructure moves, they did it in the change calendar, and the change calendar for 2033 is in the dead one."

"Which dead one?"

"The bad dead one."

He took her down to the second floor, to a room that had been a store and had a machine in it under a dust sheet, with a printed sign on the sheet that said DO NOT in capitals and nothing else.

"Do not what?"

"Do not," said Ferry.

The machine was, he explained, the last working instance of the 2028 estate's admin console. It ran on an operating system that had gone out of support in 2031 and it was not networked, because the province's security standard had been amended in 2033 in a way that made networking it a disciplinary matter, and so the only way to get anything off it was to run a query, print the result, and carry the paper upstairs.

"You print it."

"I print it."

"How much have you printed?"

"Since 2033?" Ferry considered. "About eleven thousand pages. It's in the blue boxes in the corridor. The corridor's not a storage area, before you say anything. It's been raised twice."

He pulled the sheet off, plugged it in at the wall with an extension lead that went out under the door, and switched it on, and it made a noise that Wieke had last heard in her grandmother's house.

It got to a login prompt and stopped.

Ferry typed. The machine considered this for some time and then produced a line of text in white on blue that said the profile could not be loaded.

"Ah," said Ferry.

He tried again. He tried a second account. He restarted it, which took six minutes, and it did the same thing.

"Right," he said, in the voice of a man closing a door on a subject. "I'll look at it this afternoon."

He did not look at it that afternoon, or the next, and when Wieke asked on the Thursday he said he was working on it, and on the Friday he said the same thing in a shorter sentence, and it was Monday before she understood that the machine had not been on since Wednesday and that Ferry had not asked anybody for help because asking anybody for help meant asking the one person in the building who could do it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Marja

She came up two floors on the Tuesday, without being asked, with a mug in one hand and her badge on a lanyard she had clearly customised herself, and she was talking before she was through the door.

"Right, where is it, and before you say anything, Ferry, I know you've had it off and on since Wednesday because the socket in that room is on my circuit and I've had a spike on it three times."

Ferry said something about a profile.

"It's not the profile." She put the mug down on the dust sheet, which Wieke suspected was a deliberate act. "It's never the profile. It says profile because that's the last thing it tried to do before it gave up. That machine has got a certificate in it that expired in December and every time you log in it goes off looking for a thing to check it against and there's nothing there because there's no network, because of your lot" — this at Wieke, without looking up — "and then it sulks."

"Can you fix it?"

"I've fixed it three times." She was already under the desk. "The last time I wrote it on a card and taped it to the side of the machine. Where's the card, Ferry?"

A silence.

"Did you take the card off?"

"It looked untidy," said Ferry.

Marja Ruijs came out from under the desk to look at him properly, which took a while, and Wieke had the sense of watching a long-running war produce one of its better engagements.

She was in her forties, in a fleece with the port authority's old logo on it, and she had the specific competence of somebody who had come up through operations rather than through a graduate scheme: she did not explain what she

was doing, and she did not look at the screen much, and she talked continuously the entire time about something else.

"You're the compliance one."

"Wieke Dol."

"Right." Typing. "I know what you're doing. Everybody knows what you're doing, it's the corridor, it's the hauliers, Ferry's been carrying paper up and down the stairs looking like a man with a secret." She glanced up for about half a second. "Are you going to find somebody?"

"I don't know yet."

"No. Well." She went back to it. "I'll tell you for nothing, compliance always finds somebody, and it's never the one you'd pick if you'd ever actually been in the building. No offence."

"Some taken."

"Good," said Marja, with approval. "Ferry, this is going to reboot twice and the second one takes eight minutes and if you turn it off during the second one I will come up here and do something to your day-book."

It rebooted twice. The second one took eight minutes. On the other side of it the console came up in white on blue and Marja pushed the chair back and picked up her mug from the dust sheet.

"There. Don't touch anything. And Ferry —" she was already at the door — "I'm putting the card back on and if it comes off again I'm putting it on in laminate."

"The kettle," Ferry said, to her back.

"The kettle is a fourth-floor kettle. It has always been a fourth-floor kettle. It is in your room by an accident of 2031 and you have had eleven good years out of it and you know it."

She went. Wieke looked at Ferry.

"What's the kettle?"

"Don't," said Ferry.

CONSULTANT REPORT — corridor priority weighting: distributional review. Van Hout & Partners, September 2024. Extract, summary of recommendations.

R1. The current weighting materially disadvantages operators with variable load profiles. On 2023 data this effect is not accompanied by a corresponding throughput gain; realised corridor throughput has been flat since 2022 while the distribution of slot allocation has continued to concentrate.

R2. We recommend rebalancing the reliability weight downward by a factor to be determined in modelling, with a floor allocation for operators below a defined fleet threshold.

R3. We recommend that the scheme be brought within a designated ownership arrangement, with a named officer accountable for its parameters.

R4. We recommend review at not more than three-yearly intervals.

MINUTE — Operations Committee, 14 November 2024. Item 7 — Van Hout distributional review.

Noted.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A Biscuit

Van Hout had retired in 2031 and lived in Leiden in a house with more books than shelves, and he gave her an hour and a half and was kind throughout, and it was one of the worst afternoons she had on the file.

He remembered the engagement. He remembered being paid, and that the fee had been on the low side, and that he had taken it because the corridor was interesting. He remembered a man at the authority who had been helpful and a woman who had not.

He did not remember the recommendations.

She read R1 to him. He listened with his head slightly on one side, the way you listen to a piece of music you think you might know, and then said, "Yes. That sounds like me."

She read R3.

"That's certainly me," he said, more warmly. "I put that in everything. I put it in a report about a car park. Nobody ever does it."

"Do you remember what happened to this one?"

"No."

"It was noted."

"Ah," said Van Hout, and there was no bitterness in it at all, which was the thing she could not get past for weeks afterwards. "Well. That's most of them."

She had come out with a specific expectation and she could see, sitting in the chair with the tea going cold, exactly what the expectation had been: that a man who had written *this scheme has no owner and should have one*, twelve years before a tribunal said the same thing, would be angry about it. That he would have carried it. That he would say *I told them* and she would write it down.

He was not angry. He had done a piece of work in 2024, had been paid a slightly disappointing fee, and had gone on to other work, and the corridor was one of about two hundred things he had looked at in a long career, and he

could not be expected to have kept it, and the fact that she had wanted him to have kept it was a fact about her.

"Did it make a difference?" he asked, at the door. "The report."

She thought about lying.

"No," she said.

"No," Van Hout agreed. "They mostly don't." And then, because he was that kind of man, "Have you time for a biscuit before you go? They're the good ones. My daughter brings them and I can't eat them all."

She had a biscuit. It took ten minutes. It was, she thought on the train back, the only part of the afternoon that either of them would remember.

CHANGE TICKET MIG-0441. Raised 14.08.2026. Closed 17.08.2026.

System: corridor scheduling (prod).

Description: platform migration phase 1 — carry forward legacy defaults, no functional change intended.

Risk: low.

Approver: [blank]

Closed by: R. Dekkers (contractor).

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dekkers

"He's in Portugal," said Ferry.

"Is he contactable?"

"That," said Ferry, "is a large question."

The folder had been started in 2030, when the authority had wanted to ask Dekkers about something else entirely, and had been added to twice since by other people wanting to ask him about other things, and Ferry had inherited it in the way he inherited everything, which was by being the only person who knew it existed.

There were fourteen emails in it. Two from the authority in 2030. One from a supplier in 2031. Four from a procurement officer in 2032 who had evidently been under pressure and whose tone deteriorated visibly across the four. Nothing from 2033 to 2035. Three from Ferry himself in the last year, all polite, all short.

"He doesn't answer email from Dutch domains," Ferry said. "That's my working theory. I've tested it."

"How have you tested it?"

"I don't want to say."

He turned the screen round instead. Dekkers had a website. It had not been updated since 2034 and it was about the sculptures, which were large, welded, rust-finished, and photographed on a hillside from four angles each.

Ferry had opinions.

"That one's a gate," he said. "He'll tell you it's about thresholds. It's a gate. That one there is a man who spent eleven years doing platform migrations and has now made a thing with no function at all, on purpose, out of spite, and good luck to him." He scrolled. "This is the one I object to."

"Why?"

"It's called *Provenance*."

Wieke looked at it. It was a stack of steel plates, each one slightly rotated from the one below.

"That's quite good," she said.

"It is quite good," Ferry admitted, bitterly. "That's what I object to."

She asked, later that week, whether Dekkers had ever replied to anybody, and Ferry said no, and then, after a pause long enough to be a decision, said that he had once, in 2032, to the procurement officer's fourth email, and that the reply had been two words long.

"What were the two words?"

"No," said Ferry.

"No, that's the reply, or no, you won't tell me?"

"Yes," said Ferry, and went to get his coat, and never told her, and she asked twice more that spring and he never told her.

MIGRATION 2028 — PARAMETER SET diff extract (corridor/priority/weights)

```
- # NB — priority slots are finite; the model will produce a
- # losing side, and the losing side will be small operators
- # with variable loads. This is a consequence, not a bug.
- # Someone should decide whether it is acceptable. I have
- # not been asked to.
- # E.Bakker 11.03.21
-
+ [weights]
+ schema = 2
+ source = legacy
```

Migration note: format v2 does not support inline comments. Comments not carried. No functional change.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In Red

She had it on the screen for about twenty minutes before she printed it, and she printed it on the machine by the window because the one by the door was out of toner, and it was the only thing she printed in five months.

What she looked at was the colour.

The diff showed removals in red and additions in green, which was a convention from a time before anybody had thought about what it would feel like to read one, and so the last four lines the man had written sat on her screen in red, each with a minus sign in front of it, next to a green block that said *schema = 2*.

Six lines out. Three lines in.

It had not been suppressed. That was what she made herself sit with, because the first ninety seconds of looking at it had felt exactly like discovering a cover-up and she knew that feeling and did not trust it. Nobody had decided to remove the comment. The new parameter format did not support comments. The migration script had read a file in one format and written it out in another, and the part of the file that was a human being saying *this will hurt people and somebody ought to decide whether that is all right* was, in the terms of the new format, not data.

The migration note said so, in the flattest sentence in the entire chain: *format v2 does not support inline comments.*

She thought about the man who had written the migration note. He would have been somebody's contractor, on a phase-two platform move, closing a ticket in August. He had noticed that the comments were not carried and had recorded that they were not carried, which was more than most people would have done. It was, in its way, a small piece of diligence.

She put the printout in her bag and took it home, and then did not know what to do with it, and put it in the drawer in the kitchen with the guarantees and the spare keys, and it was still there in December.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

That’s Mine

She had a technical question and she took it to Marja, because Ferry did not do technical, Ferry did custody, and there was a difference and both of them would have said so.

“The 2030 one. There’s a promotion step and I can see the outcome, but I can’t see who authorised it, and there’s no approver field, and I don’t know whether that means nobody approved it or whether approval lived somewhere else.”

Marja was eating a sandwich at her desk, which had two monitors, one of which showed something moving.

“Give me the ref.”

Wieke gave her the ref. Marja looked at it for about eleven seconds.

“Legacy set,” she said. “No approval required. It’s in the runbook.”

“Whose runbook?”

“Ops runbook. It’s not a secret, I’ll send it to you.” She took another bite. “Right, hang on, that’s — hang on.”

She put the sandwich down and typed for a while, and made a small noise of satisfaction, and turned her screen so Wieke could see it.

“There. That’s the log. That’s your promotion. Fifteenth of November 2030.” She tapped the screen with a fingernail, twice, on the operator field. “That’s mine, that is. Look. M. Ruijs. That’s me. I ran that.”

She said it the way you point yourself out in a photograph from a works outing: pleased, entirely untroubled, with a small proprietorial pride in having been there.

“You ran it.”

“Course I ran it, I ran everything in ’30, there were two of us and Hendrik was off with his back for six months.” She swivelled back. “Friday, look. Ferry’ll tell you that means something. It doesn’t mean anything, it means Fridays were when the window was, because you don’t promote into a Monday, do you,

you promote into a weekend so if it falls over you've got two days. Which is the opposite of what Ferry thinks and I've told him and he doesn't want to hear it because it spoils his thing."

Wieke looked at the operator field with her name in it.

"Do you remember doing it?"

"No," Marja said cheerfully. "I did about six hundred of them. I remember the ones that went wrong." She picked the sandwich back up. "That one didn't go wrong, look, there's no incident against it. That's a good one, that is. That's a clean promotion."

CONFIGURATION RECORD — corridor scheduling. Friday 15 November 2030, 16:42.

Script: run_param_promote.sh

Action: default parameter set marked authoritative

Runbook: OPS-RB-014, step 6 — confirm promotion. No approval required for legacy sets.

Operator: M. Ruijs

Result: success. No incidents raised.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Not an Author

She took Marja's name off the list before she had finished reading the record, and she was right to, and the being right was the part that mattered.

It was, if anything, the clearest question on the file. A promotion step is not an act of policy. A woman who runs a script on a Friday afternoon, following step 6 of a runbook that says no approval is required for legacy sets, promoting a parameter set that was already in production and had been since 2022, has not decided anything about anything. She has operated a system. If you designated her you would be designating a pair of hands, and the whole point of the code — the whole point of the thing the tribunal was asking her to do — was that hands were not what it was after.

Wieke knew that. She knew it in the way you know a thing you have been trained in, which is that it arrives complete, without effort, before you have consciously reasoned it.

She sat with it for a minute anyway, because the record was in front of her and Marja's initials were in it, and because there was something faintly uncomfortable about the ease with which she had removed a person from an inquiry into who was responsible.

Then she resolved the discomfort, correctly, which took about four seconds: the discomfort was not about Marja, it was about the fact that Marja's name was *there*, in a field, in a way that Bakker's was not, because operational systems record operators and policy processes do not record deciders. The record was biased toward hands. Any honest reading had to correct for that. Correcting for it was the job.

She wrote *M. Ruijs — operator, runbook step, no approval required — not a decision-maker* in the sheet and closed the row.

She was pleased with herself for about half a day, and it was a good pleasure, the kind that comes from having done a piece of thinking properly, and it did not occur to her at any point that afternoon that she had now twice extrac-

ted something from a person by being better at a system than they were and had twice declined to write down what it had cost.

From: Finance (corridor)

To: Operations (corridor)

Cc: [4 recipients]

Date: 6 March 2034, 09:14

Subject: corridor parms — keep as is?

Reprocurement window opens April. Do we want to go out for a new scheme or keep as is? Finance view is keep as is, no budget line for a procurement this cycle.

[thirteen messages follow. Subject line becomes: Re: Re: Re: corridor parms — keep as is?]

[msg 4] see below

[msg 7] Adding Joost. Joost — do we still hold the original model documentation from VanderLaan? Can't find it on the shared drive.

[msg 8] Out of office until 18 March.

[msg 9] Removing Joost, he's out. Does anyone know if we hold the original model?

[msg 11] I don't think we've ever held it. We hold the parameters.

[msg 12] Fine as far as I'm concerned then. It's been running eleven years.

[msg 13] Fine by me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Floor

She laid it out on the floor of the flat on the Saturday because there was not enough table, and because she had wanted to do it since the second week and had been telling herself it was theatrical.

It was theatrical. It was also the only way to see it.

She put the documents down in accession order, left to right, in two rows because the room was not long enough for one, with masking tape between them for the gaps and a pencilled date on each piece of tape.

2020 was missing, because she had not looked at 2020, because the adoption was 2022 and the model was 2021 and there was nothing before that. The row began at the architecture note.

March 2021, the note, with the comment block. June 2022, the minute, pending review. 2023, the budget line, review deferred, capacity. September 2024, Van Hout: no owner, name an officer. November 2024, item 7: noted. August 2026, MIG-0441, carry forward legacy defaults, approver blank. 2028, the diff, six lines out, three in, comments not carried. November 2030, the promotion, Friday, no approval required. 2033, the template, the weights as a constant with no author field. March 2034, thirteen emails, fine by me.

Fifteen years, on a floor, with tape.

She stood at the end of it with a mug and looked down the length of it, and the thing she had known since about week three arrived properly, in the body, which was different from knowing it.

There was nobody on the floor.

Not nobody in the sense of an absence of names — there were names all over it, a dozen of them, Vermeer and Souza and Aalders and Van Hout and Dekkers and Ruijs and the procurement officer and Joost who was out of office. There were more names than she could use. What there was not, anywhere in the whole fifteen years, was a single act by a single person that a reasonable reader could call a decision to adopt this scheme in this form with this effect.

Every single one of them had done a small correct thing.

She photographed it. It took eleven shots to get the whole length in and she stitched them badly and sent the result to nobody, and looked at it on the train the following week more than once.

It was the best work she had ever done. She was thirty-one years old and she had been moved sideways out of a job she was good at, and she was standing on the floor of a rented flat in Kralingen looking at fifteen years of an institution laid out end to end in a way nobody had ever laid it out, and she knew, with complete certainty, that whatever else happened, she had done this properly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Stepping Over

Sander came in at half past seven and stopped in the doorway.

"Right," he said.

"Don't move anything."

"I wasn't going to move anything." He took his coat off, looking at it. "How long's it staying?"

"A while."

He went round the edge of the room, along the wall, with his bag held against his chest, and into the kitchen, and made himself something, and ate it standing at the counter because the table had the overflow on it.

She explained it to him from the floor. She was good at explaining it by then; she had been explaining it to herself for six weeks.

He listened to all of it. He asked two questions, both of them good: whether the 2034 email chain had gone to anybody senior, and whether anybody had ever been told, at any point, that the thing had no owner. The answers were no and yes — Van Hout had told them in 2024, in writing, at R3 — and he said *huh* at the second one in a way that was worth more than most of what she had got from the authority.

Then he said, "Can I ask you something, and you're allowed to tell me to get lost."

"Go on."

"Why is it on the floor?"

"Because there isn't enough table."

"No," Sander said. "I mean. You could have this on a screen. You've got a screen. You put it on the floor and you photographed it and you've been standing over it for two hours."

She looked up at him.

"It's a series," she said. "You can't read a series on a screen. You have to be able to see the whole run at once, or you don't know what you've got, you only know what you're looking at."

"Right," he said. "Only it looks like a wall."

"It's a floor."

"It looks like the wall people have in films," said Sander, "where they've got the string."

She laughed, because it was funny, and because he had meant it to be funny, and there was a moment in there where it was an ordinary Saturday evening in a flat with a joke in it.

Then he said, "I'll be in the other room," and went, and she went back to the floor, and that was the last ordinary evening they had, although neither of them knew it and there was nothing in it to mark it out.

ATTRIBUTION REPORT (draft v1) — TR/2035/0288, corridor priority scheme. Provincial oversight body. Prepared by W. Dol, compliance officer.

Extract — §9, Conclusion.

9.1 No decision-maker can be identified.

9.2 The scheme in its operative form is the product of: an adoption expressly conditional on a review; a review deferred on capacity grounds and never reinstated; an external recommendation that the scheme be brought under named ownership, which was noted and not actioned; four platform migrations in which the parameters were carried forward as legacy defaults; and a decision not to reprocure, taken by email, on the basis that the scheme had been running for a long time.

9.3 This officer has examined every record held by the authority in relation to the scheme and identifies no act by any person which can properly be characterised as a decision to adopt the scheme in its operative form. The documented acts are individually minor, individually defensible, and in every case performed by a person acting within their role.

9.4 It follows that the officer is unable to identify a responsible person as directed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Excellent and Unusable

Anneke read it twice, slowly, which she did not do.

The second time she read it with a pen in her hand and did not use the pen, and Wieke sat and watched her not use it and understood that this was the closest thing to praise that was going to happen.

"It's excellent," Anneke said. "It's unusable."

"I know what it is."

"Do you? Tell me what it is."

"It's a finding of absence. It answers the question that was asked."

"It answers the question you were asked in January." Anneke put the pen down. "It does not answer the question the tribunal is going to ask you in March, which is the same question with four words added to it, and you know that, because you've read Tak's skeleton and you're not stupid."

"They haven't asked it yet."

"They will. Tak will invite it and they'll do it, because the alternative is a tribunal saying out loud that section 9 of the code doesn't work, and tribunals do not say that about codes. They say it about facts." Anneke sat back. "So. Day fifty-one. What happens when they send it back?"

"Then I've got a chain and no person, and they'll tell me to pick one."

"They won't tell you to pick one. That's the bit you need to get right in your head before it happens, because if you go into it thinking they're asking you to pick, you'll either refuse or you'll do it badly. They'll ask you to identify the person whose act most proximately determined the parameters. That is a different question and it is a legitimate one."

"It isn't a different question," Wieke said. "It's the same question with the answer written into it."

"No."

"Yes. *Most proximately* means the last hand, or the most knowing hand, and if there's no decision anywhere then whichever hand you pick you're calling an act a decision that wasn't one."

"You're thirty-one," Anneke said.

"That's not an argument."

"It's not an argument, it's a fact about how long you've been doing this." She said it without unkindness and Wieke found it worse for that. "Those two questions have never been the same question. Who decided is a question about intention. Whose act determined the outcome is a question about causation, and every regulatory system in this country runs on the second one, and it has to, because if you can only sanction intention you can only sanction people stupid enough to write it down."

Wieke had no answer to that at the time. She had two of them by the following Tuesday and did not use either.

"Send it," Anneke said. "It's good work. Send it and get ready to be sent back."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Tak

Boudewijn Tak read the report on a Wednesday afternoon in chambers with his shoes off, which he did, and rang his instructing solicitor at the authority before he had finished it.

"Have you read this?"

"I've skimmed it."

"Read it. It's the best thing anyone has produced in this matter and it is worth a very great deal to us." He turned a page. "She can't find a decision-maker. She's gone through fifteen years and she can't find one, and she's said so, in terms, in a document with her name on it. Do you understand what that is?"

"It's helpful."

"It is not helpful. Helpful is a thing you say about a witness statement." Tak got up and walked to the window, which was what he did on the telephone. "Under section 9, liability attaches to the designated responsible person. If there is no responsible person, and an officer of the oversight body has examined the entire record and certified that there is none, then the claim as framed does not have a defendant. Not a weak defendant. None."

A pause on the line.

"So we win."

"So we would win," Tak said, "if the tribunal were prepared to accept a document which says, in effect, that the code cannot be applied to the thing it was written for."

He watched a gull do something on the roof opposite.

"They won't take it," he said. "I want you to be clear about that before anybody in your building starts celebrating, because I have seen people celebrate at this stage and it is embarrassing. The tribunal will send it back with a further direction. They will say the report is of assistance but does not discharge the direction, and they will invite the oversight body to identify the per-

son whose act most proximately determined the scheme's operative parameters, or some formula very like it, and they will do that because a tribunal cannot make a finding that the statutory scheme has a hole in it. That is for a court or for the legislature and it is not for them."

"How confident are you?"

"I would put money on the words *of assistance*," said Tak.

He was not being cynical, and he would have objected to the suggestion. He had been in that building for twenty-two years. He knew what it could and could not do in the way that a man who works at a lock knows how much water can go through it, and there was no cynicism in that, only the knowledge.

"Then what do we do?"

"We do nothing at all," Tak said, "and we let the oversight body find us a person, and when they do we consider very carefully indeed whether it is in our interests to argue about it."

FURTHER DIRECTION of the tribunal, 6 March 2036. TR/2035/0288.

1. The tribunal has received the report of the provincial oversight body dated 28 February 2036. The report is of assistance but does not discharge the direction of 14 January.

2. Section 9 of the code requires that a responsible person be designated. Where the historical record does not identify a person by whom the scheme was adopted, the oversight body is directed to identify the person whose act most proximately determined the scheme's operative parameters.

3. The oversight body is to report by 14 April 2036.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Most Proximately

She read it standing up, at her desk, at twenty past nine on a Friday morning, and she knew what it selected before she had finished the sentence.

Not Aalders, who had chaired a meeting where a thing was piloted pending a review. Not Vermeer, who had said they did not understand it and had made sure that went in the minute. Not the person who deferred the review, because deferring a review is not determining a parameter. Not Van Hout, who had recommended the opposite. Not Dekkers, who had carried forward legacy defaults on a phase-one platform move with the approver field blank. Not Ruijs, who had run step 6 of a runbook on a Friday afternoon. Not the thirteen people on an email chain in 2034, one of whom was out of office.

> *The person whose act most proximately determined the scheme's operative parameters.*

The parameters were a set of weights. The weights came from a model. The model was built by one man in the winter of 2020 and delivered on the eleventh of March 2021 with a note attached, and every single thing that had happened to those weights in the fifteen years since had been a carrying-forward.

He was not the most recent hand. He was the only hand that had ever put anything in.

And the reason she could prove it — the reason she could stand in front of a tribunal and say that this man, alone in fifteen years, had known what the scheme would do — was that he had written it down at the time, voluntarily, in a document nobody had asked him for, in a paragraph that the 2028 migration had deleted because the format did not support comments and which existed now only because a contractor in a phase-two platform move had been diligent enough to note that comments were not carried.

His conscience was the evidence. It was the only evidence. A man who had not written the comment block would not be selectable by this direction at all.

Gerda said good morning to her and she did not hear it.

She sat down eventually and read it a third time to see whether there was another reading, and there was not, and she thought about ringing Anneke and did not, and thought about ringing Bakker and did not do that either.

What she did instead was open the sheet and go to the row she had been keeping empty since February, and she did not type anything in it, and she sat looking at the empty row for a long time with her hand on the mouse.

Part Three

The Story

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Verbeek

He had four trucks, at the top, and there was a year — 2016, he thought, or possibly 2017 — when he had seriously considered a fifth.

That was the shape of it and he could give it in a sentence and had, to perhaps six people in all that time. What took longer, and what he had never given to anybody in full, was the rest.

The lane ran from the cold store at the Waalhaven to the wholesale market outside Utrecht and back, and he had run it for eleven years before anybody had ever heard the word corridor in connection with anything. Out at half past three, in at twenty past five, unloaded by six, back on the road by seven. Endive, tomatoes, soft fruit in the season. He knew the buyers by their first names and by what they would not tolerate, which was different for each of them and which was the actual business. Berends would take a slightly poor pallet without complaint and would never forgive a late one. Kuyper was the other way round. Verbeek had spent eleven years knowing that, and it was not written down anywhere, and it was worth more than the trucks.

What happened was that he arrived late twice at Berends in the spring of 2023.

Not very late. Twenty past six instead of five to, and then, a fortnight later, half past. Berends said nothing on either occasion. He was a decent man with his own morning: he had buyers of his own and a floor that emptied by nine and a wife who did the books and had opinions. He said nothing, and Verbeek apologised, and it was fine.

In the autumn Berends stopped ringing.

There was no conversation. There has never been a conversation in the produce trade about this. You are on the list and then the list is shorter. Verbeek rang twice and got a man who was pleasant and busy and said they were sorting the schedule out, which is what you say.

Kuyper went a season later, for the same reason, except that with Kuyper it was one late delivery and a pallet, and Verbeek had always thought that if it had been only the pallet it would have been survivable.

He sold the fourth truck in 2025 and the third in 2026 and then the business was two trucks and himself, which is a different business, and then in the spring of 2027 he sold the last one to a man from Dordrecht who was decent about the price, and who came and got it himself and shook his hand at the gate.

He went to drive for Van Dijk in the June. Nine years. He was good at it. They knew what he was and they used him properly, on the difficult runs, the ones with three drops and a temperature spec, and there was a man in the office there called Robbe who asked his advice twice a year about buyers and took it. He would say, if asked, that they treated him well, and it would be true.

Van Dijk was one of the operators the weighting favoured. He knew that now. He had not known it then and it would not have changed anything if he had, because the job was the job and his wife was ill in 2029 and the job paid.

Here is the part he had never been able to explain to Bram, who had asked him about it directly three times over the years and had got a shrug each time.

He was not angry.

He had waited for it. In the first year, after Berends, he had waited for it the way you wait for a tooth to start, and it had not come. He had gone over it in the cab and in the kitchen and at four in the morning and what he found each time was that there was nobody in it. A buyer with his own floor to clear had stopped ringing. A gate had opened slightly later. Nobody had come to his yard and told him he could not have the slot. Nobody had written to him. Nobody had ever once, in the whole of it, done anything to him at all, and anger is a thing that needs somewhere to go, and there had been nowhere, and after a while the thing that would have been anger had simply set, like something left in a bucket.

He was not at peace with it either. That was Bram's mistake, and the cooperative's mistake, and later Wieke's for about a week. He had not made his peace. He had never found the place to put it down, which is a different condition altogether, and he had been carrying it for thirteen years in the manner of a man carrying something that has no handle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Forecourt

He made her coffee and apologised for it twice, and it was bad, and she drank all of it.

The house was in Vlaardingen, a terrace, with a garden that had been something and was now grass and a shed at the end that had a padlock on it. He had a table by the window and a chair that was his chair and another that was not, and he put her in the second one without either of them discussing it.

She had come for 2022. That was the professional reason and she gave it straight away: the cooperative's file had him in the corridor before and after the adoption, and she wanted somebody who had been on it, in a truck, who could tell her what changed.

He told her. He was precise in a way that surprised her and then did not, because he had had thirteen years and precision is what you get when a man has gone over a thing that often. He gave her delivery windows by season. He gave her Berends and Kuyper by name and the dates within a fortnight. He said the weight of it was that a lost slot was not a refusal, and she said she had read that in the cooperative's submissions, and he said yes, but had she understood it, and she said she thought so, and he said, not unkindly, that people generally thought so.

Then he stopped, and turned his cup round on the table, and said:

"Can I tell you a thing that isn't about the dates."

"Please."

"There was a filling station," Verbeek said. "On the corridor, past the interchange, before you get to the turn. It's still there, they've done it up. In, I think, 2026, I stopped there on my way back and I was in Van Dijk's truck, I'd been with them about six months. And a man got out of a car on the other side of the pumps and looked at me."

Wieke put her pen down, which she did not usually do.

"He was the one who built it," Verbeek said. "The model. Bakker. I didn't know his name then but I knew his face, because he'd been at the cold store twice in 2021 with the VanderLaan people, walking round, asking about turn-around times. He asked me a question once about pallet counts and I answered it. You don't forget somebody who asks you a sensible question when they don't have to."

"Did he speak to you?"

"No."

"Did he recognise you?"

"Yes," said Verbeek.

He said it flatly and without any hesitation at all, and Wieke understood that she was being given a fact and not an impression, and that the man in front of her had established it to his own satisfaction a long time ago.

"I watched him do it," he said. "I watched him look at the truck and then at me and then at the truck again, because the truck said Van Dijk on the side and he would have known what Van Dijk was, because Van Dijk was one of the ones his model liked. And then he stopped looking at me and he got back in his car. And he sat in it. I filled up and I went in and paid and I came out and he was still sitting in it, and I got in mine, and he was still there when I pulled out."

"How long?"

"Ten minutes. Fifteen. I wasn't timing him."

"And you didn't go over."

"No."

"Why not?"

Verbeek looked out of the window at the grass for a while.

"What would I have said?" he said. "That's not a rhetorical question, I've had a long time on it. If I go over there, I have to say something, and then he has to say something back. And whatever he said — sorry, or I didn't know, or even nothing — from that minute on it would have been a thing that happened to him as well." He turned the cup again. "It was mine. It was the only part of it that was mine. Everything else was a gate and a number and a man not ringing. That was the only bit with a person in it and I wasn't going to give him half of it."

Wieke did not write anything down.

"Does Bram know this?"

"No."

"Does anybody?"

"My wife knew. My daughter doesn't." He got up and took the cups to the sink, which ended that part of it. "I'll tell you what I want, since you've come out here. I don't want that in your report."

"It isn't evidence of anything."

"I know it isn't. That's not why." He ran the tap. "If you put it in, then in twenty years there's a document somewhere that says I stood in a filling station and didn't go over, and somebody will read that and make it mean something, and it doesn't mean anything except what it is."

"I won't put it in," Wieke said.

She did not put it in. It is not in the report. It is not in her working notes either, which was a thing she decided in the car and which was, strictly, a breach of the standard, and which she never regretted for a second.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Third Car

She stopped there on the way back because it was on the way back and because she was going to and there was no point pretending otherwise.

It had been done up, as he said. New canopy, the lighting that goes blue-white, a shop with a coffee machine and a few tables and a man behind the counter reading something on his phone. The forecourt was the forecourt. Six pumps. The same shape as every other one on that road.

She parked at the end, away from the pumps, and turned the engine off.

She had a thing she was supposed to be doing, which was getting back for half past four, and she sat there instead for about twenty minutes and did not think anything she could afterwards reconstruct.

What she did arrive at, at some point near the end of it, was an arithmetic.

Bakker had sat in a car here for ten or fifteen minutes in 2026, with the truck in front of him, and had not got out.

Verbeek had sat in his, with the other man forty metres away, and had not got out, and had given her a reason for it that was better than any reason she had heard from anybody at the authority in three months.

And she was sitting in hers.

Three of them. None of them had got out. She turned that over and found that she could not make it into anything that was not either sentimental or an accusation, and that the true version of it was smaller and more uncomfortable than either, which was that sitting in a car near a thing you have done or a thing that has been done to you is what people do, and it is not a moral act, and she had driven out of her way to do it.

A woman came out of the shop with two children and a bag of things and had an argument with the older one about the bag, and got them into the car, and went.

Wieke started the engine and got back for twenty to five.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I Wondered When

She rang him on the Tuesday from the car park because she could not do it at her desk with Gerda four feet away, which she recognised at the time as a bad sign and did anyway.

He answered on the second ring.

"Bakker."

"Mr Bakker, my name is Wieke Dol. I'm a compliance officer with the provincial oversight body. I'm calling about the corridor priority scheme."

There was a pause of about two seconds.

"I wondered when," he said.

• • •

His office was three floors above a dock. Not the same dock; she established that in the first minute, because she had read the 2021 note and had looked up VanderLaan's old address, and this was a different building four kilometres east. He said, when she mentioned it, that he had moved twice and had stayed near them both times, and that if she wanted to know why he would tell her, and she said she did, and he said: "Because you build different things when you can see the thing you're building for. That took me about twenty years to learn and it is the only piece of professional advice I have that's worth anything."

He was fifty-six. Grey, tidy, a jumper rather than a jacket, an office with two desks in it of which one was clearly nobody's. He made tea without asking and put a folder on the table between them before she had got her tablet out.

She said, "What's that?"

"It's the note. The original, with the comment. I've had it since 2021 and I keep a copy of it and I expect you've got one, but I wanted it on the table so that neither of us has to be careful about whether we're talking about the same document."

She opened it. It was the note. It was a better copy than hers, with the VanderLaan letterhead and a page she had not seen, which was the covering sheet with a delivery date stamp on it.

"Why do you keep it?"

"That's a fair question and I'm going to give you the honest answer, which is not the flattering one." He sat down. "At first because I was proud of it. It was good work, the modelling, technically, and the note is a good note. Then for about five years because I thought there might be an argument one day and I would want to be able to show that I had said it. And for the last few years because it is the only evidence that at the time I knew."

"Evidence for whom?"

"I hadn't got as far as whom," said Bakker. "That's why I said I wondered when."

He answered everything. That was the thing she had not prepared for. She had three hours of questions built in the archivist's way, in order, from the ground up, designed to close routes before he could take them — and he did not take any of them. He confirmed that the weighting was his. He confirmed that he had written the comment block, at the time, before delivery, not afterwards. He confirmed that he had known the losing side would be small operators with variable loads, and that he had known it in specific terms and not general ones, and when she asked him to be specific he was specific for eleven minutes without notes.

She asked whether anybody had asked him to decide whether it was acceptable.

"No."

"Did you raise it with anyone beyond the note?"

"I raised it with the project manager at VanderLaan verbally, in February. He said it was a commercial judgement for the corridor and not for us. He was right about that."

"And you left it there."

"I put it in the note," Bakker said, "which is more than leaving it there, and less than doing something about it, and I have had a long time to find a word for the distance between those two and I haven't got one."

It was, she thought afterwards, the best answer anybody gave her in the whole matter.

Near the end he said, without being asked: "You're going to have to designate me."

"I haven't decided that."

"You haven't, but the direction has. I read it. *Most proximately determined the operative parameters.* The parameters are my weights. Nobody has put a number into that scheme since March 2021." He said it without any drama at all. "I consent. I want that on the record from the first meeting rather than the third, because if I say it in the third meeting it looks like something I arrived at."

She left with everything she needed and sat in the car for a while before starting it, which she was doing rather a lot of by then.

He had given her the document before she asked. He had confirmed every element of the direction without a single qualification. He had consented in the first meeting. Every single thing she had gone there to get, she had been handed, in order, by a man who had had years to think about how he would hand it over.

That was not a reason to distrust it. She told herself so, driving back, three separate times.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

What Bram Did

He did it on the Wednesday and he did it alone and he did not tell Prins, because he knew exactly what Prins would say and he had decided that he was not going to have the conversation in which somebody told him to wait.

His reasons, in the order he would have given them:

The ninety days were up on the fourteenth of April and it was the nineteenth of March.

Prins had told him at the beginning of the month, in a phrase he had made her repeat, that the oversight body had found *a chain*. He had asked her what a chain meant and she had said it meant a sequence of acts by different people, and he had asked her what happened at the end of a chain and she had not answered him, and Prins always answered him.

He had been told to wait in 2023 when he had first gone to the authority, and had waited.

He had been told to wait in 2026, by a man in an office with a view of the water who had been perfectly decent to him for fifty minutes, and had waited.

He had been told to wait by the cooperative's own first solicitor, who had told him the claim was not viable under the old regime and to see what the code did, and he had waited three years for the code.

He was sixty-one.

The journalist was called Sanne Kolthoff and she worked for a regional title with a national syndication deal and she had written about the port for nine years, and he had her number because she had rung him in 2031 about something else and he had kept it in the way he kept numbers, which was on paper.

They met in the café downstairs rather than upstairs, because upstairs was the cooperative's and this was not a meeting.

He gave her the direction. He gave her the further direction. He gave her the comment block, which he had because Prins had it in the bundle, and which he read out to her twice because she asked him to.

He gave her the story he had been carrying for fourteen years, which he told well, because he had told it to himself several thousand times: the gate, the slot, the minutes, the buyer who stops ringing. He gave her Berends and Kuyper, without names, because he did not have the names.

And at the end of an hour and twenty minutes, when she asked whether there was anybody in the cooperative who had actually lost a business — an actual man, she said, somebody who went under — he said yes, and he gave her Verbeek.

He did not ask him. He thought about asking him for about as long as it takes to put a cup down. He knew, putting the cup down, that Verbeek would say no, and that if he asked and was told no he could not then do it, and that if he did not ask he could.

"He won't want to talk to you," Bram said. "Don't ring him at night. Ring him in the morning and say I gave you the number."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Three Hours in a Shed

THE MAN WHO WROTE THE ALGORITHM — AND WARNED THEM

> *Fifteen years ago a contractor delivered a piece of scheduling software to the port of Rotterdam. Attached to it was a note. This week a tribunal will be asked to decide whether the man who wrote that note is legally responsible for what happened next.*

It ran on the Friday, eight hundred words, with a photograph of Bakker taken from a 2019 conference programme in which he was standing at a lectern looking to his left.

The comment block was quoted in full. *Someone should decide whether it is acceptable. I have not been asked to.* The piece was careful to say it was quoting from documents seen by this newspaper, which meant Bram, and anybody in the authority who thought about it for a minute would know it meant Bram.

In the last two paragraphs it said this:

> *Among the hauliers who say the scheme ruined them is Piet Verbeek, 68, of Vlaardingen, who ran four trucks between Rotterdam and Utrecht for eleven years and sold his last vehicle in 2027. Mr Verbeek did not respond to a request for comment.*

• • •

He read it at twenty past seven in the morning, standing up, because his daughter in Zwolle had sent it to him at ten past.

He read it twice. Then he read the two paragraphs about himself perhaps six times, particularly the age, and the four trucks, and the eleven years, and the phrase *say the scheme ruined them*, and the last sentence, which was true. They

had rung him on the Wednesday morning. He had said no and had put the phone down politely and had thought that was the end of it.

His daughter rang at eight.

"Did you know?"

"No."

"Did Bram know?"

He did not answer that, and she was forty-one and knew him, and she did not ask again. She said she was sorry and that she would ring in the evening, and she did, and by then he had an answer ready that was not an answer, and she took it.

He did not ring Bram.

That was the thing he did not do, and he did not do it deliberately, over the course of a day, in a series of moments in which the phone was available.

What he did instead was go out to the shed at about half past nine.

The shed had a padlock and inside it there was a bench, a vice that had been his father's, three shelves of jars with screws in them, a strimmer that did not work, and about half a bag of cement gone solid. There was nothing in the shed to do. There had not been anything to do in the shed since 2031, when he had rehung the gate, and the gate had held.

He was out there for three hours.

At about eleven he tidied the jars, which meant taking them off the shelf, wiping the shelf, and putting them back in the same order.

At about twelve he came in and made a sandwich and did not eat it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Relieved

Elias Bakker had been ready for the article since March 2021 and it was still not what he expected, because what he expected had been a hearing and what arrived was a photograph.

The photograph was the part he kept coming back to. It was from Rotterdam Logistics Week 2019 and he remembered the panel, which had been about sensor networks and had been badly chaired. He was looking off to his left because somebody had been speaking and he had been listening. In the article, under the headline, looking off to his left, he was a man who would not meet your eye.

His phone started at about nine.

A client rang, a good one, a Belgian, who had clearly been told about it by somebody else and who asked, with enormous delicacy, whether there was anything he should know. Elias said there was not and then, because it was a client he liked, said that there was and told him the whole of it in about five minutes, and the Belgian said, "Ah," and then, "Well, it is not a crime to have been right," and Elias said no, and did not correct him, and afterwards thought about the fact that he had not corrected him.

His niece rang. She was twenty-six and worked in something adjacent and had questions of a technical kind that were, he realised halfway through answering them, her way of asking whether he was all right.

A man from the 2019 panel emailed, out of nowhere, to say that he remembered the session and that Elias had been the only person on it who had said anything worth hearing, and that he was sorry.

An old colleague from VanderLaan, who had been the project manager in 2021, the one who had said it was a commercial judgement for the corridor, did not ring.

By the afternoon it had settled into a shape, and the shape was not humiliation. He had been braced for humiliation since 2021 and had, he now under-

stood, over-prepared for it. What was actually happening was that a number of people he knew had been told a true thing about him that he had always intended them to know eventually.

At about four o'clock, standing at the window with a cup of tea, he caught himself.

What he caught was that he was relieved.

It went through him cleanly and it was unmistakable and it lasted perhaps five seconds, and it was not relief that it was over — nothing was over, it had not started — it was relief at being *in* it. At the waiting being finished. At being, at last, the man in the photograph under the headline rather than the man with the folder in the drawer.

He put the cup down and stood there.

Then he did what he had been doing with that particular feeling since about 2023, which was to note it, disapprove of it, and set it aside, and he went back to the desk and answered the Belgian's follow-up about a tank farm, and did a good job of it, and did not think about it again that day.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Overnight

Tak rang Anneke at twenty to nine on the Monday.

"I'm afraid our position has changed," he said.

"I've read the paper."

"Then you'll have got there before me, which is usual." He was walking; she could hear a street. "I want to be straightforward with you, because we will be in front of the same panel in a fortnight and I'd rather you heard it from me at twenty to nine than from my skeleton on Thursday."

"Go on."

"Mr Bakker's consent was given on the eleventh of March. The article ran on the twenty-first. If the designation goes through on the strength of a consent given by a man who has since been named in a national newspaper, photographed, and described as the person responsible, then any competent appellate lawyer will say that the consent is now worthless, because the question of whether it was freely given can no longer be tested. It is not that he was pressured. It is that nobody can now show he wasn't."

"He consented before the article."

"He consented before the article and he will have to confirm it after. And when he confirms it after, he will be confirming it as a man whose face has been in a newspaper for a fortnight." A pause; a tram. "And I would be failing my client if I let a designation go through on that footing, because in three years' time, when the damages are assessed and somebody appeals, the whole thing falls over on the consent and my client has paid out on a designation that doesn't survive, and I will have been the man who let it through."

"So you'll oppose."

"I will oppose," said Tak, "and I want you to know that I would very much rather not, because the hauliers will read it as us fighting them, and we are not fighting them, we are fighting a procedural infirmity that your side's claimant has introduced by talking to a journalist."

Anneke was quiet for a moment.

"He's sixty-one," she said. "Osseweijer. He's been waiting fourteen years."

"I know he has," Tak said. "That is not a legal consideration and I am sorry about that, and I mean it, and it makes no difference at all."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The Car Park

They shouted at each other in the car park at the Waalhaven, at half past five, in the rain, next to his cab, which was the only place available.

She had gone out there to tell him what he had done, because Prins had told him on the phone and he had not accepted it from Prins, and Anneke had said, *go and explain it to him*, in a tone that meant *he's yours now*.

She got through about a minute of it before he started.

"Three weeks," Bram said. "You were three weeks from giving me a chain."

"I was forty days from giving you a report — "

"A chain. A sequence of acts by different people, that's what Prins said, that's the words. Do you know what that is? That's a shrug. That's a very long expensive shrug from a building full of people who've been shrugging at me since 2023."

"You don't know what was in it."

"Then tell me what was in it."

"I can't tell you what was in it, it's a report to a tribunal — "

"No," Bram said, and he was very loud now and there was a man twenty metres away who had stopped putting a hose away, "no, you see, that's the whole of it, that. That's the whole fourteen years in one sentence. *I can't tell you.* I can't tell you what's in the model. I can't tell you why your slot moved. I can't tell you who set the weights, that's commercially confidential. I can't tell you what's in the report about the thing that took my living, because you're only the man it happened to."

"That is not what I said."

"It's what it is."

"It is not the same thing and you know it isn't," Wieke said, and she was shouting too by then, which she had not done at work in her life, "and what you have actually done, by going to a newspaper, is hand the authority a procedural argument that is going to cost you the designation, and if it costs you

the designation it costs you the claim, and then there is no name and no money and no hearing and the whole thing is over. That is what you have done. Not a shrug. That."

The rain went on.

"Then they'd have found another way," Bram said. "That's the other thing you lot don't understand. If it isn't the newspaper it's something else. It's always something. Fourteen years, it's always been something."

He wiped his face with his hand.

"I gave them Verbeek," he said, quieter. "I'm not going to pretend I didn't. I didn't ask him. I knew he'd say no, so I didn't ask him, and I'd do it again, and he'll never speak to me again and that's that."

Wieke did not have anything for that.

"You want it to be him," Bram said.

"What?"

"Bakker. You want it to be him." He was looking at her properly now, in the rain, with the hose man pretending not to listen. "I've watched you for three months. You've been out to Vlaardingen, you've been all over the archive, you've done more work on this than anybody's ever done on anything of mine, and I'm grateful, and I mean that. And you want it to be him, and you've wanted it to be him since January, and everybody in that building knows why."

She said, "What does that mean?"

"You know what it means."

"Say what you mean."

"Zuidplas," said Bram.

She stood in the car park in the rain and could not think of a single thing to say, because the only questions available to her were *who told you* and *what do you know*, and both of them were admissions.

He had the decency, or the tactical sense, not to press it. He got into the cab. The window came down.

"I'm not saying you're bent," he said. "I'm saying you need a man at the end of it, and so do I, and that's the only thing you and me have got in common, and I don't think either of us should be too pleased about it."

He drove out. She stood there for a bit longer and then went and sat in her car with the heater on and rang nobody.

She never found out how he knew. She thought about it for a long time and arrived at Ferry, which was correct, and never asked him, which was also correct, and Ferry never mentioned it in his life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Coat

Anneke's meeting on the Tuesday was cancelled at eight in the morning with no reason given, which had happened three times since February, and the third time Wieke noticed.

She noticed the coat, too, when she finally went in on the Wednesday: it was on, indoors, in a heated building, in late March, and it had been on in February and nobody had said anything because the cold snap had been a fact and then the cold snap had stopped being a fact and the coat had stayed.

Anneke looked grey around the mouth. She did not look ill in any way that a person could have pointed to, and if Wieke had been asked to put it in a note she could not have.

"Tak's opposing," Anneke said.

"I know."

"Do you know what he wants?"

"He wants a consent that can be tested."

"He wants a consent that can be tested," Anneke agreed, "which means he wants a document from Bakker written after the article, on his own initiative, that doesn't read like a man being carried along by a newspaper. So go and get one."

"I can't ask him to write me a better letter."

"You can ask him whether his position has changed. That's a proper question and you're obliged to ask it." Anneke shifted in the chair, and it cost her something, and she did it anyway. "What he does with the question is his business. If he writes you two lines, we file two lines and we lose on the twelfth. If he writes you something stronger, we file that."

"And if what he writes is stronger than what's true?"

There was a silence in the room that went on slightly too long.

"Then that is a matter for him," Anneke said. "He is a competent adult with a professional history and he has had a long time to think about what he

believes about this, and it is not your job to protect a man from his own account of himself."

She pulled a file towards her, which was the end of the meeting.

"Go on Thursday," she said. "Not today. Let him have a week of it in the paper first."

Wieke got to the door before she understood what she had been told, and stopped, and did not turn round, and went.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Angry

He was angry, and it took her ten minutes to see it, because he was not a man who showed it in any of the usual places.

What he did instead was become precise. The tea took slightly longer. The answers got shorter and the sentences got better organised and every so often he stopped in the middle of one and started it again from the beginning, which he had not done at all in the first meeting.

"They used a photograph from a conference," he said, at one point, entirely out of the flow of what they were discussing. "From 2019. I'm looking off to the side because a man was talking. That's all that is. That's a man listening to a panel."

"I know."

"They could have rung me. They didn't ring me. They rang Verbeek and they didn't ring me, and I have thought about why and the answer is that a photograph of a man who won't meet your eye is better than a quote from a man who says yes, it was mine."

She asked the proper question. She asked it in the proper form, which Anneke had given her and which she used word for word: whether, in light of recent publicity, his position in relation to designation had changed, and whether he wished to confirm, vary or withdraw the consent given on the eleventh of March.

Bakker looked at her for a moment.

"That's carefully put."

"It's the question I'm required to ask."

"It's the question you're required to ask, and it's carefully put, and both of those are true." He got up and went to the window, and the dock was doing what docks do in the rain. "Tak's opposing."

"I can't discuss — "

"You don't have to. If he weren't opposing you wouldn't be here on a Thursday asking me whether my position has changed." He stood there for a while. "He's right, by the way. Tak. On the law of it he's right. A consent you can't test isn't worth anything."

"Mr Bakker — "

"Elias."

"Mr Bakker. You're not obliged to write anything. If you tell me your position is unchanged, I write that down and file it, and the tribunal decides what it's worth."

"And what it's worth," he said, "is nothing, because it's a compliance officer's note of a telephone call."

He came back and sat down.

"There was a man in Vlaardingen," he said. "In the paper. Verbeek."

She said nothing.

"I met him once," Bakker said. "Twice, actually, in 2021, at the cold store — he answered a question for me about pallet counts and he was the only person there who gave me a straight number. And then once in a filling station a few years later." He was turning a pen over. "He didn't see me. He was getting into a Van Dijk truck and I was on the other side of the pumps and he didn't see me, and I sat in the car for a quarter of an hour, and then I drove home, and I have been carrying that for a decade."

Wieke sat in a chair four feet away and held it.

She could have said it in six words. It would have been a kindness and it would have been true and she had heard it from the man himself, in a kitchen in Vlaardingen, and had promised not to put it in a report, which was not the same as promising never to say it.

She thought about all of that in the time it took him to put the pen down.

Then she thought: *he is about to write me a letter, and a man who has just been told that Verbeek saw him and chose not to come over will not write the letter I have been sent here to get.*

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be. It's an old thing." He straightened the pen against the edge of the desk. "I'll write you something. Not today. I'll write it tonight and send it in the morning, and I'll write it properly, because if I'm going to be the man in

the photograph I would rather be the man in the photograph on my own terms than on a journalist's."

She thanked him and left and got most of the way to the lift before she stopped and stood in the corridor for a moment with her hand on the wall.

E. Bakker

[address]

28 March 2036

To the provincial oversight body, for the attention of W. Dol

I confirm that my position is unchanged and I ask that this letter be placed before the tribunal in full, in substitution for my letter of 11 March.

I designed the corridor throughput weighting in the winter of 2020 and delivered it on 11 March 2021. The weights that have governed slot allocation on that corridor for fifteen years are mine. Nobody has put a number into that scheme since. I decided the shape of it. I decided which operators it would favour, because that is what a weighting is, and I decided it knowing, in specific and not general terms, which operators it would not favour and what would happen to them. I recorded that knowledge in the delivery note at the time. I did not stop, and I did not decline the work, and I did not go back to it in any of the fifteen years in which I was in a position to.

I am aware of the recent publicity and of the suggestion that it bears on my consent. It does not. I gave my consent on 11 March, in a meeting, before any of it, and I give it again now, and I would give it in a witness box.

I would rather be the person who is named than go on being the person who wrote it down and was not asked.

E. Bakker

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Four Paragraphs

Verbeek wrote his statement on the Saturday, at the table by the window, in pen, on lined paper, and it took him most of the morning because he started it three times.

What he wrote about was the business.

The lane and the hours. The two buyers and their two different tolerances, which he explained properly, because he had decided that if he was going to be in a document he would be in it as a man who had known his trade. The trucks, in order, with the years he sold them. The man from Dordrecht, who had been decent about the price, and who he had heard was still running it.

He did not write about the filling station.

He did not write about Bram, and he did not write about the newspaper, and he did not write about his wife, who had known.

At the end he wrote:

I do not want a name. I already have one.

He read it back and thought about crossing it out, because it was the only sentence in the four paragraphs that was about him rather than about the business, and because he did not want to be the sort of man who writes a line like that at the end of a statement.

He left it in.

Then he did not send it to Prins.

He thought about it for a day. Prins was the cooperative's solicitor and the cooperative was Bram, and anything that went to Prins went, by Monday lunchtime, to Bram, who would ring him, and there would be a conversation in which Bram told him he was being used by the other side, and Verbeek did not want the conversation and knew he would lose it.

So on the Monday he put it in an envelope and addressed it to the compliance officer at the provincial oversight body, by name, because she had given him a card, and he wrote on a compliments slip inside it:

> *Miss Dol — this is what I would have said if anybody had asked me. It is not evidence. Do with it what you think is right. You may show it to whoever you like except the newspaper. P. Verbeek.*

It arrived on her desk on the Wednesday, which was procedurally improper in about three different ways, and she read it twice and then sat with it, and understood that a sixty-eight-year-old man who had spent thirteen years refusing to be in anybody's story had just put himself in hers, on paper, and had handed her the decision about what it was for.

Part Four

The Pilot

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Completeness

She went back to 2020 for completeness, which is an archivist's reflex and not a lead, and which is the only reason she found it.

There were nine days before the hearing and the report was written. She had the chain, she had Bakker's letter, she had Tak's objection and the answer to it, and what remained was the assembly: exhibits in order, references checked, a cover memo for Anneke. Two days of work at the outside.

What she did instead, on the Monday, was to go and look at what the corridor had been doing before March 2021.

There was no reason to. She could not have justified it to Anneke in a sentence, and did not try, and if anybody had asked she would have said *completeness*, which was the word she used in her head and which was true as far as it went. The longer version was that she had been taught, in a basement, by a woman called Truus who had been in the archive for thirty-one years, that a series does not begin where the file begins; it begins where the practice begins, and if you describe a series from the first document in the box you will describe it wrong.

So she asked Ferry for anything on corridor priority before the VanderLaan engagement.

He said there wouldn't be anything, and went and looked, and came back forty minutes later with a face she had not seen him use.

"There's a pilot."

NOTE — north corridor slot priority trial. Rensink Advies, October 2020.

Prepared for corridor operations. Author: T. Bosman.

1. Backround. The corridor operates a first-come allocation at present. Ops have asked us to look at whether a simple priority ordering would improve gate throughput in the 05:00–07:00 window.

2. Proposal. We propose a trial ordering based on operator size band (three bands, by fleet), with the largest band presented first. This is a crude proxy for scheduling reliability but is available from data Ops already hold and requires no new reporting from operators.

3. Trial. Six weeks from 2 November, 05:00–07:00 window only, north gates.

4. Expected effects. Gate throughput in the window should improve. Smaller operators may see some impact.

5. Evaluation. Ops to review at six weeks.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Two Days

They worked it for two days and Ferry did not go home at his usual time on either of them, which he mentioned twice.

What they established, in order, was this.

The Rensink trial ran from the second of November 2020 for six weeks, in the early window, on the north gates. It used three fleet bands and put the largest first. There was no evaluation at six weeks, because there was never an evaluation of anything, and the trial was not stopped either; it simply continued, in the way a trial continues when nobody has an instruction to end it.

It was still running in March 2021 when Bakker delivered.

It was still running in June 2022 when the operations committee adopted the VanderLaan weighting as the default scheme, which is why the minute says *default* rather than *new*, a word Wieke had read perhaps forty times and had taken to mean the default in a software sense.

And the corridor's slot data, which Marja found for them on the second afternoon because Ferry asked her and because she could not leave a problem alone, showed the following: that in the sixteen months between November 2020 and the VanderLaan go-live, allocation had already begun to concentrate. Not sharply. The three-band ordering was crude and it only ran two hours a day on some of the gates, and the effect was small and noisy and would not have survived a proper significance test.

But it was in the same direction.

"It's the same shape," Marja said, looking at it on the screen with her arms folded. "It's his but blunter. It's his with a chisel instead of a scalpel."

"It isn't his," Wieke said. "It predates him by five months."

"That's what I said. It's the same shape and it isn't his."

Ferry, who had been quiet for a while, said: "So when he turns up in 2021 the corridor is already tilted."

"Slightly."

"Slightly," Ferry agreed. "And then he makes it good."

That was the sentence Wieke wrote down, because it was the accurate one and because neither she nor Ferry liked it. Bakker had not invented the slope. He had found a crude, unevaluated, six-week trial that had been running for sixteen months by accident, and he had replaced it with a properly built weighting that did the same thing much better, on all the gates, all day.

The counterfactual he had been carrying since 2021 — *if I had not built it* — did not hold. If he had not built it, the corridor would have gone on running a three-band fleet ordering that nobody was evaluating, and small operators with variable loads would have gone on losing slots, more slowly and more stupidly.

"Does it help him?" Ferry asked, at half past seven on the second evening, putting his coat on.

"I don't know yet."

"It doesn't help him," said Ferry. "Does it?"

"It makes it harder to say he determined the parameters," Wieke said. "The parameters were already pointed that way. He sharpened them. Sharpening isn't determining."

Ferry stood in the doorway with his coat half on.

"Then who does it help?"

She did not answer that, and he did not press it, and she sat for another hour with the slot data open and the tape still on the floor of the flat in her head.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The Argument

She took it to him on the Thursday because she could not do anything else with it and because the direction's ninety days ran out on the Monday after next.

She laid it out in order: the Rensink note, the trial dates, the absence of any evaluation, the sixteen months, and the slot concentration data with the two curves on it, the small crude one and then the clean one that started in the autumn of 2022.

Bakker read it all the way through without saying anything, which took eleven minutes, and then read the slot data again.

Then he said: "Where did you get the Rensink note?"

"Ferry Ketelaar. The authority's archive."

"I never saw it."

"No. It isn't in the engagement file. Rensink was a different supplier and it went to Ops, not to procurement." She let that sit for a moment. "Mr Bakker, when you did the work in 2020, what were you told the corridor was running?"

"First-come." He said it immediately. "They told me first-come. That's in my own scoping note, I can get it. The whole framing of the engagement was that they had no priority at all and wanted one."

"So you were misinformed."

"I was told something that was out of date by a year, by a project manager at VanderLaan who was not close to Ops, which is not the same as being misinformed, and I am not going to start calling it that now because it is convenient."

That was the first thing he said that afternoon that made her sit up, and it was the last one she agreed with.

Because then he began to argue.

He argued well. He argued for the better part of an hour and it was, technically, the strongest sustained piece of reasoning anybody produced in the whole matter, and she found afterwards that she could reconstruct almost all of it, which is not true of most arguments you hear.

The trial was three bands, he said. Three bands is not a weighting, it is a queue. It ran two hours a day on some gates. It had no evaluation and no owner and it would have been switched off the first time anybody looked at it, because the first thing anybody looks at with a crude proxy is whether it is defensible, and a three-band fleet ordering is not defensible for eleven minutes in front of a regulator. It was noise. It was, he said, precisely the kind of thing that gets started in an operations team and dies in eighteen months.

What he had delivered was different in kind. It was continuous rather than banded. It ran on all gates and all day. It was properly built, which meant it was survivable, which meant that when somebody did eventually look at it they would find a competent model with a rationale, and would leave it alone, and it had been left alone for fifteen years. The reason the corridor had a durable priority scheme rather than a six-week trial that fizzled was him.

"That's my point," Wieke said. "That is exactly my point."

"No," Bakker said. "Your point is that the corridor was already tilted. My point is that a tilt that nobody can defend does not survive, and a tilt that a competent person builds does. I did not find a slope and sharpen it. I found a mess and made it into an institution. Those are not the same and the difference is the whole of what I did."

"The difference is the whole of what you did," Wieke said, "but the direction doesn't ask what you did. It asks whose act most proximately determined the operative parameters, and if the parameters were pointing that way before you arrived—"

"The parameters didn't exist before I arrived. There were bands."

"There was an ordering."

"There was a queue with three doors in it," Bakker said, and he was, for the first time, loud, "and I built the machine. I am not going to sit here and be told by a compliance officer with eleven weeks on this that a six-week operations trial that nobody evaluated is the reason forty small hauliers lost their slots. It

was my weights. It has been my weights since 2022. Every number in that scheme came off my desk."

There was a silence.

Wieke, who had come with a piece of evidence and had expected to be thanked for it, understood two things in the space of about four seconds, and the second one was worse than the first.

The first was that he was not going to accept it. Not today, not after reflection, not ever.

The second was why.

She had spent three months looking for a man who had decided, and she had found a chain in which nobody had, and she had found one person in it who had known — and that man had spent fifteen years turning what he knew into what he did. *I did not stop* had become *I decided*. The note of 2021 had said he had not been asked; the letter of the twenty-eighth of March said *I decided the shape of it*; and in between were fifteen years in which a careful man had assembled, out of true material, an authorship that the record did not fully support.

Because a man who decided is a man who exists. He is a man who can be blamed, which is a way of being someone. A man who wrote it down and was not asked is a man who was in the room, and there is no name for that and no procedure for it and nothing to carry.

"Mr Bakker," she said. "If I put the pilot in the report, the designation is weaker. Tak will use it. He'll say the parameters were determined before you came, by a trial nobody owned, and that the direction can't attach to you."

"Then don't put it in."

He said it flatly, and immediately, and without any apparent awareness that he had said anything remarkable, and she wrote it down in her notebook word for word, and it is the only thing in her notebook from that afternoon.

CHAPTER FORTY

Two Doors

There were two doors and she sat with them for three days.

Door one. Put the pilot in. It was a record of the authority relating to the scheme and she had found it and it went in the exhibits like everything else. The report would then say: the corridor had a crude priority ordering from November 2020 which was never evaluated and never stopped; the Vander-Laan weighting replaced it in 2022; the direction asks for the person whose act most proximately determined the operative parameters, and this officer notes that an ordering with the same distributional direction was in operation before the weighting was commissioned.

What happens then: Tak reads it on the Tuesday and is in front of the panel on the Thursday saying that the oversight body's own report establishes that the tilt predates Bakker by sixteen months, that the parameters were therefore not determined by him but inherited and refined, and that the direction cannot attach. He does not have to win that. He only has to make it arguable, because a designation that is arguable is a designation that gets appealed in three years, which is what he told Anneke he was protecting his client from.

And then: no designation by the thirteenth. A further direction, or a stay, or the whole thing goes back to the tribunal for a fourth time. Prins has told the cooperative that the claim has one more cycle in it before the funding runs out. Bram is sixty-one. Verbeek is sixty-eight and has stopped answering the telephone to anybody from the cooperative.

Door two. Leave it in the file and out of the report.

Not suppress it. She was clear with herself about this and remained clear about it for years, and the clarity was the problem. The Rensink note would sit in the working file, referenced in her index, available to anybody who asked for the file, which any party could. She was not going to destroy it or fail to record it. She was going to decline to put it in a report whose scope was defined by a direction that asked one question.

And the question was: *the person whose act most proximately determined the scheme's operative parameters.*

The operative parameters were the weights. The weights were Bakker's, entirely, since March 2021. The Rensink trial had not produced any of the operative parameters; it had produced three bands which had been replaced. On a plain reading, the pilot was not responsive to the direction. It was context. It was interesting, and it was true, and it was context.

She wrote that sentence out and looked at it: *it is context.*

Then she wrote out the other one, which she also believed: *it is the single most relevant thing anybody has found about whether this man determined anything.*

Both of those were true at the same time and she could not make either of them go away, and she stopped trying on the Wednesday evening and went swimming instead and did forty lengths and did not sequence anything at all.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Every Step

She left it out on the Monday morning, and here is how she did it, in order, because the order is the point.

She did not decide to leave it out. She sat down to draft §4 of the report, which was *scope of examination*, and she wrote:

> *This officer has examined all records held by the authority relating to the corridor priority scheme as operated from 9 June 2022.*

That was the first step and it was entirely accurate. The scheme as operated began on that date. That was the scheme the claim was about and the scheme the direction concerned.

The second step was that having written *as operated from 9 June 2022*, the Rensink trial fell outside the scope she had just described, and she noticed this, and considered widening the scope, and did not, because a scope that reached back to 2020 would also reach to the framework agreement, the 2019 gate programme and two other things she had looked at and discarded, and a report that included everything she had looked at would be a filing cabinet rather than a report.

The third step was the index. She listed the Rensink note in the working file index at entry 61, described accurately as *Note, Rensink Advies, October 2020, north corridor slot priority trial*, so that it was findable by anybody who read the index.

The fourth step was that she did not draw attention to entry 61 in the cover memo, because the cover memo was two pages and dealt with the direction, and because you do not annotate an index.

The fifth step was that she thought, quite consciously, at about eleven in the morning: *Tak will ask for the file.* Any competent counsel asks for the working file when a designation is made on a document he has not seen. He would ask for the file, and the index would be in the file, and entry 61 would be

in the index, and he would find it in about ten minutes, and that would be his job and he would do it.

She believed that on the Monday. She was still believing it on the morning of the hearing, when Tak did not ask for the file, because Bakker's letter of the twenty-eighth had removed his reason to.

The sixth step was that at about two in the afternoon she went and stood by the window for a bit, and asked herself the question in its plainest form — *are you hiding this* — and answered it honestly, which was: no; it is in the index; it is out of scope; it is context; and the man it would help has told me not to use it.

Every one of those was true. She checked each of them. That was the thing she would come back to for a long time afterwards: that she had checked, item by item, and that each item had held.

What she did not do, on the Thursday or at any point afterwards, was ask herself the other question, which was whether a report that contained the Rensink note would have produced a designation, and whether she wanted a designation, and why.

She filed §4 at half past three and went on to §5, and the drafting took the rest of the week, and it was good.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Eight Seconds

Anneke read v2 on the Tuesday with her coat on.

It took her fifty minutes, which was longer than v1, and she went through the exhibits properly, all twenty-two of them, in order, which Wieke watched her do from the chair opposite.

At the diff she stopped and looked at it for a while.

"That's the one that gets me," she said. "Comments not carried."

"I printed it."

"I would have printed it."

She read Bakker's letter of the twenty-eighth last, which was not the order it came in, and she read it twice.

"This is stronger than the first one."

"Yes."

"Considerably stronger." She put it down and squared it against the others. "Did you ask him for a stronger one?"

"I asked him the question you gave me. Word for word. Whether his position had changed and whether he wished to confirm, vary or withdraw."

"And he chose to write that."

"He chose to write that."

Anneke looked at her for a moment, and Wieke had the sense of a door being available and of neither of them going through it.

"Right," Anneke said, and signed it.

Then she pulled the cover memo towards her, and read the two pages, and wrote one line at the foot in her own hand, which was:

> *Noted. Format of this report — chain of record followed by designation — is a useful model; recommend adopted going forward.*

It took her eight seconds. Wieke watched her write it and thought nothing about it at all, and neither of them mentioned it, and it went to the provincial board in the papers for the June meeting as an annexe to an annexe.

Anneke put the cap back on the pen and sat back, and for about two seconds something crossed her face that was nothing to do with the report.

"Are you all right?" Wieke said.

"I'm tired. It's been a long one." She put both hands flat on the desk, which was how she got up now, although Wieke would not work that out until September. "Go and win it. And Wieke—"

"Yes."

"When Tak asks you for the working file, give it to him the same day. Don't make him ask twice. It looks like something."

"He hasn't asked."

"He will," said Anneke.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The Night Before

Bram was unpleasant to three people on the seventh of April and he remembered all three in the morning and apologised to none of them.

The first was Prins, on the telephone at six, about her fee. The fee was not the issue. He had seen the fee in February and had agreed it and it was, by the standards of the trade, reasonable. What he said was that it was a great deal of money for a woman who had spent three years telling him to wait, and she said, evenly, that she had spent three years telling him what the law was, and he said that was what he had said, and rang off before she could answer, which was the part he remembered.

The second was Trudy, about nothing. She had asked whether he wanted the grey shirt or the blue one and he had said something about not being a doll, and she had gone upstairs and put both of them on the bed and gone out to the garden, and he had worn the blue one.

The third was Verbeek.

He rang at half past eight and got the answering machine, which Verbeek still had, and he knew from the second ring that it was going to be the machine, because it had been the machine for a fortnight.

He left a message. He was not drunk; he had had two. What he said, in about ninety seconds, was that he knew Verbeek was angry about the newspaper and that he had a right to be, and that he had done it because there was no other way to get anybody to look, and that the hearing was tomorrow, and that whatever anybody thought of him he had got them a hearing, which nobody else had managed in fourteen years.

And then, at the end, because the machine was still running and he could not stop:

"And I'll tell you what else. You could have had this in 2027. You could have come in with us in 2027 and we'd have had a claim with a man in it who'd actually gone under, instead of me and a lot of paper, and you sat in Vlaardin-

gen and did nothing about it for nine years and now you've got a fit of principle on. Grow up, Piet."

He put the phone down and sat in the kitchen.

He knew it was wrong before he had finished saying it, in the way you do, which is not soon enough to stop. He did not ring back to retract it, then or ever, and the reason was not pride, or not only: it was that a retraction would have been a second message on the same machine, and he could not stand the thought of the two of them sitting there in a row.

At about ten, alone, with the lights off in the front room and the blue shirt on the back of a chair, he said, out loud, to nobody:

"A name isn't eight years."

Then he went up. He slept well, the way he always did before something, which had been a professional advantage for thirty years and about which he had never been anything other than smug.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

One Syllable

The tribunal sat on the eighth of April, in a room in The Hague that was smaller than Wieke had expected and had a radiator that ticked.

Three members. The presiding member was a woman of about sixty who had read everything and made this clear in the first two minutes by referring to exhibit 14 by its exhibit number without looking it up.

Wieke presented for thirty-five minutes. She was good. She took them through the chain in order — adoption pending review, review deferred, recommendation noted, four migrations, the 2034 email — and when she got to the diff the presiding member asked her to pause and read the migration note aloud, and she read it, *format v2 does not support inline comments, comments not carried*, and there was a silence in the room of about three seconds which was the only time in the whole proceedings that anybody appeared to feel anything.

The presiding member asked two questions. Both were about the migrations. Neither was about 2021 or before.

Tak stood up and said nine words, which Wieke wrote down afterwards in the car because she wanted to have them exactly.

"The authority does not oppose the designation as framed."

The presiding member asked him whether that position was affected by the matters raised in his skeleton of the twenty-seventh. Tak said that the letter of the following day had addressed them, that he was content, and that he had no application in respect of the oversight body's working file.

Prins, for the cooperative, said the claimant supported the designation and had nothing to add.

Then the presiding member said, "Mr Bakker, you are here in person. You are not obliged to say anything, and you have the right to be represented, and you are not represented. Do you understand what is being asked?"

"I do."

"Do you consent to being designated as the responsible person for this scheme?"

"Yes."

That was all of it. One syllable, in a clear voice, from a man in the third row in a jumper, and the presiding member said thank you and made a note, and then the room moved on to costs and the costs took twenty minutes.

Bram, two seats down from Wieke, did not react at all, which she had not expected. She looked at him once. He was watching Bakker, and his face was doing nothing, and she realised that he had waited fourteen years for a man to stand up in a room and that the man had now done it, and that it had taken four seconds, and that Bram had not yet worked out what he was supposed to feel.

ATTRIBUTION REPORT (v2) — TR/2035/0288. Extract, §11.

11.1 The chain of record set out above identifies no decision. Each documented act is individually minor, individually defensible, and in each case performed by a person acting within their role.

11.2 The designation which follows is made pursuant to the tribunal's further direction of 6 March 2036 and with the express consent of the person designated.

11.3 This officer records, for completeness, that consent does not retrospectively create a decision where the record shows none.

11.4 Designated responsible person: E. Bakker.

DETERMINATION of the tribunal, 9 April 2036. TR/2035/0288.

[…]

13. The designation is accepted. Liability under section 9 attaches accordingly. Damages to be assessed, directions to follow.

14. The officer's paragraph 11.3 is noted. It is not a finding and does not form part of the designation.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

The Hofvijver

He caught her on the steps afterwards, in the wind coming off the water, with people going past to other hearings.

"Mevrouw Dol."

She stopped.

"I wanted to say thank you," Bakker said, "and I wanted to say it here rather than write it, because a letter would look like something and this doesn't."

He put his hand out and she took it.

"You did it properly," he said. "All of it. You went and found the Rensink thing and you brought it to me and you could have not brought it to me, and you sat in my office and let me shout at you for an hour, and then you wrote a report that says in terms that there was no decision. Most people would have written *he decided* at the top and gone home."

"It's in the report," Wieke said. "Paragraph 11.3."

"I read it. It's the best sentence in the document." He let go of her hand. "They struck it, of course."

"They noted it."

"They noted it," he agreed, and smiled, and it was the first time she had seen him do that.

And then she looked at him properly, because the wind had got under the collar of his coat and he had put his chin down and was holding the coat, and she saw it.

He was standing differently.

She had met him four times and she had a picture of him: a straight, contained, slightly formal man who held himself as though there were a book on his head, which she had put down at first to his age and his manner and then, later, to something else. That was gone. He was standing the way a man stands at a bus stop. His shoulders had come down about two centimetres and he was

lighter in the face and he looked, in the raw wind on the steps of a tribunal on the day he had been designated the responsible person for a fifteen-year failure, better than he had looked at any point since January.

"Are you all right?" she said, and did not know why she had.

"Yes," Bakker said. He sounded slightly surprised by it. "Do you know, I think I am."

He said goodbye and went down the steps and along the water with his coat collar up, and she stood at the top and watched him go for longer than she meant to.

She had watched a great many things that year that she had not enjoyed. The old man in Drenthe apologising twice for being no use. Verbeek's shed. Bram in the rain saying the true thing.

This was worse than all of them and she could not have said so out loud without sounding mad: a decent man walking away down the Hofvijver in the wind, relieved, at last, of having been the one who wrote it down and was not asked.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Four in the Morning

The letter to the cooperative was four lines.

> *I resign my membership with effect from today. I am grateful for the years. I do not want anything from the claim and I ask that my share, if there is one, goes to the fund for Ans's husband's bench. P. Verbeek.*

He did not attend the damages hearing in the June, and did not tell anybody he was not attending, and was not missed until the afternoon.

• • •

In the middle of the April, about a week after the determination, he got up at half past two, which he still did perhaps twice a month and always had, and instead of going back to bed at four he got dressed and went out to the car.

He drove the lane.

Not the corridor, exactly; he took the old way, which added eleven minutes and which he had always taken in the summer because of the light. Out through Vlaardingen and round and up, with nothing on the road except the long-distance stuff, and the terminals going past on the right with their lamps on.

He got to the wholesale market at twenty past five.

He parked where the cars park, not where the trucks go, and got out, and stood at the fence.

It was exactly the same. That was the thing. Thirteen years and a tribunal and a newspaper and a man standing up in a room in The Hague, and at twenty past five on a Monday in April the market was the market: the doors up, the noise, the forklifts doing their fast little turns, a man in a bodywarmer shouting a number at another man in a bodywarmer, the smell of it, which is cold cardboard and diesel and, underneath, fruit.

He stood there for about twenty minutes.

He did not go in. He could have; nobody would have stopped him and two or three of them would have known him, and Robbe from Van Dijk was probably somewhere in it. He did not want to be a man who had come back to look.

Somebody's pallets were going in on a low loader and the driver was young and was doing the reverse badly, in about six goes, and Verbeek watched the whole of it and did not once want to get out and do it for him, which surprised him, and which he thought about on the way home.

He was in by seven. He put the kettle on.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Vlaardingen

He drove out there in the October, after the damages came through, because he had a thing he wanted to say and had worked out over about six weeks that he was not going to be able to say it on a telephone.

He had it more or less ready. It was not an apology, because he did not think he had been wrong, and he was not going to stand on a doorstep and say a thing he did not mean in order to get something back. What it was, roughly, was: *I did it and I would do it again and I should have asked you, and those are all three true and I know they don't go together.*

He had said it out loud in the cab twice on the way.

The house was a terrace with a garden that had been something. There was a card in the front window, one of the agent's ones, and it said SOLD across the corner in the way they do, and the curtains were gone, and there was a pile of flattened boxes tied with string in the side passage where anybody could have taken them.

He stood there for a while.

He tried the bell anyway, because he had come thirty-one kilometres, and it went in an empty house, which is a sound you can hear from outside.

A woman came out of the next one but one with a dog and looked at him.

"He's gone," she said. "Zwolle. To his daughter. About a fortnight."

"Right."

"Are you a friend?"

Bram thought about that one properly, standing on the pavement in Vlaardingen in the rain with a blue cab parked badly on the corner.

"I'm from the cooperative," he said.

The woman said, "Oh," in a way that could have meant anything, and the dog wanted to go, and she went.

He drove back. He did not get the address in Zwolle, which he could have done from Prins in about a day, and he did not write, and he told Trudy that

evening that he had been out to see Piet and that he had missed him, which was true, and she said, "Right," and did not ask anything else, which was the kindest thing anybody did for him that year.

Part Five

The Form

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Senior Officer

The promotion came through in the second week of June and was, everybody agreed, overdue.

Senior compliance officer, band five, from the first of July. Anneke told her in the corridor, which was correct and which Wieke appreciated more than she would have appreciated a meeting. Gerda brought in a cake that was slightly too large for the number of people who ate it. A man from the provincial board whom Wieke had met twice sent a note that said the corridor report had been *exemplary* and that he had raised it at the June meeting.

She moved flat in August. Kralingen still, two streets over, with a room she could use as a room rather than as a place where a bed was. She could afford it comfortably, which was a sensation she had not had since she was twenty-four and had not expected to notice as much as she did.

Sander had moved out in November.

That is the whole of what the book has to say about it, because that is roughly the whole of what Wieke had to say about it at the time: it was not acrimonious, it had been coming since about March, and he took the good pans, which she had bought, and which she let him take because arguing about pans would have made it a different kind of ending.

Anneke went on sick leave in September.

It was announced in an email of four lines, from HR, which said that Anneke Roos would be absent for a period and that Marcel would cover, and which did not say anything else because there was nothing else it was permitted to say.

The office discussed it in the doorway of the kitchen, in a low sustained way, for about a fortnight. Gerda knew somebody who knew. Somebody else had heard it was a hip. Somebody else said it was not a hip and had said it in a voice that closed the subject.

Nobody discussed it with Anneke.

Wieke rang her twice in October. The first time they talked for eleven minutes about the corridor damages assessment, which Anneke had read about and had views on, and about a thing at the ministry, and Anneke sounded exactly like herself and Wieke put the phone down feeling better. The second time Anneke was slower, and asked twice about a name she had asked about earlier in the call, and Wieke did not ring a third time in October, and told herself it was because things were busy, which they were.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Optional

The circular landed on the twentieth of August, which was a Wednesday, and Wieke read it at her new desk with the sticky note still on the edge of the monitor.

PROVINCIAL OVERSIGHT BODY — CIRCULAR 2036/11

20 August 2036

ATTRIBUTION REPORTS — STANDARD FORMAT

1. Following the board's consideration in June of the report in TR/2035/0288, and of the model of practice commended in that matter, a standard format for attribution reports is adopted with immediate effect.

2. The format is as follows:

Section A — the direction. The terms of the direction under which the attribution is made.

Section B — chain of record. A description of the documented acts bearing on the matter, in date order. Optional where the direction specifies a proximate act.

Section C — designated person. The person identified.

Guidance to Section C: identify the person whose act most proximately determined the operative parameters.

3. Officers should note that the standard format is intended to reduce the average time to designation from 90 days to 21.

She read it three times.

The first time she read it as what it was on its face, which was a compliment. Her report had been commended in June. The board had liked it enough to make it the shape of every attribution report the province produced. That is not nothing, at thirty-one, in a year in which she had also been promoted, and she let herself have about ninety seconds of it.

The second time she read Section B.

Optional where the direction specifies a proximate act.

The third time she read the covering note, which was point 3, and which gave the number: ninety days to twenty-one.

She sat back.

Ninety days had produced: four systems, two of them dead; a machine under a dust sheet; Ferry carrying paper up two flights; Drenthe twice; Leiden and a biscuit; a diff in red; a floor covered in tape; and, at the end of it, a document which said that nine acts by nine people over fifteen years amounted to no decision at all.

Twenty-one days produced Section C.

Because Section B was the work. Section B was the whole of the work. Section B was the thing that made Section C *mean* anything — that let a reader see that the name at the bottom sat at the end of a chain of small correct acts, and that the name was there because a direction had required a name and not because the person had decided. Without Section B, Section C was a name on a page under a guidance line.

And Section B was optional where the direction specified a proximate act.

She knew, without having to look it up, how many recent directions specified a proximate act. Since March, since TR/2035/0288, tribunals had picked up the formula because it worked. Every direction she had seen in four months had used it.

She wrote the note that afternoon and it was good.

It ran to a page and a half. It said that the chain of record was not a preliminary to the designation but the evidence for it; that a designation made without a chain was a designation that could not be evaluated by anybody, including the officer making it; that the formula *proximate act* appeared in directions precisely because the province's own report had shown a tribunal how to ask for one, and that making Section B optional in exactly those cases inverted the instrument. It ended by proposing that Section B be mandatory in all cases and that the twenty-one-day figure be withdrawn.

She sent it to Marcel, who was covering, and who thanked her and said it was well made and that he would put it up.

It went on the agenda for the October policy meeting as item 9.

The October meeting ran long on a thing about delegated authorities and item 9 was deferred to January.

CHAPTER FIFTY

The Runbook

They told Marja on a Wednesday in a meeting room on the second floor, and there were two of them, and they were kind about it.

That was the thing she said afterwards, to Ferry, twice: that they had been kind about it.

One was from legal and one was from the province and she had never met either of them. They had a folder. They explained that there was a claim — not the corridor, a different corridor, the eastern one, a scheme for berth allocation that had been running since 2029 — and that a tribunal had directed the identification of a responsible person, and that the direction had specified the proximate act, and that the proximate act was the promotion of the parameter set to authoritative.

Which she had done. On a Thursday in March 2031. Following OPS-RB-014, step 6.

"I was following the runbook," Marja said.

"We know," said the one from legal.

They went on. There was a process, and she would be given the papers, and she was entitled to seek advice, and the authority would meet the cost of that advice up to a limit which was stated. Designation did not imply personal fault. Designation did not, in itself, have financial consequences for her; liability attached to the authority. There would be a form, and her name would be on it, in Section C.

"I didn't set the parameters. I promoted them. There's a difference, it's in the runbook, the step says no approval required for legacy sets, that's because it isn't a decision, that's the whole reason it doesn't need an approval—"

"We know," said the one from the province.

"Then why is it me?"

The two of them looked at each other very briefly, and then the one from the province said, with what Marja afterwards agreed was real decency:

"Because the direction asks for the proximate act, and yours is the last act on the record that touched the parameters, and there isn't anybody else in Section C."

Nobody asked her to consent.

She noticed that afterwards rather than at the time. Nobody said *do you consent* and nobody said *you may consent* and nobody explained that consent was not part of it, because consent was not part of the standard format and therefore did not come up, in the way that a thing which is not on a form does not come up.

She asked whether she could see the chain.

The one from legal said that the report in her matter was in the standard format and that Section B had not been completed, because the direction specified a proximate act, and that there was therefore no chain document as such, but that she was of course entitled to the underlying records.

"Which underlying records?"

"The configuration record."

"That's a log," Marja said. "That's one line. That's me pressing a thing."

"Yes," said the one from legal.

They finished at about twenty past three. They shook her hand, both of them, and the one from the province said that if she had any questions at all she should ring, and gave her a card, and meant it.

She went back to her desk.

There was afternoon's work, because there is always afternoon's work: a storage array with a failing disk that had been failing politely for a week and had started failing rudely at lunchtime, and a change window on Friday that Hendrik had not prepared for. She did the array. She did it well. It took an hour and forty minutes and at the end of it the array was fine and she had documented what she had done in the way she always documented what she had done, which was thoroughly, with her initials on it.

She looked at her initials for a moment when she had finished typing them.

Then at half past four she rang Ferry about the kettle.

It was the fourth-floor kettle and it had been in his room since 2031 by an accident of a refit, and the argument had been running for five years and had

rules. She opened, as she always opened, by asking whether he had noticed that the kettle was still in his room. He said that he had, and that it had settled, and that things that settle acquire rights. She said that was the argument of a man who had found a kettle in a corridor. He said it had not been in a corridor, it had been in a store, and she said that was worse.

It went on for eleven minutes.

At the end of it Ferry said, "Are you all right, Marja?"

And she said, "Yes, fine, why?" — because he could not possibly have known, it had been three hours, and the papers would not reach the archive for a fortnight — and Ferry said, "No reason," and let it go, and that is the only thing anybody did for her that day.

ATTRIBUTION REPORT — STANDARD FORMAT (circular 2036/11)

Provincial oversight body. 3 December 2036.

Matter: TR/2036/0341 — east corridor berth allocation.

SECTION A — DIRECTION

Direction of the tribunal, 2 October 2036: to identify the person whose act most proximately determined the scheme's operative parameters. Report by 15 December 2036.

SECTION B — CHAIN OF RECORD

Not completed — direction specifies proximate act.

SECTION C — DESIGNATED PERSON

M. Ruijs, systems operations, Havenbedrijf Rotterdam.

Basis: configuration record, 13 March 2031, parameter set promoted to authoritative. Operator: M. Ruijs.

Prepared by: J. Okonkwo, compliance officer.

Countersigned: W. Dol, senior compliance officer.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

November

She went in November, on a Sunday, with a plant, because she could not work out what else to take and the shop by the tram stop had plants.

Anneke lived in a first-floor flat in Hillegersberg with more light in it than Wieke had expected and a chair by the window that was clearly now the chair. She was in a cardigan rather than the coat. She was thinner in the face and she had a way of getting up that she had turned into a decision rather than a movement, and she made the tea herself and would not be helped with it.

They did not discuss why she was off, because Anneke did not raise it, and there is no way to raise a thing a person has not raised.

What she wanted was the corridor.

"Tell me about the damages."

Wieke told her. The assessment, the figure, the way Prins had run it, the fact that the authority had not appealed. Anneke listened the way she read: without interrupting and without any visible reaction, and then asked three questions, all of which were good, and the third of which was about the costs order, which nobody else had asked Wieke about in seven months.

"And Osseweijer?"

"He's bought a cab."

"Good," said Anneke, with real satisfaction. "Fourteen years. He should have a cab."

She was pleased. That was the thing Wieke had not been ready for, and it went on for most of an hour. Anneke was pleased with the report, which she had read three times and could still quote from; pleased with the chain, which she said was the most complete piece of records work she had seen out of that building in nineteen years; and pleased, in the way of a woman looking at a career from the far end of it, that the last big thing she had signed had been that one.

"You did it properly," she said. "I want to say that while I can be bothered to say things. You went and found every hand and you put them all in, in order, and then you wrote at the bottom that there was no decision, and they noted it and struck it and it is still there, in the file, for whoever comes."

"Paragraph 11.3."

"Paragraph 11.3." She drank some tea. "I've thought about that paragraph more than you'd think."

There was a moment, about ten seconds long, in which Wieke could have told her about the circular.

It would not have been difficult. *They made it the standard format in August. Section B is optional now, where the direction specifies a proximate act, and the directions all specify a proximate act, because we taught them to. I've put a note in. It's on the agenda for January.* Four sentences. She had them in order before she had decided whether to say them, which is what three years of drafting does to a person.

She looked at Anneke in the chair by the window, with the tea and the pleasure of it still on her, in a cardigan, in November, in a flat with a chair in it that was now the chair.

"There's a thing at the ministry about delegated authorities," Wieke said. "You'd hate it."

"Tell me," said Anneke, and she did, and it took twenty minutes, and Anneke was funny about it twice.

At the door she said: "Come again after Christmas. Not before. Everybody comes before Christmas and then nobody comes in February."

"I will."

"And Wieke. The format thing."

Wieke's stomach did something.

"I put a line on your cover memo about it going up as a model. Did anything come of that?"

"The board looked at it in June."

"Good," said Anneke, and shut the door.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Two Floors

She came up on the Tuesday, which was five days after they told her, and she did not ring first.

"Have you got ten minutes?"

Wieke had a thing at two and said yes.

They went to the small room on the fourth floor with the table and the whiteboard that nobody cleaned, and Marja sat down and put a folder on the table, which was not a thing Wieke had ever seen her do, and which was somehow the worst part of the whole conversation.

She was not angry. Wieke had prepared, in the short walk down the corridor, for angry, and had a shape ready for it, and did not need it.

"Right," Marja said. "You did the corridor one. Everyone knows you did the corridor one. So you're the person who can tell me how this works, and I'd rather ask you than the one from legal, because the one from legal was kind to me and I can't be doing with another one of those."

"I can tell you how the process works. I can't discuss your matter."

"I don't want you to discuss my matter. I want to know how the form works." She opened the folder, which had one page in it. "Because I've read it four times and it's one page, and I did eighteen years in systems and I can read a change record, and this doesn't tell me anything."

She turned it round.

Wieke looked at Section B, which said *not completed — direction specifies proximate act*, in Joost's neat entry, and at Section C, and at the countersignature block with her own name in it, and there was a silence of a length she could not afterwards estimate.

"Ask me," she said.

"What's Section B?"

"It's the chain of record. It's a description of every documented act bearing on the scheme, in date order, from the beginning."

"And why isn't it here?"

"Because the circular makes it optional where the direction specifies a proximate act."

"Right," said Marja. "And what's a proximate act?"

"It means the tribunal has asked for the person whose act most proximately determined the operative parameters, rather than asking who adopted the scheme."

"Which is me, because I promoted the set."

"Which is you," Wieke said, "because yours is the last act on the record that touched the parameters."

Marja sat back and folded her arms and looked at the ceiling for a moment.

"See, that's a good answer," she said. "That's a proper answer and I'm grateful for it, and I want you to know I'm not having a go, because none of this is you."

Wieke did not say anything.

"Here's my problem. That set had been running since 2029. It got built by somebody, and it got approved by somebody, and it got carried through at least two platform moves that I know of because I did one of them, and it got looked at in about 2032 by a consultant, I remember the bloke, he had a bag. And every single one of those is on a record somewhere in this building, because I know where the records are, I'm the one that keeps the box running." She tapped the page, twice, with a fingernail, on Section B. "And the form says all of that is *optional*."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it takes three months and the format is designed to take twenty-one days."

She said it plainly, because Marja had asked plainly, and because anything else would have been a way of not saying it.

Marja looked at her for a while.

"Right," she said. "That's honest. Thank you."

She closed the folder.

"Can I have one? A Section B. Can I ask for one?"

"You can ask for the underlying records."

"That's a log. That's one line. That's me pressing a thing on a Thursday." Not heated; she was working it out as she went, in the way she worked everything out. "What I want is whoever else is on it. I don't want them *done* for it, I'm not after anybody. I want them on the same piece of paper as me, so that when my daughter looks this up in twenty years she can see what it was."

"There isn't a route to that," Wieke said. "I'm sorry. There's a note in the system arguing that Section B should be mandatory in all cases. It's on the agenda for January."

"Whose note?"

"Mine."

Marja nodded slowly.

"Well," she said. "Good luck with January."

She got up, and picked up the folder, and at the door she said, without turning round, in exactly the tone she had used two years earlier standing over a machine with a mug in her hand:

"I told you compliance always finds somebody."

Then she said, "That wasn't fair," and went.

Wieke sat in the small room on the fourth floor with the whiteboard nobody cleaned for about six minutes, and then went to her thing at two, and was, by everybody's account, completely normal in it.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

The Signature

It came to her on the fifth of December in a batch of nine, which was an ordinary Friday batch, and it was the sixth one down.

Joost Okonkwo had prepared it. He was twenty-six and had been in the team since September and was careful and quick and had, Wieke thought, more sense than she had had at his age. He had done it correctly. There was nothing wrong with it. It was one page, which was the format, and the format had been adopted by the board in June, and he had completed it exactly as the circular required.

She read Section A, and Section B, and Section C.

M. Ruijs, systems operations.

She sat with it for a while, in an open-plan office on a Friday afternoon with the heating on too high and somebody two desks away laughing at something.

She knew the corridor — not that corridor, but corridors. She knew what a berth allocation scheme was and how it got its parameters and what happened to them over seven years. She knew what a runbook was. She knew, with more precision than anybody else in the building, what *promoted to authoritative* meant, because she had spent three months in 2036 establishing that it meant a woman running a script on a Friday afternoon under step 6, and she had written *not a decision-maker* against that exact act, in a spreadsheet, in March, and had been right.

She knew why Section B was blank. It was blank because the direction specified a proximate act, and it was optional where the direction specified a proximate act, and the direction specified a proximate act because tribunals had started using the formula after TR/2035/0288, and the formula had worked there because her own report had shown them how to ask.

And she knew Marja Ruijs. She had sat at that desk with a sandwich being eaten at her. She had been told to her face that compliance always finds some-

body and that it is never the one you would pick if you had ever actually been in the building.

She thought about not signing it.

She gave that its full weight, and here is what the weight was.

If she did not sign it, it went back to Joost, who would take it to Marcel, who was covering for Anneke and who had been covering since September and who wanted, more than anything, for nothing unusual to happen while he was covering. Marcel would sign it. The designation would be made on the fifteenth either way.

If she did not sign it, she would have to say why, in writing, because you do not decline to countersign a report in the standard format without a reason on the file. The reason would be that the standard format was wrong. That was, in fact, her position, and it was on an agenda.

Item 9. Deferred from October to January.

The note survived her signing. That was the thing. The note was on the January agenda with her name on it and a page and a half of argument, and if she signed this one it would still be there in January and she would be a senior officer in post making the case, and there was a reasonable chance — not a good one; a reasonable one — that Section B would be made mandatory in the spring, and that would be worth more than one blank Section B in December.

If she refused, the note did not survive. She would have made it personal, and a policy argument that has been made personal by a refusal is not a policy argument any more, it is a grievance, and it gets handled rather than considered. She had watched that happen to a woman in records in 2032 and could remember her name.

That was the arithmetic and it was correct, and she did it in about three minutes.

At the end of it, before she reached for the pen, one other thing arrived, unhelpfully, the way they do.

It was that a woman had applied a retention schedule to eleven boxes of a care home's daily records, in accordance with a schedule she had not written, on the date the schedule required, with the right signatures. And that nobody had found that the woman had done anything wrong, because she had not. And that they had moved her anyway, correctly and kindly, in a way that had

no document in it at all, because when a thing has gone wrong and nobody has decided anything, an institution will reach for the nearest set of hands, not out of malice, but because hands are what the record has got.

She sat with that for a moment.

Then she put it down, because it was not the same — she had been moved, not designated; there had been no direction, no tribunal, no form — and because it was half past four on a Friday, and because it was the kind of thought that feels like an insight for about eleven seconds and then turns out to be a way of making somebody else's afternoon about yourself.

She signed it.

She put her name in the countersignature block and the date next to it and moved it into the outward tray, and the batch went at five, and she did four more things before she left and one of them she did badly.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Ferry, in December

Ferry rang her about something else entirely, which was an access request for the 2028 estate, and got through it in about ninety seconds, and then stayed on the line the way he did.

"Have you heard about the corridor lot? Your hauliers."

"Go on."

"Damages came through in the autumn. October, I think. I heard it off the man who does their vehicle checks, which is not a source, but he had the figure and the figure sounded like a figure." Paper moving somewhere. "Osseweijer's bought a new cab. Second-hand, but new to him. Blue."

"Good."

"And they reweighted the corridor in September. Did you know that? Not because of any of this, mind. It was in the reprocurement, it's been coming since '34. But it's done, and the small ones have got a floor allocation now, which is what that consultant said in 2024."

"Van Hout."

"Van Hout. Seventy-odd. Biscuits." Ferry made a noise. "Twelve years. And the man who wrote it can't remember writing it."

"What's the effect? On the ground."

"Three minutes," said Ferry. "Their trucks run about three minutes earlier at the gate than they did in the spring. That's what fourteen years of it comes to. Three minutes."

Wieke wrote *3 min* on a pad without deciding to and then looked at it.

"I don't say that to be miserable," Ferry said. "Three minutes is what he wanted. Three minutes is the whole thing. That's what I've been telling people in this building for twenty years and nobody believes it because it doesn't sound like enough to ruin anybody."

Then, in the same tone, because it was all one conversation to him:

"Verbeek sold the house. He's gone to his daughter's, in Zwolle. That's from the same man, so take it how you like."

"Right."

"And Marja's put in for a transfer."

Wieke put the pen down.

"Where to?"

"Terminal operations. Which is a step sideways and a worse shift pattern and about the same money, and she's been in systems for eighteen years." A pause of perhaps two seconds, which for Ferry was a paragraph. "She says it's the shifts. It isn't the shifts."

"No."

"She's not said a word about the other business to me, mind. Not one. And I've given her three or four openings." A sound of paper. "She came up to see you."

"She did."

"Right," said Ferry, and did not ask, which was the second time that year he had not asked her something, and she noticed it both times.

He went back to the access request, and gave her the reference number for it, and asked whether she wanted it as paper or as a file, and she said paper, and he said, "Good," approvingly, and rang off.

The kettle, he mentioned at the very end, was still in his room.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

The Next File

She stayed late on the Friday before Christmas, because there was no reason not to and because the flat with the room in it was cold until about eight.

The office emptied in the ordinary way. Joost went at half past four and said have a good one. Gerda went at five with a bag of things for her sister. The cleaner came through at six and they said what they said to each other twice a week.

At about seven she had one left in the tray, which was a fresh one, a new matter, a direction that had come in on the Tuesday.

She opened the form.

Section A. She filled it in from the direction, which took four minutes: the tribunal, the date, the terms. It was a housing allocation in the south of the province, an index that had been running since 2027, and the direction specified the proximate act.

Section B.

She looked at the field. *Chain of record. Optional where the direction specifies a proximate act.*

She could complete it. Nothing in the circular prohibited completing it; it said optional, and optional runs both ways, and she had said so in the note, at the bottom of the second paragraph. She could go and find out who had touched that index in nine years, and in what order, and why, and it would take her the best part of three months and the direction gave her twenty-one days.

She had made that argument in a page and a half in August. It was on the agenda for January as item 9, having been deferred once. Marcel had said it was well made.

Section C.

Under it, in the small grey type that the form used for guidance, the line she had now read perhaps sixty times, in draft, in the circular, in Joost's report, in her own note where she had quoted it in full in order to argue against it:

identify the person whose act most proximately determined the operative parameters.

She read it once more.

Outside the window a tram went along the Coolsingel with its lights on, and somebody on the floor below was vacuuming, and the sticky note on the edge of the monitor, which had been there since January and had gone slightly yellow at the top edge, said in her own handwriting: *the code presumes such a person exists.*

She saved the form as a draft.

Then she opened the next file.