THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE SETTLED ACCOUNT

Book I of the Legibility Cycle

A crime novel about certainty, and the people who learn that an honest account can close a door that was holding something open.

MANAGED HUMAN ERA

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Part One

The Commission

CHAPTER ONE

Drawer Runners

The notification came at 10:52, between the drawer runners and the soft-close hinges.

Kai Rand had been translating kitchen furniture since seven. The catalogue was German, a firm in Bielefeld whose Estonian distributor wanted ninety pages by Tuesday, and she had reached the section where the copywriter had run out of things to say about drawers and had started saying them again with different adjectives. She was good at this. She could take a sentence that meant nothing in one language and make it mean the same nothing in another, cleanly, at a rate of about four hundred words an hour, which was enough to pay for the flat and not enough to stop counting.

The console on the kitchen wall chimed once, the low municipal chime rather than the personal one, and she did not look up until she had finished the sentence about the runners. Then she looked up.

The console was not hers. It had come with the flat, or rather it had come with the block, in the retrofit the housing cooperative had done in the late forties when the city had offered to pay for half of it: a grey unit the size of a paperback, set into the wall where the old wired intercom had been, with the cooperative's stencil still faintly visible on the plaster around it and a hairline crack in the bezel that a previous tenant had tried to fix with clear tape. It ran the city's support firmware. It had a small brass plate under it that said, in Estonian and Russian, *Do not paint over*. It was, in every flat in the block, in the same place, and she had once heard a woman on the stairs refer to it as *the council*, as in *the council says it's going to rain*, and had never afterward been able to think of it as anything else.

> *Municipal Registry. Next-of-kin notification. RAND, TOOMAS, 61. Deceased, this morning, at place of employment. A person will contact you within twenty-four hours. If you require support before then, say so now.*

She read it twice. Then she read the sentence about the drawer runners again, because her eyes had gone back to the screen on their own and it seemed simpler to let them.

The console waited. It was designed to wait. After a while it dimmed the message slightly, which was its way of not pressing, and put up the small grey line it used when it had noticed something: *You have been still for four minutes.*

"I know," Kai said.

She got up and filled the kettle and stood at the window while it boiled. Fourth floor. The car park, the row of lime trees the council had planted in a straight line in 1978 and which had grown crooked anyway, the tram wire, the sky doing the flat white thing it did in early November when it could not decide whether to rain. A man in the car park was trying to get a folded pram into the boot of a small car and the pram did not want to go. She watched him for the whole of the kettle. He got it in. He stood for a moment with his hand on the boot lid, breathing, and then he shut it.

Her father was dead. She said it once, aloud, to see what her voice did, and her voice did nothing in particular.

She had thought about this, of course. Everybody thought about it. He was sixty-one and worked shifts at a heat plant and had a heart that the plant's wellbeing layer had opinions about, and she had assumed that when the day came it would arrive as a phone call from a hospital, or from Maret, and that she would cry, and that the crying would be for him and also for the fourteen months, and that at some point in the crying she would be able to stop keeping the two apart. She had not assumed it would come as a line of text between two paragraphs about drawers, and that she would finish the paragraph.

She made the tea and did not drink it. She sat back down at the desk. The catalogue was still open. *Our runners are tested for fifty thousand cycles*, said the German, *which corresponds to more than thirty years of daily use.* She translated it. She checked the figure against the distributor's spec sheet because the last time she had trusted a German catalogue about cycles it had been wrong by a factor of two and Liis had rung her about it at nine at night.

She noticed, somewhere around the hinges, that she was not crying, and she stopped to consider this, the way you might stop to consider a noise from an engine. It was not that she felt nothing. It was that the thing she felt had not

yet decided what it was, and she found that she was not willing to make the decision for it.

She filed the drawer section at 12:40, on time, and sent Liis a note saying the hinges would be late, and did not say why.

At one o'clock the console asked her, gently, whether she would like it to notify anyone. She said no. It asked whether she would like it to adjust the flat.

She did not know what that meant, and, because she was a person who looked things up, she looked it up, and the console told her, in the flat helpful register it used for its own settings. *Bereavement adjustment. For a period you select, the flat will: reduce ambient lighting by 15%; suppress non-essential notifications; mute promotional and civic messaging; extend heating hours; lower the threshold for the council's check-in prompts. You may end the adjustment at any time. Many residents find it helpful.* There was a small line under that, in the cooperative's own voice rather than the city's, which said the adjustment had been added in 2049 after the block lost four residents in one winter and the residents' committee had asked for something, and this was what something had turned out to be.

She read it twice. She thought about a flat that had been told she was grieving, and that would dim itself, and warm itself, and check on her more often, on her behalf, without her having to do any of it. She thought that it was well meant. She thought that a great many people in the block had probably said yes to it and had been glad, and that she could see exactly why, and that it was a kindness, and that she did not want it, because the flat would then be a flat in which a thing had happened, and she was not ready to live in that flat yet, and she said no. It brought the lights up a fraction, since the day outside had given up, and left her alone, which was what it was for.

CHAPTER TWO

A Person

The person contacted her the next morning and was not who she expected.

"This is Priit Lepik," the voice said. "From the plant. I work with — I worked with Toomas. I'm sorry, I should have said that first. I'm the one who found him."

Kai had been expecting the registry. She had been expecting a woman with a soft trained voice, or a form, or one of the municipal care-workers who came to the door with a tablet and a lanyard and stayed exactly as long as the protocol said they should. She had prepared for that. She had not prepared for a man who sounded as though he had dialled the number four times and hung up three.

"I got the registry message," she said. "Yesterday."

"I know. They said they'd send it. I asked them if anyone was going to actually ring you and they said a person would be in touch and I thought, well, I'm a person." A pause. "I'm sorry. That was a stupid thing to say."

"It's all right."

"I just thought you shouldn't only get the text. I don't know if that was right. Anu, my wife, she said I should let the professionals do it, and she's probably right, but I found him, and I thought, if it was my father, I'd want somebody to ring who'd actually been there."

She sat down on the arm of the sofa. Outside the window the man with the pram was back, or a different man with a different pram; the car park had a lot of prams in it in the mornings.

"Tell me," she said.

He told her. He told her too much, in the wrong order, and it was the first honest thing anyone had given her. He had come in early for the five o'clock shift because his bus was on the other timetable now and it was either forty minutes early or ten minutes late. He had gone down to the condensate pumps because it was on his walk-round and because it was warm down there and he

liked to start the day somewhere warm. Toomas had been at the bottom of the service stair, on his side, with his hard hat still on, which Priit kept mentioning, as if the hat were the fact that made it real.

"I thought he was asleep," Priit said. "For about a second. He had a way of sitting down on the stairs when his knee was bad, and I thought, he's sat down and gone off. And then I saw the angle of him."

"Was he — " She did not know how to finish it.

"He wasn't in pain. I don't think. I don't know. I'm not a doctor. The care system said he'd been gone about an hour. It knew before I did, it turned out. The building had flagged a body at rest in the pump gallery at four-ten and nobody had — well. It flags a lot of things. Somebody sits down for a smoke, it flags that too."

He paused, and she heard him decide to say the next thing.

"He was on watch," Priit said. "You should know that, because it'll come up. Two flags in a month, from the wellbeing layer. Sleep, or something. I don't know what. It doesn't tell us. What it means is the building's allowed to go and ask the city for context. Your console at home, your calls, who you rang and when and whether they picked up. Not what you said. They're very clear it's not what you said. Just that you did. Half the men on the floor have been on watch at one time or another. Anu was, after her mother. It's not — it doesn't mean anything, on its own. But it means there's a file, and the file's got more in it than a shift log."

He stopped. She heard him breathe.

"He wasn't on shift," Priit said. "That's the thing nobody's said to you yet, I expect, because it's the thing that's going to matter. He wasn't on. He'd no reason to be in the building at three in the morning. His card let him in at ten to three. I don't know why. I don't think anybody knows why."

"No," Kai said. "I don't suppose they do."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be telling you the — I don't know what's appropriate. I've never done this."

"You're doing fine."

"I'm not," he said, and laughed, once, wetly. "But thank you."

There was a silence in which neither of them hung up. She could hear a radio somewhere behind him, a woman reading the shipping levels for the gulf, and a child asking something and being told not now.

"He talked about you," Priit said. "I don't know if you want to hear that. He didn't talk about much. But he said you did languages. He was proud of that, in his way. He said you could make a German sound like he meant it in Estonian."

That was a thing her father would have said. It had his exact shape, the compliment with the small hook in it. She had not expected to hear him speak again and here he was, second-hand, through a man she had never met, and it went in under her ribs and sat there.

"Thank you for ringing," she said. "I mean that."

"There's some things in his locker. Nothing much. A jacket. His own mug. I could bring them, if you like. Or somebody from the office will send them. Whichever."

"Bring them," she said, before she had thought about it. "If it's no trouble."

"It's no trouble," Priit said, and then, as if he had just remembered it was allowed, "I'm sorry for your loss."

After he rang off she sat on the arm of the sofa for a long time. The console, having listened to the call as it listened to everything, put up its grey line: *Would you like to save the caller's details?* She said yes. It filed him under *Lepik, Priit — Toomas's workplace*, which was its own small kindness, since she had not told it who Toomas was and it had worked it out anyway.

CHAPTER THREE

Nine Years

Hedvig Sarv delivered the Kattai finding at their kitchen table. They had asked for the kitchen table. In twenty-two years she had never delivered a finding anywhere else if a kitchen table was on offer.

Jaan Kattai had gone into the harbour on a night in March nine years ago and had not come out. Since then his wife, Silvi, had been told a great many things by a great many people. He had jumped. He had fallen. He had been pushed, by nobody anyone could name. He had been drunk, though his sister said he had not touched a drink in a decade. He had been seen on the wharf at eleven, at midnight, at two, by witnesses who were drunk, or lying, or wrong about the night. The original inquiry had closed with the word *undetermined*. Silvi hated that word more than the others. It was the only one that had been allowed to stay.

A camera had changed it. The port authority had unsealed nine years of wharf footage in a retention purge, and Hedvig's office had a standing request on every purge in the district, and a hard drive had come to her desk in July with a label that meant nothing to anyone else. The footage took a week. The rest took three months: vessel tracking, tide tables, the timing of a crane movement that had put a shadow across the exact stretch of wharf at the exact moment, and the shift log of a night watchman now retired to Pärnu, who had been more relieved to be asked than she expected.

"He fell," she told Silvi Kattai. "I want to say that plainly before anything else. You've been told the other things for nine years. I'm not adding to them. He was on the wharf at 01:14. He was alone. He was walking, not staggering. His gait is steady across four minutes of footage. He went to the edge, which people did, to look at the water. A mooring ring had been left with its line off. He caught it. He went in at 01:19. I have that to within a minute, from three sources that don't know each other, and they agree."

Silvi said nothing. Her son Kaspar, thirty now, twenty-one then, put his hand flat on the table and looked at it.

"I can show you," Hedvig said. "Some people want to see it and some don't. Both are fine. There's nothing on the footage you need to see in order to believe me. But it's yours. It always was. It took a long time to reach you."

"The ring," Silvi said. "The line was off the ring."

"Yes."

"Whose job was that?"

"The night watchman's. He was at the other end of the wharf. He's seventy-four. He has thought about it every day since, though he didn't know until I told him that it mattered. He'd like to write to you. You don't have to let him."

Silvi put her face in her hands. Kaspar moved his chair. Hedvig sat still and let it happen. Nobody had taught her that part. She had come to think it was the job. The finding was six pages. The sitting still was an hour. She would not have traded the ratio.

At the door Silvi stood in her socks and said, "Nine years," and Hedvig said, "I know," and Silvi said, "No. I mean thank you for the nine years. Somebody kept the file open."

Hedvig took the stairs. The lift smelled of something. Four flights, and the hip counted every one.

• • •

Raivo was waiting by her car.

Raivo was always waiting somewhere. He had been in the office eleven years and believed that any silence longer than four seconds was a gap into which information should be poured. He was a good reconstructor. Thorough, fair, and he had a memory for filing codes that she relied on and had never told him so. He was also the reason she ate lunch in her car.

"Kattai's done, then."

"Kattai's done."

"Fell?"

"Fell."

"I always thought fell. The sister was very insistent about the drink, and I thought, well, that doesn't make him not fall, does it, it just makes him fall sober." He had his own lunch, in a bag. He intended to eat it with her. She was going to let him, because she had just made a woman cry for the right reasons and had nothing left to defend the car with.

"You've got a new one," Raivo said, through a sandwich. "Came in this morning. Heat plant. Man off the stairs."

"I saw."

"Three parties already. Insurer, union fund, pension. All wanting a determination by the end of the month because of the pension window." He chewed. "I read the front sheet. He wasn't on shift."

"I read it too, Raivo."

"Two continuance flags in the month before. The wellbeing layer had him on watch. That'll be the insurer's line. Self-directed."

"I don't care what they want."

"No," Raivo agreed, cheerfully. "You never do. That's why they give you the ones with three parties."

She looked through the windscreen at the block she had just left. Fourth floor. A woman in socks was probably still standing at the window. Twenty-two years. Two hundred and some findings. She had never delivered one she could not stand behind. She had never delivered one by letter. She had never once let a party tell her what it was going to say.

"Hip's bad today," Raivo observed.

"Eat your sandwich," Hedvig said.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Delegation

Maret had organised the funeral, because Maret organised things, and because Kai had not been in a position to argue and had not been sure she wanted to.

It was at the crematorium chapel on the east road, the modern one with the wall of glass that looked out on a stand of birches the architect had presumably intended to be consoling. Forty people, perhaps. Men from the plant in jackets that did not get worn often. Two neighbours from the old block. A cousin from Tartu whom Kai had last seen at her mother's funeral and who had aged in the interval in a way that made her wonder what she herself looked like now. The chapel's ambient layer had been told it was a funeral and had dimmed itself accordingly, and kept the temperature at the exact point where nobody would notice it, and played nothing.

Maret sat in the front row on the aisle with her handbag on her knee like a small dog. She was sixty-four, Toomas's older sister by three years, and she had the family face, which was long and pale and gave the impression of listening carefully to something slightly to the left of whoever was speaking. She had rung Kai nine times in the four days since the notification. She had said, on the second call, that the plant had killed him, and on the ninth she had not changed her mind, and Kai did not expect her to change it at the funeral.

"Three of them," Maret said, not lowering her voice. "From the plant. Look."

Kai looked. Three people had come in together and were standing at the back deciding where to sit: a man in his fifties with a lanyard he had forgotten to take off, a younger woman with a tablet held against her chest like a shield, and a large soft man in a grey suit whose expression suggested that he had been to a great many of these and had learned to hold his face in neutral.

"Site manager," Maret said. "Personnel. And the other one's from their lawyers, I'd put money on it. They send three so that later they can say three came."

"Maret."

"I'm only saying."

"He worked there for twenty-six years. Some of them will have known him."

"Some of them will have known him," Maret agreed, in the tone of a woman filing the sentence for later use.

The service was short. A municipal celebrant, since Toomas had not been anything in particular, said the things that were said. Maret spoke, and was good, and cried at the right point, and said that her brother had been a careful man in a careless industry, and looked at the back row while she said it. Kai did not speak. Maret had asked her to and she had said no, and Maret had said, *he was your father*, and Kai had said, *I know whose father he was*, and that had been the end of it. She sat in the front row with her hands in her lap and watched the birches and felt the fourteen months sitting beside her like a second person.

There was a moment, near the end, when the celebrant asked whether anyone else wished to say something, and the chapel held its breath in the way rooms do, and a man in the second-to-last row half stood and then sat down again. Kai turned. He was in his late forties, broad across the shoulders, in a black jumper under a jacket that had been bought for a different occasion. He had a face that did not know what to do with itself. He saw her looking and looked down.

She knew who he was before she had any reason to.

Afterward, in the vestibule, while Maret received condolences like a head of state, the three from the plant came and did what they had come to do. The site manager shook her hand and said Toomas had been one of the best he had, which was possibly true, and then did not let go of her hand for a moment longer than the sentence needed, and said, lower, so that the other two would not hear it, "He was in twice last month. When he wasn't on. I saw it on the card log and I thought, that's Toomas, he's checking something, and I didn't ask him what." He let go. "I should have asked him what. I wanted you to know that somebody thought it." His name, she remembered, was Kallas. He had the look of a man who had said the thing he had come to say and would now go back to being a site manager.

The woman with the tablet said the plant would of course be supporting the family through the process and that there would be paperwork and that she would be in touch, and gave Kai a card with a bereavement liaison number on it, and said the locker contents would be sent by courier within ten working days, and Kai said someone had already offered to bring them, and the woman said that was irregular but she would note it, and noted it, on the tablet, with a stylus. The large soft man said nothing at all and simply inclined his head, and Maret had been right about him.

The man in the black jumper was gone. She had looked for him and he had gone, out through the glass and across the car park, before the delegation reached her, as if he had felt that being seen talking to her while they were in the room would have been a kind of taking sides.

"That was Lepik," Maret said, at her elbow. "The one who found him. He rang you, didn't he. He rang me too. Went on and on."

"He was kind."

"He was nervous. It's not the same." Maret took her arm. "Come on. There's a room with sandwiches, and I want to see which of the three of them eats."

CHAPTER FIVE

Three Parties

The commission came as it always came. Three letters, saying the same thing in three registers of politeness.

The plant's insurer wrote first. It was a mutual, one of the old Baltic ones with a name like a ship. Two pages, reviewed by someone whose job was to make sure nothing in them could ever be quoted. *The Mutual welcomes the appointment of a Reconstruction Officer and wishes to be of every assistance.* Then, in a paragraph placed third so that it would look incidental: *It is noted that the deceased had been the subject of two continuance-risk notifications raised by the site wellbeing layer within the preceding thirty days, that the deceased was not rostered at the material time, and that the Mutual's liability under the site policy is of course contingent upon the category determined.* Then a closing line about co-operation. The mutual had not written *self-directed*. It had written *of course* and let two words do the work.

The union's benevolent fund wrote second, on paper that had been through a printer with a failing drum. A human being in an office with too few staff had written it and it read like one. *The Fund pays a death-in-service benefit in cases of accident or employer negligence. It does not pay in cases of self-direction. This rule was adopted by the membership in 1994 and the Fund has sought to amend it at every conference since. The Fund therefore has an interest in the determination. The Fund wishes to record that Toomas Rand was a member for twenty-six years and a shop steward for four, and was a good man.* Signed by a woman called Tiiu. Below the signature, in blue ink that had bled into the cheap paper: *I knew him a little. Please be careful with this one.*

The pension scheme wrote third and shortest. Six lines. The survivor's benefit was calculated on a basis that varied by category. The category was to be determined within sixty days of notification. *Where no category has been determined within the statutory period, the claim will be transferred to the deferred review pathway.* A footnote explained the deferred pathway. A different

department. A median of fourteen months, on the scheme's own figures. The scheme did not care what the determination was. It cared when.

Hedvig laid the three letters side by side and read them twice more. She read everything twice more when the writer wanted something.

"Well," said Raivo, who had come in for a stapler and stayed. He read them upside down. He was good at that. "That's the shape of it."

"That's the shape of it."

"*Of course*," Raivo said, tapping the mutual's letter. "I do love an *of course*." He had the stapler in his hand and showed no sign of leaving with it. "What do you want?"

"I want to know what happened to him."

"Yes, obviously, but — "

"That's all I want, Raivo. It's the whole job. I find out what happened. I write it down. The three of them fight about what it means to their balance sheets in a room I'm not in."

He nodded. He had heard it on his first day. He had thought then that it was what people said before the pressure arrived. Eleven years had shown him otherwise.

"You'll do the family in person," he said.

"I always do the family in person."

"There's only the daughter. The sister's not next of kin. The daughter's young. Thirty-something. Translator." He put the stapler down and forgot it. "You could do this one by packet. It's permitted. Three parties, a tight window, the daughter won't know the difference. Send the draft, take her comments in writing, file. Save yourself three meetings."

Hedvig looked at the union letter. At the handwriting.

"There was a family," she said. "My second year. Before you. A boy on a motorbike. I did it by packet. I was new, the packet was allowed, I had four other files. The mother opened the envelope in the hall of her building with a neighbour standing there, because she thought it was from the council. She read the word *negligent*. It was about the road surface. It was accurate. She read it standing up in a hallway with a stranger watching her face."

Raivo said nothing.

"The regulation says in person unless impracticable. I have never found it impracticable. I have found it inconvenient, tiring, and once, in Narva, extremely cold. The daughter gets three meetings. In a room. With me. She gets the draft in her hands so she can read it herself, and if she wants to argue with a sentence she argues with it to my face. That is the whole of what the process has to offer her. It is not much. I am not going to make it less."

"All right," Raivo said.

"Take the stapler."

He took it. At the door he turned. "The insurer will lean on you."

"The insurer always leans on me."

"This one had a lawyer at the funeral. Tiiu told me. Big man, grey suit, said nothing. That's not a mutual being sad, Hedvig. That's a mutual pricing a claim."

"Then it can price it," she said, "once I've told it what it's pricing." She pulled the file toward her and opened it. Raivo knew when he had been dismissed and went and stapled something.

CHAPTER SIX

Forty-One Seconds

The flat had to be cleared.

Not immediately. The landlord was decent, in the way of landlords who had kept the same tenant for eleven years and had not raised the rent in four of them, and had said there was no hurry, take the month. But Kai wanted a task, and this was one, and Maret had offered to help and Kai had said she would do the first pass alone.

Her father had lived, since the divorce and then since her mother's death, in a two-room flat on the second floor of a block behind the tram depot, and he had lived in it the way he had lived everywhere, which was as though he might have to leave in a hurry. The furniture was the furniture that had come with the flat. The bookshelf held manuals. The kitchen held one of everything. There was a photograph of Kai on the windowsill, age nine, with a bicycle, and one of her mother that Kai had not known he had kept, and nothing else on any surface except a radio and a jar of the boiled sweets he had eaten instead of smoking for twenty years.

She did the kitchen first because it was easiest. Then the bathroom. Then she stood in the doorway of the bedroom and did not go in, and went and sat on the sofa instead, and took out her phone.

She had not looked at it. She had known she would have to, and she had not, in the same way she had not gone into the bedroom. It was a small phone, older than most, and she kept the call log because she kept everything, and she scrolled back through it now past Liis and Maret and Liis and a number she did not recognise and Liis, and there they were.

Rand, T. — Tuesday 21 Oct — 19:14 — 2 min 06.

Rand, T. — Friday 24 Oct — 22:31 — missed (41s).

Two minutes and six seconds. She remembered it, in the way you remember a thing you had decided at the time not to remember. He had rung about the

summer house paperwork, or that was what he had said he was ringing about, and they had done two minutes on it, the transfer form, the notary, whether she still had the key to the woodshed, and then there had been a pause that had gone on slightly too long, and he had said, *anyway*, and she had said, *yes*, and that had been that. Two minutes and six seconds. Neither of them had said anything about the fourteen months. Neither of them had said anything about the sentence he had said, across the kitchen table at the summer house, the last time they had been in a room together.

And then Friday. 22:31. She had been in the bath. She had heard it ring and had looked at the screen from the bath, wet-handed, and had seen his name, and had watched it ring. She could remember the exact quality of the decision, which was that it was not a decision. It was simply a thing she was not going to do right then, in the bath, at half past ten, three days after two minutes about a woodshed. She would ring him back. Tomorrow, or Sunday. And Saturday had been a deadline and Sunday had been Aleksei and Monday she had thought of it, actually thought of it, standing in the kitchen with the kettle, and had thought, *later*, and Tuesday morning at 02:52 his card had let him into a building he was not rostered for, and at some time before 04:10 he had gone down a stair.

Forty-one seconds. It rang for forty-one seconds. She had not known phones let it go that long. She had not known she had let it.

She sat on his sofa with the phone in her hand and waited to feel the thing she was supposed to feel, and what came instead was smaller and colder and had the shape of a fact. The call was in the log. It had a timestamp. It was, she understood, sitting on the sofa of a dead man's flat with the radio and the boiled sweets, the kind of fact that did not stay in a phone.

She made herself work it through, because that was what she did with things. He had been on watch. Priit had said it and Priit had been right to say it, because it was the thing that changed what the phone in her hand was. A man on watch was a man whose building had been given leave to ask the city for context, and the city kept context the way it kept everything, in the grey unit on his kitchen wall and in the grey unit on hers. Not what was said. They were very clear about that; it was on the brass plate, if you read the small print, and it was in the leaflet the cooperative had sent round when the units went in. But

that a call had been made. From whom, to whom, at what time, for how long, and whether it had been answered. His console had logged an outgoing call at 22:31 on the Friday. Hers had logged it ringing. The plant's wellbeing layer, with a flag open on him, would have pulled his side of it as a matter of routine, the way it pulled his sleep and his card and whatever else it took to build the picture of a man it was worried about. It would be in his file now. And the woman from the archive, who did things properly and had standing requests on everything, would have pulled his file.

It would be there. Not because anyone had been cruel. Because it was true.

She did not delete it. She thought about deleting it, and saw that deleting it would change nothing except that she would then be a person who had deleted it, and she did not want to be that in addition to what she already was.

She put the phone face down on the arm of the sofa and went into the bedroom and started on the wardrobe, and found that she could do it if she did not look at the pillows, and did the whole wardrobe without looking, and filled four bags, and carried them down two flights to the car, and drove home, and did not tell Maret, and did not tell Aleksei, and did not tell the console when it asked, that evening, gently, whether she wanted to talk to anyone about her day.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Bay

The panel was scheduled for the twenty-fourth. Five days before the Rand filing date. A person who believed in a malevolent universe would have taken that as evidence.

Hedvig did not. A scheduling system had been told the panel needed to sit before the end of November and had found a day when four people were free. That it was also a day on which she would be finalising a three-party determination was what calendars did. She accepted the invitation. She wrote *Panel* in her own diary, the paper one, in pencil, and underlined it, and then sat looking at the word.

Director of the district incident archive. Not a large post. A large post for her. A room with a door. A say in which purges the office put standing requests on. The right to tell Raivo, kindly, that he was doing the Narva files this winter and she was not. And, if she was honest, and she generally was, the right to decide whether the consultation was done in person for the whole district, and not only for herself. She wanted it. She had wanted it for four years, since Lembit had announced he would retire and then had not, twice. She had told nobody. Raivo had known anyway, and had been decent about it, by mentioning it only once a week.

She got up. The hip did not enjoy it. She went to the window.

The car park was the reason for the hip. Six years ago, in ice, in the dark, she had gone over on the step by the bins with a box of files. She had got up, walked to the car, driven home, and found the next morning that the left side would not take her weight. There had been an operation. It had partly worked. There was another one available. She had put it off for two years because it meant six weeks off, and she could not think of a six weeks in which the office would not fall on Raivo.

The car park was also the reason for the other thing. Raivo called it a grudge. She did not.

The building was shared with planning, licensing, and a small department that did something with water. Fourteen bays, thirty-one people who wanted them, and a building manager called Kuusk who allocated them on principles he had never once stated. For eleven years Hedvig had had bay nine. By the door. In winter it was the one thing that made the hip tolerable. In September Kuusk had reallocated bay nine to *visitor parking, archive office* and had moved her to bay two. By the bins. The step.

She had written to him twice. In the second letter there was a paragraph about the step and the ice and the hip that she had read back afterward with some shame. It had the tone of a woman who had been wronged. She did not think of herself that way. She thought of herself as a woman who had been moved to bay two. Kuusk had replied both times that the allocation was under review. The water department said it had been under review since 2019.

There was a visitor in bay nine now. A small silver hatchback, badly parked, with a lanyard on the dashboard. Somebody visiting the archive. Somebody visiting her, quite possibly, who had parked in her bay to do it.

Raivo appeared with two coffees. The stapler apology. "Kuusk's in," he said. "I saw him by the lift. If you wanted to — "

"I don't want to."

"You've written to him twice."

"I've written to him twice. I'm not going to stand in a corridor and have a conversation about bays with a man who thinks *under review* is a sentence." She took the coffee. "I've got a determination to build and a panel to prepare for and a hip that would like me to sit down. Kuusk can have the corridor."

"Right," said Raivo, and stayed, because there was a four-second silence and he could not bear it. "Only, the visitor in nine. It's the insurer. The mutual. They've sent somebody to introduce themselves. Downstairs now. In your bay."

Hedvig looked at the hatchback.

"I'll come down," she said.

She took the stairs. The lift still smelled. On the way down she decided that she would arrive at the mutual's representative slightly out of breath and entirely without apology. By the ground floor she had also decided that after she had introduced herself she was going to walk past whoever it was, out

through the door, and take the hatchback's registration, and put it in a third letter. That was petty. She did not care.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Shelf

Priit came on the Saturday, with the box, and stayed for three hours, and none of it went the way either of them had expected.

He rang the bell at eleven. She had said any time after ten and had then spent forty minutes cleaning a flat that did not need it, because a stranger was coming who had known her father better than she had for the last year, and she wanted the flat to look like the kind of place where a daughter lived. He stood in the doorway with a cardboard box held in front of him in both arms, the way you hold a thing you are afraid of dropping, and said, "I didn't know if I should ring first," and she said, "You're here now," and he came in.

The box held a jacket, a mug, a pair of reading glasses, a paperback with a broken spine about the Winter War, a tin of the boiled sweets, and a small photograph in a cheap frame of a summer house that she had not seen since she was twenty-two. Priit put the box on the kitchen table and stood back from it and did not know what to do with his hands.

"There was a calendar," he said. "On the inside of the locker door. I didn't bring it. It's only got shifts on it. I can bring it if you want it."

"No. That's fine. Thank you."

"And I put the mug in a bag because it had — it was used. I didn't want to wash it. I didn't know if that was — I thought you might want it how it was."

She looked at him, this large awkward man in her small kitchen who had thought about whether to wash a mug, and something that had been shut since the console chimed came open about a centimetre.

"Sit down," she said. "I'll make coffee."

He sat. He did not fit the chair well. He talked, once he had a cup in his hands, and it was the talk of a man who had been holding a thing for two weeks and had not had anywhere to put it. He talked about the plant, which she had never visited, and which he described with the specific affection of a man for a large machine that had never once lied to him. He talked about Toomas, care-

fully, choosing the stories that had nothing in them. Toomas and the coffee machine in the control room, which he had repaired four times and had finally, in Priit's telling, threatened. Toomas and the apprentice who had put a wrench through a gauge glass and had been made to explain, to a room, in detail, exactly which of the wrench's properties had made this possible. Toomas and his knee, which was the reason he sat on stairs, and which he had refused to have looked at, and which Priit mentioned three times without seeming to notice he was doing it.

"He didn't talk about home," Priit said. "Not much. I knew he had a daughter. I knew there was a sister. That was about it. He wasn't a — he didn't bring it in with him. Some men do. He didn't."

"No. He wouldn't have."

"Anu says I talk too much about home. Says the whole plant knows what our Kristjan had for breakfast." He looked at his cup. "I don't know which way's right. I thought about it, after. Whether he'd have been — whether it would have been better if he'd brought it in. If somebody would have noticed something. But that's a thing you think afterwards. I don't know that it's true."

"No," Kai said.

Then, because she had a shelf.

It was leaning against the wall of the front room, in its flat pack, where it had been for nine weeks, since she had bought it in a fit of intending to organise the reference books and had opened the box and found forty-one pieces and a diagram in a language that was not one of hers. Priit saw it on his way to the bathroom and came back and said, "That wants putting up," in the voice of a man who could not walk past a thing that wanted putting up, and she said, "It's fine," and he said, "Have you got a screwdriver," and that was the end of that.

He did it badly. This was, she came to understand over the following two hours, not a reflection on his competence, which was clearly considerable in the domain of large industrial equipment, but on the shelf, which had been designed by someone who hated the people who would assemble it. He got the sides on. He got the back on, and then discovered the back was on the wrong way, and took it off, and put it on the right way, and discovered that the right way was in fact the wrong way and the wrong way had been right, and said

something in a low voice that he then apologised for. She held pieces. She read the diagram aloud, translating it, and he said, "That's not what it looks like," and she said, "No," and they looked at the diagram together, and he said, "Well, that's Swedish for you," and she said, "It's Danish," and he laughed properly for the first time.

At one point he was flat on his back on her floor with his head inside the lower section, holding a cam lock with one hand and a bracket with the other, and said, muffled, "Your father would've had this done in twenty minutes and told me I'd done it wrong," and she said, "Yes," and was smiling, and the smile was not for Priit.

It went up in the end. It was not square. The third shelf had a slope to it that the spirit level made no attempt to hide, and one of the back panels had a screw through it that had been meant for somewhere else and had been left because taking it out would have made a hole. Priit stood back from it with his hands on his hips and looked at it the way he had probably looked at every piece of equipment that had ever defeated him, and said, "It'll hold books."

"It'll hold books," she agreed.

"You want to put the heavy ones on the bottom. Because of the — " He gestured at the slope.

"I'll put the heavy ones on the bottom."

He stayed for another cup of coffee. He was, she thought, watching him find the door with his coat on and then come back for his gloves, a man who did not know how to leave a place where he had been useful. At the door he said, "The office will be in touch about the — I don't know what they call it. The reconstruction. There's a woman does it. Sarv. She's supposed to be good."

"I've had a letter."

"Right. Well." He looked at his gloves. "If you want somebody to — if there's a meeting, and you want somebody who was there. I don't know if that's a thing. But I'd come."

"Thank you."

"It's no trouble," Priit said, which was the second time, and went.

She put the heavy ones on the bottom. The shelf did not fall down. It stood against the wall with its slope and its wrong screw for the rest of the

winter, and she never once thought of straightening it, and there was a while, later, when she could not look at it at all.

CHAPTER NINE

Tuesday

Liis rang at 8:10, which was early even for Liis.

"The hinges," Liis said.

"You'll have them by two."

"I need them by twelve. The distributor's moved the print date. Don't ask me why, I asked, it's something to do with a trade fair in Riga and a man called Ülo who I have never met and have decided to hate." Liis was a woman in her fifties with a voice like a well-maintained engine and a habit of paying invoices on the day, which in Kai's experience made her a species of saint whatever else she was. "Can you do twelve."

"I can do twelve."

"I'm sorry. I know it's — I know the timing's bad."

"The timing's fine," Kai said, and meant it, and found she was grateful to be asked about hinges by a woman who wanted them for a reason that had nothing to do with anybody dying.

She did the hinges. The German copywriter had discovered, somewhere around page sixty, a genuine enthusiasm for the soft-close mechanism, and the enthusiasm had produced a paragraph that compared the closing of a drawer to the settling of a bird onto a branch, and Kai sat with it for a while, because she could see exactly what the man had been reaching for and she could see that it did not survive the trip into Estonian, where birds settled onto branches in a way that had nothing to do with kitchens. She took the bird out. She wrote something about the mechanism that was true and dull and would sell as many drawers. This was the job. Half of the job was knowing what to take out.

At 11:40 she sent it. At 11:43 Liis wrote back *bless you* and a payment confirmation, and Kai ate a sandwich standing at the window and watched the pram man, who had a routine now, or possibly had always had one and she had only lately started being at the window at the right time.

Aleksei rang at two.

Aleksei was a copy-editor at the publisher Liis sometimes worked for, and he was thirty-eight and had a flat near the port with a view he talked about, and they had been seeing each other, in the phrase she used to herself and to no one else, for about seven months, on a basis that neither of them had ever defined and that seemed to suit him. He had been at the funeral. He had stood at the back and afterwards had said the right things, and had offered to come back to the flat, and she had said no, and he had not minded, which was either a kindness or the whole problem.

"I wondered if you wanted dinner," he said. "Thursday. There's that place by the market, the one with the — "

"Thursday's fine."

"Good. Good." A pause. "Liis sent me the hinge copy. I'm doing the pass on the whole catalogue for the distributor, did she say?"

"She didn't."

"Well. I am." Another pause, and she heard him decide to say it. "You cut the bird."

"What bird?"

"Page sixty-something. The soft-close. In the German there's a bird settling on a branch. It's not bad, actually, for a man who's written sixty pages about drawers. It's the only sentence in the whole thing where he sounds like he's alive. And it's gone. You've got the mechanism and the newton figure and a sentence about quiet."

"It doesn't travel."

"It might have."

"It doesn't. Birds don't do that in Estonian. Not in a kitchen. It would read like a mistake." She heard herself, the flat professional certainty of it, and heard also that she was defending a drawer against a man who had, for once, asked her something. "Half the job is knowing what to take out."

"I know," Aleksei said. "I'm only saying I'd have left it." And then, easily, as if he had never raised it, "How are you doing? With everything."

"I cleared the flat. Most of it. The bedroom's done."

"That must have been hard."

"It was a wardrobe," Kai said. "It was four bags and two flights of stairs."

"Right," Aleksei said, in the tone of a man who had been told a thing and had understood that the thing was the answer, and that he was not going to be given the other answer, and had decided not to mind about that either. "Thursday, then. Eight?"

"Eight."

After he rang off she stood with the phone in her hand and found she was irritated, and could not decide whether it was because he had asked about the bird or because he had let it go. He had pushed once, on the one thing in the whole conversation that did not matter, and then had stepped off the other thing the moment she told him to, and she understood that she had trained him to do exactly that, over seven months, and that he had learned it well, and that she was now cross with him for having been a good student. She went back to the desk. She did not put the bird back.

In the afternoon she did a section of the appendix, which was specifications, which required no judgement of any kind and which she did with the radio on. The console had learned the radio. It brought it in at the volume she liked and lowered it, without being asked, when the tram went past, which the flat's old windows let in as a long rising note. At four she did the invoicing. At five she went out for milk and stood in the shop reading the labels on the yoghurt as though they were literature. At six she rang Maret, because she had not, and Maret talked for twenty-five minutes about the petition, and Kai said *yes* and *I see* and *I'm sure* and looked at the shelf.

It was, she would think much later, the last ordinary Tuesday. Nothing in it was about her father except the shelf, and the shelf was only about him at an angle. She had translated ninety pages of kitchens in ten days and had been paid for them and had eaten a sandwich and had agreed to dinner with a man who was not a problem, and it had all fitted, easily, around the fact that he was dead, the way water fits around a stone.

That night the console asked whether she wanted it to dim the front room, and she said yes, and it did, and the shelf stood in the half-dark with its slope, holding books.

CHAPTER TEN

Sleet

The plant was forty minutes out on the east road. Past the crematorium, past the last of the tram, into the flat land where the city stopped pretending.

Hedvig drove herself. The site manager had offered a car. She had said no. She wanted to arrive the way Toomas Rand had arrived every working day for twenty-six years: by the road, in the weather, in a small car whose heater took ten minutes to admit it was on. The weather was sleet. It had been rain in the city and had made its mind up halfway out. By the time she saw the stacks it was coming across the fields sideways, grey on grey, and the wipers had settled into the rhythm they used when they had given up.

The site manager met her at the gate. Kallas. He had been at the funeral. He looked like a man who had spent two weeks being asked questions by people whose interest was financial.

"I'll show you all of it," he said. "Whatever you want."

"I want to see the stair."

He took her. The plant was very large pipes and a noise that got into the teeth, and the smell of all such places: hot metal, wet concrete, and under those the heat itself. The control room was warm and lit. Two men looked at her and then away. The turbine hall was cold. The pump gallery was below it, down a steel service stair that turned once, rail on one side, wall on the other. Warm again at the bottom. Close. Humming. Kallas stopped at the top and let her go down alone. She noted that. She was grateful for it.

She went down slowly. Not for the hip. Toomas Rand had come down this stair between 02:52 and 04:10 on a Tuesday morning with a bad knee and no reason to be there. She wanted to know what that was, in so far as a fifty-two-year-old woman in daylight with a site manager at the top could know it.

Open steel treads, diamond-pressed for grip. Damp. Everything down here was damp. The return-water manifold ran along the wall at the bottom, lagged and painted and sweating, and the concrete under it had the permanent dark

patch of a floor that was never dry. A gate at the top of the stair: a hinged bar with a latch, meant to be shut, shut now, and worn at the latch in a way that said not always. A second rail on the wall side, added later by someone who had been told to, stopping a metre short of the bottom.

She stood where he had been found and let the pumps hum at her.

Three readings. She had laid them out on the drive. Not to choose. To know what each would need.

He fell. A man with a bad knee on a damp open-tread stair in the dark. It needed him to have been on the stair for an ordinary reason or no reason. It needed the stair to be what it was. Nothing else. The simplest reading. She trusted it least for that. Simplest was what everyone reached for when the other two were uncomfortable.

The plant let him fall. A gate not latched. A rail that stopped short. A floor never dry. A lighting schedule that, she would find, put the gallery on half power between two and five. It needed the plant to have known, or to have been able to know. It needed the failure to belong to the place and not the man. Tiiu at the fund would want it. Maret Rand, who had been ringing the office, would want it very much.

He went down on purpose. Two flags in a month. Not on shift. His card at ten to three. It needed him to have chosen the stair, and the choosing to be the kind a wellbeing layer was built to notice, and had noticed, twice, and had done what it could about, which was watch. The mutual would want this one and would never say so. And in twenty-two years it was the reading families could bear least and the one that was true most often. She did not yet know which of those two facts was going to matter more.

She went back up. Kallas was waiting.

"The gate," she said.

"It's meant to be latched. It's on the walk-round."

"Is it latched at three in the morning?"

He did not answer at once. "It should be."

"And the wet. At the bottom."

"The manifold sweats. Always has. There's a drain, but it's at the wrong end. There's a sump pump. There's isolation valves on the stair side, checked weekly, so nothing weeps onto the tread." A man reciting a regime he had re-

cited to people with clipboards. “It’s in the schedule. Thursday walk-round. It gets done.”

Hedvig wrote it down. She wrote everything down, in the plain hand she used for things whose weight she did not yet know. She did not think about it again until it was the only thing she was thinking about.

“The lighting,” she said. “Show me the schedule.”

He showed her. Outside, the sleet turned to snow and then to rain. The drive back took an hour. She ate a sandwich in the car in bay two with the engine running and the hip complaining and did not once think about Kuusk.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Petition

Maret had found a lawyer.

She had found him, she explained, at the fund. Tiiu had given her a name, off the record, of a man who did employer-liability work on the union side and who had, in Tiiu's phrase, *a good record against plants*. He had come to Maret's flat on the Tuesday evening and had drunk her coffee and had listened to her for an hour, and had said, at the end of it, that there was a case, and Maret had heard the word *case* and had not, Kai suspected, heard the rest of the sentence.

"He says the reconstruction is the key," Maret said. They were in Kai's kitchen. Maret had come without ringing, at seven, with a folder, and had sat down at the table and opened the folder, and the folder had a petition in it. "He says if the Sarv woman finds negligence — the gate, the rail, all of it — then the fund pays out and the mutual has to answer for it, and then there's a civil action, and he says the plant will settle because they always settle, and he says it won't bring Toomas back but it will make them fix the stair. He said that. *It will make them fix the stair.* I thought that was — I thought your father would have liked that."

"He might have."

"So we need the finding to go the right way. And the Sarv woman's supposed to be independent, which is fine, that's as it should be, but independent people can still be told what people think, and this — " she tapped the petition — "is people saying what they think. Forty-one signatures. Men from the plant. Neighbours. I've got Tiiu. I've got a woman from the local paper who's interested, she wants to do a piece, *Man Dies On Stair Plant Knew Was Dangerous*, something like that, she's working on the headline."

"Maret."

"I want you to sign it. And I want you to talk to the woman from the paper, because you're the daughter, and a daughter's worth more than a sister,

in a paper." Maret looked at her across the table with the family face, the long listening face, and said, more quietly, "He was your father, Kai."

"I know whose father he was."

"Then sign."

Kai looked at the petition. It was well done. Maret did things well. It was a page of text that said, in the language of a sixty-four-year-old woman who had once been a school secretary and had not forgotten how, that Toomas Rand had died on a stair that the plant had known was unsafe, and that the undersigned called on the district incident archive to find accordingly. Under it, forty-one names, some of which she knew. Priit Lepik was the third.

She could not sign it. She sat with the pen Maret had put beside the folder and could not, and could not say why.

She could not say: *the finding is going to have me in it.* She could not say: *there is a call in a log and a system that noticed and a file being built by a woman who does things properly, and if the finding goes the way you want, if it says negligence, it will say so in a document that also says a man on watch rang his daughter and was not answered.* She could not say: *I do not want the plant to have killed him, because if the plant killed him then it is a story with a clear shape, and I am in the story, three days before, in the bath.* She could not say any of it because none of it was a reason a person could give, and because saying it would make it the kind of thing that had been said, and because Maret would look at her with the long pale face and she did not think she could stand the length of it.

"I'm not going to sign," she said.

Maret waited.

"I don't think — " Kai stopped, and started again, and found the true thing that was also a usable thing, which was a skill she had. "I don't think I want to tell her what to find. The Sarv woman. I want her to find what happened. If it was the stair, she'll find the stair. She went out there, Priit said. In the sleet. She stood at the bottom of it. If she finds negligence she'll find it because it was there, and the finding will be worth more that way, and your lawyer will get more use out of it."

"That's a lawyer's answer."

"It's the only one I've got."

Maret looked at her for a long moment. Then she closed the folder, and put both hands flat on it, and Kai saw, because she was looking, that the hands were not quite steady, and that the nails on the right one had been bitten, which they had not been at the funeral.

"I sat with that lawyer for an hour," Maret said, not to Kai exactly. "Making coffee. Answering his questions. What time did Toomas usually get in, what did he say about the stair, had he ever mentioned the gate. I don't know what time Toomas usually got in. I saw him once a month. I sat there and I made things up that sounded right and the lawyer wrote them down." She looked at the folder. "I haven't cooked since the twenty-eighth. I've been eating out of the fridge standing up. I'm sixty-four. I'm not — " She stopped. Whatever it was, she put it back.

"You always were his," she said instead. It was not quite an accusation. "Your mother would have signed. Your mother would have signed and then gone round to the plant and stood at the gate. But you sit there and you think about what the finding will be *worth*." She stood up. "I'll talk to the paper myself."

"Maret — "

"No, it's fine. It's fine." She was putting on her coat. "I don't understand you, Kai. I never have. I loved him, and I think you loved him, and I think you didn't speak to him for over a year, and I don't know what that was about, and I don't suppose you're going to tell me, and I have stopped expecting you to." At the door she turned. "The woman from the paper is called Lehtsalu. She'll ring you anyway. Be decent to her."

When she had gone, Kai sat at the table with the pen and the empty place where the folder had been, and the console, after a decent interval, brought the lights up a fraction, and asked nothing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nine Days

The archive office was on the third floor of a building shared with planning and licensing and a small department that did something with water, and Kai parked, following a laminated sign that said *Visitor Parking — Archive Office* cable-tied to a post, in the bay nearest the door. Someone had painted a nine on the tarmac, a long time ago, and someone else had more recently painted a V over it, and neither coat had fully taken.

The room Hedvig Sarv had booked for the consultation was not an interview room. Kai had expected an interview room, a table with a microphone and two chairs and a window with a blind, and had steeled herself for it, and instead was shown into what was clearly somebody's office with the desk pushed to one side and two soft chairs brought in from somewhere else. There was a plant. There was a window with a view of the car park and, beyond it, the tram depot, and, beyond that, a strip of the sea the colour of the pavement. There was a woman of about fifty with grey hair cut short and a way of standing that suggested one leg was doing more of the work than the other, and the woman came forward and shook her hand and said, "Ms Rand. I'm Hedvig Sarv. Thank you for coming in. Sit wherever you like," and Kai sat, and the woman sat, carefully, and put a folder on her knee, and did not open it.

"Before anything else," Hedvig said, "I want to tell you what this is and what it isn't, because in my experience people arrive at this meeting having been told several different things by several different people, and most of them are wrong."

She explained it. She explained it the way, Kai thought, listening, she had explained it two hundred times, and had not once let it become a speech. The archive produced a settled account. The account was a reconstruction of what had happened to Toomas Rand on the morning of the twenty-eighth of October, built from every record the archive could lawfully obtain: the plant's systems, the card log, the wellbeing layer, the building's ambient record, the med-

ical examiner, the site inspection, the interviews. It would make a determination as to category. Accident. Negligence. Self-directed. Undetermined, though Hedvig said she had used that word four times in twenty-two years and did not intend to use it a fifth if the material gave her anything better. The determination would go to the three parties who had commissioned it, and to the family, and to the district record, where it would stay.

"It's not a court," Hedvig said. "I don't find anyone guilty. I don't award anything. What I produce is an account of what happened, and other people then decide what that account means for them. The plant's insurer. The union fund. The pension scheme. Your aunt's lawyer, I gather." The faintest movement at the corner of her mouth. "I know about the petition. I don't mind about the petition. People are allowed to say what they think. It doesn't change what I find."

"No," Kai said. "I didn't think it would."

"The consultation is yours. That's the part I want you to understand. Three meetings, this one and two more, in person, in this room, with me. At each one you get the draft as it stands, in your hands, and you can read it, and you can take it away, and you can come back and tell me where you think it's wrong. I don't promise to change it. I do promise to listen, and to tell you honestly why I have or haven't. Most families use the first meeting to find out what's in it and the second to argue and the third to say goodbye to it. You can use them however you like."

She opened the folder then, and took out a packet, perhaps thirty pages, held together with a black clip, and did not hand it over yet.

"The filing date is the twenty-ninth," she said. "That's nine days. It's tight because of the pension window, which is a rule I didn't write and don't much like. It means the second meeting will be on day seven and the third on day three. I count backwards. It's a habit, and not an attractive one, but it means I always know how much room I've got. I know that's not long. I'm sorry. I have never yet missed a window and I'm not going to miss this one, and I have never yet let a window make me file something I couldn't stand behind, and I'm not going to do that either." She looked at Kai directly for the first time, a plain look, neither warm nor cold. "Is there anything you want to ask me before I give you this?"

Kai thought about it. She thought about the log in her phone and the file in the woman's hands and the nine days between the two of them, and about the woman herself, who did not look like someone who could be talked into anything and did look, unmistakably, like someone who would sit in a room with you for as long as it took, which was, she understood, the worse of the two.

"Did you go down the stair?" she asked.

Something shifted in Hedvig Sarv's face. Not much. A recalibration.

"Yes," she said. "I did. Last Wednesday, in the sleet. I went down it slowly, and I stood at the bottom for a while, and I came back up, and it took me a long time because of my hip. I don't know if that tells you anything you needed to know. But yes."

"Thank you," Kai said.

Hedvig handed her the packet.

It was heavier than it looked. Kai held it on her knee and did not open it, and Hedvig, who had watched two hundred people not open it, said nothing, and let the silence be the kind that did not need to be filled.

She looked out of the window instead, because it was somewhere to look. Bay nine had a small blue car in it, older than most, parked straight. Kuusk was standing beside it with his clipboard. He was writing something down, slowly, and then he looked up at the third floor, at her window, with the untroubled face of a man for whom an allocation under review was a settled and satisfactory state of affairs, and went back to writing.

Hedvig looked at the car, and at the woman in the soft chair holding thirty pages she had not opened, and understood whose car it was, and said nothing about that either.

"Nine days," Kai said.

"Nine days," said Hedvig Sarv. "Read it at home. Not here. Ring the number on the front if there's anything that can't wait until the second meeting. And Ms Rand — " She stood, which took a moment. "I know that nothing I've said makes any of this smaller. It isn't meant to. It's meant to make it exactly the size it is, and no larger, and I find that is usually the most that can be done."

There was a slip of paper under her wiper when she got back to the car. Printed, not handwritten, on the building's letterhead: *This bay is subject to an allocation review. Please do not park here again.* She looked at it, and at the sign cable-tied to the post that had told her to, and put the slip in her coat pocket with the same care she would have given a receipt, and drove home with the packet on the passenger seat, face down, and carried it up four flights, and put it on the kitchen table, and made tea, and did not drink it, and looked at the packet, and looked at the shelf, and it was six in the evening and the console had brought the lights up and the pram man was gone and the lime trees stood crooked in their straight line and there were nine days, and she had not yet opened it, and she was going to.

Part Two

Nine Days

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Day Nine

She opened it at 21:40, which she noted, because she had by then begun to notice the times of things.

The packet was thirty-four pages. The first two were a cover sheet and a table of contents, and she read both of them the way she read the front matter of a catalogue, for the shape, and found that she was doing the thing she did with a new job, which was to look for where the difficult part would be before starting on the easy part. The difficult part was on page nineteen. She could tell from the table of contents. *Section 4.3: Contact and communication, 21–27 October.* She went to the beginning anyway and read it in order, because she had decided that she would, and because reading it in order was a way of not being at page nineteen yet.

It was well written. That was the first thing, and it surprised her, and she was ashamed of being surprised. She had expected the prose of the mutual's letter, the passive and the *of course*, and instead she had something that read as if a careful person had sat down to explain a thing to another person who deserved to understand it. *Toomas Rand was sixty-one years old and had been employed at the plant since 2010.* Plain declaratives. Times to the minute, and where the minute was uncertain, a sentence saying so and saying why. The card log. The lighting schedule, half-power between 02:00 and 05:00, with the words *this is the standard overnight setting and is not itself irregular*. The gate, described as it was: *a hinged bar with a spring latch, worn, which the site's own walk-round procedure requires to be closed and which the reconstruction officer observed, on inspection, to be closed*. The stair. The second rail, stopping a metre short, *installed 2019 following an unrelated incident; its termination point is discussed at 5.2*. The damp at the bottom, *persistent and known*. The medical examiner in two paragraphs, which she read once and did not read again. He had not suffered. The document said so in language that did not reach for her, and she believed it, because it had not reached.

Then the wellbeing layer.

Section four was the plant's watch file, and it was the part of the document that had been built from her father rather than from the building, and it was the part that made him strange to her. *Flag 1, 3 October: sleep disruption across nine consecutive nights, site wearable. Flag 2, 17 October: reduced contact frequency, household console; reduced canteen attendance; two instances of extended presence in the pump gallery outside rostered hours, with card log.* A man who had stopped sleeping and stopped eating with the others and had gone, twice before, to sit at the bottom of a warm stair in a building where he had nothing to do. She had not known any of it. She had been translating kitchens. The document did not say *and his daughter did not know*, because the document did not say things like that, but she read it there anyway, in the white space.

Page nineteen.

> *4.3 Contact and communication, 21–27 October. Household console records for the period show four outgoing calls and one incoming. Of the outgoing calls, two were to the deceased's sister, M. Rand (durations 11 min and 6 min), one to a plumbing contractor (2 min), and one to the deceased's daughter, K. Rand, on 21 October at 19:14 (duration 2 min 06 s). A further outgoing call to K. Rand was placed on 24 October at 22:31 and was not answered; the console record indicates a ring duration of 41 s. No return call is recorded in the period. The deceased's household console has no record of any other outgoing contact between 22:31 on 24 October and the card-log entry at 02:52 on 28 October.*

She read it four times.

There was nothing wrong with it. That was the thing she kept arriving at, and kept turning away from, and kept arriving at again, as if it were the only place in the room where she could stand. Every word was true. Every number was the number in her own phone. Nobody had written *estranged*. Nobody had written *did not pick up*. Nobody had written anything at all about what it meant that a man on watch had rung his daughter at half past ten at night and had been left to ring for forty-one seconds and had then, as far as the city could tell, not spoken to another human being for three and a half days and had then gone down a stair. Nobody had needed to. It was there in the arithmetic, the

way a shape is there in a set of points, and any reader who could count would draw the line.

And it would be filed. On the twenty-ninth. Into the district record, where it would stay, in the exact form of words she had just read, for as long as there was a district. Not as an accusation. As a paragraph. Section 4.3, between the canteen attendance and the medical examiner. She would be in it at nineteen, with her father's ring duration, forever, as a fact about the last week of his life that had been established beyond dispute by a woman with a bad hip who had gone down the stair slowly and had not once been unkind.

She closed the packet at 23:15 and sat with her hand on it.

The console, after a while, put up its grey line. *You have been still for twelve minutes.*

"Yes," Kai said. "I know."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Day Nine, Later

The calls came in the order she had predicted. Predicting them did not make them shorter.

The mutual rang first, at ten past four, with the light going. It was the large soft man from the funeral. Rebane. Not a lawyer, it turned out, but something the mutual called a claims counsel, which in Hedvig's experience meant a lawyer who did not want to be sued for being one. He had a voice that had been told to be warm and had practised.

"Ms Sarv. I hope I'm not catching you at a bad moment."

"You're catching me at a moment, Mr Rebane. What can I do for you?"

He wanted only to touch base. The mutual had reviewed the preliminary materials and was grateful for their thoroughness and had no wish to interfere in an independent process. He said *independent* twice. He wanted only to draw her attention, informally, to the wellbeing section. To the two flags. To the second flag in particular, which the mutual's own actuarial people had looked at, and had found, on the population data, to be strongly associated with a particular category of outcome. He would not presume to say which category. He was sure she had seen the same data.

"I've seen it," Hedvig said.

"Then I think we understand one another."

"I understand that the mutual would prefer a finding of self-direction. I understood that from your letter, Mr Rebane. I understood it from the placement of the third paragraph. You don't need to ring me to tell me what your letter said. I read it."

A pause. He was choosing not to be offended.

"The mutual would prefer an accurate finding."

"So would I. That's the one you're getting. If it's the one you'd prefer, that will be a coincidence, and I'd ask you not to ring me again to improve the odds."

She rang off. The hip had gone into the ache it went into when she had sat too long with her jaw set. She stood. She went to the window. Bay nine had a delivery van in it.

Tiiu rang at twenty to five. She did not practise warmth. She had it, and it came down the line with an office behind her that had too many people in it.

"I shouldn't be ringing you."

"No."

"I know that. I'm ringing anyway. Not to tell you what to find. The fund doesn't do that." A breath. "I want to tell you about the gate."

She told her. A member, a fitter, on the four-to-midnight the week before Toomas died, had come to her after the funeral. The gate at the top of the pump-gallery stair had been off its latch most of the autumn. The spring had gone. He had reported it, verbally, twice. The second time the shift lead had said it was on the list. Tiiu had the fitter's name. She had not put it in writing. The fitter had four years to his pension and a shift lead with a long memory.

"I've got the walk-round logs," Hedvig said. "The gate's signed as checked every night that month."

"I know."

"So your fitter is wrong or the logs are."

"I know. That's why I'm ringing and not writing. I don't know which. I know what I was told and who told me and that he was frightened to tell me. I thought you should know a man was frightened. That's all I've got."

Hedvig wrote the fitter's name down. She wrote *gate — spring — verbal x2 — shift lead*. Under it she wrote *logs say closed*. She drew a line between the two and looked at the line.

"Thank you. I mean that. I can't promise what I'll do with it."

"I didn't ask you to," Tiiu said, and rang off.

The pension scheme did not ring. At 16:58 it sent an automated message confirming that the statutory window closed on 27 December, that the scheme had noted the reconstruction officer's indicated filing date of 29 November, and thanking her for her attention to the timeline. It wanted nothing. It was the only one of the three that wanted nothing, and it was the one she would think about at two in the morning. It would still be there, patient and indifferent, if she gave the other two nothing at all.

She sat down. The hip objected. She opened the draft at 5.2, the rail, and began again to read her own words as if somebody else had written them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Day Eight

The registry public counter opened at nine and Kai was there at ten to, on the assumption that there would be a queue, and there was not, because it was cold and the people who had business with the registry had mostly learned to do it through the console.

The counter was on the ground floor of the same shared building, in a room that had once been something else and had kept the something else's ceiling. There were four service points and one was staffed. Behind it sat a man in his sixties with a moustache that had been grown in a different decade and maintained through all the ones since, and a name badge that said VALDUR, and, on the counter in front of him, a mug that said *World's Okayest Grandad*, which she suspected he had not bought for himself.

There was one person ahead of her after all: an old man in a good coat, with a folder, who was explaining to Valdur that he wanted a paper copy of a finding from 2046, about his wife, and that he had the console copy, thank you, he had had the console copy for six years, but the console copy changed.

"It doesn't change," Valdur said. "It's the same finding."

"The wording changes. I read it in March and it said one thing and I read it in September and it said it differently. Not the facts. The words round the facts."

"That'll be the display. They updated the reading layer. It puts the summary at the top now."

"I don't want the summary at the top. I want it how it was. I want it on paper, how it was in 2046, so that when I read it, it's the one I read then." The old man put his hand on the folder. "I read it a lot. I'd like it to stay still."

Valdur looked at him for a moment, and then took a form from the rack without looking, and filled in the reference number himself, from the folder, and said, "Certified paper copy. Four working days. There's no fee for family,"

and the old man thanked him, twice, and went, and Valdur watched him go, and then looked at Kai.

"Morning," Valdur said. "Cold one."

"I need to ask about a reconstruction. An incident reconstruction. My father. It's being — "

"Sarv," Valdur said. "Third floor. She'll have given you a number."

"She has. I don't want to ring her. I want to ask about the process. Whether there's a — " Kai stopped, because she had rehearsed the sentence in the car and it had sounded like a sentence in the car and here, in front of the moustache and the mug, it sounded like what it was. "Whether there's a way to object to a reconstruction being filed at all. Not to what it says. To it being done."

Valdur looked at her for a moment. Then he took a form from a rack behind him, without looking at the rack, and put it on the counter, and turned it round so she could read it.

Form R-7. Notice of family representation on a draft reconstruction.

"That's not it," Kai said.

"No," Valdur agreed. "That's the one people want when they come in and say what you've said. It lets you tell her she's got something wrong. It doesn't let you tell her not to write it." He left the form where it was. "There isn't one of those."

"There must be something."

"There's a complaint. That's R-12. That's if she's been rude to you, or lost your papers, or filed late. She won't have been rude and she doesn't lose papers and she has never, in the nineteen years I've sat at this counter, filed late, so I'd save yourself the form." He said it without unkindness, as a man giving directions to a place he knew did not exist. "There's a judicial review, if you've got a lawyer and eleven thousand euros and a year, and that's for if the archive's acted outside its powers, and it hasn't, because its powers are to reconstruct incidents and this is an incident. There's a data-subject request, which is R-3, which gets you a copy of everything they hold on you, which you'll already have because she'll have given you the packet. And there's a request to seal, which is R-15, which is for if the finding would endanger somebody, physic-

ally, and I have seen exactly four of those granted and three were witness protection."

"And if it just — " She did not know how to finish. "If it just shouldn't exist."

Valdur took his glasses off and cleaned them on the end of his tie.

"Nineteen years," he said. "I've had them all in. Mothers. Husbands. I had a man once whose brother had died in a fire and the finding said the brother started it, and it was right, the brother had, and the man stood where you're standing and said, *I don't want it written down.* And I said what I'm going to say to you, which is that I understand, and there isn't a form for that, and there never has been, and I don't think there ever will be, because the day they make one is the day nothing ever gets written down again." He put the glasses back on. "That's not an argument. It's just what the counter's for. I sit here and I hand out the forms there are."

"Right," Kai said.

"You can have the R-7. It's free. Fill it in, tell her which bit you don't like, she'll read it. She reads everything." He pushed it half an inch toward her. "And you can have a chair. There's a good one by the radiator. The blue ones are new and they're a disgrace, the council bought forty of them and they've no lumbar in them at all, I've written to the building manager. Kuusk. You won't have met him. Under review, he says. Everything's under review."

She took the form. She did not take the chair. At the door she turned, because there was a thing she wanted to ask and she could not think why she wanted to ask it.

"The man with the brother," she said. "What happened to him?"

"He filled in an R-7," said Valdur. "Told her the bit he didn't like. She read it. It got filed anyway." He picked up the mug. "He sends me a card at Christmas. Don't ask me why. I never did anything for him except tell him there wasn't a form."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Day Eight, Afternoon

The lawyer was called Mägi and she had an office above a pharmacy on the street behind the market, and she saw Kai at two that afternoon because the name Maret had been given at the fund was hers, and because, she said, sitting down behind a desk that had too much on it, she had been meaning to ring Maret Rand anyway to say she was not going to take the plant case.

"I told your aunt there was a case," Mägi said. "There is. There's a gate and there's a rail and if the finding says negligence I could get the fund to pay and probably get the mutual to settle on the civil side. I said all that. What I didn't say, because she didn't let me, was that it would take three years and cost her most of what it won and she'd spend the whole three years being a woman whose brother died on a stair, and I've seen what that does to people, and I don't think she wants it, and I don't think you do either." She looked at Kai across the desk. "But that's not why you're here. Is it."

"No."

"Go on, then."

Kai told her. Not all of it. She told her about the reconstruction, and the filing date, and the district record. She said that she did not want the finding to exist. She did not say why. She said the philosophical version, the one she had said to Maret in a different form, and found that it came out of her clean and whole and entirely true, and that she could hear, saying it, that it was also entirely beside the point, and that Mägi, who had been doing this for twenty years, could hear it too.

"Nobody should be explained after they die," Kai said. "That's what I keep coming to. He was a person. He was sixty-one years and in eight days he becomes thirty-four pages with a category on the front, and the category is the thing everyone reads first, and then that's what he was. That's what he'll have been. An accident. Or the plant. Or the other one. Not a man. A finding."

Mägi let it sit for a moment.

"That's a good argument," she said. "I want you to know I think it's a good argument. I've heard versions of it a dozen times and I have never once been able to answer it in a way that satisfied the person making it, and I'm not going to be able to now. Here's the answer anyway." She leaned back. "There is no right to remain unexplained. Not in this jurisdiction, not in any I know of. There's a right to privacy, and it dies with you, mostly, and what survives it belongs to the estate and the estate is you, and you can stop a newspaper printing his medical records but you cannot stop the district archive reconstructing an incident on a licensed industrial site, because that reconstruction isn't about him. It's about the site. He's in it because he was on the stair. If a pallet had fallen off a forklift she'd be writing thirty-four pages about the pallet."

"He wasn't a pallet."

"No. And she knows that, from what I hear of her, better than most. But the law doesn't have a place to put the difference. It has *incident* and it has *finding* and it has *record*, and it has a sixty-day window because a pension scheme lobbied for one in 2038, and it has a great deal of case law about what a finding can say and none at all about whether it can exist, because nobody has ever been able to explain to a court what the harm would be." She spread her hands. "What's the harm, Ms Rand? Legally. What is it that happens to you if this is filed that a court could recognise as a thing that happened?"

Kai did not answer. Mägi waited a while, and then nodded, as though the silence had been an answer of a kind, and reached for a pad.

"Ninety minutes," she said, writing. "I'll bill your aunt's referral rate, which is less than mine. You'll get an invoice. If you want the R-7 drafted properly, I'll do it for a flat fee, and I'll do it well, and it'll get you a sentence changed if the sentence is wrong, and nothing at all if it isn't." She looked up. "Is it wrong? The bit you don't want in there. Is it inaccurate?"

"No," Kai said. "It isn't."

"Then I can't help you," Mägi said. "I'm sorry. I mean that more than I usually do."

The invoice came through to the console before Kai had got back to the car. Ninety minutes. She paid it standing in the street, in the cold, with the pharmacy's lit sign turning her hands green, and then stood a while longer with nothing in them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Day Seven

The second meeting was in the same room, with the same two soft chairs, and Hedvig had brought coffee, which she had not the first time, and Kai saw that the coffee was a decision.

She had filled in the R-7. She had done it at the kitchen table the night before, with the packet open at nineteen, and had written, in the box that said *Please identify the passage and the nature of your objection*, a paragraph that said the household-console section drew an inference that the record did not support, and that the inference was about her, and that she asked for it to be removed. She had read the paragraph back and had seen that it was a good paragraph, a translator's paragraph, in which every word had been chosen to be defensible, and had seen also that it was a lie by shape, because the section did not draw an inference. It set out the numbers. The inference was hers.

She gave Hedvig the form anyway. Hedvig read it, all of it, slowly, and then read page nineteen again, and then put both down on her knee and looked at Kai with the plain look.

"Tell me what you want changed," she said. "In your own words. The form's fine. I'd rather hear it."

So Kai told her. She had planned it, and she used the plan, and she hated the planning while she did it, because the plan had been made the night before by a woman who had studied thirty-four pages for the place where the writer might be moved, and had found it. She talked about her father. Not about the fourteen months; about before. About the summer house, and the woodshed, and the way he had taught her to split kindling by holding the axe still and bringing the log down onto it, because the log was easier to aim than the axe. She talked about the phone call on the twenty-first, the two minutes and six seconds, the woodshed key, the *anyway*, and she let her voice do the thing it had not done since the console chimed, and it did it, and she watched Hedvig watch it, and she saw the exact moment when it worked.

It was the sentence at the end of 4.3. *The deceased's household console has no record of any other outgoing contact between 22:31 on 24 October and the card-log entry at 02:52 on 28 October.* Hedvig went back to it with a pencil, and read it, and sat with it, and said, half to herself, "That's a stretch, isn't it. That last one. That's me drawing a line I haven't got the points for. He might have talked to anyone. He might have talked to the whole floor. I've got the console and the console isn't the man." And she drew a single pencil line through it, and wrote in the margin, *cut — inference*, and looked up.

"That one goes," she said. "The rest stays. The calls are the calls. The forty-one seconds is the forty-one seconds. I can't take the numbers out because they're true and because if I start taking out true things that are hard on the family I stop being any use to anyone. But I shouldn't have written that last sentence. It's not a fact. It's a mood. Thank you for making me look at it."

Kai said thank you. She meant it, and she did not mean it, and the two things sat in her mouth together.

Because it had worked. That was what she carried down the stairs and out past bay nine, where her car was not, because she had parked on the street. She had gone into the room with a plan and the plan had moved a sentence. The document was not stone. It was paper, held by a woman with a pencil, and the woman could be reached, and Kai now knew exactly where the reaching had landed and exactly how much it had bought, which was one line, cut for the right reason, by someone who had thanked her for it.

And that was worse. She sat in the car on the street with the engine off and knew why it was worse. If the document had been immovable she could have stopped. She could have gone home and done the appendix and let the twenty-ninth come and been a woman to whom a thing had happened. Instead she was a woman who had found that the thing could be steered, a little, at a cost, and who was now going to spend seven days knowing that, and knowing what else she knew, and knowing that the knowing had a shape.

She drove home the long way, past the tram depot and the sea, and the sea was doing nothing at all.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Day Seven, Later

Raivo asked how it had gone. She said fine. He waited. She said, because she had been thinking it since the door closed, “She’s working me.”

“The daughter?”

“The daughter.” The R-7 was on the desk. The packet was open at nineteen. Her own pencil line ran through her own sentence. “She came in with a plan. She’d found the place in the draft where she could reach me. She went to it. She reached me. I cut a line. It was the right line. I’d have cut it anyway if I’d read it properly. I hadn’t. She made me. I thanked her.” She looked at the line. “She talked about kindling. Her father taught her to split kindling. She did it beautifully. And she timed it. She waited until I’d gone back to nineteen with the pencil in my hand. Then she gave me the axe. I sat in my own chair and watched her wait for the pencil and I cut the line anyway.”

Raivo said nothing for more than four seconds.

“And then I thought,” Hedvig said, “so what.”

She turned the packet so he could see nineteen. “Look at it. Forty-one seconds. She was in the bath, or asleep, or out, or cross with him. It doesn’t matter which. She’s thirty-four and she didn’t pick up one Friday and her father was dead by the Tuesday, and I’ve put that in a document that will outlast us both. Of course she came in with a plan. What did I expect? Her hands open?”

“You cut the line.”

“I cut the line because it was a bad line. I’d cut it again. She got one sentence out of me and it was one I shouldn’t have written. If that’s the worst thing that happens in this room before the twenty-ninth, I’ve got off lightly.” She closed the packet. “She’s grieving. She’s grieving and she’s clever and she found the one thing she could do with it. I’m not holding that against her. I’m filing the numbers, because the numbers are true. She’ll hate me for it. She’ll be right to. It won’t change what I file.”

“You sound very sure.”

"I'm sure about the numbers."

"I had one," Raivo said. He said it to the packet, not to her. That was how he said the things that were not filler. "My third year here. A widow. Husband off a roof. She came in three times and worked me the same way. Hers was a boat, not kindling. I read it as grief, because it was grief, and I filed. Eight months later it came out she'd known about the ladder. Not done anything. Known. And had sat in my chair and talked about a boat." He looked up. "I'm not saying that's this. I'm saying the generous reading was right about her grief and wrong about what she was grieving, and I didn't find out till it was filed."

Hedvig was quiet.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. It was filed. It was accurate. She hadn't done anything I could write down." He shrugged. "I think about her. That's what I did."

She stood. The hip made its remark. She went to the window. Bay nine was empty. It had been empty all afternoon. Kuusk had walked past it twice and she had watched him not look at it.

"I'm less sure about her," she said. "There was something else in the room. She was working me and I could see it and under that there was a thing she wasn't saying. Not the phone call. The phone call she'd decided to say. Something she hadn't decided yet."

"Grief," Raivo said.

"Probably," said Hedvig. She believed it. It was the generous reading. Twenty-two years said the generous reading was right more often than not. And she did not, that afternoon, with a pencil in her hand and a panel in two days, have room for the other kind.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Day Six

Priit came with a bracket.

He had been thinking about the shelf, he said, standing in the doorway at four in the afternoon with the light already gone, in the same jacket, holding a small brown paper bag that turned out to have a steel bracket in it and four screws and a rawlplug. The slope on the third shelf. It had bothered him. He'd been lying awake — not about that, about other things, but the shelf had got in with the other things — and he'd thought, that wants a bracket at the back, and he'd had one in the garage.

"You didn't need to," Kai said.

"I know. Anu said. She said, *the woman's just buried her father, she doesn't want you round with a bracket.*" He looked at the bag. "She sent soup, though. It's in the car. She said if I was going anyway I might as well take soup."

He fitted the bracket. It took ten minutes and involved him lying on the floor again, and when he stood up the third shelf was still not level, because the bracket had fixed the sag and revealed that the sides had never been square, but it was better, and he stood back from it with his hands on his hips and said, "Well, it won't get worse," and she was glad of him, in a way she had not been glad of anyone in some weeks, and she made coffee, and went down to the car for the soup, and came back up with a dish wrapped in a tea towel that was still warm.

They sat at the kitchen table. He talked about Kristjan, who was nine and had decided to be a goalkeeper and had discovered that the position involved being hit with a ball. He talked about the bus. He asked about the reconstruction, carefully, and she told him about the meetings, the room, the coffee, and he nodded and said Sarv had been out to the plant and had gone down the stair, everyone had talked about it, a woman with a bad leg going down that stair in the sleet, and Kallas hadn't known where to put himself.

Then he went quiet.

She had learned, in the weeks she had known him, what his quiet meant. He was a man who did not go quiet; he filled the space with stories and buses and goalkeepers, and when he stopped it was because there was something in the way. She waited. She was good at waiting. It was, she would think later, the thing she had done to him, and she had done it without deciding to, because she was a person who waited and he was a person who could not.

"I keep thinking about the Thursday check," Priit said.

He said it to the soup.

"There's a walk-round. Every shift. And then there's the weekly, on a Thursday, on the pump-gallery side. Isolation valves. There's six of them on the stair-side manifold and they weep, they always weep, it's the age of the seats, and the Thursday check is you go along and you crack each one and you reseat it and you wipe it down, and it takes forty minutes if you do it right." He turned his mug. "I do the walk-round. I do it properly. I do the gate, I do the lights, I do the sump. Everybody does the walk-round. The Thursday check — " He stopped. "I sign it. I always sign it. Everyone signs it. It's a forty-minute job on a shift that hasn't got forty minutes in it and the valves weep whether you reseat them or not, and the log's got a box, and you tick the box. That's not — nobody thinks of it as anything. It's the box. You tick the box and you get on."

"Priit."

"I ticked it on the twenty-third. The Thursday before. I remember because Kristjan had a match and I was trying to get off early and I did the walk-round in twenty minutes and I ticked the Thursday box on the way past and I thought, I'll do it properly next week." He looked at her then, and his face was the face from the back row of the chapel, the one that did not know what to do with itself. "And I keep thinking. If I'd done it. If the tread had been dry. If he'd put his foot down on a dry tread, with his knee, at three in the morning. I don't know. I don't know that it would have made any difference. Sarv says the whole floor's damp, it's the manifold, it's the drain being at the wrong end, and she's right, it is. But I keep thinking."

He put his hand flat on the table and looked at it.

"I've not told anyone that," he said. "Not Anu. Not the union. I don't know why I'm telling you. I think because you're the only one from the family

who's been — who's let me sit down. Maret had me on the phone for an hour and I don't think she heard a word I said. You just let me sit." He tried to laugh. "I've fixed your shelf twice and told you I falsified a safety log. That's not what Anu sent me round with. She sent me round with soup."

Kai said the things a person says. That the floor was damp anyway. That he could not know. That a box on a form was not a stair in the dark. She said them and she believed them, and she watched him take them, gratefully, the way a man takes a thing he has come a long way to be given, and she watched him leave, at half past six, with the empty bag the bracket had come in folded in his pocket and Anu's dish left behind because she had not finished the soup.

And she stood in her kitchen afterward, with the dish and the tea towel and the shelf that would not get worse, and understood, with a clarity that had no feeling in it at all, that she now knew a thing that was true and that was in a log with a tick beside it that said it was not, and that the woman with the pencil did not know it, and that the twenty-ninth was six days away.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Day Six, Night

She did nothing.

This has to be said plainly, because later she would tell it to herself several ways and none of them would be this one: that on the evening of the sixth day, with the thing in her hands, she did nothing with it. She washed the dish. She put the tea towel to soak because there was soup on it. She sat down at the desk and opened the appendix, which was fourteen pages of specifications for a range of tall cupboards, and she translated nine of them.

The specifications required no judgement. *Height 2100 mm. Depth 580 mm. Carcase 18 mm melamine-faced chipboard. Hinges: soft-close, 110°, adjustable in three planes.* She did them at four hundred words an hour and she did not get a single one wrong, and at eleven she stopped and checked the nine pages against the source and they were correct, and she sat back.

She did not think about Priit. That was not true; she thought about him, in the way you think about a sound in the next room, but she did not think about the thing he had said, because she found that when she went toward it her mind did a small precise step to one side, the way a foot finds a dry patch on a wet stair without being told to. She thought instead about the bracket. She thought about Kristjan being hit with a ball. She thought about Anu, whom she had never met, saying *she doesn't want you round with a bracket*, and being right, and sending soup.

The console asked whether she wanted the front room dimmed and she said yes and it dimmed the front room.

At half past eleven she rang Aleksei, which she did not do, and he answered on the fourth ring sounding as if he had been asleep, and she said she had been working and had lost track, and he said that was all right, and she asked him what he was doing, and he said sleeping, and she laughed, and he asked if she was all right, and she said yes, and he said good, and there was a pause, and he did not ask again, and she said goodnight.

She lay in bed with the light off and the tram going past every eleven minutes and the sound of the flat doing the things it did at night, the fridge, the pipe that ticked, the council on the kitchen wall breathing its small grey breath, and she did not sleep, and she did not think, and she did not decide anything, and it was, she understood at some hour between two and three, exactly what her father had done for three and a half days with a phone in the flat behind the tram depot, which was to be a person who had a thing to do and was not doing it, and she lay there with that, and it did not help, and toward four she slept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Day Five

Lehtsalu rang at nine, as Maret had said she would, and was younger than Kai had expected and better at it.

"I'm not going to pretend I don't know you don't want to talk to me," she said, which was a sentence Kai admired even as she disliked it. "Your aunt said. She said you're very private and you'd probably say no and I should ring anyway. So I'm ringing anyway. I'm doing a piece about the stair. I've got the union, I've got two men from the plant on background, I've got your aunt, obviously. I've got a fitter who says the gate had no spring on it for two months and he told his shift lead twice. I don't need you. I'd like you. There's a difference and I wanted to be straight about it."

"What do you want me for?"

"You're the daughter. A daughter says *my father* and it's a different piece. Your aunt says *my brother* and it's a piece about a woman who's angry, and she is, and she's got a right to be, but readers have met that woman. They haven't met you." A pause. "Also you've seen the draft. I know you have, she does the family in person, everybody knows that. I'm not asking you to give it to me. I'm asking whether there's anything in it that the plant would rather nobody read."

Kai stood in the kitchen with the phone and looked at Anu's dish on the drainer.

She understood, in the space of the question, what a newspaper was. She had never had reason to understand it before. A newspaper was a machine for making one thing true in public at a time. Lehtsalu had the gate. The gate was a good story: a spring, a fitter, a shift lead, a list. It would run, and the plant would answer it, and Kallas would be photographed by the stair, and it would go on for a fortnight and then it would be a thing that had been in the paper. If she gave Lehtsalu the valves instead, it would be a better story, because it would have a name in it. *Worker admits skipping safety check days before colleague's*

death. It would have Priit, on the phone, being asked. It would have Anu, at the door. It would have Kristjan being told at school. It would take a month, not a fortnight, because a name was a thing readers could come back to, and at the end of the month there would be a man who had been in the paper, and there was no form for that either.

"There's nothing in it," Kai said, "that the plant would rather nobody read."

"Nothing."

"It's about the stair. It's about the rail and the gate and the lighting. You've got all that. You've got it better than the draft has, if you've got the fitter." This was true. Hedvig's draft had the gate as *closed on inspection*; it did not have a spring. "There's nothing I can give you."

Lehtsalu was quiet for a moment, and Kai could hear her deciding whether to believe it, and deciding that she did, or that it did not matter.

"All right," she said. "Thank you for taking the call. Most people don't." And then, lightly, as if it were nothing, "If that changes, you know where I am. I run on Thursday."

After she rang off Kai stayed by the drainer. She had told the truth. She had not mentioned Priit. She would think about that afterward, and she would find that she had a place to put it, a small clean shelf in the story she told herself, on which it sat as evidence of what she would not do: she would not give a man to a newspaper. She had been asked, and she had said no, and it had cost her nothing, and that was the kind of refusal she was good at.

What she did not put on the shelf, because she did not look at it, was that she had spent the whole of the call thinking about what the valves would do to Priit if Lehtsalu had them, in detail, with a name and a wife and a nine-year-old, and had not once, in the same minutes, thought about what they would do to him if anyone else did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Day Five, Afternoon

The panel sat in the licensing office's meeting room, because it had the only table long enough. Hedvig had known all four of them for a decade. It was still the worst hour of her month.

Lembit chaired. He was director for eleven more weeks. He was seventy-one. He had been kind to her in his fashion for twenty-two years and had never once said she would have the post, because he had never once been sure he would leave it. Beside him, a woman from the district council. Beside her, a man from the regional archive service who had read Hedvig's file and said so twice. At the end, Kuusk, because the building manager sat on every panel for every post in the building, under a policy that had been under review since before she arrived.

She answered the questions. Why the post. What she would change. What she would keep. The answers were good. She had been thinking them for four years and they had had time to become true.

"You've a determination filing on the twenty-ninth," the council woman said. "Three parties. It's about to be in the paper. Is it going to file on time?"

"Yes."

"You sound very certain."

"I've never filed late. I have never filed anything I couldn't stand behind, and I have never filed late, and I have done both at once for twenty-two years. I intend to do both at once on the twenty-ninth. If the panel wants to make its decision conditional on that, I'd understand."

Lembit looked at her over his glasses. She had never been able to read that look. He wrote something down.

Afterward the man from the regional service shook her hand as though he had already voted. The council woman said she would be in touch. Kuusk went back to being Kuusk. Lembit walked her to the stairs, slowly, because his

knees were worse than her hip, and at the top of them, not looking at her, he said, "The Rand file."

"Yes."

"Tiiu rang you."

"Tiiu rang me."

"About a gate." He put his hand on the rail. "I had a gate once. 2009. A loading bay. A man said it was off its stop and the log said it wasn't, and I filed the log. The log was the record and the man was a man. I was right to, on the rules. I have thought about that man every year since." He started down. "I'm not telling you what to do. I don't know what you should do. I'm telling you that in eleven weeks it'll be your name on the door, and the door won't help."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Day Four

The summer-house paperwork arrived from the notary in a brown envelope, because notaries still did that, and she opened it at the kitchen table with the packet beside it and the R-7 beside that, and found the sentence waiting for her on the third page.

Not written. The notary had not written it. The notary had written *Transfer of title, Rand, T. to Rand, K., property at Kolga, executed 14 September, witnessed*, and a paragraph about the woodshed, which had a separate deed for reasons that went back to her grandfather, and a line at the bottom that said the transfer had been *completed in the presence of both parties*. Which it had. The fourteenth of September, the year before last. The notary's office in Kuusalu, then the drive out to the house because he had wanted to walk the boundary once more with her before it was hers, and then the kitchen table, and the sentence.

She could see the afternoon. That was the trouble with it. It had not gone grey the way the funeral already had. The notary's office in Kuusalu with its smell of carpet, the man's slow signature, her father checking the boundary description against the deed line by line while the notary waited, because he checked things. Then the drive, him in front in the old car, her behind, twenty minutes through the birches with the sun coming through in bars. The house smaller than she remembered, which it always was. The walk. He had wanted to walk the boundary, and they had, the whole of it, an hour, him with a stick he did not need and used anyway to point with. *That post wants replacing. That one's sound. There's a wet patch there in spring, you'll want to keep the woodpile off it.* Practical. Handing it over. The land was hers and he was telling her what he knew about it, in the order he had learned it, and she had followed him and nodded and had not once, in the whole hour, thought that anything was wrong, because nothing was.

And then the table, and the key on the form, and he had looked at her the way he looked at a gauge.

She could say it exactly. She had said it to herself perhaps four hundred times in fourteen months and it had not worn; it had sharpened, the way a thing does when you handle it with the same hand every time, until it was more precise than he had made it, and she suspected, sitting there, that if he had been able to hear her version he would have corrected the emphasis.

> *You've arranged your whole life so that nothing in it can ever be your fault, and you call it being careful.*

That was it. That was the whole of it. He had said it across the table with the transfer form between them and the woodshed key on top of the form, in the flat, precise, slightly tired voice he used for facts, not shouting, not even, she thought, angry, only stating a thing he had observed over thirty-three years and had decided, for reasons of his own, to state that afternoon. She had asked him what he meant. He had said he thought she knew. She had stood up. She had driven back to the city with the key on the passenger seat and had not rung him the next day, or the day after, and by the end of the first month not ringing had become the thing she did, and by the end of the third it had a shape, and by the fourteenth it had a name, which was the fourteen months, and neither of them had said the sentence again, and she had never once told anyone what it was.

She had never known what had prompted it. That was the part she came back to. Nothing had happened that afternoon. The transfer had gone through. They had walked the boundary. He had shown her where the fence needed a post. And then, at the table, apropos of nothing she could locate, he had looked at her the way he looked at a gauge and said the sentence, and she had spent fourteen months not asking, and now could not.

She put the notary's envelope on top of the packet, and the packet on top of the R-7, and sat back.

It was accurate. That was what she had never been able to get past. If it had been cruel she could have hated him for it. If it had been wrong she could have corrected it. It was accurate, in the way the packet was accurate, in the way page nineteen was accurate: a true thing about her, stated by someone who had looked, and she had responded to it the way she responded to true things she

did not want, which was to arrange her life so that the person who had said it was no longer in it. Which was, she saw now, sitting in her kitchen with the sentence in her hands, the sentence proving itself. He had said it and she had made it true by leaving.

The console asked whether she would like it to file the notary's document with her other records.

"Yes," Kai said.

It filed it. *Property — Kolga — transfer — 14 September.* It did not know what the document meant. It only knew that it was a true thing, and that true things were kept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Day Four, Evening

Hedvig finalised the way she always did. Alone. Door shut. The draft printed, because paper did not auto-summarise. A pencil, and every sentence from the first page read as though a stranger had written it and she would have to defend it to a room.

Sections one to three were sound. She read them anyway. The sound sections were where errors hid, in sentences you had stopped seeing. Section five, the stair, she read three times. The rail. Its termination. The 2019 installation. The gate. She had Tiiu's fitter on a separate sheet, *gate — spring — verbal x2*, and she had the log that said closed, and she had not resolved them. In the margin she wrote *5.1 — note the discrepancy, do not adjudicate it*. Then she wrote the paragraph: that a verbal report existed that the latch had been defective; that the walk-round log recorded the gate as closed throughout the period; that the officer had found the gate closed on inspection; that the officer could not, on the material available, determine the condition of the latch at 02:52 on the twenty-eighth. A true paragraph. It would satisfy no one. She let it stand.

Then nineteen.

She had cut the last sentence on Day Seven. She read the section without it. It was better. It was still the hardest page in the document. She sat with the pencil over the paragraph about the forty-one seconds longer than she had sat over anything else.

She could cut it. She tested that. She was allowed. The console record was context, not cause. The finding did not turn on it. She could write *contact with family was reduced in the period* and lose the times, the durations, the daughter's initial, and the finding would stand, and the daughter would go home on the twenty-ninth to a document that did not have her in it at nineteen. Hedvig looked at the pencil. She wanted to. She knew exactly why. The wanting was made of the kindling.

She did not cut it.

The numbers were the numbers. A man on watch who had rung his daughter and not been answered, and had not, so far as the city could tell, rung anyone else, was a fact about the last week of his life that an honest reconstruction had to hold, whatever it did to the daughter. She had cut the sentence that deserved it. This one did not. If she started removing true things that were hard on the family she would be doing what the mutual wanted, in the other direction, and there was no version of that she was prepared to stand in.

And there was the reason she wrote nowhere. Kai Rand had come into her room with a plan and had worked it, beautifully, and had got one line. If Hedvig cut a second now, alone, in the dark, because a woman had talked about an axe, then she would never again be sure whether a sentence had gone from one of her documents because it was wrong or because somebody had known where to reach her.

She initialled the page. She initialled every page. It took until nine. When she stood the hip had set solid and she held the desk until it would take her. She stood there, in the shut office, hand on the finished draft, and found she was thinking not about the daughter and not about the gate but about the damp at the bottom of the stair, and Kallas reciting the Thursday walk-round in the flat voice of a man who had recited it before. She did not know why. She wrote it down anyway, on the separate sheet, under the fitter. *Manifold — valves — Thursday — ask.*

Then she went home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Day Three

The third meeting was at two, and Hedvig had not brought coffee, because there was nothing left to soften, and Kai saw that too.

The draft was final. It sat on Hedvig's knee with a blue clip instead of a black one and the word FINAL on the cover sheet and a date under it, and Hedvig walked her through the changes, which were four, and which included the pencil line at the end of 4.3 and the new paragraph at 5.1 about the latch, and Kai listened and nodded and said the right things about the latch. They did not talk about page nineteen. There was nothing left to say about it, and both of them knew it, and Hedvig had the grace not to pretend otherwise; she said only, "Nineteen stands as it was, less the last line," and looked at Kai once, plainly, and moved on.

It went on for twenty minutes after that. Hedvig explained the filing. The three parties would receive the finding on the twenty-ninth by nine in the morning. The family would receive it at the same time. The district record would take it the same day. The category, which Hedvig now said aloud for the first time, sitting in the soft chair with her leg out straight, was accident, with contributory factors on the site side, and the contributory factors were set out at 5.2 and would be of interest to Tiiu and of no comfort whatever to Rebane, and Hedvig said this with a very small satisfaction that she did not try to hide. She said the word *accident* and Kai heard it land in the room the way a stone lands in a pond, and then she heard the rest, which was that an accident with contributory factors was a category that could be argued about for three years by Maret's lawyer, and that it would be argued about in a document that had her at nineteen.

She had not decided. She would say that to herself afterward and it would be true. She had sat in the chair for twenty minutes with the thing in her and had not decided, and had listened to Hedvig talk about the district record, and had watched the light on the sea through the window, and had waited, the way

she waited, and it was in the waiting that the question came, and it did not feel like a decision. It felt like a foot finding the dry patch.

Hedvig had turned to the last page. She was saying something about the cover sheet.

"Can I ask something about the stair?" Kai said.

"Of course."

"The dampness. At the bottom. The draft says it's the manifold, and the drain being at the wrong end."

"It is."

"Priit said there are valves. On the stair side. That get checked. He said there's a weekly check, on a Thursday." She heard her own voice. It was level. It was the voice she used to read a specification aloud. "Was the Thursday check performed, the week before he died?"

Hedvig did not answer straight away. Kai saw her go still, in the way she had seen Priit go still, and saw her eyes go somewhere inside, to a separate sheet with something written on it under a fitter's name, and saw her come back.

"The log says it was," Hedvig said. "I'd have to look at the log."

"Right."

"Is there a reason you're asking?"

"He mentioned it," Kai said. "Priit. He mentioned the valves. I wondered."

Hedvig looked at her for a moment longer. Then she took out the pencil, and the separate sheet, and wrote something on it, and put it back, and Kai saw that it had taken four words, and did not see what they were.

"I'll look at the log," Hedvig said.

And then she turned back to the cover sheet, because there was a cover sheet, and finished explaining it, and the meeting went on for another nine minutes about the format in which the family would receive the finding, paper or console or both, and Kai said both, and Hedvig said that was the usual choice, and stood, which took a moment, and shook her hand, and said, "Thank you for the three meetings. I know they weren't easy. They never are," and Kai said thank you, and went out, and down the stairs, and past the counter where Valdur raised a hand without looking up, and out through the

door, and past bay nine, which had somebody else's car in it, and into the street.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Day Three, Later

She walked home.

It was four kilometres and it was cold and the car was on the street outside the archive, where she had left it, and she did not go back for it. She walked up the hill past the depot, and along the road with the bus stops, and through the small park where the council had put in a fitness circuit that nobody used, and down the other side, and it took fifty minutes, and she thought about nothing.

That was not a figure of speech. She had expected, coming down the archive stairs, that the thing would arrive — the weight, the sick turn, the picture of Priit on the floor with his head in the shelf — and it had not. What was there instead was the cold, and the pavement, and the specific sound of her own boots, which had a heel that clicked on the left and not on the right because the left had been resoled. A woman in a red coat with a dog. A bus, half full, lit like a fish tank. The smell of the bakery on the corner by the park, which was closing, and which had marked-down bread in a basket by the door.

She bought bread. She bought a loaf of the dark rye that had been marked down and a packet of the seeded rolls that had not, and the girl at the counter said *is that everything* and Kai said *yes* and paid and took the bag.

At the small shop on the corner of her street she bought milk, and butter, and a jar of the pickled cucumbers her father had liked and she did not particularly, and a tin of the boiled sweets, which she looked at in her hand for a moment and put in the basket anyway. She bought eggs. She stood in front of the yoghurt and read the labels as she had read them on the ordinary Tuesday and chose one. The man at the till knew her by sight and said it was cold, and she said it was, and he said it would snow by the weekend, they'd said on the radio, and she said she'd heard.

Four flights. The bag on the kitchen table. The milk in the fridge, the butter, the eggs. The bread in the bread bin. The cucumbers on the shelf Priit had fixed, on the third shelf, which was better now and would not get worse. The

sweets beside the radio, which she had brought from the flat behind the tram depot and had not turned on.

She made tea and this time she drank it.

At some point the console brought the lights up. At some point the tram went past. She sat at the kitchen table with the tea and Anu's dish on the drainer and the packet, the second draft, still open where she had left it four days ago, and did not close it, and did not read it, and did not think about a room on the third floor where a woman with a pencil had written four words on a separate sheet.

She thought, once, about the question. Not about asking it. About its grammar. *Was the Thursday check performed.* Passive. No agent. She had built it that way without deciding to, the way she built everything, so that there was no one in the sentence, and she noticed this, and noticed that she had noticed, and put it down.

Then she fried two eggs and ate them with the rye and it was an ordinary evening and there was nothing else in it, and she washed the plate, and dried it, and went to bed at half past ten, and slept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Day Two

The log said the check had been done.

Weekly — pump gallery — stair-side isolation valves (6) — crack, reseat, wipe — 23 Oct — PL — . A line in a table in a maintenance system the plant had bought in 2018 and not updated since. Initials in one box. A tick in another. Timestamp 13:52. Twenty minutes into a shift that started at half past one.

She could have stopped there. The log was the record. Lembit had filed a log once, on the rules, and had been right to, and had thought about it every year since. She was not Lembit. She did not stop.

The valves had position sensors. Everything at the plant had sensors. It was the kind of plant where a man could sit down on a stair and a building would know. The stair-side isolation valves had been fitted with position reporting in the 2019 refit, the same refit that had put in the rail that stopped a metre short. The position data went to the maintenance system, into a table nobody looked at because nobody had needed to. Hedvig looked at it. Forty minutes to find. Ten to read. Six valves. To crack and reseat a valve was to move it, a quarter turn off its seat and a quarter turn back, and a position sensor reported a quarter turn as a quarter turn.

On the twenty-third of October, between 13:30 and 14:30, none of the six had moved.

None had moved since the ninth. Nor the second. She went back through the autumn. The six stair-side valves had been cracked and reseated, on the sensor data, on four Thursdays out of sixteen. They had been ticked on all sixteen. Four sets of initials. PL was not the worst of them and was not the best.

On the twenty-fifth, the Saturday, valve three had begun to weep. She could see it. A moisture sensor on the manifold lagging, a sump-level sensor at the wrong end of the floor, and between them, across the weekend, a slow rising line that a reseated valve would have flattened and a ticked box had not.

She sat with it a long time.

She knew what it was. She had known since the fourth word on the separate sheet. Not an accident with contributory factors. A falsified maintenance record on a licensed industrial site. That was not a thing a district reconstruction officer got to weigh. It was a category. *Systemic maintenance failure with record irregularity.* After that, *refer to the technical safety authority*. After that, *the district reconstruction is suspended pending the authority's survey*. The authority's surveys took a median of seven months on its own published figures. The pension window closed on the twenty-seventh of December. She did not need to look any of it up.

She had read the referral form too. Section C. *Identify the personnel recorded against the last relevant maintenance entry preceding the incident.* One box. One set of initials. The authority would take the sixteen Thursdays and the four sets and would in time have things to say to all of them. But the survey opened on section C, and section C wanted the twenty-third, and the twenty-third said PL. She wrote it in. There was nowhere else to write it. Her hand did not hesitate. She noticed that it did not. She noticed that she was the one writing the initials, in her own hand, on the form that would carry them, and that Kai Rand had only asked a question.

She rang the pension scheme. She was that kind of person. She got a human being eventually, a young man who had never been rung by a reconstruction officer and did not know what to do with it. She told him what was going to happen. He said the scheme would note the referral. She asked whether the deferred pathway could be expedited where the delay was the archive's doing. He said he would have to ask. She said she knew he would, and that he should. She rang off.

At 16:40 the office calendar updated. She saw it happen in the corner of the screen, the way you see a bird land. *Director, District Incident Archive — appointment decision — DEFERRED — new date 15 December.* No sender. No explanation. Raivo came to the doorway, looked at her, and said nothing for six seconds, the longest she had known him manage. Then he said, "Well," and went away.

Then she thought about the daughter.

It did not fit. She had sat across from Kai Rand three times and watched her work, and had read the work, and had forgiven it, and every bit of it poin-

ted one way. Get the sentence out. Soften the numbers. Make the document a thing she could live beside. Then, in the last ten minutes of the last meeting, draft final, category said, the woman had asked a question that blew the whole document up. Not softened. Detonated. And it had not saved her. It had put her at nineteen in a document that would now not be filed, which meant not read, which was, Hedvig supposed, an outcome, if you only counted readers. But it had cost her the finding and the pension. It had cost the plant a survey. It was going to cost a man called PL something Hedvig did not yet want to name. And Kai Rand had done it in the voice you use to read a specification aloud, and had said, when asked, *he mentioned it. I wondered.*

Grief, Raivo had said. She had believed him. She looked at the sensor data, at the slow rising line across a weekend, and could not think of a version of grief that did this, and could not think of anything else that did either. At the bottom of the separate sheet, under *manifold — valves — Thursday — ask*, she wrote three more words. *She knew. Why?* She drew a line under them and started the referral.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Day One

The notice came to the console at 08:12, on the day before the finding would have been filed, in the municipal register that the council used for things it was obliged to say and did not expect anyone to read.

> *District Incident Archive. Reconstruction ref. R/0417 (Rand, T.). Notice of suspension. The reconstruction is suspended with effect from 27 November pending referral to the Technical Safety Authority under reg. 14(3) (record irregularity). No category has been determined. The family and the commissioning parties have been notified. A revised timeline will be published on completion of the Authority's survey.*

Under it, a reference number for the survey, and a line saying that surveys under 14(3) were typically completed within seven to nine months.

Kai read it standing up.

She had known it would come. She had not known what it would look like, and it looked like this: eight lines, in the register's grey type, between a notice about tram works and a notice about a change to the opening hours of the recycling centre. *No category has been determined.* That was her father now. Not an accident. Not the plant. Not the other one. A reference number and a suspension and a survey that would take until the summer, and at the end of the summer, perhaps, a category, or perhaps not, because 14(3) surveys were about the site, Valdur had said, and the site was what the authority would find things about, and a man on a stair was, to a technical safety authority, a thing that had happened at the site.

She had done it. She stood in the kitchen and let herself have the sentence, once, in full. She had done it and it had worked. Section 4.3 would not be filed on the twenty-ninth. Page nineteen would sit in a suspended draft in a cabinet on the third floor, initialled on every page, unread by anyone who had not already read it, for as long as the survey took, and no one would open the district record this winter and find her there at forty-one seconds, because the dis-

trict record would say *suspended*, and then it would say whatever the authority said, and the authority did not care about phones.

And then the other thing, which arrived cold and complete, about four seconds after the first, the way the second half of a sum arrives. *Suspended.* Not withdrawn. Not struck. The notice said a revised timeline would be published on completion of the survey, and a revised timeline meant the reconstruction resumed, and when it resumed it would resume from the draft in the cabinet, with a blue clip and the word FINAL and a page nineteen that nobody had touched, and Hedvig Sarv would take it out and read it through with a pencil as though a stranger had written it, and would add whatever the authority had found, and would file it. In the summer. Or the autumn. Seven to nine months. She had not destroyed anything. She had bought seven to nine months, at a price that had a man's name on it, and at the end of the seven to nine months the document would still be there, and would be longer.

She stood with that. It did not change what she had done. It only told her what she had bought, which she found she had not, until that moment, actually looked at.

Maret rang at 08:30, and she was crying, and it took Kai a moment to understand that the crying was joy.

"They've stopped it," Maret said. "The finding. Tiiu rang me. It's gone to the safety people. The safety people, Kai. That means the plant. That means it was the plant, it was the stair, it was what I said, and now they can't just write *accident* and close it, they've got to go out there and look, properly, and they'll find the gate, and they'll find the rail, and Mägi says — I rang Mägi, she's taking it now, she says a 14(3) changes everything, she says the plant will settle before the survey's even — " She stopped to breathe. "I knew. I knew. I stood at that chapel and I said it and nobody listened, and now look. Now look at it."

"Yes," Kai said.

"You should have signed the petition."

"Probably."

"It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter now." Maret blew her nose. "I'm going to cook tonight. I'm going to make the thing with the cabbage, his thing, and you're going to come, and we're going to eat it, and I don't want to hear a word about deadlines. Six. Bring bread."

"I've got bread," Kai said, and Maret laughed, and rang off, and Kai stood with the phone and the bread in the bread bin and the notice on the wall in grey type, and Maret had been wrong about all of it, and had been made happy by being wrong, and was going to cook.

• • •

She took Anu's dish back that afternoon.

She had washed it twice. She drove out along the east road with it on the passenger seat, wrapped in the tea towel, which she had also washed, and found the house from the address the console had, a low brick house in a row of low brick houses in the last village before the plant, with a goal in the garden made of two poles and a length of net that had seen weather. She had meant to leave it on the step. She had rehearsed leaving it on the step. But the door was open, because it was that kind of house, and she could hear a radio, and she knocked on the frame.

Anu was small and quick and had flour on her forearms and looked at Kai with the open face of a woman who did not yet know who she was looking at, and then did, and said, "Oh — you're — come in, come in, he's not here, he's on till ten, come in," and took the dish, and looked at the tea towel, and said, "You didn't need to wash that," and Kai said she had wanted to.

The kitchen was warm and small and had a boy's drawing of a goalkeeper on the fridge, and a calendar with matches on it, and a table with three chairs and a fourth that did not match.

On the table was a letter.

It was face up. It had been folded once and unfolded and had a crease across the middle that had been flattened with a hand. It was on ordinary office paper, the plant's printer, she could tell from the slight grey cast the plant's printer gave everything, but the letterhead at the top was the Technical Safety Authority's, and the first line, which she could read from where she stood because she read for a living and could not stop, said *Notice to Named Party: P. Lepik*, and the second said *You are identified in maintenance records relevant to a survey under reg. 14(3) and are required to attend*, and there was a date, and a time, and a paragraph she did not read.

"Kallas gave him that last night," Anu said, seeing her see it. She was filling the kettle. "At the gate, when he came off. Printed it out himself. Said it had come through to the office in the afternoon and he didn't want Priit reading it on the console at home with the boy in the room, which was decent of him, I suppose. There's a proper one coming in the post, it says. He rang about it from the plant this morning. He doesn't know what it means. He says it's just the log, it's just a box, everyone signs the box." She put the kettle on. "I said, then it'll be fine, won't it. If everyone signs it." She turned round, with the flour on her arms, and the open face. "It will be fine, won't it? You've been through it all. You'd know."

"I don't know," Kai said. "I don't think anyone knows yet."

"No." Anu found two cups. "He said you were the only one who let him sit down. From the family. He said that, that first week. *She just let me sit.*" She poured. "Sugar?"

"No. Thank you."

They drank the tea. Anu talked about Kristjan, and the goal in the garden, and the bus, and did not mention the letter again, and Kai sat in the chair that did not match and drank the whole cup, because she could not think of a way to leave that was not a way of leaving, and when she did leave, at a quarter to four, with the light going, Anu stood at the open door and said, "Come again. He'd like that. He doesn't say, but he would."

She drove back along the east road in the dark with the empty passenger seat, and the plant's stacks went by on the right with their lights on, and she did not look at them, and at Maret's at six there was cabbage, and Maret cried again, and was happy, and Kai ate two helpings, and it was the twenty-eighth of November, and the finding was not going to be filed, and there was a letter on a kitchen table thirty kilometres away with a man's name on the front.

Part Three

February

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Scope

The authority wrote to her in December, because she was next of kin, and because the authority wrote to everyone.

It came on the console and it came in the post, and the two were identical, and she read the paper one at the kitchen table because paper could be put down. *Technical Safety Authority. Survey ref. TSA/14(3)/0088. Notice of scope.* Four pages. The first said what the survey was: an examination of maintenance practice at the plant's pump gallery and stair-side manifold, arising from a record irregularity identified in the course of a district reconstruction. The second said what it would do: inspect, interview, sample, report. The third said how long: an indicative timeline of thirty-two weeks, subject to revision. The fourth was a list.

Named parties. Three lines. The plant, as licensee. The maintenance contractor who supplied the software. And *P. Lepik, maintenance technician (recorded initials, 23 October entry).*

She looked at his name. It was the first time she had seen it in a document she had caused, and she found that she had expected it to feel like something, and that it did not, or not yet, or not in the way she had a word for. It sat on the page in the authority's typeface, sans-serif, small, the way a name sits in a list of parties. He was not accused of anything. The notice was careful about that; there was a paragraph, on page two, explaining that named parties were persons whose evidence was material and that naming did not imply a finding. She read the paragraph twice and could tell it had been written by someone who had once been on the receiving end of the other kind of paragraph and had wanted this one to be gentle, and that it did not matter, because a name on a list was a name on a list, and Anu had asked her whether it would be fine.

At the bottom of the fourth page, a final line, in a smaller face, the kind of line that was there for completeness.

The district reconstruction (ref. R/0417) remains suspended and will resume on receipt of this survey's final report.

She had known. She had worked it out in the kitchen on Day One, in four seconds, and had stood with it. It was different to see it printed. *Will resume.* Not might. The thirty-two weeks were not an ending; they were a corridor, and at the far end of the corridor was a cabinet on the third floor with a blue clip in it, and a woman who read things through with a pencil as if a stranger had written them, and a page nineteen that would still say forty-one seconds, and would now be followed, somewhere after it, by a section that said what the authority had found, with initials.

She put the notice in the drawer with the slip from under her wiper and the invoice from Mägi. She did not know why she was keeping them together. They were the documents of that month, and she had a drawer, and true things were kept.

• • •

The category was suspended. That was the phrase. She had wanted it, and had got it, and it turned out to be a thing that did not happen to a person so much as stop happening.

The pension scheme wrote to say the claim had been transferred to the deferred review pathway, and, because it was a scheme and schemes gave figures, it gave the figure. The survivor's benefit under the standard pathway, had a category been determined by the twenty-seventh of December, would have been one sum. Under the deferred pathway, pending review, an interim payment would be made at a lower rate, and she read the lower rate, and did what she did with numbers, which was the arithmetic. The difference was four hundred and ten a month. Fourteen months, median. She had it before she had decided to work it out: five thousand seven hundred and forty, give or take the median, which was, at her rate, fourteen thousand words, or a catalogue and a half, or the bathroom job in March and most of whatever came after it.

She had bought seven to nine months of a page not being read, and this was the invoice, and it had come to the right address. She paid the electricity

that week from the account the interim would go into, and noticed herself noticing it, and did not let the noticing become anything.

A young man rang from the scheme, a week later, apologetic, to say he had asked about expediting and the answer had been no, and she thanked him, and he said he was sorry, and she could hear that he meant it and that it was the first time he had said it to anyone, and she was, briefly, sorry for him.

The mutual did not write. Rebane did not ring. There was nothing to ring about; the site policy sat where it sat until someone told it what it was for, and the mutual was, she understood, content to let it sit, because a claim that was not a claim yet cost nothing. Tiiu wrote to Maret, not to Kai, and Maret read the letter aloud on the phone, and it said the fund would hold the file open and that Tiiu was glad, in a way that she would not put in an official letter, that the safety people were finally going out there.

Kai finished clearing the flat behind the tram depot. There was not much left. The radio, which she took. The photograph of her mother, which she took. The calendar from the locker door that Priit had not brought and that the plant had eventually sent, with shifts on it in her father's block capitals and nothing else, and a Thursday in October with nothing on it at all, which she looked at, and put in a bag with the rest. She gave the landlord the keys in the stairwell and he said her father had been no trouble, eleven years, never a complaint, and she said no, he wouldn't have been.

And she waited for the thing to arrive that she had expected to arrive when a father stopped having a category, and it did not, and she understood, walking to the car with the radio under her arm, that this was because he had never had one. He had been a man. He had gone down a stair. She had prevented anyone from saying what that meant, for thirty-two weeks, and in the space where the meaning would have been there was not relief and there was not grief but a kind of flat, level absence, like the sea on the day she had driven home the long way, doing nothing at all.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ticket

Priit had been to the plant every working day for seventeen years and had never once, until the survey, been in the room on the second floor of the admin block with the long table and the water jug.

It was not a hearing. They were careful to say that. It was an *evidential interview*, and he was a *named party*, and he had a *representative*, who was a young man from the union called Sander who had been a shop steward for eight months and had a folder he kept opening and closing.

They had him wait in the corridor. There were four chairs against the wall, the moulded kind that made a man his size sit forward, and a water cooler with no cups, and Sander beside him going through the folder for the fourth time. The door to the long room opened at ten to and a man came out, and it was Jüri.

Jüri from the four-to-midnight. Jüri who had four years to go and bad knees and had once, at a leaving do, sung. He had a coat over his arm and the face of a man who had been in a room for an hour and had said a thing he had been carrying for three months, and had found that saying it was not the relief he had thought it would be. He saw Priit. Priit saw him. They had worked the same floor for nine years and neither of them had ever, so far as Priit could remember, had a conversation that lasted longer than a cigarette.

Jüri nodded. Priit nodded. That was all there was to do. One of them had told a shift lead twice about a gate and had been told it was on the list, and one of them had ticked a box, and here they both were, in the same corridor, on the same blue chairs, on the same day, and there was not a sentence in either of their mouths that would have made it better, and they both knew it, and Jüri went down the stairs with his coat over his arm and did not look back.

Then a woman came the other way, from the stairs, to go in before him. She was fifty or so with short grey hair and a folder and one leg doing more of the work than the other, and Priit knew her before he had any reason to, be-

cause the whole floor knew her. The one who had gone down the stair. In the sleet. With the bad leg. Kallas had not known where to put himself. She was giving the archive's evidence on the referral, Sander had said; she was the one who had found the sensors. She came along the corridor and she saw him, and he watched her know who he was. It did not take her long. She looked at him for about as long as you look at a thing you have already written down. Not unkind. Not anything. Then she went in, and the door shut, and it was twenty minutes before it opened again and they called his name.

The authority had sent two people. One of them was older and did not speak much and wrote things down. The other was a woman in her forties who asked the questions, and who was, he would tell Anu afterward, all right, actually, not what he'd expected, she looked at you when she talked.

They asked about the Thursday check.

He told them. He had decided, lying awake, that he would tell them exactly what he had told Kai Rand at her kitchen table, and he did. The six valves. The forty minutes. The shift that did not have forty minutes in it. The box. He said he had ticked the box on the twenty-third on his way past, that he had done the walk-round in twenty minutes because his boy had a match, that he had meant to do it properly the following week. He said everyone signed the box. He said that without heat, because it was true and because he had understood, at some point in December, that it was not going to help.

"We have the position data," the woman said. She said it kindly. "From the valve sensors. You may not have known the valves had position sensors."

"I didn't."

"Nobody on the floor did, as far as we can tell. It was in the 2019 refit. The data goes to the maintenance system. It shows the stair-side valves were cracked and reseated on four Thursdays out of sixteen, this autumn. The twenty-third isn't one of the four."

"No," Priit said. "It wouldn't be."

"Your initials are on all sixteen entries for the weeks you were rostered. Eleven of them. The data shows two of those eleven were done."

Sander opened his folder and closed it.

"I want to be clear about what we're here for," the woman said. "The survey is about the plant. About whether the plant had a maintenance regime that

worked, and it didn't, and that's going to be most of the report, and most of the report isn't about you. There are three other sets of initials on that log. They'll be interviewed too. But you're the named party, Mr Lepik, because your entry is the one before the incident, and the incident is a death, and I can't make that not be the case."

"I know."

"Is there anything you want to say about the twenty-third that you haven't said?"

He thought about it. He thought about the stair, and the damp, and Sarv going down it slowly in the sleet, and Toomas on his side with his hat on. He thought about whether a dry tread would have made a difference, which he had thought about every night for two months and had not answered, and the woman was not asking him that, and nobody in the room could.

"I'd have done it," he said. "If I'd known. That's not — I know that's nothing. But I would have."

The woman nodded, and wrote something, and the older one wrote something, and it was over in fifty minutes.

• • •

The letter came in January.

His certification was suspended pending retraining. That was the word, *suspended*, and he had learned by then that it was the authority's favourite. Retraining was twelve weeks and would be at the college in the city and would be at his own expense unless the plant paid, and the plant, Kallas told him, decently, standing at the gate again, would pay, but could not keep him on maintenance grade while he did it, because the licence said a suspended ticket could not be on the floor, and so he would be on general duties, which was days, which was eleven hundred a month less.

He told Anu at the kitchen table with Kristjan in bed.

"Eleven hundred," Anu said.

"For twelve weeks. Then it's back. If I pass."

"You'll pass."

"I'll pass." He turned his mug. "It's not the money."

"It's the money as well," Anu said, because she was the one who did the sums, and he let her have that, because it was true.

He did not sleep, that night, and at some point in the not sleeping he thought about the woman in the kitchen with the crooked shelf, and about telling her. He had told her the whole of it, at her table, with the soup. He remembered the telling. He remembered her face, which had been still, and kind, and had let him get to the end. And he thought, lying there, that it was a strange kind of luck, that the authority had found it from the sensors. From the valves. Because if it had come out some other way — if he had told someone who had told someone, if it had gone round the floor, if Anu had said something to her sister — it would have been *Priit Lepik admitted*, and that would have been a different letter. Instead it was data. Nobody had said anything. A sensor had reported a quarter turn that had not happened, and that was all, and there was nobody in that to blame except himself, and he found, oddly, that he preferred it. He would rather have been caught by a valve than by a person. It was cleaner. It let him keep the people.

"She was decent to me," he said to Anu, in the dark, meaning Kai. "Out of all of them. Maret rang and talked at me for an hour. The plant sent a letter. That one just let me sit down."

"I know," Anu said. "She washed the tea towel."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Colour of a Hospital

The decision came through in the middle of December. Lembit told her himself, in the corridor, at ten past nine, because he had never in his life used a calendar to say a thing he could say with his mouth.

"It's you. From the first of February. I'll be here till then, clearing the desk, which is a euphemism. I haven't cleared a desk since 2004. You'll want the room repainted. It's the colour it was when I came. I never saw the point."

"Thank you."

"Don't. I voted for you in November and I voted for you again on Tuesday. In between, the council woman wanted to know why you'd blown the Rand date after telling the panel to its face you never had." He looked at her over the glasses. "I told her you hadn't blown it. You'd found a falsified log and a set of sensors nobody knew about and had done the only thing the regulation allowed, two days before your own deadline. If she wanted a director who'd file a log to hit a date she should ask Kuusk. He'd do it under budget." He started to walk. "She didn't like that. She's not a woman who likes being told the rules by a man who's retiring. But she can count, and Kuusk is not a serious candidate for anything, and the regional man had read your file twice. So here we are."

At his door he stopped.

"The gate. Tiiu's fitter. Did you put him in?"

"I put the discrepancy in. I didn't adjudicate it."

"Good." He nodded. "I filed the log. In 2009. You didn't. That's the whole difference and it isn't small. The authority will sort the gate out now with the valves. Their finding, not yours. As it should be. I want you to notice that you got there by doing the thing I didn't, and that it cost you a month and a councillor's good opinion and not the job." He went in. "Repaint the room, Hedvig. It's the colour of a hospital."

• • •

She read the Rand draft again on the sixteenth. It was in the cabinet. She was the kind of person who went back to a thing that had been stopped.

Not with a pencil. She had no standing. The reconstruction was suspended and she could not touch it until the authority reported. She would not have touched it anyway. It was final. She took finality seriously even when it had been overtaken. She read it the way you read a letter you had written and not sent. One to three, sound. Five, the stair, with the latch paragraph that was now somebody else's. Four. Nineteen.

Still there. Forty-one seconds, in her sentences, initialled at the foot in her hand. She sat at Lembit's desk, not yet hers, in a room the colour of a hospital, and thought about the daughter who had asked a question in the passive voice and had detonated the document and had not removed a word of it. Whatever Kai Rand had wanted, this was not the way to get it. This was seven months in a cabinet and then the same page, and after the same page a new section, 5.3 or near it, *maintenance record irregularity*, with initials and a sensor trace and the authority's findings, and the whole thing longer and harder and filed. She could not understand it. She had not been able to on Day Two. She had the sheet still. *She knew. Why?* Nothing written under it.

Raivo came in without knocking. He would have to stop that in February. She would let him until then.

"Congratulations. Properly. I said it in the corridor but that was in front of Kuusk."

"Thank you."

"I'll be doing the Narva files, then."

"Next winter. I'm doing them this one. I told the panel and I meant it."

He looked at her with an expression she had not seen him use. He had expected her to say it. He had not expected to be moved by it. He was.

"Lunch. Canteen. I'll not talk."

"You will."

"I'll talk less."

She went. She did not eat in the car again that winter. Not a decision. The car had been for hiding from Raivo, and she found she did not want to hide from a man who would do Narva for her the winter after. The car went back to being a car. Bay nine went on being under review. The room was repainted, a

colour she chose from a chart, and Raivo said it looked like a dentist's, and she said that was still an improvement.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Page Sixty-Three

Aleksei ended it on a Wednesday in January, over the phone, kindly, and she agreed with him, and it took four minutes.

"I don't think we're — " he said, and stopped, and tried again. "I don't think this is a thing either of us is doing on purpose. I think it just happened for a while. And I think it's stopped happening and neither of us has said."

"Yes," Kai said.

"You're not angry."

"No."

"Right." He sounded, she thought, faintly disappointed, as though he had prepared for a harder conversation and would have liked to use some of it. "I'm sorry. About the timing. With your father, and everything."

"The timing's fine."

"You keep saying that."

She had. She noticed it, the way she noticed most things after the fact. "Thank you for the seven months," she said, which was true, and he laughed, and said something about the place by the market, and that was the end of it, and she put the phone down and the flat was exactly as it had been four minutes before, and that this was, she supposed, the finding.

The catalogue arrived the same week.

Liis sent two copies, because Liis always sent two, one to keep and one to mark up if the distributor came back with corrections, and Kai unwrapped them at the kitchen table and put one on the shelf, the fixed shelf, the third one, and opened the other. It was heavy and glossy and smelled of the press, and the kitchens in it were German kitchens photographed in a light that did not exist in Estonia, and she turned to the drawer runners, because that was where she had been, and read her own sentence about fifty thousand cycles, and it was fine.

She turned to sixty-three.

The bird was there.

The drawer closes the way a bird settles on a branch: without hurry, and without sound. In Estonian. In her copy, in her voice, or near enough that she had to read it twice to be sure it was not hers. It was not hers. He had put it back. Aleksei, doing his pass for the distributor, had read her clean dull sentence about the mechanism and the newton figure and had gone to the German and found the bird and had put it back in, and had done it well, she saw, reading it a third time, because he had not translated the German bird but had found an Estonian one, a smaller one, that did settle on a branch in a way you could believe in a kitchen. It read fine. It read better than fine. It was the only sentence on the page where the writer sounded like he was alive, and it was the sentence she had cut, and a man who had let go of every hard question she had ever handed him had, on the one thing that did not matter, quietly not let go.

She sat with the catalogue open at sixty-three for a while.

Then she read it aloud, once, in the kitchen, to nobody, because she wanted to hear it in the air rather than on the page, which was a thing she did with sentences she was not sure of. *The drawer closes the way a bird settles on a branch.* It sounded fine. It sounded like a thing a person might say. The console, which listened to everything, waited a moment, and then put up its grey line: *Would you like to save that?*

"No," Kai said. "It's not mine."

She did not ring him. There was nothing to say that would not have been a way of starting again, and she did not want to start again; she wanted, she found, to have been wrong about the bird, and she had been, and that was a small clean thing she could hold in her hand without it turning into anything. She had cut it because it did not travel. It had travelled. Somebody had carried it.

Liis rang on the Friday to say the distributor was pleased and there was a bathroom catalogue in March if she wanted it, ninety pages, same rate, and Kai said yes, and Liis said *bless you* and rang off, and life continued at its ordinary width, and the catalogue stood on the third shelf beside the cucumbers, and the shelf held.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Cabbage

Maret had become, over the winter, a person who was right.

It had happened gradually and then all at once. Lehtsalu's piece had run in the first week of December, on the Thursday as promised, with the gate and the fitter and a photograph of the stair taken from the top with the light doing something dramatic, and Maret had been in it, quoted at length, the sister who had said at the chapel that the plant had killed him and had not been listened to. Then the survey notice had gone into the register, with its reference number and its thirty-two weeks, and Lehtsalu had run a second piece, shorter, *Safety Authority Steps In After Stair Death*, and Maret had been in that one too. Then Mägi had written to the plant, and the plant had written back, and the letters had gone on for a month and had ended, in January, in a meeting in a room above the pharmacy that Maret described as *civilised*, and a figure that she did not describe at all, and did not need to, because it was in her face.

"Not for me," she said. "I told them. It's for the fund. The fund and the survivor's benefit, when that comes through, and something for the fitter, Mägi's seeing to that, he shouldn't lose by it. I don't want their money. I wanted them to say it."

"Did they?"

"Near enough. *Without admission of liability.* Mägi says that's what saying it looks like when a lawyer does it." She was at the stove, in Kai's kitchen, because she had decided in December that Kai's kitchen was where she cooked on Sundays now and Kai had not found a way to say otherwise and had stopped looking for one. The cabbage thing was on. The flat smelled of it, of vinegar and pork and the caraway her father had liked, and Kai stood at the window with a glass of the wine Maret had brought and watched the pram man, who had a winter coat now, and the lime trees, which had snow on them.

"You were right not to sign," Maret said, to the pan.

Kai turned.

"The petition. I was angry with you. I said things. I said you were his, and I meant it as — well. You know how I meant it." She stirred. "But you were right. If you'd signed, and I'd had the paper, and the Sarv woman had found negligence on the twenty-ninth like I wanted, Mägi says we'd have got the fund and maybe a settlement and that's all, and the plant would have fixed one gate and put a spring on it and gone on ticking boxes for another twenty years. This way they've got the authority in for thirty-two weeks pulling the whole floor apart. This way it *matters*. You said, let her find what happened. And she did, and it was worse than I thought, and it was the right thing, and you were the one who saw it." She tasted the cabbage. "I don't say that easily. You know I don't."

"I know."

"So I'm saying it."

Kai drank the wine. She had, she found, no idea what to do with her face, and did the thing she did with faces, which was to make it still, and Maret, who had never once in thirty-four years read that stillness correctly, read it now as something like modesty, and was warmed by it, and turned back to the pan.

"There's a man," Maret said, after a while, in a different voice. "Named in it. The survey. Tiiu told me. One of the maintenance lads. The one who found him, as it happens. Lepik. The one who rang and went on and on."

"Yes."

"Tiiu says he's lost his ticket. For a bit. She says the union's doing what it can but there's not much, when it's the log." Maret shook her head. "I feel for him. I do. But somebody ticked that box, Kai. Somebody ticked it every week and Toomas went down a wet stair, and I can't make that be nobody. Somebody has to be somebody." She put the lid on. "Ten minutes. Get the plates."

Kai got the plates. She got the plates and the forks and the bread, which she had, and she set the table, and Maret served the cabbage thing, his thing, and it was good, and Maret cried a little, the way she did now, and said she was glad, she was glad they had done right by him, and Kai ate two helpings and said it was good and it was.

Maret would say it again, the thing about signing, at Christmas, and in January, and on the Sunday after the settlement. She did not change her mind about any of it. She had been right, and she had been made happy by it, and she

was warmer to Kai than she had ever been in her life, and every Sunday she cooked, and every Sunday she said *somebody has to be somebody*, or something like it, and every Sunday Kai got the plates.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

A Line at the Foot

She did it in her first week. The first week was when a director could do a thing before anybody had decided what kind of director she was going to be.

A procedural amendment. Section 9 of the consultation guidance had eleven paragraphs. Lembit had written them. Nobody had touched them since. She added a twelfth.

> *9.12. Where, at consultation, a member of the family declines to accept the account or any part of it, the settled account shall record at its foot the name of the person declining and the passage declined. This record shall form part of the filed account and shall not be removed.*

Raivo read it twice, standing at her desk in the dentist-coloured room, and said, "Huh."

"Say it."

"It's good. I'm saying it's good. I'm also saying it'll read very well in the review. The council woman will like it. Kuusk will tell the regional service the new director has *strengthened family engagement* before you've finished your first month." He put the sheet down. "I'm not saying that's why you did it."

"No."

"I'm saying it's true as well."

"It is true as well."

She had thought about the ratio. On the Sunday before, at home, hip up on a stool, she had written the paragraph out longhand three times until it said only what it said. It was right. She believed that. A family that had sat in a room three times and had said *no, not that* deserved to have the no in the record beside the thing they had said no to, so that whoever opened the file in twenty years would see not only what the archive had found but who had stood in front of it, and where. That was the reason. It had also come to her at Lembit's desk in December with the Rand draft open at nineteen and a sheet beside it

with a question she could not answer. She was honest enough to know that the order in which reasons arrived was not nothing.

Because the Rand account would resume. In the summer. When it did, when she took it from the cabinet and read it with a pencil and added the authority's section and filed it, there would be a line at the foot. *K. Rand, at consultation, declined to accept section 4.3.* The name twice. Once at nineteen. Once at the end. Not an accusation. A fact about who had been in the room.

Hedvig did not know whether that was mercy or the opposite. She had gone back and forth for a week and had not landed. It gave the woman her refusal, in the record, permanently. Kai Rand had wanted that badly enough to blow up a document for a version of it. It also put her in the document twice. Both were true.

There was a third thing. She went toward it once, on the Sunday, with the paragraph written out for the second time, and stopped at the top of it the way you stop at a stair you have decided not to go down. It was this. When the account resumed, and the line went in at the foot, and the summer's pencil went through 5.3 with its initials and its sensor trace, a reader who could count would have, on one document, a daughter who had declined the page about the phone call, and a question about a valve, and a man's name, and a date, in that order. She had not written any of that. She would not. It was not hers to write and she had no material for it. But she had built a rule that would put the daughter's refusal on the same page as everything else, in her own hand, permanently, and she could not say with certainty that she had not built it partly so that the page would be there for whoever came after her, and would say, without her having to say it, *look*. She did not finish the thought. She wrote the paragraph out a third time. It said only what it said. She let it.

Two true things could sit side by side without either giving way. Twenty-two years had taught her that. She filed the amendment with both of them sitting there, and the third thing underneath, unexamined, and did not disclose the ratio to Raivo, or to the review, or to herself.

She did not write to Kai Rand about it. There was no procedure. She had never found one impracticable and had never invented one either.

The amendment went into the guidance on the fourth of February. It applied to every account filed from that date. The first was a cyclist and a bus.

The family accepted every word. The foot of the account was blank. Hedvig looked at the blank for longer than a blank deserved.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Draft

She wrote to Priit in the second week of February, and did not send it, and the not sending was the thing she would keep.

She wrote it on the console because she did not have his address, only the house, and because a message was what people sent. It took her an evening. She was good at it; she was a person who could take a thing that meant something and make it mean the same thing somewhere else, and she sat at the kitchen table and did that, to herself, for three hours, and what came out was four paragraphs and was, she saw, reading it back, very well made.

It said that she had been thinking about him. It said that she had heard from Maret about the ticket and the retraining and that she was sorry, and it said that in a way that was true. It said that she knew what he had told her at the table with the soup, and that she had thought about it every day since, which was also true. It said that she wanted him to know something, and then there was a paragraph, the fourth, that she rewrote eleven times, in which she tried to say what the something was, and each time it came out as a sentence with no one in it. *A question was asked. The valves were raised at the consultation. It came out in the third meeting.* She could not put herself in the sentence. She tried. The third attempt read: *At the final consultation, the matter of the weekly check was raised, and I understand this is what led to the referral.* She read it and saw that *was raised* had no hands. The sixth: *I mentioned the valves to Ms Sarv. I did not know what she would do with it.* Which was a lie, and a good one, the kind that was made entirely of true parts, and she deleted it faster than the others. The ninth was only *I told her*, and she looked at that for a long time, because it was nearly right, and then saw that *told* was wrong too, that she had not told, she had asked, in the passive, with no one in it, and that even here, alone, at her own table, writing to a man who had fixed her shelf twice, she was still reaching for the version of the verb with the least of her in it. She wrote *I asked* and looked at it and deleted it and wrote *I raised* and deleted that and

wrote, finally, *I was the one who*, and could not finish the clause, and sat with the cursor after *who* for a quarter of an hour.

Then she read the whole thing again and saw what it was.

It was not a confession. A confession would have had a person in it. It was a document, four paragraphs, well made, that established that Kai Rand had been kind to Priit Lepik, and had been sorry, and had thought about him every day, and that a thing had happened at a meeting, and it was the exact shape of page nineteen, in reverse: all the true numbers arranged so that the reader would have to draw the line themselves, and would, and would be wrong about who had drawn it.

And it would be kept. That was the other thing, the thing that arrived last and stayed longest. A message sent from the console went to the other console and was retained, the way the council retained everything, and if it were ever pulled — if Priit, or Anu, or the union, or the authority, or Hedvig Sarv in the summer with her pencil, ever had cause to ask the city for context — it would be there, with a timestamp, four paragraphs from K. Rand to P. Lepik in the second week of February, and a reader who could count would count.

She did not send it.

She would tell herself, afterward, that she had not sent it because it was not honest, because it had no one in it, and that was true. She would not tell herself the other thing, which was that she had not sent it because it would exist, and she did not want to be the person it would show her to be, in a file, in a font, forever, and that the not sending was not for him at all. It was for her. It was the dry patch on the stair again, and she found it without being told to, and stood on it.

She told the console to delete the draft.

> *Drafts are retained for thirty days under cooperative retention policy. Would you like to archive it instead?*

She looked at that.

"No," Kai said. "Leave it."

It left it. It sat in the console, four paragraphs with the cursor after *who*, for thirty days, and then the cooperative's policy did what policies did, and it was

gone, and she had never once opened it again, and there was, for the rest of her life, nowhere in the city where it had been.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

February

It was the big supermarket on the ring road, the one with the car park that never emptied, at half past four on a Saturday in the third week of February, in the dairy aisle.

She had a basket. Milk, butter, the yoghurt, eggs, a packet of the seeded rolls from the in-store bakery that were not as good as the ones from the corner but were there. She had come in for those and had drifted, the way you drifted in a supermarket at half past four on a Saturday, and had ended up looking at cheese she did not want with the specific blankness of a woman who had nowhere she needed to be until Sunday.

He came round the end of the aisle with a trolley and a boy.

She knew him before she knew him. It was the shoulders, and the jacket, which was the same jacket, and the way he pushed the trolley with one hand and kept the other free, as if for a bracket. The boy was nine and had a football under his arm in the supermarket, which somebody had presumably told him not to, and was saying something about crisps. Priit was saying no to the crisps in the voice of a man who was going to say yes to the crisps. Then he looked up.

Four seconds. She would count them, afterward, because she counted things now.

One. He saw her, and his face did the thing it did, which was to not know what to do with itself, and then to decide.

Two. She could turn. There was the end of the aisle behind her and the cheese in front and a woman with a trolley between them, and she could look at the cheese, and he would see her look at the cheese, and he would understand that she had not seen him, or would let himself understand it, because he was a man who let people have things.

Three. The boy said *Dad* and pulled at the trolley and Priit did not move.

Four. She said, “Hello, Priit.”

And his face came open, all the way, the way it had at her kitchen table when she had said *sit down*, and he said, "Kai! Hello — I didn't — hello," and let go of the trolley, and the boy caught it, and Priit came the three steps down the aisle with his hand out and then did not know whether to shake hers, and did, and it was warm, and he said, "This is Kristjan. Kristjan, this is Kai, this is Toomas's daughter, you remember I told you — say hello."

"Hello," said Kristjan, who did not remember, and looked at the football.

"How are you?" Priit said. "How are you doing? I keep meaning — Anu keeps saying, go and see her, and I keep meaning to, and then it's the college three nights a week now, did Maret tell you? The retraining. Twelve weeks. I'm six in. It's all right, actually. It's a lot of sitting down. I'm not built for the sitting down." He laughed. He was thinner, she thought. Not much. Enough. "I'm on days. General duties. It's — well, you know what it is, Tiiu'll have said. It's eleven hundred a month and Anu does the sums and we're all right. We're all right. Kristjan's not getting the crisps, is what we are."

"Dad."

"You're not." He turned back to her. "And you? The survey people — they've been out, they've had the whole gallery apart, you should see it. They found the sensors, did you hear that? The valves have got sensors. Since 2019. Nobody knew. Not Kallas, not anybody. They pulled it all off the system, sixteen weeks of it, and there it all was." He shook his head, and there was something in it that was almost wonder. "Data. That's what did it. Not a person. I said to Anu, at least it was the valves. At least nobody had to — you know. Say anything. It was just there. It was just true."

"Yes," Kai said.

"Anyway." He looked at her basket, and at the rolls in it, and at her, and his face did the thing it did before it decided to be friendly, and decided. "Come round. Would you? Anu would like it. She talks about the tea towel. She says nobody's ever washed a tea towel for her in her life. Sunday, maybe. Not this Sunday, I've got the college, but the one after. Come for your dinner."

"I'd like that," Kai said.

"Good. Good." He took the trolley back from the boy. "Right. Crisps. One packet. One. Say goodbye."

"Bye," said Kristjan.

"Bye, Kristjan."

Priit raised the hand that was not on the trolley, the free one, and went off down the aisle toward the crisps with his son, and she heard him say *one* again, and *I said one*, and then the sound of him went into the sound of the shop.

She stood in the dairy aisle with the basket.

She stood there for a while. The woman with the trolley went past. The refrigeration hummed, the way the pumps had hummed at the bottom of a stair she had never seen. Somebody's child was crying, three aisles away, about something that would be over by the car. She looked at the cheese she did not want.

He had been friendly. He had always been friendly. It was, standing there, the thing about him that was not going to change, whatever else did: that he was a man who came the three steps down the aisle with his hand out, and that he would go on doing that, to her, on Sundays, for as long as she let him, and that she was going to let him, because the alternative was to be a person who did not, and she had not yet found the dry patch that let her be that.

She bought the cheese. She did not want it. She put it in the basket with the rolls and the eggs and paid for it and carried it out to the car park that never emptied, in the last of the light, and drove home, and carried it up four flights, and put it in the fridge, where it would sit until it went off, beside the pickled cucumbers her father had liked and she did not, which she had not opened, and the tin of boiled sweets by the radio she had not turned on, and the bread she had bought when she had bread, and the catalogue on the third shelf with a bird in it that she had cut and someone else had carried. The flat was filling up. She noticed it, standing at the open fridge with her coat still on. Not with her things. With the things of the people she had been decent to, and the things of the people she had not, and she could no longer always tell which shelf was which.

She shut the fridge. It was February, and the survey had twenty-two weeks to run, and at the end of them a woman with a pencil would take a draft out of a cabinet, and it was going to be a long spring.