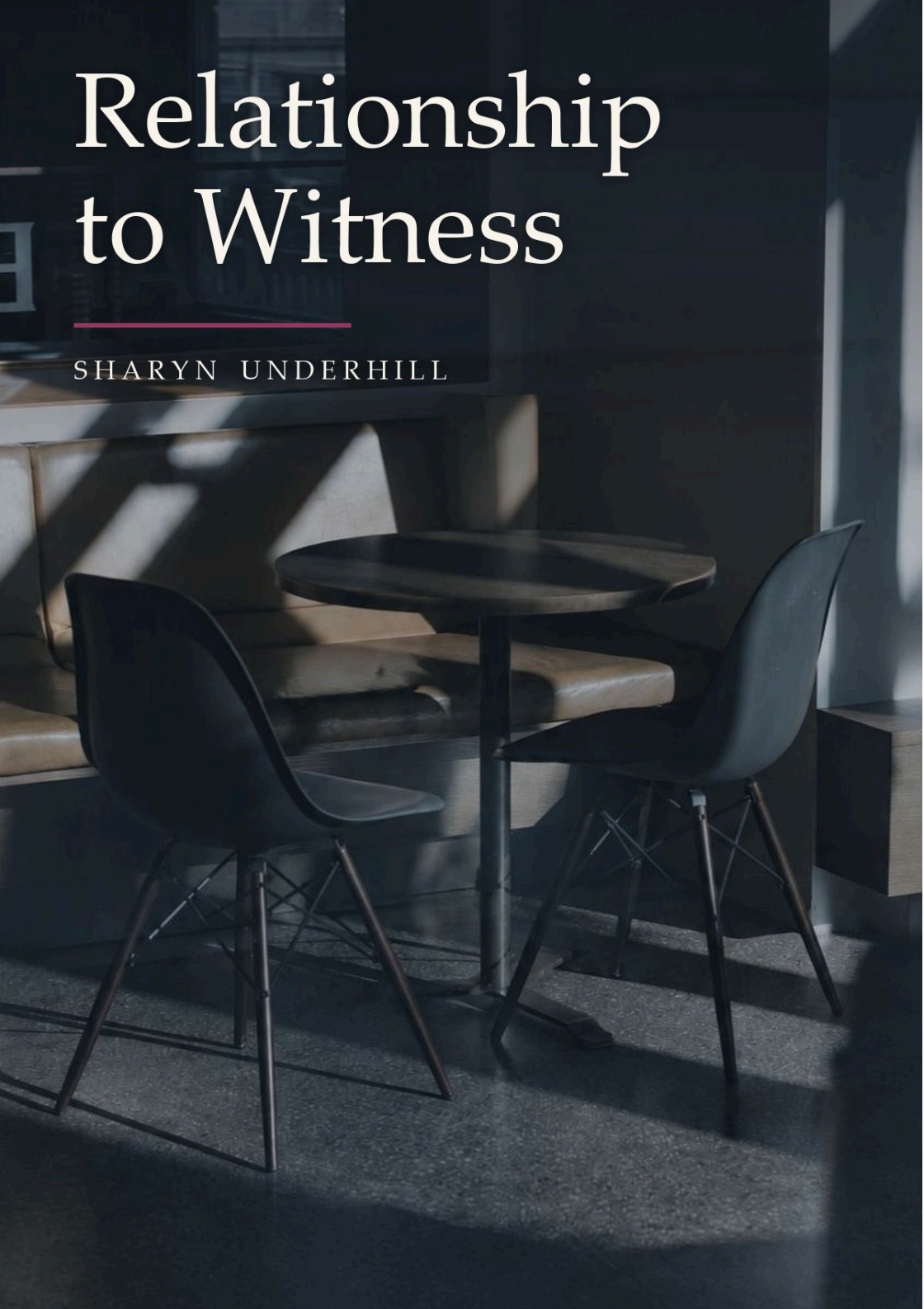
Relationship to Witness

SHARYN UNDERHILL



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A note before you begin. This is a work of fiction for adult readers. It deals with family violence, coercive control and the slow loss of a self, and it contains explicit sexual content. It does not treat any of those things as harmless. Nothing in it is a portrait of any real person, case or proceeding.

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Relationship to Witness was developed in consultation with AI. The cover image was also created with AI.

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CHAPTER 1

Proof of Service

Jessica Heart had always wanted to be a criminal lawyer.

She had said so at sixteen, in a demountable that smelled of warm photocopier, and the careers teacher had written it on a card and underlined it twice. Nobody had asked her what she thought the job was.

At twenty past nine she was in the robing room at the Magistrates Court with the blouse out of the bag, because she had stopped trusting a blouse to a hanger in a car. The good black suit. The shoes she could not walk to the car park in, which lived in her bag beside the shoes she could. Hair up, hard, with the pins in the same four places they had sat since she was twenty-three. Lipstick, because without it men asked her twice whether she was feeling all right.

It took forty minutes every morning. It had cost her about nine days a year for fourteen years and she had worked that out once, at a conference, during a session on wellbeing.

Court 3 was cold at the front and airless at the back. Sergeant Kilby had the prosecution table and two cardboard boxes and the look of a man who had been given the list that morning. Her client sat down beside her and put his phone face down on the bench without being asked, which she had told him to do in the corridor.

Dale Prewer was thirty-one and had come in a shirt with a collar. He had done that himself; she had not had to ask. It would help.

One count. Contravening a family violence order. Fifty metres, and he had been forty, in a car park at Glenorchy, on a Tuesday afternoon in March.

The complainant was in the gallery on the left with another woman beside her. Jess looked at her once, at the start.

Kelly Vautin was twenty-six. Flat shoes, a good coat, both hands on the strap of her bag. She had been crying in the corridor and had stopped, and had done something about her face before she came in. She would have been all right in the box. She would have been clear, and she would have stayed clear under cross, and the magistrate would have believed every word of it.

Jess turned back to her own table and opened the file.

* * *

The order had been made on the eleventh of February, in his absence, in a list of nineteen.

She had found it on the Sunday night, with the file on the kitchen bench and a glass of wine going warm beside it. It had taken four minutes.

Sergeant Kilby took it the way he was always going to take it. The order existed. The order had been served. There was a record of service. There was a note from Constable Whelan of a telephone call on the thirteenth, in which Mr Prewer was told that an order had been made.

"Sergeant," Jess said. "Constable Whelan's note. Does it record what he told Mr Prewer the order required him to do?"

Kilby read it again. He took his time about it, which she respected.

"It records that he was advised an order was in place."

"That's not what I asked. Does it record any condition? Any distance? Any address?"

"No."

"Is Constable Whelan here?"

"Constable Whelan left the service in August."

"And the record of service — that's the document at tab four. Whose signature is on it?"

A pause while he found it.

"It's not signed."

"It's not signed," Jess said, and sat down.

She made the submission standing, with one hand flat on the bar table, and it took her under three minutes. Knowledge of the order was not knowledge of its terms. The Crown could prove that Mr Prewer knew a piece of paper existed. It could not prove that he knew what was written on it, and a man cannot knowingly contravene a condition that nobody can establish was ever communicated to him.

She did not say one thing in that courtroom that was untrue.

The magistrate took eleven minutes. He was not happy about it and he said so, in the careful way they say it, and then he dismissed the complaint.

* * *

Prewer put his hand on her forearm in the corridor and left it there a second longer than she wanted.

"You beauty," he said. "You absolute beauty."

"Mr Prewer. The order is still in force. It doesn't go away because this charge did. If you go near her again you'll be back here and the next one won't have a hole in it."

"Yeah, no. Understood." He was already looking past her at the lift. "Hundred per cent."

Behind him the doors of Court 3 opened and the two women came out and went the other way, towards the stairs, and the one who was

not Kelly Vautin had her arm round her.

Jess stood in the corridor with her bag in her hand. The stairwell door swung to and clicked.

* * *

At the office they knew before she got there, because Kilby had told somebody and somebody had told somebody.

Hugh Tyne came out of his room with his glasses up on his head.

"On service?"

"On the note. Whelan never put the conditions in it."

"And the record's unsigned." He laughed, once, through his nose. "God help us. Good girl. That's the third one off them this year."

"Fourth."

"Fourth." He was delighted. "There's a bottle of something in the kitchen from the Ellis matter. Have a glass at five, we'll make a thing of it."

"I might."

"You should. You don't make enough of yourself, Jess, that's your whole trouble."

He went back in. Through the glass she could see him picking up the phone, still pleased. He would tell it twice more before lunch and get it slightly wrong each time.

In her own room she took the shoes off under the desk and put her feet flat on the carpet. There was a sandwich she had bought at eight o'clock and a new brief with a blue band round it that had not been there at half past seven.

She ate the sandwich.

At some point in the afternoon she went to put the Prewer file in the cabinet and found she could not bring up the woman's face from the gallery. Not the coat, not the hands, not the face.

She had been watching the sergeant.

✦

CHAPTER 2

The Blue Band

The blue band meant legal aid.

Legal aid meant a fixed fee that would cover about a third of the hours, and the firm took its share of them the way every firm did, so that the Commission would keep sending through the work that paid properly. Nobody said no to a grant. What happened instead was that the file went round the building, and people were busy, and it came to rest.

By the time one landed on a desk with the band still on it, two or three people had picked it up and put it down again.

"Wendy's got the Bridgewater thing running till October," Hugh said, in the doorway, not coming in. "And Tom won't touch a persistent. Says he hasn't got the stomach for them any more, which at sixty-one is a thing a man is allowed to say."

"Right."

"He's at Risdon. Remand. You'll want to get out there this week, they're booking a fortnight ahead." He put his hand flat on the doorframe. "It's a dog of a brief, Jess. I'm not pretending otherwise."

"I didn't think you were."

"Good girl."

She did not take it home that night, or the night after. On the Thursday she put it in the boot so that it would not sit on the passenger seat, and drove up Davey Street in the rain.

* * *

The flat was in Battery Point, two rooms and a half, and it had been hers for nine years.

She came in at twenty to seven and did it in the order she always did it. Keys in the bowl. Heating on. Shoes off at the mat, both pairs. Then the bathroom, and the pins out one at a time into the saucer on the shelf, and her hair down, and both hands up into it and the whole weight of the day coming off the back of her head in about four seconds. Then the bra, through the sleeve, which was the best part. Then the good suit on its hanger with the shoulders straightened, because it was eleven hundred dollars and she had three of them.

She ate standing up: rice from Tuesday, an egg on it, pepper. Her sister had sent a photograph of a dog in a cone.

Barney post-op. Twelve days of this. Tell me again why we do it. xx

There was a missed call from Prue at half past five and a voicemail she would listen to tomorrow.

At nine o'clock she went down to the car for the brief.

* * *

Braden Curry was forty-four and had been in Risdon since the fourteenth of June.

She laid it out on the kitchen table the way she always did, which was counter-clockwise from her left hand: charge sheet, chronology, antecedents, the orders, the statements, the medical, the photographs face down at the end. She poured a glass of wine and sat down in front of it.

One count of persistent family violence. Two of assault. Nine contraventions of a family violence order.

The chronology ran to four pages. An interim order in September. A final order in October, this one served on him in open court while he stood there, so there would be no argument about what he knew. A phone call in November. Two hundred and forty calls in December, which the summary gave as a figure because listing them would have taken a page. A car parked across the road from the house in Lindisfarne on the twenty-second of January, for five and a half hours, photographed by a neighbour from an upstairs window with the number plate legible.

He was charged at the end of January and bailed on the ninth of February, on conditions.

Six of the nine contraventions came after that. The last was on the eleventh of June. On the fourteenth he was remanded in custody, and he had been there ever since.

Naomi London was thirty-three. Her statement ran to sixty-one pages and had been taken over three days in March.

It started in 2015. She had been twenty-two and working on the front desk of a dental practice in Rosny, booking appointments and taking payments. He had come in as a patient — three visits over five weeks, for a crown — and on the third visit he had leaned on the counter and asked her out in front of the two other girls on the desk. She had found that flattering at the time. She had put it in the statement without comment.

Jess read the sixty-one pages.

It was not the hitting that did it. The hitting was in there, in paragraphs 140 to 167, dated where she could date them and described in the flat way police take it down, and it was bad. But Jess had read a great many paragraphs like that.

It was paragraph 38. He had not liked her friend Shanae, and so there had been a conversation about Shanae, and then another one, and then over about fourteen months there had stopped being a

Shanae. He had never told her not to see her. The statement said that twice.

And paragraph 71, which was about money, and which was four lines long and said that she had not known the password to her own account since 2019 and had not thought about it in years.

Jess put her hand flat on the page and kept it there for a moment.

* * *

The photographs were last because she always put them last.

There were forty-one, in a plastic sleeve, taken by a forensic officer at the Royal on the second of June and again at the station on the ninth. Each one had a scale rule laid beside it, a small white strip marked off in centimetres, so that a jury could be told how big a thing was.

She went through them in order, with the list beside her.

Photographs 1 to 6, face and neck, four angles. Photographs 7 to 11, right upper arm, the grip marks, which the officer had numbered individually. Photograph 12, the same arm at seven days. Photograph 13, left forearm, defensive.

Photograph 14: left hip and lower abdomen. Two older bruises, yellow at the edges, and a small bird on the hipbone, drawn in one unbroken line.

The list had nothing to say about the bird. She looked at it anyway.

It was about the size of a thumbnail and somebody who could draw had done it. It sat in the soft place below the point of the hip, where a waistband would cover it. Nobody would ever see it who had not been invited to.

Jess had never had one. There had been a conversation about it at twenty-two, with three other girls and a bottle of something, and nothing had come of it. She sat at her kitchen table at a quarter to

eleven and thought about where she would put one, if she ever did. Not the ankle. Not the shoulder. Somewhere she would have to decide to show.

Then she turned the page.

Photographs 15 to 19, the back of the left thigh. Photograph 20, the sole of the right foot.

She looked at the sole of the right foot for some time.

Then she squared the whole sleeve up on the table and put it at the bottom of the pile, and sat back, and found that the wine was still where she had poured it and had gone the temperature of the room.

She took it to the sink and tipped it out and washed the glass and stood it on the rack.

* * *

At twenty past eleven she opened a new attendance note and dated it.

She typed: *Reviewed brief. Client in custody since 14 June. He did it. He did all of it, and the only question on this file is how long he gets.*

She sat and looked at that for a while.

Then she took it out, word by word, back to the full stop after *14 June*, and wrote: *Client to be advised as to the strength of the Crown case and the sentencing range available on a plea at this stage.*

She read it again. It was correct. It was the sentence any solicitor in the state would have written and there was nothing in it that anybody could object to.

She saved it, and shut the laptop, and went back to the table, and read the sixty-one pages a second time.

✦

CHAPTER 3

Professional Visit

She had a bra she only wore to prisons.

It was grey and had no wire in it and it was eight years old, and it lived folded at the back of the drawer with the thermals, and twice a year she put it on at half past seven in the morning and remembered why she had bought it. Flat shoes. Trousers or a skirt below the knee, nothing that needed adjusting. A cardigan, because the rooms were cold and because sleeves were simpler. No necklace. Nothing in her pockets.

It had taken her about two years, when she was young, to notice that none of it applied to the men she went out there with. They put on whatever they had on.

The drive took twenty-five minutes. Over the bridge and north along the eastern shore with the river flat and grey on her left, then up, and the country opened out brown with the fence running over the top of the hill.

In the car park she put her phone and her bag in the boot and locked the car and walked across with the key and the clear folder in her hand.

* * *

Getting in took thirty-five minutes.

Practising certificate. The form, which asked her to declare things she had not brought. The locker, for the car key. The detector, and then the wand, held by an officer about her own age who said sorry twice and did not need to.

Then the first door, and the wait between the two doors, which was the part she had never got used to — six or eight seconds in a space the size of a lift with nothing happening and nothing to look at.

The interview room had a table fixed to the floor, two chairs, a window in the door and a smell of floor polish over something else. She sat with her back to the window and set the folder square in front of her.

They brought him at twenty past ten.

* * *

Braden Curry was a big man gone soft through the shoulders, with grey coming in at the sides and a forearm tattoo from a long time ago. He had shaved. He came in and waited by the chair until she said sit down, and then he sat.

"Mrs Heart."

"Ms. Jessica Heart. Legal Aid have given your file to our firm, so I'm your solicitor from here on."

"Right. Right." He put both hands on the table and then took them off again. "I'd offer you a cup of tea."

"That's all right."

"No, I know. I just — you say it, don't you. Someone comes in." He looked at the table. "Sorry."

She opened the folder.

"Mr Curry, before we start. Has anybody been out to see you about this?"

"There was a bloke in July. Young fella. Half an hour." He thought about it. "I've been here four months and nobody's sat down and told me what I'm actually charged with. I know what it's called. I don't know what it means."

"All right. We'll do that today."

"Thank you," he said, and he meant it, and she wrote the date at the top of the page.

* * *

She took him through it properly. The count of persistent family violence and what the Crown had to prove to make it out. The two assaults. The nine contraventions, and the difference between the three before bail and the six after.

He followed all of it.

"Say I put my hand up to the contraventions," he said. "Just them. Can that be done on its own, or is it the whole lot or nothing?"

Nobody had told him to ask that.

"It can be done. Whether it helps you is another question."

"Because of the six."

"Because of the six."

"Yeah." He rubbed his jaw. "Yeah. That's what does me, isn't it. Not the rest. The rest they'd have given me a bond for, first time up. It's that I kept going."

"That's broadly right."

He had a refrigeration business at Cambridge. Nine on the books, four trucks, twenty-two years. He wanted to know who was paying the men. He wanted to know whether his brother-in-law could sign on the account, and whether that would look bad, and he was relieved when she said it would not.

"They're good blokes," he said. "Dean's got three kids. I'm not having Dean go without because of me."

"Nobody's suggesting he will."

"No. No, I know."

When she came to character references he said: "You could talk to my first wife if you wanted. Kerry. We're still on good terms, she'd say I was all right." Jess wrote *K. Curry — refs?* in the margin and turned the page.

* * *

An hour in, he asked about Naomi.

"Can I ask you something. Is she all right?"

"Mr Curry—"

"I know I'm not meant to ask. I'm not asking where she is or anything like that, I'm not stupid." He opened both hands on the table. "I just want to know if someone's looking after her."

"I can't discuss the complainant with you."

"Fair enough."

He sat back. For a while he looked at the window in the door, where an officer went past and did not look in.

"She's not well," he said. "That's the thing nobody's put in that file. She hasn't been well for years and I've been the one holding it together, and I've said it to the doctor and I've said it to her mother and I've said it to the police, and not one of them has ever listened to me about it."

"Mr Curry."

"I'm not saying it to get out of anything."

"I understand. But I need you to hear this." She put the pen down. "If that becomes your defence, it will go very badly. Juries have heard

it. It is the thing they expect to hear, and the moment you say it they stop listening to everything else."

He took that in. He nodded slowly, twice.

"Right," he said. "Well. You'd know."

* * *

They were fifty minutes over. He stood when she stood.

"Jess," he said. "Sorry. Ms Heart. Thanks for coming out. I mean it. It's a long way for nothing much."

"It's not for nothing. I'll have the committal papers in a fortnight and I'll come back."

"You don't have to."

"I know."

He put his hand out, and then remembered, and took it back. He turned to the door and stood with his hands loose at his sides and waited to be taken.

* * *

She did it the other way round on the way out. The doors, the wait between them, the locker, the key.

In the car park the wind was coming up off the water and it was colder than town.

She wrote her note before she started the engine, because she had learned at twenty-four that you lose half of it on the drive. It took four minutes and it was a good note, and it recorded that the client presented as cooperative, understood the charges, and had been advised against raising the complainant's mental health.

Then she sat with the pen in her hand and looked at the fence going up over the hill.

He had been in that room for two hours and he had not once raised his voice. He had asked about Dean's kids. He had apologised for offering her a cup of tea.

And there were forty-one photographs in a sleeve in a cabinet in Macquarie Street, and she had read every page of the sixty-one, twice.

She could not get the two of them into the same man.

She started the engine.

✦

CHAPTER 4

The Pipeline Track

Prue Dennison had been in Jess's life since they were nineteen, when they shared a house in Sandy Bay with a bath you had to light with a match.

They had a Saturday. It had survived two of Prue's pregnancies, one of Jess's bad years, a decade of night rosters and about four hundred Saturdays when one of them had cancelled. The rule was that cancelling did not count against you. The rule was also that you rang, and said why, and Jess had not rung.

"Four days," Prue said, in the car park at Fern Tree, pulling a beanie down over her ears. "Four days to return a call. I was going to send someone round."

"I was going to ring you tonight."

"You were going to ring me tonight," Prue said, "at which point I would have been asleep, because I have done three nights in a row and I am held together with Panadol and spite. Walk."

* * *

The track was flat and wet and went along the side of the mountain under the man ferns, with the old pipeline running beside it in and out of the bracken.

It had rained in the morning and everything was dripping without any rain falling. The light came down green.

"So the woman is forty-one," Prue said, "first baby, and she has a birth plan in a plastic folder. Laminated. And I say, lovely, we'll do our best, and she says, I've printed one for each of you."

"One each."

"One each. Four copies." Prue stepped over a root without looking at it. "And I want to be clear that I love her. I would die for that woman. But at ten past three in the morning, when it has all gone sideways and we're moving, her husband is standing in the corridor holding the folder up like it's a warrant."

"What happened?"

"Girl. Nine pound two. Everyone lived." She grinned. "And at about six she looks at me and says, I didn't do any of it the way it said. And I said, love, nobody ever does, that's not what the folder is for. The folder is so you've got something to hold in the car on the way in."

Jess laughed properly, which she had not done in about a fortnight.

They went another quarter of a mile. Her knees were complaining on the downhill bits in a way they had not at thirty, and she had worn the wrong bra for walking and had known it when she put it on.

"Your turn," Prue said.

"Nothing much."

"Jessica."

"I got a persistent. Legal aid. He's on remand." She watched where she was putting her feet. "It's a bad one."

"How bad?"

"Bad."

"Right." Prue walked for a while. "And you're the one standing up for him."

"Somebody has to. If nobody does it, then the only people who get a defence are the ones who can pay for one, and then you don't have courts, you've got a queue."

"I know. You've told me that since we were twenty-two and it's still true." A fantail came down and worked the air in front of them and went. "It wasn't what I asked, though."

"It was exactly what you asked."

"I asked how you are."

Jess did not say anything.

"Here's what I think," Prue said, "and then we'll have scones. I think you've never once in twenty years been able to leave a thing alone. Not the share house, not your dad, not the Corrigan business, not any of it. And I think you call it the job."

"It is the job."

"It isn't, though. The job is you turn up, you do the work properly, you go home at six and you have a life." Prue put her hands in her pockets. "That's what everyone else in that building does. You're the only one of them who still thinks the whole thing can be fixed."

"That's not what I think."

"All right."

"It isn't."

"All right," Prue said, and let it go, because she always let it go.

* * *

At the turnaround they sat on the wet rail and looked out over the trees to the water, a long way down and bright enough to squint at.

"Anyone on the scene?" Prue said.

"No."

"Since?"

"Marcus."

"Marcus was two years ago."

"Marcus was two years ago," Jess agreed.

"God." Prue considered this with her chin up. "I'm not going to say anything."

"You are, though."

"I'm going to say one thing and then I'm going to stop. You are thirty-six and you are very good company and there is nothing whatever the matter with you, and you have arranged your entire life so that nobody can get in the door."

"That's two things."

"It's one thing with a comma in it."

* * *

The house in South Hobart was warm and smelled of a roast and there was a bike in the hall that nobody had moved since Easter.

Gav had the football on with the sound off. Toby was twelve and wanted to show Jess a video of a man falling off a roof, and showed her four. Mia was fifteen and came out of her room for twenty minutes, which Prue said afterwards was a record for the year, and sat on the arm of Jess's chair and asked her — in a voice carefully got up to sound as though she did not care about the answer — whether you could do law if you were bad at maths.

"You can do law if you can read eleven thousand words and tell me what matters in them," Jess said.

"That's it?"

"That's most of it. The rest is being the one who actually read it."

Mia thought about that and went back to her room, and Prue caught Jess's eye across the kitchen and did not say anything at all, and poured her another glass.

They ate at four because of the night shift. Gav carved badly and apologised for it and nobody minded. Toby was sent to find the other serving spoon and came back with a wooden one and was sent again.

At the end Prue put a hand on the back of Jess's neck as she went past with the plates, briefly, the way she had been doing it since they were twenty.

* * *

It was dark by half past five.

Jess put her coat on in the hall and found Toby's bike with her shin, and said something, and from the kitchen Prue said that she was not to blame the bike.

"Next Saturday," Prue said at the door. "And if you don't ring me back I'm coming to the office. I'll sit in reception. I'll talk to people."

"You wouldn't."

"I would be delightful and you would never recover."

Jess got in the car.

Prue stood at the gate in her socks with her arms folded against the cold, and stayed there until the car turned the corner, the way she had done since they were nineteen.

✦

CHAPTER 5

Complainant Disengaged

The committal papers came through on the eleventh, and with them the disclosure she had asked for and about a third of what she had actually wanted.

Hugh put his head round the door on the Tuesday.

"Curry. Where are we?"

"He hasn't instructed me on a plea."

"Get him to. It's a fixed fee and you've already done ninety hours on a grant that'll pay for thirty." He said it without malice, the way he said everything. "He's going down, Jess. The only live question is whether he gets any discount for it, and the discount shrinks every month you spend being thorough at him."

"I know what the discount does."

"I know you know." He tapped the doorframe twice and went.

He was right, and it was the correct advice, and it was what she would have told anybody else in the building to do.

* * *

She rang Kerry on the Wednesday, about character references.

It took four calls to find her. Not Kerry Curry any more; Kerry Bowden, at Sorell. The number came from a woman at the refrigeration business.

"Mrs Bowden, my name's Jessica Heart, I'm a solicitor in Hobart. I'm acting for Braden Curry and he's given me your name — he said you'd be happy to —"

The line went quiet.

Not a bad line. A person not saying anything.

"Mrs Bowden?"

"He said that."

"He said you were on good terms."

"Right," Kerry Bowden said.

And then she hung up — not angrily, not dramatically, just a woman putting a phone down on a kitchen bench somewhere and going back to whatever she had been doing.

Jess sat with the handset against her shoulder for a moment and then wrote the time of the call in the file, because you write down every call.

* * *

The 2011 application took her twenty minutes to find and about ninety seconds to read.

Interim family violence order, Magistrates Court at Hobart, on the application of Kerry Anne Curry. Granted on the fourth of May. Listed for hearing on the twenty-fifth. On the twenty-fifth there was a single line: *application not pressed. Interim order lapsed.*

Three pages. Nothing else on the file. No charge, no conviction, no mention of it anywhere in the antecedents that had been served on her, because there was nothing to mention. As far as the record was concerned, nothing had happened in 2011 to Braden Curry at all.

He had told her about Kerry himself. He had given her the name.

* * *

She went back into the brief that night with the office empty and the cleaners gone through.

At some point after eight she reached up under her blouse and unhooked her bra and pulled it out through the sleeve, because there was nobody left in the building and she was not going home yet.

It was at tab nine, in the police summary, in a paragraph she had read a fortnight ago and skimmed because it was background.

The complainant made a report at Bellerive on 9 March 2021 in relation to an assault alleged to have occurred on 6 March 2021. The complainant did not provide a formal statement. No further action was taken. The complainant disengaged.

Jess had read that phrase perhaps a thousand times in fourteen years. She had written it into submissions. She had stood up and said it out loud to magistrates, in exactly that tone, as a reason.

She found the entry in the running sheet behind it and put her finger on the dates.

Ninth of March, report taken at the front counter. Contact attempted, the eleventh. Contact attempted, the nineteenth. Complainant telephoned the station on the twenty-fourth of March, the second of April and the nineteenth of April. The file showed no returned call against any of the three. The matter was allocated to a member on the sixth of May. The member went on extended leave on the tenth.

On the fourth of December — nine months after she first walked in — the file was closed.

The complainant disengaged.

Jess read it again.

She was a woman who rang three times and nobody rang her back, and then she stopped ringing, and somebody wrote down that she had made a decision.

* * *

Jess sat in the empty office for a long time with her hand flat on the page.

Then she got up and walked to the window and looked down into Macquarie Street, where it was raining and a man was putting a bollard chain across a car park entrance, and she thought about the thing she had said to Prue on the mountain. *If nobody does it, then the only people who get a defence are the ones who can pay for one.*

It was true. It was still true. She had believed it since she was twenty-two and she believed it now.

She had simply never sat down and counted what it had cost at the other end.

In 2011 a woman went in and nothing happened. In 2021 another woman went in and nothing happened for nine months, and the record said that was her own doing. And in between, and afterwards, there had been one hundred and some weeks of a thing that nobody had written down anywhere, and the only reason any of it existed on paper now was that a neighbour in Lindisfarne had got up at two in the morning and photographed a number plate.

Braden Curry had been given, by the system Jess worked inside, fourteen clear years.

And her job — her actual job, the one she was paid a fixed fee for, the one she had wanted since she was sixteen in a demountable that smelled of photocopier — was to get him the best outcome available.

* * *

She went back to the table and squared the papers and shut the folder.

She did not open the attendance note.

At a quarter past eleven she turned the desk lamp off and stood in the dark with her coat over her arm, and then she came back and turned it on again and tore the flap off an envelope from the recycling bin.

On the back of it she wrote one word and one place:

Naomi. Lindisfarne.

She put it in the inside pocket of her bag, which was not the file.

✦

CHAPTER 6

Four Mornings

She was not going to do anything. She was going to look at her.

She set it out plainly in her own head on the Thursday night, and there was nothing in it anybody could object to, because she was not going to speak to her, or approach her, or contact her, or do any of the words that appear in the rules. She was going to be in a street at the same time as a woman and she was going to look at her, and then she was going to drive to work.

She had the address. It was in the brief. Naomi London had left the house in Lindisfarne in June and the running sheet gave a flat in Bellerive, upstairs, with the number of a letterbox.

* * *

On the Tuesday she parked a hundred metres down and waited from twenty past seven and nothing happened, and at five to eight she drove to the office and was at her desk before anyone.

On the Wednesday, the same car park, and at twenty-five to eight a woman came down the outside stairs of the flats in a navy coat and went up the hill towards the shops.

Jess did not follow her. She sat with both hands on the wheel.

She was smaller than the photographs. That was the first thing, and it was a stupid thing, because photographs have a scale rule in them precisely so that nobody has to guess. But in the frames she had been a

surface — an arm, a hip, the sole of a foot, each one numbered — and here she was a whole woman in a coat, walking quickly with her chin down against the wind, holding her bag against her side the way you do going uphill.

On the Thursday Jess was there at twenty past seven again, and this time she got out of the car and walked up the hill ahead of her and went past the café on the corner and saw her come in, eleven minutes later, and sit down.

Jess walked back to the car the long way round, by the water.

* * *

On the Thursday night she stood in front of the wardrobe for a long time.

Not the court suit. Obviously not the court suit, because the court suit was a thing people looked at and she did not want to be looked at. Jeans, then, and the grey jumper, and the coat she wore on Saturdays. And her hair down, which she had not worn down on a weekday since about 2019.

She told herself, putting the pins back in the saucer, that she was dressing not to be noticed.

She put a lipstick in her pocket on the way out the door on Friday morning and did not examine that either.

* * *

The café was small and full and had a window on two sides and a machine going flat out behind the counter.

There were nine tables. Eight of them had people at them. The ninth had a woman in a navy coat sitting in the chair that faced the door, with a book she was not reading and a bag on the seat opposite.

Jess came in with the bell going behind her and stood in the queue and ordered and did not look over, and then there was nowhere to stand and nowhere to go and the whole thing arrived about four minutes earlier than she had planned for.

By the time she got to the table the bag was already on the floor.

"Is anyone —"

"No. Go on."

"Thanks. It's chaos in here."

"It's always chaos in here. It's the only one, that's the trouble." Naomi London moved her cup two inches to the left to make room, and picked up her book, and put it down again. "You're not from round here."

"Is it that obvious?"

"You looked at the menu board."

Jess laughed. It came out of her before she had decided anything about it.

* * *

They talked for twenty minutes.

It was about nothing. It was about the café, and the woman behind the counter who had worked there for eleven years and knew what everyone had before they said it, and a brown dog tied up outside that belonged to a man who was always ten minutes longer than he said he would be, and the dog knew it.

Naomi was funny. That was the thing Jess had not been ready for.

Not performing — quick. She said things slightly sideways and then left them there and let you get to them in your own time, and when Jess did get to one she looked up over the cup and was pleased.

"Are you working today?" she said.

"I am."

"Doing what?"

"Office thing." Jess turned her cup round. "Paperwork, mostly. Reading other people's paperwork."

"God. Is it as bad as it sounds?"

"Some days."

"What's the worst bit?"

Prue had asked her much the same thing on the mountain and she had got out of it in four seconds.

She heard herself start to answer.

She said that the worst bit was that the longer you did it the better you got at it, and that getting better at it did not feel like anything. She said she had been doing it for fourteen years. She said she could not remember the last time she had been surprised at work, and then stopped, because it was more than she had meant to say and there was a woman across the table with her chin on her hand, listening to it as though it were interesting.

"That's awful," Naomi said.

"It's not that bad."

"No, I mean it's an awful thing to have happen to you." She said it quite simply. "Fourteen years is a long time to be good at something and not feel anything."

* * *

At six minutes past eight she looked at her watch and swore, and stood up.

"I'm going to be late. I'm always going to be late, it's a structural problem." She got the coat on in one movement, the way women do who have put that coat on three hundred times. "Thanks for the company."

"You too."

"Naomi," she said, putting her hand out.

"Jess."

They shook hands across the table. Her hand was cold from the window.

And then she was out the door with the bell going and up the hill past the brown dog, and the chair was empty, and the table was Jess's, and the whole thing had taken twenty-four minutes from the bell.

* * *

Jess sat there for a while with half a flat white going cold.

She had not said what she did. She had not said where she worked. She had not said one single word that was untrue, and she went back over it twice to be certain, and it was clean. Office thing. Paperwork. Fourteen years. All of it true.

Her hands were not steady. She noticed that, picking up the cup, and put it down again, and sat with them flat on the table until they were.

She was happy. That was what it was. She had not been able to place it for a minute and then she could, and it had been so long since she had felt it at eight o'clock on a weekday morning that she had needed the minute.

She was back at her desk by twenty to nine.

She did not write anything down.

✦

CHAPTER 7

Most Fridays

The committal was listed for the ninth of December, and the Crown served its papers on the Monday.

Jess did the work. She did it properly, which was the thing she would come back to later: there was not a single day in all of it when she did not do the work. She read the statements again and indexed them. She drafted her letter to the DPP about the two assault counts. She rang the solicitor acting for the brother-in-law about the company account and sorted it in eleven minutes.

And on the Tuesday afternoon she sat at her desk with the firm's practice manual open in front of her at a page she did not need to read, because she had known what was on it since she was twenty-three.

There was nothing that stopped a defence solicitor speaking to a Crown witness. That was the first thing, and it was true, and she had told it to half a dozen juniors over the years.

What there was, was this. That you identify yourself. That you do not mislead the witness as to who you are or why you are there. That you have a second person present or a contemporaneous record of what was said.

Three things. She read them twice and then shut the book and squared it on the desk.

She had not done any of the three.

* * *

The letter from Risdon came on the Thursday, handwritten, two pages, with the prison stamp on the envelope.

Dear Ms Heart,

Thanks again for coming out. I know it's a long way and I know what you charge isn't what it costs, Dean told me his brother-in-law is a lawyer so I've got a bit of an idea now.

Can you find out about the Isuzu. It's on finance through Kennards and if nobody's paying it they will come and get it and that's Dean and Troy off the road both.

I've put my name down for the course they run here but there's a waiting list. I thought it might look good. I don't know if that's the right way to think about it. If it isn't you can tell me.

I hope you're keeping well. You looked tired last time.

Yours sincerely, Braden Curry

She rang Kennards about the Isuzu and sorted it before she went home.

Prue rang at half past six and Jess looked at the phone on the passenger seat and let it go, and told herself she would ring back on Saturday, when she would see her anyway.

* * *

She went back on the Friday to tell her the truth.

That was the plan and she had it clear. She would go in, and she would sit down, and she would say: *I need to tell you something and you're going to be angry.* And then she would say her name, and the

name of the firm, and the name of the man, and she would hand over a card and stand up and go, and that would be the end of it.

It was the only decent thing left and she had worked it out on the Wednesday night and been almost cheerful about it.

She got there at twenty to eight.

* * *

Naomi saw her first.

She was in the same chair, facing the door, and when the bell went she looked up and her whole face changed, and she lifted a hand and then put it down again as though she had surprised herself.

"Oh — good. Sit down. I've been keeping it, which was optimistic."

The bag was already on the floor.

Jess sat down.

"How was your week?" Naomi said. "You said it was all paperwork. Was it all paperwork?"

"Most of it."

"That's a terrible answer."

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

"Then I'll go first, and you can see how it's done." She turned her cup round. "My week. The hot water in the flat does a thing where it's fine for four minutes. I have measured it. Four minutes, and then it's cold. Not cooling. Cold. And the agent says it's the thermostat and the plumber says it's the agent."

"What do you do?"

"I wash my hair at three minutes." She said it entirely seriously. "You have to commit at the start. If you wait, you've lost it."

Jess laughed. She did not tell her, and she knew while she was laughing that she was not going to.

There was no moment where she decided it.

* * *

They were there until nine.

Naomi told her that she had moved in June and that the flat was temporary, and said the word *temporary* in a way that did not invite anything, and moved on. She said she was between jobs. She said she had grown up at Kingston and that her mother was in Queensland now with a man called Ross who had a boat he never took out.

She asked about Jess's family and got the sister and the dog in the cone. She asked what Jess did at the weekends and got Prue, and the Pipeline Track, and the roast at four o'clock, and listened to all of it with her chin on her hand.

"She sounds great."

"She is."

"Twenty years." Naomi smiled at the table. "I don't have anyone I've known for twenty years."

She let that sit for a second, and then picked up her cup and said something about the dog outside.

* * *

At nine Naomi stood and got the coat on in one movement.

"Right. I'm going to go and be a functioning adult."

"Me too."

"You don't seem that bothered about it." She wound her scarf round twice. "I'm here most Fridays, by the way. It's the only morning I'm not in a rush."

Not an invitation. A fact, dropped on the table on the way past.

"Noted," Jess said.

"Noted." Naomi laughed at her. "Very official."

And then the bell, and the hill, and the brown dog.

* * *

At the office there was an email from the DPP's chambers with the witness list attached, and Jess opened it standing up with her coat still on, because it was quicker.

It was a table. Name, address for service, statement date, estimated time in the box.

1. LONDON, Naomi Kate.

Jess stood and looked at the screen for a while. Then she sat down, and put her bag under the desk, and printed it, and put it in the file at tab two, where it belonged.

CHAPTER 8

Committed for Trial

The committal took eighteen minutes.

It was a paper committal, which meant that nothing happened in it. The Crown tendered the statements. Jess made no application to cross-examine, because there was no earthly reason to let Naomi London be cross-examined twice when she could be cross-examined once, in front of a jury, by someone who had been paid to do it properly. The magistrate read the certificate and said the words and committed Braden Curry to stand trial in the Supreme Court.

He appeared by video link from Risdon.

There was a lag of about half a second on the sound, so that every time anybody said anything his face arrived at it late. He had got himself a haircut. He sat very straight on a plastic chair in a room with a noticeboard behind him and watched the screen with the expression of a man in a waiting room who has been told his name will be called.

At the end the magistrate asked whether he understood, and there was the half-second, and then he said, "Yes, Your Honour. Thank you."

The link went down. The screen went blue.

* * *

In the robing room afterwards the cubicle had no bin in it, which it had not had since they refurbished, so Jess did what every woman in

the building did and wrapped it in two layers of the hard paper and carried it out past the basins to the one by the door.

Then she washed her hands and looked in the mirror and put her hair back up, and went out to find the Crown solicitor.

* * *

Andrea Pitt from the DPP was about fifty and perfectly decent and had a folder under each arm.

They sorted out what had to be sorted out, standing in the corridor, and it took four minutes. The last of it was the date. May if they were lucky, June more likely, because the list was what it was.

"Seven months," Jess said.

"Seven months." Andrea shifted the folders. "He's in, so nobody's going to lose sleep over it upstairs."

"No."

"Get your counsel to ring me in February and we'll see where we are." She started to go and then stopped, in the ordinary way people do when they have one more thing. "Your bloke's got no defence, has he."

"I haven't had instructions."

"No. Of course." She smiled, and there was nothing unkind in it. "Between us — I'd be surprised if she's still there in June. Seven months is a long time. You get them as far as the committal and then they go."

"Right."

"It's nobody's fault," Andrea said. "It's just what happens."

And she went off down the corridor with her folders, to a list she was already late for, and she had not said one unkind word, and Jess stood in the corridor outside Court 2 and could not for a moment work out which way the lift was.

* * *

She went to Hugh's door at ten past four.

He was at the desk with his glasses up on his head, doing something to a costs agreement with a red pen.

"Hugh."

"Mm."

"Curry. Can it go to somebody else?"

He looked up. "Can it what?"

"Go to somebody else. I'll hand over the file, it's all indexed, anybody could pick it up in a morning."

"Why?"

She had three seconds to say it.

Because I have had coffee twice with the complainant, and she does not know who I am, and I have not written any of it down, and I need you to take it off me now, today, before it is anything.

"The hours," she said. "It's a fixed fee and I've done about ninety on it. You said so yourself."

"I did say so." He put the red pen down. "And then I went and looked at the list, because it's November, and here's where we are. Wendy's in Bridgewater till Christmas. Tom won't have it. Priya's been admitted less than a year — you wouldn't put her in the Supreme Court on this, and neither would I." He spread his hands. "There's nobody, Jess. There's just nobody. If I take it off you I hand the grant back, and the Commission remembers that."

"Right."

"Is that all it is? The hours?"

Two seconds.

"That's all it is."

"Good girl. Shut the door on your way out, would you, there's a draught."

* * *

So she had tried, and been refused, and there was a witness to it.

She would use that on herself a great many times over the following year, and it would work every time.

* * *

On the Saturday they did the Pipeline Track in proper rain and gave up at the first bridge and sat in Prue's car with the heater going and the windows white.

"You're in a good mood," Prue said.

"Am I?"

"You've been in a good mood for about three weeks. You said hello to me in the car park. You don't say hello, you just start talking."

"I'm allowed to be in a good mood."

"You are a hundred per cent allowed to be in a good mood. I am asking what it is." Prue wiped a hole in the windscreen with the side of her fist and looked out at the rain through it. "Is it a person?"

And there it was, straight down the middle, in the first four minutes, because Prue had known her since she was nineteen and there had never once been any point in trying it on with her.

"It's work," Jess said. "I got a result."

"Oh." Prue let it go. "Good."

* * *

On the Sunday night Jess put it in her phone.

Not a name. She was careful about that without examining why she was being careful. Just a time, and a place, in the calendar, between the dentist and her sister's birthday.

B'ville 7.40

She set it to repeat.

✦

CHAPTER 9

The Hot Water

In December there were four Fridays, and she went to all of them.

She learned that Naomi had done two years of a nursing degree and stopped, and did not say why, and that she could name every bone in the hand. That she had been to Bali twice and hated it both times and was going to keep going because of the water. That she read three books at once and finished about one in five. That she had an opinion about the brown dog's owner which she had refined over several weeks and would not be moved on.

She learned that Naomi was funny about small things and quiet about large ones, and that if you asked her something she did not want to answer she would answer a slightly different question so smoothly that you only noticed it afterwards, in the car.

Jess noticed it in the car about three times, and each time thought: *she's had a bad year, leave it alone.*

On the second Friday in December Naomi brought her a paper bag with a cinnamon scroll in it, because the week before Jess had said she liked them and had then said it was a stupid thing to like.

* * *

It was the last Friday before Christmas that she mentioned the hot water again.

She was not funny about it this time. That was the difference, and Jess heard it straight away.

"Still four minutes?"

"Two, now." Naomi turned her cup round. "It's gone down to two. Which I'd actually take, if it was reliable, because you can do a lot in two minutes. But it isn't. Sometimes there's nothing at all and I boil the kettle twice and do it with a jug."

"What's the agent saying?"

"The agent has stopped saying anything." She said it without heat. "I rang on the eleventh and the nineteenth and twice last week. There's a girl on the desk who's perfectly nice and she writes it down. I think she genuinely writes it down."

"How long?"

"Since August."

Jess put her cup on the saucer.

"Right," she said. "No. That's not a thing you have to put up with."

"It's a cheap flat."

"It doesn't matter what it costs. Hot water's not an extra, it's one of the things a place has to have. There's a form. You fill it in and send it to the Residential Tenancy Commissioner and it doesn't cost you anything, and the agent gets a letter with a date on it, and in my experience about nine out of ten of them discover a plumber inside a fortnight."

Naomi looked at her.

"You know a lot about this."

"Everyone should know this. It's three pages."

"I wouldn't know where to start."

"I'll do it." It was out before she had thought about it. "Send me your lease and I'll put it together, it's twenty minutes."

"Jess, no."

"It's twenty minutes."

"You'd be doing it at eleven o'clock at night after a day of your own."

"I'd be doing it at eleven o'clock at night anyway."

Naomi sat back and looked at her for what felt like a while and was probably two seconds.

"All right," she said. "Thank you. And I'm not being polite about it." Then she picked up her phone. "I haven't got your number."

* * *

Jess said it out loud and Naomi typed it in.

A woman in a café reading out ten digits while another woman put them into a phone with her thumbs. The machine going behind the counter, the bell on the door, the brown dog outside with its chin on its paws.

* * *

The text came at twenty past nine that night.

Lease attached. It is four pages and two of them are about the carpet. N x

Jess read it three times, standing up in her kitchen with the heating ticking.

Then she sat down at the table — the same table, with the Curry brief at the end of it where it had been since October, squared up and not opened in nine days — and she pushed the brief to one side and opened her laptop.

* * *

It took her fifty minutes, not twenty, because she did it properly.

The form, the grounds, the chronology of the complaints with the dates Naomi had given her. A covering letter to the agent, which the form did not require and which would do most of the work, because an agent who gets a solicitor's letter and a Commissioner's form in the same envelope generally finds a plumber before the second paragraph.

She came to the address field and typed it in without stopping.

Flat 2, 14 —

And then she took her hands off the keyboard.

She had never been given that address. Nobody had told her where Naomi London lived. She knew it because it was on a police running sheet at tab six of a brief in a cabinet in Macquarie Street, and she had sat in a car a hundred metres down from the letterbox on three mornings in October.

She deleted it, letter by letter, until the field was empty.

Then she picked up her phone.

> Sorry — need your address for the form. And the agent's full name if you've got it.

The reply came in about ninety seconds, with the address in it, exactly as she had typed it.

She put it back in and finished the letter and sent the lot through at twenty-five past ten, and then sat looking at the sent folder with her hands in her lap.

* * *

> You are extraordinary. Do you know that? I have been going round in circles since August and you did it between dinner and the news. N x

Jess put the phone face down on the table and then picked it up again.

> It's three pages. Anyone could have done it.

Nobody did though.

* * *

Christmas was at her sister's at Margate, with the dog out of the cone and six adults and a pavlova that collapsed, and Bec gave her a jumper that was almost right.

At about four in the afternoon Jess went out to the back step with a glass of wine and looked at her phone for a while.

She did not send anything. There was nothing to send. It was Christmas Day and a person she had coffee with on Fridays was presumably with her own people, and there was no version of a message that would not have been strange.

She sat there until her sister came out to find her.

* * *

She had saved the number on the Friday night, standing in the kitchen, before she opened the laptop.

She had got as far as the second letter of *Naomi* and stopped, and gone back, and taken it out.

N.

CHAPTER 10

January

The plumber came on the eighth.

> Hot water. HOT WATER. I have been in the shower for eleven minutes and I am never getting out. The agent rang me himself and called me Ms London about nine times. N x
>
> Told you.
>
> You did not tell me. You did it. There's a difference and I'm going to keep banging on about it.

* * *

After that they texted.

It started as the sort of thing that goes between people who see each other on Fridays — a photograph of the brown dog taken from across the road, a question about whether the bakery at Rosny was any good, a link to an article about the hospital that Naomi said Jess would have opinions about, and did.

By the middle of January it had moved later.

> 10.51pm. Are you awake
>
> Yes
>
> Good. Settle something. Is it worse to be bad at something you care about or good at something you don't

Good at something you don't.

That was fast

I've had fourteen years to think about it.

Oh Jess

That one she read a number of times.

* * *

On the twenty-first she sent a photograph of a magistrate's car park, badly parked, with a comment about it, and it was not one of her better efforts.

Nothing came back.

Nothing came back that night, or in the morning, or at lunchtime on the Thursday. The message sat there with the small grey word under it saying that it had arrived.

By four o'clock Jess had read her own message six times, looking for what was wrong with it.

She found several things. It was a photograph of a car park, which was nothing. The comment was trying too hard. The phrase *I thought of you* was in it, which she had typed without thinking and which now looked, on the screen, like a person leaning on a door.

She went through the previous week's messages twice to see whether something had turned without her noticing it. She did not find anything, which was worse.

At around ten that night she composed and deleted four messages, the last of which said only *Everything all right?* and which she took out because it sounded like a woman checking.

She slept badly and was in the office at ten to seven.

* * *

It came at twenty past eight on the Friday morning, while she was in the car at the lights on the causeway.

> Sorry — flat battery and then no charger and then a whole thing. That car park is a disgrace. Are you coming this morning

Thirty-one hours.

Jess sat at a green light long enough for the man behind her to put his hand on the horn, and when she got to the café she was so pleased to see her that she had to stop in the doorway and take her scarf off slowly before she went over.

Naomi looked up and smiled and moved the bag off the seat, and did not mention it again, and neither did Jess.

* * *

It was that morning she raised the dinner.

"I want to buy you a meal," she said. "Properly. Somewhere with a tablecloth, where I pay and you're not allowed to look at the bill."

"You don't owe me anything."

"I know I don't owe you. That's a different word." Naomi pulled her sleeve down over her hand. "I'd like to. That's all."

And then she let it go, entirely, and started talking about something a woman at the next table had said on the phone.

Jess sat with it for about four minutes.

"Thursday," she said.

Naomi turned round from the next table. "Sorry?"

"Thursday. Next week. I finish at six."

"Thursday," Naomi said, and wrote it on the back of her hand with a biro from her bag, slowly, with her tongue between her teeth. She held it up. "There. Now I can't get out of it."

* * *

Bec rang on the Sunday.

"What's new?"

"Nothing much. Work."

"You sound different."

"I'm in the car."

"You're always in the car," her sister said, and went on to the thing she had actually rung about, which was whether Jess thought their mother should still be driving.

* * *

On the Wednesday night Jess opened the wardrobe.

She stood in front of it for a while with her arms folded, looking at the three good suits and the Saturday coat and the green dress she had bought in 2022 for a wedding and worn once.

The dinner was the following night.

She did not take anything out. She shut the door and went and watched television for forty minutes without taking any of it in, and at eleven she got up and opened the wardrobe again and stood there a second time.

CHAPTER 11

The Green Dress

She got home at twenty past five and had an hour and ten minutes.

She washed her hair, which she had not needed to do, and then had to dry it, which took twenty-five of the seventy. She stood in the bathroom in a towel with the dryer going and looked at the saucer of pins on the shelf and did not pick any of them up.

She put on the green dress and took it off again, because it was a wedding dress and this was a Thursday, and put on the good trousers and the silk shirt, and then stood sideways in the mirror and took those off too, because they were what she wore to a mediation.

She put the green dress back on.

It was a quarter past six. She had shaved her legs in the shower without making any decision about it, and noticed afterwards, standing with one foot up on the edge of the bath doing the moisturiser, that she had.

The bra was the one that worked under that neckline and there was no choice involved. The tights she had to take out of the packet, which meant they had been in the drawer since the wedding.

She did her face at the bench while there was still light in the window, because the bathroom light made her look like a woman in a police photograph.

At the door she went back for the perfume.

Then she stood in the hall with it in her hand for a moment, and said, out loud, "It's dinner," and put it on anyway.

* * *

The place was off Salamanca and had eight tables and a blackboard, and Naomi was at the one by the window.

She had her hair up. Jess had never seen it up. It changed the whole shape of her face and showed the line of her jaw and a small mole below her ear that Jess had not known was there, and she was wearing a dark red dress with long sleeves and she stood up when Jess came in.

"You came."

"You wrote it on your hand."

"I wrote it on my hand and then I washed my hands about eleven times, and by Tuesday it was a smudge and a seven." Naomi sat down. "You look wonderful."

Jess, who had been told she looked tired twice a fortnight for about six years, did not have anything ready for that.

"So do you."

"This is ancient." Naomi smoothed the skirt of it once, briskly. "I've got a wardrobe full of clothes I never wear. Long story."

And she handed Jess the blackboard menu off the hook on the wall and said that the whole thing lived or died on whether they still did the lamb.

* * *

They were there for three and a half hours.

They had the lamb. They had a bottle and then most of another one, and the owner came and took the plates and left the bottle, and at some point the eight tables became three and then two.

Jess talked more than she had talked at a table in years. She told the story about Hugh and the fire alarm and the Dictaphone, which she had not told anybody since about 2021, and Naomi put her head back and laughed at the ceiling.

Somewhere in the second bottle Naomi reached over and took Jess's hand off the stem of her glass and turned it over and looked at the palm of it.

"You've got ink on you."

"I've always got ink on me."

"Every week," Naomi said. "Every single week there's a bit of biro on you somewhere," and she rubbed at it with her thumb, which did nothing, and then put the hand down on the tablecloth and left her own on top of it for a second and took it away.

Jess felt that go all the way up her arm and into her face.

She picked up her glass with the other hand and said something about the lamb.

* * *

It was after eleven when Naomi told her.

It came out of nothing — out of a question about where Naomi had lived before the flat — and she answered it the way she answered things, slightly sideways, and then stopped and did it properly.

"I was with someone for eleven years."

"Right."

"He's not around any more. He's — " She moved her hand. "It ended. It ended badly, and then it went on ending for about a year after that, which I didn't know was a thing that could happen."

Jess put her glass down on the cloth and kept her eyes on Naomi's face.

"I'm not going to do the whole thing," Naomi said. "It's not a dinner conversation and you'd be sorry you'd asked. But it was years of a thing that I kept thinking was nearly all right, and it wasn't, and the person who kept telling me it was nearly all right was him."

The restaurant had the radio on low in the kitchen and somebody was stacking something.

"And the stupid part — " Naomi stopped and started again. "The stupid part is I can't tell you about the worst of it, because the worst of it sounds like nothing. If I said it out loud you'd think, is that all. I've got a thing about passwords now. That's the sentence. It sounds mad."

"It doesn't sound mad."

"Doesn't it."

"No," Jess said.

Naomi looked at her for a moment.

"God, I'm sorry. This is exactly what I said I wouldn't do." She picked up her glass. "You don't have to say anything. Genuinely. I shouldn't have brought it in here."

"You don't have to tell me anything."

"I know," Naomi said. "That's why I did."

* * *

On the pavement it was cold enough to see your breath and there was a wind coming up off the water.

"I'm that way," Naomi said, pointing up the hill with her car keys, and then stepped in and put both arms round Jess's neck.

Jess did not know what to do with her hands.

They went to Naomi's waist, which was where they went, and the other woman was warm through the dress and smelled of something that was not wine, and it lasted about two seconds longer than Jess had any way of accounting for.

Then Naomi stepped back and did up the top button of her coat.

"Friday," she said.

"Friday."

"You'll be late. You're always late."

"I'm never late."

"You're forty seconds late every single week," Naomi said, going backwards up the hill. "I count."

* * *

Jess was at the lights at the bottom of Davey Street when the phone went on the passenger seat.

That is the best night I've had in about three years. N x

The light went green.

She sat there until the car behind her moved out and went round.

CHAPTER 12

A Court Thing

Counsel came on in February.

Hamish Rowe was about fifty, had done fourteen years as a prosecutor before he went to the bar, and read a brief faster than anyone Jess had ever instructed. He gave her an hour on a Tuesday afternoon in chambers with the blind half down and a coffee he did not drink.

"Right," he said. "Tell me about the complainant."

"Thirty-three. Statement's sixty-one pages over three days. I've read it four times."

"Any holes?"

"No."

"Prior inconsistent?"

"There's the 2021 report at Bellerive that went nowhere. She didn't make a formal statement then, so there's nothing to be inconsistent with."

"Hm." He wrote one word. "Health? Drink, drugs, psych history, anything the Crown's had to disclose?"

"Nothing. There's a GP letter about sleep and that's it."

"Any reason a jury wouldn't like her?"

Jess looked at the window for a second.

"No," she said. "She'll be a good witness. She's articulate, she's consistent, she's not angry. Juries believe that."

Rowe put the pen down.

"Then he pleads," he said. "That's the advice. He pleads to the lot, he gets whatever discount's going, and he's out in four or five instead of seven. The other way he gets a trial, he loses it, and the judge takes a very dim view of a man who put her through it."

"I'll put it to him."

"Put it to him hard. Get it in writing when he says no." He leaned back. "Do you get the feeling she'll run it?"

"Sorry?"

"The complainant. Will she still be there in June. You've got a better nose for that than I have, you've been in it since the committal."

"I wouldn't know," Jess said.

It came out perfectly level and it was the first thing she had said in that building in fourteen years that was not true.

Rowe nodded and picked the pen up and moved on to the two assault counts, and Jess wrote everything down in a good clear hand.

* * *

She got to the car before she let herself think about it, and what she thought about was not the lie.

It was that for about four seconds, when Rowe said *then he pleads*, she had been flooded with relief — and that the relief was not for her client, and not for her file, and not for the fourteen months a plea would take off his head sentence.

It was that if he pleaded, Naomi would not have to go into a box.

* * *

She put it to Curry by video link on the Thursday, properly, the way Rowe had said.

He listened with his head on one side and the half-second lag and then said, "So you're saying go guilty."

"I'm saying that's the advice of your counsel, and I agree with it, and I'm obliged to tell you that if you run this you will lose it and you will do longer."

"And if I plead, that's it. She doesn't have to come."

"If you plead to everything, she doesn't have to give evidence. The Crown would read her statement onto the sentencing facts."

He thought about it. He looked past the camera at something.

"I'd rather she didn't have to do that," he said. "Stand up in front of people."

Jess sat with her pen on the pad and did not write that down.

"I'll need your instructions in writing," she said.

"Yeah. All right." And then: "Can I have a bit of time. Not long. It's a big thing to say out loud."

* * *

On the Friday Naomi was there before her, in the chair facing the door, and she had already ordered for both of them, which she had started doing in the second week of February.

They were twenty minutes in when she said it.

"I've got a thing coming up. In June."

"Okay."

"It's a court thing." She turned her cup round on the saucer. "I'm not going to talk about it, if that's all right. I just wanted to say it, so that if I'm strange in June you'll know it isn't you."

And Jess heard herself say it.

"What sort of court thing?"

Four words. Entirely natural, exactly the question anybody would ask, delivered in the voice she used for a client who had just said

something she already had in front of her on paper.

"The person I told you about," Naomi said. "The eleven years. It's got to a point where there's a trial."

"Right."

"It's not a dramatic thing. He's been in prison since June." She stopped. "That's a sentence I've said about four times, and every time the person's face does something. So now I say it early and get it over with."

"I'm not looking at you differently."

"No. You're not, actually." Naomi laughed, once, with no amusement in it. "That's the whole reason I said it."

The machine went behind the counter and somebody's card declined and the girl said it happened all the time.

"Do you have to give evidence?" Jess said.

"They think so. There's a woman who rings me about it. She's lovely and she keeps saying it might not happen and I don't know whether that's a real thing or a thing you say."

"It can be a real thing."

"Can it."

"Sometimes they plead at the last minute," Jess said. "It happens more than people think."

Naomi looked at her.

"Would that be better?" she said. "Honestly. If it just — stopped."

"I don't know what would be better for you."

"No," Naomi said. "Neither do I. Nobody's actually asked me that. Everyone else has been very clear about what I should want."

* * *

Then she put both hands flat on the table and said, in an entirely different voice, that she was going to tell Jess about a woman in the

chemist on Tuesday, and that it was the single best thing that had happened to her all year, and she talked for six minutes and Jess laughed until she had to put her cup down.

At five past nine they went out and Naomi hugged her on the footpath and said Friday, and went up the hill.

* * *

Jess was home by half past six that evening.

She did it in the order she always did it. Keys, heating, shoes, pins in the saucer, hair down, the bra out through the sleeve. She ate standing up.

Then she went to the kitchen table and took the Curry brief out of her bag, where it had been riding round in the boot and the back of the car since January, and put it down and opened it.

She did not go to the statements. She did not go to the chronology or the letter from Rowe's chambers that she had to answer by Monday.

She went to the end of the pile and took out the plastic sleeve.

She went through it the way you go through a deck of cards looking for one. One to six, face and neck. Seven to eleven, the arm. Twelve. Thirteen.

Fourteen.

She stopped there.

The kitchen was quiet and the fridge came on at some point and ran, and after a while it stopped again.

It was the size of a thumbnail, below the point of the hip, done in one line by somebody who could draw. Two older bruises, yellow at the edges, measured against a white strip marked off in centimetres.

Jess did not think anything at all.

Some minutes later she squared the sleeve up and put it at the bottom of the pile and shut the folder and took it back out to the car,

because she was not going to have it in the flat.

✦

CHAPTER 13

Flat 2

Curry's instructions came back on the first of March, in his own handwriting, two and a half pages.

He would plead to the nine contraventions. He would plead to both assaults.

He would not plead to the persistent family violence count.

> *I'll put my hand up to what I did and I'll take what comes for it. But I'm not having a court say I'm that. There's a difference and I know you'll say there isn't but there is.*

Jess rang Rowe's chambers and read it to him over the phone.

"Of course," Rowe said. "They always do that."

"Do they."

"Nine times out of ten, on a persistent. They'll wear the acts. They won't wear the word." He sounded neither surprised nor annoyed. "Right. So she's in the box, and we're running a trial about whether a man who has admitted eleven separate things is the sort of man who does those eleven things. Marvellous. Put it in writing to the DPP and tell them we'll take the arraignment in April."

"He thinks it's a point of principle."

"It is a point of principle," Rowe said. "It's just not one that survives contact with a jury. Get it signed."

* * *

She got it signed on the eleventh, by video, and he thanked her twice.

* * *

The text came on a Tuesday night in the middle of March, at twenty to ten.

Ignore this. Bad evening. The woman from witness assistance rang about the trial and said a thing that was perfectly reasonable and I have been sitting on the floor of my kitchen since about seven. I'm fine. I'm telling you because I said I'd stop pretending.

Jess read it standing up.

What did she say?

That I should start thinking about whether I want a support person in the courtroom. Which is a normal question. It is such a normal question, Jess.

Do you want me to come over?

No. God no. It's half past nine and you've got work and I'm being ridiculous.

What's the address again

Jess.

What's the address.

She was in the car in four minutes with her coat over her pyjama top and her hair still up from the office, and she drove over the bridge with the river black on her right, and she was at the bottom of the outside stairs at Flat 2 in nineteen minutes.

* * *

Naomi opened the door in a jumper to her knees and no make-up and said, "You absolute idiot," and then put her forehead on Jess's shoulder and stood there.

The flat was cold.

It was two rooms and a galley kitchen and it had the brown carpet that every flat of that vintage has, and there was a sofa with a blanket on it and a lamp and a television on a box, and that was the furniture.

On the wall by the door there was a hook with one coat on it.

There was one thing on the walls. Above the sofa, not centred, a small unframed canvas of water — grey-green, a lot of it, with a thin pale line across the top where the far shore was.

"That's nice," Jess said.

"It's not, particularly." Naomi did not look at it. "It's mine. I did it about nine years ago and it's the only one that survived, so it goes up."

"Sit. I'll make something. I've got tea and I've got half a bottle of something a woman at the chemist gave me."

"Tea."

"Tea," Naomi said, and went into the kitchen, and Jess heard the kettle and then heard her stop and stand still for a few seconds, and then the cupboard.

* * *

She asked where the bathroom was and Naomi said second on the left, and the first on the left was shut.

The bathroom had a toothbrush, a bar of soap, a tube of moisturiser and a towel. There was a shelf under the mirror with nothing on it. Jess stood in there longer than she needed to and looked at the empty shelf, and then washed her hands and came out.

Naomi was on the sofa with two mugs and had put the blanket over her own feet.

"That door," Jess said, sitting down. "The first one."

"That's the other bedroom." Naomi handed her a mug. "I haven't been in it since June. Everything I own is in there in about eleven bags and I open the door roughly once a month and then shut it again."

"Do you want a hand?"

"No." She said it immediately, and then softened it. "No. Thank you. Not yet."

And she pulled her knees up and changed the subject.

* * *

They talked for two hours about nothing much.

It was Naomi who came back to the phone call, an hour later, when they were talking about something else.

She said that what had upset her was not the question but that she had not been able to answer it. That she had sat with the phone against her ear and tried to think of a single person she could ask to sit in a courtroom for a day and a half, and had got all the way to the end of the list without finding one.

"There's a woman at the chemist," she said. "That's genuinely where I got to. A woman at the chemist whose name I think is Deb."

"I'll do it."

It was out of her mouth before anything happened in her head at all.

Naomi turned and looked at her.

"You can't do that. You've got a job."

"I've got leave."

"Jess."

"I've got four weeks of leave and I have not taken a day of it since 2023, and the firm would be delighted." Her voice was completely

steady and she listened to it from somewhere slightly behind her own head. "It's a day and a half."

"You don't even know what it is."

"I know enough."

Naomi did not say anything for a moment. Then she put her mug down on the carpet and sat back, and after a while she turned sideways and leaned into Jess's shoulder, and pulled the blanket up over both of them.

"All right," she said.

* * *

She fell asleep at about half past twelve.

Jess knew the exact moment it happened, because the weight changed. A woman leaning on you and a woman asleep on you are not the same weight.

The lamp was on. The television was off. There was a tap going somewhere above them in the building.

Jess sat with her arm along the back of the sofa and did not move it.

She thought about the trial listing in June, and about the arraignment in April, and about Hamish Rowe saying *they'll wear the acts, they won't wear the word*, and about a letter in her top drawer in a man's handwriting thanking her twice.

She thought about the fact that she had just offered to sit in the public gallery of a Supreme Court trial in which she was the instructing solicitor for the accused.

Then she stopped thinking about any of it, because Naomi moved in her sleep and got a hand round Jess's forearm and held on to it, and Jess sat in a cold flat in Bellerive at one in the morning with her arm going dead and did not move for a very long time.

CHAPTER 14

Three Levels Down

It was Naomi who mentioned the gallery, on the second Friday in March, as a thing she had not done since she moved back across the river.

It was Jess who said Saturday.

She texted Prue on the Thursday night.

> Can't do Saturday — something's come up. Sorry. Next week?
>
> Everything ok?
>
> All fine. Just a thing.
>
> Ok. Next week then. x

She put the phone face down on the arm of the chair and left it there.

* * *

They took the boat.

It was one of those autumn Saturdays that Hobart produces about nine of a year, flat and gold and no wind at all, and they sat up on the top deck going north with the water going by underneath and the hills coming down to it on both sides.

Naomi put her feet up on the rail and her face back into the sun.

"Right," she said, without opening her eyes. "Best thing about March."

"The light."

"The light. Correct. You get full marks." She put her sunglasses down off her head. "Worst thing about March?"

"Knowing what's coming."

"God, that's bleak. That's so bleak, Jess. I was going to say the flies."

* * *

The gallery goes down into the rock.

You come in at the top and then you go down, by a stair that curls round the sandstone, and the further you go the darker and the quieter it gets, and by the bottom level there is no daylight in the building at all and the walls are the hillside.

They were an hour and a half getting down there.

On the bottom level, in a side room, there was a wall of small white casts, mounted in rows, more than a hundred of them, each one a different woman.

Jess laughed.

It came out of her before she could do anything about it — the short, high, involuntary laugh of a woman who has been brought up in a particular way and has just walked into a room — and she heard it and was immediately embarrassed about it.

Naomi did not laugh. Naomi walked up to within about a foot of the wall and started at the left-hand end and went along it.

* * *

"Come here."

"I can see from here."

"You cannot see from there, that's the whole thing." Naomi did not turn round. "Come on."

So Jess went and stood beside her.

Up close they were all different. That was the first thing, and it was obvious, and it was somehow not obvious at all. Different in shape and in size and in the proportion of one part to another, in colour where the colour had been kept, in everything.

"There's no normal," Naomi said. "That's it. You could stand here for an hour and you'd never find two the same, and you'd never find the one it's supposed to be."

"No."

"Did anyone ever tell you that?"

Jess thought about it properly, because she was being asked properly.

"No," she said. "There was a diagram in Year 9. It was a cross-section, so it looked like a plan of a roundabout. And there was a boy at nineteen who said something, and I thought about it for about four years."

"What did he say?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does, though."

"He said he'd expected something else," Jess said.

"What a prince." Naomi said it without heat, still looking at the wall. "And you carried that round until you were — what, twenty-three?"

"Longer."

"Longer. Of course you did." She moved along two steps. "Mine's over on the left-hand side. Not actually. I mean the one that looks like mine is over on the left-hand side, third row, with the — " and she said precisely what, in four words, in the voice of a woman identifying a bird.

Jess looked at the floor and then made herself look at the wall.

"Right," she said.

"Does that bother you?"

"No."

"It does a bit."

"It does a bit," Jess said, and Naomi laughed, delighted, and took her elbow for a second.

* * *

They stayed in that room about twenty minutes, which was longer than anybody else did.

And at some point it stopped being about the wall.

Naomi asked her, in exactly the same tone she had used about the third row on the left, what Jess thought her own was like, and Jess said she had no idea, and Naomi said that was the most depressing answer she had ever heard in a public building and that it was also the answer most women would give.

And then she said: "You know you're beautiful, don't you."

"Don't."

"I'm not being — Jess. Look at me. I'm not doing a thing. I'm telling you something true, in a room where everybody's already looking at the subject, and you're going to let me finish."

Jess put her hands in her coat pockets.

"Go on then."

"You've got hands like a person who does something. You've got a collarbone I would frankly commit a crime for. You're tall and you stand like you're trying not to be, which is a waste. You've got good skin and you'll have it at sixty. Your hair, when you let it out of that thing you do to it, is the best thing about you and you keep it pinned to your head like it's on a charge."

Jess was laughing by then and could not stop.

"That's the lot," Naomi said.

"God."

"The only thing I'd say — " and she said it in exactly the same warm, level, straightforward voice, with no change in it anywhere " — is that you dress like you're apologising for it."

"I dress for court."

"You dress for court on a Saturday." Naomi shrugged and turned back to the wall. "Anyway. It's fixable."

And Jess laughed at that one too.

* * *

They had a drink on the grass afterwards with the sun going off the river.

Jess told her, over the second drink, that she had been thinking about getting a tattoo, and had been thinking about it since about Christmas, and did not know where she would put it or what it would be.

"You should," Naomi said. "You absolutely should."

"I'm thirty-six."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

And she did not say anything else about it at all. She asked about the boat times and whether they should get the four o'clock, and whether there was any version of the day that ended in hot chips.

* * *

Jess got home at eight.

She put the keys in the bowl and the heating on and the shoes at the mat, and took the pins out one at a time into the saucer, and then

stood in the bathroom with the shirt in her hands and looked up at the mirror.

She looked at herself for a long time, properly, which she had not done since about 2019.

She thought: I've got good hands.

She was still in a very good mood when she went to bed.

✦

CHAPTER 15

Battery Point

It took a fortnight, and for most of it neither of them said anything.

They had the Fridays and they had the phone. By the middle of March the phone was different. Not in what it said. In when. There were messages at eleven and messages at midnight and one at ten past one in the morning that said only *are you still up* and then nothing else for four minutes.

Jess stopped being able to get through a Tuesday without checking it.

On the Wednesday Naomi said: "I've never seen your flat."

"It's small."

"Everyone says that. Nobody ever means it."

"It's genuinely small. It's two rooms and a half."

"Saturday," Naomi said. "I'll bring the wine and you can be as small as you like."

* * *

Jess cleaned the flat on Friday night and then cleaned it again on Saturday morning.

At about eleven she stripped the bed and put the good sheets on, the ones from her mother that she used at Christmas, and she did it quickly and did not look at what she was doing, and put the others in the machine.

She shaved her legs in the shower, and then stood with the razor in her hand for a second, and did the rest of it.

She did the shopping at Salamanca and spent more than she needed to on a piece of fish. She put a candle on the table and then took it off and then put it back on and lit it at a quarter to six so that it would have been burning for a while and would not look like a thing she had just done.

At six she changed her top twice and ended up in the first one.

* * *

Naomi came up the stairs at twenty past six with a bottle in each hand because she had not been able to decide, and stood in the middle of the room and turned round once.

"You liar. It's beautiful."

"It's two rooms."

"It's two rooms with the water at the end of them." She went and stood at the window. "You can see the light on the point."

They ate at the table. The fish was all right. Naomi said it was better than all right and then said that she was lying about that, actually, and that the potatoes had carried it, and Jess laughed so much she had to put her fork down.

Afterwards they took the second bottle to the sofa, which was a two-seater and had never had two people on it.

* * *

They talked about the ferry, and about whether Naomi should do something with her hair, and about Prue, who Jess had now cancelled on twice and did not mention cancelling on. The candle got down into the glass and started to flicker and Jess got up and blew it out and sat back down slightly closer than she had been.

At about half past ten there was a silence that went on a beat too long.

Naomi put her glass on the floor.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"And you can say no, and nothing happens, and we have a lovely rest of the night and never mention it. I mean that completely." She had her hands in her lap. "I want you to hear that bit properly."

"I heard it."

"Can I kiss you?"

Jess sat with her heart going like something in a box.

"Yes," she said.

* * *

She had no idea what she was doing and said so about four seconds in, into Naomi's mouth, and Naomi laughed and said that was fine, and that there was no exam.

The first thing was how soft it was. Not the mouth — the face. There was nothing there. Thirty-six years of a particular small roughness that she had never once thought about, and it was simply absent, and the absence of it was so strange that she stopped.

"All right?"

"I don't know what to do with my hands."

"Put them on me."

"Where?"

"Jess," Naomi said, from about four inches away. "Anywhere."

* * *

They went down the hall at eleven and Jess turned the lamp on, not the overhead light, and then stood there.

"I haven't done this in two years," she said. "And I've never done this. Those are two different sentences and I'd like to say both of them out loud now and get it over with."

"Right."

"And I'm thirty-six and I've been at a desk since 2012."

Naomi came and stood in front of her and put both hands flat on Jess's chest, below the collarbone.

"Listen to me," she said. "I'm going to ask you before I do anything. Every time. Not because I think you're fragile — because I like hearing you say it. And if you want me to stop, you say stop, and I stop."

"All right."

"Say it back."

"If I want you to stop, I say stop."

"Good." Naomi smiled at her. "Can I take this off?"

"Yes," Jess said.

* * *

She said yes a great many times that night.

She said it in the dark and then with the lamp still on, because at some point Naomi asked whether she could turn it back on, and Jess said yes to that too, and lay there and let herself be looked at by a woman who took her time about it and told her what she was looking at.

She said it when she was asked whether this was all right, and whether that was, and whether she wanted to be told what to do or would rather be asked, and she said being asked, and meant it, and was asked.

It was slow. Neither of them was in any hurry.

At some point Jess said *stop* — not because she wanted to stop, but because she had wanted to find out whether it was real — and

everything stopped instantly, and Naomi propped herself up on one elbow and said, "You all right?" and waited.

"I'm fine. I was checking."

"You were checking." Naomi put her forehead down on Jess's shoulder and shook with laughter. "You absolute lawyer."

Jess went cold for about a second and a half.

"I'm not a lawyer."

"You know what I mean. You're a — paperwork person. You read the terms."

"I read the terms."

"Can I keep going?"

"Yes," Jess said.

* * *

Afterwards they lay on top of the sheets with the window open because the room had got hot, and the light off the water came up the wall in a moving line.

Jess was a long way past being able to say anything.

Naomi was on her side with one arm over Jess's waist, and she said something into her shoulder that Jess did not catch.

"What?"

Nothing for a moment.

"Don't let me do this to you," Naomi said.

Jess turned her head.

"Do what?"

"Nothing." Naomi had her eyes shut. "Nothing. Ignore me. I'm so tired I'm saying words."

And she moved her arm up around Jess's ribs and held on, hard, the way you hold something on a boat, and was asleep within about four minutes.

* * *

Jess lay awake for a long time with the line of light going up the wall and down it.

At some point she put her hand over the hand on her ribs.

* * *

In the morning it rained.

Naomi got up first. Jess heard her in the kitchen, opening three wrong cupboards before the right one.

She came out at ten past eight in a jumper and nothing else. There were two mugs on the bench, and Naomi was at the window with her hair all over the place, looking out at the weather over the point.

"There's no tea," Naomi said. "There is coffee that expired in November."

"There's tea. It's in the tin with the dog on it."

"Why is it in the tin with the dog on it?"

"Because it's a tin," Jess said.

CHAPTER 16

Arraignment

By the middle of April there was a toothbrush in the glass in Jess's bathroom and a second towel on the rail.

There was a jar of the coffee Naomi liked in the cupboard. There was a pair of her socks in Jess's drawer, which had gone in with the wash in late March and never left. There was a charger plugged in on the right-hand side of the bed that did not fit Jess's phone.

Jess had told nobody.

Bec rang twice in April and asked what was new and got the weather. Prue sent a photograph of Toby with a broken wrist and a message saying *tell me you're alive*. Jess answered four days later, with one line.

She told herself that it was early. That it was nobody's business. That at thirty-six you do not announce something at six weeks, especially not to Bec, who would want every detail by Sunday.

She did not examine the fact that she had never in her life been secretive about a man.

* * *

The arraignment was on the twenty-second, before Justice Ashcombe, and it took eleven minutes.

Curry came up from the cells into the dock wearing a jacket that did not fit him and stood with his hands folded in front of him while

the indictment was put.

The nine contraventions. Guilty.

The two counts of assault. Guilty.

The count of persistent family violence.

"Not guilty, Your Honour."

He said it clearly and he did not look at anybody when he said it, and then he sat down, and Rowe and the Crown spent eight minutes on estimates and availability and the judge confirmed the trial for the ninth of June, three days, and that was that.

In the corridor afterwards Rowe said it had gone as well as it could have and that he would want a conference in the second week of May, and went off to the next one.

Jess went back to Macquarie Street and did a costs disclosure for a different file and ate a sandwich at her desk.

* * *

Naomi rang at twenty to seven.

She did not usually ring. The phone going with her name on it — her letter on it — was enough on its own to make Jess stand up out of the chair.

"Hello —"

"He said not guilty."

"Right."

"Sorry. Sorry. Hello. Allison rang me at five. The court thing happened today and he said not guilty." Her voice was high and very fast. "They're having a trial. In June. The ninth of June, three days, and I have to go in and do the whole thing."

"Okay. Okay. Where are you?"

"In the flat. I'm fine. I'm walking round the flat." A breath. "Jess, he's saying I made it up."

Jess stood in the middle of her kitchen with her hand flat on the bench.

She knew, with complete precision, what had happened in Court 2 that morning. She knew that Braden Curry had that day admitted, in open court, on the record, eleven separate criminal acts against this woman. She knew that what he was contesting was a word, and that the word was going to be proved out of his own pleas inside about forty minutes of the Crown opening, and that Hamish Rowe had said in the corridor at ten past ten that it was a dog of a trial and that no jury in the state would take four hours over it.

She knew that nobody had told Naomi any of that, because the woman who rang her had thirty-one other people on her list and eleven minutes between calls.

"Jess?"

"I'm here."

"Is that what it means? Not guilty — that's him saying it didn't happen?"

Four seconds.

"I don't know how it works," Jess said.

* * *

She went over that night and stayed, and she was good at it.

She made Naomi eat something. She got her off the phone to her mother in Queensland, who was upset and wanted to be managed. She sat on the floor with her back against the sofa while Naomi talked, and listened to a woman say, four separate times, *but there are photographs*, and said each time that she knew, and that it would be all right.

At about one in the morning Naomi said, "You're the only good thing in this," and went to sleep holding on to her.

Jess lay awake until the sky went grey over the roofs of Bellerive.

* * *

The following week Naomi was different.

Not cold. There was nothing you could put a finger on, which Jess established beyond doubt, because she went over it a great many times.

The messages still came and they were still kind. They were just shorter. On the Wednesday Naomi said she was tired and would see her Friday. On the Friday she was there and she was funny and she hugged her at the end, and the hug was two seconds instead of four.

On the Saturday she had a thing on.

By Monday Jess had been through every conversation of the previous fortnight twice. She found four things she might have said wrong. The strongest candidate was *I don't know how it works*, which she had said in a flat voice on the phone on the twenty-second and which she took out and turned over about thirty times that week, for the wrong reason.

On the Tuesday she texted: *Have I done something?*

> No! God no. Why would you think that
>
> You've been quiet.
>
> Have I? Sorry. Head's all over the place. It's nothing to do with you, you're the only thing that isn't.

And then nothing else about it, ever, and by the Thursday she was back — entirely back, warm the whole way through, ringing at ten o'clock to tell a long story about a man in the post office.

The relief was out of all proportion. Jess sat on the edge of her bed listening to a story about a man in the post office with her eyes shut

and her hand over her mouth.

* * *

She had the key cut on the Friday at lunchtime, at the place in the arcade, while she was out getting stamps.

She gave it to her on Saturday night at the kitchen table, flat on her palm, without any speech attached to it because she had tried three in the car and they had all been terrible.

"Keep this."

Naomi looked at it.

"Jess, no."

"It's a key."

"It's six weeks."

"It's a key," Jess said. "So that if you ever have a Tuesday like the twenty-second and I'm in a meeting, you've got somewhere to go that isn't a flat with a door you won't open."

Naomi sat very still for a moment.

Then she picked it up off Jess's palm and closed her hand round it and said, "All right," and put it in the pocket of her coat on the back of the chair, and got up and started doing the plates.

CHAPTER 17

Eleven Bags

On the second Saturday in May Naomi said she was going to do the room.

She said it at nine in the morning with a mug in her hand, in the tone of a woman announcing that she was going to clean the oven, and then put the mug down and went and opened the door and stood in it.

"God," she said.

"Do you want me to go?"

"No. I want you to be in the next room where I can hear you, and I want a cup of tea at about eleven, and if I cry I want you to carry on doing whatever you're doing and not look at me."

"That's quite specific."

"I've thought about it since about four o'clock this morning," Naomi said.

* * *

It took them until three.

There were eleven bags and two boxes, and it turned out most of it was nothing. Saucepans. A colander. Four hundred photographs on a hard drive that nobody opened. A bag of shoes, most of which she threw out. Books, which went on the shelf in the front room and immediately made it a different room.

Jess did the carrying and the holding open and the putting in the car for the tip, and twice went out for coffee, and did not look up the first time Naomi went quiet, or the second.

* * *

In the second box, under a draining rack, there was a wooden case with a brass catch, and three canvases stacked face to face with newspaper between them.

Naomi opened the case and shut it again.

"Oh," she said.

"What is it?"

"Paints." She put the case on the floor beside her. "They'll be dead. You can't leave them like that, they go like rubber."

She opened it again about ten minutes later and took out a brush and ran the ferrule across her bottom lip, and put it back.

"I'll keep them," she said. "They were expensive."

* * *

By two o'clock there was one bag left and it was the heaviest.

"Right," Naomi said, and sat down on the floor with her back against the wall, and pulled it over.

What came out of it was about fifteen dresses.

They were on hangers, three or four to a hanger, pushed into the bag in a way that had creased all of them, and they were not like anything in that flat. Dark colours, mostly. Good fabric. A black one with nothing to it at all. A dark green one with a neckline that went a long way down. Two that were silk.

Jess, standing in the doorway with a cardboard box in her arms, did not need to be told.

"He had a thing about how I looked when we went out," Naomi said. She was going through them on the floor without much interest, the way you go through a drawer. "I'd put something on and he'd say that was lovely and then put something else on the bed. And then eventually you stop putting the first thing on, because it saves a conversation."

"Naomi."

"It isn't a terrible story. That's what I keep running into." She held one up by the shoulders, looked at it, put it down. "A man bought his girlfriend a lot of expensive clothes. People would kill for that."

"Did you like any of them?"

Naomi stopped.

"That's the first time anyone's asked me that," she said. "I liked about three."

Jess put the box down and sat on the floor opposite her with her back against the bed frame.

"Why did you keep them?"

"Because they cost about four thousand dollars," Naomi said, "and I've got no money, and I'm thirty-three, and one day I'm going to need a dress for something."

Which was true, and complete, and entirely reasonable.

* * *

They hung them in the wardrobe in the second bedroom, which was the first thing to go into it.

And about halfway along the rail Naomi stopped with one in her hand and turned round.

"Put this on."

"What?"

"Put it on. Go on." She was holding out the dark green one. "I want to see it on a person it wasn't bought for."

"It won't fit. I'm about four inches taller than you."

"It's long on me. It'll be short on you, which is the entire point." Naomi pushed it into her hands. "And then we'll go out, because it is a Saturday and I have been in a room full of bags since nine o'clock, and if I don't go somewhere with people in it I'm going to start on the photographs."

* * *

It did not fit.

It did up, which was not the same thing. The zip went, and the shoulders went, and the length finished about three inches higher than it was meant to, and across the ribs it was tight enough that Jess had to take a slightly different breath.

She came out into the front room holding one arm across herself.

Naomi looked at her for a long moment and did not say anything at all for about four seconds, which from Naomi was a speech.

"Right," she said. "Yes. Turn round."

"It's too tight."

"It's not too tight, it's fitted. Those are different things and women get told the first one." Naomi came over and put two fingers inside the left shoulder strap and moved it a quarter of an inch. "That strap's going to slide all night and you're going to have to keep doing that. Do it with the back of your hand, not the front, and don't look at it when you do."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I have worn that dress," Naomi said, and went to get her coat.

* * *

They went to a place at the bottom of Salamanca with a long bar and a lot of noise in it.

Jess had not been in a bar on a Saturday night in about three years. She had forgotten what it was like to be looked at in a room — not stared at, nothing like that, just the small ordinary current of being a tall woman in a short dress coming through a door at nine o'clock — and it went through her like something electrical.

Twice she caught herself standing up straight.

She fixed the strap four times with the back of her hand and did not look at it once.

Each time, Naomi caught her eye for about a quarter of a second, in the middle of saying something else.

* * *

At about half past ten somebody said her name.

"Jess? It is you. I said to Ruby, that's Jess."

Priya Nair was twenty-four and eleven months admitted and worked two doors down from Jess's room, and she was out with four other people and had clearly been out for some time, and she was delighted.

"I didn't know you came here."

"I don't, really."

"You look *amazing*. Oh my God." Priya said it with absolute sincerity. "You look about nine feet tall."

"Thank you."

"Hugh would die."

"Hugh is not to know about this."

"Hugh is not to know about this," Priya agreed solemnly, and then looked past her, pleasantly, waiting.

There was a second of nothing.

"This is Naomi," Jess said.

"Hi." Priya put her hand out and shook it. "Priya. I work with Jess. Sorry, I'm quite drunk."

"You're very polite about it," Naomi said.

"Thank you. I've been working on it." And then somebody shouted Priya's name from the other end of the bar, and she said it was lovely to meet her and squeezed Jess's forearm and went.

* * *

Jess stood with her drink in her hand.

"Work?" Naomi said.

"Office. Two doors down from me."

"Is that a problem?"

And Jess heard the question properly, and felt the whole architecture of the thing move about an inch under her feet — a girl of twenty-four who had now seen her, in a green dress, at half past ten on a Saturday, with a woman whose first name she had been given.

"No," she said.

"Good." Naomi put her chin on her hand. "Because she's right, you know. About the dress."

* * *

They got a taxi at midnight and Jess stayed at the flat.

In the morning Naomi made her take the dress.

"It's yours now. It doesn't fit me, I'm four inches short of it and I've got no shoulders. And I'm not having it hang in that room."

"Naomi, it's — that's a four-hundred-dollar dress."

"Then take it to a party."

* * *

She hung it at the end of the rail at Battery Point when she got home, past the three suits and the Saturday coat and the green one from the wedding, and shut the door.

Then she went into the bathroom and pulled her jumper over her head.

There was a mark across her ribs where the dress had been, a line about a finger wide, pink going to white where the seam had sat all night.

She turned sideways in the mirror and looked at it for a while.

She liked how she had looked in that room. That was the thing she kept coming back to, standing in her own bathroom on a Sunday morning at thirty-six years of age with a mark across her ribs. Two hundred people and a long bar and a green dress, and she had come through the door and the room had moved.

The mark was gone by about eleven.

CHAPTER 18

Leave

Rowe had her in chambers for two hours on the eleventh of May and they built the cross-examination of Naomi London.

He did it the way he did everything, without any relish at all. He had a legal pad and he wrote across the top of a clean page *N.L. — points* and underlined it, and then said, "Right. What have we got."

"Not much."

"There's always something. Take me through the dates."

So Jess took him through the dates.

She gave him the two places in the statement where Naomi had put an event in the wrong month and corrected it on the second day of the interview. She gave him the gap between the February bail and the first complaint of a breach. She gave him the fact that the neighbour's photograph of the car was taken on the twenty-second and the complaint was made on the twenty-fourth.

And then, because he asked her directly what else there was, she gave him 2021.

"There's a report at Bellerive in March 2021. She went in, didn't give a statement, and the file was closed in December."

Rowe wrote four words.

"Closed how?"

"No further action. Complainant disengaged."

"Right." He underlined *2021*. "That's the one. That's actually the only one, because the rest of it's housekeeping." He turned the pad round so she could see it. "The proposition is: you say this man terrorised you for eleven years, and in 2021 you went to a police station and then you didn't follow it up. Why not. And whatever she says, the jury hears a gap."

"She'll say nobody rang her back."

"She might. If she's any good she will." He clicked the pen. "It's still a gap."

Jess sat with her own notebook open on her knee.

"The running sheet shows three calls from her and no return calls recorded," she said. "If she says it, and the Crown re-examines on it, the running sheet's in the brief."

"Then I won't push it past the first answer. I'm not going to get myself into a fight with a jury about whether a woman was let down by Tasmania Police." Rowe looked up. "It's a soft point and I'll use it softly. That's what it's for."

"Right."

"Anything else?"

There was a great deal else.

There was a woman who could name every bone in the hand and had stopped two years into a nursing degree and would not say why. There was a mother in Queensland with a man called Ross. There were fifteen dresses in a wardrobe in Bellerive, and a password she had not known since 2019, and a bathroom shelf with nothing on it, and a woman who said *I'm telling you because I said I'd stop pretending.*

"No," Jess said. "That's the lot."

Rowe capped the pen and squared the pad and asked whether she wanted the conference note sent through or whether she'd do it, and Jess said she'd do it.

* * *

She sat in the car in the car park off Murray Street for about ten minutes before she started it.

She had given him 2021.

She had sat in an office in November with the building empty and her hand flat on a page and worked out what *complainant disengaged* actually described, and it had put her in a car outside a block of flats in Bellerive at twenty past seven in the morning three days later.

And this afternoon she had handed it across a desk as a point for cross-examination, in about eleven seconds, because a barrister had asked her what she had.

She had not done anything wrong. That was the thing she kept arriving at. Every single word of it was her duty. A solicitor who sat on a point like that in a Supreme Court trial would be in front of the Board inside a year.

She drove back to Macquarie Street and typed the conference note and it was accurate and complete.

* * *

She went to Hugh on the Thursday.

"I want the week of the ninth."

He took his glasses off. "The week of the ninth is the Curry trial."

"I know. I want the week."

"You've never asked me for a day in four years."

"I've got four weeks accrued and the firm's been carrying it since 2023. Anne's been at me about it twice."

"Anne has been at me about it as well." He sat back. "What's in the week of the ninth?"

"Nothing's in it. That's the point. It's the first week since February that I haven't got something listed and if I don't take it now it'll be October."

Hugh looked at her for a second and then did what she had known he would do, because she had thought about it for four days and because in fourteen years she had never once miscalculated him.

"Good," he said. "Good. About time. Who instructs?"

"Priya."

"Priya."

"Priya's sat behind Rowe twice this year. It's three days, it's a plea on everything except the one count, the brief's indexed to within an inch of its life and I'll have her ready by the Friday." Jess put a hand on the back of the chair. "She'll be sitting there taking a note, Hugh. It's the best thing that'll happen to her all year."

"It is, actually." He put the glasses back on. "Right. Yes. Go away for a week, I'll tell Anne, and don't come in on the Wednesday to see how it's going."

"I won't."

"You will. You'll ring Priya at half past four."

"I won't," Jess said.

* * *

She briefed Priya on the Friday for an hour and twenty minutes and did it properly, and Priya took eleven pages of notes and asked two good questions.

At the end of it she said: "Can I ask — where are you going? Everyone's saying you're going somewhere."

"Nowhere. Just a week."

"Oh, you should go somewhere." Priya was putting her pen away. "Sorry. Not my business. Have a nice week."

* * *

Prue rang on the Sunday.

"Saturday," she said. "Yes or no, because Gav wants to know whether to get a leg."

"I can't do that Saturday."

There was a pause of about two seconds.

"That's four," Prue said.

"I'm aware it's four."

"I'm not having a go at you."

"It sounds quite a lot like having a go at me."

Another pause, longer.

"All right," Prue said. "No. You're right. I'm tired and I've done four nights and I shouldn't have counted out loud." She let out a breath. "The Saturday after, then?"

"The Saturday after."

"Good. That's that."

And they talked about Mia's subject choices for six minutes and it was perfectly all right, and Jess sat on the end of her bed afterwards with the phone in her hand.

* * *

On the Sunday the eighth she put clothes out on the bed for the morning.

It took her longer than it had taken her to get ready for the green dress.

Not the black suit. Not the navy, not the grey, not any of the three, because every solicitor and every court officer and both judges' associates on that floor had seen all three of them a hundred times.

Not the shoes. Not the coat, which Andrea Pitt had once said something nice about in a lift.

She ended up with a jumper and trousers she had bought in 2021 and barely worn, and flat boots, and her hair down.

She looked at it laid out on the bed, and what she thought was that it looked like a woman going to sit with a friend.

Then she turned the light off and set the alarm for half past six.

✦

CHAPTER 19

Support Person

She had been through the doors of that building perhaps four hundred times and she had never once come in the way the public comes in.

There is a queue. There is a tray, and you put your keys and your phone and your belt in it, and a man you have nodded to in a corridor for eleven years looks at the contents of your handbag and does not recognise you, because he has never seen you without the suit.

"Here for a matter, love?"

"Supporting someone."

"Court Two. Up the stairs, turn left, there's a lady there."

* * *

The lady there was Allison from witness assistance, who was about forty-five and had a lanyard and a folder and a manner that Jess recognised immediately, because it was the manner of a person who has thirty-one people on a list.

Naomi was standing by the window with both hands round a plastic cup.

She had done her hair and she had got a jacket from somewhere, and she had not slept, and when she saw Jess come round the corner she put the cup down on the sill without looking at it and walked straight into her.

"All right," Jess said, into her hair. "All right."

"I've been here since twenty past eight."

"I know. Your text said."

"I've read the statement about nine times and now I can't remember any of it. Jess, I can't remember the order."

"You're not supposed to remember the order. That's what the statement's for."

"Is it?"

"Yes," Jess said.

* * *

Allison took them down to the remote room.

It was off the corridor at the far end and it was about three metres by four. Grey carpet. Two chairs at a table, and a third against the wall. A camera on a stalk. A monitor the size of a small television, switched off. A jug of water and two glasses and a box of tissues, and on the wall a framed photograph of a beach that was not anywhere.

"You won't see the accused," Allison said. "That's set up so the camera's on the bench and the bar table and that's all you get. He can see you when you're giving evidence, because he's entitled to, but you can't see him."

"Good," Naomi said. "Good. Thank you."

"And your support person stays in here with you the whole time, which is what we want. You just need to not react when she's in the box. No nodding, no shaking your head, nothing. If you want to put a hand on her arm that's fine."

"Right."

Allison opened the folder.

"I've just got to take your details for the associate. There's a form."

* * *

It was half a page.

Name of support person. Relationship to witness. Signature.

Jess took the pen.

She stood at a table three metres by four in the Supreme Court of Tasmania, forty metres down a corridor from a courtroom in which her own junior was at that moment unpacking a brief with her firm's name on the front of it, and she wrote:

Jessica Heart.

Friend.

And signed it, and dated it the ninth of June, and gave it back to a woman who put it in a folder without looking at it, because it was the fourth one she had done that week.

"Lovely," Allison said. "I'll pop this down to the associate. Tea's at the end of the corridor if you want it, it's terrible."

* * *

Empanelment took an hour and twenty minutes.

They sat in the little room with the monitor off and Jess held Naomi's hand on the table between them and told her about a magistrate who had once sent a man out of court for eating a sausage roll. She told her about the acoustics in Court Two. She told her the names of the Crown prosecutor and of defence counsel, which Allison had given her outside, and said them in a flat voice as though she had heard them for the first time that morning.

At eleven the monitor came on.

* * *

It was an overhead shot and the colour was bad and the sound came a quarter-second late.

Jess looked at the bench, and at the Crown at her feet, and then at the bar table.

Priya Nair sat behind counsel with the brief open in front of her and three pens lined up beside it, and she had her hair up and a jacket Jess had not seen before, and she was sitting completely straight and writing down everything that was said including the things that did not need writing down.

Hamish Rowe was a black shoulder and the side of a wig.

Out of shot, somewhere to the left, Braden Curry was sitting in a dock with his hands folded.

* * *

The Crown opened for twenty minutes.

He did it well and he did it quietly, and about four minutes in he came to the admissions.

Members of the jury, you will hear that the accused has pleaded guilty to nine charges of contravening a family violence order and to two charges of assault. Those pleas are evidence in this trial and you may act on them. The question for you is a different one.

Beside Jess, Naomi went very still.

"What did he say?"

"Sh."

"Jess, what did he say?"

The Crown had moved on. He was on to the elements of the count, and the dates, and the word *persistent*, and the monitor was saying it a quarter of a second late in a room three metres by four.

Naomi turned in her chair.

"He pleaded guilty."

"Yes."

"To all the other ones. All of them." Her voice had gone up. "He's pleaded guilty to — he admitted it. He admitted it, Jess, he's standing there and he's said yes to all of it."

"Yes."

"Then why am I here?"

And Jess sat in a chair in a windowless room with a woman's hand in both of hers and said the only true thing she said in that building all week.

"Because he won't wear the word," she said.

"What?"

"He'll admit every single thing he did to you. He won't have anybody say what it adds up to."

Naomi stared at her.

"How do you know that?"

Nothing on the monitor. The Crown turning a page. A chair going somewhere in the court.

"Because that's what they do," Jess said. "I've read about it."

* * *

They called her at twenty past eleven.

She stood up and smoothed the front of the jacket twice and said, "Right," and then said it again, and Jess got up and moved her own chair back against the wall and out of shot, and sat down in it.

Allison came in and set the camera and told Naomi which way to look, and said that if she needed a minute at any point she was to say so and she would get one, and that this was true and not a thing people said.

Then the associate's voice came through the monitor and Naomi London took the oath, in a clear voice, with one hand flat on the table

in front of her.

* * *

Evidence-in-chief took two hours and ten minutes and it was, Jess thought, the best she had ever seen.

Not because Naomi was good at it. Because she was ordinary at it. She did not cry and she did not perform and twice she said she could not remember and once she corrected the Crown on a date and apologised for it. When he took her to the photographs she looked at them on the screen in front of her, one at a time, and identified each one in about four words, and on photograph twenty she stopped for a second and said, "That's the sole of my foot," and then said, "Sorry. Yes. That's my foot."

Jess sat in a chair against the wall with her hands in her lap and did not move for two hours.

At half past one the judge rose for lunch, and Naomi came out of shot and sat down on the floor with her back against the table leg, and Jess got down beside her and they stayed there for about four minutes without either of them saying anything.

* * *

They came back at twenty past two.

Naomi was sworn again. The monitor showed the bench, and the Crown sitting down, and Priya turning to a clean page.

And then the black shoulder on the left-hand side of the screen stood up, and a quarter of a second later the sound arrived.

"Ms London. My name is Rowe and I appear for Mr Curry."

✦

CHAPTER 20

Paragraph 38

He was courteous the whole way through. That was the thing Jess had not been able to explain to anybody, ever, about what cross-examination actually is.

"Ms London, I'm going to ask you about some dates, and if you can't remember I'd much rather you said so than guessed. Is that all right?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

He did the housekeeping in eleven minutes. The event she had put in the wrong month and corrected. The gap between the bail and the first complaint. The neighbour's photograph on the twenty-second and the complaint on the twenty-fourth. Naomi said *I don't know* twice and *that's right* four times, and none of it did anything at all, and all of it was for the purpose of letting the jury get used to her agreeing with him.

Then he turned a page.

"I want to ask you about 2021."

Jess, in the chair against the wall, put her hands flat on her knees.

"On the ninth of March 2021 you went to the police station at Bellerive."

"Yes."

"You spoke to an officer at the counter."

"Yes."

"You didn't make a statement."

"No."

"And no charges were laid in relation to anything you said that day."

"No."

"In fact, that file was closed in December of that year."

"I didn't know that," Naomi said.

A small pause. Jess heard it through the monitor a quarter of a second after it happened.

"You rang them," Naomi said. "Sorry. You said no charges. I rang three times. Nobody ever rang me back, and I thought that meant they'd decided I was —"

"Thank you, Ms London."

"— and then I stopped ringing."

"Thank you. I'm going to move on."

And he did, exactly as he had said he would in chambers on the eleventh of May, because he was not going to get himself into a fight with a jury about whether a woman had been let down by Tasmania Police.

* * *

Jess sat against the wall.

She had said those two dates out loud in a room in Murray Street with a legal pad on the desk between them. *No further action. Complainant disengaged.* She had given it to him in eleven seconds, and he had used it for thirty, and he had got exactly what he came for, which was a gap.

Three metres away a woman in a grey jacket was taking a sip of water with a hand that had started to go.

* * *

"Now. I have to put some matters to you. I'd ask you to listen to each one and tell me whether you agree or disagree, and you'll have the chance to explain yourself if you need to."

"All right."

"You had your own bank card throughout your relationship with Mr Curry."

"Yes."

"You used it."

"Yes."

"You were never refused money when you asked for it."

Naomi thought about that.

"No," she said. "I wasn't."

"Thank you." A page. "I want to ask about your friend Shanae Willis."

Jess shut her eyes.

"You've told the court that you stopped seeing her in about 2017."

"Yes."

"Mr Curry never told you that you couldn't see her, did he."

"No."

"He never forbade it. He never threatened you about it. There was no rule."

"No. There wasn't a rule."

"You chose to stop seeing her."

And there it was, in a courtroom, through a monitor, a quarter of a second late.

"I didn't choose," Naomi said.

"Well — you weren't forbidden, and nobody stopped you, and you stopped. Is there a third thing?"

"Yes. There is. It's —"

She put both hands on the table in front of her.

"It's that every time I saw her, afterwards there'd be two days. Not shouting. He'd just be — away. And I'd be going round the house trying to work out what I'd done, and about the fourth time it happens you start thinking, is it worth two days. And it isn't. One coffee isn't worth two days. And then you've not seen her in a month and then it's six months and she stops asking, and you've never once been told not to."

She stopped.

"And he could stand there and say he never told me not to see her, and he'd be telling the truth."

The courtroom did not make any noise at all.

"Thank you, Ms London," Rowe said. "That answers my question."

* * *

He was on his feet another eighteen minutes and none of it mattered, and then he sat down and said he had nothing further.

* * *

The Crown got up to re-examine.

He was not a dramatic man and he did not make a meal of it. He took her to two things and two things only.

"Ms London. My learned friend asked you about March 2021. You said you rang three times."

"Yes."

"Did anyone from the police ever ring you back?"

"No."

"Nothing further, Your Honour."

Then, after a moment:

"And you were asked about your friend. You began to say something about two days. Would you finish that answer, please."

And Naomi finished it, more slowly this time, and the jury got all of it.

* * *

She was released at ten past four.

She came out of shot and sat down in the chair and did not say anything for about a minute and a half, and then she said, "Can I have some water," and Jess poured it and she drank the whole glass.

Allison came in and said she had done very well, and that she could go, and that someone would ring her about the verdict.

* * *

They walked out through the car park at twenty to five with the light going and the wind coming up off the water the way it does at that end of Salamanca in June.

Naomi was completely calm. That was the thing Jess had not expected.

"You were extraordinary," Jess said.

"I wasn't."

"You were. I've —"

She stopped, half a syllable in, with her hand on the car door.

"You've what?"

"Nothing. You were extraordinary."

Naomi got in and put her seatbelt on and sat looking out through the windscreen at the sandstone wall.

"He was right, though," she said.

"Who was?"

"The barrister. About Shanae." She said it quite evenly, with her hands in her lap. "He never did tell me not to see her. I've been saying it for a year and a half like it's the worst thing in the file, and he stood up this afternoon and said it back to me and it's just true."

"Naomi —"

"It's true, Jess. That's all I'm saying. It's a true thing about my life and a man in a wig said it out loud and I had to sit there and agree with him."

And she put her head back against the headrest and shut her eyes, and Jess sat in the driver's seat with the key in her hand and did not start the car for a while.

✦

CHAPTER 21

Two Hours and Ten Minutes

They were not needed after the Tuesday.

That was the thing nobody had explained properly. Naomi had been the trial, for a year and a half — she had been the whole of it, she had carried it from a counter at Bellerive in 2021 to a courtroom in Salamanca Place — and at ten past four on the first day she was released, and after that it went on without her.

Wednesday was the rest of the Crown case. Thursday was whatever Thursday was.

They sat in a flat at Bellerive and waited for a woman with thirty-one people on her list to find a gap and ring.

* * *

Naomi did not talk about it.

On the Wednesday she cleaned the whole flat, including the inside of the oven, which had been somebody else's grease since before she moved in. On the Thursday morning she took the three canvases out of the second bedroom and stood them against the wall in the front room and looked at them for about five minutes and then put them back.

Jess cooked things and took her out to lunch and said yes when she said she was fine.

And Jess, who could have found out by lunchtime on the Wednesday with one telephone call, and who knew the mobile numbers of two people in that building off by heart, sat on a sofa in Bellerive in the second week of June and did not pick up the phone.

* * *

It came on the Thursday at twenty past three.

They were in the kitchen. Naomi was doing something to a cauliflower and Jess was putting plates away in cupboards she now knew, and Jess's phone went on the bench.

> GUILTY. On the one count. Jury out 2hrs10. Rowe says it was never going anywhere else. Hope you had a lovely week!! P x

Jess stood with a plate in her hand.

"Who's that?" Naomi said.

"Work. Nothing."

"On your leave?"

"They do it," Jess said. "They always do it."

She put the plate in the cupboard and shut the cupboard, and then she put both hands on the edge of the bench and looked out the window at the back of the flats opposite, and counted.

She got to about a hundred and ten before Naomi's phone rang.

* * *

It was quite a short call.

Naomi said *yes* four times, and *right*, and then, near the end, "Sorry — what's the date in August?" and wrote something on the back of an envelope with a pen she had to shake.

Then she said thank you, twice, and put the phone down on the bench.

"Guilty," she said.

"Oh God." Jess put her arms round her. "Oh, well done."

"I didn't do anything."

"You did the whole thing."

Naomi stood in the kitchen being held and did not hold back particularly, and after a moment she said, into Jess's shoulder:

"Is that it?"

* * *

It took about an hour for it to come out of her properly, in pieces, while the cauliflower got cold on the board.

That she had expected to feel something and had felt nothing, and that this frightened her more than the trial had.

That the sentencing was not until the twenty-first of August, which was ten weeks, so it was not actually over at all, it had simply moved.

That the woman on the phone had said the words *he'll be sentenced on all of it together*, and Naomi had not understood what that meant and had not liked to ask again.

That she had thought — she said this with her hand over her eyes, as the only thing she was ashamed of — that there would be a moment. A door, or a van, or somebody saying something. And instead there had been a telephone call in a kitchen on a Thursday, from a woman who had been very kind and who had another call to make.

Jess sat and listened and did not once say any of the eleven things she knew about what would happen on the twenty-first of August.

* * *

At about five Naomi stood up and said she wanted to be somewhere else.

So they drove. Out through Rokeby and down the back way to the coast, with the light going early the way it does in June, and the heater on, and nobody saying anything for about forty minutes.

At the end of the road there was a car park and a line of she-oaks and the water coming in grey and flat and long.

They sat in the car with the engine off.

"He'll have been told by now," Naomi said.

"I suppose so."

"They'd have taken him down and somebody would have said it to him. And he'll be in a room with it tonight." She was looking straight ahead through the windscreen. "He'll be lying in a room with it and there'll be nothing he can do about it and nobody he can ring."

She said it quite slowly, and with something in her voice that Jess had not heard before.

"Good," Naomi said.

And Jess looked at the side of her face in the last of the light and thought: *yes. Good. She's entitled to that.*

Then Naomi put her hand out without looking and Jess took it, and they sat in a car park at the end of a road with the water going in and out, until it was properly dark.

* * *

That night at Bellerive she slept for eleven hours.

Jess lay awake beside her for a long part of it, listening to the tap in the flat upstairs, and at some point after one she got up and went out to the front room and stood in the dark looking at the small unframed canvas above the sofa, which you could not see anything of at that hour except that it was there.

She went back to bed at about two.

Naomi turned over and got an arm round her without waking up properly, and said, into the pillow, in a voice that was most of the way under:

"That's it, then. That's all of that done."

"Go back to sleep."

"Mm." And then: "Now there's just us."

CHAPTER 22

Eleven Pages

The file came back to her desk on the Monday with a rubber band round it and Priya's note on top.

Hugh put his head in at ten past nine.

"Good week?"

"Very."

"You look like you haven't slept in a fortnight." He came in two steps, which he did not usually do. "We lost Curry."

"I heard."

"Jury took about two hours. Rowe's view is it was never going anywhere else, which is also my view, and the Commission's view will be that we ran it properly and that's what matters." He tapped the doorframe. "Priya was good. She's been insufferable since Thursday and she's entitled to be."

"Good."

"Sentencing's August. You'll want the references in by the end of July." And he went.

* * *

Priya came in at twenty to eleven with two coffees and sat down without being asked.

"Was it all right? Did I do it right?"

"Hugh says you were very good."

"Hugh says everyone's very good." She put a coffee down. "I wrote everything. Everything. Rowe said at the end of the first day that I could stop writing when the judge is just asking about timing and I said I'd rather not, and he said suit yourself. So it's eleven pages."

"I'll read all of it."

"You won't."

"I will," Jess said, and meant it, and Priya looked so pleased that it was difficult to be in the room.

* * *

She read it at her desk between twelve and one with the door shut.

It was a good note. It was a very good note. The girl had put the time in the margin every ten minutes, which almost nobody does after the first year, and she had got the shape of the thing on the page.

Page four was the end of the cross-examination of Naomi London.

16:08 — witness released. No application.

And below it, in slightly smaller writing, because it was procedural and because Priya wrote down everything:

NB: complainant's evidence by AVL from remote witness room. Support person present throughout.

Jess sat with her thumb on that line for some time.

It was correct. It was exactly what you would write. It would go into the file, and the file would go into storage in July or August, and in seven years somebody would shred it.

She turned the page.

* * *

Curry gave evidence on the Wednesday afternoon.

Priya had written *AGAINST ADVICE (HR conf. w client 13:40, 25 mins, client insisted)* and underlined it, and Jess could hear Rowe

saying it in that flat voice with nothing in it at all.

He was in the box for fifty minutes.

Priya's note of the evidence-in-chief ran to three-quarters of a page. He agreed with everything he had already pleaded to. He said he had a temper and had always had one and was not proud of it. He said he had been seeing somebody about it since February, which was true, because Jess had organised it.

And then he said that he was not what they were calling him, and the judge told him that it was for the jury, and he said sorry, Your Honour.

The Crown took eleven minutes.

Jess read it twice.

Q. In December you called her 240 times.

A. I know the number now. I didn't at the time.

Q. Did you know there was an order?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you know what it said?

A. Yes.

Q. Why did you keep ringing?

A. Because nobody would tell me if she was all right.

Jess put the note down on the desk.

She had sat in a room three metres by four at Risdon in October with a man she had never met before, and he had put both hands flat on a table and said that to her, and she had written it down in a good clear hand, and she had told him that if that became his defence it would go very badly.

He had not used it as a defence. He had used it as an answer. And it had taken eleven minutes.

* * *

She went home at six.

The light in the flat was on from the street, which it was not when she left, and when she got to the top of the stairs there was music going and the window open and the whole place smelled of garlic.

Naomi was at the stove in Jess's jumper with a tea towel over her shoulder.

"Don't be cross."

"Why would I be cross?"

"Because I used the key. I've been standing in your kitchen for an hour deciding whether using the key was a thing you meant or a thing you said." She turned round. "And then I thought, she's a grown woman, if she didn't mean it she shouldn't have had it cut."

"I meant it."

"Good." Naomi held up a wooden spoon. "Then come here and taste this, because I've put something in it and I don't know what it was."

And Jess stood in her own kitchen at ten past six on a Monday with a woman's hand on her waist and a spoon at her mouth, and did not think about the Curry file for about four hours, which was the longest she had managed in eight months.

* * *

The letter came on the Wednesday.

It was two pages and the handwriting had got worse, and most of it was about the business, because the brother-in-law had done something with a quote for the Cambridge job and Curry wanted to know whether he could stop him.

The last paragraph was four lines.

> I know you can't tell me anything and I'm not asking you to break a rule. But I've been thinking about it all week and there's nobody else I can

put it to.

>

> Was she all right? On the day. Nobody will tell me and I keep thinking about her sitting in a room somewhere on her own.

>

> Yours sincerely, Braden Curry.

Jess read it at her desk with the door shut and the office going on outside it.

Then she put it in the file at tab eleven, where correspondence goes, and wrote the date on it in the top right-hand corner the way she had done for fourteen years.

CHAPTER 23

One Line

She saw it properly for the first time on the Saturday after the verdict.

Not for the first time. For the first time in daylight, with nothing happening, at twenty past eight on a June morning with the heating not yet up and the blind half open and Naomi asleep on her front with the sheet down round her hips.

A bird. About the size of a thumbnail, below the point of the left hip, in the soft place where a waistband sits.

One unbroken line. Head, back, the long sweep of the wing coming round and finishing without lifting. Whoever had done it had not taken the needle off.

Jess lay on her side and looked at it for a long time, and then put a finger on it, very lightly, and Naomi made a noise and did not wake up.

* * *

She asked about it that afternoon in the car.

"The tattoo."

"Mm?"

"The bird. Where did you get it done?"

"Place in North Hobart that isn't there any more." Naomi had her feet up on the dash, which Jess had stopped objecting to in April. "I was twenty-four."

"It's beautiful."

"It's all right."

"No, it's — it's one line. The whole thing's one line. I sat and looked at it this morning and I couldn't find where it starts."

Naomi took her sunglasses off and turned her head.

"I drew it," she said.

"You what?"

"I drew it. I did about forty of them on the back of a pad over about three weeks, and I picked the one that worked, and I took it in. He just put it on." She shrugged and put the sunglasses back. "That's the whole of my career as an artist. One bird, about that big."

"Why a bird?"

"Because I could do a bird in one go," Naomi said. "That's genuinely the reason. Everything else needed two lines and I didn't want two lines."

And then she asked whether they were stopping for fuel, and they stopped for fuel.

* * *

On the Tuesday night Jess took a photograph of it.

Naomi was asleep on her front with one arm hanging off the bed. The lamp was off and the light from the hall was enough. Jess knelt on the floor beside the bed with her phone about twenty centimetres away and took four, and checked them, and took one more because the third was blurred.

Then she got back into bed with her heart going and lay in the dark holding the phone face down against her chest.

She would delete them in the morning.

* * *

The place in Elizabeth Street gave her an appointment on the Thursday.

The woman was about thirty with a shaved head and hands like Prue's, and she looked at the photograph on the phone for some time and then turned the phone round.

"Whose is this?"

"My partner's."

"It's good. Somebody who could draw did that." She zoomed in with two fingers. "Single pass, no lift. You don't see that much because it's hard and it's not worth doing unless the drawing's right."

"Can you do it?"

"I can match it. Same scale?"

"Same everything."

"Where?"

Jess touched the place through her jumper. Left side, below the point of the hip.

"Same as hers," she said.

The woman looked up.

"Right," she said, and went to get the stencil paper.

* * *

It took twenty-five minutes.

She lay on her side on a vinyl bench with her jeans undone and pushed down four inches and her jumper held up under her ribs with her own hand, in a room with a radio on, while a stranger leaned over her and worked.

It hurt more than she had expected and in a way she had not expected, which was not a sting but a dragging over the bone, so that every time the line came close to the hip point her whole leg wanted to move and she had to think about not letting it.

"You can swear if you want," the woman said. "Everybody does on the hip."

"I'm fine."

"You're not, but that's fine too."

Afterwards she cleaned it and put the film over it and gave her a sheet of paper about aftercare, and said no swimming, no baths and no sun for two weeks, and that the two weeks mattered.

Jess paid two hundred and forty dollars and went back to the office and did a costs disclosure, and sat for the rest of the afternoon with a small hot square under the waistband of her trousers that she could feel every time she moved in the chair.

* * *

She did not tell Naomi for two days, because of the film.

On the Saturday morning she took it off in the bathroom and looked at it properly for the first time in a mirror, and it was slightly red round the edges and otherwise exactly right.

Then she went out into the kitchen where Naomi was doing something to the toaster and said, "Hang on," and undid the button of her jeans and pulled the waistband down four inches and stood there.

Naomi looked at it.

She did not say anything at all.

She put the knife down on the bench and came over and went down on one knee on the kitchen floor in front of her — not making a thing of it, just so that she could get her eyes level with it — and she put two fingers near it without touching, the way you do, and stayed like that for about ten seconds.

Then she put her forehead against Jess's hip, above it, and Jess felt her shoulders go.

"Don't," Jess said. "Don't. It's a tattoo."

"Shut up."

"It's twelve square centimetres of —"

"Shut *up*."

* * *

She stood up eventually and wiped her face with the back of her wrist and laughed at herself and said something about the toaster.

And then, from the sink, with her back turned:

"You shouldn't have done that."

Jess's stomach went.

"What?"

Naomi turned round. Her face had gone completely soft and open, and she came back across the kitchen and took Jess's face in both hands.

"It is the loveliest thing anyone has ever done for me in my life," she said, "and you absolutely should not have done it."

And she kissed her, and that was the end of the conversation, and the toast burned.

* * *

Jess went to Prue's that afternoon because she had said the Saturday after, and the Saturday after had now been and gone twice, and she went.

It was fine. Mia was doing legal studies next year and wanted to talk about it. Gav had done something to the back fence. Toby's wrist was out of plaster and had set at a slightly interesting angle.

Prue walked her out to the car at five.

"You're all right?"

"I'm all right."

"You look different."

"Do I."

"You look like somebody's feeding you," Prue said, and laughed, and put her hand on the back of Jess's neck the way she had been doing since they were twenty.

And Jess got in the car, with twelve square centimetres of her under the waistband of her jeans that she had not mentioned, and drove back across the bridge.

CHAPTER 24

The Shortest Day

She found out on the Tuesday, because Naomi left the confirmation email open on the laptop on purpose and then went into the kitchen so that Jess would find it on her own.

"Naomi."

"Mm?"

"You've registered us for the swim."

"I have."

"The nude one."

"There's only one." Naomi came to the doorway with a tea towel. "I did it the day after the verdict. I sat on the floor at about eleven o'clock at night and thought, I would like to do something that is only mine, in the dark, with a lot of strangers, and then get breakfast. And then I thought, no, with you."

Jess sat looking at the screen.

"I've got a tattoo that's nine days old."

"I know."

"You're not supposed to swim for two weeks. She said it twice and she wrote it on the sheet."

"Then don't," Naomi said, perfectly easily. "I'll go in and you can stand on the beach and hold the towels, and I'll still have done it with you."

And she went back into the kitchen.

* * *

Jess sat with the laptop for about four minutes.

She thought about a woman with a shaved head saying *the two weeks matter*, and about the Derwent in June, and about what two hundred years of ships have put into the bottom of that river.

Then she went into the kitchen and said, "No, I'm coming," and Naomi said, "Are you sure?" and Jess said she was sure.

* * *

They got there at ten to seven in the dark.

It was two degrees. There were braziers going along the top of the beach and a man with a microphone and several hundred people standing about in coats and dressing gowns and beanies, holding bags, not saying very much, the way people do at that hour.

They gave you a red cap at the tent. That was the whole of the uniform.

"Right," Naomi said, pulling hers on over her ears. "I look like a condom."

"You look like a woman about to get in a river."

"Those are the same thing."

* * *

Nobody tells you about the undressing.

Jess had thought about the water for a fortnight and had not once thought about the three minutes before it, which is several hundred people taking their clothes off on a beach in the dark in winter, folding them, putting them in a bag, and then standing there.

There is no way to do it elegantly. You balance on one leg. You get sand on your foot and put it back in the trouser leg anyway. The

woman next to her, who was about sixty, said, "Oh, *bugger* it," to nobody at all and sat down on the sand to get her tights off.

And then it was done, and Jess was standing on Long Beach at twenty past seven in the morning in a red rubber cap with her arms by her sides, and the extraordinary thing — the thing she thought about for a year afterwards — was that it was nothing.

Nobody looked. There was nothing to look at. There were four hundred bodies on a beach and every single one of them was somebody's actual body, and the whole apparatus she had been carrying since she was about eleven simply had nothing to grip on.

She started laughing.

"What?" Naomi said.

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm fine."

* * *

The horn went at twenty-five to eight, somewhere behind her, and four hundred people went down the sand.

The cold is not cold. That is the other thing nobody tells you. It arrives as pain, in the feet first and then in a band across the middle of you, and then — somewhere around the point where it comes up over the ribs — it stops being anything at all and becomes a kind of enormous noise in the head.

Jess went in up to her chest and under and came up shouting.

She could hear herself doing it and could not stop. Four hundred people in the water all making the same sound, which is not a scream and is not a cheer, and over the hill behind Sandy Bay the sky had gone the colour of the inside of a shell.

Naomi was beside her with her face completely white and her mouth open.

"ARE YOU ALIVE," she said.

"I CAN'T FEEL MY LEGS."

"NEITHER CAN I. I'M NOT FRIGHTENED BY IT."

And she got a hand round the back of Jess's neck and pulled her in and kissed her in two feet of water at the winter solstice, with somebody's grandmother going past them doing a very slow breaststroke, and then let go and went under again.

* * *

They were in for about ninety seconds, which was longer than most.

Coming out was worse than going in, because that is when your body works out what has happened to it. Jess got up the sand with her feet gone entirely numb, and somebody put a towel into her hands, and she stood by a brazier shaking so hard she could not get the cap off her head.

Naomi did it for her.

Then she got Jess's jumper over her head and her arms into it, which took both of them about a minute, and found the thermos and held it to her mouth because Jess's hands were no good, and the whole time she was talking — a continuous stream of nothing, about the woman with the tights and the man with the microphone and the grandmother — and Jess stood in the dark on a beach being dressed and fed by somebody and laughed until she had to bend over.

She had never in her life been so happy.

She knew it at the time. That was not something she worked out later. She stood by a brazier at ten to eight on the shortest day of the year with her hair wet and her feet dead and a woman's hands pulling a sleeve straight on her arm, and she thought, quite clearly: *this is the best I have ever felt.*

* * *

They had breakfast at a place in Sandy Bay with the heater on above their table and ordered everything.

Naomi took the photograph at the door of the café, on the way out, with the light coming up properly over the water.

"Stand there."

"No."

"Stand there, you've got the cap in your hand and your hair's doing something."

So Jess stood in a doorway in Sandy Bay at twenty past nine in the morning, in the jumper, with a wet red cap in one hand, and Naomi took three and looked at them and said, "Oh," and turned the phone round.

It was a good photograph. Jess was not looking at the camera and her mouth was open and she looked about twenty-seven.

"Send it to me."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll look at it for four seconds and then it'll be in a folder with eleven thousand other things," Naomi said, and put the phone in her coat pocket. "I'm keeping it."

* * *

That night Jess took the dressing of the day off in the bathroom and stood with one foot up on the edge of the bath.

It had gone red round the outside of the line, properly red, in a way it had not been on the Thursday. It was hot under her finger and it had started to weep slightly along the bottom of the wing.

She put a clean dressing on it and the aftercare sheet in the bin, and went out to the kitchen, where Naomi was making tea and wanted to know whether a woman could get into the Mercury for swimming naked in a river, and said nothing about it at all.

CHAPTER 25

Twice

By the Monday it had spread.

Jess took the dressing off in the bathroom at Bellerive and the redness had gone out past the line of the wing by about two centimetres on the lower side, and the whole area was hot, and there was a thin yellow weep along the bottom edge.

"Right," Naomi said, from the doorway. "Sit on the bath."

"It's fine."

"Sit on the bath, Jessica."

* * *

She went and got a saline sachet and a packet of gauze from a drawer in the kitchen that Jess had not known had anything in it, and knelt on the bathroom floor and cleaned it properly, which took about four minutes and hurt.

Then she got a biro.

"What are you doing?"

"Marking it." She drew a line round the outside of the red, following the edge, about a millimetre clear of it the whole way, and wrote the time underneath in small figures. "If it's past that line in the morning you go and see somebody and you get antibiotics and you don't argue. If it's inside the line, it's winning and you leave it alone."

"Where did you learn that?"

"Second year."

She put a clean dressing over the top of it and taped the corners and sat back on her heels.

"It's not infected-infected," she said. "It's angry. You put a nine-day-old tattoo in the Derwent with four hundred other people, which is roughly what you'd do if you were trying to achieve this. You'll be fine. Don't put it in anything for a week."

"Should I go to a doctor?"

"You can if you want." Naomi stood up and washed her hands. "You'd wait two hours at the after-hours and a very tired man would look at it for forty seconds and tell you to keep it clean, and you'd have paid ninety dollars for a thing I've just done for free."

In the morning it was inside the line.

* * *

July was the best month of Jess's life.

That is not a figure of speech and it is not hindsight. There was a fortnight in the middle of it when she caught herself, twice, standing in the lift at Macquarie Street grinning at nothing.

Naomi was at the flat four nights a week and then five. Her shampoo was in the shower. There was a second set of keys cut, for the car, because it was stupid for one person to have both. She had started cooking properly, which she had not done in nine years, and on the eleventh of July she signed up for a Tuesday night class at the adult education place off Argyle Street — six weeks, oils, bring your own if you've got them — and came home from the first one talking so fast that Jess could not follow any of it.

Jess went to Prue's twice in July and it was perfectly all right both times.

* * *

Hugh asked her into his room on the twenty-second.

"Tom's going," he said. "March, or June if we're lucky. He's told the others and now he's told you."

"Right."

"So there's a question about the crime practice." He had his glasses off, which was how she knew it was real. "I'm not going to dress it up. It's yours if you want it. Salaried partner from the first of January, your name on the letterhead by the end of the year, and the whole list — including the north-west, because somebody has to go to Burnie and it isn't going to be me."

Jess sat very still.

"How much north-west?"

"Three nights a fortnight, more in the circuit months. And you'd be in the Supreme Court properly, Jess, not instructing — your own listings, your own counsel, your own mistakes." He put the glasses back on. "You've been ready for about four years and I've been a coward about saying it because you were doing the work anyway."

"Can I think about it?"

"Take a fortnight." He was already looking at something else. "Don't take three."

* * *

She told Naomi that night and Naomi put both hands flat on the table and said, "*Jess.*"

"It's not decided."

"It's not decided. Of course it's not decided." She got up and came round and put her arms round Jess's neck from behind and her chin

on her head. "You've been doing that man's job for four years and he's only just noticed. What does it actually mean?"

So Jess told her what it actually meant.

The first of January. The letterhead. The three nights a fortnight at Burnie, which with the drive is really four. The circuit months, which are February and August and November. Her own listings, which means her own weekends.

Naomi listened to all of it with her chin on the top of Jess's head and did not interrupt once.

"That's wonderful," she said. "You should absolutely do it."

And she meant it. Jess would have put money on her meaning it.

* * *

She was quiet for the rest of the evening.

Not cold. Jess had got very good at telling the difference, in the way that people get good at things they practise without knowing they are practising. She was just not talking much. She did the dishes without the radio on. At about ten she said she had a headache and was going to go to bed, and she went, and she was asleep when Jess came in.

In the morning she was entirely herself.

Nothing was said about it at all, that night or afterwards, by either of them.

* * *

Jess went to Hugh on the fifth of August.

"I'm not going to take it."

He took his glasses off again.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm thirty-six and I've done fourteen years of fifty-hour weeks and I've got about four months of a life so far, and if I take the

north-west I'll give it back." She had rehearsed it twice in the car and it came out well. "I'd be doing it because it's the next thing. That's not a reason."

Hugh looked at her for a while.

"That's a better answer than most people manage," he said.

"Thank you."

"It's a good answer and it's the wrong one, but it's yours." He put the pen down. "I'll give it to Wendy and she'll say yes in about four seconds and she'll be adequate at it."

"Hugh —"

"No, you're entitled. You're entirely entitled." He waved a hand. "I'd just say one thing and then I'll shut up. These come round about twice. Not every year, not when you're ready. Twice, in a career, if you're lucky, and I've watched a great many people sit where you're sitting and say exactly what you've just said and be right about it at the time."

"And then?"

"And then they're fifty," Hugh said, "and they're very good at their jobs."

* * *

She rang Naomi from the car park.

"I said no."

There was a second of nothing on the line.

"Oh, thank God," Naomi said.

And then, straight away, in a completely different voice: "Sorry. God. Sorry, that's not — I mean I'm glad for you. I mean I think it's the right thing and I'm glad."

"It's all right."

"It came out wrong."

"It came out honest," Jess said, and leaned her head back against the headrest, and found that she was smiling at the roof of the car. "I'd rather have that."

✦

CHAPTER 26

Victim Impact

She wrote to Kerry Bowden on the fourth of August, because Curry asked her to twice and because a solicitor who does not try is not doing the job.

It was a careful letter. It said that Mr Curry had been convicted, that he was to be sentenced on the twenty-first, that the court could receive a reference from anybody who wished to provide one, that she was not asking Mrs Bowden to say anything she did not believe, and that if she did not wish to reply she need not do anything at all.

She got nothing back.

On the fifteenth she wrote a file note recording that no response had been received and that no further contact would be attempted, and she put a copy in the envelope to Risdon.

* * *

Naomi wrote her statement over five weeks.

She did not show it to anybody, including Jess, and she did it at the kitchen table at Bellerive with the laptop and a glass of water and the door shut, on Sunday afternoons, four times.

"Do you want me to look at it?" Jess said, the first Sunday.

"No."

"I'm quite good at —"

"No," Naomi said, pleasantly, and shut the door.

* * *

The question of whether she would go came up in the second week of August and ran for about ten days.

Allison had said it was entirely her choice. She could attend and read it herself. She could attend and have the prosecutor read it. She could not attend and have it read anyway. All three happened all the time and none of them was better than the others.

Naomi went back and forth about it for a week and a half and then asked Jess what she thought.

And Jess told her.

She sat on the sofa at Battery Point on a Tuesday night with a woman's feet in her lap and said that she did not think Naomi should go.

That she had already stood up in front of him once and she did not owe anybody a second performance. That courts are not cathartic, whatever people say. That she had watched a great many complainants go to a sentencing hoping for something and come out of the building with nothing, because what actually happens is twenty minutes of arithmetic. That there would be no moment.

"And you'd be in a room with him," Jess said. "For an hour. And you'd be able to hear him breathing."

Naomi looked at the ceiling for a while.

"You're right," she said. "God. Yes. You're right."

And Jess sat there with her hands round a woman's ankles and did not examine what she had just done, because she had meant every word of it.

* * *

On the twenty-first of August she wore the black suit.

She came up the steps of the Supreme Court at half past nine with a wheeled case and her practising certificate in her bag, and the man at the security tray said, "Morning, Ms Heart," without looking up, because he had seen her four hundred times in it.

Rowe was in the robing room doing his collar in the mirror.

"Morning. Anything overnight?"

"The references are in. There's four. The brother-in-law's is the only one worth anything."

"The wife?"

"Nothing."

"Hm." He got the stud in. "Doesn't help him. Right. We'll be an hour."

* * *

Braden Curry came up into the dock at ten past ten.

He had lost weight. The jacket was the same one and it fitted him now, which was somehow worse than it not fitting. He had cut himself shaving.

He looked round the court while they were waiting for the judge, the way everybody does, and he found Jess at the bar table and his whole face did something — relief, and something that was almost pleasure at seeing a familiar person, and then he remembered where he was and put it away.

He nodded to her, very slightly.

Jess nodded back, because to do anything else in open court would have been remarkable, and she turned to her notes.

She was exactly where she was supposed to be. That was what she thought about afterwards. For the first time in eleven months she was sitting in the correct chair, doing the correct thing, visible to

everybody, with her name on the record — and it was the safest she had felt since October.

* * *

The Crown opened the facts and tendered the convictions and then said that there was a victim impact statement, and that the complainant was not present, and that he would read it.

It took four minutes.

Jess sat with her pen in her hand and did not write anything down.

It was good. It was very good. It did not do any of the things the bad ones do — it did not argue, it did not editorialise, it did not ask for a sentence. It set out, in order, what eleven years had cost, in short sentences, almost all of them about ordinary objects.

A bank card. A spare key. A friend called Shanae Willis. A door that she still could not sleep with closed. A box of paints that had been in a bag since June. It said that she was thirty-three and had started again with eleven bags and one chair, and that she did not want anybody to be sorry for her, and that she was saying it out loud because for eleven years she had said everything out loud to one person and that person had explained to her, each time, what she actually meant.

Somebody in the gallery blew their nose. The judge was writing.

And there was a sentence about three-quarters of the way through — about how nobody had ever told her not to see her friend, and what had happened instead — that was, as nearly as Jess could tell, the same sentence she had said in a witness box in June, with two words taken out of it and one word moved.

It was the best victim impact statement Jess had ever heard, and she had heard something like five hundred.

She sat at the bar table in a black suit and thought: *she's been carrying it for eleven years. Of course she says it the same way. People say the*

true thing the same way every time.

And then Rowe stood up to make the plea in mitigation, and Jess passed him the references in the order they had agreed.

* * *

Justice Ashcombe sentenced him at twenty past twelve.

Six years on the persistent count, with the assaults and the contraventions concurrent, backdated to the fourteenth of June the previous year. Non-parole period of three years and six months.

Curry stood up for it and took it with his hands folded and said nothing at all.

On the way down he looked at the bar table again, and this time he did not nod.

* * *

She was in the car park with the keys in her hand when the phone went.

"Allison just rang me," Naomi said.

"And?"

"Six years." A pause. "Non-parole three and a half."

Jess put her other hand flat on the roof of the car. The metal was warm. She had watched Ashcombe J arrive at those two numbers at twenty past twelve and had written them both down in the margin of her brief.

"Three and a half," she said.

"That's what she said. It's not very long."

"It's a real sentence." It was out before she had decided anything. "For that count, after a trial — that's the top half of the range."

A silence of about two seconds.

"Is it," Naomi said.

"That's what people say."

"Which people?"

"Lawyers. You hear it." She made herself stop there. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that."

"No, it's good to know." Nothing in Naomi's voice had moved at all. "Allison said they read it out."

"Did she?"

"All of it. She said the judge mentioned it in the sentence." A sound that was not quite a laugh. "Was anybody crying?"

"I wasn't there, Naomi."

"No. I know." A pause. "I'd just like to know if anybody was."

CHAPTER 27

Fern Tree

The fifth invitation came on the ninth of September and Jess said yes to it in the kitchen at Bellerive with the phone in her hand and Naomi four feet away putting plates in the rack.

"Who is it?"

"Prue."

"Oh, go," Naomi said. "You should. You've said no to her about a hundred times."

"Four times."

"There you are, then." She put the last plate up and dried her hands. "Take the good coat. It'll be freezing up there."

* * *

The good coat was not a coat for the mountain. It was a soft grey wool thing that came to mid-thigh and buttoned on a slant and had been bought in March, in a shop in Salamanca, with Naomi sitting on a stool by the mirror saying *turn round*, and it was the single most expensive item of clothing Jess had ever owned.

She had worn it to the car park at Fern Tree before she understood what she had done.

Prue was already there in a thirty-year-old Gore-Tex with a bit of tape on one elbow, and she looked at the coat, and then at Jess's boots,

which were ankle boots with a heel on them, and she did not say anything at all, which was how Jess knew.

"Morning."

"Morning." Prue locked her car. "You'll want to watch the first bit. It's greasy."

They went up through the fern gully with the water coming off the rock on the left and nobody saying much, the way they had done it two hundred times. Jess's heel went out from under her twice in the first ten minutes and she got it back both times and laughed at herself the second time, and Prue did not laugh.

About twenty minutes in Prue said, "You've gone thin."

"I've been busy."

"You've gone thin in your face. It's different." She stepped over the root without looking at it. "Your hair's different too."

"I had it cut."

"I can see that."

"Do you not like it?"

"I didn't say that." Prue put her hands in her pockets. "It's very nice. It's just not how you've had your hair since you were nineteen."

* * *

They stopped at the turnaround where they always stopped, out of the wind, and Prue got the thermos out, and Jess sat down on the wet rail in a coat that cost nine hundred dollars.

"I'm going to say a thing," Prue said.

"Right."

"And then I'll shut up about it and we can talk about anything you like." She poured one cup and gave it over and drank out of the lid herself. "You've stopped. That's what I want to say. You've stopped doing everything."

"I've been —"

"Let me get through it." Not unkindly. "You've stopped coming to this. You've stopped ringing me. You didn't come to Mel's fiftieth. You didn't go to your own firm's thing in July, and Hugh rang *me* about that, which was humiliating for both of us. Your sister rang me in August to ask if you were all right, because she's had one text off you since Easter and it didn't sound like you. You turned down the partnership."

"That was a work decision."

"Jess."

"It was a work decision. There were reasons."

"Tell me one."

Jess drank the tea. It was too hot and she drank it anyway.

"The timing was wrong."

"The timing was wrong," Prue said. "You've wanted that since you were twenty-four. I have heard you want it, out loud, in a pub, with a drink in your hand, more times than I can count." She looked out at the gap. "And there's the clothes."

"What about the clothes?"

"Nothing. They're beautiful. That's the point. You look like somebody dressed you." She turned her head. "Who chose that coat?"

"I did."

"Did you?"

"I was in the shop. I paid for it."

"That's not what I asked you."

* * *

Jess set the cup down on the slat beside her, and something happened in her chest that she recognised, and it was the thing that happens about nine seconds before a cross-examination goes well.

"All right," she said. "Can I say something back?"

"Of course."

"You've described a woman in her late thirties who has lost a bit of weight, had a haircut, bought a nice coat, missed some parties, and made a career decision you don't agree with." She counted it on her fingers as she went, which she had not meant to do. "And you've arranged it in an order. You've put it in an order so it means one thing. I do that for a living. I do it two days a week."

"That's not —"

"It is, though. That's exactly what it is." She heard her own voice and it was level and pleasant and it was Rowe's voice, and she did not stop. "Every item on your list is also a thing that happens to a happy woman. Every single one. The only thing holding them together is you deciding in advance what the answer is and then going and collecting the bits that fit it."

Prue did not say anything for a while.

"I'm not a court," she said at last.

"No. You're better than a court, usually."

"I'm your friend of eighteen years, and I'm sitting on a wet rail on this mountain telling you I'm frightened, and you've just told me my evidence is circumstantial."

* * *

The wind came up through the gap and Jess put her hands inside the sleeves of the coat.

"Prue, she's thirty-three and she got out of eleven years of the worst domestic violence I have read a file on," she said. "She has no family. She has one friend who she lost in 2015. She's got a flat with one chair in it. She is the most frightened person I've ever been in a room with, and she's frightened of everything — she can't sleep with the door

shut — and what she has got, after all of it, is me." Her voice did something on the last word and she took it back. "And what you want is for me to be worried about *her*."

"I don't know anything about her. That's the whole trouble." Prue put the lid back on the thermos and screwed it down. "I've met her once, for eleven minutes, in a car park. I don't know where she grew up. I don't know what she does. I don't know one single thing about that woman except what you've told me, and all of it is terrible things that happened to her." She stood up. "Doesn't that strike you? After nine months? I know what Mel's mother's cat is called."

"She's private."

"Yes," Prue said. "She is."

* * *

They walked back down and it took forty minutes and they talked about Prue's son's apprenticeship and the new roundabout at Kingston and whether the pub at Fern Tree had been sold, and it was fine, and it was the worst part of the day.

At the car park Prue got her keys out and then stood with her hand on the door and looked over the roof of the car.

"I said I'd shut up and I did."

"You did."

"I'm not going to ask you again. I've asked you five times and I'm not going to be the woman who keeps asking, because that's how it ends up being about me and whether I've been reasonable enough, and I'm not doing that." She was quite steady about it. "So I'm going to stop. And I want you to know what I'm doing, so you don't have to work it out later and wonder."

"Prue —"

"Ring me. Any day, any time, three in the morning, and I'll come and get you from wherever you are and I won't ask you one question about it. That's on the table and it does not come off the table. Ever. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"You're saying goodbye."

"I'm saying the opposite of goodbye," Prue said. "I'm saying it in advance so you'll remember it."

She got in the car and did her belt up and put the window down.

"I'm not angry with you," she said. "I want to be. I've tried. I can't get there."

* * *

Jess sat in her own car for a while with the heater going and her hands on the wheel.

She had won. That was the part she kept arriving back at. She had sat on a wet bench and taken six items of evidence and shown that none of them carried any weight on its own, and she had been right about every one of them, separately, and she had watched it land, and Prue had not had an answer.

She had a mark on the grey coat from the bench, a wet stripe across the back of it, and she twisted round in the seat to look at it in the mirror and could not see properly.

Her phone went.

how was it — did you freeze x

She looked at it for a second and something in her let go all down her back, and she put her head against the headrest.

cold. good walk. home by 2

wear the coat tomorrow too. it suits you x

She pulled out onto the Huon Road and drove down through the fog, and she was most of the way to the bridge before she understood that she had not told Naomi one thing about the conversation, and that she was not going to.

✦

CHAPTER 28

Margate

Bec rang on the Tuesday and asked them both to lunch, and did it carefully, which was how Jess knew it had been discussed.

"Just us. Not Mum. Saturday. And tell her there's a dog and he's an idiot but he doesn't jump."

"She likes dogs."

"Does she? See, I don't know that. That's my whole point, Jess, I don't know one thing about her and she's been in your life since Christmas."

"Since October."

"Since *October*," Bec said. "Right. Well. That's worse, isn't it."

* * *

Naomi said yes at once.

"Of course. God, yes. I'd love to." She was at the sink with her sleeves pushed up. "What does she like? I'll take something."

"You don't have to take anything."

"I'm not turning up at your sister's house with my hands swinging." She turned the tap off. "Is she older or younger?"

"Older. Four years."

"Kids?"

"Two. Ruby's nine, Finn's six."

"Right." She was filing it. Jess watched her do it and thought nothing at all about it. "And what's she like?"

"Bec? She's —" Jess thought. "She's the one who rings. In the family. She's the one who makes everybody ring everybody."

"That's a job," Naomi said.

* * *

The house at Margate was down a gravel drive with a paddock on one side and somebody's horse in it, and the dog came out first and did a circuit of the car at full speed and then lay down.

Naomi had brought a lemon tart in a box from the place in Salamanca and a bunch of white stock wrapped in brown paper, and she handed both of them over at the door before anybody had said anything, and Bec said *oh, you shouldn't have,* the way you do, and was pleased.

Lunch was in the kitchen because the dining room had the ironing in it. Dave carved. Finn showed Naomi a lizard in a takeaway container and Naomi took it seriously for four minutes, properly, asking him what it ate, and Finn went red with the pleasure of it. Ruby sat next to her and asked whether she had ever had her ears pierced twice, and was told yes, at fifteen, and that it had gone septic, and the two of them got on from there.

She was wonderful. Jess sat with a glass of wine and watched her be wonderful, and there was a feeling in her chest she could not get the lid onto.

Bec caught her eye over the bread and raised her eyebrows a quarter of an inch, which meant *all right, yes, I see.*

* * *

It happened at about ten past two, over the tart.

Bec had been topping up Naomi's glass and did not sit down again straight away. She stood with the bottle in her hand, and she had had three herself, and she said it with her whole heart.

"I just want to say, while I've got you both. Naomi. I know a bit about what you've come through, because Jess told me some of it, and I want to say I think you're extraordinary." She put her hand on the back of Naomi's chair. "Honestly. To come out of that and be sitting here making my son laugh. I don't think I could do it."

The kitchen went on exactly as it had been. Dave was cutting a second slice. Finn was under the table with the dog.

Naomi said, "That's kind of you."

She said it warmly. She put her hand briefly over Bec's hand on the chair back, and she smiled, and then she picked up her fork and ate the rest of the tart and said it was the best one in Hobart, and asked Ruby about the netball.

Jess watched all of it with her ears roaring.

* * *

In the car Naomi did her belt up and put her bag in the footwell and looked out of the window at the paddock.

"She's lovely," she said. "Your sister. She's exactly like you said."

"Naomi."

"The little one's funny. He told me the lizard's name is Gregory. I don't know where a six-year-old gets Gregory."

"Naomi."

"Mm?"

"I'm sorry."

"What for?" She turned her head and she was quite pleasant about it. "Don't be silly."

They went up the highway past the sign for the cherries and the long bend where the water comes in on the left, and about four kilometres along Naomi said, to the windscreen, not to her:

"How much?"

"What?"

"How much did you tell her."

Jess had her hands at ten and two.

"Not much. That you'd been in a bad relationship. That it had been a long time and it had been serious." The road came at her. "That there'd been a court thing."

"A court thing."

"Yes."

"Did you tell her his name?"

"No."

"Did you tell her about the hospital?"

"No."

"Did you tell her what he did on the first of June?"

"No. Naomi, no. Nothing like that."

"All right," Naomi said, and put her head back against the rest, and shut her eyes, and did not say anything else between Kingston and the bridge.

* * *

She was not angry.

That was the thing. Jess would have known what to do with anger; she had spent fourteen years in rooms with angry people and anger is a door you can get your foot in.

Naomi made a pot of tea when they got in and asked whether Jess wanted the heating on. She said goodnight at eleven and kissed her on the side of the mouth. On Sunday she cleaned the bathroom and went

to the shops and came back with the washing powder and the bread, and at some point in the afternoon Jess looked up and found her sitting on the end of the bed with her phone face down beside her, not doing anything.

"Talk to me."

"I'm all right."

"You're not all right."

"I'm all right," Naomi said. "I promise you. I'm just quiet. I'm allowed to be quiet."

On Monday she was quiet. On Tuesday she was quiet.

On Wednesday night, in the dark, with her back to Jess and Jess's arm over her, she said:

"It's not that you told her."

"It is, though."

"No. Listen." She found Jess's hand and held the ends of two fingers. "I've had eleven years of my life being the thing in the room that everybody knows about and nobody says. The doctor knew. His mother knew. The girls at the desk knew. They all *knew*, and not one of them ever said a word to me, and I had to walk around being looked at and pretend I couldn't feel it."

"I know."

"You don't, though." Not unkind. "And the one thing I've had since June — the one thing — is that there are rooms I can walk into where nobody knows. That's all. That's the whole of what I've got."

Jess lay in the dark with her face against the back of a woman's neck.

"And I walked into your sister's kitchen," Naomi said, "and ate her food, and made her little boy laugh, and the whole time she'd already read it. She was being kind to me. She was being so kind to me. And I was sitting there working out which parts she had."

"I'll fix it."

"There's nothing to fix. She didn't do anything wrong." Naomi turned over then and put her forehead against Jess's collarbone. "You didn't either. You told your sister about your girlfriend. That's a normal thing. That's what people do."

"Naomi —"

"Don't you dare stop talking to her over this," she said, into Jess's skin. "I mean it. Don't you dare. I'd never forgive myself."

* * *

Jess rang Bec on the Friday night at twenty past nine.

She had gone outside to do it, onto the deck, with the door shut behind her and the water black down the hill, and she had a glass of wine she did not drink.

"Hiya." Bec had the telly going behind her. "Was going to ring you. Was it all right? I thought it went well."

"I need to say something about Saturday."

"Oh God." The telly went off. "What did I do?"

"What you said to her. About what she'd come through."

A pause.

"I was being nice to her, Jess."

"I know you were."

"I was trying to let her know she didn't have to hide it. In this house. That's all that was."

"She hadn't told you. She didn't know you knew." Jess heard how level her own voice was. "You took something off her that she gets to decide about."

"Then why did *you* tell me?"

And there it was.

"That's a fair question," Jess said.

"No, don't — don't do that. Don't do the courtroom thing at me." Bec's voice had gone up. "You rang me in February and you talked for forty minutes and you were crying, and you told me about this woman, and I sat on the floor of my own hallway and listened, because that's what I do. And now I'm the one who's done something?"

"You said it in front of your husband and your children."

"Finn was *under the table*."

"Ruby wasn't."

A long breath on the other end.

"Right," Bec said. "Okay. I'm sorry. Tell her I'm sorry, properly, I'll ring her myself if she'd like, I'll —"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because it makes it something she has to manage. She'd be gracious about it and then she'd be up all night."

"Jess, I'm not —" Bec stopped. Started again. "Can I say something? And I want you to hear it in the spirit it's meant."

"Go on."

"You've described a woman who's so fragile that my saying one kind sentence to her has taken a week off her. And then you've described the same woman telling you not to fall out with me over it, which is a very mature thing to say, and the two of those don't sit together in my head. One of those is a person who can't take anything. The other one's running the conversation."

Jess stood on the deck in the cold with her free hand round her own elbow.

"That's a vile thing to say about someone who's been through what she's been through."

"I know. I know it is. I've been sitting here all week trying to get it to be something else." Bec's voice broke somewhere in the middle. "I

rang Prue."

"You what?"

"I rang Prue, because I didn't know who else —"

"You rang my friend about me."

"She wouldn't say anything. She wouldn't say one word, Jess. She said it wasn't hers to say and she hung up, and then I sat in the car for twenty minutes, because *that* told me, didn't it."

* * *

Jess did not shout. She never shouted.

She said, very evenly, that she was thirty-seven years old, and that she had spent her entire adult life being managed by this family, and that she had rung to resolve something and had instead discovered that her sister had been running a committee about her.

She said that she would not be bringing Naomi to Margate again.

She said: "And I'd like you to stop ringing Prue."

She listened to her sister cry for about nine seconds, and said goodnight, and ended the call, and stood there with the phone in her hand.

* * *

Inside, the kitchen light was on and the radio was going low and Naomi was taking the washing out of the machine.

She looked up.

"You've been out there ages. You'll freeze."

"I rang Bec."

"Oh." Naomi straightened with the basket on her hip. "How was she?"

"Fine. It's sorted."

"Good." She shifted the basket. "Did you say I wasn't cross? Because I'm not."

"I said that."

"Good," Naomi said, and went past her to the line with the basket, and on the way she put her free hand flat on Jess's back between the shoulder blades and left it there for a second.

Jess stood in the kitchen with the radio going.

Her phone was still in her hand. There were two messages she had not opened and she did not open them. She put it face down on the bench next to the bread bin, and found that she was looking at the bread bin, and that her heart was going, and that under everything else — under the sister crying, under the whole vile week — she was not miserable at all.

It was the feeling of having come down on the right side.

CHAPTER 29

Seven Mile

By January her life was four streets wide and she was happy in it.

That was the part nobody would believe afterwards. She got up at six and swam at the Aquatic Centre twice a week. She worked, and she worked well. She came home to a flat where the washing was done and the bread was fresh and a woman looked up when the door went. She had not had a Saturday with nothing in it since she was twenty-four.

There was nobody left to ring, which she experienced as peace.

* * *

On the Saturday it got to thirty-one before eleven, the dry northerly kind, and Naomi packed the car while Jess was still in the shower.

"Where are we going?"

"Seven Mile. The far end, past the pines, where there's no one."

"That's a long walk in."

"Forty minutes." Naomi put the esky in the boot. "Bring the blue towel."

She was in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled and loose linen trousers and a hat, and she had her sunglasses up on her head, and she did not change out of any of it all day.

* * *

The beach went on and on, the way it does, and the planes came over low on the approach every ten minutes or so and then there was nothing but the water going flat in and flat out.

They walked forty minutes and then another ten because Naomi said she could still see a man with a dog, and then they put the towels down in a scoop behind the first dune where the marram was and you could not be seen from the track.

Jess had worn the black one-piece. She had bought it in November and Naomi had been in the shop and had not said anything about it, which she had noticed at the time.

They ate the lunch. They drank the wine out of the two plastic cups. Naomi lay on her side in her shirt with her hat over her face and said that this was the only good thing about January and that the rest of it was a tax.

Then she sat up and took the hat off.

"Can I ask you something."

"Mm."

"Take that off."

Jess laughed, and then looked at her, and stopped.

"Here?"

"There's no one here. We walked for fifty minutes. You could hear a car from here." Naomi pulled her knees up and put her arms round them. "I want to look at you."

"Naomi —"

"You can say no. I mean that properly, not as a thing people say." She was entirely steady about it. "You say no and I'll put the hat back on and we won't mention it again and I won't be funny about it later. Nothing happens if you say no. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"Then say whichever one you mean."

* * *

Here is what Jess thought about, in the four or five seconds.

She thought about being eleven, and the swimming carnival at Clarence, and crossing the concrete to the blocks with her arms folded over the front of her because somebody had said something in March. She thought about being fifteen in a change room at Eastlands with her mother outside the curtain saying *well it's not going to get any better, love.* She thought about twenty-two, and Toulouse, and the hotel with the shutters, and a man who had been lovely for nine days and had said *you're very hard on yourself* at breakfast on the eighth.

She thought about the shop in November where she had chosen the black one because it had the panel at the front.

She was thirty-seven. She had never once lain in the sun without something on. Not as a child, not at university, not on any beach in her life, because there had always been a reason, and she could remember what every single one of them was.

"Yes," she said.

"Say it the whole way."

"Yes. All right. Yes."

* * *

She did it quickly, which was cowardice, and she knew it while she was doing it. Straps down, and the whole thing off over her hips, and then it was in her hand and there was nothing to do with it, so she put it on the corner of the towel and squared it up, and then she had no job at all.

She sat down on the towel with her knees together and her arms where they had been at eleven.

"Lie back."

She lay back.

The first thing was the sun. That was the thing nobody had told her, and she had lived here her whole life. It came down on the front of her — on her stomach, on her breasts, on the inside of her thighs — in places that had been in the dark for thirty-seven years, and the heat of it was so specific that she made a sound.

The second thing was the air. There was enough breeze off the water to move, and it went over her in a slow wash every few seconds, and her whole skin came up to meet it.

"Oh," she said.

"I know."

"Nobody tells you."

"No."

She lay with her eyes shut and the red going across the inside of her lids and she put her arms down by her sides, deliberately, one and then the other, and left them there.

* * *

Naomi sat and looked at her, in the shirt and the linen trousers, with her hat in her lap.

She did not touch her for a long time. That was what undid her, afterwards, when she went back over it: not what happened next but the fifteen or twenty minutes of being looked at by a fully dressed woman on a hot day while a plane went over.

"You've got freckles on your shoulders that stop," Naomi said. "There's a line. It's exactly where your work blouse is."

"I know."

"You're whiter below it than the inside of a shell."

"That's not —"

"I'm not being unkind. I'm describing you." She shifted. "There's a crease under your left breast that isn't under your right one. Did you know that?"

"No."

"It's from how you sleep. You sleep on that side." A pause. "Your hips are wider than your shoulders by about three inches and you've been dressing against it since I met you. Every single thing you owned in October was cut to make that not true."

Jess lay with her eyes shut.

"Open your eyes."

She opened them. Naomi was leaning over her with the sun behind her so she was a shape.

"There's not one thing wrong with you," Naomi said. "Not one. And you've spent your whole life in a changing room."

* * *

The bird on her hip had healed badly after the infection, so that the line went thin on the lower wing and there was a pale patch round it about the size of a ten-cent piece where the skin had come back wrong.

Naomi put two fingers on it.

"Does it still go funny in the heat?"

"It itches."

"Mm." She left her fingers there. "I like that it went wrong. The good one's on me and the ruined one's on you."

"That's a horrible thing to say."

"Is it?" She was smiling. "You've gone red all down your neck."

"That's the sun."

"It's not the sun," Naomi said, and put her hand flat on Jess's stomach, and then lower, and Jess's hips came up off the towel before she had made any decision about it at all.

* * *

She came the first time in about ninety seconds, which had never happened to her in her life, and she made a noise that went out across fifty metres of open sand.

"Shh," Naomi said, delighted. "There could be anyone."

"You said there was nobody."

"I said I couldn't see anybody."

She took her time about the second one. She sat back on her heels in her linen trousers with the sand on the knees of them and did it slowly, with her sunglasses pushed up in her hair, watching Jess's face the entire time and not her own hand, and twice she stopped and waited until Jess said something out loud.

"Say it."

"Please."

"Say what you want. In words."

And Jess, thirty-seven, who had taken sixty-one pages of another woman's life out of a plastic sleeve at her kitchen table in October and had not been able to look at the sole of a foot, said it in words, out loud, on a public beach, with her hands in the sand over her head.

* * *

The walkers came past about twenty minutes later.

Two women and a dog, along the hard sand at the water's edge, a hundred and twenty metres off and in no hurry.

Jess went to move and Naomi put a hand flat on her sternum.

"Don't."

"They'll —"

"They won't look up here. And if they do they'll see a woman on a beach." Her hand did not move. "Stay where you are."

So she stayed. She lay on her back in the open with nothing on and her heart going like a bird's while two strangers and a dog went past below her, and the dog stopped and put its nose in the weed and came on, and the taller woman laughed at something, and they went on down the beach and got smaller.

It took them four minutes.

Jess shook for about a minute afterwards, in her arms and across the top of her chest, and Naomi lay down beside her fully dressed and put an arm over her and said nothing at all until it stopped.

"There," she said eventually. "Now you know."

"Know what?"

"That nothing happens."

* * *

The photograph was at about four, when the light had gone long and gold off the water.

"Sit up. Like that. No — knees up, arms round."

"Naomi."

"Just one." She had the phone up. "You'll want it later. You will, I promise you. In ten years you'll want to know what you looked like at thirty-seven on a beach."

Jess put her arms round her knees.

Naomi took four, and then turned the phone round and showed her one of them, and Jess looked at a woman sitting in the marram grass with her chin on her knee and sand on her shin and the whole of her gold down one side, and did not recognise her, and then did.

"Oh," she said.

"I know." Naomi was already putting the phone away. "I'll keep it. Yours has got your sister in it."

* * *

On the drive back the air coming in the window was hot and smelled of the pines and Jess had salt dried in the small of her back and sand everywhere and felt as though she had been taken apart and put together in a better order.

At the lights at Cambridge, Naomi said, without any particular emphasis:

"You know what you did today."

"What?"

"You said yes to something you've said no to for twenty-six years, and the sky didn't fall in." She put her indicator on. "That's all anything is. It's one yes and then you find out it was fine, and then the next one's easier."

"Is that right."

"That's all it's ever been," Naomi said. "That's what he never understood. You can't make anybody do anything." The light went green. "You just have to ask them properly."

CHAPTER 30

The Long Pose

The paints came out of the bag in the first week of February, nine months after they went in.

Naomi did it without ceremony on a Sunday afternoon, with the case open on the kitchen table and the brushes laid out in a row on a tea towel, and she sat and looked at them for about ten minutes and then got up and washed four of them that did not need washing.

The class was in a church hall in North Hobart on Wednesdays, seven till nine, eleven dollars. She found it on a noticeboard at the newsagent.

Jess drove her the first week and sat in the car with a brief, and the second week, and the third.

"You could come in. There's a table at the back."

"I'd put you off."

"You wouldn't put me off," Naomi said. "You'd put *me* off," and laughed at herself, and got out.

* * *

On the Wednesday of the eleventh she came out at twenty past nine instead of five past.

"Trish has got shingles."

"Who's Trish?"

"The model. She's been doing it eleven years and she's got shingles down one side of her face and Dell's cancelled next week." Naomi did her belt up. "They've rung round. There's a bloke at the uni but he wants eighty dollars and Dell's got forty-four in the tin."

"That's a shame."

"Mm," Naomi said, and put the heater on, and they talked about something else all the way home.

* * *

She raised it on the Saturday, in bed, at about eleven in the morning, with the paper on the floor and the window open.

"Can I ask you something and you're not going to like it."

"Go on."

"Do it for them."

Jess laughed. She actually laughed, out loud, at the ceiling.

"No."

"All right."

"Naomi —"

"I said all right." She reached over for her tea. "It was a thought. It's gone."

And it had. That was the thing. They had lunch, and went to the hardware shop about a bracket, and watched half a film, and she did not raise it again, and by five o'clock Jess was the one who had not stopped thinking about it.

She brought it up herself at the sink at about seven.

"How many people."

Naomi did not turn round.

"Seven. Sometimes six. Dell makes eight."

"Men?"

"Two. Bob's about seventy-five and draws like a child and is the nicest man I've ever met. Raf's forty-something, he's the only one there who can actually do it, and he's so serious he barely speaks." She put a plate up. "Nobody talks to the model. That's the first thing I noticed. Trish sits there for two hours and they discuss her shoulder in front of her like she's furniture, and at the end everybody says thanks Trish and she puts her coat on and goes."

"That sounds awful."

"She says it's the only two hours in the week nobody wants anything off her."

* * *

Jess sat up in the dark that night and did it properly, the way she did everything, which was the only way she knew how.

The professional question first. She was a solicitor on the roll. There was no rule about it — she went looking in her head and there was nothing, not in the conduct rules, not anywhere. It was not dishonest. It did not involve a client. It would not come before a court. If somebody put it to her, in the worst version, standing in a corridor with a folder under her arm, the honest answer was *I sat for a community art class and I was paid forty-four dollars*, and there was not one thing in that sentence a tribunal could do anything with.

She got all the way to the end of the reasoning and it was sound.

And underneath it, the whole time, running along like a second track, was a beach in January and the sun coming down on the inside of her thighs.

"Naomi."

"Mm."

"Ask me again."

Naomi did not move and did not open her eyes.

"No," she said. "You ask me."

* * *

Dell Prosser was about sixty-five with reading glasses on a chain and a cardigan with a brush through the pocket, and she was so grateful that it made the whole thing ordinary in about ninety seconds.

"Oh, you *beauty*. You've saved me. Now — have you done it before?"

"No."

"Right. Well. The heater's rubbish, so I'll put it behind you. There's a gown on the hook. We do six two-minutes to warm up, then two tens, then twenty minutes, then a break and a cup of tea, then the long pose, which is forty-five with a stretch in the middle." She was writing in a notebook while she talked. "You'll get pins and needles in the long one. Everybody does. If you need to move you say *moving* and you move, you don't be a hero about it, because if you faint on me I've got to fill in a form."

"Right."

"And they're a good lot. Nobody's ever said a word to me in nineteen years." She looked up over the glasses. "You're a bit nervy. That's normal. It goes at about the ten-minute mark and then it's just boring."

* * *

The hall smelled of kerosene and wet wool. There were seven easels in a horseshoe round a dais made of two pallets and a bit of carpet, and a bar heater on a stand, and a plastic chair with a blue blanket over it in case she wanted to sit.

She got changed behind a screen at the back and the stupidest things were the hardest. What to do with her hair — up, in the end, which was the court answer and the wrong one, and she took it down again. Whether to keep her earrings in. Whether she should have done something about herself that afternoon, which she had spent forty minutes on and was now ashamed of, because Dell had not asked and nobody had ever asked Trish.

The gown was towelling and somebody else's.

She came out holding it shut and walked eleven feet across a church hall floor in bare feet in front of seven people who did not look up, and stood on the dais, and Dell said, "Whenever you're ready, love," and went back to sorting charcoal.

Naomi was at the fourth easel with her sleeves rolled, mixing something, not looking.

Jess took the gown off and put it on the chair.

* * *

The first two minutes were the worst two minutes of her adult life and the second two were fine.

Dell was right. It went at about ten. What did it was that nobody was looking *at* her. Seven people were looking at a problem — at where the weight was, at what the light did down one side, at an arm that was a difficult length — and the fact that the problem had her face on it was of no interest to anybody in the room.

Bob said, to nobody, "The foot's beaten me again," and went and got a biscuit.

Raf looked at her for four seconds and then at his board for forty, over and over, and his face never changed at all.

By the twenty-minute pose she was so cold down her left side that she had stopped thinking about anything else.

* * *

In the break she put the gown on and drank a cup of tea standing up, because sitting felt like more of a decision, and Dell talked to her about the hall's roof.

Nobody said anything about her. Nobody said anything *to* her except Bob, who said that the heater had been rubbish since 2019 and that he had written to the parish about it twice.

Naomi came past with two biscuits and gave her one and did not say anything either, and her thumb went across the back of Jess's hand on the way.

* * *

The long pose was forty-five minutes, lying on the left hip on the blanket with the right knee up and the left arm straight out along the boards.

Dell set it, moving her wrist about two inches with one finger, and said, "Good. That's lovely. Don't fall asleep."

The bar heater came up red behind her.

And somewhere in the second quarter of an hour Jess went somewhere she had not been before. The pins and needles came and sat in her foot and she let them. The hall noise went flat. Seven people moved charcoal and water around on paper and she lay on a bit of carpet on two pallets in a church hall with the whole front of her open to the room and there was nothing she was required to do, nothing to prepare, nobody to be careful for, nobody whose brief she had read.

She thought: *this is the first hour in eighteen years that nobody has wanted an answer out of me.*

She thought about Trish, and understood her exactly.

And about four minutes before the end, with her hip gone numb and the light going yellow in the high windows, she felt the thing move in her, low down and unmistakable, and had to lie absolutely still in front of seven people and wait for it to pass.

Naomi was looking at her. Not at the board. At her face.

She held it for a second and a half and then went back to the painting.

* * *

Afterwards everybody said thanks Jess, and Bob said she had very good feet and that it was not her fault he could not do them, and Dell put four tens and a five in her hand from a biscuit tin and would not hear a word about it.

Six of the pictures were ordinary. Two were bad in the cheerful way. Raf's was accurate and cold and it was of her ribcage.

Naomi's was eighteen inches of board and it was only her head and shoulder, from above, foreshortened, and it was not flattering in any way at all. The jaw was heavy. There was a line under the eye. The mouth was doing the thing Jess's mouth did when she was listening to somebody and had already decided they were wrong.

Jess stood in a towelling gown in a church hall and looked at it for a long time.

"That's me."

"Yes."

"Not — I mean that's actually me. Nobody's ever —" She stopped.

"I know," Naomi said. "You can't have it. It's not dry and it's mine."

* * *

She was dressed and had her bag on her shoulder when it happened.

Dell was stacking boards at the far end and called down the hall without looking up.

"Fi — you right to do the urn? You've got the key."

And a woman at the second easel said yes, and turned round with a rag in her hand, and it was a tall woman about fifty in a linen smock with her hair in a clip, and Jess had sat beside her for two and a half hours at a Law Society dinner at the Hotel Grand Chancellor in 2019 and had talked about Spain.

"Jessica, isn't it," Fiona Rowe said.

The hall had a clock in it that ticked. Jess had not heard it all evening.

"Yes."

"I thought so. You're at Tyne's." She was perfectly pleasant. She was wiping her hands. "Hamish's got a long one with your people, hasn't he, the one that went in June. He was very taken with your note-taking, which from him is the Victoria Cross."

"That's kind of him."

"Mm." Fiona put the rag on the easel tray. "Well. Thank you for tonight. It's very difficult to get anyone, and you were awfully still."

And she went off down the hall to do the urn.

* * *

In the car Jess got as far as the Elizabeth Street lights before she could say it.

"That's Rowe's wife."

"Who's Rowe?"

"Hamish Rowe. He's senior counsel. He's my barrister. He's *led* for me on — " She stopped and put both hands on the top of the wheel. "She's sat in a room and painted me with nothing on for two hours and she's going to be at a dinner on Friday."

"Mm."

"Naomi."

"I heard you." Naomi had her head back against the rest. "What do you think she's going to do?"

"I don't —"

"No, go on. Properly. You're the one who knows how these things work." Still perfectly mild. "She's fifty-something and she does a painting class on a Wednesday. She's been doing it for years, I'd say. She's seen Trish with nothing on about four hundred times. Who's she going to tell, and what's she going to tell them? That the solicitor from her husband's junior firm sat for a life class? Where does that sentence go?"

Jess opened her mouth and shut it.

Because it was right. It was exactly right. It was the answer she would have given anybody who came to her with it, and she had given a version of it to herself in the dark four nights ago, and there was not one hole in it.

"Nowhere," she said.

"Nowhere." The light went green. "And if she does say it to somebody, so what? It's eleven dollars a week in a church hall. Dell can't get anyone. You did a nice thing."

"Yes."

"You've gone white."

"I know."

Naomi reached over and put a hand on her thigh and left it there, warm, through the trousers.

"You were the bravest thing I've ever seen tonight," she said. "Don't let her take it off you."

* * *

She came back the next Wednesday, and the one after, and by the end of March Dell had her in the book as a regular.

✦

CHAPTER 31

Paragraph 71

She gave up Flat 2 at the end of April.

It made no sense to keep it. She had not slept there since February. The lease was month to month and the hot water still did four minutes, and she was paying three hundred and ten a week for a chair and a mattress and a box of plates.

It took one carload and two of the eleven bags, because she had never unpacked the rest.

"That's it," Naomi said, in the doorway at Battery Point with a bag in each hand. "That's the whole of me. I'm thirty-four and I've got nine bags and a kettle."

"You've got a kettle?"

"It's a good kettle. Don't start."

* * *

The money conversation happened the following Sunday and it was horrible.

Naomi had three hundred and eighty dollars. That was the number. She had been on a benefit since July and had done some hours at a nursery at Cambridge in the autumn, cash, and she had worked out on a bit of paper what she could put in and the figure she arrived at was forty dollars a week.

She put the bit of paper on the table and then put her hand flat over it.

"I know."

"Naomi —"

"Don't. Please don't be kind about it, I'll go to pieces." She did not take her hand off the paper. "I had a car. In 2016 I had a car and a credit card with a four-thousand-dollar limit on it in my own name and I earned fifty-one thousand dollars a year."

"I know."

"I'm not asking you for anything."

"You're not asking me for anything," Jess said. "I'm offering. There's a difference and you know there is, because you'd say exactly the same thing to me."

Naomi sat with that for a while.

"Forty a week," she said. "And it goes up the minute I've got more. And I'm not having you say it doesn't matter, because it matters to me, and you don't get to decide what things mean to me."

"All right."

"Say yes to the forty."

"Yes to the forty," Jess said.

* * *

What happened next happened because Jess was hopeless.

She had always been hopeless. She earned a good salary and had done since she was thirty and she had no idea at any given moment what was in her account, because she had never had to. She paid for things and the money was there. Her car registration had lapsed twice. She had been on the same power plan since 2017 and had never once looked at it. There was a gym direct debit she had been paying since a January resolution she could no longer date.

Naomi found the gym one in the second week of May, going through a statement at the kitchen table with a pencil.

"How long have you been going to this gym?"

"I don't go to a gym."

"Jess."

"I swim at the Aquatic Centre. I pay for that separately."

Naomi put the pencil down.

"You have paid this company sixty-one dollars a month," she said, "since March of 2019."

"That can't be right."

"It's two thousand three hundred dollars."

Jess laughed, because it was funny, and it was funny, and Naomi did not laugh. She got the laptop and rang them and was on hold for nineteen minutes and cancelled it, and then she sat there and went backwards through eighteen months of statements with the pencil, line by line, and by nine o'clock that night she had found four hundred dollars a month that was going out of the account for nothing at all.

She was extremely good at it.

That was the thing Jess kept saying, to her, that night and for weeks afterwards. *You're so good at this.* And Naomi said that it was not a talent, and that anybody could do it, and that it was just a matter of looking at the actual number instead of the number you thought it was.

She did not say where she had learned to look at the actual number.

* * *

The arrangement was Jess's idea.

She would say that to herself a great many times afterwards, and it was true, and it would not help.

The salary went into the joint account. The bills came out of it. Naomi had the logins because Naomi was the one doing it, and there was no sense in a system where the person holding the pencil had to ring the person at work every time the water rates came in.

And it was wonderful.

It was the single most restful thing that had happened to her in a decade. The rego did not lapse. The power plan changed and the bill halved. There was a spreadsheet, colour-coded, that Naomi showed her once a fortnight and that Jess looked at for about forty seconds and understood none of and was delighted by. By the end of June there was nine thousand dollars in a savings account that had not existed in April.

"That's yours," Naomi said. "I want you to say that out loud. That's your money, I've just stopped it running out of the bath."

"It's ours."

"It's not ours. I put in forty dollars a week."

"Naomi."

"I'll say it however you like," she said. "But I know what it is."

* * *

Jess had the Devereux matter through June and July, which was a four-week Supreme Court trial with a co-accused and eleven thousand pages, and she was at the office until nine most nights and worked both days of six consecutive weekends.

She did not think about money once in all of it.

She came home to food. She came home to the dry cleaning having been collected. Her mother's birthday happened and there was a present and a card and the card was in Jess's handwriting because Naomi had put it in front of her on a Sunday morning with a pen. Her car went in for a service she had not booked.

In the last week of it she said, with her face in a pillow, "I don't know how anybody does this without you."

"They don't," Naomi said. "They just drown slowly and call it being busy."

* * *

The thing happened on a Thursday in the middle of July and it was over in four seconds.

Jess had bought a coat. Not an expensive one — a hundred and forty dollars, in a sale, navy, because the good grey one was at the dry cleaner and it had been raining for a week.

She came in with the bag and Naomi was at the table with the laptop open, and she looked at the bag and then at Jess and said:

"What's that."

Three words. The *what's that* came down slightly at the end, which is not where a question goes.

And Jess, who had cross-examined police sergeants for fourteen years, stood in her own hallway with a paper bag in her hand and heard herself begin to explain about the dry cleaner.

She got about six words in.

Naomi's face did something.

It went through about four things in a second and a half and Jess could not read any of them, and then Naomi stood up and said, "Sorry — sorry, I'm — " and went into the bathroom and shut the door.

She was in there for eleven minutes.

When she came out her eyes were red and she came straight across the room and put her arms round Jess's neck and held on hard enough to hurt.

"It's a lovely coat," she said. "Buy whatever you want. Please. Please buy whatever you want, you work like a dog, it's your money."

"Naomi, what —"

"Nothing. It's nothing." Still holding on. "I heard somebody else say it. That's all. For about two seconds I heard somebody else."

And Jess stood in the hall with her arms round a woman who was shaking, and understood that she had just been given something, and that it had cost her, and she held onto her and said *all right* and *all right* and did not ask one more question about it.

She thought about it for days afterwards and what she thought was: *God, what he did to her.*

* * *

The hairdresser was on the fourteenth of August.

Cut and colour, two hours, two hundred and eighty dollars, at the place in Criterion Street she had been going to since 2016. Shaz had done her hair for nine years and knew about her sister and the dog and asked after both.

Jess came down from the basin with her hair done and felt, for the first time in about three weeks, like a person.

The card declined.

Shaz did it again, with the little apologetic face they do, and it declined again, and tried the tap and then the chip, and said the machine had been playing up.

It had not been playing up.

The salon had six chairs and four of them had women in them and the dryer went off and the place went quiet in that way places do.

"I'll just —" Jess said. "Sorry. One second."

She stood by the window with the phone against her ear and her hair perfect, and it rang four times.

"Hiya."

"Something's wrong with the card."

"Oh *God*." Immediately. "Oh, Jess, I'm so sorry. I moved it this morning — the rego's due on the twentieth and the insurance came out early, I put eleven hundred across to the savings and I meant to —" A sound of a chair going back. "I sent you a message at about ten. Did you not get it?"

Jess took the phone away from her ear and looked at it.

There were nine unread messages and one of them was at 10:04 and it said exactly what Naomi had said it said.

"I didn't read it."

"I'm putting it back now. Right now. Give me thirty seconds." Keys going. "Tell her it'll go through in a minute. Tell her I'm sorry."

"She doesn't need —"

"Tell her it was me," Naomi said. "Don't you dare stand there and let her think it's you."

* * *

It went through at the second attempt and Shaz said these machines, honestly, and Jess tipped her twenty dollars she did not have on her and had to find it in coins and notes in the bottom of her bag.

She sat in the car in the Centrepoint car park for a while with her hair done.

It was fine. It was completely fine. It was an entirely ordinary thing that happens to everybody, and the money was there, and it had been there the whole time, in a savings account with nine thousand dollars in it that had not existed in April, and which existed because of a woman with a pencil.

She felt, under her sternum, something she could not name and did not try to.

So she did what she always did with a thing she could not name, which was to go and look at the document.

She opened the banking app to see the balance for herself.

And it asked her for the password, the way it does when you have not used it on that phone for a while, and she sat in a car in a car park with her thumb over the keypad.

She did not know it.

It had been changed in April, when they set the whole thing up properly, because the old one had been her sister's dog and the year, which Naomi had said, kindly and correctly, was the worst password she had ever heard in her life.

She could not remember the new one.

She had never needed it.

CHAPTER 32

Nine Hundred and Six

The camera had started with her, which mattered later and helped not at all.

It was the last week of August and she had been looking at the painting — the eighteen inches of board with her own heavy jaw on it, which Naomi had finally given her and which lived on the shelf in the bedroom — and she had said, out of nothing:

"Take one of me now."

"Now?"

"Now."

So Naomi had, on the phone, in the bedroom with the lamp on, and Jess had lain on her side and looked into it the way nobody had ever looked at her before and had felt the back of her neck go hot.

They had looked at it together afterwards with their heads on one pillow.

"God," Jess said.

"I know."

"Is that what I —"

"Yes," Naomi said. "That's what you look like."

* * *

After that it was in the room.

Not every time. Perhaps one time in four, perhaps less, and never without her saying so — and she did say so, out loud, in words, because that was how it had been from the start and the saying had become part of it. *Get it. Get the phone.* She said that. She heard herself say it.

The first video was in September.

It was eleven minutes long and she had asked for it in a particular voice with her face in the mattress, and halfway through she had looked up and seen Naomi's eyes above the phone — not on the screen, on her — and had come so hard that she bit the inside of her own cheek and tasted it for two days.

They watched it on the Sunday morning with the rain going and a cup of tea each, and Jess had to put the tea down.

"I don't recognise her."

"No."

"She's —" She could not finish it.

"She's having a wonderful time," Naomi said. "That's all that is. That's what a woman having a wonderful time looks like, and you've never once seen it, because every other time it's happened you've had your eyes shut."

* * *

The folder was the fourth of October.

Naomi's laptop was on the kitchen table and she was doing the bills and she said, without any particular weight, "Come and look at something."

It was in a folder on the desktop. The folder was called **J**.

Inside it were other folders, and the other folders had dates on them in the way a careful person dates things, year first: *2024-06-21 solstice. 2025-01-17 seven mile. 2025-02-18 first sitting. 2025-08-24 lamp.*

There were forty-one of them.

Jess stood behind the chair with her hand on the back of it.

"How many —"

Naomi clicked something and the number came up at the bottom of the window.

Nine hundred and six items.

* * *

It is worth saying what she felt, because it was not one thing.

The first thing was vanity, and it was instant and it was shameful. She wanted to look. She wanted to go through all nine hundred and six and find the good ones and know that there were good ones.

The second thing was that somebody had kept her. Nobody had ever kept her. There were about nine photographs of her in existence between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-six, and four of those were from her sister's wedding, and in all of them she was in something navy with her hair up, standing slightly behind someone.

And the third thing came up underneath the other two about four seconds later, cold, and it came up in her professional voice.

There is an organised archive of nine hundred and six intimate images and recordings of you, on a device you do not own, in folders named and dated by someone else.

She had read forty-one photographs out of a plastic sleeve at this table. They had each had a little white strip of card laid beside them marked off in centimetres, so that a jury could be told how big a thing was.

She said: "That's a lot of them."

* * *

Naomi went very still, and then turned round in the chair.

"Yes," she said. "It is."

"I didn't mean —"

"No, you did, and you're allowed to." She shut the laptop halfway and put both hands flat on the table. "Sit down. Sit *down*, Jess, I'm not upset. I want you to hear me properly and you can't hear anything standing behind me."

Jess sat down.

"I want to ask you something and I want a real answer," Naomi said. "Not a kind one."

"All right."

"Does it frighten you?"

And Jess, who had spent fourteen years getting other people to say true things in rooms, said:

"A bit. Yes."

"Right." Naomi nodded, twice, taking it. "Good. That's good, that you said it." She opened the laptop again and turned it round so the screen faced Jess, and put her finger on the trackpad over the folder. "Then we'll do it now."

"Do what?"

"Delete it. All of it. Right now, in front of you, and then I'll empty the bin and then I'll hand you the laptop and you can go through every folder on it and the phone as well and satisfy yourself." She was entirely matter-of-fact. "And I won't be hurt and I won't bring it up in six months and I won't be *fine* about it in that way people are. It'll be gone and we won't mention it again."

She waited.

"It's nine hundred photographs of a woman I love," she said. "It isn't worth one bad night of yours. Say the word."

Her finger was on the trackpad.

* * *

Here is what went through Jess's head in the three or four seconds, and she would have cause to set it out, later, in order, to a stranger.

If she said yes, then she was a woman who had asked for the phone, said get it, said the particular words in the particular voice, and then — in daylight, at a kitchen table — had taken it all back and treated the person holding the phone as a risk to be managed.

If she said yes, then everything that had happened on a beach in January and on a pallet in a church hall and in this bedroom six weeks ago went back in a drawer, and she was a woman in a changing room again, and the last three years were a thing she had got away with rather than a thing she had done.

If she said yes, she was saying *I think you might use these.*

And she was not frightened of Naomi. That was the truth of it and it was not a delusion. She had no fear of her at all. What she had felt for four seconds was the thing you feel reading a file — a professional reflex, a pattern-match, the same thing that makes a doctor look twice at a mole — and it had attached itself to the only person in her life who had never once done her any harm.

"No," she said. "Don't be ridiculous. Keep them."

"Jess —"

"I mean it. I asked for every single one of them." She reached over and shut the laptop herself. "I'd be ashamed of myself."

Naomi looked at her for a long moment.

"All right," she said. "But you say the word any day. Any day, for the rest of our lives. That stands."

* * *

The joke came three weeks later and it came from Jess.

They were in the car park at the hall after the Wednesday class, and it was raining, and Dell had been talking for forty minutes about a

man from the parish council. Naomi had the phone out to check something and Jess leaned over and looked at the screen and said:

"God. Imagine if you lost that thing."

"Imagine."

"You could end me." Jess was laughing while she said it. "Honestly. Half an hour and a mailing list. There's a picture in there that would take the Law Society about four minutes."

Naomi laughed too — properly, head back, delighted.

"The one on the dais," she said.

"Don't."

"The one on the *dais*, Jess."

"Don't." She was wiping her eyes. "I'd have to leave the state."

"Tasmania's lovely this time of year."

And they laughed about it all the way down Elizabeth Street, and Naomi put a hand on her knee at the lights, and that was the whole of it, and it was never mentioned again in those terms.

Except that it had been said.

It sat there afterwards the way a thing does once it has been given words. Not a threat. Nobody had threatened anybody. A joke that two women made together in a car in the rain, which both of them had found funny, and which had entered the house.

* * *

Two nights later Jess lay awake at about three.

She went through it, because she could not help it, the way she went through a brief.

The images had been made with her consent, on every occasion, expressed in words, some of them on the recordings themselves. She had asked for them. She had asked for them in a voice that was on tape.

Nothing had been distributed. Nothing had been threatened. There had been no demand of any kind, ever, for anything — not money, not conduct, nothing. The one time the subject had been raised, the other party had offered to destroy the whole archive on the spot and had been refused, by Jess, in terms.

She ran the elements across it the way she had run them across four hundred other sets of facts.

There was no offence. There was nothing. There was not one provision in the statute book of this state that reached a single thing that had happened in her own house, and if a woman had come into her office and put all of it on the desk in front of her, Jess would have had to tell her — kindly, because you are kind about it — that there was nothing there.

She lay in the dark next to a sleeping woman and understood that she had just built, in her head, at three in the morning, a complete defence.

And that she had been acting for herself.

CHAPTER 33

In Words

The first correction was about the word *just*.

They were in the kitchen in November and Jess was on the phone to the agent about the gutters, and when she hung up Naomi said, "Do you know you said *just* nine times?"

"I did not."

"I counted. I was listening because you've got a nice phone voice and then I started counting." She was peeling something. "*Just checking in. Just wondering if. I just wanted to see whether it might be possible to.* Nine."

"That's how you talk to tradesmen."

"It's how *you* talk to tradesmen." She did not look up. "I've heard you talk to a judge's associate. You didn't say it once."

* * *

The second was about the smile.

"You smile before you ask for something. Not after. Before. It goes on your face about a second ahead of the sentence and it's an apology for the sentence."

"Everybody does that."

"Women do that."

* * *

The third was the one that stayed.

"Stop saying sorry when you haven't done anything. You said sorry to a door this morning."

"The door was in my way."

"The door was in your way," Naomi agreed, "and you apologised to it."

* * *

Here is the thing that has to be said about this, because it was true and because it is why none of it stopped.

The corrections were right.

Every one of them was right. Jess had spent eighteen years in a profession full of men who did not do any of it, and she had known it, in the way you know a thing without ever setting it down, and nobody had ever once put it in front of her in words.

She stopped saying *just*. It took about three weeks and it was difficult and it left a small hole in each sentence where the word had been, and she filled the hole with nothing, and the nothing was better.

She stopped smiling first.

In February she asked for an indemnity in a conference with two insurers and a silk from Melbourne and she did not say *just* and she did not smile and she did not soften the back end of the sentence, and the room went quiet for about two seconds, and she got it.

Hugh was in the lift afterwards with his glasses on his head and he said, "Where in God's name did *that* come from?"

* * *

The silence was the next thing, and she had not been taught it; she had caught it.

Naomi let a silence sit after a question. Two seconds, sometimes three — long enough that the other person filled it, and what they filled it with was always more than they had meant to say.

Jess started doing it in March and by May she was doing it without choosing to.

It is a filthy technique. She had watched Rowe use it on witnesses for eleven years and she had never used it herself on anybody who was not in a box, because it is a technique for people who are at a disadvantage.

She used it on a client in June and he told her about a second phone.

* * *

The thing with Priya was in the last week of July.

Priya Nair was three years admitted now and she was good — better than good, better at twenty-seven than Jess had been — and she came in with a bail application that had a problem in it and she knew it had a problem and she had come in to say so.

She got about four sentences in.

"Priya." Jess did not look up from the page. "Did you ring the surety or did you email her?"

"I — emailed."

Two seconds.

Priya's hands came together in her lap.

"I emailed on the Thursday and then I rang on the Friday and there was no answer and I didn't leave a message, because I didn't want to put it on her voicemail in case somebody else —"

"Is it," Jess said.

It is two words. It is not a question and it is not a comment and it has nothing in it at all, and there is nothing a person can do with it

except keep talking.

Priya kept talking for about forty seconds and by the end of it she had set out, unasked, three things she had not done and one thing she had got wrong, and she had got slightly red across the chest, and when she finished she sat with her hands flat on her knees and waited.

Jess looked up.

"Ring her this afternoon," she said. "Leave a message. She's the surety, she's allowed to know she's the surety. The rest of it's fine."

"Right. Thanks. Sorry."

"Don't say sorry."

"Sorry," Priya said, and laughed, and it came out wrong, and she went.

* * *

She came back at about six, when the floor was empty, and stood in the doorway with her coat on.

"Can I say something that isn't about work?"

"Go on."

"You've got really good." Priya said it carefully. "I mean that. In the three years since I started with you. You used to be — you'd give me the answer and then you'd give me three ways round it and then you'd tell me about a time you'd ballsed it up in 2016, and I'd go away feeling like I could do the job."

"And now?"

"Now you give me the answer." She shifted the strap on her shoulder. "It's a better answer. It's always a better answer. I just —"

Two seconds went past.

Priya did not fill them. She stood in the doorway and let them go, which Jess understood about half a second too late.

"I was going to say *I just miss you*," Priya said, "but I'm not allowed to say *just* any more either, am I."

And she said goodnight, and went.

* * *

The voicemail was on the Thursday.

A solicitor at Sorell had not returned four calls on a conveyancing matter of her mother's, and Jess had left a message on the Tuesday, and on the Thursday the woman rang back and said, with a small wobble in it, that she had got the message and was terribly sorry and had been off with her shoulder.

There was nothing wrong with the call. It took ninety seconds. The woman apologised four times.

Afterwards Jess sat and thought about it for a while, and then did a thing she had not done in years, which was to ring her own mobile from the desk phone and let it go to voicemail and listen to her own greeting.

That was not what she wanted.

So she rang the Sorell office after hours, and got the machine, and left a second message — the same message, more or less, about the title search — and then she hung up and rang back and pressed the numbers to hear it played to her, the way you can.

It was eleven seconds long.

Jessica Heart, Tyne Vosper. I rang on Tuesday. I'd like the search by Monday. You can get me on this number.

Four sentences. No *just*. No *sorry to chase*. No rising at the end of the line. A flat, pleasant, completely level voice with a two-beat gap before the last sentence, saying a thing once.

Jess sat in an empty office in Macquarie Street with the handset against her ear and listened to it twice more.

I don't recognise her.

She had said that in a bed in September with a cup of tea going cold, about a woman on a screen having the best time of her life, and Naomi had said: *that's what you look like.*

She put the phone down.

She was not frightened. She wanted to be clear about that afterwards, when it mattered, and she was clear about it: she sat there and listened to a voice that was not hers coming out of her own mouth and what she felt was not fear.

It was that the voice was better than hers. It got things. It did not apologise to doors. It had asked for an indemnity in front of a silk from Melbourne and got it, and it had made a very good young solicitor stand in a doorway and say *I miss you*, and both of those were the same instrument.

* * *

At home she was telling Naomi about the woman at Sorell and the shoulder, and she got to the end of it and said:

"She'd have had it done by Friday if she'd rung me back on Tuesday."

Naomi was at the sink.

"She was off with her shoulder."

"She was off with her shoulder and her office has four other people in it." Flat. Pleasant. The two-beat gap. "Is it her shoulder that answers the phone?"

And Naomi turned round.

She had a plate in her hand and she stood there holding it and she looked at Jess for a good deal longer than two seconds, and something went across her face that Jess had seen exactly once before, in a hallway, over a coat in a paper bag.

"What?"

"Nothing," Naomi said.

"Naomi."

"Nothing. You sounded like somebody." She put the plate in the rack and did not say who, and did not say anything else about it, and later that night she held onto Jess in the dark for a long time without talking.

CHAPTER 34

Taroona

She raised it in November and it took four minutes and then it was gone for five months.

"There's a thing some people do," she said, in the car, going nowhere in particular. "Couples. Meeting other couples."

"I know what it is."

"Would you ever."

"No," Jess said.

"Fine."

And that was it. It did not come up again at Christmas or in January or in February. Jess thought about it perhaps six times in five months and each time it had less in it, and by March it was a thing Naomi had said once in a car.

* * *

In April she said, at the sink, with her back turned:

"I've said yes to something."

"To what?"

"A couple at Taroona. Lorraine and Dan. She does something with the council and he's got a business doing bathrooms." She rinsed a cup. "I've been talking to her since about August."

Jess stood in the middle of her own kitchen.

"Since August."

"Yes."

"You said it in the car in November like it was a thought you'd had."

"It was a thought I'd had. I'd had it for three months by then and you said no, and that was completely fine, and I let it go." Naomi turned round and dried her hands. "And then I kept thinking about it, and I'm thirty-six in July, and I've had one body in my life and he had me from twenty-two."

Nothing in her face was hard. That was the thing.

"So I've said yes," she said. "For the ninth of May. And you can come or you can not come, and if you don't come I'll go on my own, and I'll tell you all of it or none of it, whichever you want. I'm not asking you to do anything."

"You're —"

"I'm telling you what I'm doing. There's a difference and you know there is." She put the tea towel over the rail. "Because you'd say exactly the same thing to me."

* * *

Jess did not sleep properly for eleven nights.

She did not argue. There was nothing to argue with — not one word of it was unfair, and she went over it the way she went over everything and could not find the hole. A woman who had been owned for eleven years was going to a house in Taroona, by her own decision, and had told her in advance, and had not asked her for anything.

What she had, in the eleven nights, was the picture of coming home on the ninth of May to an empty flat.

She said yes on the twenty-fourth of April, standing up, in the hall.

"I'll come."

Naomi looked at her for a long moment.

"You don't have to."

"I know."

"Say it properly."

"I want to come," Jess said, and it came out level and clear and it was the first sentence she had said to that woman in three and a half years that was not true.

* * *

The two weeks before were taken up with things that nobody ever writes down.

She went and had everything done, which cost ninety dollars and hurt, and lay on a table in a room off Elizabeth Street with her forearm over her eyes while a very kind twenty-four-year-old asked whether she was going anywhere nice.

She stood in front of the wardrobe on four separate evenings. Everything in it had been chosen by Naomi since October of the second year and all of it was better than anything she had ever owned, and there is nothing a woman owns that she wears to a brick house at Taroona to meet two people called Lorraine and Dan.

She thought about the fact that she had not been touched by a man since Marcus, four years ago, and that before Naomi there had only ever been men, and that she had no idea at all which of those two facts was the frightening one.

She bought a new razor and threw out the old one and was ashamed of herself.

* * *

The house was ordinary.

That was what she had not prepared for. A brick place on the hill at Taroona with a glassed-in porch and a bin out and a rosemary bush by

the step, and a woman in her forties in a jumper opening the door saying *come in, come in, it's freezing*, and a hall with a basket of shoes in it.

Lorraine was fifty, not forty, and solid, and funny, and nervous. Dan was a big quiet man with grey in his beard and forearms like a man who carries tiles, and he shook Jess's hand at the door and said, "You right? Can I get you something?" and she said a glass of water and he brought a glass of water on a coaster.

There were coasters.

They sat in a lounge room with a gas heater and talked for fifty minutes about a kitchen Lorraine's sister was having done at Howrah, and about whether the ferry made any difference to the traffic, and Jess sat with her knees together on a sofa with a throw over the back of it and thought: *we are going to have to stand up at some point and nobody is going to know how.*

Lorraine said, at about ten past nine: "Right. Well. I'm going to stop talking about my sister's splashback."

And Naomi laughed, and Dan laughed, and that was how it started.

* * *

They did not go anywhere. That was the other thing nobody tells you. There was no door, no corridor, no other room. Lorraine turned the big light off and left the lamp on and knelt down on the carpet in front of the heater and said, "It's warmer down here, honestly, the sofa's terrible."

So it was the floor.

* * *

Jess will not be able to put the next hour in order, afterwards, and she will try.

She remembers the carpet, which was wool and had a seam in it that was under her shoulder the whole time, and that she kept finding the seam with her hand and letting go of it.

She remembers Lorraine's kindness, which was enormous and constant and specific — *is that all right, is that too much, tell me* — and that it was the kindness of a woman who had done this before with people who were frightened.

She remembers Dan's hands being careful in a way she had not expected and did not want to have noticed.

She remembers, in the middle of it, finding the ceiling, and that there was a cornice with a chip out of it above the window, and that she looked at the chip for some time.

And she remembers that Naomi was four feet away on the same floor with her head back and her throat open and the lamp on her, making a sound Jess had heard perhaps thirty times in three and a half years and had never once heard her make for anybody else, and that at some point in it Naomi turned her head sideways on the carpet and found her, and did not look away again.

They watched each other for a long time.

* * *

Twice, Naomi asked.

The first time she said, "All right?" and Jess said yes.

The second time was later, and she reached across the carpet and put two fingers on Jess's wrist, and said, in the voice she used for this and had always used for this, clearly, so that everybody in the room could hear it:

"Do you want to stop?"

There was a complete and perfect opportunity. It was three feet wide and it was held open for her by the only person in the world who would have closed the room down in four seconds without one word of complaint, and every single person on that carpet would have said *of course* and gone and put the kettle on.

Jess said: "No."

* * *

Lorraine made toast afterwards.

That was the part Jess could not deal with. They sat in the kitchen at half past eleven with their clothes on, and there was toast, and Dan put the butter in front of her and said that the heater in the lounge was on its last legs and he'd been meaning to do something about it since autumn.

Lorraine hugged her at the door. Properly, with both arms.

"You were very brave," she said. "First one's a lot. Don't go home and have a think about it tonight, do it on Sunday. That's my advice. Everybody has a think and it's always better on Sunday."

* * *

In the car Naomi was lit up.

Not crowing — happy, the way she had been on the beach, talking fast with her hand on Jess's leg, saying that Lorraine was wonderful, that she had not expected to like her that much, that Dan was the gentlest man she had ever met in her life and that she had spent eleven years not knowing a man could be like that.

And then at the lights at Sandy Bay she went quiet, and said:

"I had a good time."

"I know."

"No — listen." Her voice had changed. "I had a good time, and nobody did anything to me, and I knew the whole time that I could get up and get my coat. I've never had that. Not once. Not in my whole life." She was looking straight ahead. "You gave me that."

Jess drove.

"You gave me that, Jess."

"I didn't give you anything. You decided."

"I decided because you came with me," Naomi said. "I'd have gone on my own and I'd have been frightened the whole time and I'd never have gone back."

The light changed.

"Thank you," she said. "I mean that in a way I can't do properly in a car."

* * *

Jess did not sleep.

She lay in the dark next to a woman who had gone out at about one, and at ten past two she got up and sat on the lid of the toilet in the bathroom with the door shut and the light off, with her phone in her hand.

She went through it.

There was nobody at the office. There had been nobody at the office since the partnership, and what there was now was Priya, who had stood in a doorway in July and said that she missed her.

There was Bec, who had cried on the phone in October of the year before last and had not rung since, because Jess had told her not to ring Prue and had not rung her either, and whose two children were now ten and seven and would not know her.

And there was Prue.

She brought the number up. It was still where it had always been, because she had never moved it and had never deleted it, and underneath it the app said that the last call between them was two years and seven months ago.

Ring me. Any day, any time, three in the morning, and I'll come and get you from wherever you are and I won't ask you one question about it. That's on the table and it does not come off the table. Ever.

She sat in the dark on the lid of a toilet with her thumb over the button at ten past two in the morning.

And the whole way through she was composing the first sentence, because that was how her mind worked and had always worked, and she got as far as *Prue, it's me* and then she had to do the next part, which was the part where a woman says what has happened to her.

Nothing had happened to her.

She had been asked, weeks in advance, in terms. She had been given a complete out and had refused it twice, the second time out loud in front of two witnesses. She had said *I want to come* standing up in her own hallway.

She put the phone face down on the cistern.

If a woman had come into her office on Monday morning and set out those facts, in that order, Jess would have had to tell her — kindly, because you are kind about it — that there was nothing there.

✦

CHAPTER 35

Six Days

Lorraine texted on the second of June.

> Hello love. Dan and I are free the 20th if you two were interested. No pressure at all, we'd understand either way. L x

Naomi read it out at the table and then put the phone down and buttered her toast and said nothing more about it for about four minutes, which was how Jess knew she wanted to go.

"I'm not going to," Jess said.

"Okay."

"I don't want to do it again. I'm glad I did it once and I don't want to do it again." She said it levelly, with no *sorry* in front of it and nothing softening the back end, in four seconds. "You go. I mean that. Go on the twentieth and have a good time."

Naomi looked at her with something on her face that might have been admiration.

"That's completely fine," she said.

And it was. That was the thing. She picked up her phone and texted Lorraine back while Jess watched, and she was warm about it, and she asked Jess what she wanted for dinner, and she went to work on the water rates.

* * *

The first day there was nothing wrong at all.

The second day there was nothing wrong at all.

On the third day Jess came home at twenty past six and said something about Hugh and the new photocopier, and Naomi laughed — the right laugh, the proper one — and it came about half a beat after it should have.

Half a beat. There is no word for half a beat. You cannot say to a person, *you laughed half a beat late.*

* * *

Here is what a withdrawal is, since nobody writes it down.

Everything continues. That is the first thing. There was dinner on the third night and the fourth and the fifth. The washing was done. The bills were paid. The spreadsheet was updated on the Sunday and shown to her and colour-coded as usual. Goodnight was said every night and it was said kindly.

She answered every question. Fully, pleasantly, at length. *How was the class? Good — Bob's got a new easel and he's furious with it.*

She asked none.

That was all. It is the whole of it. For four years there had been a woman who asked Jess things — what the magistrate had said, what Priya had done, whether the woman at the Sorell office had rung back, what she thought of a colour — and in six days she did not ask her one.

And her hand did not go on her back. It had gone on Jess's back between the shoulder blades in a kitchen two and a half years ago and about nine hundred times since, going past with a basket or a plate, and on the third day it stopped, and there is no way on God's earth to raise that with another adult human being.

* * *

On the fourth day Jess said, "Are you cross with me?"

Naomi put down what she was holding and gave her the whole of her attention, which she always did.

"No."

"You'd say if you were."

"I would. I promise you I would." She came over and kissed her on the side of the mouth. "I'm not cross. Why would I be cross?"

She meant it. Jess would have staked her practising certificate on it.

* * *

Her mother used to do it in the car.

Jess had not thought about that in twenty years and she thought about it on the fourth night lying awake at half past one. The drive home from her grandmother's at Devonport, three hours, and some time around Campbell Town her mother would stop talking to her, and Bec in the back would go very quiet too, because Bec had worked it out earlier than Jess ever did.

Nothing was ever said. Her mother would be perfectly pleasant at the petrol station. *Do you want a Paddle Pop?* And then back in the car and nothing, for an hour, in the dark, while a nine-year-old girl in the front seat went through everything she had said since Devonport looking for it.

And the terrible part, the part Jess had forgotten entirely and that came back whole at half past one in the morning, was what she used to do about it.

She used to confess to things.

She would sit in the dark and invent something she might have done wrong and offer it up. *Sorry I was rude to Nanna about the puzzle.*

And sometimes it landed, and her mother would say *oh, love, that's not it* and reach over and put a hand on her knee, and the radio would go back on.

* * *

On the fifth day she rang Lorraine.

She had a reason ready and the reason was perfectly good — a thank-you for the toast, and a line about the twentieth, so that there would be nothing awkward. It took eleven minutes and Lorraine was lovely about all of it.

And near the end Lorraine said:

"And listen, don't you give it a second thought. Naomi said you'd probably not want to, when she messaged. She said don't take it personally, she said you're a very private person and once is probably once." A kettle going on somewhere in Taroona. "I thought that was nice of her, actually. Not everybody's that good about it."

Jess said that she was, yes. Very good about it.

She put the phone down and sat in her car outside the Aquatic Centre with her gym bag on the passenger seat and worked out that the message to Lorraine had been sent on the second of June, at the breakfast table, in front of her, about ninety seconds after she had said she did not want to go.

It had been forgiven before she had finished saying it.

There was nothing left to apologise for. There was no grievance anywhere. There was not one fact in the world she could put in front of anybody, including herself.

And it had been six days.

* * *

She broke on the Saturday night.

They had eaten and Naomi was at the sink and the radio was on low, and Jess stood in the middle of her own kitchen — she would remember that she was standing in the middle of the floor, not near anything — and said:

"I'm sorry."

Naomi turned the tap off.

"What for?"

"I don't know."

"Jess."

"I don't know. That's the honest answer." Her voice had gone somewhere she could not get it back from. "Something's wrong and it's been wrong since Monday and I can't find it, and I've been through everything I've said and I can't find it, and I'm — " She stopped. "I'm sorry. Whatever it is."

Naomi came across the kitchen with her hands still wet and took hold of her by both upper arms.

"Listen to me." She was bewildered. She was completely, visibly bewildered, and her eyes had gone bright. "You haven't done anything. There is *nothing wrong*. God — have I been off? I've been off, haven't I. I've been in my own head all week, I've had — " She shut her eyes for a second. "It doesn't matter what I've had. It's nothing to do with you. Nothing. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, I've made you stand in a kitchen and apologise for nothing."

And she held her, hard, for a long time, in the middle of the floor.

* * *

It was Jess who brought up the twentieth.

Later, in bed, in the dark, after everything had come back on — the hand, the questions, the laugh arriving in the right place — she said it into the space between them.

"I'll come on the twentieth."

"What?"

"To Lorraine's. I'll come."

Naomi came up onto one elbow.

"Absolutely not."

"Naomi —"

"No. No, listen to me." She was almost angry, and it was the first thing that had sounded like anger in six days. "You said no. You said it beautifully, actually, you said it like a woman who knows her own mind, and I was *proud* of you. You don't get to take that back because I've had a bad week."

"I'm not taking it back."

"Then why are you saying it?"

"Because I want to come," Jess said.

Two seconds went past.

"Only if you want to," Naomi said.

"I want to."

"Say it the whole way."

"I want to come on the twentieth."

* * *

Afterwards Naomi went to sleep with one arm over her and her forehead against the back of Jess's neck, breathing slowly, the way she did.

And Jess lay in the dark, awake, with the whole weight of a woman against her back, and what she felt was so large that it took her some time to find the edges of it.

It was relief.

It had come back. All of it had come back, the whole house of it, and she had not lost it, and she was warm, and somebody's forehead

was against her neck.

I would do anything, she thought, with enormous tenderness, *not to have that again.*

And she went to sleep.

✦

CHAPTER 36

Good Girl

She won the Howden arson in September after four weeks and two days, and she felt nothing at all.

That was not depression and it was not burnout and she did not call it either of those things. It was that she stood in the corridor outside Court One with her wheeled case and her hair up and watched a twenty-six-year-old man cry on his mother in front of the lifts, and the thought that arrived was: *there's the Lowther matter on Monday.*

Hugh took her to lunch. He had a bottle of something up and he told the story twice and got it slightly wrong both times.

* * *

Naomi said it on the Sunday, on the sofa, with the paper on the floor.

"You don't like it any more."

"I like it fine."

"You came home on Thursday and you were grey." She had her feet in Jess's lap. "Not tired. Grey. There's a difference and I've watched it for four years."

"It's a job."

"It was never a job." Naomi was looking at the ceiling. "You told me about it in a café before you knew me. You said you'd been doing it

fourteen years and couldn't remember the last time you'd been surprised, and I said that was an awful thing to have happen to a person." She turned her head. "That was four years ago. What's it now, eighteen?"

Jess sat with a woman's feet in her lap.

"Eighteen."

* * *

The arithmetic took one evening and Naomi did it with the pencil.

There was sixty-one thousand dollars in the savings account. The flat was hers and had been since she was twenty-seven and there were eleven years left on it at a payment Naomi could recite. There was superannuation Jess had never looked at in her life and that Naomi found and read out to her in a flat voice like a weather forecast.

"You could not work for two years and nothing would happen to you," she said. "I've done it four ways. Two years, if you don't buy a car."

"And you?"

"I'd get something. Lorraine says the council's always after people." She squared the papers. "But I want to say a thing and I want to say it properly, so put your phone down."

Jess put her phone down.

"Don't do it for me."

"Naomi —"

"No. Listen." She was entirely serious. "If you leave that firm because of a conversation on a sofa, and in three years you're forty-two and you've got nothing, you will look at me across a kitchen for the rest of your life. I have *been* the person somebody gave something up for. I know exactly what it costs and I am not having it." She put the

pencil down. "So I'm saying it once, in front of a witness, which is you. Don't do this for me."

"I'm not."

"Say it again in a month."

* * *

In a month she said it again.

* * *

She resigned on the sixteenth of October with three months' notice, which was more than she owed them.

Hugh did not take it well, and the way he did not take it well was the first interesting thing he had done in eighteen years.

"No."

"Hugh."

"No. Sit down. Shut the door." He took his glasses off his head, which she had seen him do perhaps four times. "What's the money? Because if it's the money I can fix the money this afternoon and you know I can."

"It's not the money."

"Then it's the partnership, and I'll tell you now that offer did not die in July of whenever it was, it's been sitting on my desk like a dog waiting at a door —"

"It's not the partnership."

"Then what is it?" He put the glasses on the blotter. "You're thirty-nine. You're the best criminal lawyer in this building and you have been since you were thirty-one, and there is nobody in this state who does the work the way you do it. Nobody. Rowe says it. Andrea Pitt said it to me at a function and she's spent ten years trying to beat you."

"Hugh."

"Where are you going? Are you going to Pardoe's? Because if you're going to Pardoe's —"

"I'm not going anywhere."

And that stopped him.

He sat back in the chair and looked at her properly — for the first time, she thought, in eighteen years; actually looked, the way you look at a document — and something went across his face.

"You've gone thin," he said.

"I've been in a four-week trial."

"You've been thin since about the year before last." He said it slowly, working it out as it came. "You don't come to anything. You don't have lunch. There was a Christmas party you missed and I rang your friend about it, which I shouldn't have done, and she was very polite with me." He turned a pen over on the blotter. "Jess. Is somebody —"

Two seconds went past, and she let them, because she had been taught how.

Hugh Tyne was sixty-six years old and had been calling her *good girl* since she was twenty-four, and he had got about four words into the only question that mattered and could not find the end of it.

"Is somebody what?" she said.

"Nothing." He put the pen down. "Three months. I'll want the Lowther matter handed over properly and I'm not having Priya do it alone."

"Of course."

"Good girl," he said, and it came out of him like something falling off a shelf, and they both heard it, and neither of them said anything about it at all.

* * *

Priya did not argue. She asked one question.

"Is this what you want?"

"Yes."

"Okay." She nodded, twice. "Then I'm very happy for you and I'm going to be unbearable about it for the next three months."

She was. She made a list of every file and made Jess sit with her for eleven hours over four weeks going through them, and she wrote down what Jess said in a notebook with a green cover, and on the last day she said that she had four years of notes now and that she intended to use all of it.

"You'll have my mobile," Jess said.

"I will not. You'll change it by March and you'll feel bad and then you'll feel bad about feeling bad." Priya said it lightly and it was the truest thing anybody said to her that year. "Just tell me one thing honestly. Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Right." Priya picked up the green notebook and held it against her chest. "Well. You know where I am."

* * *

She cleared the room in two days in January.

Eighteen years is four archive boxes and a wheeled case and a cactus somebody gave her in 2019. There were counsel's notes from matters she could not remember and a Christmas card from a client's mother and a running sheet from 2016 with a coffee ring on it.

At the back of the cupboard, under the spare robes bag, there was an old leather handbag she had stopped using in about the second year of all this, because Naomi had bought her a better one.

She picked it up to put it in the bin and it had something in the inside pocket.

It was a torn-off envelope flap.

The ink had gone brown at the edges and the paper had a crease across it from eight years of being folded, and on it, in her own handwriting, at a quarter past eleven at night in an empty office in Macquarie Street:

Naomi. Lindisfarne.

Jess sat down on the floor of her own office with her back against the filing cabinet and a torn bit of envelope in her hand.

She had not thought about that piece of paper in seven years. She had written it and put it in the inside pocket of her bag, *which was not the file*, and she had known exactly what she was doing when she did that, and she had done it anyway.

She looked at it for a long time.

Then she put it in the pocket of her coat.

* * *

The last afternoon was ordinary. People came and said things at the door. Somebody had got a cake from the place downstairs and it was cut up on the kitchen bench and there was a card that nineteen people had signed, and Hugh made a short speech that was mostly about a magistrate who had retired in 2014.

She carried the last box down herself.

In the lift she caught herself in the brushed steel of the doors — a woman of thirty-nine in a very good coat with her hair down, holding a box with a cactus in it — and thought that she had come up in this lift at twenty-three in a suit from Myer with her mother's good scarf on, because she had thought you wore a scarf.

She stood in Macquarie Street with the box on her hip and the traffic going, and she did not feel anything she had been expecting to feel.

She felt light.

* * *

The suits went to the op shop at New Town in February. All three of them, at eleven hundred dollars each, and the two pairs of shoes — the ones she could walk in and the ones she couldn't — and four white blouses, and the grey one-piece she had bought in November of the first year because it had a panel at the front.

She kept the prison bra. She could not have said why. It went back in the drawer behind the thermals, grey and wireless and nine years old, and it was still there at the end.

* * *

The certificate expired on the thirtieth of June.

It did not require anything. That was the part she thought about afterwards. There was a renewal notice in March and a reminder in May and both of them went into a folder in an email account, and all she had to do to remain what she had been since she was twenty-three was to fill in a form and pay a fee in the second week of June.

On the second week of June they were at Lorraine's.

On the thirtieth she was in the garden at Battery Point repotting something, and at some point in the afternoon she went in to get a drink of water and remembered, standing at the sink, and looked at the clock on the stove and it said twenty past four.

She drank the water.

Jessica Heart had always wanted to be a criminal lawyer. She had said so at sixteen in a demountable that smelled of warm photocopier, and a careers teacher had written it on a card and underlined it twice.

She went back out to the garden.



CHAPTER 37

Your Turn

That winter they had all day, every day, and nowhere to be.

It should have been unbearable and it was not. They got up late. They walked. Naomi had three days a week at the council by then, administration, badly paid and enough, and on the other four they were two women in a flat with a heater and a radio.

Jess had not been happier in her life and she did not think that was a strange thing to be, at thirty-nine, with no certificate and no friends.

* * *

It was the twenty-third of July and it had rained all day.

They had eaten at six and the plates were done by seven and there was a documentary neither of them was watching, and at about nine Naomi got up and turned the television off and sat down on the floor with her back against the sofa and her knees up.

"I want to tell you a thing," she said. "And then I want to ask you for one, and you can say no to the asking. I'm telling you mine either way."

"All right."

"Sit down there." She patted the carpet. "Not up there looking at me."

So Jess sat on the floor with her back against the armchair, four feet away, which was about the width of a lounge room at Taroona.

* * *

"In 2017 I was pregnant," Naomi said.

The rain was doing something on the window.

"Nine weeks. I worked it out in a toilet at the Shoreline with a test I'd paid cash for, and I sat in there for about twenty minutes because I couldn't think of anywhere else to sit." She had her arms round her knees. "He didn't know. He never knew. Nobody knew. Not my mother, not the doctor, not anyone. Nobody ever asked me a question that would have got it out of me."

"Naomi —"

"Let me get through it." Quite level. "I lost it at about eleven weeks. On a Thursday. I told him I had a bug and he was perfectly nice to me about it, actually, he brought me things, he was like that when you were sick. And I lay in that bed for two days."

She stopped for a while.

"And what I have never said out loud to one single human being in nine years," she said, "is that I was glad."

Jess did not move.

"Not sad and then glad. Not relieved afterwards. *Glad*, lying there, while it was happening." Her voice had not changed at all. "Because I knew exactly what my life was by 2017 and I knew what it would be with a child in it, and I knew that I would never get out, and when it stopped I lay in that bed and what I felt was *thank God*."

The heater ticked.

"There it is," Naomi said. "That's mine. That's the one."

Jess came across the four feet of carpet on her knees and held her, and Naomi let her, and did not cry.

* * *

After a while — ten minutes, fifteen — Naomi straightened up and pushed the hair off her face and said:

"Your turn."

"Naomi, you don't have to —"

"I'm not trading. I'd have told you that tonight whatever you do." She took hold of Jess's hand and held the ends of two fingers. "But I'm asking. Tell me something you've never told anybody."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you don't, and I'll put the kettle on, and that's the end of it and I won't be strange about it, and I won't bring it up in six months." She was entirely steady. "You know by now that I mean that."

Jess sat back on her heels on the carpet.

She knew by now that she meant it.

"I need to get something," she said.

* * *

It was in the drawer in the bedroom under the passport and the spare keys, where it had been since February of the year before, folded along a crease that was eight years old.

She came back in and sat down on the carpet and put it on the rug between them.

Naomi looked at it and did not pick it up.

"What is it?"

"Tell me when I can stop," Jess said, "and I'll stop."

* * *

She told it properly, because that was the only way she knew how to tell anything.

She started in October of the first year with a blue band on a file and a solicitor who was hopeless in the way that everybody was

hopeless, and she went through it in order.

The sixty-one pages, twice, at a kitchen table. Paragraph 38. Paragraph 71. The file note she typed and took out word by word. The 2011 order that lapsed. The nine months in 2021, and the phrase *the complainant disengaged*, which she had said out loud to magistrates in that exact tone, as a reason.

The torn envelope flap at a quarter past eleven at night, and the inside pocket of her bag, which was not the file.

The car a hundred metres down the hill on the Tuesday, from twenty past seven, and nothing.

The Wednesday, and a navy coat on the outside stairs, and a woman going up towards the shops holding her bag against her side.

The Thursday, when she had walked up ahead of her and seen her come in eleven minutes later and sit down.

The three rules in the practice manual, which she had read twice and shut the book on.

The Friday she had gone back to confess and had not, and the moment she had understood, laughing at a joke about a hot water system, that she was not going to.

The witness list that came through that afternoon. *1. LONDON, Naomi Kate.*

Hugh's doorway in November, and the three seconds, and *the hours*.

And then she stopped, because there was nowhere else to go.

* * *

Naomi had not moved for about eleven minutes.

Jess sat on the carpet with her hands open on her knees and found that she was not frightened, which was the strangest part, and understood a second later why: it was because she had wanted to say

it for four years and nine months and there had never been anybody left to say it to.

"Say something."

"I'm thinking about how to do this," Naomi said.

"Do what?"

"Tell you that I know."

* * *

The rain went on doing whatever it was doing on the window.

"You —"

"I saw the car on the Tuesday." Naomi said it gently. "Jess. I'd had eleven years of a man who sat outside a house at Lindisfarne for five and a half hours. Do you think I don't look at parked cars?"

"That's —"

"I got the plate on the Wednesday. I wrote it on the back of an electricity bill and I put it in the cutlery drawer, and I was going to take it to Allison on the Monday, and then on the Thursday somebody walked up the hill about forty metres in front of me and went past the café without going in, and I thought: *that's a woman, and she's on her own, and she's frightened of something*."

Jess sat on the floor of her own lounge room.

"The chair," she said.

"What?"

"You were in the chair that faced the door. Both times. Every time."

"Yes," Naomi said.

"I thought that was —" She could not finish it.

"I know what you thought it was." Not unkind. "It was that as well."

* * *

"When did you know what I was?"

"The third Friday. The one with the dog and the man who was always late." Naomi pulled her knees up again. "I asked Allison on the Monday who was acting for him. She told me straight away — there's no reason not to, it's not a secret, it's on the file. She said Tyne Vosper and a woman called Jessica Heart."

"And you'd —"

"I'd shaken her hand across a table four days before."

* * *

Jess got up off the floor and stood in the middle of the room, because she could not sit any more.

"Four years," she said.

"Four years and nine months."

"You've let me sit in a *witness room* —"

"You signed a form," Naomi said. "I watched you sign it. *Relationship to witness. Friend.* I thought about that form for about a year afterwards."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"To who?"

"To Allison. To the police. To *me*."

And Naomi looked away.

* * *

"I've had a long time to work out how to answer that," she said, "and I've got four answers, and you'll have to take all of them."

She put her hands flat on the carpet on either side of her.

"The first one is that I didn't want to be the woman who made another complaint. I'd made two in my life and the first one lapsed and the second one took nine months and ended in a line on a file, and

I was three weeks off a committal, and I thought: if I say this, it all comes down. All of it. He walks."

"That's not —"

"I know it isn't. I said there were four."

She was quiet for a second.

"The second one is that you were the only person in eleven years who came looking for me." She said it to the carpet. "Nobody has ever wanted to know where I was. Not my mother. Not the girls at the desk. Not him — he only wanted me after he had me, that's not the same thing and anybody who's had it knows it isn't. And you sat in a car for three mornings in the cold."

"Naomi."

"The third one is that you'd read all of it." She looked up. "Every page. The hospital, the photographs, the sole of my foot. You knew the whole of it before you ever said hello to me, and that meant there was nothing — not one thing — I was ever going to have to explain. Do you have any idea what that is? To meet somebody who already knows?"

Jess stood in the middle of the room with her arms at her sides.

"And the fourth?"

Naomi thought about it for a long time.

"The fourth is that it was the first thing in my adult life that was mine," she said. "Nobody gave it to me. Nobody could take it off me. He was in Risdon. You were in a car at the bottom of my street. And I was the only person alive who could see both of you, and I decided what happened next, and I have never had that, not once, not for a single day, and I —"

She stopped.

"I liked it," she said.

* * *

Jess asked the only question she had left and she asked it badly.

"Was any of it real?"

And Naomi came up off that floor like something coming out of water.

"Don't." She was white. She was shaking, and it was the first time in four years and nine months that Jess had seen her angry at all. "Don't you *dare*. Don't you dare stand in that spot and ask me that."

"Naomi —"

"All of it was real. Every single thing. The beach was real and the hall was real and the floor at Taroona was real and you were there, you *were there*, you looked at me across a carpet —" Her voice went. "I have told you one lie in four years and it was by not saying something, and you have told about forty, and I have never once asked you to account for a single one of them."

She stood in the middle of her own lounge room with her fists shut.

"I chose you," she said. "That's the worst thing you've heard tonight and you haven't worked out why yet. I *chose* you. Out of everybody. Knowing exactly what you'd done and exactly what it would cost you, and I picked you up and I kept you, and I have been good to you every day for four years."

"Yes," Jess said. "You have."

* * *

It was nearly one in the morning when they were both sitting on the floor again with their backs against the sofa, side by side, not looking at each other.

The torn envelope flap was still on the rug where she had put it.

Naomi reached forward and picked it up at last and turned it over and read the two words, and then read them again.

"Your handwriting's awful."

"I know."

"*Naomi. Lindisfarne.*" She said it the way you read out a street sign. "That's me, that is. That's the whole of me in 2018 — a first name and a suburb, in somebody's handbag."

She held it between two fingers.

"Can I have it?"

And Jess, who had kept it through eighteen years of files and four archive boxes and a wheeled case and a cactus, who had carried it out of a building in Macquarie Street in the pocket of a coat another woman had chosen —

"Yes," she said.

✦

CHAPTER 38

Eleven Drafts

In the morning there was toast.

That was the thing she could not get over. She came out at twenty past eight and Naomi was at the bench in the grey jumper with the radio on low, and there was toast and there was tea and she said, "There's no marmalade, I'll get some," and Jess stood in the doorway of her own kitchen and could not work out how a person was supposed to stand.

"Sit down," Naomi said. "You didn't sleep."

"No."

"I'm not going to talk about it today unless you want to. It'll keep." She put the plate down. "It's kept five years."

* * *

For three days Jess did very little.

She slept in the afternoons, which she had not done since she had chickenpox at nine. She did not eat properly and then ate enormously at about four o'clock. Her period came eleven days early and was vicious, and she stood in the shower on the Saturday with her forehead against the tiles and thought, with the small detached part of her that never stopped working: *that'll be the stress, and you're forty next year, and this is going to start happening.*

Naomi was perfect. She brought things. She asked nothing. She did not once mention the twenty-third of July.

On the fourth day Jess got up and had a shower and sat down at the kitchen table with the laptop.

* * *

The first draft took two hours and was no good, because it apologised.

She knew within four paragraphs what was wrong with it. She had read five hundred letters like it in eighteen years — solicitors explaining themselves — and every one of them was a man building a corridor he could walk back down.

The second draft was shorter and still no good. The third was cold and accurate and it left out the three mornings in the car.

She did eleven in all, over nine days, and by the eleventh it was a page and three-quarters.

It said that in October of that year she had received the Curry brief. It said that she had obtained the complainant's address from the brief, had attended her street on three mornings, and had engineered a meeting in a café at Bellerive on the twenty-fourth of November. It said that she had not identified herself as a solicitor acting for the accused, then or at any time. It said that she had made no contemporaneous record of any of it. It said that she had formed a personal and subsequently sexual relationship with the complainant, which had commenced before the trial and had continued at the date of the letter. It said that she had signed a form at the Supreme Court of Tasmania on the ninth of June describing herself as a friend of the witness, and had sat with her for the whole of her evidence.

It asked for nothing. It did not say that she was no longer practising and it did not say that she was sorry, because neither of those was a

fact that belonged in it.

At the bottom it said: *I am available to answer any question the Board may have.*

She read it on the Thursday and it was true and it was complete, and she sat back in the chair and felt something she had not felt since a corridor outside Court One in September.

* * *

She worked it out on the Thursday night, in bed, at about two.

She had not set out to work it out. She had been lying there going over a sentence, and the lawyer in her, which had not stopped once in five years, took the letter and ran it to the end.

The Board receives it. The Board must deal with it. There is an investigation and it is not secret.

And somewhere in that investigation somebody says out loud, in writing, that the solicitor on the record for Braden Curry was in a relationship with the complainant from before the committal, and sat beside her in the remote witness room while she gave her evidence.

That is a ground. That is a real ground. Jess lay in the dark and drafted the other side's submission in about ninety seconds, because she could have done it at twenty-six: *the appellant's legal representatives were affected by an undisclosed conflict of such gravity that the trial miscarried.*

Six years, non-parole three and a half, backdated to the fourteenth of June. He had been eligible since December.

And if it went anywhere at all — if a single judge thought there was something in it — then there would be a retrial, and there would be a witness list, and at the top of it there would be a name.

* * *

She did not delete the letter.

She got up at about three and sat in the kitchen in the dark and worked out, for the first time in five years, what she had actually done — which was not the café and not the car and not the form.

There was no honest act left that she could do on her own. Every one of them went through a witness room.

She could not fix it without spending Naomi to do it.

* * *

She took it to her on the Saturday morning.

That was the one decent thing in the whole chapter of her life and she would be able to hold onto it afterwards: she did not decide. She printed the letter and put it on the kitchen table and told her everything — the Board, the investigation, the appeal ground, the retrial, the witness list.

"Read it."

Naomi read it twice. It took her about four minutes.

"It's well written," she said.

"Naomi."

"No, I mean it. There's nothing in it feeling sorry for itself." She put it down and squared it with two fingers. "Is that what they'd do? An appeal?"

"They'd try. Any counsel worth paying would try."

"And would it work?"

"I don't know." She made herself say the rest of it. "It might. It's a good point. If I'm honest with you, it's the best point anybody's had in that case."

"And then I'd do it again."

"Yes."

"The room. The screen. All of it, with him sitting there." Naomi looked at the table for a while. "Who'd sit with me?"

* * *

Jess did not answer that, and Naomi did not make her.

She got up and filled the kettle and stood with her back to the room while it went, and Jess sat at the table with a page and three-quarters in front of her.

When she turned round her face had changed.

"Send it," she said.

"What?"

"Send it. If you need to send it, send it." She leaned back against the bench with her arms folded. "I mean that. I'll go back in the box. I've done it once and it nearly killed me and I'd do it again, and I'd be all right, because I'm not the woman who was in that flat with one chair any more."

"You don't —"

"Don't tell me what I don't understand." Steady. "I've sat in more courtrooms than you'd think. I know what it costs. And I'm telling you that if you have to do this to be able to live in your own head, then I will stand in front of that man one more time and I will not blame you for one day of it, not one, for the rest of my life."

The kettle came up behind her and clicked off.

"I'd rather have you," Naomi said, "than be comfortable."

* * *

Here is what Jess could have done on that Saturday.

She had thirty-four thousand dollars. She had a flat in her own name with eleven years on it, and the woman at the bench had no claim on it and would not have made one. She had a brain that two

silks had called the best in the building. She was thirty-nine years old and in good health and the bus to Hobart went past the end of the street every twenty minutes.

And there was a woman in South Hobart who had said, two and a half years earlier, standing in socks at a gate: *any day, any time, three in the morning, and that does not come off the table, ever.*

She could have put four things in a bag on the Saturday afternoon and been drinking tea in Prue Dennison's kitchen by five o'clock.

She thought about all of it. She wants that on the record. She sat at that table and thought about every single piece of it.

* * *

What she did instead was stand up and go across the kitchen and put her arms round a woman who had just offered to be cross-examined for her.

"I'm not sending it," she said.

"Jess —"

"I'm not sending it. It's not a sacrifice and I'm not being noble." She had her face against the side of Naomi's head. "It would wreck one life and it wouldn't repair anything. It'd put you back in a room with him so that I could feel clean."

"You'd be able to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep that much."

And Naomi held on to her, very hard, for a long time, and said into her shoulder: "You are the best person I have ever met in my life."

* * *

She deleted the file that afternoon and emptied the bin and took the printed copy out to the kitchen bin under the sink and then took it out again and tore it into six pieces before she put it back.

Then she went and sat in the garden, and it was a good afternoon, and something had come off her.

She did not notice at the time that she had just done, to herself, in one morning, exactly what the hallway and the trackpad and the carpet at Taroona had all done, and that the difference was that this time nobody had asked.

* * *

On the Sunday she went to the drawer in the bedroom for her passport, because there was a renewal notice and because that is the sort of thing you do on a Sunday.

The passport was there. The spare keys were there.

The envelope flap was not.

She stood with the drawer open for a second and then went out to the lounge room, where Naomi was on the floor with the newspaper, and said, lightly, in the voice you use:

"Where'd that bit of envelope go?"

"I put it somewhere safe," Naomi said, without looking up.

And Jess stood in the doorway in her socks with her passport in her hand and opened her mouth to ask the next question.

✦

CHAPTER 39

The Front Counter

She did not ask.

She stood in the doorway with her passport in her hand and her mouth open and then she said, "Right," and went and put the passport back in the drawer, and that was the twenty-ninth of August.

* * *

She turned forty in the March and they had dinner at a place in Salamanca and it was a good night.

Then there was a winter, and then another spring, and the thing that is hardest to set down about that year is that most of it was pleasant. They walked. Naomi had four days at the council now and was good at it and was liked. There was a Wednesday class and a Thursday film and a woman who came to the door about a hedge.

Jess read. She read more in that year than she had in the eighteen before it. She would not have been able to tell you what about.

* * *

The flat came up in October.

Naomi had it worked out. Battery Point was forty-one years old and had no insulation and a bathroom from 1994 and the body corporate had put a special levy on in July. There were places at

Lindisfarne and Howrah for two hundred and sixty thousand less with a yard, and she had been to see one.

"You'd be out from under it," she said. "No mortgage at all. Nothing owing on anything, ever again."

"And the rest of it goes where?"

"In the account. Where else would it go?"

Jess sat at the table and looked at her own hands.

"No," she said.

* * *

It was not like the other no.

The other no, in June of the fourth year, had been four seconds and flat and Naomi had been proud of her. This one came out of her like something tearing.

"That flat is mine," she said. "I bought it when I was twenty-seven on my own and it is the last thing in the world that is mine, and I'm not selling it, and I'm not putting the money in an account I can't get into."

The room went very quiet.

"You can't get into," Naomi said.

"You know what I mean."

"I'm asking what you mean."

"I don't know the password," Jess said. "I haven't known the password since April of the second year."

Naomi sat completely still for a moment. Then she got up and went and got the laptop and brought it back and put it on the table and turned it round and opened the banking page and typed, and the balance came up — twenty-nine thousand, four hundred and ten — and she pushed the laptop across.

"Change it."

"Naomi —"

"Change it now. Put whatever you like. Don't tell me what it is." Her chin had gone. "And then ring them in the morning and take my name off, I'll sign whatever they want, and I'll go back to doing my own and you can do yours, and —"

She stopped and put her hand over her mouth and stood up and went out of the room.

* * *

She was in the bathroom for twenty minutes and she came out with her face washed and she was perfectly all right, and she did not mention the account again, that night or ever.

And she did not change. She was not cold. She did not go away.

She grieved.

That was the word for it and Jess could not get round it. For about five weeks there was a woman in the flat who was quiet and kind and who flinched, very slightly, about once a day, when Jess came into a room. Who said *of course* to things. Who stopped putting her hand on Jess's back and then, when Jess said something about it, put it back on deliberately, which was worse than it being gone.

Jess apologised three times in five weeks for things she could not name, and on the third time Naomi cried and said, "Please stop saying sorry to me. You've done nothing. I'm the one who —" and did not finish it.

* * *

She went to the bank on the eleventh of November.

She did it quietly and she felt filthy doing it, and she queued behind a man with a cheque book and sat down with a young woman called Erin who had a lanyard and a screen.

It took eleven minutes.

The account was in both names and had been since April of the second year. Either party could operate it. There was twenty-nine thousand, four hundred and ten dollars in it, and Erin reset the online access there and then with Jess's licence and a code to her phone, and said that she could transfer the lot to a sole account that afternoon if she wanted and that it was entirely her decision.

There were no restrictions of any kind on that account. There never had been. Nothing had been hidden and nothing had been moved and every transaction for five years was there to be scrolled through, and Jess scrolled through nine months of it standing at a bench in a bank in Elizabeth Street and found a woman buying groceries and paying a mortgage and putting forty dollars a week in from a council wage.

"Was there anything else I can help with today?"

"No," Jess said. "Thank you. You've been very helpful."

* * *

She sat in the car in the car park at Centrepoint for a long time, which was where she had sat with her hair done five years before.

She had twenty-nine thousand dollars and access to all of it and a flat in her own name and a car with eleven months' rego on it.

And she sat there and could not think of one single place to drive.

* * *

She found the box on the twenty-eighth of November, and she was not looking for it.

The hot water service had gone and the plumber wanted the meter box key, and the meter box key was in the laundry cupboard on the top shelf with the paint tins and the bag of pegs and a plastic tub that had been there for years.

She got the tub down to reach past it and the lid came off.

* * *

It was not hidden. That was the first thing. It was a two-dollar plastic tub on a shelf in a laundry in a flat she owned.

Inside it, in order, there was this.

A spiral notebook with a blue cover, about half full, in Naomi's handwriting. The first page was dated the eighth of October of the first year and said: *White Corolla bottom of Pindari St 0720–0755. Not a neighbour. Didn't get out.* The second entry was the Wednesday with a registration number on it. The third was the Thursday.

The entries ran, roughly weekly, for five years. They were short. They were almost all ordinary — *J home late, good mood, said the Lowther matter is settled* — and perhaps one in fifteen was not ordinary, and those ones were dated and timed and had no adjectives in them at all.

23 July. Told J about 2017. J told me about Oct, all of it, incl the car. Produced envelope. 11.40pm.

Under the notebook there was a manila folder.

In it: a printout of a Supreme Court remote witness room support person form, which must have been photographed, because Jess had signed only one and had handed it to an officer. A printout of the Legal Profession Board's complaints page from a Thursday in September. A printout of the practice rule about communicating with a represented party. Two pages from a judgment with a paragraph marked in pencil.

And at the bottom, flat, in a small clear sleeve, a torn-off envelope flap with brown edges and an eight-year-old crease.

Naomi. Lindisfarne.

* * *

Jess sat down on the floor of the laundry with the tub in her lap.

Here is what she understood, in about ninety seconds, sitting on the lino with the plumber's van idling outside.

That this was the behaviour of a woman who had spent eleven years being told, pleasantly, each time, what she had actually meant — and who had come out the other side having learned exactly one thing, which was to write it down at the time.

That there was nothing in that tub that a reasonable person could call a weapon. That the first three entries were a frightened woman recording a car outside her house, and that she had been right to.

That the printouts were what anybody does at two in the morning.

That if this tub were put in front of a court, every single page of it would help Naomi and none of it would help Jess.

And that it was all true. That was the part. There was not one false line in the whole of it. A woman had written down, accurately, for five years, what the other woman in the flat had done.

* * *

She put the lid back on and put it on the shelf and gave the plumber the key and made him a cup of tea.

* * *

She left at twenty past eleven that night.

Naomi was asleep. Jess packed in the dark in the spare room with the door shut, and what she took was: three days of clothes, her passport, her birth certificate, the title documents from the bottom drawer, her toothbrush, the charger, a photograph of her father, and the grey bra from behind the thermals.

She stood in the bedroom doorway for a while and looked at a woman asleep on her side with one knee drawn up, in a bed in a flat at

Battery Point, and did not wake her, and did not leave a note.

She drove to a motel on the Brooker and paid a hundred and twelve dollars for a room with a kettle and a plastic cup in a bag, and she lay on top of the covers in her coat with the light on and did not sleep at all.

Her phone did not go. That was the thing she kept checking for and it did not happen. At eight in the morning there was one message.

> Your car's gone. I'm not going to ring you and I'm not going to come and find you. Whatever you need. x

* * *

She went to Bellerive.

She could not have told anybody why that one. There is a station in Hobart four minutes from the motel and she drove across the bridge and up and parked outside the station at Bellerive and sat there for twenty-five minutes.

Then she went in.

It is a small front counter with a glass partition and a rack of pamphlets and a bench along one wall, and there was a woman ahead of her about a dog, and then there was a constable of about twenty-six with a very clean uniform who said, "Morning. How can I help?"

And Jess Heart, who had stood up in that building's courtrooms for eighteen years, opened her mouth.

"I want to report —"

She stopped.

Because the next word had to be a noun, and there wasn't one.

* * *

She tried for about four minutes. She could hear herself doing it.

She said that she had been in a relationship for six years. She said that it had ended last night. She said that there was a — that there were photographs, that there were a lot of photographs, and the constable said, right, has she threatened to share those, and Jess said no.

She said that there had been a period where she had not had access to money, and the constable asked whether she had access now, and she said yes, and he said, right.

She said that she had given up her job, and he waited, and she said, no, nobody asked me to.

She said, "She knew who I was before she met me."

"Sorry — before she met you?"

"Before I met her. She knew." Jess heard it leave her mouth. "I was the solicitor acting for her ex-partner and she worked out who I was in the third week and she never said."

The constable looked at her.

"Okay," he said, carefully, and he was not unkind, and she watched him arrive at it. "And did she do anything to you? Physically?"

"No."

"Has she threatened you?"

"No."

"Has she said anything about the photos?"

"We used to joke about it," Jess said.

* * *

He took her name and date of birth and a contact number and he wrote about half a page.

Then he came round from behind the partition, which was decent of him, and gave her two pamphlets — one about family violence services and one with a number for a support line — and said that

what she was describing sounded very difficult and that there were people a lot better at this than he was, and that somebody would be in touch.

"Can I ask what the follow-up is," Jess said.

"It'll go in as an occurrence and it'll get allocated." He was already half turned back to the computer. "Someone'll give you a ring."

* * *

She sat in the car outside the station at Bellerive with two pamphlets on the passenger seat.

Four hundred metres up the hill there was a café on a corner with nine tables and a window on two sides, where a woman in a navy coat used to sit in the chair that faced the door.

Nobody rang her that week.

Nobody rang her the week after.

✦

CHAPTER 40

Nine Tables

Nobody rang in December.

She rang them in February and was told that the occurrence had been allocated, and in April that it had been reallocated, and in June a woman was very apologetic and took a message and read her number back to her twice.

In the last week of August she stopped ringing.

* * *

She had the folder done by then.

She had started it in the motel on the Brooker and finished it in a flat at Battery Point with no furniture in the lounge room, and it ran to sixty-four pages and it was the best piece of work she had done in five years.

Chronology. Tabs. A schedule of the money with the account numbers and the dates. The eleven drafts of the Board letter. A note of the tub in the laundry cupboard, its contents listed, undated, because she had no photograph of it and would not take one. Everything in order, counter-clockwise from her left hand, the way she had laid out every brief since she was twenty-three.

It was a good brief and she knew it was a good brief, and she also knew — sitting on the floor with it at one in the morning — that she had been reading briefs for nineteen years.

* * *

She made the appointment for the twenty-ninth.

The firm was a two-partner thing in a converted house at Lindisfarne that did family law and orders and conveyancing, and the woman she was given was about thirty and had been admitted four years and her name was Carly Deane.

It was three hundred and thirty dollars for the hour.

She asked to meet somewhere other than the office. She could not have explained why and Carly Deane did not ask her to, and said there was a café at Bellerive four minutes from them and would that do.

* * *

Jess got there twenty minutes early.

It had been painted since. There was a different machine and the counter had moved and the rack of newspapers had gone. There were still nine tables and a window on two sides, and the woman who had worked there eleven years was now a woman who had worked there seventeen, and she did not recognise her.

Jess bought a coffee and sat down and put the folder on the table.

* * *

She had thought about what to wear for two days.

The suits had gone to New Town three years ago. What she had was the navy coat and the grey coat and four good jumpers and the boots with the heel on them, and every single item of clothing she put on that morning had been chosen for her, in a shop, by the woman she had come to this café to make a complaint about.

She did her hair up with the pins.

She sat in the chair facing the door.

* * *

Carly Deane was small and quick and had a leather satchel and a laptop she did not open.

She was perfectly courteous and she was also, in a way Jess recognised at forty paces, slightly nervous — because she had looked the name up, obviously, the way anybody does, and three minutes of searching turns up eleven years of reported decisions with *Ms J. Heart appeared for the accused* in them.

"Thanks for meeting me out here. Shall I —"

"It's all in there," Jess said. "It's indexed. Tab one's the chronology."

"Right." Carly Deane put her hand flat on the cover and did not open it. "Can I do it the other way first? Just — tell me what's happened, in your own words, and then I'll read all of it properly, I promise. I'd rather hear it."

And that was the correct way to do it, and Jess had taught it to two juniors, and she sat there and could not get a sentence out for eleven seconds.

* * *

It took her fifty minutes.

She did it in order and she did it accurately and she did not editorialise, and at some point she noticed that she was giving evidence and could not stop.

Carly Deane wrote it down and asked eight questions.

Had there been any physical violence at any time? No.

Any threat, express or implied, of physical violence? No.

Had the respondent ever prevented her from leaving a room, a house, a car? No.

The photographs and the recordings — had there been any threat to publish, share, or show them to anybody? No. The opposite. She offered to destroy all of them, in front of me, and I said no.

The money. There were no restrictions. I could have walked into any branch at any time for five years. I didn't know the password because I never asked for it.

Employment. Nobody asked me to resign. She told me three times not to do it for her, once in terms, and I said at the time that I wasn't.

The friends and the family. I did that. Both of them. I made those phone calls myself and I was the one who said the unforgivable things.

Taroona. She asked me whether I wanted to stop, out loud, in front of two other people, and I said no.

* * *

Carly Deane stopped writing and sat back.

"Can I ask you a lawyer question or would you rather I didn't."

"Ask it."

"Why didn't you leave?"

"I had thirty-four thousand dollars, a flat in my own name, a car, and a friend in South Hobart who'd told me the door was open at three in the morning." Jess turned her cup round. "There isn't an answer. I've had nine months and there isn't one."

"That's not true, though, is it."

"Isn't it?"

"You've just given me the answer for fifty minutes," Carly Deane said. "You've just told me that she asked you every time, and that every time you said yes, and that each yes made the next one smaller. That's not nothing. That's a known thing. It's got a name."

Something went through Jess's chest.

"It has," she said.

"So I'm not going to sit here and tell you nothing happened to you."

* * *

And then she did the job properly.

She said that the definition was wide. That family violence in this state is not only assault — that economic abuse is in there, and emotional abuse and intimidation are in there, and that a course of conduct can found an order without anybody ever being hit. She said she had run those applications and won them.

She said: so the question is not whether the law has a word for it. The law has a word for it.

The question is what a magistrate would have in front of them on the day.

"Tell me what you think she'd file," Jess said.

"You tell me. You've read more of these than I have."

So Jess set it out, in a café at Bellerive, acting for the other side one last time.

A response denying nothing of consequence, because nothing of consequence needed denying. Bank statements for five years showing a joint account with no restrictions, a woman putting forty dollars a week in from a council wage, and nine thousand dollars saved in the first four months. A resignation letter in Jess's own words. Two witnesses from Taroona who would say, truthfully, that the applicant was asked whether she wanted to stop and said no. A support person form signed *Friend* in the applicant's hand.

And a spiral notebook with a blue cover, begun on the eighth of October eight years ago, with *White Corolla bottom of Pindari St 0720–0755* on the first page.

"Yes," Carly Deane said quietly. "That's what I'd have filed."

* * *

"And then there's the other thing," she said, "and I have to put it to you, because if I don't, somebody will."

"Go on."

"If she applied against you. What would she have?"

Jess sat with her hands round a cold cup.

"She'd have a solicitor who obtained her address from the brief of a man charged with persistently abusing her," she said. "Who attended her street on three mornings and recorded none of it. Who engineered a meeting and did not identify herself. Who formed a sexual relationship with her before the trial and concealed it from the court, her principal, counsel and the Director. Who sat beside her through her evidence on a form describing herself as a friend."

"Yes."

"She'd have all of that from my own mouth, in writing, eleven times over, in tab seven."

"Yes."

"And a magistrate would hear it in open court," Jess said, "and would be right to."

* * *

The machine went behind the counter and somebody laughed at the far end of the room.

"I can file it," Carly Deane said. "It's your decision, not mine. If you tell me to file, I'll file it, and I'll run it properly, and I won't pull a punch."

"But."

"But I'd be putting you in a witness box for two days to be cross-examined about every one of those answers you gave me, by

somebody good, and at the end of it my honest view is that you would not get your order." She said it without dropping her eyes. "And it would be the only time any of this is ever said out loud in a public courtroom, and it would be said about you."

"I know."

"I'm sorry. I'd rather tell you that now than in nine months."

Nine months, Jess thought.

* * *

Here is what she had said, standing up, in Court 3 and Court 1 and a dozen others, for eighteen years, in exactly that tone, as a reason.

The complainant disengaged.

* * *

Carly Deane put the folder back across the table, squared it with two fingers, and did not let go of it straight away.

"Can I say one more thing, and it's not legal advice."

"Yes."

"The best brief I've ever seen is the one you've just handed me about yourself." She let go of it. "That's not a kind thing to say. I think it's a terrible thing, actually. But somebody should tell you that you're still very good at this."

* * *

She paid the three hundred and thirty dollars by transfer at the table, which took about forty seconds, and Carly Deane packed the satchel and stood up and then stopped.

"Is there someone you can ring?"

And Jess looked past her, at the door.

She had been sitting in that chair for an hour and a half and had not once thought about why she had chosen it. It faces the door. You can see everybody who comes in and everybody who goes out and nobody can come up behind you, and a woman had sat in it eight years ago with a book she was not reading and a bag on the seat opposite, and Jess had put that down to being frightened, and had been right.

"Yes," she said. "There is."

* * *

She sat on in the café for about twenty minutes after Carly Deane had gone.

Then she took her phone out and found the number. Underneath it the app said that the last call between them was five years and ten months ago.

It rang four times.

"Jess?"

She opened her mouth and nothing came out of it at all, not one word, and she sat in a chair facing a door with her hand over her eyes while a woman in a kitchen in South Hobart waited.

"Right," Prue said. "Where are you."

✦

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Relationship to Witness was developed in consultation with AI. The cover image was also created with AI.

Read more from Sharyn Underhill, and write to her, at underhillnovels.com

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