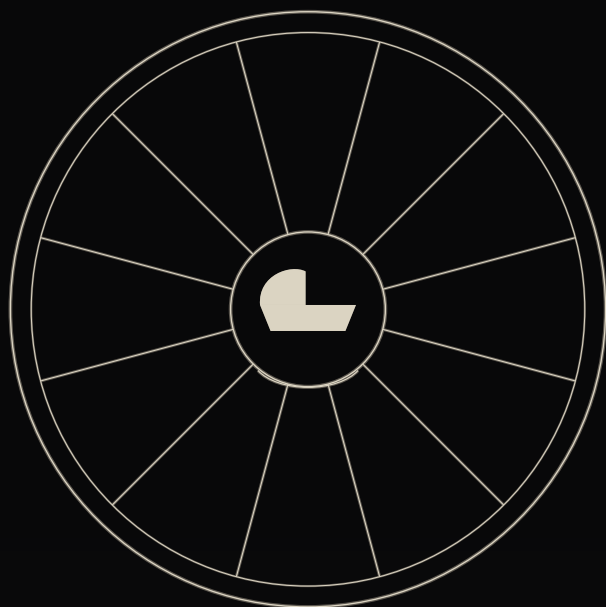


CRADLE OF ASH



Its flesh keeps no memory of fire.

ENDER KNIGHT

A NOVEL OF THE GAME

CRADLE OF ASH

Its flesh keeps no memory of fire.



Ender Knight

A novel of the game

This is a work of fiction. The town, the company, the hospital and the people in it are invented, and the documents quoted are the ones a player finds on the floor.

Set in Palatino and Courier.

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*Write this above every door: its flesh keeps no memory
of fire. What we burn today will be whole tomorrow
and will not remember that we tried.*

— The First Rule, Order of the Second Cradle, 1891



Before

I'M NOT GOING TO tell you why I was on the bus.

The other three will tell you why they were on it. They didn't tell me in the ditch, and I want to be honest about that, because the version of this where four strangers stand in the wet and explain themselves is the version that didn't happen. It came out of them the way things come out of people: a piece at a time, over days, in kitchens and stairwells and once under sixty feet of water, when there was nothing left to talk about but the truth. I never told mine. They asked twice, and then they stopped asking, and it is the one thing in all of this that I am keeping. It doesn't matter. That is the point of it, and it took me the whole valley to understand that it was the point: it did not matter what any of us thought we were there for. We had a letter, or a call, or a reason, and the letters and the calls and the reasons were the same letter, and the town had sent it.

So I went.

Route 9 was closed below the ridge. There was a county truck across it with its light bar going, orange, slow, the color that means somebody else's problem, and two sawhorses, and a man in a reflective vest with a clipboard in a plastic sleeve against the wet. He said chemical spill. He said it the way you say a thing

you've been told to say. Behind him a bus was idling with its door open and its interior lights on, a charter bus, the kind with the high windows, and there were three other people already on it who had also been let through, because we all had letters or calls or reasons, and the man in the vest had a list, and we were on it.

That should have been the first thing. We were on a list.

I remember the smell more than anything else about the checkpoint, because it was the first thing that was wrong and I didn't have a word for it yet. Diesel, from the bus. Wet asphalt. Pine, from the ridge, which you couldn't see. And under all of that, coming up the road out of the fog, something else, faint and sweet and low, like a refrigerator that's been unplugged for a week with the door shut. The man in the vest had a cloth over his mouth that he let drop when he talked to us. He didn't look down the hill. He looked at his list.

The bus was warm and smelled of the heater and the driver's coffee, and I sat halfway back on the left. The two in the back seat were girls, and I took them for older than they were, because one of them was tall and sat the way tall people sit, taking up the space she was owed, and the other was folded up small with her sneakers on the seat in front, one earbud in her own ear and the other in her sister's. The big kid across the aisle from me had a lanyard on and a bag on his lap with both arms around it, and he was asleep before we moved, or doing a good impression. The driver never turned his head. Not once, at the checkpoint, when the man in the vest banged twice on the door, not on the hill.

The bus went down into the fog with its headlights on and the four of us not talking. The lights made a wall in front of us, white, and the wall moved with us, so that we were always about to arrive somewhere and never did. The small girl said one thing in the whole ride. She said, "It smells like the fridge at Dee's," and the tall one said, "Ska," and that was all.

Then the bus went off the road.



ONE

Quarantine

I WOKE UP SIDEWAYS, with the window under me and grass pressed against the glass like something trying to get in, and somebody's bag on my head. The bus was on its side in a ditch at the edge of a subdivision, and the driver was gone, and the door was open above us like a hatch, and the fog was inside with us. It had come in the way water comes into a boat, without hurrying, and it lay in the aisle.

The first voice I heard was a girl's, saying a name, once, sharp, the way you say a name when it's the only word you have. "Scarlet."

"I'm here. I'm here, I'm — ow. I'm here. I'm fine. Get off my leg."

"That's not me. That's the seat."

"Then get the seat off my leg."

There were four of us. The two girls were sisters, and you could see it, the same jaw, the same way of standing once they were standing, though you wouldn't have put them a year apart. Tessa was the older one, seventeen, and she was tall the way some girls are tall at seventeen, all at once and ahead of

everyone, so that adults talked to her like she was twenty and she let them. She was built solid, not heavy, the build of somebody made to carry things, and she had a stillness about her that I mistook for calm. It wasn't calm. It was arithmetic. She was always counting something.

Scarlet was sixteen and looked thirteen and behaved, at any given moment, like whichever of those would be more trouble. She was a coat hanger in a hoodie. Elbows, knees, a mouth. Fourteen months younger than her sister, which she would tell you was fourteen months and not a year, because she counted too, differently. She was the one who had been saying *ow*.

Tessa had been the one who said the name.

The third was a kid, nineteen it turned out, and built like he had never missed a day of anything. Jayden Jones. He had the lanyard still on, a laminated pass with a company logo I didn't look at yet, and he was already up and moving down the tilted aisle checking each of us like he'd been trained to, hands on shoulders, *you good, you good, look at me, look at me, you good*, and I told him I was, and he didn't believe me until I had looked at him. He said afterward it was the site first-aid course. It wasn't the course. It was him.

And me. I told them my name in the ditch and I'm not putting it here.

Nobody was hurt. That was the first wrong thing and I didn't notice it. The bus had gone off the road at speed and rolled and laid down in a ditch, and all four of us climbed out of the door-hatch into the wet without a scratch, and the driver's seat was empty, and the driver's coffee was still in its holder, still level, not a drop of it spilled, like the bus had been set down gently on its side by a hand.

"Where's the driver," Tessa said.

"Gone," said Jayden.

"Gone where."

"I don't know. Gone."

"He never looked back," Scarlet said. "The whole way. Did anyone see him look back?" Nobody had. She was crouched on the side of the bus with her arms around her knees, looking down the road into the fog, and she said, in a voice that was trying for something and not getting it: "Well. That's a bad sign."

It was the first joke. It wasn't a good one. I have thought since that it was the bravest thing anybody did that day.

. . .

The second wrong thing was on the school fence by the road, printed on company paper, laminated against the weather and zip-tied to the chain-link at the height of an adult's eyes.

RENLOW BIOGENETICS — VOLUNTARY RELOCATION NOTICE

Do not wait for family members employed at the campus. They have already been relocated.

Do not wait for family members admitted to Ashbrook Memorial. They have already been relocated.

This is a precaution. Ashbrook's water is safe.
Ashbrook's air is safe.

We thank you for fifty-one years of partnership.

Tessa read it twice. She read everything twice. "Relocated where," she said.

Scarlet read it once. "Who thanks a town?"

The subdivision was the kind that gets built all at once and then ages all at once: a curve of houses in three colors, garages facing the road, saplings in wire cages that had grown into the cages and would now never get out of them. Wet grass. Wet lawns. Everything beaded. The fog took the ends of the street in both directions and gave nothing back, and out of it, from somewhere up the curve, a smoke alarm was chirping on a low battery. One chirp, a pause the length of a slow breath, one chirp.

It went on the whole first day. Nobody was ever going to change that battery.

The other sound was the bus. Its engine had died but something under it ticked, cooling, and diesel was going into the ditch water and lying on it in colors.

"Is that a hospital?" Scarlet said. "On the lanyard. The little building."

"Campus," Jayden said.

"What's a campus."

"It's what they call it." He had the pass turned in his fingers, then let it drop to his chest. "Renlow. It's the company. It's the—" He stopped. "It's a job."

"Was," Tessa said, looking up the road at the notice.

"Was," he agreed, and got his phone out.

There was no signal, there was never going to be any signal, but the map on his phone was cached, and it had the campus on it, and the hospital, and the town, and the roads, and he turned it so we could see. The hospital was northeast, on a hill. Through the fog, when he pointed, we could see the shape of the hill, and on it a light. One light. Steady, white, too high to be a streetlight. It turned out later to be the generator floods on the maternity wing, and it turned out later that everything in the valley was facing it.

"Why've you got the map of the town," Scarlet said.

"They send you a packet."

"Who's they."

"Ska," said Tessa.

"I'm asking."

"Ask later."

We went into the houses because there was nothing else to do.

. . .

They were the houses of people who had left in a hurry, or not at all. Lights off. Doors unlocked, most of them, or open. In the first one the fridge was standing open with its light dead and the milk had gone to cheese in the carton, and the smell of it met us in the hall and didn't get better in the kitchen. A pan was on the stove, black inside, the burner off, and the whole kitchen had the flat scorched smell of a pan that boiled dry days ago and got left, the kind of smell that gets into the curtains. A clock on the wall was going. Somebody's slippers were side by side under the table where they'd been stepped out of.

Tessa opened drawers. Jayden went through into the back and I heard him try a door and come back. Scarlet stood in the middle of the kitchen and turned around slowly once with her arms out, like she could feel where the people had gone if she pointed at it.

There was a gas bill on the counter with pencil on the back, and I read it standing up, and then I sat down.

Dale came back.

Not woke up. Came back. He was cold four hours and then he was standing in the hall with his head wrong.

BURNING IS THE ONLY THING THAT WORKS. Not the head. Not the heart. I tried both on the dog and the dog kept coming and I had to do the fire anyway and by then it had my hand.

Do it while they're still down. Do it all the way. Stand there and watch it go black and then keep watching.

I know how that sounds. I know what I'm asking you to do to your own family.

Do it anyway.

I passed it to Jayden and he read it and passed it to Tessa, who read it twice, and Scarlet read it over her sister's arm, on tiptoe, and none of us said anything for a while.

We didn't believe it. I want that written down: we read that, and we didn't believe it, and it was Jayden's fault and mine that we didn't, because we were the ones who said what adults say, which is that a person who writes in capitals on the back of a gas bill is a person who hasn't slept. Jayden said it first and I agreed with him, and I was the one who should have known better, being older, being the one who's supposed to know what a note like that costs.

"Or it's true and he hadn't slept," Tessa said. "Both can be true."

"Tess."

"I'm just saying both can be true."

Scarlet had gone into the hall. She came back with the dog's bowl, which was full, and put it down on the counter beside the bill without a word, like she was entering it into evidence, and then she went and stood by the back door with her arms folded and looked at the yard.

We went on to the next house, and the next. I won't do all of them. The one with the sewing machine still threaded and the radio on with nothing coming out of it but the hiss. The one with the birthday banner. The one where the bathtub was full and cold and there was nobody in it, which was worse than if there had been. The smell was the same in all of them, the sweet fridge smell, and under it something older, mildew and carpet and the faint sourness of houses where the windows haven't been opened; and in each one the clocks were going, which I had never before noticed was a sound.

Somewhere down at the end of the curve a loudspeaker on a pole came on every fifteen minutes and said something official in a tinny voice, on a timer, and by the time it reached us across the lawns and through the fog it wasn't words anymore. It was just the shape of an announcement. We stopped hearing it after the first two.

Tessa found the pistol in the fourth house. Nightstand, right-hand side of the bed, the box of rounds beside it and the manual under both, and she stood in that bedroom with the fog against the window and read the manual before she touched the gun, the way you would if you were the kind of person who reads the manual, which she was, all the way down. Then she checked it the way people check things in movies, and then she checked it for real. Scarlet watched her from the doorway with her mouth slightly open.

"Since when do you —"

"Since now."

"Let me try."

"No."

"I'd be good."

"You'd be *enthusiastic*," Tessa said, and put the box of rounds in her jacket, and that was that.

. . .

Then the first of them came out of the fog at the end of the street.

They are residents. That's the thing nobody tells you and the thing you can't unknow. Slippers. A bathrobe. A man in a company polo shirt with the lanyard still on, the same lanyard as Jayden's, the same little building on it. They walk slowly and they don't run and they murmur; I thought it was praying, and it is, in a way. When there are two of them there are soon six. When they have you down they don't finish you. They pick you up.

You hear them before you see them. The shuffle first, slippers and bare feet on wet asphalt, a sound like somebody sweeping. Then the murmur, which at a distance isn't a voice at all but a hum in the fog, low and level, and I couldn't have told you then that it had a tune. Then they're shapes, and then they're people, and that's the moment you lose, every time, the half second

where your eye says *neighbor* before the rest of you says otherwise.

The man in the bathrobe came up the middle of the road with his head hanging to one side and his hands open at his sides, and he didn't look at us, and he didn't stop. Tessa stood in the road with the pistol in both hands the way the manual had told her to and said, "Stop," in a voice that was not seventeen, and he didn't stop, and she put him down with three shots, close together, and he stayed down. Then the polo shirt came out of the fog behind him with two more, and we went around the man in the road and got into the next house and shut the door and Jayden put the couch across it.

Ninety seconds later he was up. Faster. Something in his neck had gone that had let his head hang, and now it didn't hang; it looked at us through the glass beside the door, level, and it murmured.

Scarlet had the grill lighter in her hand. The long kind, for a gas stove, the kind you find in a drawer with the rubber bands. She had a bottle in the other hand, brandy, the kind people keep at the back of a cabinet for a Christmas that hasn't happened yet, and she had a dish towel half stuffed into the neck of it, and she was doing the rest of the stuffing with her thumb, fast, and I realized she had been building it since the kitchen, since the gas bill, since before any of us believed a word of it. She held it out to me.

She was sixteen. I want that written down before the next sentence.

I took it. I went out the back door and around the side of the house, and he was in the road still getting his legs under him in the way they do, the way a foal does, and I poured it, and I lit it, and I stood there and watched it go black, and then I kept watching.

The smell of it is the thing I can give you. Brandy, at first, sweet and hot, almost pleasant. Then hair. Then the other thing, which is the thing you know from cooking and refuse to know from cooking, and then just smoke, and then the fog took the smoke and there was nothing left in the road but the shape.

Tessa stood in the doorway the whole time with the pistol up, not on him. On the street. Watching the fog for the others, watching my back, with her sister behind her already halfway through the second bottle.

I have burned more people than I can count since then. I can still see the first one. He had a wedding ring on.

. . .

We learned the rest the way the town had learned it: from what the town had left behind.

On the back wall of the liquor store on the corner of Winslow, spray-painted, in a hand that had run out of paint on the last word and gone over it again:

ONE BOTTLE

ONE RAG

DON'T BE CLEVER

AND FOR GOD'S SAKE STAND BACK, MARCUS

(smaller, lower right)

Marcus didn't.

The liquor store smelled like the inside of a bottle. The window was in, and the floor was a glitter of glass with liquor pooled between the shelves, and every breath in there was sweet and sharp enough to make your eyes water, and somewhere under the sweetness the same fridge smell, faint, coming from the back. Bottles were everywhere. Rags were not. We took what we could carry and Jayden cut a curtain into strips with a kitchen knife in the apartment upstairs, and Scarlet, sitting cross-legged on the floor with the strips in a pile in her lap, worked out the rest.

"It's aimed at me," she said. "Don't be clever. Everything that says don't be clever on it is aimed at me. Ask her."

"It's aimed at you," Tessa said.

"See." She held up a bottle. "Rag in. Not all the way. You leave some out for the—" She looked at the graffiti through the window, upside down from where she sat. "For the not being clever. Then it's got to be wet, the part that's out, or it's just a bottle with a scarf on."

"How do you know it's got to be wet?"

"Because the other way's stupid," she said. "You'd be lighting a dry rag. You'd be standing there like Marcus."

She was right, and she had worked it out from a wall and a picture in her head, and she showed the three of us how to stuff and tie and tip, and how to throw so the arc came down and not the bottle, and by the third one she was throwing better than any of us, a whipped underhand thing with her whole skinny body behind it that put the bottle where she was looking. The fire pools. It burns what's in it. That's bodies, and brush, and, once, Jayden's left boot.

He had a way of dealing with things like that. He stamped it out, checked the boot, checked the foot, said "fine," and ate a protein bar. He had a box of them in his bag, a whole box, which was what had been on my head in the ditch. He made us eat one each, in the second house, and again in the fourth, and when Tessa said she couldn't, he said, "You don't lose it in a week. You lose it in a day of not eating. Eat." She ate.

"Are you a bodybuilder," Scarlet said, through hers.

"Construction."

"What do you construct?"

"Whatever's on the drawing."

"What's on the drawing Monday?"

He chewed. "Was," he said.

"What was."

He didn't answer that one. He finished the bar and folded the wrapper into a square and put it in his pocket, because you don't drop things on a site, and got up, and looked out the window at the fog.

. . .

On a kitchen cabinet, on the inside of the door, taped, in the round careful hand of somebody who doesn't write much:

RULES WHILE MOM IS AT WORK

3. If you hear the singing, get in the cupboard.

Don't look first. Get in.

4. The singing is not close when you can hear it.
That's the good part.

5. They stop singing right before. So the quiet is
the bad part, not the song.

6. Count to five hundred after the quiet. Slow. Then
you can come out.

(in crayon, underneath)

I WAS QUIET THE WHOLE TIME.

The cabinet was empty. I want to say that clearly. The cabinet was empty and the door was open and I don't know either way.

Scarlet read it and then read the crayon and then went and sat on the stairs. Tessa read it twice and said, "Where are one and two."

"What?"

"Rules one and two. It starts at three."

"They're on the other side," Jayden said. "The first page. It's the second page." He looked at the door and there was nothing on the other side of it, and there was no first page anywhere, and he stood there with his big hands hanging and said, quietly, "Somebody should have left the first page."

We hadn't heard any singing then. We heard it an hour later, from the east, from the direction of the hospital, so faint that Jayden said it was a radio. It was children. It was a nursery tune,

a simple one, the kind you know without knowing where you learned it, and I did know it, and it took me three days to work out from where.

Tessa stood very still in the road with her head turned.

"It's a nursery rhyme," Scarlet said. "Everyone knows that one."

"No," said Tessa. "*I know it.*"

She didn't say anything else about it then. Scarlet looked at her sister, and I saw the small one file something away about the big one, and I have thought since that they were both doing that the whole time, filing each other, keeping each other's pages.

. . .

The vet clinic was on the corner past the school, a low brick place with a ramp and a sign with a cartoon dog on it. It smelled of disinfectant and dog and, faintly, of the thing you smell in every vet's, which is fear. The kennels in the back were all open. The bowls were all full. Thirteen of the cages were empty, and in the fourteenth, at the end, there was a dog.

A big yellow dog, a Lab or most of one, sitting up. Not lying. Sitting, square, with its back to the door of its cage and its face to the far wall, and it didn't turn its head when we came in. It was humming. I don't have another word. Its mouth was open a crack and there was one note coming out of it, held, low, and it didn't get louder when we came near and it didn't stop.

There was a sheet on the intake desk in the front, in a vet's handwriting, which is a doctor's handwriting with less time:

They will not lie down facing the door. Every one of them turns northeast and sits. That's the hospital. I checked on a map because I thought I was losing my mind.

At two in the morning they hum. Not howling. Fourteen dogs holding one note together and none of them opening their mouths more than a crack.

Scarlet went back to the cage. Tessa said, "Don't," and Scarlet undid the latch anyway and swung the door open and stood back, and the dog didn't move. It didn't so much as flick an ear. It sat facing the wall, and beyond the wall the hospital, with its one note going.

"It doesn't want out," Scarlet said, after a minute. "It wants northeast."

We left it. I think about that dog more than I think about a lot of the people.

Outside, she walked next to me for a while with her hands in her hoodie pocket and didn't say anything, which for Scarlet was a kind of speech, and then she said, "We had a dog at Dee's. Have. He's a stupid one, he's got one ear that doesn't go up." Then: "He'd have wanted out."

"Who's Dee?"

She looked at me sideways. "You didn't say why you're here," she said. "Did you."

"No."

"Then I've got a dog with one ear, and that's what you get." She said it lightly. She wasn't being unkind. She was showing me the rules.

. . .

At 14 Bellwood Row there was an answering machine with four messages on it, and we played them because there was a light blinking and you press the button. The house was a widow's house, you could tell, one chair worn and the other not, a cardigan over the back of the worn one. The machine had a tape in it; it was that old.

A daughter calling her mother. *The Hoyle boy is in your yard again. Do not go out to him. Then: He is still there. He has not moved at all. Then: Ma. He is facing the house now. Then: He is nine years old and he is not a boy any more.*

Then thirty seconds of humming, very close to the microphone, and *You have no new messages.*

Scarlet reached over and stopped the tape, though it had stopped. None of us said anything. There's no reply to that.

Jayden went and looked out the front window at the yard, which was empty, and stood there longer than he needed to, and when he came back he said, "We should keep moving," in the voice of somebody who has decided to be the one who says that, and we did.

. . .

The fire station was at the bottom of the hill road, and it was the first place we'd been that felt like people had left it on purpose. The doors were down. The engine bay smelled of diesel and rubber and the cold-coffee smell of a break room, and both engines were gone, and the bay was a big clean concrete room with the hoses racked and the boots in a row, each pair with its bunker pants rolled down over it, ready to step into. Somebody had chalked the date on the board by the door and then nothing after the date. Jayden took a fire axe off the brackets by the door, the red kind with the pick on the back, and hefted it once, and carried it the rest of the way through the valley, and I don't think he put it down again except to sleep.

There was a radio log on the desk in the watch room, the last page, in three hands. Engine 2 had hosed out Chapel Row, and the station had asked how far down the bodies went, and Engine 2 had said some of them are black and some of them are just —, and the station had said *Put them back in the fire. Half-done is worse. Half-done gets up angry and it does not feel it any more.* And then Engine 2 had said one of them was standing, and it was still on fire, and it didn't care.

We stayed there the first night. We put the bay doors down and wedged the side door and kept a fire going in a steel drum on the concrete, and the smoke went up into the roof and hung

there, and outside the fog pressed on the high windows and the smoke alarm chirped somewhere far off, on and on, and once, about midnight, the loudspeaker on the pole said its piece into the dark and nobody answered it.

We slept in the cab of the one small truck that was left, a pickup with a light on the roof, two at a time, and two on watch by the drum. Jayden took the first watch with me, and didn't say much, and did push-ups on the concrete at some point, very quietly, so as not to wake the girls, and when I looked at him he said, "Habit," and went on. Then he sat back against the wheel of the truck with his knees up and said, "The pass gets you through the gate. It doesn't get you into anything. I asked. They said everything else is Monday." He turned it over on its lanyard. "I think that's all it was ever going to be. Getting through the gate."

Tessa took the second watch with me. Scarlet was asleep in the cab with her face against the window and her mouth open, and Tessa sat where she could see her, which I learned was where Tessa always sat.

"Why'd you come," she said. Not looking at me. Looking at her sister.

"Why did you?"

"I asked first."

"I know you did."

She was quiet for a while. The drum ticked. "It's a house," she said. "Our nana's. It's on the other side of the subdivision. The letter said somebody from the family had to come sign for it in person." She stopped, and I could hear her decide how much more of that there was going to be, and it was a little more. "It had my name on it. Not Mom's. Mine. So I came." Then: "Dee thinks we're at a friend's until Sunday."

"Dee's your—"

"Aunt. Mom's sister." She stopped again, and this time it was none. "That's ours. That's what you get."

"Your sister said the same thing."

"She would." Then she looked at me, once, quickly, and away. "You don't have to. Tell us. I'm just saying I'll ask again."

She did ask again, once, days later, in the dark under the ridge, and then she let it go, and I have thought since that she let a lot of things go, for me, that she didn't have to.

Toward morning the singing came again, from the east, from the hill, very faint, and Tessa sat and listened to it with her whole face, and when it stopped she let out a breath she had been holding for the length of the tune. I didn't ask. That was mine to let go of.

. . .

The fog didn't lift in the morning. It thinned, the way milk thins in water, enough that you could see the ends of the street and the shape of Ash Hill going up behind the last houses with the road on it, and it smelled different in daylight, colder and cleaner, pine off the ridge and wet earth, and underneath it always the other thing. The smoke alarm was still going. We counted the bin of brandy bottles and the bin of rags and the box of rounds, and Tessa wrote the numbers on the back of her hand in pen, and Scarlet said, "You've got a phone for that," and Tessa said, "The phone's got no battery for that," and we went up the hill road.

We met one of the half-done ones on the first bend.

It had been burned to the waist. Somebody had done the job the gas bill said to do and hadn't stood there and watched it go black, and it came at us out of a hedge screaming, with the top of it still a man in a plaid shirt and the bottom of it not anything, and it didn't stop for the bottle Scarlet put in front of it. It ran through the bottle. It came out of the fire with the fire on it and didn't care. Tessa emptied the pistol into it, eight rounds, standing her ground, with her sister to her left and back, and it went down in the fire, and we stood in a ring around it and

poured everything we had on it until it was a shape, and then not a shape.

The sound it made is the thing I would take out of my head if I were allowed one. Half-done is worse. Learn it once.

Afterward Tessa reloaded with hands that were steady, and then, when the pistol was full and back in her jacket and there was nothing else for the hands to do, they weren't steady, and she put them in her pockets. Scarlet leaned against her, shoulder to arm, without looking at her, and stayed there a while. Nobody said anything. Jayden picked up the empty bottle out of the road, because you don't leave things lying around on a site, and then looked at it in his hand and put it down again.

"Eight," Tessa said.

"What?"

"It took eight. I'm counting." She looked at the box in her hand and did the math and put it away.

. . .

Checkpoint 4 was a sandbag position across the Ash Hill road with a county truck parked behind it, both doors open, the cab light on and the battery long dead. There were spent casings in the road, bright brass on wet asphalt, and a smell of gunpowder that the fog had kept, sour and sharp, a day or two old. A duty log was on the sandbags with a lighter weighting it down.

01:15. Contact at the fence line. Six of them. Pruitt went down.

01:16. They did not finish him.

01:20. They picked Pruitt up. Two of them, under the arms, careful, like a man carries a full cup. And they walked him northeast, up the hill, and Pruitt was screaming the whole way and they did not hurry.

I have four rounds and a lighter. I know which one I'd rather have.

The lighter was still there. The four rounds were not.

Scarlet picked up the lighter and looked at it and put it in her pocket, and then took it out, and put it back on the log, exactly where it had been, and then picked it up again and kept it. "He'd want it used," she said, to nobody, to the sandbags.

There was a handheld radio on the dash of the truck, the county kind, with a little recorder clipped to it that somebody had been using to log their patrol, and Jayden thumbed it on while the girls weren't looking and thumbed it off again fast, but not fast enough. A man's voice, tired, flat, saying the patrol unit's number and the time, and then saying that his daughter had passed him on the road at two feet, walking northeast with the rest of them, and had not looked at him, and that he had not been able to do what the gas bill people had done, and that he was going to go and sit in the truck for a minute. The recording went on after that with nothing on it but the fog.

"Northeast," Jayden said, after a while. He had the phone out with the map on it. He wasn't looking at the map. He was looking up the hill, at where the light was, still burning in the day, on the wing of the hospital.

"Like a full cup," Tessa said. "Why would you carry a—" She stopped. "You'd carry it like that if you didn't want to spill it."

Nobody said anything to that. There was a great deal in this town that nobody said anything to. It became a kind of language.

. . .

That was the night they took Tessa.

We had gone back down into the streets because the hill road in the dark wasn't a thing any of us wanted, and we were in the last curve of the subdivision below Winslow, where the houses are older and bigger and set back behind hedges, and it was full dark and the fog had come back in thick, so that the streetlights, the ones that still worked off whatever they worked off, were just smears above us, orange, each in its own ball of wet air. You

could hear the murmur before you could hear anything else. You could hear it in the hedges.

Six of them, out of a garage. The door had been up and we had walked past it, and they came out of it behind us in a group, the way people come out of a church, and one of them had Tessa's arm before Scarlet's bottle landed. The fire got two. The other four picked her up under the arms, two each side, careful, like a man carries a full cup, and started walking northeast with her screaming, not hurrying.

I have never seen anything move like Scarlet moved. She didn't shout. She didn't throw. She went straight through the fire that was still burning in the road, through it, sixteen years old and eighty-some pounds and her hoodie catching at the hem, and put Pruitt's lighter into the face of the one on her sister's left arm and held it there, and Jayden hit the one on the right so hard I heard it, a sound like a door, and I did the two at the back with a bottle I didn't remember lighting. Tessa crawled out from under and Scarlet had her by the hood before she was on her feet and didn't let go of the hood until we were in the garage with the door down and Jayden's back against it.

It was black in there, and it smelled of oil and cut grass and the mower, and we stood in it breathing. Then a small voice, very close, with its forehead against another forehead.

"Rule," Scarlet said. "Say it."

"We don't split up."

"Say the rest."

"You don't come for me if it's stupid."

"I'm always going to come for you," Scarlet said. "So don't make it stupid."

There was a sound then that I thought was Tessa laughing and wasn't.

The rest of them stood outside. They didn't come at the fire, which was still going in the road where the bottles had broken, a

low orange light under the garage door. They didn't leave either. Through the gap under the door we watched their feet, slippers and bare feet and one pair of good brown wingtips, go down onto the asphalt, kneeling, and turn, all of them, to face the hill. And they murmured. Up close, for the first time, with nothing between us and it but a door, and it had a tune, and it had words, though you couldn't have said what the words were. It was the thing from the answering machine. It was the thing the dog had been doing.

"It's a hymn," Tessa said, very quietly, in the dark.

"How do you know."

"I know it. I've known it since the first day. I didn't want to say." She swallowed. "I sang it. In a choir. When we lived here."

"When you lived here," I said.

She didn't answer that, then. Scarlet did. "We were little," she said. "I don't remember it. She does. She remembers everything, it's disgusting." And then, because she couldn't leave anything alone: "Tess, you never said you were in a choir."

"You were seven."

"I'd have remembered a choir."

"You remember the dog with one ear."

"The dog's *important*."

When the fire went out they stood up, all of them, in one movement, and went away up the road, and we heard them go, and we didn't come out for a long time after we couldn't hear them, and Jayden, at some point, said, "Five hundred," and Scarlet said, "What?" and he said, "Count to five hundred after the quiet. It's on the cabinet door. It's what the kid did." And we did, slowly, the four of us, in the dark, not out loud.

. . .

The last house on Winslow was 41. The others on the street were the same as the others everywhere, open, dark,

sweet-smelling; 41 was the one with a board nailed to its front door.

IF YOU CAN READ THIS YOU MADE IT UP THE STREET

The room behind this door is fine. I checked it twice.

They don't come at a fire. I don't know if it hurts them or if it just makes them patient. Keep something burning and sleep in shifts.

Do not go up the hill until you have to.

You will have to.

— R. Vance

Scarlet stood and looked at the board for a while with her head on one side. Then she went down the two steps and along the front of the house to a concrete frog beside the downspout, a garden ornament, gray and chipped, and tipped it up with her foot, and there was a key under it.

"Nana's house," she said. She held the key up. "Somebody's been sleeping in Nana's house."

She said it lightly. She said everything lightly; that was the trick of her, and the trick of the trick was that it didn't always work, and it didn't work then. Tessa hadn't moved from the sidewalk. She was looking at the front door, and the board, and the window beside the door with the lace curtain behind it that somebody had hung a long time ago, and her face was doing nothing at all, carefully.

"You said it was your nana's," I said. "The house. In the letter."

"It's what the letter was about." Tessa came up the steps and stood beside her sister and didn't take the key. "You didn't need the key, Ska, the door's got a board on it."

"I wanted to see if it was still there."

"Well. It was."

The door wasn't locked. The board was to be read, not to keep anyone out. Inside, the house smelled different from every other house we had been in, and it took me a moment to know why: no fridge. Somebody had emptied it and left the door propped with a dish towel, and the kitchen smelled of nothing but old wood and the cold, and in the front room there was a kerosene heater going, and a candle in a saucer, and a sleeping bag on the couch with the top folded back the way you fold it when you mean to come back to it.

It was fine. It was the first room since the bus that was lit.

Scarlet walked through it like she was walking through a museum of a place she'd been told about. She touched the back of the armchair. She opened the drawer in the hall table and shut it. She went up the stairs, quickly, and we heard her go into a room over our heads and stop, and then come out and shut the door, and she came down slower than she had gone up and said, "Nobody's up there," in the voice of somebody reporting a thing, and went and sat on the floor in front of the heater with her knees up.

Tessa took the kitchen. She stood in it a long time.

"When were you here last," Jayden said. He had put the couch across the front door and was checking the back one, and he said it the way he said everything, straight, like there was no reason not to.

"January," Tessa said. "For the funeral."

Scarlet, from the floor: "Nana died in January."

"I'm sorry," Jayden said.

"It's okay. She was old. She was—" Scarlet turned the lighter over in her fingers. "She was old and she'd been sick and it was okay. It was the kind of dying that's okay." Then: "We didn't stay. We went to the church and then the thing after with the sandwiches and then Dee drove us back. Mom didn't come." A pause, and it went on a little too long. "Mom couldn't come."

Tessa came out of the kitchen with four mugs and a tin of cookies from somewhere, ginger snaps, gone soft, and handed them around like this was a thing you did at eleven at night in a dead town with a heater and a candle, and it was, and we ate them.

. . .

We slept in shifts, and Jayden did push-ups in the hall between his, quietly, counting under his breath, and when Tessa asked him why, from the couch, in the dark, he said, "Because I'm going home. You don't go home soft."

"Home where."

"Not far. Other side of the county line. Two hours."

"Is that where you were born?"

"No." He finished the set and sat back against the wall with his forearms on his knees, breathing. "Born here. Left when I was two, my mom says. I don't remember any of it. She never brought me back." He was quiet. "The packet came with a map of the town in it and I looked at it for an hour, working out where the house would've been. I don't even know the street. It's stupid."

"It's not stupid," Scarlet said, from the depths of the sleeping bag, where she was supposed to be asleep.

"Go to sleep."

"You're the one doing push-ups at midnight. *Some* of us are trying to—"

"Ska."

He had a photo in his wallet, and he showed it to us without being asked, on the second watch, by the candle. A girl in a hoodie laughing at whoever was holding the camera, with a diner behind her and a coffee pot in her hand. He said her name when he showed it to us, and he said it a lot after that, more than he knew he was saying it, and I'm not putting it here either. It was his. He said it the way you say a word that still works. She

waited tables at a place on the county road and he did the breakfast shift there, at the counter, five days a week, before the site, because the site started at seven and she started at six. They had a truck between them, one truck, and the payment was due on the first, and he had told her he would be back for it. He said it the way a man reads out a contract he intends to honor, and then he put the photo away, and then, because he was nineteen and had said too much, he got up and did another set.

Tessa watched him with a look I couldn't read then and can now. She was filing him, too.

. . .

I didn't sleep. I read the two things I had picked up and not read, because you don't read in the dark on Winslow.

The first was a Renlow memo, NATIVITY, DO NOT FORWARD, out of a desk in the house of somebody who had worked on the campus. It had been in a drawer under a pile of pay stubs, and the pay stubs had the company's little building on them and the man's name, and I didn't keep the name.

Specimen M was moved to the ward in 1974 and has been waiting since. Containment has never once failed. Nothing has escaped.

Fifty-one years is not an incident. It is a gestation.

The obstetrics wing was built for this. The maternity ward was built for this. You have been paying to keep the lights on in a nursery, and the notices went out in March because in March we finished counting.

Burn your copy. I mean that literally.

I read it three times, and the third time I read it I was doing the math, and Tessa, who wasn't asleep either, was watching me do it from the couch.

"Fifty-one years," she said. "The sign on the fence. We thank you for fifty-one years."

"Yes."

"So it's not thanking the town."

"No."

"It's thanking it for something it did." She thought. "What's Specimen M."

"I don't know."

"What's the ward."

"I don't know that either."

"You keep saying that," she said, not unkindly, "and you keep reading them first." And she put her head back down, and I sat with the memo, and after a while I heard her breathing change.

The second thing was a program. A church program, the folded kind, one of a drawer full of them in the kitchen at 41 Winslow, kept the way you keep a thing from the year you were happy. ASHBROOK FOUNDERS' DAY, 1960. Six banners for the six founding families, who came over from the old country in 1891 and named the town for the one they left. Dedication of Ashbrook Memorial Hospital, Dr. Albert Renlow to speak; he calls it a homecoming. Twelve o'clock, the children's choir sings the Founders' Hymn, and parents please note the old words are sung, not the school's. The town crest on the cover: a wheel of twelve spokes, and at the hub, a cradle.

Somebody had written on it in pencil, a long time after 1960, in a hand gone soft:

that hymn. that is what they are singing in the
kitchens. every kid in this town learned it in second
grade. so did I.

In the morning, on the stairs, Tessa was humming, and it was that, two bars of it before she heard herself and stopped, with one hand on the banister and the other in her jacket where the pistol was.

"Second grade," I said.

"Yes."

"Here."

"Ashbrook Elementary. Miss Kovac. We did it for the Founders' Day thing in the park." She came down the last three steps. "We moved the summer after. I was eight. Ska hadn't done it yet, she was in first, that's why she doesn't know it." She looked at the program in my hand, at the wheel on the cover, and said, "That's over the town hall. We drove past it on the way in."

"I know."

"Nana had a pin of it. It's in a box upstairs." Her voice did nothing. "Everyone's nana had a pin of it."

Scarlet came down behind her, hopping, with one shoe on, and said, "What are we whispering about," and Tessa said, "Nothing. Shoe," and Scarlet put her shoe on.

. . .

Before we left 41 Winslow, Scarlet asked the question on the stairs, the way you ask a thing you already know the answer to and want to hear said.

"Where were you all born."

Jayden, by the door, with his bag on: "Here. Ninety-two."

Tessa: "Here. Ninety-seven."

Scarlet, for herself: "Here. Ninety-eight. June." And then to me.

"Here," I said.

She waited for the year. I didn't give it to her. She looked at me on the stairs for a moment, one shoe still not all the way on, and then she nodded, once, like I had passed something or failed it, and let it go.

Four people on one bus with three reasons said out loud, all answering *born* for one hospital in one town, all on a list at a checkpoint.

"So it's the hospital," Jayden said.

"It's the hospital."

"Then that's where we go." He looked at the board on the door as we came out, the one that said *you will have to*, and he put his hand on it flat as he passed, the way you touch a doorframe for luck, and went down the steps into the fog.

We did the thing R. Vance said we would. We went up the hill.

. . .

The hill road goes up through trees and the trees drip. That's what I remember of it. The fog was in the trees and the trees were full of water and every branch let it go at once when the wind moved, so that we walked up the hill through a rain that wasn't falling from the sky, and the road under it was black and shone, and there were no birds. I hadn't noticed that there were no birds until there were no birds on a hill, in trees, in the morning.

The hospital came out of the fog in pieces. A sign first. Then the gate, a county gate with a guard booth nobody was in and the arm up. Then the parking lot, half full, the cars parked straight in their spaces like it was a normal day, beaded with wet, one with its driver's door open and the dome light long dead. Then the floods, the ones we had seen from the ditch, on a pole at the corner of the newest wing, running off a generator we could hear now, a throb under everything, with the smell of diesel exhaust drifting across the lot in the still air. And the building itself, a long low county hospital in brick, and at the east end of it a newer wing in metal siding, with the company's little building on a sign by its door and its door open.

It was at the gate that Scarlet stopped, and said, "What's that," and pointed east, along the Ashbrook road, the one that runs along the front of the hospital grounds and on toward the campus.

There was something standing in the road. A long way off, where the fog started to take things, so that it was more a shape

than a thing: tall, too tall, the height of a basketball hoop and then some, narrow, with its arms down, standing in the middle of the road the way a deer stands in a road, as if the road were its. It wasn't walking toward us and it wasn't walking away. It was just there, facing the hospital, like everything else in the valley.

"That's not a person," Tessa said.

"It's a pole," Jayden said. "It's a sign or a—"

It took a step back. One step, long, without turning around, the way nothing that is a sign or a pole does, and the fog had it, and there was nothing in the road.

We stood at the gate a while longer than we should have. Nobody said what we were waiting for. It didn't come back, and we went in.

The reveal was on the way. I'll put it here because it's where it happened, and because it's the thing I would tell you first if I only had a minute: the east wing was open, and dark, and the corridor inside it was the long pale corridor of every hospital you've ever waited in, with the hand sanitizer dispensers on the wall and the floor a color that isn't a color, and at the far end of it, on the floor, in the light from a window, was a small pale shape that could have been a doll.

It was rocking.

The wing smelled of hospital, of antiseptic and floor polish and warm plastic, and of something else that I didn't have a name for until I did, which was a nursery. Baby powder. Milk. The sweetish smell of a place where small things are kept warm.

We walked up to it because you do. Nobody said don't. Scarlet said, "That's a—" and didn't finish. It turned its head.

It had a skull too big for it, and a mouth full of teeth, and small horns at the temples, no longer than the top joint of a finger, and a soft place at the top of the head that glowed, faintly, the way a nightlight glows, and it looked at us with eyes that

were the eyes of a baby, and it cried, once, a baby's cry, a real one. The cry went down the corridor and came back off the walls.

Then the walls moved. Then the ceiling. Then they were on us.

They are the size of a newborn. They run on the walls. There were nine.

I'm not going to write what that fight was. I'll write that they are fast and that they are light and that when one lands on you it is the weight of a baby, exactly that weight, and that it doesn't feel like anything else, and that your hands know what it is before the rest of you does and don't want to do what they have to do. Jayden did it. He did it with his hands and he didn't stop, and his face while he did it is another thing I would take out if I were allowed two. Scarlet did it with fire, in a corridor, close, with her sister's arm across her chest holding her back from doing it closer. Tessa did it with the pistol, four rounds, one at a time, standing still while things came down the walls at her, and one of them took a piece of her scalp on the way past, and she didn't know until it ran into her eye.

We got out of the east wing and we got the doors shut and Jayden held them while I found the bar, and we stood in the parking lot of Ashbrook Memorial in the fog with the floods on and the generator throbbing and Tessa bleeding from the scalp into her collar and Scarlet trying to look at it and Tessa not letting her, and the singing had stopped, and Jayden said, to nobody, in a voice I hadn't heard him use: "Those are babies."

Nobody answered him. Scarlet had gotten her sister's head down at last and was parting the hair with her fingers, and she said, "It's a flap. It's just a flap. It's not deep, it's just a lot of—" and stopped, because it was a lot of blood, and because she was sixteen and it was her sister's head, and she pressed a clean part of her own sleeve to it and held it there and said, "Sit down. Sit

down, Tess," and Tessa sat down on the curb of the parking lot with her sister standing over her holding her head together.

"They're babies," Jayden said again.

"I heard you," Tessa said, from under Scarlet's hand. Then, more quietly: "I know."

Then the street behind us filled up, and I mean filled: a line of residents walking slowly in the same direction up the hill past the parked cars, hundreds, a column, coming out of the fog at the bottom of the lot and going into the fog at the top, none of them turning their heads, none of them hurrying, the shuffle of it like the ocean on gravel, and the murmur, and behind them, out on the Ashbrook road, far back, the tall shape again, standing, watching them go in. We went into the hospital because there was nowhere else to go.



TWO

Memorial

ASHBROOK MEMORIAL IS A county hospital with a Renlow wing bolted on, the way a company town grows a company. The power was on in the wrong places. The power is always on in the wrong places.

You could hear it before you understood it: a generator somewhere outside throbbing through the walls, and in the corridors the lights that were on ticking, the fluorescent tick, one tube in three alive and the live ones flickering, so that the corridor came and went. The rest was dark. A hospital in the dark doesn't sound like a building. It sounds like a body. Pipes knocking. Somewhere a door on a closer, sighing shut and being pushed open and sighing shut, on and on, by nobody. The smell was antiseptic and floor polish and, under that, the thing we had smelled in every house, only here it was everywhere and old and it had been warm, and under that, very faint, baby powder.

We came in through Outpatients, through a waiting room with the chairs still in their rows and a magazine open on one of them, face down, holding somebody's place. Jayden took the couch from Reception, an actual couch, and put it across the

doors we had come in by, and then stood looking at it, and then went and got a second one.

"They don't push," Tessa said. "They kneel."

"The little ones climb," said Jayden, and got the second couch.

The lights in the corridor ahead of us died as we watched, all at once, and a second later came back at half, and a board by the elevators told us why. A distribution panel in the wall, the door open, and a card taped inside it in a careful hand: *three cartridges, then the battery, and in that order*. There were three fuse cartridges in a bag on the floor, and the battery wasn't there, because the battery was the size of a suitcase and was in the back of the ambulance on the ramp outside, still connected, still turning a warning light on the dashboard over and over in a faint dying orange. It was the only one on the floor. It weighed what a man weighs.

Jayden carried it. He wouldn't let anyone take an end. He said it was a technique thing, that two people on a load like that hurt each other, and that on a site you'd get sent home for it, and then he lifted it out of the ambulance with his back straight and his face going a color and walked it in through the doors and up two flights of stairs with his jaw set and the battery acid smell coming off it in the stairwell, sharp, like a headache, and put it down beside the panel and stood with his hands on his knees and said, "Okay. What's next."

Scarlet had walked up beside him the whole way with a lit bottle in her hand, being the light, being the fire, chattering at him the way you talk to somebody to keep them going up a hill. "You know there's an elevator."

"No power."

"There'll be power when you put the battery in."

"So the battery goes up the stairs."

"I'm just *saying*—"

"I know what you're saying."

"—it's a very big battery."

"It's a very big battery," he agreed, on the landing, and didn't stop.

So the first three hours in the hospital were Jayden carrying a battery and the rest of us carrying fire. Tessa put the cartridges in, in order, reading the labels twice, and when she closed the knife switch the whole floor came on with a sound like an intake of breath, and the elevator, and the doors on the corridor. Nothing else runs off that board. We tried. The elevator hummed. The doors held. That was what we had.

. . .

Records was on the first floor. I went in alone, which was stupid, and I'll tell you why I did: I wanted to find her chart before anyone else saw it.

I didn't find her chart. I found ours.

It was a long room with the shelves on rails, the kind you crank apart with a handle, and a fluorescent tube dying in the far corner, and the smell of paper, tons of it, dry and dusty and faintly sweet, and dust in the light, and my own breathing. I had a flashlight. I read the labels on the ends of the rails until I found the ward I wanted, and it wasn't the ward I wanted, it was the one below it, and I cranked the shelves apart and they came apart slowly, with a grinding, and the sound went all down the room. I cranked them apart because the drawer I wanted was labeled Ward 3 and I didn't know what Ward 3 was.

Ward 3, live birth outcomes, by quarter. A ledger with columns, the bound kind, with a marbled cover. Admitted, discharged, transferred, deceased. The transferred column said nineteen every quarter. The deceased column said nineteen every quarter. Under the last column in pencil:

nineteen every quarter for eleven years. it is not a count of what happened. it is a quota, and somebody downstairs is holding us to it. the deceased column and the transferred column are the same nineteen children written twice.

That was the modern ledger, 1997 on. The old ones were in the drawers below, older paper, the same four columns going back and back. I found the Kings, 1997 and 1998: discharged. Two lines, fourteen months apart, one hand. I found Jones, 1992: discharged. I found the fourth of us, in a drawer with older paper than any of those, and I read the line, and I closed the book on it, and it stays closed. The lucky column.

Beside each of us, in the same hand that kept the book, a small mark. A circle with a dot in it. Not on every discharge. On ours.

I stood in that room with the flashlight on the mark for a long time. I don't know how long. Long enough that Tessa came and found me, because she had counted the minutes, and she stood in the doorway with the pistol down and said, "You said five," in a voice with an edge on it, and then she saw my face and came in, and Scarlet behind her, and Jayden filling the door.

I showed them. I showed them their own lines. Tessa read them twice. Scarlet read hers once and put her finger on the mark beside it and said, "What's that."

"I don't know."

"It's on all of us."

"Yes."

"Is it on the others? The other discharges?"

"No."

She took her finger off it like it was warm. Tessa was looking at the pencil under the columns, at *the same nineteen children written twice*, and doing the math, and I watched her get there, and she said, "Nineteen. Every quarter. Eleven years," and then

she said, "That's more than eight hundred," and then she didn't say anything else.

The consent forms were in the drawer with them. Form NB-9. *I confirm that I have not been told the name of the study. I understand that the delivery will take place in the west ward and not in this building, and that I will be asleep for it. I understand that I will not be shown the child. I understand that if I am told the child did not live, that is the end of the matter, and I agree not to ask again. I understand that I have been paid.* Witness: A. Serrat. In the margin: *nine of these in the drawer. Four handwritings. Somebody signed for these women.*

Under the NB-9s, the form that came before them. NB-2. Eligibility screen. Complete BEFORE consent is offered.

1. Mother's maiden name. Father's surname.
2. Birthplace of all four grandparents.
3. Hair and eye colour, both parents.
4. Ashbrook founding family (see list): Y / N.
5. Aschenbach registry number, if the family holds one.

Eligible: proceed to NB-9. Ineligible: refer to standard care. Do not explain the criteria to the patient.

I didn't know what an Aschenbach registry number was. I still knew the form was wrong. You don't screen a fertility trial for the color of the grandparents' eyes.

There was pen on the back, a different hand, a woman's, and Scarlet was reading over my shoulder and she stopped breathing for a second.

Dee got a No. She cried in the car park and I sat with her. She has twins now, in Millbrook, and rings me every Christmas.

I got a Yes.

"That's Mom," Tessa said.

She said it before her sister could. She said it flat, the way you'd read out a number, and she reached past me and turned the form over, to the front, and back again, and looked at the loop on the g and the way the Y was made, and said, "That's her writing," and I understood that the older one had known the hand from across the room and had said it fast so that the younger one wouldn't have to be the one to say it.

"Who's Dee," Jayden said.

"Our aunt," said Scarlet. Her voice had gone up half a tone and very careful. "Mom's sister. She's in Millbrook. She's got twins. They're a year older than Tess." She was still looking at the back of the form. "She's got us now."

"Since when?"

"Since March."

Nobody asked what had happened in March. Tessa said it anyway, because Tessa didn't leave things for other people to have to ask. "Mom died in March. She was in the hospital in Millbrook from Christmas, that's why she couldn't come to Nana's. Then she died. Then Dee." She said the three things like three steps down a stair, one, two, three, and got to the bottom, and stood there. "Then the letter came to Dee's about the house. With my name on it."

"And Dee let you—"

"Dee doesn't know," Scarlet said. "Dee thinks we're at Kayla's."

Jayden looked at the two of them, seventeen and sixteen, in a records room under a dead hospital, and whatever he was going to say about that he didn't say. I watched him decide not to. It was the right call and it cost him something, and I think it was the moment he stopped being the big kid across the aisle and became whatever he was to them after.

Scarlet put the form in her jacket and didn't say a word about it for two days, and Tessa let her, and I didn't ask.

Jayden did a thing then. He didn't say anything. He put one hand on the top of Scarlet's head, big, the way you'd put your hand on a dog's, and left it there a second, and took it off, and went to check the corridor.

. . .

There was a tape in the records clerk's desk, in the drawer with the rubber bands, a little pocket recorder with the clerk's name on a piece of masking tape across the back. Mrs. Garrity. We played it because Scarlet pressed the button before anyone could say not to, and it was a woman's voice, older, tidy, the kind of voice that has filed things for thirty years and does not approve of the way the young ones do it.

She was talking to herself about the drawer. About a doctor, a Dr. Hollinger, who had come down to Records in the spring and asked for the Ward 3 ledgers by year and had taken the pencil out of her hand, gently, and asked her not to write in the margins any more. *I said to him, I have kept this room since before you were qualified, and he said, I know, Mrs. Garrity, that is why I am asking you and not telling you. A pause. I have not stopped. I have just started writing smaller.*

"Good for her," Scarlet said.

Tessa had the ledger open again, at the pencil. "That's her. The nineteen. That's her writing smaller."

. . .

Dr. Serrat's recorder was in obstetrics, in a desk drawer, under a hospital cardigan that still smelled of somebody's perfume, and we played it at the desk with the door shut and the light ticking over us.

Delivery at oh four twelve. Stillbirth. No complications. Mother stable. That is the report. That is what goes in the file. A pause on the tape you could hear her decide in. The hiss of the room. A gurney going past outside, then, in whatever night that was. It

was crying when they took it out of the room. That is the seventeenth one this month that was crying. They take them down the service lift and the service lift only stops at three. Ward C is on sublevel three. There is no sublevel three on the plans.

I am going to stop dictating now. I am going to go and look.

Click.

Nobody named Serrat was in the building, alive or otherwise. We looked. Scarlet looked hardest. She went through the staff photographs on the board by the nurses' station with her finger, name by name, and found her, a small woman in glasses with a serious mouth, and stood in front of the photograph for a while, and then took it off the board and put it in her jacket with the form.

"What are you doing," Tessa said.

"Keeping her."

"Ska."

"She went to look," Scarlet said. "Somebody should keep her."

. . .

Maternity was on the second floor. The lights flickered there the way they do in movies, which I had always thought was a movie thing. They tick, when they do that. Each flicker is a tick, and the ward was a long room full of ticking, and it was warm. That's the thing. Every other room in the building was cold, and maternity was warm, the heat on and the radiators clanking under the windows, and the warmth had the smell in it, baby powder and milk and the other thing, sweet, so that the air had a thickness.

The ward was built in a ring. I didn't understand that until later, when we had been around it. A corridor that went all the way around a core, with the cot bays opening off it on the outside, each bay a half room with a glass front and a curtain, and in the middle of the ring, where you would put a nurses'

station, a nurses' station, glassed in on all four sides so that one woman on nights could sit in the middle of the lit ring and see every bay at once. The glass had wire in it. The door of it had a lock.

Rows of bassinets, in the bays. Clear plastic tubs on wheeled stands, each with a folded blanket, each with a name card in the slot at the foot, and the cards had names on them, and I didn't read the names. One bassinet was rocking on its own, in the first bay, on its stand, a slow rock, and there was heat coming off it, a shimmer above it like the air over a road, and Jayden said don't, and I didn't, and we went around it.

That's where we saw her. The first of them.

I'm going to describe her once and then not again. She is a woman from this town, an Ashbrook woman, same skin as the rest of them, same eyes, barefoot, in a gown that stopped fitting a long time ago, and she is nine feet tall, and she is carrying. Not one. Her belly reads as several bodies, and it moves, and both her hands are under it, holding it up, the way you would.

She doesn't chase. I need you to understand that, because it's worse. She stood in the third bay along, in the half dark among the bassinets, with her lamp, a lamp that wasn't lit, an old oil lamp of the kind you'd find in a museum of the town, and when we moved she moved, away, always farther around the ring, always along the way we needed to go. She hums. It's the tune. A fourth lower, sung down at herself.

Scarlet said, very small, "Oh," and that was all, and then she got the bottle up.

The sister's day book on the ward desk had her in it, before she had grown. It was a hardback notebook with a ward name on the front in marker, and the last page written was in a fast slanting hand:

She does the rounds at night and the rounds are not ours. I have watched her go bed to bed with a lamp that is not lit. She stops at the empty ones longest.

Ledoux emptied a magazine into her in March. She took none of it – I mean that she did not fall, and I mean that in the morning there was nothing on the floor to sweep up.

Fire is the only thing that moves her, and it does not hurt her. It makes her stand somewhere else. That is all it does, and it is enough to walk past her, if you are walking and not stopping.

Do not let her get her hands on you. Whatever she takes you to, it is not a bed.

Tessa read that one out loud, standing at the desk, with the thing in the bay humming, and her voice went at *she stops at the empty ones longest*, and Scarlet took the book out of her hands and finished it for her, fast and level, the way you finish a thing for someone, and put it down.

“Okay,” Scarlet said. “Walking and not stopping. That’s a thing we can do.”

Under the day book there was a second tape, a ward handover, the kind nurses leave for the next shift, and Tessa played it with the volume down low while the rest of us watched the bays. A nurse, Okonjo, the name was on the label, tired, matter-of-fact, giving the night report to nobody. Which bays had one in them. Which had two. *Never three in one bay. Two is a ward. Three is what happened in bay six.* And then, quieter, like she had turned away from the microphone: *They sing to each other across the ring. If you get three of them singing the same bar, get out of the ring. I don’t care what you’re carrying.*

Tessa stopped the tape. She looked at the ring, at the bays going around it into the dark, and at the one in the third bay with its lamp, and she said, “There’s more than one.”

“She said never three.”

"She said never three in a bay. She didn't say never three." Tessa put the tape in her pocket. "She said three is what happened in bay six."

. . .

The way out of maternity is through maternity. That's how the ring works. The service elevator is at the back, on the far side of the ring from where you come in, and the way to it is around, one side or the other, past the bays. And the elevator wanted a key. A plain brass key on a plain steel ring, the kind every hospital has a hundred of, and the hook for it was on the wall of the glassed-in nurses' station in the middle of the ring, and the key was on the hook, and the door of the station was locked.

"Of course it is," Scarlet said.

Jayden put the fire axe through the glass. It was wired, so it didn't fall; it went white and hung there in its frame, and he hit it twice more and pushed it in with the flat of the axe, and the sound of it went around the ring, and around, and came back, and in the bays the humming changed.

I don't have a better word than *changed*. It had been one voice, low, a fourth down. Now it was two. The second one came from across the ring, from the bays on the far side, the same tune, the same note, a half beat behind, the way two people hum a thing when one of them is following. And then a third, from somewhere in between, from behind the curtains of a bay we hadn't gotten to, and the three of them found each other. That's the only way I can say it. The half beat closed. The three voices came together on the same bar, and the bar finished, and the ward went quiet, and there was a sound like three wet sheets tearing at once.

Three is what happened in bay six.

They came out of the bays on the walls. I'm not going to count them for you. Jayden was in the nurses' station with his arm through the broken glass, feeling along the wall for the

hook, and he didn't stop feeling along the wall. That's the thing I'd tell you about him if I had a minute. He said, "Got it," in a perfectly level voice with the first of them on his back, and came out of the station with the key in his fist and two of them on him and did what he did, and Scarlet was behind him with fire, and Tessa was in the middle of the ring turning in a slow circle with the pistol, firing one at a time, picking the ones on the walls above us, and I had a bottle, and then I had the axe, and I don't remember the handover.

We got around the ring. We walked and did not stop. Scarlet held a lit bottle out in front of her like a lamp of her own, a sixteen-year-old with a burning bottle in her fist and her sister's blood on her sleeve, and the Vessels, that's what Jayden called them, and it stuck, backed off ahead of the flame, bay to bay, hands under their bellies, humming, singular now, each on her own note, looking at us with faces I won't describe, and the one that had been in the third bay stood in the last bay before the elevator and did not move until Scarlet was close enough to feel the heat off the bottle on her own face, and then took one long step back into the dark behind the curtain and was gone.

The floor was tacky under our shoes. I didn't look down to see with what.

That's what she is. That's what they are. They aren't the thing that kills you. They are where the things that kill you come from, and they are her children, and she is still carrying more, and when there are three of them close enough to sing it together, it's not six. It's the ward.

When it was done Scarlet stood with her back to the elevator doors and the empty bottle still in her hand and said, "She looked at me," and Tessa said, "I know," and Scarlet said, "No. She *looked* at me. Like she knew me. Like at a bus stop." And she put the bottle down very carefully on the floor, standing up, as if

it mattered that it didn't fall over, and wiped her hands on her jeans, and picked up the next one.

Jayden was bleeding from both forearms where he'd gone through the wire glass, long shallow cuts, and from the back of the neck where one of them had been, and he stood with the key in his fist and let Tessa wrap his arms in gauze from the station and didn't say anything until she was done, and then he said, "They were singing to each other."

"Yes."

"Like a round. Like in school."

"Yes."

"So you don't let three of them get close enough to hear each other."

"That's the rule," Tessa said. "That's the rule from now on."

. . .

A maintenance memo on the ceiling hatch on the second floor, typed, in a plastic sleeve, gone yellow: *Stop working alone above the tiles. The service void runs the whole floor and it is not empty. Three men have gone up to trace a duct and come down bleeding from above the shoulder, which is not where a man falling hits. And: The singing is not a warning. The singing is the last thing that happens before.*

We had heard the singing on that floor for a while by then. We'd been walking under it. It was above the tiles, over the pharmacy, and it was children, many, and it was the tune, and it went around and around the way children sing a thing they've been taught, with no end to it, and the tiles above us were the flimsy kind that lift when a door opens, and they lifted, sometimes, when nothing had opened.

The first Choir was in the void over the pharmacy, and I'm going to have to describe it too, because it's the thing that told us what the litters become when they're left. Jayden pushed a tile up with the end of a mop and put the flashlight through and

looked, and took the flashlight down, and said, "Don't," to all of us, and Scarlet went up the shelving and looked anyway.

It is Crawlers. Dozens. Grown into each other and into the ceiling, a mass of them, mouths and hands and the glow under the skulls, in the dark of the void with the ducts running through it, and it doesn't move, and when you come near it, it screams, and everything on the floor comes.

It smelled of the nursery, up there, and of something else, a heat, like a compost pile.

Scarlet burned it with the last four bottles we had and it took all four. She stood on the pharmacy counter with her arm through the hole in the ceiling and threw them in, one after another, into the void, with her sister holding her legs, and the light of it came down through the tiles all along the corridor, orange, moving, and the screaming was the worst of anything in the hospital, and it went on, and when the last of it went black the floor went quiet. The whole floor. The singing stopped, everywhere on that level, like a plug pulled.

Scarlet came down off the counter with her eyebrows singed and sat on it and didn't say anything for once. The air was full of a black greasy smoke that came down out of the ceiling and hung at head height, and we breathed it, and it tasted of what it was.

"They're one thing," Jayden said, looking up. "All of them. One thing." Nobody argued.

. . .

We ate in the pharmacy, because it had a door with a lock and no ceiling anymore and so nothing above it could sing. Protein bars. Jayden had counted them: eleven left. He laid them out in a row on the counter like they were something he'd built.

"Where'd you get a whole box," Scarlet said.

"Gas station on Route 9. Before the checkpoint."

"Why a whole *box*."

"They had a box."

She thought about this. "Do you actually like them."

"No."

"Then why —"

"Because you eat them, and then you're not hungry, and then you can carry the battery." He ate one. "You don't eat for taste on a site. You eat so you don't fall off the roof at two o'clock."

"That's the saddest thing anyone's said all day," Scarlet said. "And someone said *she stops at the empty ones longest*."

Tessa said, "Ska," and Jayden, to my surprise, laughed. It was short and it surprised him too. He put the wrapper in his pocket.

"What's she like," Tessa said, after a while. "Your girlfriend."

He thought about it for real, which was how he did everything. "She talks to everyone. Every table. She knows the trucker's dog's name. I sit at the counter and don't say anything and she says, that's fine, you're the quiet one, I've got enough for both of us." He turned the pass over on its lanyard. "She's the one who found the ad. She said, it's a real company, it's a real paycheck, you go and get it and we'll get the truck paid off. I said, I don't know that town. She said, you were born there, it's practically home." He stopped. "I said that to my mom on the phone and she didn't say anything for a while. Then she said, don't take the valley road. Go around by the county line."

"Why?"

"She didn't say why." He picked up another bar and looked at it and put it down. "I took the valley road. It's an hour shorter."

"Does she know where you are," Scarlet said. "Your girlfriend."

"She knows I'm in Ashbrook. She knows I start Monday." He looked at the pass. "Started."

"Does she worry?"

"She's not a worrier. She's a—" He looked for it. "She's a figure-it-out-er. If I don't call Sunday she'll figure out who to call." He said it like he believed it. I think he did, then.

. . .

The service elevator only stops at three. There is no three on the plans. There's a laminated plan by every elevator in the building with a red *you are here* on it and the floors listed down the side, and the list goes one, two, three, roof, and the service elevator at the back of maternity had a key slot where a floor button should have been, under the others, and the brass around the slot was worn bright where the key had gone in a thousand times.

We stood in the elevator and the doors closed on the ward and it was quiet in there, for the first time all day, just the four of us and a hum and a light in a wire cage, and Jayden put the key in and turned it and the elevator went down, and we watched the floor numbers go down past the lowest labeled button, past 1, past a dash, and dust came out of the ceiling panel each level we passed, fine dust that hung in the caged light, and the elevator got colder, and the smell changed.

It was the smell of a swimming pool. Chlorine. And under it something clinical and sharp, formalin, the smell of a jar in a high school science room, and under that, faint, ozone, like the air after a storm or beside an old TV.

Scarlet said, "Tess," and Tessa said, "I'm here," and Scarlet said, "I know where you are, I can see you, I just wanted to say it."

Jayden touched the site pass on his chest and said, "I was starting Monday."

The elevator stopped. The doors opened on a corridor that wasn't on any plan, and it was lit, all of it, bright, white, humming, every tube alive, as if the power had been on down here the whole time and had never been in the wrong place at all.



THREE

The Cradle

SUBLEVEL 2 WAS SECURITY. Sublevel 3 was the wards. Sublevel 4 was something else and had a door.

It was cold down there in a way the hospital above hadn't been, a wet cold, a basement cold, and everything hummed. Not the singing. Machines. Air handling, pumps, the big slow breathing of a plant room, and it came up through the floor into your feet, and you stopped hearing it after a minute and then noticed you could still feel it. The walls were painted block, cream to shoulder height and green above, with pipe runs along the ceiling labeled in stencil, and the floor was sealed concrete with a drain every few yards, and every drain had a smell coming up out of it that was chlorine and then, if you stood over it, wasn't.

Scarlet stood over one. "Swimming pool," she said. "Then, like, science." She sniffed. "Then like a dentist's. Then—" She stepped back. "Don't stand over the drains."

"I wasn't going to."

"I'm telling *me*."

. . .

The armory on S2 had a sign-out sheet on a clipboard on a hook by the door, and the door was open, which it shouldn't have been, and the light inside was on. *Tier 1 opens the stair doors. Tier 2 opens this room. There is no tier 3 on this level and the men who had one are not on this level either.* Under it a list: incinerator unit, one, issued, returned; fuel, four canisters, issued; fuel, none, returned. Four more the next day. The last line was pressed hard enough to tear the paper.

stop signing for it. there are eleven canisters left
in the building and when they are gone the only thing
that works on these does not work any more. burn what
you have to burn and walk past the rest.

The incinerator unit was on the rack. A flamethrower is what it is, an industrial one, the kind they sell for clearing brush, with a tank on a harness and a wand with a trigger and a pilot that you light with a striker, and it smelled of fuel and hot metal even cold. It has a cone the length of a car and it makes you stand close to the thing you're ending, close enough to smell it. There were six canisters on the shelf under it. There were supposed to be eleven. Somebody had walked past the rest.

Scarlet took it.

She took it before anyone said anything, lifted it off the rack with both arms and nearly went over backward, and Jayden caught the tank and held it while she got her arms through the harness, and it hung off her to the backs of her knees, the straps made for a man's chest, and she stood in it like a kid in a coat with the sleeves down over her hands and said, "Okay. Fix that."

"Ska, no," Tessa said.

"Who then?"

"Me."

"You've got the gun. You're *good* with the gun. You're good with the gun because you read the book." She was already at the buckles. "I'm good with the fire. I've been good with the fire

since the first house and everyone knows it. You do the one you're good at and I'll do the one I'm good at, and Jayden carries things, and—" she looked at me "—and whoever that is reads things out."

"It's too heavy for you."

"Then I'll be slow. I'm not going to be *carrying* it, Tess, I'm going to be *pointing* it."

Jayden had a knife out and was looking at the harness the way he looked at everything, as a problem with a drawing. "I can take four inches out of the shoulder straps and cross them at the back. It'll ride high. It won't fit anybody else after."

"It doesn't need to fit anybody else."

Tessa looked at her sister for a long moment. Then she said, "You light it. You never put the pilot out. And you tell me before you pull the trigger, every time. Say *fire*, so I know."

"Fire," Scarlet said. "Yes. Fire."

He shortened the harness there on the armory floor with the knife and a lighter to seal the cut webbing, and Scarlet stood with her arms out while he did it, and when he had crossed the straps and she shrugged into it, the tank sat on her back like a schoolbag and the wand came around under her arm to her hands, and she lit the pilot with the striker on the second try and stood there with a small blue flame on the end of a thing that could take a wall out, and she grinned. She was sixteen and it was, I think, the happiest I saw her.

"Fire," she said, softly, at nothing, and then, catching Tessa's face, "I'm not going to. I'm just saying it. To practice."

She didn't put it down again until the ridge. Tessa took the pistol back and stayed at her sister's shoulder, and that was the shape of us from then on: fire in front, the gun on its flank, Jayden and me carrying whatever had to be carried.

. . .

The tier 2 keycard was on a man in a Renlow security vest whose armor had grown into him.

We heard him before anything. Not the murmur. Boots. A slow tread on concrete, regular, unhurried, coming along the cross corridor at the far end, and then he stood in the junction, under a light, and he was a big man in the black vest and the cap with the company's building on it, and the vest had gone into him at the edges, the nylon and the plates, so that there was no line where the man stopped, and he had a carbine at his shoulder the way he had been taught, and he shot Jayden.

From the far end of the corridor. One round, and Jayden went around on his feet like somebody had tapped his shoulder to ask him a question, and went down on one knee, and the man kept shooting, not rushing, three, four, walking rounds down the corridor into the wall and the floor and the pipe over our heads, which burst and hissed, and the smell of the corridor became gunpowder and steam and something out of the pipe.

Scarlet said, "Fire," and the corridor went orange.

Her fire took the vest and didn't take what was under it, and he came at us through the flames half-charred and screaming, and his scream was a man's, which was the worst thing, and we put him down twice before the cone found the gap at his neck and he went down and stayed. Armor doesn't burn. Partial burns come back angry. His cap was still on. It had gone into him too.

The keycard was on a reel on his belt and Tessa cut it off with Jayden's knife, and stood up with it, and didn't look at his face. Then she looked at the carbine on the floor, and at the pistol in her other hand, and she put the pistol in her jacket and picked up the carbine and found the magazine release by feel in about four seconds, because she had read one manual all the way down and the second one is easier.

"There'll be more of him," she said. "There's a word for him on the sign-out sheet. Shepherd. There's a column for them."

Jayden sat against the wall afterward with his hand over the hole in his shoulder and his face gray, and said, through his teeth, "Went through. That's good. Through is good." Then, when Tessa had the first-aid kit from the armory open and was reading the instructions on the packet of the dressing, twice: "Front and back. Pack it. Don't be gentle, it doesn't help."

"How do you know that?"

"Site course."

"They shoot you on the site course?"

"They show you a video." He shut his eyes while she did it. His hand found the wall and pressed flat on it. "My mom's a nurse. She showed me the real one. She said the video was garbage."

"Your mom's a nurse," Scarlet said, from the flamethrower.

"Was. Nights, at the county. She stopped when I was small."

"Why?"

"She just stopped." His eyes were still shut. "She's never driven through this valley. Not once. We go to my aunt's in the next county and it's an hour around the long way and she goes the long way. I asked her once and she said it was a bad road." He opened his eyes and looked at the corridor, at the ceiling, at the light. "She was born here. She had me here. Then we left. She won't say why."

Tessa tied the dressing off. "Done."

"Okay." He stood up. It took him two tries, and nobody helped him, because he hadn't asked, and by then we knew not to. "Okay. What's next."

There was a note in the observation booth at the corridor's end, taped to the glass on the inside, facing out, so that whoever came along the corridor would read it before they looked through the window, and it said all of it in four lines:

The tall ones do not rush the glass. That is the whole warning. It stands at the far end of a ward and it opens, and whatever comes off it crosses the room before you have decided anything.

It herds. If you are being pushed somewhere, it is because one of them wants you there. Look at what it is pushing you towards before you go.

"We were pushed," Tessa said. "In maternity. They backed off around the ring and we followed."

"To the elevator."

"To the key." She looked at the note. "They pushed us to the key. Three of them in a ring, and the key in the middle, and the glass we had to break to get it."

. . .

The thing on the S3 landing I'm going to call what Jayden called it, which was the Cord, because the first thing any of us saw of it was the cord.

The north stair comes down into a long corridor on Sublevel 3 with the ward doors off it, and the corridor was lit, and empty, and about forty feet down it there was what I took for a mop bucket on its side, a gray coil of something on the floor, and then the coil moved. It went out across the floor, fast, flat, like a hose being pulled, and it took Tessa around the ankle and she went down on her back on the concrete with a sound I felt in my own teeth, and then she was moving. Being moved. Sliding down the corridor on her back toward the far end, the carbine skating away from her hand, and at the far end of it there was a thing standing up out of a doorway that I had taken for a coat on a hook.

It is a person, or it was. It's thin the way nothing alive is thin, gray, long, with its arms down at its sides and its head down, and out of the middle of it, out of where you'd expect, there's a cord. Thick as a wrist. Wet. The color of the inside of a lip. It goes

out from it across the floor and it had my friend by the leg and it was reeling her in, not fast, about the speed a person walks, and it didn't move anything else while it did it. It just stood in the doorway with its head down and pulled.

Scarlet said "Fire" and didn't wait for anyone to agree, and the cone went down the corridor over her sister and hit the thing in the doorway and it screamed and it did not let go. Jayden got there first. He went down the corridor past Tessa with the axe in his good hand and took the cord in the middle, one swing, like a man cutting a root, and the cord parted and both halves of it jumped like something electric, and the thing in the doorway folded over on itself and went down, and Scarlet stood over it and finished it, and Tessa lay on her back in the corridor with the gray half of the cord still around her ankle and said, very steadily, "Get it off. Get it off, get it off, get it off."

Jayden got it off. It came away in his hands and he threw it down the corridor and wiped his hands on his jeans and then on the wall.

"Okay," Tessa said, sitting up. "Okay. Where's the gun." Then, when she had it, and had checked it, and had stood up on an ankle that was already going purple: "You cut it."

"It's a cord."

"You cut it. That's the thing. You don't shoot it, you don't burn it, you cut the cord." She looked at the two of us, and then at the dead thing in the doorway. "If one of those gets any of us, somebody cuts the cord. Say it."

We said it.

. . .

Ward B's handover book, night staff, was on the desk at the bottom of the north stair, and the desk was a nurses' station like any nurses' station, with a mug on it and a pen on a chain and a schedule on the wall, except that the schedule's names had been crossed out one by one in different pens.

Do not call them specimens in front of the new ones. Say children and watch their faces, and then they take it seriously.

That is what they are. Ward C's census is a list of live births and every one of them is down here, and they have been fed for eleven years on something that made them long instead of tall.

They arrive in numbers because they were kept in numbers. There is no such thing down here as one of them.

I read it out, because that was what I did, and when I got to *say children and watch their faces* Jayden's face did the thing, the thing it had done in the parking lot, and he turned away and put his good hand on the desk.

"Eleven years," Tessa said. "Ninety-seven to now. The ledger." She had the number on the back of her hand, still, in pen. "The nineteen. They're here."

Sublevel 3 was where the hum was. You felt it on the stair, coming down, before the door, a slow pulse through the handrail, through the soles of your shoes, and Scarlet stopped on the stair and put her hand flat on the wall and said, "It's got a heartbeat," and it did. Forty a minute. Slow. You could stand on that floor and feel it through the concrete like standing on a ship.

Ward C was glass. Incubator wards, bay after bay off a central aisle, the glass of the bays gone, broken outward onto the floor so that it crunched, and the pipe runs under the benches where they run, and it was warm, blood-warm, and it smelled of the nursery so strongly that it was a taste. Milk. Baby powder. And under it the heat smell, the compost smell, the smell of the void over the pharmacy. The light was white and even and every tube alive, and there were no shadows anywhere for anything to be in, and there was nothing in the bays, and the floor pulsed.

There was a tape on the incubator round desk, a technician's, Keane on the label, the kind of log a man keeps for the next man

when he's stopped expecting there to be a next man. He was talking about the sounds. Which ones mean what. *Fast and fiddly means asleep. Slow and simple means behind you.* Scarlet listened to it twice and then stood very still in the aisle for a second with her head on one side, listening to the ward, and said, "Slow and simple," and Jayden turned around.

Nothing was behind us. Not then.

A terminal still lit at the ward station with the census on it, last sync twenty-two days ago, green on black, the cursor blinking on the last line.

```
Bed 04 DOB 11-1998 dev. age 0y 5m mass 38.2 kg HR 41
vocalising
Bed 05 DOB 02-1999 dev. age 0y 4m mass 44.7 kg HR 41
vocalising
Bed 06 DOB 02-1999 dev. age 0y 6m mass 51.0 kg HR 41
vocalising
Bed 07 decommissioned 06-2011. See incident file.

Vocalisation synchronous across wards A-D.
Cardiac rhythm synchronous across wards A-D.

Appended at terminal, user PRAKASH_S:
they are all one heartbeat. pull the chapel feed. it
is the same heartbeat.
```

Twelve years old, developmental age five months, thirty-eight kilos. The nineteen a quarter. The deceased column. Dr. Serrat's seventeen that month that were crying.

Scarlet read the dates over my shoulder and went very still, which I hadn't known she could do. "Eleven, ninety-eight," she said. "That's five months after me."

"Ska—"

"That's my *year*, Tess. That's a kid from my year. That's a kid I'd have been in first grade with if we'd stayed." She looked at the bays, at the broken glass and the benches and the warm white light. "Thirty-eight kilos. What's that. Eighty-something

pounds." She did the math on her fingers and stopped. "That's what I weigh."

"You weigh more than that."

"I do not, I weigh exactly—" She stopped. "That's not the point."

"I know it's not the point."

"What's the chapel feed," Jayden said, and nobody knew.

. . .

She came down the aisle while we were still at the terminal. The nurse.

I'll describe her once too. A woman in a nurse's uniform, the old kind, white, with the cap, and she is seven feet tall, and she walks the aisle between the bays at the pace a nurse walks a ward at night, unhurried, with her head bent over the thing in her arms, and the thing in her arms is a bassinet. A hospital bassinet, the clear plastic tub, cradled in both arms against her chest the way you'd carry a baby and not a baby's bed, and there is something in it, and it's crying.

She didn't look at us. That's what I can't get out of my head. She came down the aisle toward us like we were furniture, bent over the bassinet, and Tessa put the carbine on her and said "Stop" and she didn't, and Scarlet said "Fire" and the cone went down the aisle and she walked through it. Walked. Not ran, not screamed, not burned. The flame went over her and around her and she came out of the other side of it with the hem of her uniform not even smoking, and she stopped at the bay beside us, and she bent, and she put something down out of the bassinet onto the floor of the bay, gently, the way you put a baby down, and it was one of them. Newborn-sized. Wet. And then she straightened up with the bassinet still in both arms and there was already something else in it, crying, and she walked on past us down the aisle and around the corner at the end and she was gone.

Nobody fired. I want that written down too. Four of us with everything we had, and none of us did anything, because she wasn't doing anything to us. She was doing her rounds.

She had dropped something behind her, going. Scarlet went and picked it up. Cloth. A strip of it, white, soft, hospital cotton, torn along the grain, the kind you'd tear from a sheet if you needed a rag and didn't have one. Scarlet stood with it in her hand and looked down the aisle where the nurse had gone.

"She left me a rag," she said.

"Ska."

"She did, though. Look at it. That's a rag. That's a bottle rag." She put it in her pocket with the lighter. "She's leaving us rags."

We did the one on the floor of the bay before it could cry twice. Then we went on, and twice more before the chamber door the nurse came past us, down a cross aisle, around a corner, with her head bent over the bassinet and her lips moving, and each time she left something behind her, on a bench, in a bay, crying, and each time there was a strip of white cotton on the floor where she had been.

. . .

There was a tape in the deck in the booth, and someone had loaded it with hands that shook, you could see the marks on the label. The ward's own ceiling microphone, 03:12, the night it started. We played it. Room tone, first, the room we were standing in, the same hum. A fan. Forty voices, none of them together, small, high, the sounds a ward of infants makes at night, a wet unsettled noise. Then they agree. You can hear them agree. Then they are singing the tune, all forty, in unison, in that ward, and they stop on the same beat, and there is a woman's whisper right at the microphone, close, so close you could hear her lips: *There is no speaker in here. Nobody taught them that. And they are looking at the door.*

Tessa had her eyes shut while it played. Not against it. Listening. When it stopped she said, "It's the old words."

"What?"

"The hymn. On the tape. They're singing the old words. The ones we did for Founders' Day." She opened her eyes. "Nobody taught them that. She's right. Nobody teaches anyone the old words, they're—" She frowned, and I watched her hunt for it, a seventeen-year-old on a floor with a heartbeat trying to remember a thing from second grade. "They're not English. We learned them like sounds. Miss Kovac said it was the old country."

"What do they mean."

"I don't know. I never knew. Nobody said." She looked at the deck. "I can still sing every word."

The security channel had recorded the other half. It was on a handset in a charger on the booth desk, the recording function, and the battery had lasted, and it had one file on it. Kessler, channel three, the night of the fall, a man's voice, tired, doing it right: *recording this because I want somebody to hear it in order*. They had burned the west wards, all of them, and it worked. Corporate said stop at ward C. The asset in ward C is not to be damaged. So they stopped at a door. And it came past four of his people and took the two with burns on their hands. Not the nearest two. The two who had been holding the torches.

It remembers fire. It does not remember anything else, but it remembers that. Do not send a next crew.

That's why they hunt the one carrying the lighter first. That's why Scarlet, who had carried it up Winslow, had a burn across the back of her neck she wouldn't let Tessa look at, and the rest of us didn't.

"I've been holding it since the first house," she said, when the file ended. Not to anyone. "The lighter. Then the bottles. Then

this." She looked down at the wand in her hands and the small blue flame at the end of it. "It knows me."

"Then give it to me," Tessa said.

"No." She said it quickly, and then again, more slowly, as if she had thought about it. "No. If it's going to come for one of us for that, it's not going to be you, and it's not going to be him with one arm, and it's not going to be—" She looked at me. "It's me. It's already me. Let it be me. I'm the fast one."

Tessa opened her mouth and shut it. Her hand went to the back of her sister's neck, to the burn, and Scarlet let it, for a second, and then twitched away.

. . .

Bed 07's incident file was on the chamber door, in a sleeve, and the chamber door was at the end of the aisle, steel, with a window in it, and the window was fogged from the inside.

Subject did not fail to develop. Subject continued. Containment glass was not broken outward. It was taken in. The panels are on the subject and the subject is using them, and no round we own goes through that. Subject nests. Subject carries the young on her back in the glass until they are ready and will not leave the chamber to deliver them. Seven sacs. Five down the spine, one on each shoulder. The sacs are the armor. There is nothing under the sacs but meat. Recommendation, filed and refused twice: the glass is the only thing keeping it standing. we have oxygen lines on all three bay walls and a way to open them from the floor. the pressure will take the sacs off her one at a time. then it is a job for the incinerator and nothing else.

The Matron was the head of the nursery, once. She is the nursery now. She wears the glass of the incubators the way the Shepherd wore the vest, plates of it grown into her, except that the plates aren't plates. They're sacs. Seven of them, down her back and on her shoulders, each one an incubator, each one with the glass gone milky and something moving in it, and when she turns her back to you, which she does, you can see them. Each

one is a litter. She is carrying seven litters on her back in glass, and the glass is the only thing in that room that stops a bullet, and she isn't the worst thing in the room.

The worst thing is the three bays on the walls, left and right and back, and what's chained in each of them, and what those are.

They are Vessels. Three more. Chained at the wrist to the wall, standing, each in her bay, each with her hands under her belly, each humming a fourth low in time with the heartbeat coming out of the walls. And set in the floor of each bay under a grating, where somebody had put it so that it could be opened from the floor, a valve wheel. Three bays, three Vessels, three wheels. Whoever had refused the recommendation twice had understood exactly what the recommendation meant, which was that to open the oxygen on the Matron you had to go and stand in a bay with one of those.

I didn't look at their faces. I'm telling you that so you understand it was a choice.

The room was hot. That's what I'll give you of the room: the heat of it, wet, like a laundry, and the sound, which was the heartbeat, loud here, coming out of the walls, and the three chained things humming, and the floor slick, and the oxygen lines on the walls with their green valves, and the Matron in the middle of it with her back to us, bent over something on the floor, with the seven sacs on her back catching the light.

She turned around. I'll give you that too. She was a woman once, a big woman, and the face is still a face, and the hands are still hands, and she came at us across the slick floor with the hands open and the sacs on her back swinging, and when Tessa put six rounds of the carbine into her chest they went into the glass of the shoulder sacs where she'd hunched them forward and did nothing, and she had Jayden. By the bad arm. Lifted him. Not to bite. To carry. She turned with him toward the back

bay like a woman carrying a child to its bed, and the thing chained in the back bay opened its arms as far as the chains let it.

Scarlet said "Fire" with her voice cracking in the middle of it and put the cone into the Matron's back, into the sacs, and the sacs didn't burn, they were glass, but the thing inside the nearest one screamed, and the Matron dropped him. Let him go. He hit the floor and rolled and came up with the axe, and she stood and shook herself like a dog, and the sacs on her back swung, and one of them was smoking.

"The wheels," Tessa said. "The wheels, the wheels, the wheels." And she went into the left-hand bay.

I'm not going to pretend I understood what I was watching. She went into the bay with a nine-foot thing chained to the wall of it, close enough for it to put its hands on her if it had wanted its hands anywhere but under its belly, and she got down on her knees on the slick floor and got her fingers under the grating and got it up and found the wheel and turned it, both hands, her whole solid weight on it, with the thing humming over her and looking down at her with a face I had chosen not to look at, and the wheel was stiff, and she turned it, and the oxygen jets on the left wall came on with a sound like a kettle, white, hard, a hiss you could feel in your teeth, and the Matron, who was coming for Scarlet, walked into them.

The sac on her left shoulder went. Not broke. Went. Burst like a bulb, outward, with a sound like a bottle dropped in a bathtub, and what was in it came out onto the floor, five, six of them, newborn-sized, and the Matron went down on one knee like somebody had cut a string, and stayed there with her head hanging, and Scarlet stood over the litter and burned it where it lay without saying the word, and then, while the Matron was still down, put the cone on the shoulder where the sac had been, and there was nothing under there but meat, and it burned.

That was how it went. I'll do it once and not seven times. Tessa went bay to bay, left and right and back, and in each one she got down under a chained Vessel and turned a wheel, and in the back bay the Vessel put a hand on her, on her shoulder, and left it there while she turned, not holding her, not pulling, just resting there, the way you'd rest your hand on someone, and Tessa didn't stop turning, and I don't know how. Each wall of jets took a sac when the Matron crossed it, and each time a sac went she went down for a count of maybe forty, and each time she went down Scarlet did the shoulder or the spine where the glass had been, and Jayden did the litter with the axe, one-armed, swinging it flat like a man knocking down a partition, and I did whatever was left. When a litter came out of a sac it came at the one with the fire. Every time. Scarlet never stepped back. Her hair lifted in the heat coming back off the Matron and she stood at the near end of the cone and didn't step back, and when Tessa was empty she said, "Empty," and reloaded, and wasn't empty for long.

The seventh sac was the one at the base of the spine and it was the one that killed her. The Matron. When it went she didn't go down on a knee. She went down on her face on the slick floor with her back open from the neck down, seven holes in it, seven sockets, and she lay there with her hands opening and closing on the concrete, and Scarlet walked up and stood over her and Tessa said, "Ska," and Scarlet said, "I know," and did it. All of it. She stood there and watched it go black and then she kept watching, like the gas bill said, and the wand shook in her hands the whole time and the fire didn't.

Then the three in the bays. We burned one of the mothers, with the last of two canisters, because an unburned Vessel doesn't get up. It opens. And the whole litter comes at once. Scarlet did it and her face while she did it was nothing, was a

wall, and afterward she went to the corner of the room and threw up, and Tessa held her hair.

We didn't have the fuel for the other two. We walked past them. They were humming.

At the chamber door, going out, Scarlet stopped, and turned, and looked back at the two we had left. Not at their faces. At their hands, which were under their bellies, holding them up, the way you would. Then she said, very quietly, "Sorry," and came out, and Jayden shut the door.

"She put her hand on you," Scarlet said, in the corridor. "The back one. I saw it."

"Yes."

"What did it—"

"It was warm," Tessa said. "It was just warm. Like a hand." And she didn't say anything else about it, then or after.

. . .

On the way to the north stair I picked the last thing off a printer tray in the S4 anteroom, print three of three, because it had the word PROVENANCE on it and I had a form in my jacket with a word I didn't know. The anteroom was a lobby with a keypad door on its far side, heavy, a door for a vault, and the smell through the seals of that door wasn't chlorine or formalin or anything of the hospital. It was cold stone and old water and something burned a long time ago.

M-1. Acquired 1945, Harz district. Founding collection. Custodian on acquisition: Dr A. Renlow. Ridge House 1951-74. The ward, 1974 to date.

M-2. Recovered 1994, ridge excavation, Sublevel 4 vault. In situ under the seal.

Full sequence comparison: M-1 and M-2 are genetically identical. Not related. Identical. One individual, two locations, an ocean apart, for a hundred years.

[*biro, margin*]

somebody in 1891 cut it in half to keep it from being whole. somebody in 1945 packed the other half in a crate and brought it across an ocean. we put the crate downstairs from the dig. nobody asked me if it should be in the same building.

Acquired 1945. The Harz is in Germany. Renlow brought it here himself, fifteen years before he built the hospital, and put it in the ward in 1974, and I read that on the stair with the four of us on it and I did the math that I had been putting off doing since the drawers in Records.

NATIVITY had a name from 1997 and a ward from 1974. Two of us were in the trial: two lines in the modern book, 1997 and 1998, the ward's dates, not the family's, fourteen months apart, one hand, a mother who got a Yes. Two of us were in the old drawers. Jones, 1992, five years before the study had a name, born to a nurse on nights at the county who never drove through the valley again. And the fourth, in older paper than that, in a drawer I have closed.

"We're not all the trial," I said.

"What?"

"You two are. Ninety-seven, ninety-eight. It had a name by then, it had forms." I held up the printout. "Ninety-two didn't. It had a ward and a thing in it and no name."

Jayden looked at the sheet. He looked at *the ward, 1974 to date* for a while. "So what was I."

"Practice," said Scarlet, and then, at once, "Sorry. Sorry. I don't—that came out—"

"No," Jayden said. "That's about right." He wasn't angry. He looked at the date again and then at me. "And you."

"Older."

"How much older."

"Older," I said, and he let it go, the way the girls had, and I thought that of everything in that building the thing I was least able to bear was how easily the three of them let me keep it.

The placard on the stair door:

SUBLEVEL 3 — EMERGENCY FLOOD PROTOCOL — DO NOT
OBSTRUCT

On the order of any two directors, the sublevels will
be flooded from the reservoir main. Fill time to
ceiling, S3: eleven minutes. Stairs to S2: north and
east. East has been welded since April.

(scratched into the paint)
eleven minutes is not for us. it is how long the
water takes. we are the thing they are flooding.

Two directors, somewhere outside the valley, gave that order while we were on the stair. We heard it before we saw it: a sound in the walls, a rising roar like a train in a tunnel, and every red light on the level coming on at once and a horn, and then the water came through the laboratory doors the way water doesn't, all at once, waist high in the first second, black and freezing and stinking of the reservoir, of weed and mud and iron, with the jars and the paper lifting off the tables and going past us and the lights shorting out one by one along the ceiling with a bang each. The north stair was already gone; we could see the water going up it in the red light, a staircase filling like a pitcher.

Tessa let the carbine go to get Scarlet by the harness, and it went where the paper went and she did not look after it, and Scarlet got Tessa by the jacket and Jayden got the wall and I got Jayden, and we went the only way the water wasn't coming from, which was down, through a hatch in the floor of the plant room with a ladder in it and a smell of cold coming up, into the pipes.



FOUR

Baptism

UNDER THE HOSPITAL THE pipes go down to the pump house and the pump house goes down to the reservoir main and the reservoir main, in 1994, was cut into a cellar nobody knew was there.

The first hour in the pipes was the dark and the cold and the water. I want to be exact about the water. It was not cold like a swimming pool. It was cold like a thing that has been under a hill for a hundred years with no sun, cold that got into the bones of your hands in the first minute so that you could not feel the wand or the pistol or the lighter, and it came up to the chest in the low sections and to the chin in the lower ones and it stank. Weed. Iron. Rot. And something under those, faint, that Scarlet named the first time we stopped: "That's the drain smell. From upstairs. It's the same thing. It's just wetter."

The pipe itself was concrete, big enough to walk in bent double, with a crown of old slime at the water line and a sound in it that was our breathing coming back to us from both ends, and behind our breathing, forty a minute, the hum, through the water now instead of the floor, so that you felt it in your chest

instead of your feet. Jayden had the last flashlight from the armory, the big rubber kind. It made a cone of gray water and gray wall and steam off us. The pilot on Scarlet's wand was out. You cannot keep a pilot in water. She had the striker in her teeth, in a bag, to keep it dry, and she talked around it.

"Ith a ship," she said.

"What?"

She took the bag out. "It's a ship. This. It's like being in the bottom of a ship. Dee took us on a ferry once, to see the twins' dad, he's on the island, and we went down to the car deck because Tess was throwing up and it was like this. It had that noise." She put the bag back in her teeth and said, around it, "Thith noith."

"You were the one throwing up," Tessa said.

"Noh."

"You were. You threw up on Dee's shoes."

Scarlet considered this. "Thath fair," she said.

The Carriers were in the water with us, and there the fire rule fails: a molotov thrown at a thing in water goes out, and a thing on fire that walks into water goes out, and they knew it, and they came at us wading, the same slow purposeful walk, the same murmur, out of the dark at the pipe's end with the flashlight finding them one by one. These weren't the ones from upstairs. These had been in the water a long time. They were swollen with it, white where the others had been gray, and the water ran out of them when they stood up and kept running, out of the mouth, out of the sleeves, and they didn't murmur so much as gargle it. Scarlet called them the drowned ones the first time she saw one and it stuck, because it was true, and because we needed a word that meant *don't bother with the fire*.

In the water we had the pistol and the axe and Jayden's arm. Tessa shot them and they went down in the water, and stood up out of it thirty seconds later dripping and whole, and she shot

them again, and reloaded, counting, and we backed off up the pipe with them following until the water dropped to the knee and Scarlet could get the pilot lit, and then we stood on the first dry step of a maintenance stair and burned three of them at the waterline as they came up out of it. It took longer than it should have. A wet thing doesn't want to catch. Steam first, a lot of it, and the smell of it, and then the fire getting a hold the way it gets a hold of a wet log, grudging, and then all at once. They went down into the water still burning and the water put them out and they did not get up. Enough had gone.

"They don't drown," Scarlet said, on the stair, with her teeth going.

"No."

"Why don't they drown."

Nobody answered her. Jayden said, "How much fuel."

"Three canisters. One's in the tank."

"Right."

. . .

The pump house was at the top of the maintenance stair, a brick room with two pumps in it the size of cars, both running, both screaming, and a control desk with a handset in a cradle, and the handset was live. Not a person. A recording, on a loop, a man's voice, tired, flat, the kind of voice that has said a thing so many times it has stopped hearing itself. Dowd, he said his name was. Night engineer. He said the sublevels were flooded on the directors' order and the pumps were running at capacity and would run until the fuel was gone. He said what came out of the sublevels went into the main and the main went down the hill. *It drains into the valley*, he said. *Everything we put in the water down here comes out in the town. I have said this to three people and I am saying it to the tape.* Then a click, and the tape started over, and he said his name again.

"The pool smell," Scarlet said. "In the drains. Upstairs."

"Yes."

"That's this. This is where it comes from."

"This is where it goes."

The pump house log was on the crank housing by the desk, and I took it, because that was what I did. I didn't read it there. The pumps were too loud to read anything. I read it later, in the dead air, by the ring, and I'll put it where I read it.

There was something else on the desk, in a dry bag, and Jayden found it: a dive crew's voice log, 1994, on a little recorder, the kind with the tape the size of a matchbook. Three men's voices and the sound of water. They had gone into the void from the reservoir side, before the gate, before any of it was built, with lights and a line, and they describe the cistern and the passage and the round room, and one of them, the one holding the recorder, says it without any feeling in his voice at all, the way you'd report a reading: *Twelve of them. Seated. Facing in.* Then a long time with nothing but the water. Then another voice, closer: *The site director came down alone and he knew the way. He didn't ask us for the line. He knew the way.*

"Renlow," Tessa said.

"On site within the hour," I said, and didn't know yet that was a quote.

. . .

The junction was a cistern, an old one, older than the pipes, brick, with the water in it to the ceiling in the middle and lower at the edges where the floor rose, and the way through was under the surface of the middle, and on the far side, where the dry began again, was a gate, and the gate was shut. A diver's slate on a hook by the waterline, the kind on a lanyard, the pencil still tied to it. The writing was firm and blocky and had been done by somebody who was cold.

Do not swim the middle. Hug the wall and get to the pocket in the alcove before you need to breathe.

The crank for the gate is in the alcove. It fell in when the gantry went. Set it in the socket on the dry side and the junction drains to the knee.

Two of us went in for the crank. One came back to write this.

they are the ones who went in before us.

The last line was in a different pencil.

There were things in the water in the junction. That is what the last line meant. The drowned ones don't float and don't sink and don't drown, and the ones who had gone in before us, wearing what they had drowned in, were standing on the floor of the flooded junction in the dark under the surface, and if you swam the middle you swam over them, and they reached up.

"I'll go," Jayden said.

"You've got one arm."

"I've got one arm and I swim." He was already getting the boot off, the good boot, and Tessa said, "*You swim*," in a tone I had not heard from her before, which I figured out afterward was the tone of somebody hearing the thing she was afraid of and being told it was fine.

"Cold water. There's a lake, the other side of the county. My mom's side go in on New Year's Day, every year, since before I was born. Everyone. Down to the babies. You go in and you come out and you don't feel your feet for an hour." He looked at the water. "This is warmer than that."

"That's not warmer than anything."

"You'd be surprised."

"Of course you do," Scarlet said. "Of *course* you swim in a lake on New Year's Day. Of course you do push-ups on a fire station floor and swim in a lake and carry a battery up two flights with a hole in you. What else. Do you run a marathon."

"Half."

"Of course you run a half."

"Ska."

"I'm just saying he's a *specimen*."

There was a silence in the cistern. It went on. Then Jayden, of all of us, laughed, one bark that came back off the brick, and said, "Yeah, well," and went in.

He went in with a rope tied to his belt, an extension cord from the plant room, the heavy orange kind, because Tessa would not let him go without one, and she held the other end, both hands, her feet braced on the wet brick, her whole weight set against it, and I have never seen anyone hold a rope like that, as if it were the only rope. He hugged the wall as the slate said. The flashlight was ours, on the edge; his cone of light went along the brick under the surface and then was gone, around the wall, and the water went still and there was only the hum in it and the drip.

Tessa counted. Under her breath. I heard her get to forty.

"He's fine," Scarlet said. "He's a specimen."

"Shut up."

"He's fine, Tess."

"Sixty. Shut up."

At ninety the cord jerked in her hands, twice, hard, and she went white, and put her boot against the brick and hauled, and I got behind her and hauled too, and the cord came in wet and heavy and then stopped, snagged on something under the surface, and she said "No" and hauled, and it came, and the crank came up on the end of it, an iron thing the size of a car jack, and after it Jayden with both hands on the cord and his face gray and his mouth open, and he got the edge and hung there, and coughed, and said, "There's a lot of them."

"How many."

"Don't." He coughed again. "Don't ask that. I got the crank. That's what it's for." He looked at the cord, at her hands on it, at

the marks on her palms where it had gone through. "That's what it's for," he said again, to her, and she let go of the cord and put her hands under her arms and did not answer.

One of them came up after him. I'll say that because it happened and because it's the only time I saw Jayden afraid of a thing and not of what it meant. It came up the brick slope out of the middle on its hands and knees with the water running off it, white, swollen, with a diver's weight belt still buckled around what had been its waist, and it got a hand on his ankle while he was still half out, and he kicked, and it didn't let go, and Scarlet went at it with the wand, and the pilot was out, and she had nothing, and she hit it with the wand like a club. Tessa shot it twice in the head from four feet and it let go, and went down the slope on its face, and slid back into the water, and the water closed over it, and we all four stood there and watched the surface.

"Fire doesn't help down here," Tessa said, finally. "Gun doesn't help. Nothing helps. We just have to be faster than them." She looked at Jayden's ankle, at the white marks on it that were finger marks. "Get your boot on. Get the gate up."

The crank went into the socket on the dry side, and he wound it with one arm, because the other would not lift that high, and it took twice as long, and the gate came up out of the water an inch at a time on a chain that screamed, and the water in the junction went down to the knee, and for a moment, as it drained, we saw the floor of it in the flashlight, and I am not going to describe the floor of it. Scarlet did, once, later, in the dark, and Tessa told her to stop, and she stopped.

. . .

Where the water dropped to the knee, the brick went older, and on the far side of the junction there was a passage, low, arched, with a floor that had been laid by hand, and the air changed. It had been cold and wet and alive with the hum. Now

it was cold and dry and dead, and the smell was stone, and old candle, and under those, ash. Not woodsmoke. Ash. The smell that is left in a grate a week after the fire.

"It's a church," Scarlet said, in a whisper, without knowing why she was whispering. "Tess. It's a church. Feel the—" She put her hand on the wall. The stones were dressed. Somebody had cut them square.

"It's under a hospital."

"It's older than the hospital."

We came up out of the passage into a round room, brick-vaulted, with the ceiling lost in the dark, and a ring in the floor of it, burned into the stone, a wide black ring the width of the room, and inside the ring, nothing. Ash. A fine gray layer of it, undisturbed, a hundred years of no wind. And the ring was warm. That is what I noticed before anything, before the books, before the door: that in the coldest place under the hill, the ring in the floor was warm to stand near, the way a hearth is warm the morning after.

Around the wall, cut into the stone at the height of a bench, there were seats. Twelve of them. Stone, with a worn place in each where a man's weight had been, and every one of them facing in, toward the ring. There was nothing in them. In 1994 there had been. *Twelve of them. Seated. Facing in.* Whatever had been in them when the dive crew came through with their line was gone, and I didn't ask where, because by then I had a fair idea who had carried it out, and I didn't want to be right in that room.

There was a door on the far side, iron, and it stood open. It had been cut, not opened. The cut was recent. Bright metal.

Jayden stood at the edge of the ring, at the edge of the ash, and did not step onto it, and none of us did.

I read the pump house log here, by the ring, in the flashlight, in the dead air.

03-94. Excavation for the S3 footings broke into a void at nineteen metres. Brick, dressed stone, an iron door on the far side. Not on any survey. Foreman logged it as a cellar and kept digging.

04-94. The door was cut. Inside, a ring burned into the floor and material in the ring that does not read as bone or as anything else. Dr Renlow on site within the hour. Void renamed Sublevel 4. Material tagged Specimen M.

06-94. Water table rising. Pumps at capacity. Specimen M does not tolerate the pumps being off and has not tolerated much else.

(pencil, worn)

the ring was a wall and we cut the door out of it. it has been coming up the pipes since.

"Nineteen meters," Tessa said. "That's sixty feet. That's the hospital's basement. They dug the basement and hit this."

"They were digging the basement," I said, "on a hill they'd bought that year. That they'd waited fifty-six years to buy."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't. Yet."

The books were on a shelf cut into the wall, three of them, in the dry, in an alcove that had been a closet once with the door long gone. Ledgers, the tall kind, bound in something that had been leather and was now stiff and black, and the writing in them was in a hand that had learned to write from a copybook, careful and upright, and it had been written by men who had come down here to do something and had known that the last thing they would do was write.

I read the first one aloud. There was no reason to whisper anymore. There was nothing in that room but us and the ash.

It was called up on the ninth night and it came as we asked, and it did not go when we asked. Brother Ames struck it with the iron and the iron went into it and stayed.

On the eleventh night Brother Coll put the lamp to it. It burned. It burned to the floor and it did not die. It lay as ash, and by morning the ash was standing.

Write this above every door: its flesh keeps no memory of fire. What we burn today will be whole tomorrow and will not remember that we tried.

(another hand, later)

the fire is not for it. the fire is for what it makes of us.

Scarlet said, "That's the thing over the door."

"What?"

"On the hospital. The words. Over the front. Tess, it's the words on the hospital. *Its flesh keeps no memory.* It's cut in the stone over the door. I read it going in." She looked at the ledger. "They wrote it above every door. Like it says. Somebody read this and did what it said."

"In nineteen-sixty," Tessa said. "When they built it."

"Somebody who'd read this. In nineteen-sixty."

"Renlow," I said. "Who was on site within the hour."

The second book.

THE SEAL

It cannot be banished. We have tried the names and the water and the bell, and it listens to all of them and stays. It can be bound.

A binding is a wall it agrees to. It agreed to ours for blood, and it will keep agreeing while the blood is fresh. Twelve of us cut for the first line. The ring took forty pints and was dry by the third day.

Whoever holds this house after us: the ring must be fed or lit. Fed with what it was drawn in. Lit with what it hates, which is all of us. The door is iron and the ring is under the door.

(margin)

it drinks. it is patient. it is waiting for the blood to run out.

"Forty pints," Jayden said. "Twelve men. That's—"

"Three and a bit each," said Tessa. "A body's got about ten. That's a third of you." She had gone quiet in a new way. "They bled a third of themselves into the floor. Every three days."

"It drinks."

"It drinks."

"Twelve," Scarlet said, and looked at the seats.

The third book had one page written in it.

LAST ENTRY

The ring will not hold on blood alone. It has learned the taste and takes more each week, and there are nine of us.

There is one thing it cannot make itself whole from, and that is us, if we are ash first. What it cannot remember, it cannot wear.

The door is barred from inside. The oil is laid. We go into the ring with the lamp and we do not come out, and the ring will be lit with the only fuel it has never been able to keep.

Forgive us the smell. Do not open the door.

(scratched under it, much later, a different tool)

they opened the door.

Nobody said anything for a while. The flashlight was going yellow; Jayden turned it off to save it, and we stood in the dark by the warm ring with the smell of the old ash, and I heard Scarlet breathing, fast, and then slower, and then she said, in the dark, in a small voice, the goofy gone out of it entirely:

"So that's them. In the ring. The ash. That's the nine."

"Yes."

"And the other three are the seats. The ones who didn't make it to the end."

"I don't know. Maybe."

"And they did that so it would stay in."

"Yes."

"And it stayed in for—" she did the math "—a hundred and three years. Until ninety-four. Until they cut the door."

"Until they cut the door."

"How long did it hold," Jayden said. His voice came out of the dark near the door. "Before ninety-four. Before they cut it. Was it holding."

"It says the ring was a wall. It says it's been coming up the pipes *since*. Since the door."

"So it held."

"It held."

"A hundred and three years," Jayden said. "Nine men. Okay." And that was all he said about it, then or later, but I have thought about that *okay* more than about anything else that was said under that hill. He had asked whether it had worked. He had wanted to know, before anything else, whether it had been worth it. And he had been told yes, and had filed it, the way he filed everything, and had gone on carrying.

. . .

We could not go back through the water and we could not go on through the vault, because the vault's only other way was a stair in the northeast corner to a hatch and the hatch was under something heavy, so we stayed. The alcove with the books was dry. It had a ledge, and a draft from somewhere that was not the pipes, and the draft was cold and clean and smelled of outside, of trees, of the hill, and we sat in it with our backs to the dressed stone and the flashlight off, four in a row, with the ring's warmth on our faces like a fire that was not there.

Jayden was shivering. He was the wettest of us, and the coldest, and the one who would not say so. Tessa said, "Take the jacket off, it's soaked, put mine on," and he said no, and she said, "That's not a *question*," and he took the jacket off, one-armed, and she got hers around his shoulders. It did not close. He is a big man and she was seventeen, however solid, and it sat on him like a cape, and Scarlet, who had been silent for ten whole minutes, said, "He looks like a superhero. He looks like a really cold superhero," and it went through us, the laugh, all four, in the dark, in a room with nine men's ash in the floor, and stopped, and was better.

"Tell me about Dee," Jayden said, after a while.

"Why."

"Because you keep saying her name like she's here. And I want to know who's going to be there when you get back."

Tessa did not answer at once. Scarlet did.

"Dee's Mom's sister. Younger. Two years. They grew up here, both of them, in Nana's house, they were at Ashbrook together, Dee's in the Founders' Day photo, Tess found it, she's on the end pulling a face. She got out first. She went to Millbrook for a guy and the guy didn't last and Millbrook did. She's got the twins, Mia and Nate, they're a year older than Tess, and a dog with one ear, and a house with a room over the garage that's ours now. She's a lunch lady. She's loud. She swears at the TV." A breath. "She came and got us in March. From the hospital. She just came, in the car, with the twins in the back and blankets, and she'd been crying but she'd stopped by the time she got to us, so we wouldn't have to see it. She's like that."

"She sounds all right."

"She's all right."

"And she thinks you're at a friend's."

"Kayla's," Scarlet said. "Till Sunday." She said it to the dark. "She's going to kill us."

"She's going to be so glad she doesn't kill us," Tessa said, "that she kills us."

"Yeah."

"Was it Dee who told you the rule? The one you say?"

"No," said Tessa. "That was Mom."

The draft moved in the alcove. Somewhere above us, a long way, water dropped.

"Mom was sick a long time," Tessa said. "Not the—not just the last part. She was sick when Ska was little. She'd go in and come out. And when she went in the first time, I was seven, and she sat me on the stairs and she said, *I'm always going to come back for you. So don't make it stupid.* Meaning, don't do anything stupid while I'm gone that means I've got to come back for you sooner. Meaning, hold on. Meaning look after your sister." She stopped. "And then she came back. Every time, she came back. Until she didn't. And I'd been saying it to Ska since she was six, so."

"So it's the rule."

"It's the rule."

"She was in a lot," Scarlet said. "Mom. Tess remembers more. I remember the going in and the coming out. I remember she smelled of the hospital when she came out and it took a week to go. I remember Nana came and stayed. Nana was—" She stopped. "Nana didn't talk about here. Ever. Nana lived here her whole life and she didn't talk about it and when we moved she was glad. She said so. She said *good, that's the last of us out*, and I didn't know what she meant, I was eight."

"The last of us out."

"That's what she said."

"But she stayed."

"She stayed. She had the house. She had the pin. She had—" Scarlet's voice went odd. "She had the pin with the wheel on it, Tess, the one on the coat. She wore it *every day*. She said her mother gave it to her."

Tessa said nothing. In the dark I could not see her face and did not need to.

"What's the wheel," Jayden said.

"It's the town. It's on the town hall. It's on the school crest. It's the founders' thing, it's just—it's Ashbrook." Tessa's voice, level. "It's on the company's letterhead. And it's on the stamp on the report I haven't found yet." She stopped. "Sorry. I'm cold. I'm not making sense."

"You're making sense," I said.

She was. She had done the math before I had and she had done it in the dark with her sister's head on her shoulder and she had decided to say it so far and no further, and I have done the same thing, and I knew what it cost.

Jayden said, "My mom said a thing, when I told her about the job. I told you the road thing. There was another thing. She said, *they'll ask about your grandad*. I said what do you mean. She said, *if they ask about your grandad, say you don't know*. And I said I *don't* know, you never told me, and she said, *good*." He shifted in the borrowed jacket. "Nobody asked. At the interview. I thought she was being—I thought it was a her thing."

"Was your grandad from here."

"I don't know. She's never said. Her dad, my grandad, died before I was born, she said he was a hard man and she didn't want to talk about him, and that was the end of it. She kept her maiden name. Jones. I've got it. She never—" He stopped. "It's not a story. It's a bunch of things she didn't say."

"That's all any of it is," Tessa said. "It's a bunch of things nobody said."

Scarlet, half asleep against her sister, said, "Does your girlfriend know about the lake thing."

"She's been in the lake."

"On New Year's."

"Three years running." You could hear him smile in the dark. "She hates it. She goes in anyway. She says if my whole family's going to be stupid together she's not going to stand on the shore and watch." He was quiet a moment. "She gets out first, every year, and she has the towels ready. For everybody. Twenty towels. She counts them the night before."

"I like her," Scarlet said, and was asleep.

. . .

I found the last thing in the vault myself, in the hour before we tried the hatch, and I want to be honest that I nearly did not read it out.

It was in the alcove, behind where the books had been, in a sleeve of oilcloth pinned to the back of the closet, and it was a letter, folded small, and the paper was older than the ledgers, and the hand was a different hand, a foreign hand, small and spiky, and at the top, in the copybook hand of the books, somebody had written *rendered from the German by Brother Aldous*.

Tessa saw me holding it and held out her hand.

"Give it here."

"Tess—"

"I found the last one. I get to read one. Give it."

She read it by the flashlight. Her voice did not change until near the end, and then it changed only in that it got slower.

To Ridge House, from the old house at Aschenbach.

Brothers. You have the relic and you have our blessing. Now have our warning.

We called it in the year 1743, in the Harz, for the Line: that our blood should not die out, and should own the century after. We offered it the village so it would take the village and spare the House. It took the offer to mean itself. It was born in the village and has been being born since.

Fire holds it. Blood binds it. Nothing sends it home; it has none.

You go to a new country to finish what we could not.
Do not call it. Bind it. Call it, and you are
Aschenbach, and Aschenbach is ash.

Heil the House and the Line.
— the Elder, Aschenbach, Whitsun 1891

[pencil, later hand]
they called it anyway.

She folded it along its folds. She said, “Aschenbach. Ash. Brook.” She said it like it was math. “Ashenbach. Ashbrook. They just—said it in English. The town’s named after the old house. Where it came from.”

“Seventeen forty-three,” Scarlet said. “That’s—” she did it “—a hundred and forty-eight years before 1891. And that was a hundred and twenty years ago. So it’s been—”

“Don’t.”

“Two hundred and sixty-eight years. Being born.”

“Ska.”

“I’m just doing the math.”

“I know you’re doing the math. Stop doing the math.”

Tessa was still holding the letter. “It says *for the Line*,” she said. “*That our blood should not die out and should own the century after*. That’s what they called it for. Not for—not to get rid of anything. To *have* something.” She looked at the ring. “Somebody asked for that. A hundred and ninety years before they built the hospital, somebody stood in a village and asked for their family to own the next hundred years, and it came, and they got—” She lifted the letter. “And Nana’s mother gave her a pin with the wheel on it. And Nana wore it every day.”

“Tess.”

“I’m all right.”

“You’re not, but okay.”

“Then what did it mean in 1891,” Scarlet said. She was looking at the paper over her sister’s arm. “*Heil the House and the*

Line. If it's that old. If it's seventeen-whatever. It's not—" She looked at me, because I was the one who read things. "That's not what it means later. Is it. What did it mean when they wrote it."

"It means *hail*," I said. "Health. Long life to. A toast."

"Then what did it mean later."

I did not answer, and she let me not, and she looked at the paper for a long time.

"Somebody's going to tell me," she said. "Soon. Aren't they."

"Soon," Tessa said. "Not yet. Come on. Jayden's freezing. Let's get the hatch."

The hatch was at the top of an iron ladder in the northeast corner, an outflow ladder, the rungs rusted to the thickness of pencils, and it was under a crate. The crate was empty, and stenciled, and the stencil was in German and had a date on it, 1945, and I did not read the stencil to them, and Jayden, who went up the ladder first and put his shoulder under the crate and lifted it one-armed off the hatch, read it himself, and looked down at me, and said nothing, and I have loved him for that, in the way that you can love somebody you knew for eight days.

The hatch came up on a slope of loose stone and brush and a smell of morning: wet earth, pine, cold air with the sun not in it yet, and, far off, faint, coming up the hill through the trees, the singing.



FIVE

Procession

THE VILLAGE ON THE ridge has been empty since 1938, and at dusk it fills.

We came up out of the vault into a hollow of the hillside above the hospital's parking lot, with the east wing below us and the smoke of the nursery still rising, and above us the ridge road, an old wagon road cut into the slope with a wall on the downhill side, and the trees. It was morning. Real morning, the first we had seen since the fire station, with a sky in it, low and gray and moving, and a wind coming over the ridge that smelled of rain on dead ferns and of pine and, under those, faintly, of the reservoir. There were birds. I had not noticed there were no birds in the town until there were birds on the ridge.

Scarlet stood with her face up in the wind for a long minute and said, "That's better," and then, "I'm never going indoors again," and then, "I'm so hungry I could eat one of them," and Tessa said, "Ska," and she said, "A *small* one," and Tessa hit her, not hard, on the arm, and it was the first thing that had felt like the two of them since the ward.

Jayden's shoulder had bled through the dressing in the water and he had let Tessa change it on the slope and had not made a sound and had gone a color I did not like. He was moving well. He was moving too well, the way people do when they have decided that the alternative is not available.

"What's on the ridge," he said.

"The abbey. The map had it. Ruin, it said."

"Then there's the road up and we walk it."

"In the day," Tessa said. "We walk it in the day. Not at dusk. Whatever we do, we're not on that road at dusk."

"Why?"

She did not know why. She said so. "I don't know. It's a thing Nana said. *Don't be on the ridge road at dusk*. She said it like you'd say don't put your hand on the burner. I thought it was because of the drop."

"It's not because of the drop," Scarlet said.

"No. I don't think it is."

. . .

We saw the deer first, and they were the worst thing I saw in Ashbrook, and I have told you about the ward.

It was Scarlet who saw them, because she was ahead, because she was always ahead, and she stopped in the road and put her hand out flat behind her the way Tessa did, which I had not seen her do before, and said, "Look," and we looked.

They were coming out of the treeline below the road, a long way down, where a clearing opened in the pines. Deer. A herd of them, forty or fifty head, and they came out of the trees at a walk, not a run, one behind another, and went up the slope in a line, and none of them looked around and none of them grazed and none of them stopped, and they went up the slope through the brush in that line, the big ones and the small ones, at the same pace, at a walk, and went into the trees on the far side, up toward the ridge, and were gone. Like a funeral. There is no other way to

say it. I have seen a procession of cars behind a hearse go up a hill at that exact speed, in that exact quiet, nobody looking anywhere but ahead.

"Deer don't do that," Jayden said.

"No."

"Deer don't *walk* like that."

"No."

"Where are they going."

"Up," Scarlet said. Her hand was still out behind her, flat. "They're going up. Same as the dog. Same as the ones kneeling. Everything's going up."

There was a forester's shed on the lower road, a green tin-roofed thing with a stovepipe and a stack of cut logs gone silver under a tarp, and a chain across the yard gate with a new padlock on it, and the door was open and the stove was cold and the smell inside was creosote and old coffee and mouse, and a note was on the bench, weighted with a mug.

Brenner —

Don't take the crew up the ridge road. I mean it.

Wednesday at dusk about forty head of deer came out of the treeline below the glade and went up the road. Walked. Not ran. In a line, like a funeral, and not one of them looked at me with the saw going ten yards off.

This morning it's people. The Kessler girl. Both Halloran boys. Old Mrs Dowd, who cannot walk to her own gate. Same line. Same quiet.

I've locked the yard. If the county asks, tell them the ridge is closed for felling.

— Pete

"Kessler," Tessa said.

"The security man. On the tape."

"His girl."

"Dowd," Jayden said. "The pumps."

"His mother. Or his wife." Scarlet read it twice. "*Like a funeral*," she said. "He said it too. Pete. He saw it and he said the same thing. So it *is* like that. It's not just me."

"It's not just you."

"*With the saw going ten yards off.*" She put the note down under the mug where it had been, exactly. "Forty deer and a chainsaw and not one of them looked. And Mrs Dowd who can't walk to her own gate. He put that in so Brenner would believe him. And Brenner didn't."

"Why do you say that."

"Because the note's still here. And the padlock's on the gate and the lock's new and nobody came to cut it."

. . .

There were houses on the lower road, past the shed. Not the old village. Newer, a row of them, eight or nine, 1950s, the kind with the carport and the picture window, strung along the uphill side of the road with their backs to the slope and a wooden sign at the first one that said RIDGE ROW, and every door was open and every house was empty and in the kitchen of the third one there was a kettle on the stove, full, cold, with the burner under it turned off and the lid set beside it, neat, the way you'd set it if somebody had called you from the next room.

The last house but one had a mast in the yard, a steel thing forty feet high guyed with cable, with wires running from the top of it to the eaves, and Scarlet, who notices things, said, "That's a radio," and it was. A ham shack in the back bedroom, a desk full of gray boxes with dials, a headset on the desk, a logbook open, and the man who kept it had written his last entries in a hand that got bigger as it went down the page, and had written them to be read.

Log, continued. Nine hours on the air, and I will say the useful part first.

The band is open. I have had Erie, I have had Windsor, I have had a man in Kentucky playing cards.

They are all fine. Nobody out there is having a bad night but us.

So I told them. I gave them the town, the hospital, the campus, all of it, twice.

Erie came back and asked me to repeat the name of the town.

I repeated it. He said there is nothing on the wire about Ashbrook. Nothing at all.

A town of eleven thousand, and we are not on the wire.

That takes somebody. That is not a thing that happens by itself.

"Eleven thousand," Jayden said.

"That's the town. That's everybody."

"And nobody out there knows." He put his hand on the desk, on the logbook, flat. "A man in Kentucky playing cards."

"Chemical spill," Tessa said. "That's what the man at the checkpoint said. That's what's on the wire. Chemical spill, road closed, nothing to see." She looked at the radios, at the dials, all dark now. "Somebody made that happen. He says so. *That takes somebody.*"

"Can we use it?"

Jayden looked at the gray boxes for a long time and then flipped a switch, and nothing happened, and he flipped it back. "Battery's gone. Or the power. Or he pulled something so it couldn't be traced." He took his hand off the desk. "It wouldn't matter. He was on it nine hours. He got through. He told them twice. Nobody's coming because nobody's told it's a thing you'd come for."

Number 14 was the end house, and it was the only one with the door shut, and the door was locked, and Jayden put his shoulder to it and it went. An old man's house, clean, the TV with the sound bars on the remote taped over, the phone off the hook on the kitchen wall, and in the front room a chair at the window with a view straight down the road, and a tape recorder on the arm of the chair, a kid's one, red plastic, with a cassette in it that had DAVEY on the label in marker. He'd been using his grandson's machine. He said so. He'd watched them go, out of that window, all of the row, and he'd put it on tape because the phone was dead, and he said one thing at the end that Scarlet made us play three times.

GRANDAD'S TAPE, 14 RIDGE ROW

Davey, this is your grandad. I am using your machine because the telephone is dead.

Everyone on the hill went up the road tonight. I watched it out of this window.

They put down what they were holding first. Mrs Halloran set down a full kettle.

Nobody called them. Nobody knocked. They all stood up at the same minute and went.

I have had no hearing since the quarry blast in sixty-one. I am the only one left on this hill.

I do not think those two things are separate, Davey. I think it is a sound.

Do not come for me. Whatever you do, do not come up here listening for me.

"The kettle," Scarlet said. "Third house. We saw it. That's Mrs Halloran's kettle."

"Yes."

"*I think it is a sound.*" She had the recorder in both hands. "He couldn't hear it. He's deaf. Everyone who could hear it went up the road and he's the only one who couldn't and he's the only

one who didn't." She looked at Tessa. "It's the hum. It's the thing in the floor. It's what they're all singing. It gets you through your ears."

"We can hear it."

"We can hear it and it doesn't take us. Because of the dot." Scarlet put the recorder down on the chair arm, carefully, where it had been. "He's not here. The old man. He said he was the only one left and he's not here."

"No."

"He went up anyway. Or somebody came for him."

Nobody answered that. Jayden was standing at the window where the chair was, looking down the road the way the old man had looked down it, and he said, "Davey didn't come. Good." And then, "Let's go. It's past noon."

. . .

The village was above the treeline, where the road came out of the pines onto the shoulder of the ridge and the wind got at you, and it was stone. Gray stone houses, a dozen of them, either side of the road, with the roofs half in and the windows out and the doors gone, and a well with a pump, and a chapel at the top with no roof at all and its gable standing against the sky, and above it, further, a bulk of black wall on the skyline that was the abbey. Nettles in every doorway. An elderberry growing out of a hearth. It smelled of wet stone and sheep and the particular green smell of a place that people left a long time ago and nothing has come back to. It had been empty since 1938. You could feel the year on it, like a date on a gravestone.

And it was not empty.

They were in the street. Not moving. Standing, in the road, between the houses, facing up the hill toward the chapel and the abbey beyond it, thirty or forty of them, and they were the town. The bathrobe from the first house was not there but his kind was, the ones from the subdivision, the ones from the ward, a woman

in a pharmacy smock, a man in coveralls with a name on the chest, a boy in an Ashbrook Elementary hoodie, two old women together, a firefighter in the bunker pants with the suspenders down. Facing up the hill. Humming. Forty a minute, the hum, and under it that other thing, the fourth below, from somewhere higher up, and they were waiting, and they had been waiting since the light came, because at the light they had stopped where they were.

"Don't," Tessa said, to Scarlet, who had not moved. "Don't go in. There's a way around. There's the back of the houses."

"They're not doing anything."

"They're not doing anything because it's day. Don't go in."

We went around the back of the houses, through the nettles, past the old gardens gone to blackberry with the sound of the hum coming through the empty windows, and Scarlet, in the middle of it, in a whisper, said, "It's like a school assembly. When you come in late and they're all facing the front and you have to go around the side," and it was, it was exactly that, and I hated her for saying it and was grateful.

The notice was on the pump at the top of the street, nailed to the wooden post, sodden, the print running. County paper.

COUNTY OF RENLOW — EMERGENCY NOTICE — RIDGE RESIDENTS

Ashbrook is CLOSED below the Route 9 checkpoint. Do not go down. Do not admit anyone from the town, including family.

If instructed, evacuate ON FOOT by the ridge road to the assembly point at the abbey. Bring nothing. Vehicles will not be permitted on the road.

Report anyone with fever, a fixed stare, or humming to the checkpoint by phone. Do not approach them.

Posted 14 June 2011.

(pencil, small, careful, another hand)

nobody instructed us. they just went. all of them, up the road, at dusk, and they did not bring anything.

"On foot," Jayden said. "By the ridge road. To the abbey. The county said that."

"The county said what it was told to say."

"By who."

"By whoever owns the hill," Tessa said. "Whoever bought it in ninety-four. Whoever's got a company with a wheel on it. The county's *named* for him." She looked at the notice. "They sent the town up the road. The ones that were left. On the fourteenth. And the town went."

"*Bring nothing*," Scarlet said. "The county wrote *bring nothing* and the old man said they put down what they were holding. Same thing. They knew what it would look like. They wrote it down ahead of time so it'd look like orders." She looked at the pencil. "And they didn't need to. Nobody instructed anybody. Somebody watched them go and wrote that and stayed behind. Why did they stay behind?"

"Because they could."

"Why could they?"

Nobody answered. She had asked it the way she asked everything, all at once, in the open, as if the answer would be simple, and it was simple, and I did not say it.

. . .

The chapel had no roof and the ledger was in the vestry, in a stone cabinet, dry, and the vestry smelled of pigeon and lime and the old wet-wool smell of a place where men had hung coats. The ledger was the Order's, the same copybook hand as the vault, and it had a heading, ON THE WALKING, and it had been written by somebody who had gone out to see.

At the failing of the light every one it has touched sets down whatever is in their hands and walks up the road together, and none of them speaks. Brother Aldous stood in the road with a lantern to test it.

The column parted around him like water round a stone and closed again above him.

And further down, in the same hand, on a later night:

Fire on the hedges turns them, for a while; they will not walk through it and they will not wait for it. Where the road is lit, they go round.

"Aldous," Scarlet said. "He did the letter. The German one. *Rendered by Brother Aldous.* And he stood in the road with a lantern."

"He tested it."

"He stood in the road with a *lantern*, Tess, on his own, with all of them coming, to see what they'd do." She read it again. "*Closed again above him.* They went past him. Up. They didn't want him. They wanted up."

"That's what it says."

"What did it want up there."

Tessa did not answer. She had the ledger and she had the letter in her jacket and the report she had not found yet, and she was doing the math, and Jayden had gone to the vestry door and was looking at the light.

"It's four," he said. "Maybe five. It's going."

"We can't get past them in the light."

"And we can't be in the road at dusk."

"Then we get off the road," I said, "and we light it."

. . .

The inn had been the last house in the village to be lived in, a low stone thing at the top of the street across from the pump with a sign gone to bare wood and a cellar with a hatch in the road, and the cellar had bottles. Not many. Old ones, the labels gone, liquor by the smell, and somebody more recent had left a gas can of kerosene for the lamps, half full, and a crate of empties, and Scarlet went through it on her knees in the dark with the striker for a light and came up with nine that would do

and started tearing the vestry curtains into rags without being asked. She had the Midwife's rags too, the white cotton strips, four of them, in her jacket pocket, and she used those first.

"You're getting good at that," Jayden said.

"I was always good at that. I'm good at anything that's kind of stupid."

"That's not true."

"It's a *little* true." She wet a rag and worked it into a neck, careful, the way she had since the first night. "Tess is good at the things you have to think about. I'm good at the things you have to *not* think about. It's a system." She held up the bottle. "Fire."

"Not yet."

"I know not yet. I'm *practicing*."

We laid them along the top of the street where the road went past the pump and up to the chapel, in the dead ferns and brush on either side, because the ledger said fire on the hedges, and Jayden, one-armed, carried the gas can and laid a line of kerosene across the road below the chapel step, and Tessa stood at the pump with the pistol and watched the light go, and the hum went on under all of it, steady, forty a minute, from forty throats, and from somewhere above, from the black wall on the skyline, that fourth below.

At the failing of the light, they moved.

All at once. Not one, then another. All of them, the way the deer had, the way the dogs had wanted to, the way the men in the garage had knelt: the light went off the ridge and they lifted their heads and set down what they were holding. The firefighter had a hose coupling. A woman had a bag. The boy in the hoodie had nothing and set down nothing and it was the worst, somehow, that he had come with nothing. And they walked. Up the street, toward us, toward the chapel and the road above it and the wall on the skyline, at that pace, in that quiet, and the humming did not stop but it did not get louder either, and they

did not look at us, and they were forty feet away, and Scarlet said, "Fire," and lit the brush.

Dead fern burns like paper. It went up either side of the road with a roar, orange, and the smoke came off it thick and white and rolled across the street, and the column stopped, and turned, and went around.

They went around. The ledger was right. They will not walk through it and they will not wait for it. Where the road is lit they go around, and around meant off the road and up through the houses, through the doorways, over the walls, and one of them came through the smoke ten feet from Tessa at the pump and she put it down and it got up and she put it down again, counting, and I heard her say "Six" and then "Empty" and then nothing, and I could not see her.

The smoke did it. The wind had turned with the light and the smoke came back across the road instead of away, and Tessa was in it, and she is solid and tall and she has never been fast, and something came out of the smoke and put her down. I did not see what. I saw her go down. I heard Scarlet scream her name, which she had never done, not once, not in the garage, not on the ward, and I saw Scarlet turn with the wand and not fire, because Tessa was in the cone, and stand there with the pilot burning and her face open and screaming, and it was Jayden who went into the smoke.

One arm. Into the smoke where a thing was, where Tessa was down, and he came out with her over his good shoulder in a lift he had learned on a site course from a video his mother said was garbage, and the thing came out after him and Scarlet said nothing at all and burned it.

We got into the inn. Jayden kicked the door in with Tessa on his shoulder and we got into the inn and got the door shut and got the bar across it, and outside the brush burned and the column went around, past us, up, in the smoke and the orange

light, and their shadows went across the window one after another after another for a long time, and none of them stopped, and when the last had gone by the humming had gone with them up the hill and the fire was dying and there was only the wind.

Tessa was breathing. Tessa had a lump on the side of her head the size of half an egg and threw up on the floor and then said, "How many," and Scarlet said, "All of them. They've gone up," and Tessa said, "How many did I get," and Scarlet said, "Six, you said six, you were counting, I heard you," and Tessa said, "Good," and closed her eyes.

Scarlet sat on the floor beside her and held her hand and did not say anything, and her face was white, and she was sixteen, and she had held a flamethrower on her sister and not fired, and I do not know what that cost her and I never asked.

. . .

The kitchen at the back of the inn had a wood stove and a stack of dry kindling somebody had laid ready, and a kettle, and Jayden got the stove going one-armed with the striker while I watched the door, and it was the first warm room since the pharmacy. The smell of it, when it caught: woodsmoke, real smoke, not brush, not the other thing, and old grease on the stove, and the kerosene on Jayden's hands, and then, when he found the can in the back of the cabinet, tea. There was a pump in the yard and the water came up brown and then clear. He made it in a pot. He put a tin cup in Scarlet's hands and closed her fingers around it and she looked at it as if she did not know what it was.

"Drink that."

"Is it—"

"It's tea. It's been in a can since before you were born and it's tea. Drink it."

She drank it. Tessa was on the bench with a wet cloth on her head and her eyes open, tracking, and she drank hers too, with both hands, and said, "Dee puts sugar in," and Scarlet said, "Dee puts four sugars in and says it's for the shock and it's not for the shock, she just likes sugar," and Tessa nearly smiled.

Jayden sat down on the floor with his back to the stove, in her jacket that did not close, and shut his eyes, and said, "Her feet are always cold."

Nobody said anything.

"She gets in the bed and puts them on me. On my back. Like ice. Every night. And I say her name and she laughs. She's got a laugh you can hear from the road. I've been thinking about it since the water. Since the—" he lifted the hand a little "—since the lake. I've been thinking I'd give an arm to have her put her feet on my back."

"You've nearly given one," Scarlet said.

He laughed. It hurt him and he laughed anyway. "Yeah."

"You said she'd figure out who to call. If you didn't call Sunday."

"She will."

"It's not Sunday yet."

"No." He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling of the inn kitchen, which had hooks in it for hams, and a crack, and a spider. "She knows the town. She knows the company. She knows I was starting Monday. She'll have called the number and got nothing and called it again. She'll be at the counter. She'll be doing the breakfasts because if she doesn't do the breakfasts the breakfasts don't get done. And she'll be looking at the door every time it goes."

"She sounds all right," said Tessa, from the bench, with her eyes shut.

"She's all right."

"That's what you said about Dee. We're all just saying it now.
She's all right."

"It's true, though."

"It is true."

. . .

Tessa found the report herself, in the morning, and she had been looking for it, because she had said *the stamp on the report I haven't found yet* in the vault and had not explained and had not been asked, and it was where she had guessed it would be: in the inn's back room, which had been the village's post office once and still had the pigeonholes, in a tin box under the counter with the ridge's deeds and the last church register, folded in an envelope with an eagle on it. Gray paper. Typed. Signed.

She read it standing up, at the counter, with the lump on her head and the cloth in her other hand.

STUDIENGESELLSCHAFT — EXPEDITION 14 — RIDGE ABBEY,
ASHBROOK

The abbey stands. The 1891 seal lies beneath it,
unbroken. The village below is empty; the locals say
it walked. The Ashbrook families remember the old
house and were glad to meet a Rehnlaue again.

Purchase of the ridge is not possible under the
present owners. Recommend acquisition after a
suitable interval, through a local intermediary, once
the founding families can be shown that our interest
is theirs.

The relic at Aschenbach and the seal here are two
halves. The Reichsfuehrer is informed. Nothing moves
until both can move together.

Filed by Dr A. Rehnlaue, Berlin, 12 September 1938.

[pencil, another hand]

the wheel on that stamp is over the town hall door.
it is on my ring.

The eagle on the stamp was over a wheel. Twelve spokes. I had seen it on the envelope; Tessa had seen it before I had, on the school crest, on the town hall, on a pin.

She put the report down on the counter and put both hands flat on either side of it, the way Jayden did with a drawing, and she said, "Okay."

Then she said, "Rehnlau. Renlow. He just said it in English. Like Aschenbach. Like Ashbrook."

"Yes."

"He came here in 1938 and the families were *glad to meet a Rehnlau again*. Again. They knew the name. From the old house. From Aschenbach. They'd been waiting for one." She looked at the paper. "And then a war, and then he's Renlow, and then it's a company, and they buy the ridge in ninety-four and dig up the seal on purpose. On *purpose*. Because they knew it was there. Because they'd been told in 1938 it was there and unbroken and they waited fifty-six years to cut the door."

"Yes."

"*The Reichsfuehrer is informed*." She said it very carefully, the way you say a word you have only read. "Who's that?"

"Tess," I said.

"I know who it is. We did it in school. I'm asking you to say it."

"Himmler."

Scarlet, from the doorway, where she had been standing since the first line: "The—" and she stopped. She is smart. She had had *Heil the House and the Line* in her head since the vault, and *Studiengesellschaft* since the letterhead, and a date, and an eagle, and she had been lining them up and she had not wanted them to line up, and they had. "The SS," she said. "That's who was *informed*. That's who he was writing to."

"Yes."

"It meant the house," Tessa said. "In 1891, *heil* meant the house. A toast. Long life to the family." She put her finger on the stamp. "And then in 1938 they were the same people and it meant *this*. It didn't change. They didn't change. The word changed around them." She took her finger off it. "That's what's under the hospital. That's what the wheel is. That's what NATIVITY is. It's the Line. *Our blood should not die out and should own the century after*. They asked for that in 1743 and they're still asking. They asked Mom."

"Mom said yes."

"Mom said yes because she was twenty-two and it was a form and it said *treatment* and a thousand dollars a quarter." Tessa's voice did not shake. "Mom said, when we left, when I was nine, in the car, she said, *that town has had enough out of me*. I thought she meant the choir. I thought she meant the carpool and the church and the Founders' Day, I thought she meant she was tired of *doing things* for it." She stopped. "She meant us. She meant it had had us out of her. Two. And she'd got Nana to say she'd sign for the house so nobody looked at her, and she got us out."

Scarlet came in from the doorway. She came to the counter and she took the NB-2 form out of her jacket, where she had carried it since the ward, folded, and she unfolded it on the counter next to the report with the eagle, and she put her finger on the *Yes* in her mother's hand, and then on the null marker, the circle with the dot, and she read it again, the eligibility line, the one that said what a null carrier was, and she said:

"So we're the ones it can't have."

"Yes."

"It made all of them. The ward. The town. The deer. Everything that's walking up that hill, it made, or it's got. And it can't have us. That's what the dot means. It tried, with Mom, it tried twice, and it got two it can't have." She looked up. "That's

why Nana said *good, that's the last of us out*. Because she knew. She had the pin and she knew and she got us out."

"I think so."

"Good," said Scarlet. And then, because she was sixteen and it was too big, and because she is who she is, she said: "Good. I'm glad. I'm glad it can't have me. I'm *un-haveable*. That's my whole thing now."

Tessa put her arm around her sister's neck, over the burn, and pulled her head against her shoulder, and held it there, and Scarlet let her, and did not twitch away.

Jayden had been at the door with the light on him. He had not said anything through any of it. He said now, "The founding families. It says *the founding families can be shown that our interest is theirs*."

"Yes."

"Jones isn't a founding family."

"No."

"My mom kept her name," he said. "She never said why. My grandad was a hard man and she never said his name and she never said why." He turned around. "I'm not going to find out up there, am I."

"I don't know."

"No," he said. "I don't think I am. Okay." And he picked up the last of the bottles, and the gas can, and we went up to the abbey.

There was one more thing on the road, and I'll put it here because it was on the road. A hundred yards below the abbey wall there was a contractor's trailer, white, with the wheel on the door and RENLOW under it, and a scaffold tower lying on its side in the weeds where somebody had let it go, and inside the trailer on the drafting table a little voice recorder, a mason's, the kind men use who don't like to write. He'd walked off the job. Twice, he said. This time he was putting the reason down.

MASON'S DAY BOOK, THE ABBEY CONVERSION

Day book, Thursday. Renlow job, the ridge abbey.
Talking it in; my hands are wet.

Second time I have walked off this job. This time I
am putting the reason down.

It is not the scaffold and it is not the pay. It is
the window.

From up on the boards you are level with it and you
can see what is in it.

Twelve people sat in a ring round a wheel, and all
twelve of them are burning.

At the hub of the wheel there is a cradle. Same wheel
as on their letterhead.

The thing in the cradle has been given a child's face
and too many hands.

"Conversion," Tessa said. "The map said ruin."

"The map's old."

"Renlow's been fixing it up. Putting in a window." She
looked up the road at the black wall against the sky, which from
here you could see wasn't black at all, was new stone laid in old,
pointed, with scaffold clips still on the buttresses. "Twelve in a
ring. Twelve seats. A cradle in the middle."

"We've seen the seats," Scarlet said.

"We've seen the seats."

"I don't want to see the window."

"No," Tessa said. "Neither do I. Come on."



SIX

Nativity

THE ABBEY WAS A company chapel from 1994 and the company did not change much.

It stood on the crown of the ridge with the wind going through it, a long black building of the same dressed stone as the vault, with a tower at the west end and a nave that had lost half its roof and kept the other half, and a wall around it that was the company's, and a gate in the wall, steel, with the wheel on it, standing open. The cars were inside the wall. Renlow's cars, white, a dozen, parked in rows on the gravel like the lot at a conference, and the doors of some of them were open, and nobody was in any of them, and the gravel between them was worn flat in a wide path that went from the gate to the big doors at the west end of the nave and did not go anywhere else.

The path was where the town had walked. Every dusk since the fourteenth. You could see it: the gravel worn down to the dirt under it, a road made by feet in a month.

The doors were shut. Oak, iron-strapped, twelve feet high, and the oak was dark to the height of a man's reach with handprints. Hundreds. Thousands. Flat, open, pressed, one on

top of another, the way the window of a store gets when there's something in it that people want.

"They can't get in," Scarlet said.

"No."

"They come up here every night and they stand there and they put their hands on it and they can't get in." She looked at the handprints and did not go near them. "Why not. It wants them. It's been calling them for a month. Why's the door shut."

"I don't know yet."

The smell, from the gate, was incense. Real incense, church incense, resin and smoke, coming out of the broken half of the roof on the wind, and under it, the other. The nursery. Warm. Sweet. Wrong.

. . .

There was a smaller door at the side, in the annex that ran off the north side of the nave, a plain door with a Renlow sign screwed to it, SITE OFFICE, and it was not locked. Inside, a narthex, which is the porch of a church, a stone room with a stone floor and the cold of a place that has never once been warm, and a corridor off it, and the corridor went east past a clock.

I want to describe the clock, because it mattered more than I knew when I was looking at it. It was in the wall of the corridor behind a glass panel, a church clock, the mechanism of one, iron and brass, a train of wheels the size of dinner plates and a pendulum as long as a man, and it was not going. There were gaps in it. Three places where a wheel should have been and was not, with the shafts standing bare, and a card tied to the frame with string, typed, 1962, COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, and the card said the escapement was original to the building and the three gears had been removed for conservation and would be returned, and nobody had.

Beyond the clock the corridor opened into a cross hall with a door on each side and a bigger door, shut, straight ahead, and the bigger door was the nave. Oak again. Iron again. And over it, cut into the stone, a wheel. Not painted. Cut. Twelve spokes, and the hub worn smooth by hands.

Jayden put his good hand on the nave door and pushed and it did not move at all. Not the give of a locked door. The nothing of a wall.

"It's on the clock," Tessa said. She had read it before I had. There was a memo pinned to the chapter house wall, through the door on the left, and she had gone through and read it and come back, and she said it the way she said things she had read all the way through. "The nave door's on the clock. The clock works the door. And the clock's missing its gears."

The chapter house had been the Renlow site office. A good room, round, stone benches around the wall, and in the middle of it a desk and a chair and a safe and a coffee maker and a schedule on the wall with the wheel at the top, and the safe was open, because whoever had been in there on the fourteenth had opened it and taken the money and left the paper. The memo was pinned beside the schedule. It was from 1994 and it was about the conversion and it had been written by somebody who thought they were fitting out a lab.

RENLOW BIOGENETICS - FACILITIES - INTERNAL

RE: Ridge abbey, conversion to campus chapel

3 October 1994

Trustees have approved keeping the abbey as a chapel.
From the walkthrough with Dr Halvard:

1. The four iron braziers stay. Cap the gas feed; do not remove it.
2. The three stone basins in the nave floor are NOT to be removed. The drains run down to Sublevel 4 and Dr Halvard wants the flow kept. Plate them; do not fill.

3. The nave door is on the clock escapement, which is missing its gears (historical society, 1962). Leave it. The vestry door serves.

4. The scaffold on the north wall is the contractor's and comes down when the stonework is done. NB: contractor has walked off twice. Find out why.

5. The stained glass depicts something the trustees would rather it did not. It is listed. Leave it.

"Four braziers," Tessa said. "Three basins. A scaffold." She had the covenant in her head already, or the shape of it. She had had it since the vault, since *the ring must be fed or lit*, and she was ahead of me, and she looked at the memo the way she had looked at the pistol manual: as a thing you read all the way through before you touch anything. "The drains run down to Sublevel 4. That's the vault. That's the ring. *Wants the flow kept.*"

"Blood," said Scarlet.

"Yes."

"They kept the *blood* going. Down the drains. To feed it."

"Fed or lit. The ledger said fed or lit. They fed it. They fed it for—" she counted "—seventeen years. Since ninety-four. Since they cut the door. And then this summer it wasn't enough."

"Why wasn't it enough?"

"Because it learned the taste. It says. It takes more each week." She looked at the nave door through the chapter house doorway, at the wheel cut over it. "And it ran out of what they were giving it and it called the town. And the town can't get in."

"*Leave it,*" Jayden said. He was reading item three. "They left it. On purpose. Seventeen years, a company this size, and they left a door shut that a clock works and didn't put the gears back. *The vestry door serves.*" He looked across the cross hall at the door on the right. "Serves who."

"Them," Tessa said. "Little door for the people who work here. Big door for—" She stopped.

"For the town."

"For whatever's supposed to come in that door when the clock says. They kept the big door shut on purpose. The gears aren't lost. Somebody knows exactly where they are."

Somebody did. They were in the safe, at the back, behind where the money had been, in a wooden box with a label in the same typeface as the card on the clock, HIST. SOC. 1962, RETURN, and three brass wheels inside in a nest of tissue paper gone brown, and Jayden lifted the box out and looked at the wheels and looked at the clock through the doorway and I saw his face do the thing it did with a drawing.

"Don't," Tessa said.

"I'm not. I'm looking."

"Don't look like that either."

. . .

The vestry was the other door off the cross hall, and the vestry was where I am writing this.

I'll tell you about it now, because I have been sitting in it for most of three days and it is the last room. It is a low room, lower than the hall it comes off, with a dropped ceiling the company put in so the heat would stay, and a desk, and a cabinet of documents, and a cot, and a door that shuts and has a bar, and on the east wall a window of plain glass that looks down the ridge at the hospital with the east wing smoking, and the town below that, and below that the fog. It was a robing room. It is the only room in the abbey where the hum does not come through the floor, and I don't know why, and I have stopped asking.

The letter was in the floor. There was a board loose by the door, one of the old ones, and the board had been up before and put down badly, and under it a stone, and the stone had been lifted and not put back, and in the hole was a lead box the size of a Bible, and in the lead box was a letter on vellum in the copybook hand, the hand from the Last Entry, shaking.

To whoever opens this house.

The fires are lit. Brother Aldous is on the scaffold;
it has him by the leg and he is still climbing. The
fonts are fed. I have the last oil and am going to
the seal, writing this with the other hand so
somebody knows we chose it.

It is not evil. It is a child that was never born and
cannot stop being born, and it wants what any child
wants: everyone.

If you read this, the binding held a while and then
did not, and you stand where I stand. The covenant on
the altar says the seal is lit from within. It does
not say by whom.

Forgive us the calling. Do not forgive the binding;
it was the only good thing we did.

Abbot Emrys Cole, the ridge, 20 November 1891.

I can hear it singing. It sounds pleased.

Scarlet read the last line and put the letter down on the desk and walked to the vestry door and stood in it with her back to us. She said, after a while, not turning around, "Aldous."

"Yes."

"It had him by the leg and he was still climbing."

"Yes."

"He translated the letter and he stood in the road with a lantern and he went up the scaffold with it on his leg." She turned around. Her eyes were wet and her voice was not. "I want it written down somewhere that he did that. Not just here. Somewhere people can see."

"It's written down here."

"Here's not *somewhere*. Here's a hole in a floor." She wiped her face with the back of the hand that held the wand. "I'm just saying. Somebody should."

"Somebody will."

I have. This is it. Brother Aldous of the Second Cradle, who rendered the letter from Aschenbach into English, and stood in

the ridge road with a lantern to see what the column would do, and went up the scaffold on the twentieth of November 1891 with the thing's hand around his leg and did not stop climbing. Scarlet King asked that he be written down, and he is.

. . .

The Trustees' minute was in the safe too. Under the box with the gears. A single typed sheet on the company's letterhead with the wheel at the top, and the wheel at the top had a cradle at the hub, and it said the whole thing once.

MINUTE OF THE TRUSTEES — RIDGE HOUSE — 3 MAY 1951

Present: A. Renlow (formerly Rehnlaue), and the five.

1. The House has had three names. The First Cradle, at Aschenbach, 1743. The Second Cradle, here, 1891. The Studiengesellschaft, 1935 to 1945. One house. We are done with names that can be tried.
2. Resolved: we shall be a company. Companies are not tried at Nuremberg. Renlow Biogenetics is incorporated this day.
3. The aim is unchanged since Aschenbach: the Line, and the century after it. The method is corrected. The old house called it into a village and got a village. We will grow it in the unborn, where it is small, and raise it. Our children. Our blood. Nobody else's.
4. M-1 stays in this house until the hospital is built.
5. The crest is the wheel. Twelve spokes, and at the hub, a cradle.

I read it once, out loud, to the three of them, in the chapter house, with the coffee maker and the schedule and the wind on the roof, and nobody said anything for a long time, and I want to set down what each of them did, because it was the last quiet we had before we knew what we were going to do.

Jayden put both hands on the desk, flat, the good one and the other, which he had not lifted that high since the corridor on S3

and lifted now, and looked at *the five*, and at *our children, our blood, nobody else's*, and said, "Okay. That's where I come from, then. One of the five. Or one of the five's." He said it the way a man reads a drawing. "That's what she wouldn't say. That's what the grandad was. He was a hard man. Okay."

Tessa read it over, twice, standing, and then sat down in the site manager's chair, which was too low for her, and put the ledger page and the letter from Aschenbach and the report with the eagle and the minute in a row on the desk in front of her, in order, by date, 1743, 1891, 1938, 1951, and the NB-2 form at the end, 1998, and looked at the row. "That's it," she said. "That's the whole thing. That's every bit of it, lined up." She touched the minute. "*Companies are not tried at Nuremberg*. He wrote that down. He was so sure nobody would ever read it, he wrote it down."

"They read it," Scarlet said. "Whoever took the money. They had to move it to get to the money. They read it and they took the money and they left it."

"They didn't care."

"They *knew*. Everybody who worked here knew. That's what the pin is. That's what the Founders' Day is." She was standing behind her sister's chair with the wand in one hand and the other on the back of the chair, and she read it over Tessa's shoulder to *our children, our blood, nobody else's*, and said, very quietly, "Well, I'm nobody else's, then. I'm not theirs. I'm Mom's." And then, because she had to: "And Dee's. Since March."

And I stood in the doorway with the wind on my back and read *one house* and did not say what house I was from, and none of them asked me, and I have never been forgiven anything so completely.

. . .

The card about the window was pinned in the narthex, by the outer door, where the Historical Society had put it for visitors in 1962 and nobody had taken it down.

RIDGE ABBEY, NAVE WEST GLASS

County Historical Society, 1962. Card four of six.

Not original fabric. Installed 1891 by private subscription, and the only glass here that is not Victorian pattern work.

SUBJECT. High in the tracery, not legible from the floor: twelve figures in a ring, each burning. Not martyrs. A martyr is shown suffering and these are shown willing. At the centre a wheel, and at the hub of the wheel, a cradle.

INSCRIPTION. The dedication band, transcribed as it stands. The Society offers no translation.

ANNO MDCCXLIII VOCAVIMUS

ET RESPONSUM EST

IGNIS TENET SANGUIS LIGAT

DUODECIM CIRCA ROTAM

IN MEDIO CUNABULUM

QUOD DATUM EST NON REDDITUR

EX DONO SOCIETATIS STUDIORUM

The donor appears in the subscription list as a study society of no address.

Visitors ask whether it may be moved to the south wall for the light. It may not. It is listed.

None of us had Latin. I'll give you what we got out of it, which was not all of it, and the Society did not do any better.

"MDCCXLIII," Scarlet said. "We did these. M is a thousand. D is five hundred. CC is two hundred. XL is forty. III." She counted on the hand that still had all its fingers, then. "Seventeen forty-three."

"Ignis is fire," Tessa said. "Like ignite. Sanguis is—" she frowned—"sanguine. Mom said it about Nana. It means blood. Fire something, blood something."

"Duodecim's twelve," I said. "A dozen. In a circle. Around the wheel."

"*A study society of no address,*" Jayden said. "That's them. Studiengesellschaft. They paid for the window. In 1891. Before the war, before any of it, they had a name and they were putting their name on a window on a hill in America." He looked up the corridor at the shut door with the wheel cut over it. "What's the rest."

"I don't know."

"Guess."

"I'm not going to guess," I said. "I'll tell you when we've seen it. Fire something. Blood something. Twelve around a wheel. A cradle in the middle. Something about giving." That was as far as I could take it, and it turned out to be far enough.

. . .

Jayden put the gears in.

I want to be fair to him about this, because it is easy to make it sound like a mistake, and it was not a mistake. It was him. He had been putting things back together since the garage. He had put a battery back in a wall and a crank back on its shaft and a harness back around a girl and a stove back in service, and he stood in front of the clock with three brass wheels in a box and the shafts standing bare, and he looked at it the way he looked at everything, and he said, "I know which one goes where. Look. The teeth. You can see which one goes where," and Tessa said "Don't" again, and he said, "Tess, we have to go in that room. Everything's in that room. The door's on the clock and the clock's got three gears out and the gears are here. There's no version of this where we don't," and he was right, and she knew he was right, and she said, "Okay. But not yet. Not till we've—" and he had the glass panel off already.

It took him twenty minutes with one hand and a knife. The third wheel went on with a sound like a coin going into a slot,

and he stepped back, and nothing happened, and he reached into the frame and pushed the pendulum.

The clock went. The first tick was a sound I felt in my back teeth, and the second was a sound I had heard all my life and not known I was listening for, a clock in a wall going, and the train of wheels began to turn, slow, the big ones so slow you had to look away and look back to see it, and somewhere above us in the tower a weight started to come down on its chain, and the hands on the face outside, which we had not looked at coming in, which had been stopped at some hour of some day in 1962, began to move.

And the nave door did not open.

Jayden pushed it. Nothing. The wall.

"It's not on the clock," Scarlet said. "You said it was on the clock."

"It's on the clock," Tessa said slowly. She was looking up at the hands through the narthex door, at the sky through the broken roof going from white to gold. "It's on the clock the way a door at a store's on a clock. It opens when the clock says." She looked at the three of us. "It opens at a time. There's one time of day anything happens here."

"Dusk."

"The doors open at dusk," Tessa said. "Both of them. That's what the clock's for. That's why the town stands out there with their hands on it. It's a door that only opens when the clock says, and they took the gears out so it never would, and we put them back." She looked at Jayden. He was looking at the clock. "I'm not saying it was wrong."

"It was right," he said. "There's no version where we don't."

"I know."

"I'm just saying I did it, so when it opens, that's on me."

"Jayden."

"Okay," he said, and that was the end of it, and we had about two hours.

. . .

We watched the first night from the choir loft.

The loft is over the west end of the nave, under the window, and you reach it from the vestry by a hatch in the dropped ceiling and a ladder bolted to the wall of the tower, and Jayden found the hatch and went up it one-handed before anyone could tell him not to, and came back down white, and said, "You can see the whole thing. Come up. Don't make a sound."

So I'll give you the nave from above, because that is how I first saw it, and because it was the last room and I owe you the last room.

Long and stone and dark, and half the roof gone so that the sky was in it, going gold, going gray. At the east end, where the roof held, the altar on a step, and in front of the altar the three basins in the floor in a line, stone, the size of birdbaths, each with an iron plate bolted over it, and a channel from each to a drain, and the drains went down. The four braziers at the four corners, iron, waist-high, on their capped gas feed, cold. The scaffold on the north wall, the contractor's, aluminum, four lifts high, up to the row of little windows under the roof, and it was the only new thing in the room, and it shone. And off the nave, through arches a Matron could walk through, three chambers, dark, each with one candle burning at the back of it, and in front of each candle a shape, standing, facing the arch, and not moving. Three of them.

"Sisters," Scarlet said, very low. She did not explain the word and nobody asked her. It was the right word. They stood in their doorways the way the three had hung in the bays in Ward C, facing in, and they did not move, and the candles behind them did not gutter. They were asleep. I don't know how I knew that and I knew it.

And in front of the altar, under the east wall, where the drains went down, was the thing they were facing.

I had been ready, after the ward, for a heap. For hands. I was not ready for it to be closed.

It stood on the floor in front of the altar, taller than a man and about as wide as a car, and it was shut. That is the only word. It was the color of the clear glass in the window, which is to say it was no color, it was the color of what was behind it, and its sides were folded in over its top like hands folded over something held, like the skin of a thing before it is born, and at the very top, where the folds met, a little fluid stood, brimming, the way water stands in a glass filled too full, and did not spill. It breathed. Forty a minute. The whole closed shape of it going out and in, and with every breath the hum came up through the floor of the loft and into the soles of my feet, and the three Sisters in their doorways breathed with it, and so did I, and I had to stop myself.

"It's a cocoon," Scarlet whispered.

"It's an egg."

"It's a *cradle*," Tessa said, and the clock below us struck.

I did not count the strokes. The doors opened on the first one. Both of them, the big west doors under us and the nave door out of the cross hall, the way a theater opens, not slow, not fast, on a sound of iron going through wood that had been waiting forty-nine years to make it, and the light came in. Red, low, the last of it, straight down the nave from the west, under the loft, and landed on the shut thing in front of the altar, and the window over our heads threw the twelve burning men down the length of the floor in color, and the thing opened.

Not all the way. The folds at the top drew back the width of a hand and the fluid ran down the sides of it, one drip, then two, and inside the fold there was a shape, and the shape was a head, the top of a head, the crown of it, and it was a child's.

And the town came in.

Under us. Through the doors, out of the dusk, up the path they had worn, into the nave, forty, fifty, more, the ones from the street and the ones from the ridge road and the ones who had walked up every night for a month and stood with their hands on the oak, and they did not run and they did not look up, and they went down the nave between the pews and stood in the red light facing the thing, and the hum came up out of them to meet the hum coming up out of it and the two became one sound, and the thing rose.

It rose the way the ash had stood in the vault by morning: not climbing, just taller. The top of it came up the east wall and the folds opened another hand's width and the head inside came up out of the fold to the brow, to the eyes, and the eyes were shut, and the fluid ran down the sides in five lines, and the town stood under it humming with their faces up like people watching fireworks, and nothing happened to the town. It did not take them. It did not need to. It had them already. It just stood over them and was born, a little, and that was what it had called them for. To watch. A child wants to be watched.

Seven minutes. Tessa had her eyes on the clock face through the broken roof and she timed it. Seven minutes from the first drop to the eyes, and then the light went off the ridge, the way it does up there, all at once, and the folds came back over the head, and the fluid stopped, and it closed, and it was a shut thing on the floor again, shorter than it had been, breathing, forty a minute. And the town sat down. All of them, in the pews, on the floor, the same beat, like a congregation, and bowed their heads, and did not move again until the light came back.

We went down the ladder in the dark and barred the vestry door and nobody said anything for a long time.

Then Tessa said, "It got to the eyes."

"Yes."

"Yesterday it got to the brow. The night before, the top of the head. That's why the fluid line's higher on the wall each time. You can see the marks. It's getting further every night." She had her hands in fists in her lap. "It's being born. That's what the ledger was. That's what the ward was for and the drains were for. Seventeen years they kept it a baby and it got hungry and called the town, and now it's getting itself born a little every night, a hand at a time, and one night it's going to get to the chin and open its eyes and that's it."

"How many nights."

"I don't know. Three. Two." She looked at the vestry window, at the dark where the hospital was. "It has to be in the light. You saw it. It stopped when the light went. It's got seven minutes a day and it uses all seven." She stopped. "We've got seven minutes a day too. That's the whole thing. Nobody does anything in that room except in the seven minutes, because the rest of the time the door's shut and it's asleep and so are they."

"Them," said Scarlet. "The Sisters."

"The Sisters wake up when it does. You saw them. They moved when it moved." Tessa looked at her sister's hands, both of them, on the wand. "We don't fight it with them awake. That's three of Ward C, in three rooms, at once. We do them first. In the day. Asleep."

"You want to go in a room with one of those on purpose."

"I want to go in a room with one of those asleep, on purpose, in daylight, with a door, instead of three of them awake in the dark with the town in the room and that thing getting born behind us." Tessa's voice did not go up. "Yes. That's what I want. Say it's wrong."

Nobody said it was wrong.

. . .

The covenant was on the altar, under glass, like a relic, and Tessa read it in the morning with the town sitting in the pews

around her with their heads bowed and the thing shut on the floor ten feet from her, breathing, and she read it out loud so we could hear it from the nave door, and I'm going to give it to you the way she read it, flat, like a recipe.

THE COVENANT OF THE SECOND CRADLE — ON THE BINDING

It came when we called and will not go. It cannot be killed: it keeps nothing, no wound, no age, no harm. But it keeps no fire either, and fire is new to it every time. That is the whole rule.

Bind it thus, and only thus.

First, four fires at the nave's four corners, so it cannot pass the walls. It will send what it has made to put them out. Keep them lit.

Second, the ascent. It rises; the binders rise with it on the scaffold, and it strikes at them there. The seal is above it.

Third, the three fonts, fed with the blood of those it cannot take; it reaches for them and closes on nothing.

Then the seal is lit from within, the binders with it.

We have thirteen it cannot take. We are ready.

"*Ignis tenet*," I said, when she had finished. "*Sanguis ligat*. Fire holds. Blood binds. That's the window. That's what it says."

"Thirteen," Tessa said.

"Twelve in the window," Scarlet said. "Twelve cut for the first line. Twelve spokes. Twelve seats in the ring."

"Thirteen it cannot take. One more. The one who—" Tessa looked at the last line. "The one who wrote it down. Who wasn't in the window because he was the one looking at it."

"*Fed with the blood of those it cannot take*," Jayden said. He had read it over her shoulder. He had been quiet since the clock.

"That's you two."

"That's us two."

"And it's me. It doesn't have me. It's taken its shot and it hasn't got me." He knocked the toe of his left boot on the stone, the one the fire had had in the first street, and touched his shoulder where the round had gone in. "I've been carrying fire as much as her. It's taken its shot."

"It's taken a shot at all of us," I said.

"Then it's all of us."

Tessa put her hand flat on the glass over the covenant and looked at the three plated basins in the floor and at the thing beyond them and said, "The fonts are the basins. Fed with blood. That's what the drains are, that's what they kept the flow for. Only they fed it the wrong blood. Theirs. The town's. Blood it *can* take. The covenant says the blood of what it can't." She took her hand off the glass. "And the ledger said what it can't wear is us, if we're ash first. Blood it can't take and ash it can't wear. That's what goes in the basins. Fire holds. Blood binds. In that order."

"Whose ash," Scarlet said.

Tessa looked at the three dark arches off the nave, at the three shapes standing in them, asleep in front of their candles.

"Theirs."

. . .

The Font was the chamber on the west side, and we did it first, because it was nearest the door and because Scarlet said so.

I'm going to tell this one and not the other two, because the other two were the same fight in worse rooms and because this is the one that cost.

It was a baptistery once. A round room with a stone font in the middle of it on a step, a basin the size of a kitchen sink, dry, and a candle at the back on a bracket, and in front of the candle, between it and the font, the Sister. The Matron from Bed 07, again, or her twin: the long body bent under its own weight, the arms, the back open from the neck down with the seven glass sacs standing in it like lanterns, and the panels of glass in her

hands where she had taken them in, and her head down, and asleep. You could hear her breathing. Forty a minute. The sacs lit and went dark with it.

"Eight meters," Tessa said, in the arch, in a whisper. "Last time she woke up when we were about eight meters off. We don't go closer than the font till the fire's on her."

"The fire's got to be on her from the font. The wand doesn't reach from here."

"Then you go to the font and not one step past it and you light her from there and you come *back*. Jayden's on the arch with the axe for the litter. I'm on the sacs." Tessa had the pistol in both hands. "You light her and you come back. Say it."

"I light her and I come back."

"Ska."

"I *said* it."

She went in. Sixteen years old with a tank on her back and the pilot going at the end of the wand, in a stone room, in daylight from a window too high to see out of, up to the step of the font, and the Sister did not move, and Scarlet stood at the font with the wand up and looked back once at her sister in the arch, and said, not loud, "Fire," and lit her.

The Sister woke burning. That was the plan and it worked. She came up out of her sleep already on fire and screaming with the sound they make, and the sacs along her back lit from the inside, and Tessa shot the first one from the arch and it went like a lightbulb, and the second, and the litter came out from behind the font where we had not seen it, from the dark at the base of the step, six of them, long and quick and crying, and Jayden was in the arch with the axe swinging it like a man swings a bat, one-handed, and I was behind him with the last of the bottles, and Scarlet.

Scarlet came back. I want that on the record. She did what she said. She lit her and she turned to come back and the Sister,

burning, reached across the font for her the way the back-bay Vessel had put a hand on Tessa at the wheel, not fast, not angry, the way you reach for a child that is leaving the room, and her hand closed on Scarlet's hand. The left one. The one on the wand's grip.

The hand had glass in it. Containment glass, the panels they had taken in, and the hand closed, and the glass closed with it.

Scarlet did not let go of the wand. That is what happened. The Sister's hand was around hers and the glass was in it and the Sister was burning and pulling and Scarlet pulled the other way with the wand still up and the fire still going into her and screamed and held on, and the third sac went and the fourth, Tessa shooting past her sister's head from the arch, steady, counting, and on the fifth the Sister let go, the way they do when a sac goes, and Scarlet came back across the step with the wand in her right hand and her left hand held against her chest and her face white and I saw the hand and it was not all there.

Two fingers. The small one and the next. The glass had them. She looked at the hand, in the arch, with the Sister going down behind her onto the step and the litter burning around the font and the room full of the smell, and she said, "Oh," in a small voice, surprised, like someone who has found something in a pocket, and then she sat down on the floor of the arch very suddenly, and Tessa shot the last two sacs over her head and then dropped the pistol and had her.

Jayden tied it. He tied it with the harness strap off the tank and the last of the Midwife's rags, and his hands were steady and his face was not, and she did not cry. I want to be exact about that, because I would have, and she did not. She watched him do it and she said, through her teeth, "Is it bad," and he said, "Yeah," because he had never once lied to them and was not going to start with this, and she said, "Okay," the way he said it, and he heard her say it and had to look away.

The Sister burned to the step and the step was black and the font had ash in it. Real ash, gray and fine, the kind that's left when the fuel's gone and there's nothing to come back from. We had seen the Matron on S3 go to ash. We had never stood over it afterwards and watched it not move.

"It's not getting up," Jayden said.

"No."

"The others got up. The vault, the ward. The ledger said by morning. This one's not."

"The ledger said it stands up out of its *own* ash," Tessa said. "This isn't its own. This was a person once. It made her. It wore her. And it can't remember her now because she's burned, and that's the Order's whole trick. *What it cannot remember, it cannot wear.*" She was looking at the font. "That's what goes in the basin. Her. Not us."

We scraped the font with the axe head and Jayden's knife and we wrapped what we got in a strip of the Midwife's white cotton, and it was warm through the cloth, and Scarlet, sitting against the arch with her hand against her chest, watched us do it and said, "She left us rags for this. For wrapping it up."

"She didn't know what she was leaving them for."

"She knew they were for us."

. . .

The Lady Chapel was the chamber on the east side, the font's twin across the nave, and it had been a chapel to Mary once. The niche where she had stood was empty, a clean shape on the stone where the company had taken her out, and the candle was on the floor of it. It was a smaller room than the font's and eight meters was most of it, and the Sister there woke before we lit her, because Jayden's shoulder hit the arch coming in and the axe rang on the stone, and she came up out of her sleep all at once, and her litter went out past us through the arch into the nave, and the town in the pews did not look up. We did her with the

kerosene from the gas can and a bottle, because the wand was almost out, and she burned against the back wall under the empty niche with the candle still going behind her, and the wax ran down into her ash. Tessa said it didn't matter. I didn't know if it did. We took what we could.

The Apse was behind the altar. That was the problem with it. The arch was in the east wall under the window, the narrowest of the three, and to stand in it you had to go up the altar step and around the back of the altar, and the thing was in front of the altar, shut, ten feet from where you would be standing, breathing. In daylight. Asleep, if that is the word for it. Nobody wanted to walk behind that. The apse itself was a half-round of stone with the floor pitched down toward the back the way old floors go, and the fluid from the sheath had been running back into it for weeks, a dark line on the wall at the height of a hand and the floor wet to the step, and the Sister stood at the far end of the curve in front of her candle with the wet around her feet and did not wake, and we stood in the arch and could not light anything, because the lighter would not strike in it and nobody was going to carry an open bottle past that thing.

Jayden did it. He took the gas can up the altar step and around the back and stood in the arch with his back to the thing, and poured what was left of the kerosene along the top of the pitch so it ran down the stone and across the top of the wet in a sheet toward her feet, the way oil runs on a puddle, and he lit it at the arch with the striker where the stone was dry, and the fire went down the curve like a thing with somewhere to be, and across the wet, and she woke standing in it. We shot the sacs from the arch. Tessa did, with Jayden flat against the wall beside her and the thing behind them both, breathing, and it did not open. She had eleven rounds left when we went in and four when we came out.

That left us the last canister on the wand and no kerosene and one bottle, and three bundles of ash in white cotton, warm, on the vestry desk, in a row, where I am looking at them now.

. . .

We did not go in the second night. The clock struck and the doors opened and the town came in and we sat in the vestry with the bar down and Scarlet's hand in Tessa's lap and listened to it rise, and the hum came up through everything but the floor of that one room, and after seven minutes it stopped, and the town sat down, and it was the longest seven minutes of my life, and it was nothing. It was practice. Tessa said that. "That's practice. Tomorrow's the real one."

"Why not tonight," Jayden said. "The Sisters are done. We've got the ash. The fires are gas, they'll light."

"Because she's got no blood in her." Tessa did not look at her sister. "Because you've got one arm and she's got one hand and I'm the only one who can shoot and I've got four rounds, and because it's dark in there in two minutes and we don't know where the plates come off and we don't know how the gas turns on and nobody's done the sum. Tomorrow. In the day, we learn the room. We learn where everything is with our eyes shut. Then we do it in the seven minutes. Nobody does it out of order and nobody does it in the dark."

"Okay."

"Say it's wrong."

"It's not wrong."

"Then don't say why not tonight."

So we learned the room. That is what the third day was. The gas cocks were in the floor by each brazier under an iron lid, and Jayden found them, and freed them with the axe head and oil from the vestry cabinet. The plates on the basins came up with the axe as a pry bar and we left them up, and under the plates the stone was crusted black an inch deep with seventeen years of

what Dr Halvard had wanted the flow kept for, and the drains under the crust went down, down, and the smell that came up out of them was the vault. The scaffold was sound. Jayden climbed it, one-handed, all four lifts, with the town sitting in the pews under him and the thing shut on the floor, and came down and said, "It's solid. The top's level with the window. The mason was right, you can see all of it from up there." He did not say what he had seen. "There's a hatch."

"Where."

"Under the altar. In the step. Iron. It's open. They cut it." He looked at the thing on the floor between him and the altar, breathing. "That's the ring. That's the way down to it. It's ten feet from that."

"That's where the seal is lit from within."

"That's where."

. . .

I'm going to set down the argument, because there was one, and because the version of this where four people agree to a thing like that in one clean moment is the version that didn't happen.

Jayden started it. In the vestry, in the afternoon, with the three bundles on the desk and Scarlet asleep on the cot with her hand up on her chest. He said, "I go down."

"No."

"Listen. The fires are gas. Anyone can turn a cock and put a striker to it. One each, there's four of us, four fires. That's the first thing. The second thing is somebody goes up the scaffold and it follows, because it follows us, you've seen it, it can't help it, we're what it's missing. That's the ascent. *It strikes at them there.* Fine. It strikes at me on a scaffold, I've been struck at. Third thing, you two feed the fonts. Ash, then blood. It reaches for them and closes on nothing. Then I come down the scaffold and I

go down the hatch with the canister and the bottle and I light it from inside. The binders with it. One binder. Me."

"That's not what it says."

"It says the seal's lit from within. Cole said it doesn't say by whom."

"It says *the binders with it*. Plural. It says *thirteen*. Cole had twelve and him and it held a hundred and three years and it *didn't hold*, Jayden, they cut the door, and that was twelve men who weren't even what it can't take. The Order was just men. Blood it could take. Ash it could wear. They did it with the wrong fuel and it still held a century." Tessa was standing. She was seventeen and she was doing the math and I have never seen anyone do a harder one. "We've got four. Four it can't take. That's the only thing we've got that they didn't. And you want to send one."

"I want to send the one with no one to come for."

"You've got someone."

He didn't answer that.

"You've got someone and she's doing the breakfasts and looking at the door." Tessa's voice shook once and then didn't. "Don't tell me who's got no one. I've got a sister with eight fingers who needs a hospital that isn't there, and a county on Route 9 that's three days off through everything that walks, and you want to go down a hole and burn and leave me to walk her down that road with four rounds. And if I get her down it, what. Dee's. The county. A letter with a wheel on it. Somebody at Dee's door with a clipboard asking about Nana." She put her hand flat on the three bundles. "*Our children. Our blood. Nobody else's*. It's not done with us if we walk out. It's not a thing under a hill that's done with us. It's a *family*. It'll find her at Dee's. It found Mom. It found Jayden through a job and it found us through a house. There's no down the hill, Jayden. There's no door. There's

a ring, and it's open, and it's got twelve seats in it, and we are what it can't keep."

"You're seventeen."

"I know what I am."

"You're seventeen and she's sixteen and I'm not—" He stopped. He had both hands flat on the desk again, the good one and the other. "I'm not going to stand here and let two kids decide to—"

"You don't let us. We're not asking." She said it gently. It was the first gentle thing anyone had said in the room. "You've been not treating us like kids since the ditch. It was the right call. It cost you. Don't start now."

Scarlet was awake. I don't know when. She was sitting up on the cot with her back to the wall and her hand on her chest and she had heard, I think, most of it, and she said, into the quiet, "What goes in the bowl."

"Ska—"

"The font. The basin. *Fed with the blood of those it cannot take.* That's a bowl. You're going to cut your hand and bleed in a bowl."

"Yes."

"*Mine's not going in a bowl!*"

It came out of her high and clear and furious and it was the most alive thing in the room, and all three of us turned, and she was sitting on the cot with her chin up and her eyes wet and she said it again, lower, so there'd be no mistake. "Mine's not going in a bowl. I'm not a *bowl* thing. I didn't walk through fire in a hoodie and shoot it with a flamethrower and lose two fingers in a glass hand so you could squeeze me into a birdbath for it to *reach for*." She wiped her face with the back of the good hand. "Mine goes in the fire. With me. Same as Aldous. If it's going anywhere it's going in the fire where it *can't have it*. That's different. That's not a bowl. That's the opposite of a bowl."

Nobody said anything.

"And I'm not going down a hill without her," she said, to Jayden, quieter. "So don't."

"I'm always going to come for you," Tessa said. It was Scarlet's rule. She had never once said it back. "So don't make it stupid."

"I'm not making it stupid. *You're* making it stupid. You were going to put me in a bowl."

And Tessa laughed. It came out of her like something breaking and she sat down on the floor by the cot and put her forehead against her sister's knee and laughed, and Scarlet put the good hand on the back of her head and held it there, and Jayden stood at the desk with both hands flat on it and looked at the floor for a long time.

"Okay," he said at last. The way he said it. The way that meant a thing had been checked and filed. "Okay. Four fires. Four of us. That's not out of order. That's the order."

. . .

He gave me the wallet after that. Not Tessa. Me.

"It's in the jacket. Her jacket." He pulled at the jacket that did not close. "Inside pocket. There's a photo and an address and there's eleven dollars, and there's a card from the gym, and there's a receipt, from the gas station, for the protein bars, from the morning I drove up, when I took the valley road because I thought my mom was being my mom. It's all in there. That's her. She's on the counter. She's doing the breakfasts." He got it out with the good hand and held it a minute and then put it on the desk on top of the pages I had been writing, square, the way he put things down. "That goes in the box. With this. With yours. Whoever opens it goes and tells her. In person. Not a phone. Not a letter from the company with a wheel on it. They go in and they sit at the counter and they tell her what I did, and they tell her—" He stopped. "They tell her it wasn't the thing I said. In the

ditch. About the road. Say I knew it wasn't my mom being my mom. Say I knew by the garage and I stayed because there were two kids and I'm the size I am. She'll want it to be that. It was that."

"It was that."

"And say her feet are always cold." He almost smiled. "She'll know it's me."

I have not written her name. He said it, in the vestry, twice, and I have left it out, and I'll tell you why, since I am being honest about what I am leaving out. Everything else in this account belongs to the valley. The town sent for all of us and it has had everything it sent for. It has had Mom's Yes and Nana's pin and Jayden's grandad and nineteen children a quarter for eleven years. It does not get her. She is on a counter on a county road on the far side of the hill, doing the breakfasts, looking at the door, and she is the one thing in all of this that the town never sent a letter to, and I am not going to be the one who writes her name down in a book about it. Whoever opens the box will have the photo and the address. That's for them. That's not for here.

. . .

Tessa asked me once more. Last night, late, with the others asleep and the bar down and the pen going, she came and stood by the desk and said, "Go on, then."

"No."

"You're going to say. Before. You're going to tell me where you come from, and what drawer, and what year, and why nobody sent *you* a letter. I'm going to ask again."

"I know."

"I'll ask you in the ring. I'll ask you with the fire going. You'll have about a minute to decide if it matters."

"Okay."

She stood there. Then she said, "You've been writing it down. All of it. Since the first night here."

"Yes."

"Aldous."

"Aldous. And you. And her. And him. All of it."

"In a book."

"In whatever this is."

"Good," she said, and did not say it the way Jayden said it. She said it the way you say it when you've decided to let someone keep something. "Put the window in. What it says. You said you'd tell us when we'd seen it."

"I don't have all of it."

"Put in what you've got."

So. *Anno MDCCXLIII vocavimus*. In the year 1743, we called. *Et responsum est*. And it answered. *Ignis tenet, sanguis ligat*. Fire holds, blood binds. *Duodecim circa rotam*. Twelve around the wheel. *In medio cunabulum*. In the middle, a cradle. The last two lines I will not pretend to. *Quod datum est non redditur* has give in it and *not* in it and I think it means that what is given is not given back, and I think they meant it as a boast, and I think it is true, and I do not think it means what they thought. *Ex dono societatis studiorum*. The gift of a study society. Of no address.

That is the window. That is what the mason saw from the boards and would not work under. Twelve people in a ring, willing, burning, around a wheel with a cradle at the hub, paid for by the men who called it, and put up high where you cannot read it from the floor, so that the only people who ever see it are the ones who have climbed.

. . .

It is late afternoon. The clock in the corridor says ten past five and I believe it; Jayden set it by the sun and it has not lost a minute in three days, which is a thing to say about a clock that stood still for forty-nine years. The light in the vestry window is

going gold on the ridge. The town will be at the gate in an hour. We have been through the order so many times that Scarlet says it in her sleep.

Four fires. Ska takes north, because it's nearest the scaffold and she's the fast one, one hand or two. Jayden south. Tessa east, by the thing, because she's got the gun and the four rounds. Me west, by the door, because somebody has to be by the door. Ska lights hers and goes straight up the scaffold, all four lifts, to the top, level with the window, with the wand and the last canister, and it follows her, because it can't not, and while it is on the north wall reaching for her and closing on nothing, Jayden and Tessa and I feed the fonts. Ash first. The three Sisters in their rags. Then blood. Jayden's arm, Tessa's palm, mine. Scarlet's is spoken for. *It reaches for them and closes on nothing.* Then down the scaffold, and the hatch under the altar, and the ring, and the twelve seats, and the bottle and the canister and whatever is still going in us by then, which is the only fuel it has never been able to keep.

The binders with it.

I don't know if it will hold. The nine did it with the wrong blood and it held a hundred and three years. Cole had twelve men and the lamp and it held until a company with a torch and a Trustees' minute decided it was theirs to open. We have four it cannot take, and three Sisters it cannot wear, and seven minutes of light, and a clock that Jayden fixed. Tessa says that is more than anyone has ever brought into that room. I think she's right. I think it's also the last anyone will.

I'm going to stop here, because the light is going and because Scarlet is awake and wants her hand looked at and because there is nothing else. These pages go in Cole's lead box with his letter and Jayden's wallet, and the board goes down over the stone, and the vestry is the one room where the floor doesn't hum, and I don't think that is an accident, and I think whoever lifts the

board will find them. Lead doesn't burn. Stone doesn't. It kept his for a hundred and twenty years.

If you are reading this, it held.

Scarlet wants to write something on the top sheet before it goes in. She says it's for Aldous. I'm going to let her.

Tessa's counting the rounds again. Four. She knows it's four.

Jayden's at the door with his hand on the bar and his eyes shut, breathing, the way he did in the hall that first night between sets of push-ups, and in a minute he's going to open them and say "Okay," and we're going to go in.

It's a cradle. She was right about that. It always was.



After

THE FIRE ON THE ridge was seen from Route 9 a little after eight on the evening of the fifth, by a county deputy who had the checkpoint that night and who wrote it down because he had been told to write down anything.

ROUTE 9 CHECKPOINT — INCIDENT LOG — 5 JULY 2011

20:14. Glow on the ridge above Ashbrook. Not the hospital. Higher. The old church. Called it in.

20:40. Whole top of the ridge going. Can hear it from here. No wind and the smoke is going straight up like a rope.

21:30. Fire has come down the ridge road into the trees. Called it in again. Told to hold the checkpoint. Holding.

23:00. Town is burning. Not the way a town burns. All of it at once, every street, like somebody lit it from underneath. Nobody has come up the road. Nobody has come up the road in three weeks.

02:10. Singing has stopped. I have not put the singing in this log before because I did not want to write it down. It has been coming up the valley every night since I got this post and it has stopped and I am writing it down now.

05:50. Light. Ash coming down on the checkpoint. Thick. Like snow. No smell to it. Convoy due 07:00.

The convoy came up the valley road at seven, eleven vehicles, county and state and two from the company with the wheel on the door, and found the checkpoint standing and the deputy in it, and the barrier up, and the ash coming down on the hood of his truck so that he had the wipers going, and went on down into the valley.

They found the town burned to the foundations, every house and the hospital with it, and no fire still going anywhere, which the fire people said was not possible in a burn that size and wrote down anyway. They found no one. Not in the streets, not in the houses, not in the hospital, not in the shelter under it when they got the doors off. Eleven thousand people on the last census and not one body, and not one bone, and the ash on everything, fine and gray and warm, and not wood ash, the fire people said, and would not say what.

The abbey was still standing. Stone does. The roof was gone, all of it now, and the window at the west end was gone, every pane of it, melted out of its lead and lying on the floor of the nave in a sheet of clear glass that had run like water and set, and the four iron braziers at the four corners were still lit. Gas. The feed had been opened and nobody had closed it, and they burned in the daylight with the ash coming down through the open roof onto them, and the company's man wanted them off and the fire chief said leave them, and they were left.

Under the altar there was a hatch, iron, open, and a stair going down into the ridge, and a smell coming up it that nobody would go down into on the first day. On the second day two men went down with masks and lights and came back up and would say only that the room at the bottom was round and had been very hot, that there were twelve places around the wall where the stone was shaped like seats, and that the floor in the middle had gone to glass.

They did not find the vestry until the fourth day, because it was a small room off a side hall and the door was barred from inside and nobody thought a room barred from inside had anyone to find. When they got the bar off there was a cot and a desk and a cabinet, and the one window in the abbey still whole, plain glass, looking down the ridge at where the town had been, and nothing in the room, and a board loose in the floor by the door.

Under the board a stone, and under the stone a lead box, and in the lead box a letter on vellum from 1891 and a wallet with a photograph in it and eleven dollars and a gas station receipt, and under those, folded once, a stack of lined paper from a nurse's clipboard and the backs of county forms and the blank sides of a Founders' Day program from 1960, written over in pencil and then in pen and then in pencil again, every inch, both sides, in a hand that got smaller toward the end.

The top sheet was not in that hand. It was in a child's, large, pressed hard, and it said:

Brother Aldous kept climbing. So did we. Tell somebody. S.K.

The rest is what you have read.

The county closed the valley road on the fifth of August and it has not been opened. The company's name is on the fence. The ash is still there. It does not blow away, the people who have been up say, and it does not wash into the ground, and it lies on the stones of the ridge the way snow lies when it has decided to stay, and nothing stands up out of it.

That is the last thing written in the log, in the deputy's hand, on his last day at the post, after the convoy had gone and the barrier was down for good.

Nothing stands up out of it. Checked every morning.
Nothing does.

