

A pig mask with a black strap is resting on a dark, worn wooden chair. The scene is set in a rustic kitchen with a window on the left showing a vase of dried flowers. In the background, there is a wooden cabinet with various kitchen items. Sunlight streams in from the window, casting shadows on the floor.

SWINE FACE

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Contents

Part One The family house

1. The shelf.....	1
2. Saturday jobs.....	8
3. Owen comes over.....	15
4. The pig mask.....	22
5. What happened.....	30
6. A place outside.....	37

Part Two Leaving home

7. The camera.....	44
8. Things to keep.....	50
9. The same evening.....	57
10. The move.....	64
11. The table.....	71
12. Meeting Peter.....	76
13. The workshop.....	84
14. His own arrangement.....	90

Part Three A room of his own

15. The rented room.....	97
16. Putting it right.....	104
17. Owen leaves.....	110
18. What Ruth remembers.....	116
19. Nina's confidence.....	125
20. The customer's instructions.....	132
21. Words kept.....	140
22. June's conditions.....	149
23. A weekend away.....	159
24. The clearance.....	165

Part Four The return

25. The cupboard.....	171
26. Ruth's account.....	178
27. He remembers.....	185
28. A paid repair.....	192
29. Saturday morning.....	199
30. The conversation ends.....	206
31. Wearing it.....	214
32. Afterward.....	222

PART ONE
The family house

Chapter 1

The shelf

The pencil line had to go on the inside, where the shelf would meet the upright. Samuel turned the piece of pine over and found the little arrow his father had drawn. Then he turned it back. An arrow ought to have made it easier. There were four faces to the wood if you counted the narrow ones, and the pencil seemed able to belong to any of them.

He laid the piece beside its twin on the kitchen table. Newspaper covered the tablecloth. The breakfast advertisement beneath the wood showed a woman holding a bowl which looked too large for her hand. He moved the pine off her wrist.

"You ready?" his father said.

"Nearly."

Peter came through the back door carrying the small tin of screws. His trousers had pale stripes on the thighs where he had wiped his hands. He put the tin down beside Samuel's elbow and opened it with his thumbnail. All the screws had slots. They moved together with a pleasing dry sound.

"These two are the sides. Top, middle. Show me."

Samuel touched each piece. The unit would stand on his chest of drawers. There would be room beneath the middle shelf for the box of stones from the beach, and the middle shelf itself could hold his paperbacks. On top he would put the little red aeroplane with a missing propeller. Owen had never seen the aeroplane. At school Samuel had described how its wheels folded into its wings, then had worried that this made it sound better than it was.

"There's no bottom," Samuel said.

"Doesn't need one. Chest makes the bottom."

"I know. I was showing you."

His father lifted the top and sighted along it, one eye closed. Samuel tried the same with an upright. At ten he was still short enough for the far end to strike the sugar bowl when he raised it. He caught the bowl with his spare hand.

"Clear your area first."

Samuel moved the sugar, the empty mugs and the folded cloth to the sideboard. Through the window he could see the wet strip of yard and the shed door standing open. Inside, his father's workbench had a lamp on a bent metal stalk. When the lamp was on in the evenings, its yellow patch made the rest of the shed seem deeper.

"Is Owen still coming Sunday?"

"Depends if you've got this finished."

"Mum said she would ring."

"Well, she can ring. It won't build itself."

Samuel nodded. He lined up the two uprights with their bottom ends towards him. His father had cut everything already, leaving the measuring and assembly for Samuel. There was a knot on the outer face of one side, an oval with a dark centre. Samuel chose that one for the side he would see from his bed.

Peter set a metal square against the wood. The thick part hugged the edge and the ruler part reached across it.

There were old pencil marks on the square, trapped in the little scratches. Samuel ran a nail over one. His father said the square had belonged to Samuel's grandad, who used to keep it wrapped in a cloth. Samuel had met his grandad only in photographs. In one he wore a hat made from newspaper, with his arms hanging out of the sides of a deckchair.

"Did he make things?" Samuel asked.

"All sorts. Gates, shelves. Made your aunt a bed once."

"A whole bed?"

"Frame, anyway. Didn't make the mattress."

Samuel imagined a mattress stuffed with the shavings in the shed bin. A person would have to sleep very carefully. His father saw him smiling and asked what the joke was. When Samuel explained, Peter laughed through his nose.

"He'd have done it if he thought it would save him a few pounds."

Samuel found a scratched H on the handle. He was going to ask about it when his father turned the square back over.

"Numbers up. We need to see them. Keep this tight here. See? Any gap, your line's crooked."

He drew a line on an offcut. Samuel held the square while Peter pushed a finger against it. It stayed where it was.

"That's it. Don't strangle the thing. Just hold it."

Samuel loosened his grip. They made a second line together. Peter's hand smelled of soap and the oily rag from the shed. Samuel liked the width of his father's fingers beside his own. He kept his elbow clear so Peter could reach the pencil.

"Bottom edge to the top of the middle shelf. Twelve centimetres. Mark both sides."

"From this end?"

Samuel put his finger on the end nearest him.

"Yes. Bottom."

He pulled the tape out carefully. Its little hook clicked over the wood. He found twelve, checked the numbers on either side, and made a small mark. The next upright had a rough tuft at its end. He held the hook against the solid part and did the same.

"This one's got a bit sticking up."

Peter ran his thumb over it. "Saw's caught it. Won't matter at the back."

"It might stop it standing flat."

His father looked again. He fetched a piece of abrasive paper from his back pocket and rubbed the tuft away, twice along the grain.

"Good spot."

Samuel felt himself smile. He took the abrasive paper when it was offered and smoothed the other end, although there was only a tiny roughness there. The pale dust lay on his fingertips. He brought the two pieces together. They stood level on the table.

"Like twins," he said.

"Let's hope one of them listens."

Samuel laughed with him. He drew the two lines, using the square. The pencil made a little bump as it crossed the grain. He went over the gap with its sharp edge.

His father brought the middle shelf across and rested one end at Samuel's mark. The plank lay flat on the newspaper. Peter took a second pencil from behind his ear and made a short line below the shelf.

"There. Holes in the middle of that."

Samuel bent to see. The new line was lower than the first by the thickness of the plank. That was right. The first line marked the top of the middle shelf. He found the halfway space between them and made two crosses while his father watched.

Peter turned away to answer a knock at the front door. Samuel heard him go along the hall, past the stairs on the right and the front room on the left. A man outside wanted to know whether Peter could look at his mother's cupboard hinge on Saturday. Peter said he could come after the ironmonger's. Their voices became wider and easier at the open door. Samuel measured the second upright and made its crosses too.

When his father returned, he stood looking down at the table.

"What's that?"

"The other one."

"I can see it's the other one. Why's the shelf so low?"

Samuel put the middle piece against the line again. His father moved it so its lower surface touched Samuel's original pencil mark. There was now a strip of bare pine between the shelf and both crosses.

"Twelve to the bottom," Peter said. "That's what I told you."

Samuel looked at the crosses. The shelf would cover them if he put it back. He could still remember his finger pointing to the edge, and his father's voice saying top.

"You said the top of it."

"The top of what?"

"The middle shelf."

"I said measure from the bottom."

"I did."

"Then why have you put it here?"

Peter lifted one upright and held it beside the other. Both lines matched. Samuel had made them match very carefully.

"I measured twelve from there," he said, touching the end again. "Then you put it on the line."

"I was showing you how to mark it. You've taken one look and decided you know."

The front door knock had left a cold patch in the hall. Samuel felt it round his ankles. He lowered his finger. His father placed the pieces on the table and tapped one pencil cross, then the other.

"You know what happens if we put screws through those?"

Samuel did know now. "They won't go into the shelf."

"Exactly."

Samuel opened his mouth, then reached for the mug where Ruth kept spare pens. The eraser was underneath a birthday candle and a folded receipt. He rubbed at the crosses until the pink rubber became grey.

"Careful. You'll rub a hole through it next."

Samuel stopped. Faint crosses remained. His father took the drill from its case. He adjusted the bit, pulled the trigger once, and set it down. The sound made Samuel's shoulders lift.

"Right. We can still do it. Pay attention this time."

Peter drew fresh crosses. Samuel held the wood flat while the drill made its small holes. Dust rose in little collars round the bit. Samuel watched his father's knuckles. The drill finished with a squeal.

"I was going to let you try," Peter said. "We'll have to leave that till you can follow an instruction."

The back of Samuel's throat tightened. He swallowed and selected four screws, lining them up with their heads towards his father.

"Other way. I need to pick them up."

Samuel turned them.

They got the first side attached. The screws made little indentations in the soft pine where Peter tightened them. Samuel held the far end of the shelf up at the right height. His arm began to ache. When Peter finally said to let go, the upright and the middle shelf stood together like a large letter L.

"At least that's straight."

Samuel waited for another instruction. His father checked the clock, then began gathering the drill and its loose lead into the case.

"We'll do the rest another time."

"There's only the other side and the top."

"And if we'd done it properly the first time, it would be finished."

Samuel pushed a curl of wood dust off the woman's printed wrist. He wanted to ask whether another time could be that afternoon. The key turned in the front door before he had decided how.

Ruth came along the hall with her work shoes in a carrier bag. Her hair had been pinned flat beneath a cap and still held the shape. She smelled of warm flour and rain. She stopped in the kitchen doorway and looked from Samuel to the pieces on the table.

"Look at you two. How's it going?"

Peter shut the drill case. "Slowly."

"It looks like a shelf already."

"It will when he starts listening."

She put her bag down. "What happened?"

Samuel put his fingertips beneath the half-made shelf. His original marks were on the inside; he would have to turn it over for her. Peter stopped wiping his hands. Samuel slid his fingers out and tucked them into his palms.

"I measured it wrong," Samuel said.

His father let the cloth fall on the table. His shoulders dropped. "We got there in the end."

Ruth looked at Samuel for a little longer. He pressed his tongue against the place behind his teeth where it could stay still.

"I need to sit down," she said. "Can we clear enough for lunch? Are these scraps?"

She held up an offcut. Samuel nodded. She put it beside the sink and began clearing the part of the table nearest the window. His father said he had a couple of things to finish in the shed. He took the drill out, letting the back door bang behind him.

"Did you have a good morning?" Ruth asked.

"We did the holes."

"I can see."

"I held it."

She ran a finger along the top edge, well clear of the pencil. "Smooth."

"I did that as well."

"Keep that bit clear, then. I don't want butter on it."

She cut the crust from the heel of the loaf and put it on her own plate. Samuel said this was lucky, because a family where everybody wanted the middle would have a lot of ends left over.

"Crumbs," she said.

"What?"

"For cooking. You can use the ends. Sorry, love, were you telling me something?"

He shook his head. She had eaten her crust already. He pushed the other heel across the board to her, and she broke it in half.

"I'll ring Owen's mum later. You still want him here?"

"Yes."

"Sunday after lunch. I'll do it before I forget."

When she went upstairs to change, Samuel stayed beside the table. The tape measure lay beside the tin. He checked that the shed door was closed, then laid the unfinished shelf on its side. He hooked the tape over the bottom end and drew it slowly along the pine.

The first line met twelve. The short line his father had made underneath was still there too, his pencil darker than Samuel's. Samuel put his finger on that darker line. He remembered watching it appear. He moved the tape to the other side and checked again, keeping the hook flat against the wood.

Chapter 2

Saturday jobs

On Saturday Samuel was allowed to hold the list. His father folded it into four and passed it over as they reached the end of the road. There were six things on it, some written so closely together that Samuel had to separate them with his finger. He could read screws and hooks. The last item looked like a word for an animal.

"Washers," his father said. "Little ones. For that tap."

"I thought it said badgers."

Peter glanced down at him. "Two small badgers, please. In a bag."

Samuel laughed. At breakfast his father had let him turn the toaster dial up, so the edges came out dark. Now they were going to the ironmonger's and then to fix a neighbour's cupboard. Peter carried the tool bag, its handles worn smooth and dark. Samuel hoped he might be given something suitable to carry home.

They passed a parked van with a wheel standing in a puddle. There were neat circles of oil in the water. Samuel stepped over the puddle and stretched his stride to match Peter's. He could do three paces together before falling out of time.

"Any more tests at school?"

"Spellings on Friday."

"How many right?"

"Nine."

"Out of?"

"Ten."

"Which did you miss?"

Samuel thought of the word in his exercise book, the red line through it. "Separate."

"Difficult one. What did you put?"

He spelled it out. His father told him how it should go. There was a rat in the middle of separate, he said. Samuel tried to fit one into the word while walking. He liked a rule that made a picture.

Rat for separate. The lady at school had given them a sentence about an elephant, although Samuel always remembered the elephant and forgot the word it was meant to help with.

At the shop, Peter held the door with his heel while Samuel went in. A bell sounded overhead. There were brooms in a barrel and little drawers all along the wall behind the counter. Some drawer labels had grown yellow. Samuel thought a person who knew what was in all those drawers could mend almost anything.

"Morning, Peter," the man at the counter said. "Brought your foreman?"

"He's got the list."

Samuel unfolded it. The man waited while he read. When he got to washers, he looked at his father, who kept a straight face.

"Any particular size, young man?"

Peter took an old washer out of his pocket. "This one's given up."

The man fetched a shallow box. The washers lay in rows like small liquorice sweets. Samuel looked without touching. His father asked him to pick the one that matched, and when he chose it, Peter put the old one on top to check. They were the same size.

"Two of those," Peter said.

They bought screws in a paper bag, a pair of brass hooks and a little tin of polish. The man put everything on the counter in a heap, and Samuel fitted the smaller items into the spaces round the tin. Peter gave him the carrier bag to hold.

"Don't swing it."

Outside, the bag made a square shadow with a long thin handle. Samuel walked carefully enough to keep the shadow whole.

Their neighbour lived in another terrace round the corner. She had put newspaper on her kitchen floor and made tea before they arrived. Samuel remembered her from a summer when she had handed icy orange drinks over the wall. Her cupboard door hung low on one side, making a triangle of darkness at the top.

"Only when you open it," she told Peter. "Shuts all right if you lift it."

She demonstrated, pulling the knob towards her. The lower corner scraped the cupboard beside it.

Peter crouched. "Screws have pulled loose. Door's carrying the whole lot on the bottom hinge."

"Can it be saved?"

"Certainly. Wood's good round it."

Samuel set the bag on a chair, clear of where Peter would need to kneel. His father nodded without having to ask him to move it.

"Hold this for me, Sam. Bottom corner."

Samuel held the door while his father loosened the hinge. The neighbour told them her grandson had suggested replacing the whole kitchen. She said he had once burned soup, so she would keep his suggestions in reserve.

"What sort of soup?" Samuel asked.

"Tomato. All over my good saucepan." She went to the worktop. "Peter, will you be finished before twelve? I've got to go out."

"Easy."

She offered Samuel a biscuit. He couldn't take one while holding the door, so she put two on a plate near his elbow.

His father took the hinge off and showed him the holes, furry round the edges. With glue and small pieces of wood he filled them. The plates stayed in their pile inside, with a chipped one on top.

"He's doing a shelf at home," Peter told the neighbour.

"Oh, lovely. What are you making it for?"

"My books and things."

"Put me out of a job in a few years," Peter said. "Once we've taught him the difference between twelve and fourteen."

Samuel had been reaching for a biscuit. He kept his hand on the edge of the plate.

"I got twelve right," he said. "It was which edge."

His father continued tightening the bottom hinge. "It's going to be a useful little thing."

"I can always use shelves," the neighbour said. "Every room in here could do with another one."

Samuel took the biscuit. He could read a tape. She ought to know that if she wanted him to make her shelves. His father reached for a screw and Samuel moved the plate aside.

When the cupboard door closed level, the neighbour opened it again to make sure. She said it had never been so good, which made Peter laugh and tell her it certainly had. He refused the extra money she offered. Samuel swept the floor while she put on her coat, and she gave him a paper sack of biscuits for his mother.

On the walk home, Samuel had the shopping and the biscuits. He tried to think of another question about the cupboard.

"Would you have to take the whole kitchen out if the wood was bad?"

"Depends how bad."

"Could you put a new bit in?"

"Sometimes."

Samuel walked two paces behind. A dog barked through a gate. He looked at it until the gate had passed out of sight, then hurried to catch up. His father took the shopping from him without being asked. Samuel couldn't tell whether this was because the bag looked heavy or because he was carrying it wrongly.

At home, Ruth was hanging washing in the yard. Samuel went through the kitchen and held the back door open so she could bring in the empty basket. His father took off his jacket.

"Have a nice morning?" she asked.

"Got a few bits done."

"She gave us biscuits," Samuel said.

He showed Ruth the sack. She looked inside and chose a broken one.

"You can have a whole one," Samuel told her.

"I know. I'll have this now and then another later. That's how it works."

Peter was at the sink washing his hands. He shook the water off twice and turned towards Samuel.

"A word before lunch."

Ruth's hand stopped in the paper sack.

"When we're in somebody's house doing a job, you leave the talking to me. All right?"

"She asked me about the shelf."

"I'm talking about correcting me."

Samuel studied the crumbs in the crease of the sack.

"You made yourself look silly. That lady doesn't need to hear you arguing about a measurement."

"I wasn't arguing."

"You see? Doing it again."

Ruth put the biscuits down. "What did he say?"

"A joke about his shelf. That's all."

"I did measure twelve," Samuel said.

Peter lifted both hands. They were still damp, the skin pale round his wedding ring. "There we are. Can't let it go. We had a perfectly good morning, and he wants to turn it into this."

Samuel felt the whole walk and the shop sliding out of reach. He wanted to tell his father about the spelling rat again. That had happened. They had both laughed about the badgers. Perhaps saying those words would bring the morning back, although he could hear how stupid they would sound in the kitchen now.

"Put the bags away," Peter said. "And think before you speak next time."

Samuel put the screws in their tin in the shed and the hooks in the shallow drawer beneath the bench. He turned the polish tin until its label faced him. After a while he heard the front door open: his father going to the car.

Ruth appeared in the shed doorway.

"Come and have your lunch."

"Is he cross?"

"He's gone to fetch the cloths from the car."

That wasn't the answer, although Samuel followed her. His plate had a roll, cheese, an apple cut into quarters. Ruth sat opposite with a cup of tea. She asked about the cupboard door, and Samuel showed her with his hands how it had hung sideways.

"You helped, then."

"I held it."

"Doors can be heavy."

He nodded, mouth full. Peter came in with a bundle of cloths and put them in the sink. He took his plate into the front room. Samuel watched the kitchen doorway after he had gone.

"This afternoon," Ruth said, "you and I can get the shelf done."

"Dad said he'd do it."

"I'll ask him where he put the screws."

"I know where."

"Even better."

She went to the front room. Samuel could hear the television beginning, then his mother's voice saying they needed the kitchen table free for tomorrow. His father said the last screw holes were ready, anyone could put it together. Ruth came back and put newspaper down.

Ruth listened to his explanation, then held the second upright against the wrong end.

"The holes," he said. "Look where the holes are."

"I am looking. Give me a second."

She turned it over. The middle shelf dropped and Samuel caught it against his knee.

"We need three arms," she said. "Get something to go under there."

The sugar bowl was the right height. With it holding the middle shelf, Samuel could turn the screws while Ruth kept the side in place. She finished each one when it became too stiff for him.

Ruth knelt to check the sides and stayed there, rubbing her knee. Samuel fetched a cushion. She pulled it under her without looking up. One corner of the shelf had a split where Peter's screw had gone in close to the end.

"Is that going to break?" she asked.

"Dad said it's all right. The screw holds it."

"We'll give it a check before we put anything on."

Samuel held the side while she pulled at the shelf. The split stayed the same. He found the abrasive paper and smoothed the corner until her finger passed over it without catching.

"I might put a photo on the top," he said.

"Which photo?"

"The one of us at the beach."

"Then we'll need a frame. Have a look in that box under my bed later. I think there's a spare."

He remembered the box. There were buttons in it, too, and a blue ribbon she said he could have if he ever found a use for one.

At the last corner she dropped a screw. It bounced off the chair and disappeared.

They both stayed still, listening for another sound.

"Under your foot?" she asked.

Samuel lifted his shoe. There it was, caught in the tread.

"There. Lucky. Last one."

When the shelf stood, Samuel pressed on its top with both hands. Ruth let him carry it upstairs, following with the cushion under one arm. He had put three books on it when she said she had to get the washing in and left him there.

He fetched the aeroplane. With it on the top, there would be hardly any room for the photograph. He moved the books, put the plane in the space beside them, moved it back. The missing propeller was less obvious from the bed.

Downstairs Peter laughed at the television. Samuel could take the shelf down, hold it in the front room doorway so his father saw it finished. He picked it up with the books still on it, then lowered it when the aeroplane slid. He put the plane back with its good wing towards the door.

Chapter 3

Owen comes over

Owen arrived holding a bicycle mudguard like an enormous silver eyebrow. His mother followed with the bicycle itself. She stopped outside the gate and asked whether Samuel was sure they wanted the whole thing.

"We need to see where it goes," Samuel said.

"Fair enough. Don't take anything off that makes it stop."

She passed the handlebars to Owen and went up the steps to speak to Ruth. Owen rolled the bicycle into the hall. The front tyre left a narrow wet track on the tiles.

"It's only the mudguard," he told Samuel. "She thinks we're going to build a motorbike."

"We could."

"With what?"

Samuel looked at the bicycle. "A motor."

They laughed while the adults talked over them. Owen's bicycle was blue beneath the dirt, with a white patch where someone had pulled off a sticker. A metal support on the rear mudguard had come loose. It tapped the tyre when Owen rode over a bump. He had taken the guard off with his older cousin, who had promised to help put it back and then gone somewhere else. Owen had kept the screws in an empty mint tin, which he now shook beside his ear.

"All present," he said.

"How many?"

"Several."

Samuel wanted Owen upstairs first. He had arranged the books by height on the finished shelf, leaving room for the red aeroplane. The beach photograph was in a plain frame on top. Peter had held the camera out at arm's length, and his thumb covered one corner.

They left the bicycle in the yard and went upstairs. Samuel stood by the window while Owen examined the shelf. He wished he had left it less tidy. It looked as though he had been expecting an inspection.

"You made all that?"

"Dad cut the wood. I did the marks and smoothed it. Mum helped with the screws."

Owen ran a finger down the side. "It's proper wood."

"What did you think it was?"

"Cardboard. At school everything's cardboard."

Their class had made a town from cereal boxes. The church had collapsed when someone filled the baptism bowl with water.

"My bridge wasn't," Samuel said. "That was sticks."

Owen was already looking at the aeroplane. He lifted it with both hands. Samuel waited, then showed him the little doors beneath the wings. "The wheels go in. Look." One wheel stuck, so Owen held the wing while Samuel used a fingernail to free it. The doors closed with a click.

"How did the propeller come off?"

"I dropped it."

"You could make one."

"It'd have to be the same as the other."

"Make two. Then they'd match."

Samuel had never thought of that. He took the plane and looked at the remaining propeller. Owen opened the box of stones after asking, and they chose which ones could pass for meteorites. Samuel said the grey pitted one had to be. Owen said a meteorite might be any colour, since he had never seen a new one.

Below them, the back door closed. Samuel knew his father's step on the kitchen floor. He put the plane down.

"We should do the bike."

They carried the mint tin downstairs. Peter was standing beside the bicycle with his hands on his hips.

"You brought half the garage, then."

"It's the mudguard," Owen said.

"I can see what it is. You'll need to clear a space. Sam, those pots have to go to the end."

Three flowerpots stood near the shed, full of old stems. Samuel had been told to move them before Owen arrived. He had carried the first one as far as the drain, where the bottom began shedding soil, and gone indoors to find a tray. Then the bell had rung.

"I'll do it now."

Owen put the mudguard on the back step. "I'll help."

They each took a pot. The largest needed both of them, their fingers hooked beneath its rim. It was heavier than it looked. They shuffled along the yard, putting it down twice.

"There's a whole tree buried in it," Owen said.

"It's soil."

"That's what it wants you to think."

They left it against the wall. Samuel put the smaller pots beside it. His father had fetched a broom.

"Might as well sweep while it's clear."

Samuel took the broom. Owen held the dustpan, pulling a face when a wet leaf stuck to its edge. They swept the corner, then the strip beside the drain. The dustpan left a line, and Samuel went over it again with the broom angled more steeply.

Peter came out carrying a bucket. "Water will shift that."

Samuel looked towards the kitchen clock. The hands were hidden from the yard by the window frame. He could see his mother's arm moving as she wiped the table. Owen picked up a broken peg and made its two pieces bite one another.

"These need sorting as well," Peter said. He put a cardboard box of plastic plant trays by Samuel's feet. "Decent ones in the shed. Rest in the bin."

Samuel set the broom against the wall. He had imagined them working on the bicycle in the sun, with the parts in a row and the repaired mudguard fitted by the time Owen's mother returned. The sun had already gone off half the yard. A thin breeze lifted the old dry roots in the box.

"Can we do the bike first?"

Peter was pouring water over the swept corner. He paused with the bucket tilted.

"This'll take five minutes."

Samuel knelt beside the box. Owen crouched too and began putting the trays into piles. One had green slime in its corners. Another shattered when Owen pressed the base with his thumb.

"Dead one," he said.

"They've been out all winter," Peter told him. "That's why things need putting away."

Samuel fitted the good trays together. He knew how to do the job. They made a tidy stack when they were the right way round. Beneath them were plant labels, bits of string and a pair of Ruth's gardening gloves. One glove was folded inside the other, holding a little clump of blackened leaves.

His father looked at the shed doorway. "And those lengths of wood can go up against the side. Been meaning to shift them all week."

Samuel put down a tray.

"You said I could do the bike when Owen came."

Owen stopped snapping the ruined tray. Peter turned the empty bucket over and tapped its bottom to release a leaf.

"You'll do the bike. I'm asking for a bit of help."

Samuel's mouth felt dry. His father had said the words easily, as though Samuel had failed to hear something obvious. Owen was looking into the box. He could have left the bicycle at home. Samuel had told him to bring it.

"He has to go at four."

"Plenty of time."

"You said after the pots."

The kitchen door opened. Ruth stood on the step with a tea towel over her shoulder.

"Pete, leave the wood. They've done the pots and the sweeping."

"It's a few lengths."

"Then you and I can do it. I've got washing to go out. I need this bit clear." She looked at the boys. "Bring the bike over here."

Peter looked at Samuel, then at Owen. Samuel waited. He could hear water moving down the drain in small gulps.

"All right. Mind you put my tools back."

"We will," Samuel said.

He said it too quickly. His father went into the shed and reached for something above the bench. Owen picked up the mudguard. They carried the bicycle to the part of the yard where Ruth had placed two old towels. She asked whether they wanted squash. Owen said yes before Samuel could decide whether asking for anything else was wise.

* * *

There were five screws in the mint tin, two washers and a boiled sweet covered in fluff. Samuel took the sweet out and held it up.

"Vital component," Owen said.

Samuel placed it on the empty lid. "It'll make it sticky."

"Better brakes."

They tried the guard against the wheel with the bicycle upside down. Its shape looked different inverted. Samuel put his head on one side and imagined the bicycle the right way up. The loose metal support should have met a small hole near the axle, although it sat a thumb's width away. Owen pushed it. Samuel stopped him.

"That's why it bends. We need to loosen the other end."

"Which one?"

Samuel showed him. They found a spanner in the shed drawer, and Peter checked that it fitted. He watched them for a minute, then told Samuel to make sure the tyre had room all the way round before tightening anything.

The nut moved suddenly. Owen's knuckles knocked the frame and he said a word which made Samuel look towards the kitchen. Ruth glanced round from the sink. Owen put his hand in his armpit.

"Did she hear?"

"Probably."

They waited. Ruth turned the tap off and went upstairs with a pile of towels. Owen let his shoulders drop. They swapped jobs. Samuel held the support where it belonged and Owen fed the screw through. It fell out twice. On the third attempt they worked out that Samuel could hold the washer from behind with one finger while Owen turned the nut.

"You've got to let go now," Owen said.

"I know. Wait."

"Your finger's going to be part of it."

"Then you'll have to come here every time you ride."

Owen laughed hard enough to drop the spanner. Samuel held the washer while he fetched it. The metal had left a round groove on his fingertip by the time the nut was tight.

They spun the wheel. There was a tick on every turn, where a dent brought the guard close to the tyre. Owen wanted to push it while it was moving.

"Stop it first," Samuel said.

"I know."

"You were going to."

Owen stopped the wheel with his hand. He adjusted the guard, then spun it again. Samuel crouched on the other side to listen. This time it ran clear.

They turned the bicycle upright. Samuel wanted the work to be done, although one of the stays still looked crooked. His father came over and crouched beside it. He checked the nuts with the spanner and moved the wheel backwards and forwards. Then he pointed to the bent support.

"Keep an eye on that. New one would be better. This'll do for now."

"Out front, walking pace," Peter said when Owen asked to test it. He rolled the bicycle through the hall, steering round the stairs. Ruth held the front door. Owen climbed on outside and made a slow circle by the gate. Samuel watched the guard.

"No jumping off kerbs," Peter said.

"I don't," Owen said.

Samuel looked at him. Owen winked, very badly, closing both eyes.

There was time for squash and two biscuits each before Owen's mother came. They sat on the back step. The good plant trays were still beside the shed, a whole stack left for someone else to put away. Samuel kept looking at them.

Owen had a line of dirt down his cheek. Samuel told him, and Owen rubbed the wrong side. Samuel pointed again. In the end he fetched the little mirror from the hall and held it while Owen scrubbed at his face with a damp corner of the towel.

"Still there?"

"You've moved it."

"Where?"

"Towards your ear."

They ended up at the sink, elbowing each other for space. Ruth gave them soap and moved the clean tea towels out of reach. When Owen had finished, he held his wet hands over Samuel's head and threatened rain. Samuel ducked under his arm and escaped with the mirror. He put it back on its hook exactly as it had been.

Owen's mother called from the hall. His face was still wet when they went to meet her. He said the mudguard worked, the support needed watching, and there was a pump at home they could take apart next Saturday.

"Could he come?" he asked.

"I'm working the morning. After lunch."

Samuel looked at Ruth. She nodded, then went to find the coat Owen had forgotten on the back of Samuel's bedroom door.

"What if the pump doesn't go together again?" Samuel asked.

"We'll draw it first."

"Before you take anything off."

"Obviously."

Owen walked his bicycle down the steps. At the gate he called back that Samuel should bring his aeroplane too. Samuel was about to say they might lose the other propeller, then pictured them making two. He put a hand above his eyes and called that he would.

Chapter 4

The pig mask

The fork made a noise when it touched the plate, so Samuel tried keeping its points inside the sausage while he cut. This gave him a row of pieces which stayed joined along the bottom. He turned the fork and tried again.

"What are you doing to it?" his father asked.

"Cutting it."

"I can see that. Sawing away like a carpenter."

Samuel loosened his fingers on the knife. He had been hungry when his father put the plates down. The sausages were dark on the outside, and there was a hollow of gravy in the mashed potato. Now he had too much potato on his fork and a piece of skin hanging from the sausage. He put them in his mouth together, keeping his lips closed.

Ruth's note was beneath the pepper pot: home after six. She was helping with food for a school event. Samuel had asked whether she could bring back cake. She said she would see.

"How was school?" Peter asked.

"All right."

"Must have done something."

"We made a circuit."

"What sort?"

Samuel explained about the battery and the little bulb. One crocodile clip had come apart. Owen held the bare wire in place while they waited for another. Samuel had seen the filament up close, a tiny orange curl. He began to describe it. His father asked whether they knew how a fuse worked.

"It's for when there's too much electricity."

"Too much current. What do they teach you there?"

Current. He knew the teacher had said it because Owen had asked about currant buns. Their group had laughed until two of them were moved. Samuel and Owen had been allowed to stay together; they had finished their circuit.

"You're eleven," his father said. "You should know that much."

"I do. I forgot the word."

"That's what knowing means. Remembering."

Peter cut his sausage straight through. Samuel looked at the edge of his own knife. It was the same sort. He tried holding it nearer the blade, as his father did.

The kitchen was warm from the oven. On the window there was a patch of steam shaped like a country in Samuel's atlas. Beyond it, the washing line hung slack over the yard. A pillowcase still waited there because Peter said it wasn't dry. Samuel could see its corners moving whenever the wind entered between the houses.

"Eat up," his father said. "I've got things to do."

Samuel took more potato. There were peas underneath, and two rolled off the fork. One landed on the plate. The other dropped onto the tablecloth beside his wrist. He picked it up with his fingers before his father could say anything.

"Use your knife."

He put the pea back down and pushed it towards his fork. It flattened under the knife, leaving a green smear. His father's eyes followed it.

"Honestly."

Samuel scraped the pea onto his plate. His face felt hot. He had most of his potato left, the sausage pieces still joined by their skin, peas he ought to have eaten first. His father was nearly finished. Samuel pushed a large mouthful together, keeping it away from the edge.

Peter took a drink of water. "Pass the pepper."

The pepper stood beyond the serving bowl. Samuel had to reach across it. He kept his right elbow high to avoid his glass, and the edge of his sleeve caught the rim of his plate. He felt it move before he heard anything. The plate tilted against his other wrist. Gravy slid over the edge, carrying potato and a piece of sausage onto the cloth and his lap.

He caught the plate with both hands. It hit the table with a short, hard sound.

"Oh, for God's sake."

Samuel sat still. A warm wet patch spread through his trousers. One pea lay in the fold beside his knee. His father pushed his chair back.

"I asked you to pass one thing."

"My sleeve caught."

"I watched you."

"It caught the plate."

Peter looked at the cloth, then at Samuel's lap. He seemed to be deciding where to begin. Samuel reached towards the worktop for the roll of kitchen paper.

"Leave it. You'll knock something else over."

Samuel put his hands back on either side of his plate. There was gravy between two fingers. He rubbed them together under the table.

His father took the kitchen paper and tore off several sheets. He dropped them over the spill, pressed with his palm, then lifted them. The grease left a dark irregular patch.

"Little pig," he said.

Samuel looked down. Sorry. He should have said it before the thing about his sleeve. Peter stood beside him with the wet paper in his hand.

"Sorry," Samuel said.

Peter made a short sound through his nose. He put the paper in the bin and opened the back door.

"Stay there."

Samuel listened to him crossing the yard. The shed bolt scraped back. He could see his father's shoulder through the kitchen window, bent towards the old green cupboard at the back of the shed. The cupboard held Christmas things, a lamp with a broken shade and bags Peter brought home when people threw useful things away.

Samuel tried to think what could be needed from there. A different cloth. Something to get the grease out. He picked the pea off his trousers and put it on the edge of the plate. The wet patch was cooling.

His father returned with a plastic bag. Something pink showed through it. He shut the back door and drew out a face with pointed ears and a broad round snout.

Peter sometimes held up strange things and waited for a reaction. Samuel tried a smile. His father kept coming towards him.

"If you're going to eat like a pig, you can look like one."

The mask was dull pink, with darker paint inside the nostrils. Small openings sat above the snout. A black elastic strap hung behind it. His father held the elastic between finger and thumb, stretching it once.

"Come here."

Samuel stayed on the chair. His feet found the crossbar beneath it. "I said sorry."

"And I'm making sure you remember."

Peter moved behind him. Samuel turned his head to follow, and his father put a hand on his shoulder.

"Face the front."

The pink face came down in front of Samuel's own. He raised one hand and touched its lower edge. Peter caught his wrist and put it back on the table. The material smelled of a cupboard and something sweet, a smell like new shoes. His father drew the elastic over the back of his head. It caught his ear, folded it, then slipped behind it.

Samuel could see the table through one opening. The other sat too far to the side. He shut his left eye, opened it, shut the right. The mask belonged on someone bigger. Its snout hung in front of his mouth, with room for his breath to move inside. Peter adjusted it with a finger under Samuel's chin.

"There. Suits you."

Samuel tried to lift it. His father tapped the back of his hand.

"Leave it on."

"I can't see."

"You can see enough to make a mess."

Samuel moved his head until the eye opening showed him the plate. Everything in the room had become pieces with pink edges: the window, his father's sleeve, the black handle of a saucepan. He could see the cloth more easily if he bent his neck. A drop from his nose touched the inside of the mask. He tried breathing through his mouth and tasted the warm, stale air.

Peter sat opposite. He pushed his own plate back and folded his arms.

"What do we say?"

"Sorry."

"Can't hear you."

Samuel said it louder. The mask made the word sound thick. He tried raising the bottom edge with his chin. It moved against his cheek and settled again.

"You'll have to speak properly."

"I'm sorry."

"What for?"

Samuel knew several answers. The plate, the pea, saying the wrong word about electricity. The one he chose might leave the others still waiting.

"Spilling it."

"Being a little pig at the table."

He looked towards his father's voice. The eyehole gave him a piece of Peter's mouth and the edge of his chin. His father seemed to be smiling. Samuel wanted to make the smile finish. He could repeat the words and perhaps that would be enough.

"Being a little pig."

Peter laughed once. "You sound like one as well."

Samuel pressed his lips together. His eyes had begun watering. He could feel the water moving towards the crease beside his nose. There was nowhere to wipe it. The elastic pulled at his hair whenever he moved his head. He tried to hold still so that nothing else would happen.

The refrigerator started. A car went past outside the front of the house. Samuel heard both sounds with unusual sharpness. He wondered how long it was until six. The kitchen clock was above the doorway, behind his father. He turned his head enough to find it, though he could see only part of the white face.

"Looking for an escape?"

Samuel shook his head.

"Look at me when I'm talking."

He turned back. His father picked up a pea from the clean part of the cloth and placed it on Samuel's plate. The pea stuck to Peter's finger; he wiped it on the rim. Samuel's trousers clung to his leg. He wanted the toilet. He had wanted it before they sat down, then forgotten when he saw the food.

"Can I take it off now?"

"Have you learned anything?"

"Yes."

"We'll give it another minute. Make sure."

Samuel counted to sixty in his head. At twenty-three he lost his place because his father rose and went to the sink. He began again at twenty. Peter rinsed his glass, leaving the tap running while he looked out at the yard. Samuel reached beneath the snout with one finger to wipe his nose. His father turned.

"Hands on the table."

He put them flat. The gravy between his fingers had dried tacky. He could smell sausage fat inside the mask now, mixed with the cupboard smell. He had started crying without choosing to, and his breath made small noises which he couldn't stop. His father said there was no need for that, which made Samuel try harder to breathe evenly. The next breath caught in his throat.

The front door opened.

Samuel heard the key fall against the door and his mother call that she was home. He tried to answer. What came out was a wet sound, hardly a word.

Ruth's steps stopped in the kitchen doorway. Through the right eye opening Samuel saw a strip of black cardigan, then her hand holding the carrier bag. The bag lowered to the floor.

"Take that off him."

Peter turned from the sink. "We're having a little lesson."

"Take it off."

Samuel raised his head. His mother came to him and put both hands against the sides of the mask. The touch made him cry harder. She found the strap with her fingers, lifted it clear of his ear and drew the mask forward.

The kitchen light hurt his eyes. Air touched the damp places on his face. Ruth put the mask on the table. It landed beside the potato with its snout pointing up.

"Come on," she said.

"He tipped his dinner everywhere," Peter told her.

Ruth took Samuel's hand. He stood, and the food in his lap fell to the floor. The piece of sausage made a small soft noise.

"Look at that," Peter said.

"Leave it."

"Don't come in here speaking to me like that. You weren't here."

Ruth kept hold of Samuel. They went along the hall, past the front room door and up the stairs. He could feel his wet trousers rubbing both knees. His mother took him into the bathroom and shut the door. She pulled the small stool across to the basin.

"Sit there. Let's get this off your face."

She ran water over a flannel, testing it against her wrist. Samuel tried to tell her about the pepper. The words kept breaking apart.

"You can tell me in a minute. Here. Hold this."

She gave him a piece of toilet paper for his nose. Downstairs his father called her name. Ruth wiped Samuel's cheek, then the place behind his ear where the elastic had pressed. The flannel was warm. She rinsed it and turned to a clean part.

"That shouldn't have happened," she said.

Samuel stared at the corner of the basin. "He said a minute."

She stopped rinsing the flannel. "For wearing it?"

"It was longer."

"I'm sorry, love."

She gave him the flannel. He held it without using it while she fetched clean trousers from his room. He changed with her facing the door. His father called again, louder. Ruth opened the door a little and said she would be down when Samuel was ready.

"I need the toilet," he said.

"Of course. I'll be just outside."

She stepped onto the landing and pulled the door almost closed. Samuel had to ask her to close it the rest of the way. The click of the latch made him feel foolish for asking, although he was glad when it came. Afterwards he washed his hands twice. There was still a smell of gravy on one thumb. He worked the soap round the nail, rinsed it, and called to tell his mother she could come

in. She brought his slippers. One had a hole near the toe, and he looked down at the little patch of sock showing through it while she gathered the dirty clothes.

Samuel sat on the stool. His mother's carrier bag was downstairs; he couldn't remember whether she had put it on the floor. He had something to ask about it. She crouched and brushed the damp hair off his forehead.

"I'm staying here a bit," she said.

He nodded and held the flannel against the back of his neck. Downstairs a cupboard shut. Ruth looked towards the door, then sat down on the edge of the bath.

Chapter 5

What happened

In the morning the tablecloth had gone. Samuel could see the pale wood round the edge of his plate, with a darker mark where a hot pan had once stood. The pepper pot was by the cooker. His mother's note had disappeared too.

His father was putting bread in the toaster. He wore the jumper he kept for Saturdays, the one with a loose thread on the cuff. Samuel watched him press the lever down. It came up again. Peter pressed it harder.

"Morning."

"Morning," Samuel said.

Ruth sat at the table with a mug between her hands. There was no plate in front of her. She looked tired, though she had brushed her hair and put on her earrings. Samuel took the chair by the wall. It was the same chair he had used the previous evening. He moved it an inch away from the table before sitting.

"Sleep all right?" she asked.

He nodded. In the night the pipes had woken him. He knew that knocking sound; he had stayed awake after it stopped.

Peter put the butter down. "Come on, then. No long faces. Fresh day."

Ruth stared into her mug. Samuel had heard voices after he went to bed, his name once through the floor. Perhaps they had gone through it all. He watched for his mother to look up.

His father set a piece of toast on his plate. The edges were dark, how Samuel liked them. Peter knew that. Samuel put butter in the centre and watched it turn glossy.

"We can get the bike tyres done later," his father said. "Weather holds."

Samuel had forgotten about the tyres. The front one had been losing air slowly. Owen said they could find the hole by putting the tube in water, and Samuel had wanted to see the little bubbles. His father had said he would show him at the weekend.

"Can Owen come?"

"Let's get it done first."

Samuel nodded. Peter sat down. He cut his toast into two triangles and put jam on one. The knife left a red streak on the butter dish. Samuel had been told to wipe the knife first when he used both things.

"That business last night," Peter said.

Samuel stopped spreading. His mother lifted her head.

"Got blown out of all proportion. You know we were having a joke, don't you?"

Samuel watched a bubble rise in the melted butter. It broke, leaving a small hole. His father was looking at him in the friendly way he used when the answer should be obvious. Samuel could say yes and go on eating. They could mend the tyre. That was a whole afternoon he would lose if the conversation went wrong.

"It hurt my ear," he said.

"Elastic strap, Sam. It wasn't a vice."

"He was crying when I came in," Ruth said.

Peter turned towards her. "And you came charging over. Naturally he carried on."

"He was crying before I touched him."

"Over a silly mask."

"He couldn't speak properly through it. You kept him sitting there."

Samuel looked at his mother. From behind the mask he had seen her cardigan first, her hand round the carrier bag. She had been there.

"I asked to take it off," Samuel said.

Peter put his knife down. "And it was coming off. Then your mother arrived and turned it into a performance."

"I took it off," Ruth said. "You told him to leave it on."

"How do you know what I told him? You weren't here."

"I saw him, Pete. Don't tell me I didn't see him." She took a breath. "No, I didn't hear that part. I heard him tell me. I saw his face when I took it off."

"Exactly. You weren't here."

Ruth reached for her mug without drinking. Samuel pushed the edge of his toast against the plate. There was more she could say.

"I told you I was sorry," he said.

"I know you did. We've been through it."

"Then you made me say it again."

Peter leaned back. "That's enough. Eat your breakfast."

Ruth moved her mug away from her. "You frightened him. Putting that on him was cruel."

The word sat in the room. Samuel had heard it about children pulling the legs off insects, about things on the news which his mother turned off when he came downstairs. He looked at his father's hands. Peter lifted the knife, then set it down again.

"Careful," he said.

"I mean it."

"I cook his dinner. I try to teach him a few manners. You walk in at whatever hour suits you and start throwing words like that about."

"I was working."

"For what? A few pounds extra and somebody else's leftovers?"

"We needed the money."

"We manage."

Ruth gave a short laugh with no smile in it. "We manage because I do the extra hours."

Samuel took a bite of toast. It tasted dry despite the butter. His father asked what Ruth thought paid for their food and began listing things: the car, electricity, the washing-machine part. Samuel knew the part. Peter had shown them where the old one was worn.

Ruth was talking about her wages now. Peter asked her to lower her voice. Samuel tried to catch her eye.

"Mum," he said.

"Just a minute, Sam." She stopped herself and turned. "What is it?"

His father looked at the clock. "I've got a job to get to."

Samuel held the toast above his plate. "Did you bring cake?"

His mother's face changed. She reached for the carrier bag on the sideboard and took out a foil parcel.

"I did. Two pieces. We'll have them later."

Peter stood, taking his plate to the sink. "Well, there we are. Worth all the trouble."

He left the kitchen. Samuel heard the front room door, then keys. His father called from the hall that he might be back late. The front door closed hard enough to rattle the loose pane above it.

Ruth stayed seated. Samuel finished the bite in his mouth. He wanted to tell her why he had asked about the cake. He put his toast down and tried to think.

"You can leave that if you've had enough," she said.

He pushed the plate away.

* * *

Ruth washed the breakfast things and set them on the rack. Samuel dried the butter dish. Neither of them mentioned the tyre. When the worktop was clear, she brought a cheap exercise book out of the drawer where the bills were kept. It had ruled pages, a blue cover and a bent corner. Samuel had used the back pages once to work out a sum for homework.

There were envelopes trapped beneath it. One slipped to the floor and Samuel picked it up. His mother's name was in a little clear window. She took it, unfolded the paper inside and looked at it before putting it back.

"Is that for work?"

"It's about my wages."

"Did they pay you for yesterday?"

"They will next week."

"But you've done it."

"I know. That's when they pay us."

"Could I get paid if I dried more things?"

"I've hardly any change." She rubbed one eye. "We'll see. Don't put that away wet."

She smoothed the envelope and put it beside the book. Samuel laid the tea towel over the chair so its damp part could dry.

"I'm going to write down what happened," she said.

"For Dad?"

"For me. So I have it."

She wrote the date at the top of a fresh page. Samuel sat beside her. Her handwriting leaned forwards. She drew a line through a word and wrote another above it.

"Do you have to cross it out?"

"I put the wrong time. I finished work at six. It was after that when I came in."

"He said you were late."

"I came home when I'd finished. He knew where I was."

She wrote that she had found Samuel at the kitchen table wearing a pig mask. Samuel watched the letters appear. The word wearing sounded as though he had put it on himself. He told her.

Ruth lifted her pen. "I will put that he made you. Let me get this bit down first."

"Will you put I asked him?"

"Asked him what?"

"To take it off."

"Yes." She finished the sentence and started a fresh paragraph. "Tell me."

Samuel described the pepper, the sleeve and the plate. He showed her how he had held his arm. She looked at the worktop where the pepper now stood and asked where it had been at dinner. He moved it back to its place beyond the serving bowl, using a mug to show where the bowl had stood.

"There. I had to reach over."

"I see."

He reached again, keeping his elbow clear this time. Ruth caught the mug before he moved it.

"Leave it there. I've got it."

"It didn't fall off that time."

"I know you didn't mean to spill it."

He sat down. "Are you writing what I say?"

"What you told me here. What I saw here. Look."

She showed him the separate paragraphs: Samuel said at the start of one, I saw in the other. He moved his chair closer so he could follow the writing.

"He said I sounded like one."

"Like a pig?"

Samuel nodded. His mother's pen stayed still for several seconds. Then she wrote it down. She asked whether there was anywhere that still hurt. He touched behind his ear, where the skin felt tender if he pressed it. She examined the place without pressing.

"That's all," he said.

"You can tell me anything else later."

Peter could pick the book up and say she had got it wrong. Samuel put his finger beside the sentence about the mask.

"He won't say he did it."

Ruth looked at the sentence too. "I heard him this morning."

"Can you make him?"

"No." She put the pen down. "I wish I could. I'm going to work out what we do now."

"What do we do?"

She capped the pen. "First I'm going to talk to someone. Someone who can help me think about where we could stay."

Samuel looked towards the hall. There was the front door, with his coat hanging beside it. His shoes were under the stairs. A place where they could stay would need both of those things, and school clothes, and the box of stones if they stayed long enough. He tried to make a sensible question from all that.

"Tonight?"

"I don't know yet. We have to find out what's possible."

"Will Dad come?"

"I'm talking about somewhere for you and me."

"Does Owen know?"

"Nobody knows yet."

"He comes here."

"You'd still see him."

Samuel looked at the empty chair opposite. He pulled his feet back beneath his own.

Ruth took out her phone and found a number. She said she was ringing a woman from work, someone who had told her about a spare room. Samuel watched her press the button. The woman answered, and Ruth said her name as though she might be a stranger, then began again in her usual voice.

"Have you got a minute?"

Samuel gathered the plates with the two pieces of cake. He put them on the table, one in front of his mother. She mouthed thank you. He could hear a small buzzing voice from the phone. Ruth looked at him, then went to stand beside the back door.

"Something happened last night," she said.

Samuel stayed at the table. He picked a crumb from the edge of his cake and rolled it between his fingers. Ruth spoke for a long time. She listened for longer. Once she said, "Both of us," and once, "Yes, I can bring the papers." She wrote another number on the inside cover of the exercise book.

When she finished, she took a bite of cake with the phone still in her hand.

"I'll see her Monday."

"At school?"

"After work. We'll talk properly."

Samuel wanted Monday to come before his father returned. He ate his cake while Ruth put the book in the folder with the household papers. She left the new number showing until she had copied it into her phone.

"You can come to the shops with me. I need bread."

"We've got bread."

"Well. I want to go out for a bit."

He fetched his shoes. Ruth was still by the table, checking in her bag for keys, when he opened the front door.

Chapter 6

A place outside

The chair was heavier at his end. Samuel knew this because his mother held two slender legs while he carried the seat and most of the back. He had worked out how to rest the seat against his hip. At thirteen he was nearly as tall as she was. He could carry a chair to the repair shop without swapping over.

Ruth asked if he wanted to swap ends. He shook his head. The chair bumped his leg with every third step.

They had left before Peter got back from a job, with a note saying where they were going. For weeks a strip of paper across the seat had warned them not to sit down. Peter kept meaning to mend it. Ruth had caught her own mother's old chair as it began to give under her, and this morning she had picked up the phone.

They crossed at the lights and turned down a narrow road behind the shops. Samuel had been past it many times without noticing the workshop. A board above the wide doors read ELLIS FURNITURE REPAIRS. One door stood open, showing a row of chair backs and the leg of an upside-down table. Inside, a woman was crouched beside a cabinet with a pencil tucked through the edge of her apron.

"Come in," she called. "Mind the stool."

Samuel looked down just in time. A low stool stood in their path with a heap of cloth on it. Ruth stepped round it and they lowered the chair to the floor.

"June? We spoke on the phone."

The woman stood, wiping her hands. "You did. This is the loose one."

"Very loose," Samuel said.

June moved the chair back. The frame gave beneath her hand.

"It's there," Samuel said. "Under the seat."

She turned it towards the light. "Show me."

He held the seat while she moved the back. A narrow gap opened. Samuel pointed without putting his finger inside.

June nodded. "And the other side, look."

The second joint moved too. He hadn't seen it at home because that side had been against the wall. He crouched. There was a pale crumb of old glue in the gap.

"Both?"

"Both, and we'll check the rest when it's apart."

"You take it all apart?"

"As much as needs it. Clean the joints, get the old glue out. Then it can go together properly."

Chairs lined the wall, each with a label tied to it. One had no seat. At the back, clamps stood in a row above a bench. The room smelled of wood dust, polish and coffee.

June wrote an amount on a small form. Ruth read it twice.

"That's for the whole job?"

"Unless I find something else when it's apart. I'd ring before doing any more."

Ruth rubbed the edge of the seat. "It's my mum's. Yes. Go on."

June filled in the rest of the form. A telephone rang somewhere behind the cabinet. June excused herself and went to answer it. Samuel stood with his hands in his pockets so he wouldn't touch anything. There was a strip of veneer on the bench, curled at one end like a shaving from an enormous pencil.

"Did Grandad make it?" he asked his mother.

"No, love. She bought the chairs years ago. That one's the last of them."

"Where are the others?"

"Two went when she moved. One broke."

Samuel rubbed a finger over a pale dent in the seat. Someone might have made it in his grandmother's kitchen.

June came back and read the form. "Next week. If that's any good to you."

"We've managed this long," Ruth said.

"How do you get it apart?" Samuel asked.

"Depends what the joints are like. This one's helping us already."

She moved the back again. The loose rail made a small clicking sound.

"Could I watch?"

June looked at the jobs along the wall. "I won't do it today. Thursday, probably. You're welcome to look in after school. If I'm busy, you'll have to wait by the door."

"I can do that."

"He's interested in making things," Ruth said.

"Thursday, then." June tore off their copy of the form. The telephone started again while she was passing it to Ruth. Samuel could hear it through the door as they left.

* * *

The idea of another home had first been a flat above a row of shops. Samuel remembered its bare windows and the sound their shoes made in the empty front room. He had been eleven, still wearing the coat with the torn inside pocket. A woman from Ruth's work had stood beside the window while they looked round, explaining where her bed would go. Samuel and Ruth would have the other bedroom. For a while the three of them discussed a screen which would give Samuel his own corner.

He had asked whether Owen could come. Both women said yes. The man showing them round waited by the door with keys hanging from one finger. There were forms to fill out and money needed before they could have it.

Later, at home, Samuel drew the room on the back of a school letter. He put the window in twice because he had begun too close to the edge. Ruth kept the drawing with the other papers. For days she made telephone calls from the yard.

Then the woman from work had to go and live with her mother. Ruth told Samuel at the kitchen table. She could still speak to the man about the flat, though she couldn't pay for all of it alone. Samuel asked whether they could close one bedroom and pay for the rest. Ruth said she'd asked about a smaller place already, and folded his drawing with the school letter showing. Samuel opened it again when she went upstairs.

The drawing stayed in the folder. The flat went to someone else. After that his father bought a takeaway and told them there had been too much unpleasantness in the house. He said he would watch his temper. He said Samuel needed to listen, and Ruth said she needed him to keep his word. Samuel had eaten chips from the paper while they talked. His father repaired the bicycle tyre with him. They went to see the river when the water was high. Ruth held his hood while he leaned over the railings, and Peter explained how the water carried whole branches to the bridge.

The mask stayed in the shed cupboard. Samuel saw it once when he fetched a brush, its pink snout showing through a clear bag beneath a coil of cable. He left it where it was. Nobody made

him wear it again. When he turned twelve, his father gave him a set of small screwdrivers and let him choose dinner. Samuel chose chicken and rice because there was nothing difficult to cut.

Now, two years after the first plan for the flat, Ruth had started putting money in an envelope again. Samuel saw it when she opened the kitchen drawer to pay for the chair. She counted the notes facing away from the doorway, then put some back. He didn't ask about it until they were walking home from June's.

"Is that the money for moving?"

His mother looked at him. "Some of it. There's enough for the chair as well."

"I could have waited."

"I can't have everything waiting. I want the chair done."

He looked at her. She was folding and unfolding June's form along its crease.

"I'm looking into places," she said. "I am. I'll tell you when there's something to see."

Samuel put his hands in his pockets. At least he knew which day he could go back to the workshop.

* * *

June had the chair apart when he arrived after school. The seat lay on the bench; the back stood against a cupboard.

"You've done it," he said.

"Some of it. Put your bag by the door."

"I wanted to see it come apart."

"Sorry. I had an hour this morning. I've got to get a cabinet out of here tomorrow."

He left his bag where she pointed. June worked on a joint with a small tool, taking off pale flakes of glue. Samuel had expected a great crack, the pieces coming away in her hands. Now he had missed it.

"Does it hurt the wood?"

"What does?"

"Getting it apart."

"Sometimes. Hold on, Samuel."

She leaned closer to the rail. He could hear her breath through her nose. A customer came in carrying a drawer, and she put the tool down. Samuel moved back to his bag while they talked. The man had photographs of the rest of the chest. He wanted to show every one.

Samuel had told his mother he would come straight back afterwards. He looked at the clock, then at the door. When June returned to the bench he asked whether he could feel the joint she'd cleaned.

"That one, yes. Don't pick up the tool."

The clean part was smoother than he expected. He turned it in the light and looked into the matching hole. June pushed the pieces together for him. The gap closed.

"Is it all right if I come again?"

"Tomorrow's no good."

He waited, holding the rail. June glanced at him, then at the clock herself.

"Try next Thursday. I can't promise what I'll be doing."

Samuel put the rail back exactly where she had laid it. On Saturday, when he and Ruth collected the chair, he checked that June had meant the Thursday still to come. She said yes, then asked him to hold the door while his mother lifted her end.

* * *

At home he wanted a ruler to draw what he had seen. He pulled the household folder out of the kitchen drawer to reach behind it. The blue exercise book slipped from among the envelopes and opened on the table.

He recognised his name before he recognised the account. The writing filled most of one page. There was a date at the top and the crossed-out time beneath it. He stood with his hand on the cover, reading.

Ruth came from the yard with a basket of dry clothes. She put it down when she saw the book.

"I was getting the ruler," he said.

"It's all right."

He read to the bottom. His mother's account said she had taken him upstairs. It said he had been crying. It included the words he remembered telling her, though there were others missing.

"He made me put my hands on the table."

Ruth came closer. "That evening?"

"After I tried to wipe my nose. I put my finger under it and he said hands on the table."

She looked down at the page. "I didn't know that."

"Can you put it in?"

"Yes."

She fetched the pen from the mug on the sideboard. Samuel watched while she wrote beneath the old account, adding the new date. She began with Samuel remembers. He read over her arm.

"Why does it need today's date?"

"Because you're telling me today."

"It happened then."

"I know. I'll put that too."

She added the evening's date. Samuel followed each word. Less space than a piece of schoolwork. There ought to be enough paper for how long it had taken.

"Are you still showing someone?" he asked.

"I've talked to someone again. About finding a place, and what money we need."

"Like the other flat?"

"I'm asking about smaller places."

Samuel rested his elbows on the table. From there he could see the repaired joint beneath his mother's chair. It held while she turned to put the pen away.

"You said we were going before."

"I thought we could. I did try, Samuel."

"He said he'd stop."

Ruth pressed her lips together. The clothes basket was still by the table, a shirt trailing over its side.

"Yes. And I stayed when he didn't. I know that."

Samuel rubbed his thumb along the edge of the table.

His mother opened the folder to a sheet of figures, wages down one side and bills down the other. Several amounts were crossed out.

"This time I'm working it out without anyone else's wages. Look, this is what I can put by."

He leaned over the figures. One sum was written twice, with different answers. Ruth tapped it and said she needed to check which amount included the extra hours. She found another slip in the folder. Samuel fetched a pencil from the mug on the sideboard and sat down beside her.

PART TWO
Leaving home

Chapter 7
The camera

The man in the secondhand shop put the camera on a square of green felt and pushed it towards Samuel with one finger. There was a pale scuff beside the lens. A small flap underneath had lost the paint from its corner. Samuel turned it over, following the movement of the man's hands in reverse, and found the catch that released the batteries.

"You don't want that open while it's on."

"It isn't on."

"Right. Just telling you."

Samuel closed the flap. He was fifteen now and could look down at everything laid on the glass counter. He put his thumb over the flap while he worked out how to ask the next question. Behind the man, shelves held an electric keyboard, two clocks with different ideas about the time, and a row of cameras tied to price labels. He had looked at this one through the window on three separate afternoons. The label included the word video. He had imagined Owen coming towards him on the bicycle, then passing out of the picture. The ordinary photographs he had seen stopped everybody in the middle of doing things.

"Can I try it?"

The man pressed the power button. The lens came forward with a sound like a large insect trapped inside a matchbox. A picture of Samuel's thumb appeared on the screen.

"Keep your finger off there."

He moved it. The green felt became very bright, and the man's hand acquired a pale fringe. Samuel lifted the camera until the clocks appeared. Their faces leaned towards one another in the little picture. He tried the button on top and the camera clicked. For an instant the screen went black.

"That's a photograph. How do you do the moving bit?"

The man showed him the dial. Samuel had seen the tiny picture of a film camera without knowing what it meant. He turned it and pressed again. A red point appeared. On the screen the man picked up a pencil, tapped it twice against the counter, then laid it down.

They watched the pencil perform those same small actions again. The taps came through a speaker Samuel had mistaken for decoration. They were thin and surprisingly clear. He asked the man to wait, surprising himself, and played it a second time. He wanted to hear the taps.

"You'll fill the card if you do hours of that. Short pieces. It's a camera first."

"Does the card come with it?"

"The one that's in there does. And that lead. No case."

Samuel had worked out the money on paper at home: birthday notes, the smaller amounts from cleaning fittings and rubbing down stool legs under June's eye, and what remained after mending a neighbour's cutlery tray. He had kept it in an envelope inside his old dictionary. The total had seemed large. Laid on the counter, with coins divided into small piles, it barely covered the green square.

The man counted it without comment. Samuel liked him better for that.

He put the receipt in his coat pocket and carried the camera in a clean sock Ruth had given him that morning. It was her suggestion, after he had asked whether a folded handkerchief would do. The sock made a soft, peculiar parcel. On the bus he kept it in his lap, his hand around the lens through the cotton, feeling the new weight every time the driver braked.

* * *

June was trying to answer the telephone with a pencil held between her teeth when he arrived. She pointed at the clear patch of bench near the window. Samuel put his bag there and waited. A chest of drawers stood on blocks in the middle of the workshop. One drawer lay upside down beside it, with the repaired runner still showing a different colour from the old wood.

"Thursday afternoon," June said into the telephone. She took out the pencil. "Afternoon. I'll ring when it's ready."

She listened, wrote something on the pad, and shut her eyes briefly.

"You can bring the handles then. Yes, the handles you took home."

She hung up. June tore the top sheet from the pad and put it beneath a weight. Samuel waited until she looked up.

"Did you get it?"

He unwrapped the camera. She held out her palm and waited for him to place it there, then turned it over, examining the scuff beside the lens.

"Does it work?"

"There's a man tapping a pencil on it. In it, I mean."

She watched the clip. At the second tap she looked towards her own pencil on the bench, then returned the camera.

"You can get a picture of that chest when it's finished. Bag closed while we're making dust, please."

He had helped with the drawer the previous Saturday, cleaning old glue from a loose runner under her eye. Now she wanted him to try it in the chest. He rolled the sock's cuff over the lens and put the camera away. The drawer slid in easily until the last few inches. He pushed harder.

"Stop doing that. Out again."

June was looking at a delivery note. He drew the drawer out and found the bright rubbed patch underneath. She came over when he called her and showed him, on a scrap, how little he would need to remove. His first pass produced dust. The next lifted a thin pale curl, which he kept on the bench beside his hand.

"Try it now."

The drawer closed. Samuel opened it by its one remaining handle and let it slide back. There was still the small patch of new wood underneath, although the chest looked whole from where he stood. He tried it again.

"Yes, all right. Get the brush."

He wanted a photograph before somebody came for it. He swept the floor with the curl tucked in his shirt pocket, taking care to keep his dusty sleeve away from it.

June had said he could use the camera when the bench was clear. By then she was on the telephone again. Samuel took a photograph from beside the window. The flash made a pale circle in the brown wood; without it, the chest became a dark shape around a square of white daylight. He moved to the other side and tried once more. Now he could see the grain and the worn corners. He brought the screen close to his face. There was the thing he had worked on, looking as if somebody might choose it from a shop.

He started a video. His left hand entered the frame and took hold of the handle. He drew the drawer out too far and bumped his stomach. The picture fell towards his shoes, and June's laugh came from behind him.

"Careful. I haven't got its replacement handles yet."

"I was trying to show it opening."

"I saw."

She was already turning back to her work. He watched the attempt. His fingers looked terribly solemn before the bump. He kept it, though he made another one in which the drawer opened only halfway.

When June came past, he asked whether she could hold the camera. She glanced at the clock.

"One go."

He stood behind the drawer and opened and closed it slowly. She handed the camera back before he could ask to see it.

"Would you say what I did to it? Just so it's in there."

"Sam, I need the chest moved. You'll have to write it down."

He put the camera away. He had pictured her saying his name, the camera showing the runner, somebody else looking at it afterwards. He would have liked her to understand the picture without having to explain it to her. They lifted the chest onto the wheeled board. June had to stop because he was still holding his end up.

"Lower, now. That's it."

He let the weight go. She bent to check the feet were clear, then asked him to pull the door wide.

* * *

Owen had tied a piece of white rag to his handlebars.

"For speed," he explained.

They were in the paved space behind Owen's house, where two bins and a stack of cracked plant pots narrowed the available track. The bicycle was his cousin's old one, taller than the machine they had worked on as children. Owen had put new grips on it and spent the morning adjusting the saddle until his knees stopped knocking upwards at an angle that made Samuel laugh.

"That'll get in your wheel."

"It's a flag."

"A very short country."

Owen untied it and fastened it to the back of the saddle. He wore a helmet with a missing piece of foam at the edge. Samuel asked whether he wanted to see the camera first, and Owen took it with exaggerated care, standing with his elbows pressed to his sides.

"Heavy."

"You can hold it normally."

"I don't want to drop it. Get over there."

He filmed Samuel opening the gate. Samuel watched his own body turn, one shoulder lifting as he pulled the bolt. The movement looked familiar and strange. He hadn't known his mouth did that when he concentrated.

"I look miserable."

"You're opening a gate."

He asked Owen to delete it, then changed his mind before Owen found the right button. He wanted another go with his face doing something better. Owen had turned towards the bicycle and was talking about the saddle again, so Samuel took the camera back.

They took the bicycle to the path beside the recreation ground. There were no cars and a long stretch between the gate and a litter bin. Samuel stood near the bin, framed the path and signalled with his free hand. Owen pedalled towards him with his face arranged in serious lines. The white rag rose behind the saddle. A gust caught it, and Owen glanced back just as his front wheel crossed a crack. His legs flew wider for a moment. He recovered, rolled past Samuel and said, with considerable dignity, "Road conditions."

The camera had recorded Samuel's laugh as a loud scrape over the little microphone.

Owen came back and leaned across the screen. They watched him approach. The rag fluttered. His feet spread out as though he were trying to run while still sitting down. Samuel began laughing before it happened, and Owen hit his shoulder with the back of his hand.

"You were supposed to be professional."

"I kept you in the picture."

"You kept the stupid bit in the picture."

They played it again. This time Owen laughed too, bending forward with his hands on his knees. He asked for another go. Samuel moved farther from the edge, so the bicycle would fit into the frame as it passed.

On the second attempt Owen sailed along the path and lifted one hand for a moment. The camera followed him into a patch of sunlight. His wheels made soft ticking sounds. Samuel could hear birds above the road noise and a man calling to a dog outside the picture. When they watched it, the white flag was only a flicker. It looked better moving through the afternoon than it had tied to the saddle.

"Keep both," Owen said. "You should have a turn."

Samuel hesitated. He wanted a clip with himself in it, though he would have preferred to ask when his face had stopped being hot. They changed places. The saddle was too high and he could scarcely touch the path with his toes. He set off stiffly, conscious of the camera, and by the time he remembered to smile he had passed Owen.

On the screen his head was missing for half the journey.

"I was doing the wheels," Owen said.

"I could have lent you my legs."

Owen began to explain how he had tried to follow him. Then he saw Samuel's expression and laughed. They did it again. This time Samuel rode away from the camera, came round the litter bin and returned, the bicycle clicking beneath him. For a few seconds, with the wind drying his mouth, he forgot what his face might be doing.

They went back for squash. Owen's mother let them use the computer to look at the photographs, after Samuel found the lead and Owen worked out where it fitted. The drawer filled most of the screen. A tiny scratch Samuel had missed at the workshop appeared near the handle. Owen said he could hardly see it.

Samuel copied the bicycle clips into a folder bearing his name. Owen's mother told him to keep them on his own card as well. He checked before removing the lead and wrote the clip numbers on the back of the shop receipt.

At home he put the receipt in the envelope that had held his money. There were three coins left. He stood the camera on his bedroom windowsill and watched the second bicycle clip once more. Owen entered from the left, the wheels turning, the rag lifting. Samuel could hear his own voice saying, "Go on, then."

Before bed he found the last clip of himself. He came round the litter bin too widely, as though the whole path belonged to him. Owen said something behind the camera that he couldn't make out. Samuel turned the volume up and heard, "There he is."

He played it again, watching for the moment he had forgotten to smile.

Chapter 8

Things to keep

Ruth agreed to be filmed if Samuel kept her slippers out of it. They were made from pink material that had gone grey at the toes, with a bow on one foot and the remains of a bow on the other. He tried to frame her hands and the mixing bowl, but the camera kept including the left slipper whenever she stepped back.

"You'll have to stop moving."

"You'll have to follow me. You're the one with the equipment."

She shook flour from a sieve into the bowl. The dust caught the light from the rear window and spread over the black surface of the cooker. Samuel saw it arrive on the screen a fraction after he thought he had seen it in the air. He moved nearer.

"Mind the bowl."

"I'm nowhere near it."

"Your elbow is."

He looked away from the screen. His elbow was above the rim. He pulled it back, and Ruth smiled as she turned the sieve in her hand.

She was making small cakes for a woman she worked with. A party at the weekend had produced an extra job, two trays of cakes and a tray of something savoury she would assemble on Saturday morning. Samuel asked whether she was getting paid. Ruth lowered the sieve.

"I am."

"How much?"

"I haven't added it all up yet. Don't put that bit in."

"It's still going."

"Well, stop it. I don't need everybody knowing my business."

He pressed the button. Ruth looked at the bowl, running a thumb round a lump of flour stuck to its rim. He asked if she wanted the clip deleted.

"No. Who's going to see it, anyway? Your dad doesn't need a discussion about what I charge."

"Owen might see the cakes."

"That's fine. He can order some."

He had begun by wanting a picture of the flour falling. Now he wanted the complete making of the cakes. Ruth let him film again once she had measured the sugar. When she turned towards him at the end of a sentence, he asked her to look at the bowl.

"That's where my hands are. My face is up here."

"I know. It looks better if you carry on."

She gave him a long look and tipped the sugar in. He kept that part. The look was funny on the little screen, especially with the white grains still pouring.

When the first tray went into the oven she pulled out a chair and sat down. Her feet slid forward beneath the table. Samuel switched the camera off without being asked. The oven door had fallen from her hand for its last few inches.

"Can I do the second tray?"

"You can put the cases in. Wash your hands."

There were twelve hollows and fourteen paper cases stuck together. He separated them while she drank tea. One came apart with a tear down the side and he put it underneath another. Ruth nodded without looking up from the receipt she was reading. He set the doubled case at the back, where it would be harder to see in his picture.

The telephone rang from the hall. Ruth looked at the clock, then went to answer. Samuel heard her say her name. Her next words were too low to make out. He spooned the mixture into the first few cases, trying to give each one the same amount. When she came back there was a pencil in her hand and a number written across the margin of an envelope.

"More cakes?"

"Something I need to sort out. Did you put all that mixture in?"

"You said twelve."

"I did. You need some left for the others."

She took a little from the fullest cases and added it to the others. The envelope went into the pocket of her cardigan. Samuel wanted to ask where the call had come from. He watched her test the mixture on the spoon with her thumb, and asked whether he could film the cakes coming out.

"As long as you leave room for me to put them down."

* * *

Two evenings later, Owen brought a small wooden box to Samuel's house. Its lid hung from one hinge. His mother kept sewing things in it and had offered them both a share of a packet of biscuits if they could make it close properly. Owen thought it needed an entirely new lid. Samuel thought it needed a screw hole that could hold a screw.

"We could put a handle on," Owen said. "On the top."

"What for?"

"Carrying it. I don't know. It looks like it should have one."

Samuel liked the lid as it was, with its dark oval where somebody's thumb had worn the finish. He said they should get it to close first.

They sat in the yard while the kitchen window stood open behind them. Samuel had permission to film their work. He balanced the camera on a stack of wood offcuts and angled it towards their hands. Owen waved a screwdriver across the lens as though announcing the start of an important operation. The screwdriver had a rounded yellow handle, and Samuel told him which end needed to appear in the picture.

They examined the hinge, took out the loose screw, and discovered that another screw had been fitted at an angle. Owen held the lid while Samuel worked. When Samuel asked for the shorter screw, Owen said he had already given it to him.

"You gave me the long one."

"I put it there."

"That's the long one."

"Well, you moved it."

"I haven't moved anything. You keep waving your hands about."

Owen put the screwdriver down. "I'm holding your stupid lid."

They searched the cracks in the paving. Samuel was certain Owen had kept the little screw in his palm. Owen became certain Samuel had dropped it. Both boys grew irritated in the way they did when they were hungry and had spent too long leaning over something. Ruth opened the back door to ask why they were crawling about. Owen said Samuel had lost part of his mother's inheritance.

"How valuable?"

"One very small screw."

She brought them bread and cheese on a plate. The missing screw turned up under Samuel's shoe while he reached for it. They finished the box and went inside to watch the recording at the kitchen table.

For a long time the screen showed their hands, the open lid and the edge of Owen's knee. Samuel had forgotten to stop it during the search. He was about to skip forward when Owen said, "Wait."

His own hand entered the picture holding two screws. He put the short one on a flat piece of wood beside Samuel, then picked up the long one and rolled it between his fingers. A moment later Samuel shifted the box. The wood tilted. The screw slid off the edge.

"There," Owen said.

Samuel played it again. His elbow had moved the wood. He could see where it touched. He still remembered Owen with both screws in his palm, though now he had seen what followed.

"All right. I moved it."

"And I was holding the lid," Owen said.

"You were."

He wanted to laugh now that they had found it. Owen was still looking at him, waiting for something.

"Sorry. I thought I saw you."

"You did see me. You missed the next bit."

Samuel watched his elbow move again. He could remember being certain Owen was the one who had to look harder. It made him hot to hear himself explaining it on the recording. He stopped the clip and asked whether Owen wanted to borrow the camera for the bicycle at the weekend.

"Maybe. I'll ask my cousin if he's got the pump."

Ruth told them both to take the plate to the sink. Owen got there first and stood in the middle while Samuel waited with the cup. Samuel rinsed the cheese crumbs from the plate, then rinsed his cup. Water ran over the inside and carried a brown ring down towards the plughole. Behind him Owen was opening and closing the lid. He said his mother would have to provide the whole packet of biscuits, considering the labour involved, and Samuel turned from the tap with water running off his hands.

Later, Samuel watched the few seconds around the lost screw once more. He stopped before his own accusation came. The short screw was visible beside his hand. He let it run on, hearing himself through, then wrote the clip number beside the words sewing box.

* * *

Peter found him filming a patch of sunlight on the kitchen table the following Sunday. The camera stood beside the sugar bowl. Samuel had been watching the light reach a scratch in the varnish, then creep across it as a cloud thinned. It was the sort of thing he would have had difficulty explaining if someone asked too quickly.

"What's the subject?"

Samuel looked up. His father was still wearing his outdoor coat.

"The table."

"Fascinating. Is it going somewhere?"

"The light moves."

Peter leaned into the picture and looked directly at the lens. His face filled the little screen. He lifted his eyebrows twice, pulled an expression that made his forehead fold, then stood up laughing.

"You'll wear the batteries out filming the furniture."

Samuel stopped the clip. Peter took his coat off and hung it on the kitchen door. He had been fixing a loose handle for somebody, and he took a packet of unused screws from his pocket and set it beside the bread bin.

"Here. I'll show you something worth filming."

The catch on the back door had been sticking. Peter lifted and lowered it, demonstrating the place where metal scraped. Samuel held the camera up. His father talked towards it while fetching a tool from the shed, then returned to repeat the part Samuel had failed to catch.

"You have to get the beginning. Otherwise nobody knows what you're doing."

Samuel started again. Peter explained the screws, the small movement of the plate, the way the door settled in damp weather. He used his ordinary helpful voice. Samuel kept his hands steady. The whole performance lasted less than a minute, and the door closed cleanly when Peter tried it.

"Show me."

They watched together. Peter's voice sounded closer than his hands looked. Near the end Ruth crossed the background carrying a basket of washing. She looked at the camera, then towards Peter, and left by the hall.

"She's got a face on," Peter said.

Samuel had been watching the catch. He looked at his mother on the screen. Her mouth was slightly open, as though she had been about to speak. He couldn't tell what she had meant to say.

"She was carrying things."

"I can see that."

Peter replayed the end. The door shut with a click. Ruth disappeared through the doorway. He handed the camera back.

"That could do with cutting down. Too much of you moving about."

"I don't know how."

"You'll learn. Show it to that woman at the workshop. Tell her who taught you."

He washed his hands and began looking through the post. Samuel returned the camera to the table, meaning to film the last of the sunlight. The red point appeared. He nudged the sugar bowl out of view.

"Pack that away now."

"I'm doing the table."

"I've said put it away. I don't want that thing on all afternoon."

Samuel pressed the button. The point vanished. His father turned an envelope over and tore it open. The sound filled the kitchen. Samuel put the camera in its sock and carried it upstairs.

He watched the door repair once, sitting on his bed. At the end his mother crossed behind the door. He paused there, enlarging her face as far as the camera allowed. It became little squares, her mouth half open. He moved back to the catch and listened to his father's explanation of the plate.

That evening Ruth came to his room with clean shirts. She placed them on the bed and asked if he had enjoyed filming the cakes. He showed her the tray emerging from the oven, all twelve risen tops, one paper case folded slightly inwards.

"They look better there," she said.

"They looked like that."

"I was looking for the burnt ones."

She sat beside him. A bus went past outside, making the window tremble. Samuel asked whether the phone call had been about a flat. Ruth rubbed the edge of a shirt between her fingers.

"It was. There's a place I can look at. I have to get some papers together first."

"When?"

"This week, I hope. I'll tell you when there's something definite."

"You said this week before."

"It's a different place. I need a letter from work."

"Can they give you one?"

"Yes, Sam. I'm asking on Monday."

Her answer came quickly. He looked at the white mark in the edge of her thumbnail and wished he had waited for her to tell him.

"Would there be room for the table?"

"A table," she said. "We'll need to see what fits."

She began folding the shirts. He took the last one from the pile, matching the sleeves as she did. His was the smallest when they finished, almost square. Ruth tucked it underneath the others and stood with them balanced against her chest.

"I shouldn't have snapped. It's just another thing to get done."

She needed the door opened. He went ahead to do it.

Chapter 9

The same evening

The box lid would close if Samuel pressed its left corner. He held it against the kitchen window, trying to see what caught. The yard was blue with the evening. His reflection filled the dark square of the shed window.

Owen wanted the box for model parts. Samuel had replaced a cracked strip supporting the inner tray, and Owen had said the lid was good enough. Samuel had brought it home anyway. He disliked the way Owen pressed it hard and then announced that it worked.

His own work box stood on a chair beside the table, a broad plastic thing bought from a stall with money he had earned at June's. Pencils and fittings occupied the lift-out tray; below it were sandpaper and a small clamp. At home he kept it beside his bed. Everything he needed fitted into it, if he put the clamp in first.

Peter had told him the table would be needed for supper at six. Samuel had repeated the time so there would be no uncertainty. Now the kitchen clock showed twenty minutes to. He had enough time to find the catching point, put the tools away and wipe the table.

He checked the replacement strip. The edge looked clear. With the camera facing him, he might be able to watch the lid while he held the box from the other side.

He put it on the low shelf near the sink, where Ruth kept a recipe book and a jar full of elastic bands. A folded tea towel raised it enough to show the table. He walked back, checked his hands in the little screen and adjusted the angle. The work box was near the edge of the picture. His own face would be above it.

The first attempt was a photograph. He had forgotten to turn the dial. He muttered at himself, changed it and started again. This time the red point stayed on. He held the wooden box up, lowered its lid, then pressed the corner. The click sounded louder in the kitchen than he expected.

Peter came in through the hall carrying a brown envelope and a bundle of folded papers. Samuel could see the front room door standing open behind him. The television was on, voices reaching the kitchen in broken bursts.

"I need this cleared."

"I've nearly done."

His father put the envelope on the only empty corner of the table. It nudged the little pile of sandpaper. Samuel moved the paper away before it could fall.

"Now, Sam."

"You said six."

"And I'm saying now. I've got something to do."

Samuel lowered the lid. If he closed it fully the new strip might catch again. He held the box in one hand and tried to put the loose screw into its packet with the other. The mouth of the packet had folded underneath itself. He rubbed it between his finger and thumb.

"I am clearing it."

Peter put the papers down, then lifted them again as though he had discovered the table covered in something wet.

"What is all this doing in here anyway? You've got a shed."

"Your things are on the bench."

"Move them, then."

Samuel looked at him. There were tools on the shed bench he wasn't allowed to move. He had been told that often enough. He opened his mouth, saw his father's expression and pushed the screw through the packet's folded edge. It fell inside with a tiny tap.

"I'll take it up."

"You can take the lot up."

Peter reached for the plastic work box. Samuel's first thought was that his father was going to help, lifting it so Samuel could put the wooden box on top. He took a step towards him.

His father held the plastic box by its side, above the kitchen table, and tipped it. The lift-out tray fell first. It struck the edge of the chair, turned and landed upside down. The tools followed, a sharp scattering noise on the tabletop and floor. The clamp hit a chair leg. A packet split, sending small bright fittings across the lino.

Samuel's hands tightened around the wooden box. He could still feel the catching lid beneath his thumb. Peter shook the empty work box once and dropped it upright on the table.

"Now you can see what needs clearing."

A pencil rolled to the floor and stopped against Samuel's shoe. He looked at the place where the tools had been. The screwdriver lay between two sheets of Peter's paper. His father drew the paper free and brushed it with his palm.

"You tipped it out."

"You had a straightforward thing to do."

"I was doing it."

"Then get on with it."

Samuel put the wooden box on the draining board. The camera stood just beyond it, its screen dimmed, its lens facing the table. He had forgotten it completely. He looked away so quickly that he felt his neck pull.

His father carried the papers into the front room. A car door closed outside. Samuel crouched, gathering the fittings from around the chair legs. He picked up each one carefully because some were small enough to disappear under the cooker. His hands were shaking. A screw slipped between his fingers and rang against the clamp.

The front door opened. Ruth came down the hall with a shopping bag bumping her leg. She stopped in the kitchen doorway, looking at Samuel on the floor. Peter appeared behind her before she had put the bag down.

"What happened?" she asked.

"He dropped his box," Peter said. "I asked him to clear the table and he got himself in a state."

Samuel stayed crouched. He had one screw in his palm and another caught beneath his nail. He looked up at his mother.

"Dad emptied it."

Peter made a short sound through his nose.

"Look at him. Straight away. Somebody else's fault."

"You picked it up and tipped it."

Ruth put the shopping on the draining board. The bag rustled against the wooden box. She looked at the overturned tray and the empty work box still standing on the table.

"Let him finish picking it up."

"That's what I've been trying to get him to do."

"I'll help him."

Peter stood in the doorway. Samuel could see his father's shoes beside his mother's, one pair dusty, the other marked with something pale from the school kitchen. The television audience laughed in the front room. Peter turned towards the sound.

"Make sure you find everything. I don't want screws in somebody's foot."

Ruth waited until he had gone, then bent to pick up the clamp. Samuel stood too quickly and knocked his hip against the table. He went to the camera, reached around the shopping bag and pressed the button. The red point disappeared. The screen filled with the first small image of the clip.

His mother had begun putting pencils into the tray. She followed his gaze.

"Was that on?"

He nodded.

"All the time?"

"I think so."

He wanted to check immediately. He also wanted to get the tools into their places before his father returned. The two wishes pulled at his hands. Ruth took the empty box off the table and put it on the chair.

"Let's get these up first."

They found the last screw near the back door. Samuel counted what had been in the packet and counted again. One short pencil had disappeared. Ruth looked beneath the cooker with a torch, then told him it could wait. He had sharpened that pencil until the maker's name was gone. He wanted every piece back.

"We can pull the cooker out another day," she said. "Put the box upstairs."

He closed the lid and lifted it. The handle pressed into his fingers. It felt heavier than when he had carried it down.

* * *

After supper Ruth came to his room with a cup of tea and a plate containing the two smallest cakes from her weekend job. Their paper cases had gone a little soft. She put them on the bedside table and sat on the edge of the bed while Samuel found the clip.

He had already found the beginning. The wooden box was clear, his hands large in the frame. Peter entered from the shoulders down, carrying the papers. Samuel set the camera on his knee where they could both see it.

"You have to watch from here."

Ruth leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. When the work box tipped, she moved one hand to the bedcover and held a fold of it. The camera caught the tray falling, the tools spreading and Peter's wrist above them. Samuel glanced at her face, then back at the screen.

There was his father's hand under the box. There was the tilt. Samuel looked at his own hands, both occupied, and felt his shoulders come down. The tiny screen had caught all of it. He almost smiled before he remembered his mother beside him.

The camera continued to show the table after Peter left. Samuel was only partly visible as he crouched. His breathing could be heard close to the microphone when he moved towards the sink. Then his mother's shopping bag entered the picture, and his father said he had dropped the box.

Samuel stopped the clip.

"There. He says I dropped it."

"I heard."

"But look at my hands."

He went back to the tipping. His own hands remained where they had been. Peter's certainty still made him want to check the seconds between the falling tray and Ruth's arrival. He let it play again, waiting through the empty view of the table.

Ruth touched the edge of the camera.

"Sam. I believed you downstairs."

"I know."

He knew. She had helped him pick up the tools. He could look away from the screen, look back, find his hands still full. The event waited where he had left it.

"Will you tell him?"

"What?"

"That I've got it. That you saw."

Ruth looked towards the door. Below them, a cupboard closed in the kitchen. She kept her voice level.

"I can tell him what I think about it without showing him your camera. I'd like you to keep that with you for now."

Samuel pictured the little bin on the screen, the question about erasing all the files. He moved the camera farther onto his lap.

"You won't tell him it's there?"

"I won't tell him about the recording."

She took her cup and drank. The tea had stopped steaming. Samuel picked at the paper case of a cake, peeling it away a little at a time. He could hear the stiffness in his mother's breathing as she settled farther back on the bed.

"The flat I looked at last week," she said. "I can have it."

He turned towards her. The cake broke in his hand.

"You said you were waiting."

"I was. They wanted another reference. That's done now. There are still things to sign, and I have to pay money before we get the keys. I've got most of it. I can cover the rest when I'm paid."

"When do we go?"

"After your birthday, if everything happens when it's meant to. A few weeks."

His birthday was on the school calendar in his own handwriting. He counted the weeks against it, then tried to picture the first day after moving.

"Does Dad know?"

"He knows I'm looking. I'll tell him when it's signed."

"Will he let us?"

She put the cup down. For a moment she looked towards the window, where the curtain had caught on the latch.

"I'm going to arrange it. You don't have to persuade him."

Samuel placed the broken cake on the plate.

"Is there a room for me?"

"A bedroom each. Yours looks out at the back. It's small."

"That's all right."

"I know you wanted more room."

"A door's all right."

She looked at him, then reached for the fallen cake. There was a piece of its paper stuck to the crumb, and she picked it free with care. He wanted her to go on describing the flat, but he wanted to see it himself too, before the words became another place they had never lived.

"When can we look?"

"When I get the keys. I'll take you straight there."

He ate the piece she gave him. It tasted strongly of lemon.

After she went downstairs, he wrote the recording's number on a clean sheet of paper. He added work box and the evening's date, then folded the paper into the camera envelope. He didn't watch the clip again. He took out the removable card, checked that the little edge was undamaged, and put it back. The camera fitted inside the sock with the lens turned towards the toe.

Across the room his plastic box stood closed. He opened it and arranged the pencils in the tray, leaving a space where the short one belonged. Then he put the wooden box beside it. He tried the lid once before leaving it. The catching point was still there. He marked it, rubbed the pencil line with his thumb and held it closer to the lamp. For several seconds he followed the grain along the edge before he heard his father moving about downstairs.

Chapter 10

The move

The first thing Samuel carried out was a box marked BEDROOM, which contained three plates, a saucepan and Ruth's winter shoes. She had run out of boxes after writing on the lids. He asked whether to change the label. She looked from him to the front door, then took the thick pen from her pocket and crossed the word out.

"Put downstairs."

"It's all upstairs."

"Oh, yes. Put kitchen, then."

He wrote KITCHEN beneath the crossed-out word. The pen caught in a soft crease and made a black star. Ruth had hired a small van for the morning. Her friend from the school kitchen was waiting beside it, holding a folded blanket over one arm. She pointed Samuel towards the clear space behind the wheel arch.

"Heavy things low down. Mind your fingers on that edge."

It was barely nine. The pavement still carried a wet stripe from the previous night's rain. Samuel had turned sixteen ten days earlier. His birthday cards remained on the mantelpiece in the front room, and for a moment, seeing them through the open door, he thought he ought to turn around and collect them. He would get them on the next journey.

Peter stood near the stairs with his hands in his pockets. Samuel had to turn sideways to pass him with the empty blanket. His father looked at the van through the front door.

"There's no need to take half the kitchen."

Ruth was wrapping two bowls in towels.

"We've been through the list."

"A list you made."

"Yes."

Samuel went upstairs. His bed was stripped. Without the cover, the mattress showed a brownish shape in the fabric near the bottom, something that had been there as long as he could remember. His clothes were in two bags. The work box sat closed by the door. On the desk, the camera

waited inside its sock, with the lead beside it and the envelope of receipts and clip numbers underneath.

He checked the envelope once, opening it far enough to see the sheet marked work box. The recording was on the camera card. Copies of the bicycle clips were at Owen's, where he had asked for them to be kept. He put the camera, lead and envelope in his school bag and slipped one strap over his shoulder. That bag would stay with him in the front of the van.

The shelf he had made as a child stood beside the wardrobe. He had emptied it into a box. A pale rectangle on the middle shelf showed where an old tin had kept the light off the wood. He ran his finger over the edge and tried to judge whether it would fit under a window in the flat.

Ruth had said they could collect anything left behind later. The van already had a chair, two mattresses and the narrow chest of drawers from her bedroom to accommodate. Samuel left the shelf where it was. He picked up his plastic work box and went down.

At the turn in the stairs, the handle caught his knee. Peter looked up from the hall.

"Careful with that."

Samuel moved his knee clear. He had checked the lid twice before lifting it. His father stepped back towards the front room to let him pass.

"You'll want those things here if you come over to do anything."

"I need them there."

"You haven't even seen what space you've got."

He had seen it. He had measured the hall cupboard with a tape June lent him. The work box would fit on the bottom shelf, beside a paint tin. He carried it to the van without answering.

* * *

Ruth's friend folded the blanket round the chest of drawers. She had brought a packet of biscuits and kept offering it whenever someone came within reach. Samuel took one without wanting it, then discovered he was hungry. The biscuit broke against his teeth and left crumbs on his shirt. He had eaten breakfast standing at the kitchen sink while Ruth checked a folder full of papers.

The folder was in her handbag now: tenancy papers, the receipt for money paid and the blue exercise book. He had seen her press the bag closed over them.

Peter helped carry the chest down the stairs. He took the lower end and told Samuel to raise his side at each turn. For several minutes they worked well together. The back of the chest came close to the banister. Peter stopped, shifted his grip and waited until Samuel had room.

"All right?"

"Yes."

"Down one."

They reached the hall. Samuel's aching hands relaxed around their grip. He knew the next movement, and his father waited for him to make it. Outside, Peter helped slide the chest into place and tested whether it would shift. He told Ruth's friend to drive slowly over the uneven part near the junction. She said she would.

Then he looked at Ruth.

"You'll soon find out how much all this costs."

"I have worked it out."

"You've worked out the rent. There's everything else."

"I know."

He rubbed a mark on the chest with his thumb. Samuel stood holding the folded blanket that had fallen to the pavement. He could feel the biscuit crumbs at his collar.

"You can leave the rest until you come to your senses," Peter said.

Ruth took the blanket from Samuel and shook it once.

"We have two more bags. Then we're going."

She went inside. Samuel followed her past the stairs and along the hall to the kitchen. The table near the rear window was bare apart from the kettle, two mugs and the bag of food they were taking. Its cleared surface made the room look prepared for visitors. The back door was closed. Through its glass he could see the shed, the cupboard of old household things somewhere inside among his father's stored possessions.

He didn't ask to look in it.

Ruth opened the cupboard above the sink, checked the back of it and shut it again. She put the tea bags in the food bag, then took half of them out and returned them to the cupboard. Samuel watched without understanding.

"There's plenty," she said.

She tied the handles together and handed him the bag. He took it without asking whose tea she was thinking about. In the hall she paused to look up the stairs. Her keys were already in her hand.

"Did you get your cards?"

He had forgotten. He went into the front room and gathered them from the mantelpiece. One had coins taped inside by a relative who always wrote his age in large figures. He pressed it closed, though he had removed the coins on his birthday. Peter stood beside the television.

"Keep in touch," he said.

Samuel nodded.

"I'm still here. This is still your home."

The van horn sounded once, a small accidental noise. Ruth's friend raised her hands in apology through the windscreen. Samuel could see her mouth shaping the word sorry. It gave him something to look at while he answered his father.

"I've got the number."

Peter put his hand on Samuel's shoulder. The weight stayed for a moment, then lifted. Samuel went out with his cards held flat against the food bag. Ruth locked the door, tested the handle and put her key in the pocket of her handbag. The front windows reflected the opposite houses. He could see his father behind the glass, moving towards the hall.

He climbed into the van between Ruth and her friend. His school bag sat on his knees. The seat belt pressed against it until he shifted the bag closer to his feet. Ruth looked back once as they pulled away. Samuel watched the road ahead.

* * *

The flat had a pale strip of carpet on the shared stairs and a front door whose lower edge had been painted while something was resting against it. A small crescent of old blue showed through the cream. Samuel noticed it each time he came up carrying a box.

The mattresses were awkward. They bent where they needed to stay straight and stayed straight where the landing required a bend. Ruth's friend laughed when Samuel disappeared behind the larger one, then asked him to stop pushing because her hand was trapped. He stopped at once. They shifted their grips, turned it onto its long edge and got it through the doorway.

Inside, the sitting room opened into a small kitchen at one end. Someone had left a square table and two chairs. The table had a cigarette mark near a corner and one foot padded with folded

cardboard. Ruth had asked whether it was included, and the landlord had waved towards everything too inconvenient to remove.

Samuel set his school bag in the smaller bedroom at the back and shut the door. There was grass below the window and space for a narrow desk. In his mother's room the traffic was loud enough to hide what she was saying to her friend. He opened his door again, trying to hear whether they needed him.

By the time the last box came upstairs he could feel each finger separately. Ruth's friend had to return the van. Ruth went with her to sign something and settle the remaining cost, leaving Samuel with instructions to open the windows and find the kettle.

For the first time, he was alone in the flat.

The fridge rattled. Outside the bathroom, a floorboard dipped beneath his heel. He returned to the sitting room and moved a box away from a socket. The kettle fitted there, its lead barely reaching. The mugs were inside the bowls, and he unwrapped them all before finding the one he wanted. There was no milk. He remembered Ruth saying she would get some.

He took out the camera and filmed from beside the sitting-room door. A box obscured most of the table, though he could show Owen where the chairs were. He turned towards the open window and caught his own reflection in the dark part of its glass, camera held in front of his chest. The sound of the fridge was much louder on the recording.

When Ruth came back she carried milk, a packet of cheap washing-up cloths and two apples. She put the receipt beside the kettle and stood looking at the boxes.

"I thought I'd got rid of more," she said.

She put her hands on her hips and looked at the table. Samuel was about to offer to move another box.

"That chair can go by the window. I want to see out."

He carried it across while she opened the milk.

They ate bread rolls at the table. Samuel used a box as a footrest and Ruth took off her shoes. A red line crossed the top of each foot. The fridge rattled, stopped, then started again.

"We can put something under it," Samuel said.

"Tomorrow."

"It might just need moving."

"Tomorrow, Sam. I've moved everything I can for today."

He nodded and ate. The table shifted when he leaned on it. He looked at the folded cardboard under its foot and decided to leave that until tomorrow too.

Ruth found the money for bread and put it beneath the sugar bowl.

"If I forget to leave it when I'm working late, remind me."

"I've got some."

"So have I. That's for the bread."

She rubbed an apple against her sleeve and began eating it without cutting it into pieces. Samuel bit into his roll. From his end of the table he could see straight down the short hall to his room.

They unpacked until the sitting room had a clear path from the door to the kitchen. Samuel put his work box on the bottom shelf of the hall cupboard, exactly where he had measured. The old paint tin went behind it. Ruth found the curtains and discovered that one pair was too short. She held them against the bedroom window while Samuel stood on the chair to hook them onto the rail.

"They're too short," he said.

"I can see that. They'll do until I get paid. Keep hold of that end."

He had let it fall while comparing the two lengths. She reached up and hooked the last ring herself.

Before they started on supper, Ruth gave him two keys on a plain ring. One opened the communal entrance, the other the flat. He turned them in his palm, comparing their teeth. The smaller key had a spot of green paint on its round end.

"Try them while I'm here," she said. "The downstairs one needs a bit of a pull."

He went down without his coat. The air in the shared hall smelt of carpet and somebody's fried onions. Outside, he let the door close behind him and stood on the step. He could see the corner shop from there, its window full of bright packets, and the bus stop farther along. The first turn of the key failed. He pulled the door towards himself, felt the pressure come off the lock and tried again. It opened. Upstairs, the other key fitted without effort. Ruth was still at the table, taking paper from around a plate.

"All right?"

He held up the ring. "This one's ours."

"Keep them in the same pocket."

He put them in his trouser pocket. The small ring left room for the measuring tape he had been unable to find that morning. He would look for it when the boxes were empty.

At dusk his mother made soup. They had no ladle, so she poured it from the saucepan with a folded cloth beneath the handle. Samuel held the bowls steady. Afterwards he washed them while she unpacked her clothes. The kitchen was small enough for him to put things away without moving his feet.

In his bedroom he laid the envelope in the drawer beside his mattress, with the camera on top. He left the drawer open a little so the lead wouldn't catch, then pulled the school books out of his bag. They had work due on Monday. He had nearly forgotten there would still be a Monday.

From the next room Ruth called to ask whether he had seen her slippers. He found them inside a saucepan beneath the table. One bow was crushed almost flat. He took them to her and she laughed until she had to sit down on the bare mattress. Samuel laughed too. He stood in the doorway while she wiped her eyes, holding the slippers against her chest.

Chapter 11

The table

At half past ten, Samuel touched the clamp again. The footstool stood upside down on the flat's table, its loose rail pressed into place over a clean rag. He had drawn a pencil line beside the joint so he could tell if it moved.

"Leave it," Ruth said from the armchair.

"It might slip."

"Has it?"

The line remained unbroken. He let go of the handle.

His mother was watching a woman on television make curtains. She wanted him to look at the fabric, which she said was too ugly to have been bought by accident. He stood behind her chair for a while, then asked whether he should move the stool into his room.

"We're going to bed. It can stay there."

She took her cup to the sink. Her slippers remained under the chair, one lying on its side. Samuel went to bed with his door partly open. He could see a leg of the footstool until she turned the sitting-room light off.

In the morning he came out without his socks. The clamp's handle still pointed towards the cooker. His pencil lay alongside the table's cigarette mark. He crouched to inspect the joint.

Ruth appeared with her hair flat on one side.

"Move the sugar, will you?"

He moved it. She sat down and reached round a wooden leg for the margarine. The table rocked beneath her elbow, and she lifted her cup before the tea could spill.

"That wants seeing to. Later."

* * *

Owen found the flat on his second attempt. On the first he had gone up a neighbouring staircase and met a woman who appeared to believe he was delivering something. He arrived with a bag of crisps held out in front of him.

"She wanted to sign for these."

"What did you tell her?"

"That they were yours. Then I had to explain that."

Samuel showed him round. The bathroom door opened properly now, after the landlord's visit. His bedroom still had boxes against one wall. Owen looked down at the grass from the window and suggested they could get a football down there.

"It's somebody's garden."

"A small football."

Back in the sitting room, he sat on the repaired footstool, his knees almost level with his ears. Samuel asked to photograph him. Owen arranged his hands on his knees and looked solemnly past the camera. His legs were so long the stool had almost disappeared. Samuel took another picture when Owen tried to reach the table from that height.

The table rocked. Owen reached underneath and pulled at the cardboard beneath one foot.

"Don't take that out."

"I was looking."

They pushed it back, though the cups still rattled when Owen leaned forward. Samuel fetched a cloth to catch the tea drips. He meant to say something about the ancient toast crumb stuck to the cardboard, then heard keys outside.

Ruth came in with her friend from the school kitchen, the woman who had helped with the van. She carried a paper bag of buns. Samuel put the camera down and offered to make tea.

"Four cups. And can you shift those books off the chair?"

He had been unpacking them, dividing the ones he wanted from the ones he had finished with. He piled them up together.

"Take them through to your room, love."

It meant losing the two piles. He carried them through anyway. When he returned, his mother was sitting in the chair by the window. Her friend had begun a story about a tray of peas at work. She kept laughing before she reached the part that made sense. Ruth interrupted to say that the floor had been slippery to begin with, which apparently made it funnier.

Samuel gave Owen the cup with the small handle. Owen tried to fit a finger through it and gave up. They sat at the table with their buns while the women talked. Samuel caught enough to understand that somebody had tried to save the falling tray with one foot. He wished he had seen it.

Ruth's friend asked about the footstool. He picked it up, pleased to explain the rail, though before he finished she was telling Ruth about something in her sister's house. Samuel lowered the stool to the floor. Owen hooked a foot beneath it and pulled it back into reach.

"My chair."

"You're already on one."

"This is for pudding."

They took their crisps and went out for a walk. When Samuel came back alone, his mother and her friend were still by the window. There was a second plate with bun crumbs on it. He fetched his book and lay on his bed, occasionally losing his place when their laughter came down the hall.

* * *

By the fourth week, the dishes had become a problem.

Samuel had agreed to wash the breakfast things before he went out on Saturdays. Ruth often worked an extra morning, and she wanted to come home without finding porridge dried against the saucepan. He had done it the first week. The next, there had been only two cups. On this Saturday he left the pan soaking because the bus to June's was due and he had spent too long finding a clean shirt.

When he returned, the pan stood on the cooker. The dishes were stacked beside it. Ruth was at the table opening an envelope with the handle of a spoon.

"I asked you to do those before you went."

"I left the pan soaking."

"I can see that. The water's cold."

He put his bag down. He had been looking forward to showing her a small patch of colour June had let him mix, three stained scraps wrapped in paper. His hands still smelt of workshop soap. He left the scraps wrapped. She could have waited until he had taken his coat off.

"I'll do them now."

"You said that last week."

"Last week it was cups."

"They still needed washing."

"I washed them when I got back."

Ruth pushed the envelope aside. A strand of hair had escaped her clip. Samuel left his coat on, although the room was hot.

"I did them. That's what I'm saying."

"And I'm asking you to do them before you go."

His camera was in the top of his bag. He took it out while she stood to move the kettle. The action felt almost practical: here was the thing that could hold each sentence where it had been said. He turned the dial and pressed the button. Ruth looked at him over the back of the chair.

"Put the camera down, please."

"I just want to get what we're saying."

"I don't want to be filmed over the washing-up. Turn it off."

The red point shone at the corner of the screen. Samuel could see her hand resting on the chair, the envelope beside her elbow, the three cups near the cooker. He pressed the button. The point vanished.

"It's off."

She watched him lay the camera on his bag. He wanted her to see that he had done it as soon as she asked, but she sat down without speaking. There was a pause long enough for the kettle to begin making its first soft noises. Samuel looked at the pan.

"I thought leaving it in water would help."

"It did help. It still needed washing. I've got things to do when I come home too."

"I had to catch the bus."

"I know there's a bus. I spent half the morning looking forward to a cup of tea. All the cups are dirty, the pan's there, I can't get to the tap."

"Some of those plates are yours."

"Don't start that."

He looked towards the cooker. She followed his glance, then rubbed her forehead.

"Yes. Those two are. I should have done them last night."

He could imagine the cup waiting in her head while she worked. He had imagined showing her the stained wood in the same way. For a moment both things seemed equally easy to have arranged.

"I'll do the pan now. Next week I'll get up earlier."

He took his coat off at last. Ruth filled the bowl. He reached past her for the washing-up liquid, then waited while she washed the plates. She was still annoyed. So was he.

She passed him the sponge. He scraped the softened porridge from the pan. The kitchen window had steamed at the bottom, hiding the building opposite. When they finished, Ruth took a cloth across the cooker and Samuel dried his hands.

He took the camera to his room. The brief clip contained his mother's request and stopped where he had pressed the button. He deleted it. The next picture appeared: Owen on the stool, one long leg across the other. Samuel turned the camera off and stayed on his bed until Ruth called him to eat.

Later she asked what was in the paper he had brought home. He almost said it didn't matter. She was holding it by the folded corner, waiting for him to show her, and he took it across to the light.

Chapter 12

Meeting Peter

Peter had said eleven, so Samuel reached the café at ten minutes to and walked past it once. He could see his father through the window, sitting beneath a framed photograph of a harbour. A carrier bag rested on the chair beside him. There was already a cup on the table.

Samuel went as far as the crossing and waited for the lights. If he walked back on the other side, his father might see him doing it. He came straight back, irritated with himself, and entered the café. Peter was reading the folded newspaper beside his cup.

"There you are."

"I'm early."

"So am I. Sit down."

His father lifted the carrier bag off the chair. Samuel took off his coat and folded it over the back. The room smelt of hot oil, toast and the sweet cleaning liquid someone had used on the tables. Near the counter a little bell sounded whenever the kitchen door swung shut. He could hear it beneath the radio.

Ruth had written the meeting time on the back of a shopping list after Peter telephoned. Samuel had spoken to him himself the second time, agreeing to an hour because he was meeting Owen afterwards. His mother had asked where they would be and whether he wanted to go. He had said yes too loudly. She had left the shopping list beside the telephone.

Now his father pushed the bag across the table.

"A few things you left."

Inside were a pencil tin, two school exercise books, a packet of photographs and a small measuring tape with a dent in its case. Samuel recognised the tape immediately. It had lived in his bedroom desk, and he had searched his boxes twice for it.

"I thought I'd lost this."

"You leave things everywhere."

Peter said it lightly. Samuel pulled the tape out a little way and let it return. The metal made its familiar dry whirr. He put it in his coat pocket before looking at the rest.

A woman came to the table with a pad. His father ordered another tea and asked Samuel if he wanted breakfast.

"Toast, please."

"Get something proper."

"I've had breakfast."

"Just the toast, then," Peter told her. "And another tea for me."

She collected his empty cup. Peter thanked her and moved the newspaper to give her room. There was a small nick on his thumb, partly covered by a strip of plaster. Samuel wondered what he had been fixing.

"What have you been doing?" he asked.

"Washing machine yesterday. You'd have heard it from the road."

"Did you fix it?"

"For now. She'll have to replace it soon. Told her that."

Samuel asked which part had gone. Peter drew its shape on the edge of the newspaper with the pen from his shirt pocket. He held the paper flat while Samuel leaned closer. For several minutes they talked easily, Peter listening when he suggested another place the noise could come from. When the tea arrived, they moved the newspaper together and both thanked the woman.

"Are you still helping at that place?" Peter asked.

"June's. Sometimes on Saturdays."

"Getting paid?"

"For some of it."

"Make sure she's paying you properly."

"I'm learning things."

"That's what people say when they want cheap help."

Samuel spread butter on his toast. The triangle bent beneath the knife. June paid for what she could use. Last Saturday she had stopped her own work three times to show him something. He wanted his father to know how much of the drawer he had done, although he could hear how this would sound.

"She checks everything. I can't just do a job on my own."

"You could if someone let you."

He looked up. For an instant he wanted to accept the compliment exactly as it sounded. Then Peter added, "You've had enough teaching at home."

Samuel put the knife on the edge of his plate. The warm beginning of the conversation seemed to move farther away, though the café looked the same. Behind his father's shoulder, the harbour photograph showed rows of small white boats tied to a wall.

"I'm going to ask about more work after school finishes," he said.

"You need a proper trade."

"Furniture repair is a trade."

"You know what I mean. Something steady. There's only so much furniture people want mended."

Samuel knew June had a waiting list pinned beside the telephone. He knew some customers were still waiting for her to come and look at things. He ate a piece of toast and decided to tell his father about the chest of drawers. He kept the account short, describing the runner and the way he had found where it caught.

Peter listened. He asked one question about the wood, which Samuel could answer. Then he nodded.

"That's the sort of thing. Don't let her keep you sweeping up."

Samuel took another piece of toast. "Is the house all right?"

"House is fine. It's easier to keep straight now."

He said this without looking away. Samuel held the toast above his plate. His father picked up the sugar and poured a little into his tea.

"How is your mother managing?"

"She's all right."

"She says that."

"She is."

"Have you got a proper bed yet?"

"Yes."

"The last I heard it was mattresses."

"We've got a bed."

One bolt had been missing from the secondhand frame. June had found another of the right size, and he had fitted it himself. He could tell his father that and they might talk easily again. He put his toast down.

Peter stirred his tea until the spoon clicked against the side of the cup.

"I've left yours as it was. Few boxes in there, that's all. You'll have somewhere when this has run its course."

"We're staying at the flat."

"For now."

Samuel looked at the clock over the counter. There were twenty-five minutes left. A man near the window was trying to persuade a child to eat the crusts of a sandwich. The child had arranged them around the plate with considerable care.

"Mum likes it," Samuel said.

"Your mother's always liked an idea. Living with it is another matter."

"She goes to work. She pays for things."

"I know what your mother does."

Peter's voice had flattened. Samuel felt heat rise under his collar. He reached for his tea and found it still too hot. He put it down without drinking.

There was no camera in his bag. He had left it in the flat because he was coming to collect things and then meet Owen. Now he thought of the red point on the screen, the small exact space a recording made around a sentence. He couldn't remember whether his father had said when this had run its course or when it all had. It was a useless distinction, and he knew that, yet his mind kept returning to the words.

He took the packet of photographs from the carrier bag. Most were from school, with a pale background and the same crooked smile he wore whenever someone told him to smile naturally. In the youngest photograph his jumper was too large at the shoulders. He had a gap where a tooth should have been.

Peter looked at it upside down.

"Look at the state of you there."

"It's the jumper."

"You'd never stand still."

Samuel turned the photograph over. There was a price written on the back in pencil, and his first name in Ruth's handwriting. He remembered the school hall, waiting for his turn, the photographer telling him to lower his chin. He couldn't remember moving.

He put it back with the others. A question he had kept away from the meeting came forward while his hands were busy. He had intended to ask about school books, about the shelf, about whether he could collect anything else in the summer. He heard himself ask about the cupboard in the shed.

"What about it?" Peter said.

"Have you still got that mask?"

His father stopped stirring. The spoon rested against the rim.

"What mask?"

"The pig one."

Peter looked towards the counter. The woman who had served them was putting cups on a tray. He turned back.

"That old thing?"

Samuel nodded. He could feel the edge of the carrier bag beneath his thumb. It had stretched into a thin white band where the handles joined.

"Threw it away," Peter said. "Ages ago."

"When?"

"I don't keep a calendar of things I put in the bin."

"Was it before we left?"

"I couldn't tell you. What do you want with it?"

"I don't want it."

"Then why ask?"

On moving day he had carried his bags past the kitchen, certain it was still in the shed. He could still picture the snout beneath the cable. He wanted to ask how something that large had fitted into a bin bag with ordinary rubbish. He wanted his father to say when he had last held it.

"I wondered where it went."

Peter lifted his cup.

"It's gone. You're sixteen. You've got better things to occupy yourself with."

Samuel watched him drink. He wanted to ask whether his father remembered making him wear it. The words formed almost completely, then caught behind his teeth. Across the room the child had begun eating one crust. His father praised him loudly. The child kept chewing, looking at the door, and Samuel found himself watching until the crust was gone.

"You could throw those old exercise books away too," Peter said. "I brought them because I didn't want another fuss about something going missing."

Samuel put the photographs back in the bag. One exercise book had a corner turned down beneath the cover. He smoothed it flat. The clock now showed five minutes to twelve.

"I've got to go in a minute."

"Already?"

"I said twelve."

"Your toast isn't finished."

He ate the last piece. It had gone cold, and the butter stood in pale ridges where the knife had left it. Peter asked where he was meeting Owen. Samuel told him. His father said Owen ought to be thinking about work too, and Samuel said he was.

At twelve he stood and put on his coat. The measuring tape knocked lightly against the table through the pocket. Peter remained seated.

"You can come round next weekend. Do a few jobs with me."

"I'm at June's."

"Sunday, then."

"I'll let you know."

His father looked up at him for a moment. Samuel held the carrier bag by both handles. The little bell sounded at the kitchen door.

"All right," Peter said. "Don't leave it too long."

Samuel thanked him for the things and the toast. He walked past the counter, opened the glass door and stepped onto the pavement. The traffic sounded louder outside. He put his free hand in his pocket and closed it around the measuring tape. The metal case was cool where the dent pressed against his palm.

* * *

Owen was waiting outside the library with two books he had borrowed and failed to read. One was about engines; the other, he said, had looked better on the cover. Samuel asked whether they could walk for a bit.

"I need to take these in."

"Afterwards."

"Yes. All right."

Samuel waited on the steps. He could see Owen through the glass, talking to the woman at the counter. She opened one of the books and pointed at something. Owen searched his pockets. Samuel looked along the road towards the café, then back at the glass doors.

When Owen came out, he began describing a bicycle he had seen for sale. They walked through the recreation ground. Samuel heard the price and missed the next part. He took the measuring tape from his pocket and held it out.

"Dad brought this."

Owen took it, pulled it out too far and had to feed it back by hand. "You said that was gone."

"I couldn't find it."

"Same with my pump. I keep buying another and then the old one turns up. Anyway, this bike's got..."

Samuel let him go on. After a while Owen stopped beside the gate.

"Was it awful?"

"Some was all right."

"Right."

He thought Owen would ask which parts. Owen looked back across the grass and asked if he wanted to walk round again. They went past the litter bin where they had filmed the bicycle.

Samuel pointed out the crack in the path. Owen said it was deeper now, a hazard to professional riders, and this time Samuel heard him.

At the flat, Ruth was sitting at the table with a basket of clean washing. She asked how the meeting had gone. Samuel put the carrier bag on the floor and took off his coat.

"All right. He brought some things."

She waited. He took out the photographs and set them beside the basket. Ruth picked up the youngest one.

"I liked that jumper. Your dad said it made you look lost."

"He said I wouldn't stand still."

"For the picture? I don't remember that."

Samuel sat opposite her. He told her his father had said the mask was thrown away. She looked at him, then laid the photograph down.

"Did he?"

"He said ages ago."

"I didn't see him throw it away. I don't know."

"He said it like he remembered."

"He might. I wasn't there."

She drew a sheet from the basket and shook it out. One corner struck his knee. He caught it and stood to help her fold it, although he wanted to stay sitting, to go back through what Peter had said in order.

"Bring your end this way," she said.

When the sheet was folded, he gathered the photographs. Ruth asked which one he wanted to keep out. He took them all to his room.

Chapter 13

The workshop

The customer wanted his chest back before lunch. Samuel had written after lunch on the sheet, but that was tomorrow, and the man was coming today.

"You said two hours," he told Samuel over the telephone.

"That was the work. I meant how long the work would take."

June looked up from the other bench. Samuel turned a little towards the wall. He was seventeen, three weeks into regular days at Ellis Furniture Repairs, and this was the first customer who had asked for him by name.

"Well, you've had it since yesterday."

There was a child making a noise at the man's end of the call. He covered the receiver, spoke to someone, then came back. Samuel waited with the telephone pressed too hard against his ear.

"Is it ready or isn't it?"

"It isn't. I'm sorry. I've found something else that needs doing."

"I'll come and have a look. I'm passing anyway."

Before Samuel could say when, the man had finished. He replaced the receiver and stood beside June's desk. She kept working at the line of stitching in her hands.

"He thinks I said today."

"Did you?"

"I said it was two hours."

"Then don't give him hours. Give him a collection time."

"I thought he understood."

June pulled a short thread free and examined the hole it had left. "So did I, once. Where have you got to?"

He showed her the drawer. It stopped with its handle still a hand's breadth from the front of the chest. He had smoothed the left runner before finding that the right one had come loose at the back. Now the drawer lay on padding and the loose runner waited beside it.

June ran her thumb along the surface he had shaved. "Leave that alone now. Secure the other one and we'll see."

"I've already put the screws in a tray."

"Good. And the bench has to be clear at twelve."

He had put that on the sheet beneath the two hours, which had seemed generous when he wrote them.

At ten to twelve a man arrived with a roll of striped cloth under his arm and three chair seats in a bag. Arthur, the upholsterer, worked there on Tuesdays and Thursdays, sometimes an extra day when June could give him the space. He had a close white beard and spectacles on a cord that caught on the buttons of his shirt. Samuel had heard him ask people to wait while he disentangled himself from his own collar.

Today he put the bag down and looked at the chest occupying the central bench.

"How much longer?"

"I can move it."

"I need the whole bench."

Samuel looked around. The clear patch under the window would take the chest if they shifted two dining chairs. He carried one towards the door.

"You'll have to put it somewhere else," Arthur said. "I've got the other seats in the car."

June came through with a sandwich held between her teeth, moved the chair herself and pointed to a space beside the desk. Samuel followed with the second one. By the time the chest stood on low trestles against the wall, Arthur had unrolled the fabric across nearly the entire bench.

"Sorry," Samuel said.

Arthur nodded without looking up. He laid a seat on the stripes, lifted it and turned the cloth round. Samuel began putting his tools on the shelf beneath the trestles.

"Could you hold this end?" Arthur asked.

Samuel held the cloth while Arthur checked the pattern. There were six seats to cover. He wanted them out by morning because he had his own work waiting, and he had already promised June more time than he meant to. He said this while studying the fabric, as if the promises were another measurement he could check and discover wrong.

"Does the pattern have to match on all of them?" Samuel asked.

"It has to look as if somebody thought about it. Move your thumb."

He did. Arthur made a chalk mark, glanced towards June's desk and asked whether the braid had arrived. June swallowed her sandwich.

"I ordered it."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I'll ring."

Samuel bent over the chest, relieved to have something of his own to do. The runner fitted where it had been before it loosened. He secured it, cleaned away the squeeze of glue and left a card on top so nobody would try the drawer too soon.

The customer arrived while Samuel was washing his hands. He could hear the man saying that his wife had all her sewing things in a washing basket. June called Samuel out, then went to answer the telephone before he had finished drying his fingers.

The man stood close to the chest in a coat with a newspaper in its pocket. His eyes went to the drawer on the padding.

"Looks worse than when it came in."

The man had brought it because the drawer stuck. What did he expect them to do without taking it out?

"This bit had come loose," Samuel said, showing him. "It has to set before I can test it."

The man bent to see, resting both hands on his knees. He was breathing through his mouth. Samuel moved the lamp so he could look without bending so far.

"Oh. I see."

"I should have said tomorrow when you rang. After lunch. That gives me time to check all three."

"I can't get here after lunch tomorrow. I've got someone giving me a hand in the morning."

Samuel looked towards June. She was listening to the telephone with the invoice book open. Arthur had the fabric between his teeth while he reached for something. Nobody was going to settle this before he spoke again.

"I can help you carry it out. If you can come on your own."

"It'll go in the car?"

"You brought it in the car."

The man looked at him. Samuel heard the sharpness in what he had said.

"I mean, I can do the lifting. We can take the drawers out."

The man considered it, then nodded. He wanted the estimate checked as well. Samuel found the sheet and showed him the amount June had written. That appeared to settle more than the explanation of the runner had. The man folded his newspaper into a smaller shape, put it back in his pocket and said he would come at three.

Samuel wrote the time on the sheet while he could still see the car leaving.

At three the following afternoon, he carried one end of the chest across the pavement. All three drawers had run freely when the man tried them. Samuel had found himself watching his face throughout, wanting pleasure, or surprise, something beyond the inspection. The man was chiefly concerned about the blanket protecting his car.

"Pull it towards you a bit. There."

They settled the feet on it. Samuel passed in the drawers separately and shut the boot. The customer checked it was latched, thanked him and left. Inside, June took the paid sheet and asked him to wash his hands before touching the cream fabric she had laid out.

He had expected to feel taller. He was hungry, and there was glue on the edge of his thumbnail.

* * *

Owen was waiting outside the flat that evening, trying to fold a leaflet into its original shape. His bicycle leaned against his knees. One brake cable had a blue cap, the other a red one, because those were the two they had found.

"I've brought homework," he said.

"You've left school."

"They've followed me."

The leaflet showed a man smiling beside an engine. There was an application tucked inside it, a timetable and a page on which Owen had written his name three times before settling on how large it ought to be. Vehicle maintenance training, with blocks at a centre in another town. There might be a work placement attached.

Upstairs, Ruth was getting ready for an evening catering shift. She had left a saucepan on the cooker and told them to put the rest in the fridge. Owen lifted the lid.

"How much is the rest?"

"You'll recognise it," she said. "Leave me some."

He fetched bowls while Samuel opened the papers on the table. Ruth had to reach over them for her bag. She said good luck to Owen and went out with one earring still in her hand.

The form asked for examples of things he had done. Owen had written repaired bikes, crossed it out, then written it again in smaller letters.

"It sounds like pumping tyres up."

"You can pump tyres up."

"I want to sound more impressive."

Samuel reminded him of the bicycle belonging to the woman at the end of his road. Its basket had pulled to one side and the brake cable needed replacing. Owen had fixed that, then found a problem with the wheel they couldn't deal with. He had wheeled it to a shop and fetched it back the next day.

"I can't put that."

"Why?"

"Took bicycle to man who knew how."

Samuel laughed. "Put the bit you did. Then say you got the wheel checked."

Owen took up his pencil. He wrote slowly, making each line shorter as he approached the right-hand edge. Samuel ate while he worked. The food was hotter than he wanted, but if he waited, Owen would finish writing and watch him reading the paragraph.

The training centre was far enough away to mean an early bus followed by a walk. They looked at the timetable. Samuel found a connection that left Owen six minutes between buses.

"No," Owen said. "Mum's already done that. She says I need the earlier one."

"She's right."

"There's been contact between you."

"We meet while you're asleep. Plenty of time."

Owen smiled and carried his bowl to the cooker. Samuel watched him scrape the remaining food to one side of the pan before taking another small portion. It annoyed him that Owen could be

careless about leaving town and careful about leaving Ruth her supper. Owen had been talking about this for months.

"Where would you live if you got the placement?"

"Depends where it is. I've only got to apply yet."

"I know."

Owen sat down. "You could come there. Wherever there turns out to be."

Samuel pulled the timetable closer and checked the return journeys. There were Saturday buses. The larger station had trains going that way too. He folded the timetable along the creases Owen had given up on.

"Do they let people in without an engine?"

"I'll say you're a wooden one."

They read the application once more. Samuel found an empty line Owen had missed. Owen found that Samuel had put a bowl on his envelope and made a wet ring across the address. They dried it as best they could, then transferred the address to a fresh envelope. Owen sealed it before Samuel could suggest another improvement.

"Finished," he said.

"You could leave it and look tomorrow."

"Then I'd have to think about it tomorrow."

They went down with the bicycle and walked to the postbox. Owen pushed the envelope through, missed the slot at the first attempt and blamed the bicycle leaning against his hip. Samuel offered to hold it. Owen said he could manage a letter.

The envelope dropped inside. Owen looked at the collection times, then stood back.

"Do you think I should've put the other brake in?"

"Bit late now."

"On the form."

"I know."

Owen gave him the shove he deserved. They started back towards the flat to put Ruth's supper away.

Chapter 14

His own arrangement

The woman had brought scissors to collect her sewing table. Before she examined the repaired edge, she opened the shallow drawer, put the scissors inside and shut it. She did this twice.

"Lovely," she said.

Samuel had placed the table by the front window, where the light fell along the edge he had worked on. He had spent a long time getting that corner right. The woman laid her handbag over it while she tried the drawer again.

June was filling in the receipt. Samuel waited for her to look up. She checked a figure against the job sheet and went on writing.

"Will I have to polish it?" the woman asked.

He told her what to use. Then she wanted to know whether she could put her sewing machine on it. He asked how heavy the machine was, though the table had carried it for years, and found himself telling her more about the repair than she had asked.

She listened, then took a folded cloth from her bag. Green leaves had been stitched around its border, two paler than the others where the thread had changed.

"My mother did this. It goes underneath."

She spread it over the top. His corner disappeared. He had turned eighteen in the spring and had been hoping people would begin to recognise the difference. The woman looked at him across the cloth.

"Could you help me out with it, love?"

He lifted his end. At the door June called that she had done the receipt. The woman returned to pay and told her Samuel had explained everything.

"He did the whole job," June said.

The woman looked back at him. "Well. You can be pleased."

He was. The cloth slipped as they carried the table to the car, and he asked her to wait while he folded it safely over the centre. She held his end for him. It was an awkward little exchange of hands that worked on the second attempt.

Afterward June called him to the desk. She had the next week's jobs spread across a calendar, with Arthur's name covering most of Tuesday.

"I've promised this wardrobe door back before their visitors come. Which of these can wait?"

Samuel read the slips. "The stool can fit round the door. I could start it on Monday."

"Put yourself down, then."

He wrote his name in the space. June was reading the sewing-table sheet. She tapped the hours, close to what they had allowed, then slid it into the completed tray.

* * *

Ruth had stopped to look at the lamp two weeks earlier. Samuel remembered her trying the switch, even though the lamp stood unplugged on a cupboard among china birds. He had been thinking about whether they had milk and had hurried her along.

It was still there on Saturday. The base was heavy and cream, the shade covered in plain green fabric. This time he asked the shopkeeper to plug it in. The birds acquired little white reflections on their backs.

"Does the shade come off?" he asked.

"I hope so. I put it on."

She showed him. He counted the money from an envelope, bought it and went home with the base wrapped in newspaper. He had left himself enough for the rest of the week. Owen would have to accept a cheaper evening if they went out, which Owen usually preferred anyway.

The bag containing the shade caught the wind. He had to stop twice to get it out of the road. Ruth opened the flat door while he was trying to turn the bag the right way round.

"What have you got?"

He carried it past her to the table. There were peeled potatoes beside the sink and music playing in the sitting area. She saw the shade and left the door open until he went back to close it.

"You liked it," he said.

"I did. Samuel, it's lovely. You didn't have to."

"I know."

They tried it by the sofa, where the lead failed to reach. He offered to find an extension, but Ruth was already pointing to the small cupboard against the wall. There its light fell on the side where

she sat to read. She turned off the ceiling light although it was still afternoon, sat down and opened a magazine.

"Can you see?"

"Very well."

She moved the shade a little. He watched her find the right position and wished he had thought to take the torn price sticker off the base. She picked at it with her thumbnail, got half away and gave up.

"I'll do that later."

"There's a bit left."

"It'll wait. Come and see these."

On the table she had three advertisements for rooms that a woman from work had brought in. Samuel pulled out the notebook in which he had begun adding up what he would need. One room was available now. Another said partly furnished. The third cost too much, although it had a window overlooking a park.

He kept returning to the third photograph.

"You'd need to eat," Ruth said.

"I know."

"And travel."

"I've done all that here."

She read his figures, her lips moving slightly. He had counted what he could save if his hours increased, what he would need for a deposit and what he could spend while he waited. There was a line called things. Ruth tapped it.

"Washing powder," he said. "Shoes. If the kettle breaks."

"I was going to ask where you'd put shoes. You go through them."

She handed the notebook back. He had been ready to defend the figures and felt foolish with his hand still over the bottom of the page. He put the expensive room aside. The partly furnished one might be worth looking at when he was ready, if it was still available.

"After winter," he said. "If I can get the full week."

"Then we'll look after winter. These give you an idea."

Ruth folded the advertisements and returned to the potatoes. She asked whether he would be in on Friday. Two women from the kitchen were coming round; one had offered to bring a cake and the other had changed her mind twice about whether she liked fruit in one.

"I've said bring what you like. Now they're both bringing cake."

"I can be here."

"You'd make a special effort."

He asked if she wanted the small table moved beside the sofa. She looked at it, then at the women she appeared to be arranging in her head.

"Perhaps. I haven't decided."

He had already taken hold of a corner. She laughed and put a wet hand on his wrist.

"Leave me something to do. I've got the evening off."

He let go. She began singing with the radio, missing the same line twice and making a noise to fill it. Samuel knew the words. When he supplied them she stopped and pointed the potato peeler at him.

"That's it. That bit's been annoying me all week."

The telephone rang before she could try it. Ruth looked at the number and passed it to him.

"Your dad."

He took it to the sofa. Peter asked about the workshop, and Samuel told him about the sewing table. His father knew the sort of edge he meant. For a minute they talked about how he had matched it.

"You had a good start," Peter said. "Those afternoons with me. Most lads your age can't put up a shelf."

"June's taught me a lot."

"I'm sure she has. You knew how to hold a tool before you got there."

"Yes."

He looked at the lamp. From here the remaining piece of sticker showed beneath the shade. He wanted to tell Peter that he had bought it, to be asked what Ruth thought, and knew how unlikely the second question was. He lifted a magazine from the cushion and held it on his knee.

"Come over Saturday," Peter said. "I've a couple of things you could have a proper look at."

"I'm going out with Owen."

"You see plenty of him."

"We arranged it."

"Well, Sunday."

Samuel opened the magazine and shut it again. Ruth was tipping peas into a saucepan. He could go on giving his father days until one had nothing written against it.

"I can meet you after work on Wednesday. At the café. Five o'clock."

"You could have your tea here."

"I'd like to meet at the café. I've got about an hour."

Peter left a silence. Samuel kept the telephone where it was, though he wanted to move it and see whether the line had gone.

"If that suits your arrangements."

"Let me know by Tuesday."

After the call Ruth asked whether he still wanted peas. He said yes. At the table he took too many and had to eat them while they cooled, wanting to leave the last few and irritated with himself for caring about an empty plate.

* * *

Owen brought the wooden spoon wrapped in a towel.

"For the man who has achieved adulthood."

"My birthday was three months ago."

"I've been working on it."

The bowl was scorched black at one end. Samuel recognised the spoon from Owen's kitchen. They had used it to stir paint years earlier and had been required to clean the saucepan, a task which had occupied a great deal more time than the stirring.

Owen had scraped away the remaining paint and written SAMUEL down the handle. Beneath it, in small letters, was FOR EMERGENCIES.

"What sort?"

"Soups."

Samuel put it in his room. Owen stood looking at the lamp, then remembered he had come to collect him. Ruth gave them containers of food and told them one needed returning because it was particularly good for freezing things.

They carried the food to the grass beyond the recreation ground, where the ground rose enough to see the roofs. Owen had begun coming home from training with a stain along the side of his hand which washing made paler and never quite removed. He rested that hand against the low fence and told Samuel about a machine he had been allowed to work on.

Samuel lost him at the second unfamiliar part. He asked what it did. Owen began explaining, lost his own place and had to start with the engine again.

"You're making it sound much harder than it is," Samuel said.

"You should hear me do something difficult."

A dog put its nose beneath the fence beside them. Its owner called from the other end of the field. The dog weighed the possibilities and stayed where there was food.

Samuel told Owen about the room advertisements. Owen asked if they might share somewhere eventually. He said it with his mouth full, as if it had only just occurred to him.

"Here?"

"If I'm here. Depends where I get taken on."

"You'd have to wash up."

"I wash up."

"You introduce plates to water."

Owen laughed, swallowed badly and had to drink. Samuel waited. He liked the idea of coming home to somebody who would understand the spoon without being told.

"I've applied for the placement outside town," Owen said when he could speak. "It might lead to something."

"The one you mentioned?"

"Yes."

Samuel pushed the empty container into its lid. It wouldn't fit that way round. He turned it.

"You should take it if you get it."

"I think I would."

They watched the dog finally give up and run towards its owner. Owen asked whether the flat over the takeaway was still advertised, then remembered that Samuel had said after winter and apologised for not listening. Samuel said it didn't matter. They talked about the park room until they had made it much larger and brighter than the photograph allowed.

On the way back they bought ice creams. The woman was closing the tub and gave them enormous scoops. Owen immediately lost part of his onto his thumb.

"Should have brought the emergency spoon," he said.

Samuel laughed and a drop ran down his own cone. They stood under the awning while the blind came down behind them, licking at the sides before they could take another mouthful. The walk home would take as long as it took.

PART THREE
A room of his own

Chapter 15

The rented room

Samuel drew the door towards him and turned the key. The latch released. He had watched the woman who owned the house do it twice; doing it alone, with her car already gone, gave him an unreasonable wish to show her.

Ruth stood behind him with a bag on each arm.

"Are we going in?"

He held the door and took the heavier bag. His room was at the back on the first floor, with a broad window over the gardens. A washing line hung between two fence posts, one peg left in the middle. There were a bed, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe and a desk marked by a pale rectangle where someone had kept a mat. Beside the window, a recess was painted cream over an older green.

Ruth set her bag on the bed and tried the window catch.

"That opens nicely."

"It sticks. You have to push there."

She had opened it without pushing there. He waited for her to shut it, then carried on unpacking.

He was nineteen and earning a full week's wages. The deposit and first rent had gone from his account. On the bus he had checked the remaining balance, though he had copied it into his notebook before leaving the flat. Now he could see what some of the money had bought: the space from the bed to the window, the door he could close, the desk where there was room to leave the laptop open.

Ruth had brought a spare pillow he had said he wouldn't need. He put it at the head of the bed. She wiped the wardrobe shelf with a cloth from her bag, then held out her hand for his clothes. He gave her the first two shirts and stopped.

"I'll do them."

"Right."

She looked round for something else. At the bottom of the bag she found Owen's spoon wrapped in a tea towel.

"I thought this was one of mine."

"Does it look like one of yours?"

She turned the blackened end towards him. "It has had a hard life."

He laid it on the desk beside the compact camera. The battery cover was held shut with tape and there was a scratch close to the screen. His phone could take video now, but he still preferred the camera when he knew what he wanted to film. He had made space on the new shelf for it and the cases of cards.

The shelf was waiting downstairs. They carried it up together, resting once at the turn while Ruth changed her grip. Plain pine, three broad surfaces and a rail across the back to keep it square. June had let him buy the timber through the workshop. He had made it in spare time and taken longer over the sanding than anyone would pay him for.

It slid into the cream recess with room at either side for his fingers. A thin packing piece under the rear foot took out the rock he had expected from measuring the floor. Ruth pressed a palm on the top. It stayed still.

"You could put a plant there," she said.

"That's for the camera."

"I meant by the window."

They looked at the space, agreeing at last about which part of it she meant. He could have a plant if he wanted. He had never considered whether he did.

Downstairs, the shared kitchen had two fridges, a long worktop and four different chairs around the table. A note by the washing machine asked for somebody's wet towels to be collected. Beneath it, another hand had written SORRY, BACK AT SIX.

In his allotted cupboard stood a mug left by the previous occupant. He put it on the worktop and unpacked his own plates. Ruth reached for one, withdrew her hand and put the kettle on.

"I've got Sunday free," she said. "If you want to come round."

"I was going to."

"Good."

She looked tired when she sat down. He made the tea and discovered he had packed the spoons in the bag upstairs. She drank hers unstirred while he fetched them. When he came back she had moved the old mug beside the sink and was holding it by its chipped handle.

"Someone might still want this."

"It was in my cupboard."

"You could ask."

He set it on the windowsill. After she left, he stood in his room listening to someone walk about overhead. Water travelled through a pipe in the wall. He put his tools on the bottom shelf, shut the door and opened the laptop on his desk. It took so long to start that he finished unpacking his books before the screen was ready.

* * *

By Wednesday he had burnt rice and brought a chair home in his head three nights running. June wanted him to decide what could be saved on it. Each time he lay down, another joint presented itself.

He had gone upstairs to fetch his washing when the rice began sticking. A man was at the cooker when he returned.

"Yours?"

Samuel switched off the ring. "Yes."

"I was about to turn it off."

"I only went upstairs."

"It's caught."

The man was wearing a shirt with one cuff still buttoned and the other rolled back. He introduced himself as Tom, from the front room. Samuel had seen his shoes by the door, substantial ones with a pale band across each toe.

He lifted the lid. Around the black centre there was a ring of rice which might be edible. He scraped it into a bowl, filled the pan with water and put it in the sink.

"I need that," Tom said.

"The pan?"

"The sink."

Samuel picked it up again. Hot water touched his fingers and he set it on the worktop too quickly. Tom stepped back from the splash.

"Sorry. I'll wash it now."

"Just leave it to soak. Here." He moved a packet of bread and pointed to the cleared space. "I've only got a few things to rinse."

Tom washed a pepper and a tomato, then began cutting them. He ate a piece of pepper and offered Samuel one. Samuel shook his head. He was trying to decide whether his dinner smelt as bad in the bowl as it did in the pan.

"Have an egg with it," Tom said. "There's a frying pan in there you can use."

He pointed with his knife. Samuel found it. They cooked beside each other, Tom taking the hob on the right, and agreed that Samuel could use the washing machine on Wednesday evenings. Tom preferred Thursday. He left early for work on Fridays and liked to have his shirts done before then.

"Don't start it late, though. You can hear it in my room."

"What time's late?"

"After ten. Earlier if you're doing towels. It walks about with towels."

Tom ate standing by the worktop and left his plate beside the sink while Samuel was still scrubbing the rice pan. He called goodnight from the doorway. Samuel looked at the plate. There was orange juice on it from the tomato and a fork beneath the edge. He finished his own pan and left Tom's things where they were.

The next morning Tom had washed them. The chipped mug was gone from the windowsill. Samuel never found out whose it was.

At the workshop, June handed him the keys to the cash tin before taking off her coat again to search a pocket.

"I'm going to measure that cabinet. Three collections and the webbing delivery. Balances are in the book. Don't quote for anything new."

Samuel nodded. She stopped with the van keys in her hand.

"What do you do if they want a price?"

"Take their details. Tell them you'll ring."

"And write the number so I can read it."

She went out, came back for the measuring tape and went again. Samuel checked the three names against the furniture. One woman arrived early and wanted to sit on her chair before paying. He let her, standing behind it because he didn't know where else to stand while she moved about on the seat. A man collecting a table asked about a cupboard door at home. Samuel took the details and declined to guess a price when the man asked a second time.

The delivery was missing a roll. He asked the driver to mark it on the sheet. By the time June returned he had six things to tell her and had written four down.

"Hang on," she said as he began. "Let me get in."

He waited while she put down her bag and hung up her coat. She listened to all six things, checked the receipts and said he could do Friday morning as well. She had another visit to make.

"Same arrangement?" he asked.

"Yes. You've got it."

He went to hang the keys up and realised they were to stay with him until Friday.

* * *

Peter came on Saturday. He had asked twice to see the room, and Samuel had invited him for half an hour before Owen was due. Downstairs, his father ran a finger over the split in the back of a kitchen chair.

"You could sort this."

"It's the owner's."

"I'm sure she'd be grateful."

Samuel led him upstairs. He had put his drying clothes away and wiped a ring off the desk. With Peter in the middle of the room, coat buttoned, there seemed less space between everything.

His father asked the rent. Samuel told him.

"You could have saved that at home."

"I wanted my own place."

"It's a room."

Samuel opened the window. There was a warm smell from the gardens, somebody's cut grass drying in a heap. Peter examined the pine shelf, bending to see the back rail. His hand came towards it, then stopped.

"Did you make this?"

"Yes."

"Bit of a slope." He nodded at the packing under the foot. "Keep an eye on damp behind it. They'll paint over anything."

"I checked the wall."

Peter sat on the desk chair and tested it with a sideways movement. Samuel stood by the window, then sat on the bed because standing made it seem as though he was waiting for his father to leave.

Peter began describing a job for a neighbour from the old street. A replacement part had no mark he could use to identify it. He had tracked it down through a man who recognised the shape. Samuel asked how the man knew, and his father took an envelope from the desk and asked for a pen.

The little drawing helped. Samuel leaned closer. He could see what had been changed between the original and the replacement, and his father was pleased he had understood.

Owen knocked downstairs while Peter was drawing a second version. He called Samuel's name. Samuel looked at the clock.

"That's Owen. We're making tea."

"I could stop for a cup."

There was room to make another cup. They had enough pasta as well. Samuel looked at the envelope, the pen still in his father's hand.

"We're cooking. I said we'd start at six."

Peter put the pen down with its lid off.

"I can see you've got your timetable."

Samuel stood. "I'll walk you down."

Owen waited in the hall with a bag of food and biscuits under one arm. He answered Peter's questions about training. Samuel opened the front door and waited another minute while his father gave Owen advice he hadn't asked for. Then Peter said he had things to do and went out.

Owen held up the biscuits. "Insurance."

"Against what?"

"The rest of the bag."

In the kitchen he produced tomatoes, a pepper and an onion so large it occupied the chopping board.

"I panicked," he said.

Samuel handed him a knife. Tom came in for the kettle, saw the onion and stopped in the doorway.

"How many are you feeding?"

"Two," Samuel said.

Tom filled the kettle. He said he would have used half of it, though Owen had already cut the whole thing into pieces. He watched for another moment, then took his drink upstairs.

"Did he like it?" Owen asked.

"The onion?"

"Your dad. The room. Sorry. I meant before."

Samuel emptied the tomatoes into the pan. "He liked the money better."

Owen nodded and went back to cutting. The sauce took longer than Samuel had expected. He lowered the heat and sat with Owen at the kitchen table, both of them hungry enough to begin on the biscuits.

After eating they went upstairs. Owen took a book off the new shelf and put it back upside down. Samuel corrected it before he had thought.

"Still you," Owen said.

They watched an old clip on the laptop, Owen riding past the camera too close and shouting something the microphone had broken into a roar. Owen wanted it again. On the second viewing he began laughing before he appeared. Samuel watched the empty patch of road, waiting for him, then laughed too.

Later he carried the leftover sauce down and wrote his name on the lid. In his room the lamp lit the pine shelf and the clothes he had folded into his drawers. Peter's envelope was still on the desk. He put it with his other papers, fetched the second pillow onto the bed and opened his book.

Chapter 16

Putting it right

The shelf dropped past its supports and Samuel caught it against his wrist. He remained bent into the cabinet, holding the wood diagonally, while the pain of the edge spread up his arm.

It was too small. He drew it out and placed it on the padding. The front edge was smooth, the colour close to the shelves that remained. He had measured the opening, written down the number and made the piece to match. Through the glass he could see the supports farther apart inside.

The broken original lay on the rack behind him. Large enough to measure. He had taken it out himself.

June was at the supplier. Her coat had gone from the chair, though she had left her scarf hanging on the back. Samuel looked up at the timber rack. There was a board that might do. If he began now he could have the replacement cut by the time she returned.

Then the finish would have to dry, and the cabinet was due to go that afternoon. He lifted the shelf again and tried it at a different angle. There was no angle at which it became wider.

"Too short?" Arthur asked from the central bench.

Samuel nodded.

Arthur put down his shears and came to look. He pressed the supports with his finger, checked the original and made a small noise in his throat.

"Yes."

He went back to the seat he was covering. Samuel had hoped for a suggestion. He stood the wrong shelf against the cabinet and wrote NEED TO REMAKE on the job sheet. The letters looked accusatory when he stepped back. He kept them.

June returned with two parcels and an invoice she held by one corner, trying to read it while she came through the door. Samuel took the larger parcel.

"I've made the cabinet shelf too small."

She stopped reading. "The one going today?"

"Yes."

He showed her. She tried it herself, then looked at the measurement on the sheet.

"What did you check it against?"

"The front. I held it up here."

"You finished the whole thing without putting it inside?"

His face heated. The cabinet had been facing the wall. A chair had stood in the space where he needed to be. He could hear how the explanation would sound while he was still assembling it.

"Yes."

June set the shelf down. "For heaven's sake."

She looked towards the desk. The telephone had begun ringing. She went to answer it, leaving him with one hand on the cabinet door. He closed it, opened it again and took the old shelf off the rack.

June's call lasted several minutes. When she came back, he had laid the original beside the spare board and checked the thickness. She examined the grain.

"That'll do. What are you allowing this time?"

He gave her the stages, including the time between coats. The customer had someone available to help carry the cabinet today. June would have to offer delivery tomorrow. She rubbed the side of her face and asked if Samuel could come with her after his usual finishing time.

"Of course."

"Don't say of course if you've got somewhere to be. I need to know."

"I can come."

She wrote it on the sheet.

"Do you want me to pay for the board?"

"No. Put the size on the back of this one. We'll use it somewhere."

She made the call. The customer had plenty to say, and June listened without trying to get Samuel to hear how much. He could hear anyway. Tomorrow afternoon would be inconvenient; in the morning nobody was there; the person who was supposed to help had changed a shift. June apologised and found a time they could manage.

Samuel measured the original in two places and checked the cabinet's inside width. He fitted the replacement before he touched the front edge. It rested on all four supports. He fetched June.

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

He stood back to let her see it better, although she was already moving on. He had wanted the second inspection to last as long as the first.

At lunch Arthur put a bag of bread rolls on the back step and said there were too many. Samuel took one. June stayed inside with the paperwork, eating over the plate she had balanced on a stack of fabric books.

Arthur talked about a customer who had changed her mind about piping after he ordered it. She would pay for more, but he couldn't find the colour she now wanted. Samuel offered to look at the samples when they went back in.

"I've looked. They haven't got it."

"There might be another book."

"I've got all the books."

They ate their rolls. Arthur pulled his spectacles free of a button and inspected one lens. There was a little line of glue across it, or something that caught the light that way. Samuel watched him polish it with a corner of his shirt.

"I borrowed your shears last week," he said. "I should've asked."

"What for?"

"Paper. Only a little."

Arthur stopped polishing.

"Don't use them for paper."

"I won't again."

"No. You won't."

He put the spectacles back on and went inside, leaving the bag between them. Samuel finished his roll alone. Through the window he saw Arthur try the shears along a fabric offcut, then try them again. He wished he had saved the confession for a different day. When he returned to the workshop he put the bag on Arthur's bench. Arthur thanked him and asked for the room to pull a long piece of cloth through.

* * *

The washing machine was running when Samuel brought his basket down. He stood in the kitchen doorway and watched a dark sleeve appear at the round window, vanish, then appear again.

Tom came in with the washing powder.

"Sorry. I meant to knock."

"It's Wednesday."

"I know. I got in late. Put it straight on."

Samuel set the basket on a chair. His clean work shirt had a mark at the cuff that had survived the last wash. The two in the basket were worse. He had planned to hang them in the kitchen before he ate and take them upstairs dry in the morning.

"Couldn't you do yours tomorrow?" Tom said.

"I need them for tomorrow."

Tom looked at the basket, then at the machine. "Mine's got a while left."

"That's why we agreed Wednesday."

"I forgot."

The kitchen was warm and smelt of powder. Samuel looked at the clock. There was still time for his own wash, though the machine's final spin might run past ten. He wanted Tom to offer something more useful than forgetting.

"When yours is done, take it straight out. I can eat first."

"All right."

"Will you?"

Tom put the powder on its shelf with a thump. "Yes."

Samuel warmed food in a pan and sat at the table. Tom came back for a drink, saw the occupied chair and took the other one. For a while they ate without speaking. Samuel could hear the washing machine making a soft repeated knock, possibly something in a pocket.

"Does that always do it?" he asked.

Tom listened. "Zip on my jacket."

When the programme finished, Tom was on the telephone in his room. Samuel waited until the door lock released, then knocked. Tom came out still talking, ended the call and emptied the drum into his basket.

"Thursday next week," he said.

Samuel loaded his shirts. He had made his point twice and wanted to make it a third time, about having to fetch him. Tom had already gone upstairs. Samuel put in the powder and started the machine.

In his room he read until the final spin ended, then went down to empty the machine. He was hanging the last shirt when Tom came through with a glass of water, lifting his elbow over a sleeve. He stopped at the doorway.

"Is this all right till morning?" Samuel asked.

"Yes. As long as people can get through."

Samuel had left a towel over the back of a chair in the way. He moved the chair under the table and turned the airer a little. Upstairs, he set an alarm to check the shirts before breakfast.

* * *

The replacement shelf went into the cabinet late the following afternoon. June tested it while Samuel fetched the blankets. They drove to the customer's house and carried the cabinet into a dining room where its place showed as a clean rectangle on the carpet.

The woman asked why it had needed remaking. Samuel told her he had measured the opening and failed to allow for the shelf sitting inside. Saying it to someone who had never seen the workshop made the mistake sound smaller and stupider.

"Well, it's done now," she said.

She fetched the ornaments she kept in it. There were small chipped animals and a cup with a handle too narrow for fingers. Samuel held the blankets while she arranged them, then she asked if the shelf would come out for cleaning. He showed her the slight turn needed to clear the opening. She did it herself the next time, and he enjoyed watching it settle without a wobble.

In the van June said she was going straight home after they unloaded. She had been working in the evenings and needed one off. Samuel asked if she wanted him to finish the paperwork.

"Materials and hours. Leave the rest."

He filled in his part at the workshop. The new board took the cost past their estimate. He checked the addition, left the sheet on her desk and went home while it was still light enough to see the colour of the gardens from his window.

The next morning a man brought in three nesting tables. The smallest fitted under the middle one. The middle scraped the underside of the largest and stopped. The man demonstrated it, looking up to make sure Samuel had seen.

June crouched beside him. "Can we film that movement? Just the tables. It'll help if it behaves itself when we try later."

"Certainly. My wife thinks I push it crookedly."

Samuel fetched his camera. The frame showed the tables, the man's shoes and a corner of the mat. He showed the man the screen before beginning.

"Ready?"

The middle table slid forward. Its leg touched, making a soft scrape. June asked for the movement from the other side as well. Samuel shifted his feet, keeping the camera low. The man repeated it, so slowly that it took several seconds to reach the point where it caught.

"That's enough," June said.

Samuel stopped and played it back. The catch was clear. The man was pleased to hear the scrape and said his wife should see that. June asked Samuel to copy it to the workshop computer with the job number.

"Clear the video when the job goes. We can keep the photographs."

He wrote the number on a slip to put in the camera case. The man began asking about a fourth table he had once seen in a set like these. June was looking for space to put the three they already had. Samuel lifted the smallest and found the mark underneath, then called them both over to see it.

Chapter 17

Owen leaves

Owen had written KITCHEN on a box containing two jumpers, a lamp and some bicycle parts. Samuel found it while checking whether the bottom needed more tape.

"Are you going to cook with a brake cable?"

"Depends how much money's left."

Owen took the box and put it by the door. The job offer had arrived six weeks ago. For five weeks his room had looked much as it always did; now everything was going somewhere and very little of it had a place. They were both twenty. Samuel had expected the year to involve a bigger celebration than either of them had managed, and now Owen was moving out of town with a bag of clothes he hadn't washed.

"What actually goes?" Samuel asked.

Owen pointed at the bed. The heap on it shifted and a sock fell to the floor.

"All that. The tools. The bike. Me, eventually."

His uncle had hired a van for the morning. Downstairs, Owen's mother was wrapping plates and warning them to keep the hall clear. She had to go to work later and kept calling up the time, though they could both see the clock.

Samuel found another box for the lamp. Among the bicycle parts was the old bell with a dent shaped like a thumbnail. Owen asked what he was doing with it.

"Taking it out of the kitchen."

"That goes."

"It hardly rings."

Owen pressed the lever. The brief, dull sound made him smile.

"Discreet."

He wrapped it in one of the jumpers. Samuel put the other parts together and wrote what they were on the side. His handwriting spread into the space where Owen had begun drawing an arrow, then abandoned it without showing what it pointed to.

They carried boxes down, waiting on the stairs while Owen's mother came up with towels. She told him these were his. He asked whether he needed so many.

"I'm clearing the cupboard. Take them."

She pushed the bag against his chest. He accepted it and followed Samuel outside. The chest of drawers was already in the van, secured by his uncle, who had discovered that two other objects had to go in before the next box. They stood holding it while he rearranged a strap.

Samuel went back for the bicycle. Its rear tyre was soft. Owen pressed it with his thumb and groaned.

"I'll do it there."

"Where's the kit?"

They looked at the packed van. There was a box marked BOOKS and another marked BITS. Beneath the second, Owen's mother had written WHAT BITS?

The kit was still in the kitchen box. Owen carried the bicycle to the low wall while Samuel found a container of water. The small line of bubbles appeared near Owen's fingers as he turned the tube through it. Samuel steadied the container. He knew how much longer every part of this would take than Owen wanted it to.

"You can have ten minutes," his uncle said.

"Enough."

"Ten actual minutes."

Owen sat with the tube over his knees. His mother brought out a bag she said must stay beside him in the front, then went inside before he could ask why. He opened it. Food, documents, another towel.

"She thinks I wash all day," he said.

Samuel laughed. Owen waited for the patch, watching the van. A neighbour came to ask if he was leaving, and he gave the account again: work on Monday, room ready that afternoon, sharing with somebody from the firm. Samuel held the water while they spoke. He knew the name of the man Owen would be living with but had never met him. He was trying to imagine a voice with which Owen might discuss who had used the last of the milk.

The neighbour went on. Owen checked the patch and began putting the tube back. Samuel set the water out of the way and steadied the bicycle. They had worked like this in so many places that his hands went where they were needed without being told.

When Owen stood the bicycle upright, Samuel fetched his camera from his coat.

"Historic occasion," he said.

"I've repaired a puncture before."

"You've packed a sock as well."

Owen grinned. Samuel started recording as he wheeled the bicycle towards the van. On the screen the pavement looked paler than it did around him. Owen's mother emerged with a saucepan containing smaller things. She looked at the van, then at the saucepan.

"Where's the lid?"

Owen's uncle put down the strap.

"It'll turn up."

"I just had it."

Samuel laughed. It came out too loudly. Owen was trying to lift the bicycle past a box and his mother was waiting behind him, tired and holding the pan with both hands.

Owen turned towards the camera. "Put that away. I'm trying to get this done."

"I was getting the bike."

"I know. Put it away now."

Samuel stopped the recording. He closed the case and left it on the wall. By the time he reached Owen, the pedal had caught the box again. He moved the box while Owen lifted the rear wheel, and they pushed the bicycle into its space.

"Cheers," Owen said, already reaching for the strap.

Samuel went back inside. The saucepan lid lay under a newspaper on the kitchen table. He brought it out and Owen's mother slid it down the side of the pan without wiping it. She thanked him and told Owen they had to go.

Upstairs, Owen's room had become visible. Pale squares marked where the poster and photographs had hung. Samuel looked under the desk and found a pencil, a coin and a pen cap. He put the coin on the windowsill. It was worth keeping, but taking it downstairs would require another decision about where to put it.

Owen was patting his pockets in the hall.

"Keys."

Samuel waited while he tried the same pockets again.

"To this house. Mum said to keep them."

They were in the bowl beside the door. Owen picked them up, then took the pencil from Samuel's hand and put it behind his ear. He had done this since school and still forgot it was there.

Outside, his uncle was in the driver's seat. Samuel was staying behind. There was work at the workshop that afternoon, and the journey was arranged around Owen's furniture. He had offered to help at the other end when they planned it and had been told there were people there. Now he was glad to have a reason to leave as well.

Owen stood with a hand on the van door.

"I'll call when it's in."

"When what's in?"

"All of me."

Samuel nodded. The bicycle tyre was firm. He had the address. He picked a loose strip of tape off his thumb.

"Send a picture of the kitchen. I want to see where the brake cable lives."

Owen laughed and put an arm around him, drawing him against the shoulder of his jacket. Samuel returned the embrace a little late. Then Owen climbed into the van and had to open his door again because it hadn't caught.

As the van moved away, Samuel remembered the camera on the wall. He went to fetch it. Owen's mother stood beside the empty space with her bag against her ankle, looking at the road.

"He'll be all right," she said.

Samuel said he would. She picked up the bag and asked if he could bring in the container of water. She had to get ready for work. He tipped it into the drain, rinsed it and put it beside the sink. There were fewer mugs on the draining board than he was used to seeing.

* * *

Three weeks later Owen met him at the station wearing a shirt Samuel hadn't seen before. For a moment, before Owen lifted his hand, Samuel took him for somebody waiting for another person.

They walked to the flat over the shops. Owen had been held at work and began explaining the delay, then remembered that Samuel didn't know the people concerned. He supplied names and began again. Samuel carried the bag in which Ruth had sent a cake. It was heavy and kept striking his knee.

The staircase smelt of carpet cleaner. Upstairs there was post in front of the door, a bicycle wheel in the hall and Owen's familiar lamp on the chest of drawers. The bed creaked when Samuel sat down.

"It's got opinions," Owen said.

"About me?"

"Everyone."

In the kitchen, a brake cable lay beside a basil plant. Samuel looked at it and Owen grinned.

"Put it there specially. It's been waiting all week."

Samuel had meant to take a photograph of it, but Owen was already showing him where the cake could go, and he left the camera in his bag. They made sandwiches. The other man arrived while they were cutting the cake and asked how Samuel's journey had been, then told Owen somebody had rung about a Sunday run.

"Run where?" Samuel asked.

"Along the canal. I've been a couple of times."

Owen looked faintly embarrassed. He had once objected to running far enough to catch a bus. Samuel tried to imagine him getting up for it voluntarily.

"There's breakfast after," the housemate said.

"Ah," Samuel said. "He's been training for that for years."

They ate in the kitchen. Owen and the man began discussing something that had happened at work. There was a phrase that made both of them laugh, and Samuel smiled while he waited to hear what it meant. Owen explained badly. The other man supplied the missing part, then asked Samuel about the workshop.

Samuel told him about opening up on his own. Owen wanted to see the keys, weighed them in his hand and passed them back. They talked about the things you could forget when everybody assumed you already knew what you were doing. By the time they left to walk to the canal, Samuel had asked the man two questions about his job and found that the answers interested him.

The path was muddy. Owen showed him the part they ran along and pointed out where he had stopped on the first attempt. Samuel said he would need different shoes if he came again. Owen thought he meant to run and began offering advice. Samuel let him finish before explaining that he had meant walking.

They stayed out too long and had to walk quickly back for Samuel's bag. On the way to the station, Owen asked when he could come again. Samuel said he would check his Saturdays. Owen said he would check his too, which made Samuel smile without knowing quite why.

On the train, his shoes left small marks under the seat. He moved them away from his bag and found the piece of cake Owen had wrapped for him. His phone showed a message from Ruth asking whether they had eaten it. He sent her a photograph of the remaining slice, then ate it before the next stop.

Chapter 18

What Ruth remembers

Samuel's lunch had become VERY IMPORTANT SCREWS. The label was in Nina's narrow handwriting, stuck crookedly over the name on his container. On the bench, his actual screws were labelled PASTA.

He took both labels to her. She was pulling tacks from a stool seat, holding the loose ones in a saucer because Arthur had complained about finding them on the floor.

"There's been an administrative error."

"Speak to management."

"June says this department is yours."

Nina glanced at the labels and went back to the tack she was trying to lift. "I want a department with a chair."

"You're holding one."

"I want a chair I can sit on. Give us a hand with this."

Nina Foster had been at the workshop for several months. At first she had asked Samuel where everything was, then begun putting things in places of her own. He had objected to the tape measures moving. She had objected to there being only one useful pair of scissors when Arthur locked his away. They had eventually labelled a pair CUTTING PAPER, which still amused her when there was nothing else to laugh at.

Samuel held the seat while she worked. He could have got the tack himself, but she had asked him to hold it. When it came free, she made a small satisfied noise and dropped it into the saucer.

"That one's mine," she said. "I put it in last week."

She had brought a cake for his twenty-first birthday in the spring. The price label was still on its box. When she tried to remove it the cake nearly slid onto the bench, and Samuel had caught the box with both hands, receiving considerably less gratitude than the rescue deserved. They had eaten half of it before June told them to put something over the rest.

At lunch Nina brought out a pear with a brown patch at one end. Samuel cut round the patch while she showed him photographs on her phone. Most were of work in progress. One contained so much shadow that the seat appeared to have a second layer of fabric across it.

"I need decent ones for my samples. Could you do this when I've finished?"

"You can use the window."

"I tried. It gets the bin and all the other stuff. I want the stitching to show."

He enlarged a photograph with his thumb. She moved it back.

"That one's awful. Next one."

She knew what she wanted. The pictures would go with her application for further training; she wanted the stages, including the bit she had taken apart and done again. Samuel thought the finished seat would be enough. Nina said she had spent an entire morning on the edge and somebody was going to see it.

They put the stool by the window later, with a plain board behind it. She held the board while he crouched with his phone.

"Your fingers are in it."

She moved them.

"Other fingers."

"I've only got ten. You'll run out of complaints soon."

He took three photographs. She chose the clearest, asked for a closer one of the stitching and thanked him properly when he sent them. Then she helped turn the cupboard he needed moved, complaining halfway round that he had given himself the easy end.

"You chose that end."

"I chose badly."

He liked the way she said it, already lifting again. At closing time she asked if he was going straight home. He said he was going to his mother's. Beneath his clean shirt in the bag was the old camera. He had charged it the previous night and found the file he wanted to show Ruth. During the day he had thought of the visit as tea.

* * *

Ruth had changed the curtains. From the doorway their yellow pattern looked almost plain; up close it separated into little leaves.

"Do you like them?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm looking at the rail."

"The rail is fine. I managed."

He smiled and stepped away from the window. The green-shaded lamp stood where they had put it. A plant Ruth had once called a temporary guest was large enough now to prevent the cupboard opening all the way. He moved one leaf aside while she fetched the plates.

"That's why I want to move it," she said. "Then I worry it'll die somewhere else."

"It'll be all right by the window."

"Come next week and tell it."

They ate at the table. She was tired, her feet pushed out of her slippers beneath the chair, and had brought home a problem about the school kitchen rota. Samuel understood until she added a third person who had changed her hours. He asked which woman wanted the Thursday. Ruth began again, heard herself repeating it and stopped.

"Never mind. It'll be all different by tomorrow. Tell me something else."

He told her about his lunch labels. She laughed and asked how Nina's work was going. He said she was good at the seats, that she kept going until the edges were even. Ruth said that sounded familiar, then took a folded leaflet from the cupboard.

She and a friend had booked a coach trip for the following month. The photograph promised a harbour, a castle and blue weather. Ruth had circled the departure time and written the taxi arrangement in the margin.

"That's early," Samuel said.

"We know. We've discussed whether to go to bed."

He read the small print. Lunch was extra. She said they would buy something there, and he began suggesting food to take before she reached over and turned the leaflet round.

"I make lunches all week. I'd like somebody else to make me one."

"All right."

She smoothed the fold. "We might eat by the water if it isn't raining."

Her friend remembered a shop selling enormous sticks of rock. Samuel asked for one. Ruth said he could have a normal one; an enormous one would sit on his shelf for years. She stood the leaflet beside the lamp, then moved it because the shade hid the picture.

He helped clear the plates. She put the kettle on while he rinsed their cups. Water gathered inside his cup and ran cleanly away as he tipped it. He did it again, though it was already clean.

"Mum. When you came in that evening. With the mask."

She was reaching for the tea bags. Her hand stopped inside the cupboard.

"Yes?"

"Was he at the sink?"

"Near it, I think."

"I remember him washing something."

"He may have been."

He set the cup down. He had meant to ask a small thing first, something she could confirm before he took out the camera. Already there was a may have been to deal with.

They took the tea to the table. Ruth moved the salt pot and sat opposite him. He asked when Peter had said it was a lesson. She thought it was when she first came in. Samuel remembered his voice following them towards the hall, after she had taken the mask off.

"Perhaps he said it twice," she said.

"Did he?"

"I don't know, Samuel. Perhaps."

He rubbed the side of his cup. The doorway he remembered had a sentence attached to it. If that sentence belonged earlier, something else was missing.

"You wrote it down."

"The next day. Some of it."

"Have you still got the book?"

"I think so. With the other papers. I'd have to look."

He waited for her to get up. She held her mug and looked towards the hall, then back at him.

"I'll look another day. I'm tired."

"It's only the order."

"I found you wearing it. You were crying. I took it off. I remember that. What he did was cruel."

"I know."

"Then what are we doing?"

He looked down. Ruth put a hand over her eyes, took it away and reached for the mug again.

"Sorry. Ask me. I'll tell you if I can."

He wanted to explain how Peter could take a small uncertainty and make it wide enough for everything else to fall into. If Ruth remembered the words, they would have somewhere firm to begin. He could not find a way to say this without making her sound unhelpful, which she would object to, and then they would be discussing that as well.

"There's something I brought."

The old camera took a moment to start. He had copied the work-box file back onto its card from the laptop. He wanted her to see it on the device she remembered. The first image showed the old kitchen table, the work box near its edge and a strip of window beyond.

Ruth leaned closer. "I remember this."

He played it. His younger voice came through thin and high. He disliked hearing himself so much that he almost moved past it, then Peter's hand entered the frame. The box tipped. Ruth's fingers left the mug and rested on her knees.

Samuel watched her while the recording continued. Her shopping bag appeared at the edge of the picture. Peter said Samuel had dropped the box. The table in the image still showed what had happened.

He stopped the clip.

"You can hear it."

"Yes."

"He did it, then said I did."

"I know."

"You knew then."

"Yes, Samuel."

There was a small cut beside her fingernail, covered with a plaster that had begun to peel. He could see it when she picked up the mug. Her hand in the recording had looked younger, though he couldn't have said how.

"Why did you keep waiting?"

Ruth set the mug down before drinking.

"I didn't think it was all right. You make it sound as if I thought it was all right."

He had said nothing about that. He felt his jaw tighten.

"I asked why."

She looked at him for several seconds. "Yes. You did."

The refrigerator started. She pulled the edge of the plaster away, pressed it back and stopped touching it.

"I was frightened about money. Getting us somewhere and finding I couldn't keep it. When that place fell through, I thought I had to wait until I could be certain. And sometimes I believed him when he said things would change. I stayed too long."

Samuel took the phone from his pocket. He stood it against the sugar jar and touched the screen. Ruth looked from his hand to the lens.

"What are you doing?"

"Keeping what you're saying."

"We're talking."

"I want to remember it properly."

Her face was on the screen. He adjusted the phone a little so her mouth was clear. The beginning of her answer had already gone without being kept. He could remember it, though he wasn't certain whether she had said frightened about money or frightened of it.

"You said you stayed too long."

"I did. I wish I'd left earlier. You needed me to leave earlier."

He nodded. She put a palm flat on the table.

"Now put that away. I don't want you filming this."

His hand moved towards the phone and stopped beside it.

"Were you going to leave after the first time?"

"I tried to arrange somewhere. You know that. Then it fell through and I stayed. Please switch it off."

"How long after it fell through did you try again?"

"I can't give you a date."

"A month? A year?"

She pushed the chair back. "Samuel. I said stop."

The counter advanced above the image of her face. He wanted the next answer. If he stopped here, she would have asked him to stop and the question would still be waiting, exactly where he had reached it.

"I haven't asked you to say something you don't think."

"I'm saying it to you. I don't want it on there."

"You were saying it anyway."

"Yes. To you."

She reached towards the phone, then drew her hand back. He had kept his own hand beside it. His thumb was close enough to touch the button without lifting his wrist. He watched its reflection in the edge of the screen while he formed the next question.

"Did you believe him after you saw what he'd done?"

"Sometimes. I hoped things would change. I've told you."

"Even after that?"

Ruth pushed the mug away. Tea ran over its rim onto her fingers. She wiped them on her skirt and looked at the mark with a tired, furious expression he wanted her to turn back towards him.

"Yes. That was wrong. I was wrong. You can ask me about it. Switch the phone off."

He heard every word. The counter was still going. He asked whether she had told anyone exactly what had happened.

She stood. For a moment the image held her cardigan and the lower part of her face. Then she went to the sink, leaving the chair empty. She tipped out her tea and stood with both hands on the edge of the worktop.

"I'm here," Samuel said.

"I know you're here. I'm taking a minute."

The phone showed the salt pot, part of her back and the empty chair. He waited, then stopped it. He laid it flat, screen downward.

"It's off."

She turned. "I asked you over and over."

"I wanted an answer."

"You were getting answers. I don't know how to say some of it. I was trying."

He took the camera and put it in its case. The wrist strap caught in the zip. He pulled it free and tried again while Ruth wiped the spilt tea with a cloth. Neither of them looked at the phone.

She sat down. "I should have done more, sooner. I can't make that different now."

He wanted to ask what she had thought the next morning, the day after that, the evenings she came home and found them getting on. There would be things she remembered. If they kept going, they would come to them. She rubbed her foot against the floor until she found the slipper under the chair.

"I should get back," he said.

"You don't have to."

"I've got work."

"Tomorrow."

He stood. Ruth followed him into the hall and waited while he put on his coat. He took his bag from the chair before she could reach for it.

"Leave the phone in your pocket next time," she said. "If we're talking about this."

He nodded, looking at the door handle. She touched his sleeve, then let him open the door himself.

* * *

In his room he played the new recording. The sound was much clearer than the old camera's. Every contact between mug and table had been kept. He paused when Ruth said she wished she had left earlier. Those were the words he had wanted, and the pause made it possible to look at her while she wasn't saying anything else.

He let it run. His own voice asked for a date. It sounded harder than it had felt in his mouth. Before her first request to stop, he turned the volume down. He watched her reach towards the phone and withdraw her hand.

At the end he connected the phone to the laptop and copied the file beside the old work-box clip. Then he shut the lid. Downstairs, someone was calling up to ask whose clothes were in the machine. Samuel had no clothes in it. He sat on the bed until the calling stopped.

Two evenings later Ruth sent him a message. She had bought too many potatoes for a meal with a friend. Would he come on Saturday? There would be pie, and he could bring a container to take some home.

He read it at the workshop. Nina was searching the floor around her stool.

"What have you lost?"

"Pencil. I had it a second ago."

It was behind her ear. He told her. She touched the wrong ear first, found it at the other and stood up, cross with herself. He handed her the small ruler she would need next.

Samuel looked at the message again and typed, What time? He put the phone where he could see the screen, then helped Nina clear room to turn the stool.

Chapter 19

Nina's confidence

Nina had brought three tins of beans and no bread. She put them in a row beside the workshop kettle, regarded them for a moment, and said that she had left a loaf on the bus.

"For the driver?" Samuel asked.

"I put it down while I found my ticket. I knew I would. I actually thought, don't leave that there."

He opened the bag containing his own supper. Two rolls, a tomato in a separate paper bag, cheese wrapped so carefully that the paper had acquired corners. Nina leaned across the bench to inspect it.

"Could I have half a roll? I can pay you tomorrow."

"Help yourself. There's a knife as well."

She took out the tin opener. "We'll have beans left over. Quite a few beans."

They had June's permission to stay late. Samuel was repairing a pair of cupboard doors for a woman who could only collect them early the following morning; Nina was making an upholstered stool for the photographs she would send with her course application. June had checked the heater and made them promise to leave by half past eight. Her sister was waiting, and she had already stayed to answer two questions Nina had thought of at the door. The door clicked behind her. For several seconds Samuel could still hear her keys moving against one another as she tried to find the car key in the dark.

He was twenty-one, had worked here long enough to recognise most jobs by the sound they made, and still enjoyed being left with the building. Without the radio, the large room seemed to extend into corners that remained unnoticed during the day. A plane hung from its hook. The handles of four brushes projected from a jar. Beyond Nina's bench stood a dining table whose owner had been promising to collect it for six weeks. June had rung twice that day about it. The second call ended with her writing a collection time in large figures on the cloth that protected its top.

Nina took off her coat and put on the cardigan she kept at work. One elbow had a patch made from a fabric sample, a bold blue square with a pink bird that disappeared into the sleeve when she bent her arm. She had asked Samuel to help with the stool's loose leg, then protested when he offered to do the whole frame. She wanted to be able to describe every stage herself. That had led to an hour of measuring, asking and waiting while she made the joint fit. The leg now stood firmly beneath the seat.

"Go on," she said. "Give it your suspicious look."

He pressed down on opposite corners.

"Looks like a stool."

"Does it move? This corner felt wrong before."

He pressed again and shook his head. She sat on it with both feet lifted, hands spread to show that she was balancing. The cover was still loose around its edges. Samuel bowed, and she laughed and put her feet down.

"I want a picture of that joint before I cover it," she said. "They want to see what I did underneath."

"You made it sound."

"Yes, but I need to explain how. I can do it and then I go blank when someone asks me."

She had written frame preparation in a small notebook. Beneath it was a sentence she had crossed out so thoroughly that the paper shone. Samuel suggested making a drawing with arrows. She fetched another piece of paper and began, pausing to lift the stool and check where each piece met. He watched her find a way into the explanation. When he offered a word, she wrote it at the side, then used a different one in her sentence.

He liked being able to spend ten minutes discussing whether the pink thread belonged with the green fabric. Nina had put a mug beside his elbow before he remembered to ask.

The cupboard doors had been built from different sorts of wood and hidden under paint. Their owner wanted the old handles kept, though one sat higher than the other. Nina said the difference would worry her every morning. Samuel said his hand would learn where to go. She tried reaching for an imaginary handle, missing it, trying again until he laughed and told her to do some work.

They stopped for food at seven. He cut his rolls in half and divided the cheese. The tomato escaped the first cut and rolled under the kettle, leaving a watery track. Nina caught it and washed it in the little sink. They heated one tin of beans and ate from bowls found in the cupboard, hers bearing a crack through the picture of a windmill. Samuel sat on the dining table. Nina pulled up the stool, tested its stability again, and announced that supper would be part of the assessment.

She asked about his mother. He said they were having a meal on Saturday, which Ruth had offered after the difficult visit. She had sent him the time while they were working.

"She's making enough for six," he said.

"Can she send some here?"

"You'd have to bring the bowls back."

"I would. Seriously, if she ever has too much."

He nearly told her about the recording at Ruth's flat. Nina could be practical about disputes, asking which part had actually been agreed and which part someone had assumed. He wanted her to say that getting the sequence clear mattered. But the thought of explaining his mother's face while she asked him to stop, then explaining why the phone had remained on, made him take another mouthful. Nina was reading the writing on the empty bean tin.

"I have to ask June for Friday afternoon," she said. "There's an open session at the college."

"For the course?"

She nodded. "They'll look at samples while you're there. I'm taking the stool if I can carry it."

"I can help."

"You're working."

"I can get it to the bus stop before work."

"I'll bring wheels. Very dignified, arriving with a stool on a shopping trolley."

The prospectus had fitted into her bag at first. Now she folded it into a back pocket, soft at the corners.

"Have you finished the cover letter?"

"Nearly. I've written 'I have always been interested in upholstery' about forty times."

"Were you interested when you were a baby?"

"I don't know how else to start it. Everything I write sounds stupid."

He suggested starting with the things she had done at Ellis. She pulled a face, thinking about it, then unfolded the prospectus on the table between them. The fees had a pencil circle around them. Further along she had written travel, tools, days off. He looked without picking the paper up.

"It's the hours," she said. "I can work out the actual fee. They spread it. If I lose two days here, I lose two days every week. And I still have to pay the rent. I can't keep doing the sums and leaving that out."

"Could you do Saturdays somewhere?"

"I'm already asking."

He heard the strain beneath the briskness and wanted to remove one piece of it. They went through the timetable. Samuel moved the bowls so the folded sheet could lie flat. Monday was clear. Tuesday involved a train connection that looked possible on paper and, according to Nina, failed regularly in life. They tried a bus route on his phone. It took too long. She drew a line through Tuesday and kept talking about the following year.

After supper she asked him to make a short video of her drawing the fabric into place, so she could see what happened at the corners. She set his phone against a jar on her bench and checked that it showed her hands. Samuel started it for her. He watched for a while, then returned to his own work. The light over her bench made a warm oblong on the wall.

She was still talking. It was easier for both of them to speak while they were occupied. Samuel fitted a handle, removed it, and shaved a slight roughness from the edge of the repaired door.

"I haven't told my mum the whole amount," Nina said. "She'd offer it, and then she'd have nothing left for anything breaking down. She's got this washing machine that sounds as though it's full of cutlery. I can't have her sitting there hoping it holds together because I've bought special scissors."

"They're quite good scissors."

"I know. I want them. I just don't want Mum pretending she can manage without her washing machine."

A tack fell and clicked across the floor. Samuel found it beside his shoe and set it in a dish. Nina paused with the fabric between her fingers.

"Sometimes I think I'll leave it another year. Keep working with you. Get properly good at what I'm already doing."

He looked across at her. "You are good."

"At some things. I want to be good at the whole thing. But I like this. Here, I mean. I like knowing where I'm coming in the morning."

"We'll still be here if you do the course."

"I know. I keep changing my mind. You must be sick of hearing about it."

"You can keep telling me."

She bent her head over the stool again. Samuel worked for several minutes with the particular pleasure of having been included in someone's possible future. Next year had usually arrived in conversations as a departure, a job somewhere else, a changed flat. Nina had placed him in a room she hoped to return to.

When she stood up to loosen the fabric at a corner, she noticed the phone.

"Is that still going?"

Samuel glanced over. He could see the small counter on the screen. "Yes."

"Oh. Stop it, please."

He wiped his thumb and stopped the recording. She came to stand beside him.

"How long?"

"Since you started that edge."

"So all the stuff about Mum."

"I suppose."

She rubbed the side of her nose, leaving a faint mark from the fabric. "Can you delete it? I was talking to you. I don't want that kept."

He felt the request reach beyond the black rectangle in his hand. The evening had been comfortable up to this point. He had helped, listened, divided his food. Now there was something he had to remove before comfort could continue.

"It's mostly the stool."

"It has me talking. Delete the whole thing, please. We can do the corner again."

He could have touched the small bin symbol then. She was looking directly at him, with one hand still holding a loose length of thread. He had the phone upright, ready.

"All right," he said. "I'll delete it."

"Thank you."

"You can trust me."

"I know. That's why I asked you."

She stepped back to her bench. He returned to the list of files. Another clip from that morning filled the screen, a chest of drawers waiting for collection. He locked the phone and put it in his pocket. The private conversation remained where it was.

They made a second recording, this time short enough for Nina to watch before putting the phone down. Her hands appeared at the edge of the stool and drew the cover smoothly over the padding. She approved that one. Samuel sent it to her while she watched the progress mark reach its end.

The last half-hour took effort. One of his handles sat crooked until he realised he had picked up the wrong screws. Nina tightened the cover too much along one side and had to undo it. Their conversation returned, though Samuel heard himself choosing subjects. He mentioned the missing bread. She said she hoped somebody had taken it home. The rest of the beans would last her most of the week, which made the loss of the loaf more annoying.

They swept around their benches and washed the bowls. At the door Nina held the stool while he locked up, and they carried it between them to the stop. She wanted the notebook from her bag while they waited. Samuel held the stool and watched her turn to the drawing. There was a patch she had forgotten to photograph. She could do it in the morning, she said, and put the notebook away. On the bus she set the stool upside down beside her, its four legs rising past the window. She waved with two fingers around the pole.

* * *

In his room, he set the phone on the desk and changed his shirt. The evening's warmth remained in him, disturbed each time he remembered the file. Downstairs, Tom stopped him to ask about a drip above the bathroom window. Samuel said he would look in the morning. Tom wanted to know whether he should move the towels. Samuel went up with him and checked the patch, annoyed at being needed until he saw the wet fabric on the sill. They moved the towels. He would ask the landlord about it in the morning.

There were two recordings of Nina's stool. He opened the longer one. For a little while the camera looked straight into the edge of the bench, then her hand passed close to the lens. Her voice arrived with the scrape of his own work in the background. He could tell from the sound when he had first fitted the handle. The whole room had been kept together.

He moved through the clip to the passage he remembered. Keep working with you. The sentence sounded less certain now that he could hear what came before and after it. She had been thinking aloud. He replayed it, concentrating on the words themselves, and remembered the prospectus lying between their bowls.

Nina would feel embarrassed if anyone else heard the talk about money. He understood that. He had no intention of showing it to anyone. He could rename the file, put it beside his other private

recordings, and leave it there. Its existence would cost her nothing she could see. She had been tired when she asked him to delete it; the request had followed her surprise at finding the phone still running. If he played it to her on some happier day, she might recognise the evening as he did.

He connected the phone to his computer. Among the folders were photographs of completed jobs, Owen holding a bicycle upright with an exaggerated expression of importance, and older material copied from the camera's cards. He made a place for this file. The transfer took only a short time. When it finished, he checked that the copy played.

On the desk the phone displayed the same small picture of Nina's hands. He touched the delete symbol on that copy, considered the question that appeared, and cancelled. Keeping both felt safer. He unplugged the lead and wound it around his fingers.

From the shared kitchen came the snap of a cupboard door and someone laughing at a programme. Samuel set an alarm and reached to close the laptop. The little picture of Nina's hands was still visible. He touched it once more, then drew his hand back and shut the lid before the file opened.

Chapter 20

The customer's instructions

The customer had brought a dining chair to show them the colour. She opened the boot and apologised for its state. The chair lay on its back inside. Samuel helped lift it out around a folded pushchair and a bag of books intended for a charity shop. Rain had gathered along the rubber seal. It ran on to his sleeve when he reached inside.

"The table has to go with this," she said. "My kitchen's quite small. Everything ends up next to everything."

The table was already in the workshop. It had belonged to her aunt and arrived with a dark, cloudy coating and a pale circle where a hot dish had stood. Under one corner Samuel had exposed a small patch of wood so she could see what lay beneath. He liked its colour. The patch looked warmer when he dampened it for her.

"That would be lovely," she said. "I don't want it as dark as it is now."

"We can leave the wood this colour and give it a clear finish."

"Yes. Keep it light. I can put the chair at the other end."

Samuel was twenty-two and had begun handling some of the estimates without June beside him. He wrote clear finish on the job card. June, who was finding a receipt for another customer at the front desk, asked whether he wanted a reference clip for the damaged surface. He asked the woman. She agreed and moved the chair out of his way.

He filmed the cloudy surface, the pale circle and the small exposed patch. On the recording he asked her to confirm that she wanted the old coating removed and a clear finish on the table. She said yes, and pointed at the patch again. Her ring made a small tapping sound against the wood.

While the phone continued recording on a folded cloth, Samuel carried the chair round to the window. She stood it upright beside the table and looked from one to the other. The chair was a more even brown. In the grey daylight the exposed patch on the table appeared very pale.

"Actually, can I see the colours you have?" she asked.

He brought over a board carrying several samples. They held it against the chair, tried it in another position and chose the middle brown. She checked it twice, then touched the sample with her finger.

"This one. I've changed my mind. I think I'd spend years saying I should have had them the same. Can we make the table this colour?"

"Yes," Samuel said. "I'll use that as the guide. It won't be exact with different wood underneath."

"Close is fine. I just don't want one to look white beside the other."

"Medium brown, then."

"Yes, please."

He lifted the phone and brought the sample into view. She pointed again. He said the colour aloud, stopped the clip, and promised the table for the following Friday. She left the chair so he could compare it during the work.

At the bench, he put the job card beneath the sample board. June asked whether the woman had made up her mind. He said she had. Nina called him over to help turn a sofa frame, and when he returned the top of the card showed only the first instruction. He could still have changed it. He remembered the brown sample. He carried the card across to the rack as it stood. He would change it when he brought the sample back. The chair remained by the window.

* * *

By Wednesday the table was pale all over. He had removed the old coating and worked across the surface until the colour settled evenly. A few old marks remained deep enough to keep. Nina stopped beside it with a mug in her hand.

"That's come up well."

"I thought it would."

"What colour's it going?"

He looked at the chair, then at the job card. "Clear."

The word came readily because it was written in his own hand. As soon as he had said it, he remembered the woman moving the sample against the chair. The recollection contained no uncertainty about what she had asked. He had held the board while she decided. Medium brown, then. He had said that himself.

There was time to correct the card and change the work. The table had yet to be coated. But he had already arranged the materials for the clear finish, and the bare surface pleased him. The woman had liked it in the small patch. Perhaps, when she saw the whole thing, the chair would matter less. He could show her before doing anything else.

He did not telephone her. By the end of the afternoon he had put the first clear coat on the table. It deepened the grain, bringing out variations he had hoped to preserve. He set the card against one leg and crossed off preparation. The next morning he checked the surface and continued.

Once he went as far as finding the customer's number, with the thought of describing how well the grain had come up. He put the card down. She would probably ask whether it was the colour they had agreed.

On Friday the customer arrived with a friend and a hired van. Samuel had brought the table to the front, where there was room to turn it through the door. He had polished the old brass feet and packed the spare leaf separately. The woman stopped a few paces away.

"Oh," she said.

Her friend came in behind her, holding the van keys.

"Is this the colour it's staying?"

Samuel put down the cloth. "That's the clear finish we discussed."

"We changed it. I brought the chair."

He felt the shop front become smaller. June was at the desk, and Nina worked beyond the partition. The customer touched the edge of the table. She glanced at the hired van through the open door, then put her bag on the chair she had left with them.

"It's very pale," she said. "I asked for the brown."

"You said to keep it light."

"At first, yes. Then we looked at the samples."

Her friend put the keys in a pocket and stepped out of the doorway to let someone pass on the pavement. Samuel wished the friend would wait outside. There was no reason for two people to be looking at him.

"I made a recording," he said.

The customer drew her hand back. "All right."

He found the clip on his phone. Its opening picture was the ring on the table, easily recognised. He knew where her first instruction came. There was a brief difficulty finding the right volume; everyone had to wait while he adjusted it. Then her recorded voice filled the space beside the desk.

Yes. Keep it light.

He stopped the clip before he carried the chair round to the window.

"That's what I worked from," he said.

June had come to stand beside them. She glanced at the job card, then at the customer, who was frowning with the effort of remaining patient.

"I did say that," the woman said. "I've already said I did. We changed it five minutes later. You showed me three browns. I chose the one in the middle. We agreed it might be a bit different on the table."

"I have the colour written down," she went on. "I put it in my diary because my sister wanted to know."

She took a small diary from her bag and opened it against the table edge. Under a dentist's appointment were the words table, medium brown, chair left.

June asked him how long the recording was.

"A few minutes."

"May we hear the rest?"

He turned the phone towards her. The customer stood with the diary open, waiting.

The clip resumed. They heard the chair scrape against the floor, the woman ask to see the colours. Samuel's recorded voice sounded entirely at ease. He supplied the samples. She made the request. He accepted it. Medium brown, then. On the screen his hand held the chosen sample next to the chair.

June waited until the clip ended.

"You changed the instruction with Samuel," she said to the customer. "We should have changed the work card. I'm sorry. We can put it right."

The woman's shoulders dropped. "I don't need a perfect match. I know you said that."

"Of course. Could we keep the chair until the colour is agreed?"

"Yes. It's the van. We only have it today."

June asked when she would be home the following week. They discussed delivery. The friend's keys appeared again, and the woman turned to explain the delay. "You may as well take it back," she told her friend. "We're being charged while it sits there."

Samuel heard her apologise for the wasted morning. Her friend said she could still get to the shops, although she had wanted to do that after lunch. They moved aside to talk about who had the paperwork for the hire. He kept wrapping the leaf, folding one end of the cloth twice.

June wrote down a delivery day and promised to telephone before any new finish went on. There would be no extra charge. The woman thanked her. At the door she paused beside Samuel.

"I've moved everything out of the kitchen," she said. "I'll have to put it back now."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So am I. I only get Fridays off."

She waited a moment, possibly for more. He looked at the cloth in his hands. Then she followed her friend out to the van.

* * *

June put the amended job card flat on his bench. Samuel had moved the table back inside and was looking for a place to set the leaf.

"Leave that a minute," she said.

Nina was working near the far wall. He could hear the steady pull of fabric, a snip, then another pull. June kept her voice low enough that he had to stand close.

"Why did you stop the recording?"

"That's the bit I remembered."

"You agreed the brown. It's there."

"I know that now."

She looked at him for several seconds. "Did you know before we played it?"

He pressed a thumb against a raised thread in the cloth. He could admit the bad finish decision and keep the selection of the clip separate. An ordinary mistake already explained enough.

"I thought she'd see how well it came up."

"You needed to ask her."

"I know."

"And when she came in, you played the beginning to make it sound as though she'd forgotten what she asked for."

"I didn't say she'd forgotten."

"You knew what the whole recording said. You chose that part."

The snipping had stopped at the far end of the room. He wondered whether Nina had heard him claim to remember only the clear finish.

"All right," he said. "I shouldn't have stopped it there."

June pushed her glasses up. "You left me standing beside you, letting her think we were going to argue about it. I have to deal with her now. I needed to know."

"I know."

"Do you? You've said that a few times."

He pulled at the thread until a little loop came free. "I knew she'd changed it. Before I started the clear. I remembered."

June looked across at the table. She rubbed the side of her face and picked up the amended card. "We'll put the table right. Before we do anything, you'll ring her and apologise for the way you handled the complaint. I'll sit with you. Then we'll agree the colour on a proper sample and get it delivered."

"Are you taking it out of my wages?"

"No. You can do the work here. We have other jobs to fit around it."

He had expected something larger and was left with the awkward size of the actual task. A telephone call. More hours on a table.

They called after lunch. The customer answered over the noise of a kettle. Samuel held a sheet of paper on which he had written three short points. June sat at the other side of the desk, looking at the delivery diary.

"I should have followed the later instruction," he said. "And I played the first part of the recording when I knew we'd changed it. I'm sorry."

The kettle stopped. He could hear her setting something on a surface.

"Thank you for saying that. I was beginning to think we'd have to argue all afternoon."

"We'll make a sample for you."

They arranged another visit. She would come during her lunch break, and he would have two shades ready, close enough to give her a useful choice. He repeated the day and time. When the call ended, June gave him the delivery diary. "Put it in, please. I need to get back to the chairs."

* * *

The correction occupied parts of the next week. On Monday Samuel arrived early and found June moving his next job to a different bench. It was a small chest with a hidden drawer he had been looking forward to repairing.

"Who's doing that?"

"I am. You have the table."

"I can do both."

"The chest is due Thursday. Please take the other end."

He helped her carry it. At her bench she tried the concealed catch, which stuck halfway in. He told her to lift it a fraction. The drawer slid out, and she thanked him without looking up. He remained there until she asked for room to put it down.

He had spent two days completing the clear surface. Removing it took him past the place where he had stood imagining the customer's pleasure. The colours he liked were still there. She had seen them too and chosen something else. He worked down one section and stopped to ease his shoulders.

Nina needed the long supports under his table. He said he was using them. She pointed to the short pair standing free beside the wall.

"Those would do you. I need the length for the sofa."

"I'll have to lift it again."

"I'll help. It's only a lift."

He heard himself making the job difficult for her and fetched the shorter supports. They counted and lifted together. When the table was down he thanked her. She was already dragging the long pair away, one in each hand.

The customer came during her lunch break to approve the new samples. She chose quickly and wrote beside his entry on the card. He gave her a copy. She had brought a tape measure and wanted to check the distance between the legs, having put a different cupboard in the kitchen while she waited. He held the far end for her.

"That's all right. I thought it was wider."

"You can move the cupboard back."

"I've filled it now. I'll see."

She sounded tired. He had almost wanted her to be difficult, to make some fresh demand June would consider unreasonable. She put the tape in her bag and asked him to ring as soon as he knew which part of the afternoon they would deliver. She needed to tell work when she was leaving.

On the delivery day her friend held the door while they carried the table through a narrow passage. Samuel watched the edge nearest the wall, calling to June when he needed them to stop. They brought it through without touching the paint.

The chair waited in the kitchen. Once the table stood beside it, the colours sat comfortably together. The customer came round to look from the doorway, putting herself where she would see them each morning.

"That's what I wanted," she said.

She asked about wiping the top and putting hot dishes down. Samuel explained, and wrote the care instructions on the spare copy of the card. She folded it and put it in a drawer. June asked her to try the leaf before they left. With it opened, there was just enough space to pass the little cupboard she had decided to keep where it was.

"Thank you," the customer said. "For bringing it."

Samuel said he was sorry again. She nodded, watching her friend test how far the kitchen door would open.

Outside, June asked him to find the delivery receipt. He had left it on the van seat. She went back for the signature while he secured the loose supports. He could hear the customer talking through the doorway, already discussing who might come for a meal. He tightened the last strap and climbed into the van.

Chapter 21

Words kept

Nina came in carrying a roll of paper almost as tall as herself. She stood it inside the door, took off her coat and caught the roll with one foot as it began to fall. Samuel was holding a chair upside down. Neither of them could help the other without dropping something.

"Morning," she said.

"I thought you'd brought a carpet."

"Pattern paper. It was cheaper in a roll."

"How are you getting it home?"

"I'm leaving it here. June said I could."

He smiled, lowered the chair and held the paper while she fetched a length of cord. She tied it to a shelving upright. Her fingers were chapped at the knuckles, and she had put a plaster around one thumb. He asked whether she had hurt it working on the stool.

"Paper cut. It keeps opening."

"Did they like it?"

"They did. I've got a place."

For a moment he enjoyed the news without qualification. She had worked hard for it. He had seen her unpick a seam that looked entirely acceptable to him, then start again because she knew a stronger way. He congratulated her, and she grinned so broadly that the corners of her eyes folded.

"They said my sample photographs were useful," she said. "The ones you helped with."

"You should put that in writing."

"They did. In the letter. I'll show you."

He held out his hand, and she shook it between their benches. Her palm was warm from holding the roll. She squeezed hard, still grinning, then let go to look for the letter. Across the workshop June looked up from an invoice.

"Show him the timetable," she said. "We need to work out which days to take deliveries."

Nina pulled a folded sheet from her bag. There were two long days at the college and one shorter session. She had arranged to keep three days at Ellis, with an extra Saturday when work and assignments allowed. The figures confused Samuel at first because he was looking for the schedule they had discussed the previous year. She pointed out the revised course pattern.

"So you start now?" he asked.

"In a few weeks."

"I thought you were leaving it."

"I nearly did. Then this place came up. They had someone withdraw."

June came across to look at the sheet. Her glasses hung from the neck of her jumper, and she put them on to read the small print. They discussed a regular collection that would need moving. Samuel stood at the edge of the conversation, holding one corner of the timetable so it stayed flat.

"We can manage Thursday," June said. "I can book the bigger things for the morning. Samuel, could you take the desk collection on Friday?"

"Yes."

"And we'll keep Monday for the two of you when we can."

Nina asked about a customer whose cushion covers she had begun. She wanted to finish them herself before the course started. June agreed. She had written the new collection day on her hand while they talked. Nina checked that she had written Friday, and June held it up, impatient to return to the invoice.

"Have you got enough for it?" he asked.

Nina folded the paper. "Enough to begin."

"Travel as well?"

"I've done the sums. I can stay with someone one night if the trains are hopeless."

"Who?"

"A woman on the course. We met at the open day. She has a spare room."

Nina went home, made calls, took buses. Of course she did. Still, he wanted to know when she had met this woman and how they had begun discussing spare rooms. He had been beside her for so much of the deciding.

"That's convenient," he said.

"It's a lot to ask her. I might manage with the train. We'll see."

She set her bag under the bench and picked up the chair she was working on. He went back to his own chair, lowering it again though he had meant to inspect a joint underneath. At lunchtime he asked whether she wanted to go to the bakery. She had brought food and needed to telephone the college. She held up a sandwich in evidence.

"Tomorrow?" she said.

"Tomorrow's fine."

He ate in the little yard, sitting on an upturned crate. On his phone the old folder of work clips was only a few touches away. He opened it, found the stool recording and closed it before any sound played.

* * *

The next day they went to the bakery. Nina bought two pastries because one had split in the oven and was reduced. She offered Samuel half of the damaged one. They took their food to a bench near the bus stops, where people eating lunch had to make room for people waiting to go somewhere. A woman with a shopping bag sat at the other end and immediately began searching for her ticket.

Nina was talking about a tool list. Some of the things could be bought secondhand; others would be supplied at the college. She wanted to keep working at June's while she studied because a real job made the exercises easier to understand. Samuel listened and separated a piece of flaky pastry from the paper.

"We were going to do the chairs," he said.

"Which chairs?"

"The little pair. You said we could find a pair and do them together. My frames, your covers."

"We still could."

"When?"

She looked at him, then at the buses. "I don't know. When I have time."

"You said you wanted to get good at what you were already doing."

"I do."

"You said you might leave it another year."

"I might have. I was trying to work it out."

He watched her pick a piece of filling from her paper. There had been a particular warmth in her voice on the recording, and he had expected its words to bring that warmth back into this conversation. She sounded puzzled. The woman beside them found her ticket, stood up and examined an approaching bus.

"I thought we had a plan," he said.

"To work on some chairs together? Yes. I'd still like to."

"To stay at the workshop."

"I am staying at the workshop. Three days."

"It's different."

"Yes. I need to learn things we don't do here."

There was pleasure in the answer. She looked towards the college bus when it passed, as though it already belonged to her week. Samuel folded his paper around the remaining food. He felt foolish for having carried an arrangement alone while she developed others. If she could hear the exact words, she would at least admit why he had understood them that way.

"You said you liked knowing where you were coming in the morning."

Nina turned back to him. "I do like that."

"You said you couldn't ask your mum because of the washing machine."

"Why are we talking about my mum?"

"You said there wasn't enough."

"Samuel. I talked about a lot of things while I was deciding. I've worked something out."

He could feel the phone through his pocket. It was already awake when he took it out because his thumb had pressed the side. The folder was where he had left it the previous day.

"Listen," he said.

He had moved the clip close to the relevant passage before leaving his room that morning. His own preparations seemed to become apparent only as he used them. Nina watched his thumb

touch the screen. The sound began with a small scrape, then her voice talking about leaving it another year.

Keep working with you.

Her face changed before the sentence ended. Samuel stopped the recording, having produced the words he wanted. The bus at the stop drew away. In the brief clear space after its engine he could hear someone shaking coins in a pocket.

"That's the recording from the stool," she said.

"Yes."

"You told me you'd deleted it."

"I said I'd delete it."

He heard its inadequacy while he was still speaking. Nina set the paper containing the second pastry down beside her.

"You promised me."

"I kept it because it was a good evening."

"I asked you to delete it."

"I haven't shown anyone."

"You kept something I asked you to delete. And you brought it here to play at me because I'm doing the course."

Her voice had stayed level, which made it difficult to find a point at which to interrupt. He looked down at the little still image of her hands. In the picture she was occupied with something useful. He wanted that version of the afternoon back: two benches, the covered stool, food shared without calculation.

"I thought you'd understand what I meant if you heard it."

"I know what I said. I was worried about money. I was talking to a friend."

"You are."

She shook her head. The movement was small, with no performance in it. Samuel felt his stomach tighten.

"I don't want you recording personal conversations with me," she said. "I told you that then. I want that recording deleted, including any copies you've made."

He looked up quickly enough that she saw there were copies.

"All of it," she said.

"I'll do it now."

"You can do what you said. I can't check every place you've put it."

He opened the file options, expecting her to watch. She began collecting the food and papers. Her fingers shook slightly when she folded the top of the bag. He had never seen her fail to make a simple crease before.

"Can we finish talking?" he asked.

"I've finished this conversation."

"I didn't mean to upset you."

"I asked you to get rid of it. I can't keep saying the same thing."

She stood. He stood as well, almost automatically, and she moved one step back from the bench.

"We can talk about work at work," she said. "I want you to leave my private life alone. Please don't call me tonight or come after me to explain it again."

"We're going to the same place."

"Then give me five minutes."

She walked towards the workshop with the pastry bag in one hand. He remained beside the bench. The woman who had been searching for her ticket came back, saying the bus she needed left from a different stop. She asked whether he was using the seat. He moved his lunch to make room.

On the phone the deletion question still waited for an answer. He confirmed it. A small empty space appeared among the pictures, which closed over it. Then he opened the deleted items, selected the same image of her hands and removed it permanently. The copy on his laptop remained at home. He put the phone away and sat down with the food he no longer wanted.

* * *

Nina was at her bench when he returned. He had taken longer than five minutes, walking to the next street and back, considering what he could say without making it sound as though he had prepared a speech. She looked at him once, then lowered her eyes to the cloth laid before her.

June called him to help inspect a loose table leg. He spent the afternoon removing an earlier poor repair. A lump of hardened glue resisted him for so long that he began to curse it aloud. He waited for Nina to ask for help with something. Twice she went to June. Once she lifted a chair frame herself, taking care to keep the loose pieces together. He moved towards her and stopped when she said she had it.

At four she brought over a work card.

"Can you check the joint before I cover the seat?" she asked.

He took the frame. "Yes."

"Thank you."

He checked it with more care than it needed. The repair was sound. He called her name and she came back, keeping the width of the bench between them. He told her it was ready. She wrote a tick on the card and took the frame away before he had finished saying how he had tested it.

When she put on her coat, he asked whether she wanted the short video of the stool corner sent again for the course. He had already sent it months before. She had it, she said. He offered to take photographs of the finished seat. She said June was helping. The answers were factual and complete.

"I've deleted it from the phone," he said.

She stopped with her scarf in her hand. "And the copies?"

"There's one at home. I'll delete that too."

"Please do."

"Then can we..."

He did not know how to finish without asking for something she had already refused. Nina waited for him to decide, then wound the scarf round her neck.

"I'm going home," she said. "I'll see you at work on Monday."

He watched her leave. June carried on sorting the day's receipts until the door had closed, then asked him to lock the side gate. He went into the yard and slid the gate bolt home. It had been oiled while he was at lunch and moved without the little resistance he expected.

At home he switched on the laptop before changing out of his work clothes. The file had the name he had given it after the good evening. He opened the folder and rested a hand on the edge of the desk. In the glass of the dark window, his room appeared as a second room arranged beyond the garden: shelf, bed, the back of his head. He had kept other evenings there, other people in moments they had already passed through. None of those files appeared to have changed when Nina asked her question.

He selected this one and deleted it. Then he opened the place where deleted files remained, selected it again and removed it. The computer asked for confirmation. He gave it. Afterwards he sat for a while looking at the folders that were left.

He typed a message to Nina saying he had done it. Underneath he began explaining why the evening had mattered. The explanation lengthened, acquired an account of how much he had helped with her application, and made him uncomfortable when he read it back. He removed the added lines. Then he remembered that she had asked him to leave her alone that evening, and saved no message at all.

On Monday the revised schedule was pinned beside the kettle. Nina's name occupied three days. June had written it in pencil so they could make changes as the course settled. Nina said good morning when he came in. He returned the greeting and hung up his coat.

By midmorning a delivery had blocked the front entrance. The driver stood with one end of a long bench resting on the lip of his van, explaining that the customer had forgotten to mention its size. June came out with a tape measure. Samuel measured the doorway while Nina held the door against the wall.

"We can turn it," he said.

"If the legs come through first," Nina said.

They had moved enough furniture together to understand the suggestion at once. Samuel took the far end, June held the other, and Nina watched the nearer leg clear the frame. Up a little. Your end towards me. Hold it there. The driver reached in to help and found there was nowhere useful to put his hands.

Once the bench stood inside, Nina inspected the delivery sheet. One split had been marked as a scratch. She showed the driver the gap and waited while he amended it. Samuel noticed a strip of blue fabric caught on her cardigan. He would once have lifted it off and held it up as though she had been shedding feathers. He told her it was there. She reached behind her shoulder, missed, and asked June to get it.

After the driver left she brought him the work card.

"June says you'll inspect the frame before I touch the seat."

"This afternoon. The other copy's deleted. From the laptop. It's gone."

Her eyes stayed on him for a moment. "Thank you."

He handed her the card. She tucked it beneath the bench's strap and went back to her cushions. Later she needed the narrow clamps. He showed her where they were and held the door back while she carried two through. That was the whole conversation.

Chapter 22

June's conditions

On Monday Nina asked him to hold the frame while she checked the line of the webbing. She had set the new strips beside an old photograph and kept looking between them. Samuel put a hand on each rail. It had been several months since the lunch by the bus stops. His birthday had passed, and the card from Ruth was still on his shelf, making him twenty-three each time he moved it to reach something.

"Here?" he asked.

"That's right. Just keep it down."

She pulled. The frame shifted against his palm, and he moved his grip. They had done this together often enough for him to feel when she would need more weight. When she released the strip, she leaned over to check its position.

"It's pulling that way," he said.

"Yes. I can see it now. Hold it again?"

He did. This time it came square. She sat back on her heels, wiping her forehead on the sleeve of her cardigan.

"That's better. Thanks. I was trying to make it follow the old ones. They were all over the place."

He told her about another frame with the same problem. She asked what he had done, and he brought the scrap of shaped wood he had used to support its corner. They tried it beneath this one. Nina said it was useful, could she keep it until the end of the day? He said she could.

The easy rhythm had returned at intervals since the course began. She could laugh when a loose cushion burst stuffing down his apron. She could ask him to check a joint. On a morning like this the months between them seemed an unnecessary extension of one bad lunch. He had done what she asked. The old file was gone from the phone and laptop, removed even from the places where deleted things waited. He had caught himself missing it, then remembering that he had given it up.

Nina wrote a note on her card. He watched her put the shaped piece beneath the rail again, using his suggestion without hesitation.

"We could do those chairs some time," he said.

She kept writing. "Which?"

"The pair we were going to find. Your covers, my frames. I've seen some."

The pencil stopped. "I'm busy with the course."

"Later, then. When it's less busy."

She put the card down. "Samuel, I don't want to do a project with you outside work. I've said that."

"We'd be doing what we're doing now."

"This is my job."

He could see the little dent where the pencil had rested on the paper. He wanted her to finish the note and return to the easy voice. "A cup of tea, then. We could talk about it."

"No. I'm saying no to having this conversation again."

"You were happy enough to ask for help."

She drew the frame closer to her. "Yes. I needed help with the frame."

It was exactly the distinction she had made before. He understood it. Still, he had held the thing while she pulled, found the piece of wood, offered it for her use. A few minutes earlier she had trusted him with something that mattered to her. He felt the pleasure of that exchange being taken back and made smaller.

"Can you at least listen to what I mean?"

"I have listened. I'm going to ask June to finish this with me."

She stood. He took out his phone. There would be an account of the conversation now, carried across the workshop while he stayed at the bench. He opened the camera and started a new recording, the lens facing the frame between them.

Nina saw the screen. "Are you recording this?"

"So we can hear what's actually been said."

"Turn it off."

His thumb rested along the side of the phone. "You could say what you just said. About it only being work."

"I'm not doing this. June?"

She went past him, leaving the frame and the scrap of wood. He did not follow. He lifted the phone a little, keeping it running, and said that he had only asked. Nina reached the desk before June came round the partition. They spoke briefly, too far away for him to hear all the words. He wanted that part kept as well. Now the record would contain his question and an answer made somewhere else.

June walked over. "Stop it, Samuel."

"I haven't gone after her."

"The recording. Stop it."

He touched the screen. The sudden stillness of the counter seemed to leave him alone beside the work. June held out her hand, then drew it back.

"Delete that one. She told you she didn't want it."

"It shows what I said."

"I heard what you said. I've got a delivery outside and Nina's waiting to know whether she can come back to her bench. Delete it."

He removed the new clip, then opened the deleted items when she asked whether it was still there. June watched him clear it. There was nothing else in the folder. He turned the blank screen towards her, wanting her to notice how little he had kept.

"Thank you. Leave the phone put away. You and I will talk in the morning."

He returned to his bench. Nina came for the frame later, with June beside her to lift it. The shaped piece of wood remained on the cleared surface. He put it back with his scraps.

* * *

On Tuesday June asked him to bring the estimate book to the desk. A low partition separated it from the workroom, and anyone sitting there could hear the brushes being washed at the sink. Samuel had helped build the partition. He knew which screw on the desk side had missed the timber.

Nina was at college. Her bench held two cushion covers waiting for her return. June had the estimate book open to the previous week and a sheet of paper beside it.

"Leave your phone on the bench, please."

"It's off."

"Leave it there anyway."

He placed it face down beside his pencil tin. When he returned, June waited for him to sit. He kept his knees together to avoid the drawer projecting beneath the desk.

"Yesterday can't happen again," she said.

"I deleted it. You saw."

"I did. After she'd told you to stop and you'd kept it going."

"She asked for my help. We were talking normally."

"She needs to be able to ask for help. We all do."

He looked through the gap beside the partition at Nina's bench. June had put the shaped piece back underneath the frame that morning.

"I thought things had changed."

"Then she told you they hadn't. I heard that bit. You started recording after it."

By the time he took out the phone, he had known the answer would be no. The phone would at least have kept the way she said it, the briefness of her voice after all the time they had worked together. He rubbed his palms against his trousers.

"I don't know how long I'm meant to keep being sorry."

June took off her glasses. "You need to let her get on with her work. That's what she's asking for."

She drew the paper closer. "We've had the table complaint, with you choosing which part to play. Then Nina found you'd kept that personal recording. I know you've deleted it now. This is a new one, after a clear no. I need an agreement before it happens again."

She turned the paper so he could read it. There were four points in ordinary handwriting. No personal recordings at work. Customer recordings only with permission and an agreed work purpose. Respect colleagues' requests to end personal discussions. Put disagreements about work to June directly, with the whole relevant information.

"Read them first," she said. "All four. Then we can talk."

"You want me to agree that I was wrong about everything."

"No. I want these four things. And I need you to accept that you broke her trust. Keeping the old recording, then doing this yesterday."

"I said sorry."

"You did. Then yesterday you asked her to explain herself on camera."

He looked down. Each point fitted on a single line. He could already hear the agreement in his own voice, how readily it would make the room easy for June. She would tell Nina, and Nina would carry on with her course and let him hold the occasional frame.

"What happens if I agree?"

"You carry on working. We'll meet again in two weeks and see how things are going. Nina keeps her boundary. You won't be asked to have a personal conversation with her."

"And you'll watch me."

"I haven't got time to watch you all day. I need to be able to leave a room without worrying about what's happening in it."

Beyond the partition a delivery driver knocked on the open door. June called that she would be a moment. He said he could wait. Samuel could hear him setting down a box, then walking back outside. He could take the box, sign for it and enter it in the book. He knew exactly where it belonged. That was still a task June trusted him to do.

"I can get that," he said.

"We'll finish here first."

"I don't think I can agree to this."

June waited.

"If people change what they say, I need to be able to show it."

"You can keep work notes. We can write decisions in the job book. We already do."

"People can say the notes are wrong."

"Then bring it to me. I'll listen. I can get things wrong as well, Samuel. But I won't have people filmed whenever you're annoyed with them."

He pushed the estimate book towards her. "I can't work like this."

"Think about it before you decide."

"I've decided."

The answer surprised him with its firmness. June leaned back in the chair. He had imagined her reaching across the desk for the sheet, altering one of the points, revealing which part was negotiable. She looked tired. For the first time that morning he noticed the dark mark beneath one eye where she had rubbed at her glasses.

"Are you resigning?" she asked.

He could have said he needed the day. The driver coughed outside. Samuel looked at the partition screw.

"Yes."

* * *

They agreed that he would finish the week. June had work he could complete, wages owed to him, keys he would return on Friday. She asked him to write the resignation down so both of them knew what had been said. He did it on the back of a blank estimate form. His handwriting looked cramped beneath the printed name of the business.

Before he went back to his bench, she offered him the four-point sheet.

"Take this home. If you want to reconsider, come and speak to me by Friday at four. The conditions stay. We can work out the rest."

"You said I'd resigned."

"You have. I'm giving you until Friday to change your mind."

He folded the paper and put it in his pocket. The delivery driver had left the box just inside the door. June signed a form he brought back from the van, apologised for the wait, and asked after a road closure. Samuel stood at his bench with the unfinished table leg between his hands. The workshop continued at its ordinary volume.

Nina returned the next morning. He knew June had told her because she asked which jobs he would finish and which needed handing over. She took notes while he described them. The blue patch on her cardigan had frayed, and the bird's pink tail was almost gone.

"The small frame's sound," he said. "You can start that. The dining chair needs another day."

"All right. Could you mark which rails are loose before you go?"

"I will."

He waited for her to ask why he was leaving. She checked the card numbers against the furniture, thanked him and began her work. She needed the rails marked before lunch. He had

another job in progress and wanted to finish it first, then saw that she would spend the morning waiting. He found a pencil and marked them while she watched.

At home he calculated his rent and what remained in his account. He could manage several weeks if he found something soon. The room looked different while he added the figures. Its rent had always occupied a known part of his wages, and now each week required a portion of the money he could see. He rang an agency whose card he had taken from a shop window months earlier. They asked when he could begin. Monday, he said. He was available from Monday.

Ruth called that evening about a meal. He told her he was changing jobs. She asked what had happened at the workshop, and he described June's rule about recordings. He left out the new recording he had made after Nina refused him on Monday. Ruth listened, then asked whether he had another job to go to.

"I'm sorting it out."

"Do you need help with the rent?"

"No."

"All right. You can still come for dinner."

He said he might come on Sunday. She asked him to confirm before she went shopping.

"I can't keep doing enough for two and guessing whether you're coming. I'm sorry, I'm tired. Just ring on Saturday."

He promised he would.

On Thursday he finished the dining chair and cleared the space for its collection. June inspected the work, asked him to adjust one small patch on the underside, and approved it when he showed her again. He had expected every criticism to become part of the larger disagreement. Her attention remained on the chair. She moved it to the collection area and called the customer.

He packed the few tools he owned into a box. Most of what he used belonged to Ellis. Taking his things away left the bench looking almost unchanged: one empty hook, a pale rectangle where his pencil tin had stood, no coat behind it. He had imagined a more visible absence.

Friday passed in small handovers. June asked him to show her where he had filed the photographs for an estimate. He demonstrated the folder names. A customer came in to collect a drawer and thanked him for fitting it properly. At half past three Nina left for a course session. She came to his bench with her bag over one shoulder.

"Good luck with the next job," she said.

"Thanks."

"I've got the notes for those chairs."

"Call if something's unclear."

She paused. "June can ask you if we need anything."

"Right."

He watched her cross the room and close the door. Then he checked the clock. There was still time to take the folded sheet to June. He could agree to its points. He knew what each required; none had altered since Tuesday. His hand went to the pocket where he had kept it all week.

June was speaking to a customer on the telephone. He waited for her to finish. When she did, she looked across at him.

"Anything you need?" she asked.

He took out his keys. "These."

She received them in her palm. "Thank you."

He left at half past four carrying his box. The folded sheet travelled home in his pocket. At home he put it in the desk drawer. He had set his alarm for Monday out of habit. He changed it to the earlier time the agency had given him, then phoned Ruth to say he would come on Sunday.

* * *

The agency sent him to a warehouse where the work consisted of checking returned household goods against lists. A woman at the entrance gave him a vest and showed him where to put his lunch. She spoke quickly because several people had arrived together. Samuel asked her to repeat the instructions for the forms. She did, pointing to the boxes with a capped pen.

He spent the first morning opening packages. A lamp had a missing shade. A kettle had been returned without its base. Someone had wrapped a clock in a towel and written fragile on the towel itself. The man opposite him held it up and asked whether the towel counted as packaging or as a second return. Samuel laughed. It surprised him to hear the sound come readily.

Near the end of the morning he found two identical cartons with different labels. Both held the same kind of lamp. One had a cracked fitting; the other appeared complete. He checked the numbers twice and called the woman who had explained the forms.

"They've been swapped," he said.

She read the labels and opened the second carton. "Could be. Put them to one side."

"I can put the right label on."

"Someone has to check it against the return first."

He had already loosened a corner of the label. It lifted cleanly under his thumbnail, leaving a grey crescent of adhesive. The solution was so simple that stopping seemed wasteful. He looked at the intact lamp again.

"We'll lose the number if that tears," she said.

He lowered his hand. "Sorry."

"No harm done. These go on the shelf there. Write a note about what you found."

He carried the cartons across and wrote the note. For a few minutes he expected the woman to watch him more closely. She was busy helping another worker unfold a large piece of cardboard around a damaged mirror. When she passed again, she asked whether he had gloves that fitted. The pair he had been given were loose at the fingers. He said so, and she found a smaller pair in a drawer.

The next package contained a stool with a badly assembled leg. He could see the problem as soon as he took it out: a fitting caught at an angle, preventing the pieces from meeting. He turned it once, felt it begin to move, then stopped and read the instructions on his work sheet. His task was to record the condition. He described the leg, marked the appropriate box and set it in the right area. Someone else would decide what happened next.

The man opposite had watched him testing it.

"You know furniture?"

"I used to repair it. Still do a bit."

"I've got a wardrobe door at home that opens on its own."

"It might be the floor."

"My wife says it's a ghost."

"Check the floor first. It's cheaper."

The man laughed and asked what he should look for. Samuel explained enough for him to test it safely, then wrote down his number when the man asked whether he took small jobs. He had no idea whether the call would come. It was pleasant to have an answer to offer.

The hours were uncertain. Some weeks the agency offered five days, others three. He accepted an early shift that required him to walk because the first bus arrived too late, and took small repair jobs from people who knew his work. A loose cupboard hinge, drawers that had swollen in a damp kitchen. He kept the money separate until the rent was paid.

On the second Friday he was given a sheet headed availability. He filled in every morning and afternoon. The woman at the desk asked whether he wanted to leave a day for himself.

"I can do any of them."

"I'm asking because once I put you in, I need you. Don't say yes and then remember something."

He thought of Ruth, and the repair he had promised to finish, and chose one afternoon to keep free. The woman crossed it out with him. She had already turned to the next sheet when he left, carrying his own copy folded in his pocket.

Chapter 23

A weekend away

Owen's partner, Beth, had left a note on the desk asking them to keep the pages in their order. Samuel read it twice before moving the first pile. Several sheets had writing on the back; two were joined with a bent paperclip. He laid them on the sofa as they stood, put the lamp on the floor and tested the desk's rear corner.

"You don't have to do that yet," Owen said from the doorway.

"We're going out. I thought I'd see what it needs."

Owen put two mugs on the cleared desktop. "About that."

Samuel had arrived the night before, bringing his clothes and a small bag of tools. At twenty-four he had learnt to wrap the metal pieces so they stayed still in his bag. Owen had heard him put it down and said he missed the noise. They had eaten late because Beth needed to finish something for her course, and had carried on talking with their plates on their knees when she asked for the table back. She was working that morning. Her assignment was due on Monday.

"I said I'd give her sister a lift," Owen said. "Car won't start. She's booked to collect something."

"What time?"

"Half ten."

They had planned to borrow a bicycle and ride out beside the water before lunch. Owen had sent a picture of the route. Samuel looked at the two mugs. The tea had been standing while Owen made breakfast, and a skin had formed where the milk settled.

"You said we were going this morning."

"I know. We can still go later."

"How much later?"

"I don't know yet. It depends where this thing is."

"You don't know where you're going?"

Owen took his mug from the desk. "I've got the address on my phone. I haven't looked."

Samuel's own phone lay on his bag, beside a book he had finally remembered to bring back. The messages about the bicycle ride were there. He would need to move through only a few

exchanges to find the one that said morning. Owen was drinking his tea, waiting. He had already agreed about the morning.

"I'd kept the day," Samuel said.

"I've kept the day too. Mostly. Look, I should have asked you. I said yes and then I thought we'd move the ride."

Samuel looked down at the desk. A brace was loose beneath it. He had promised to examine it when Owen first mentioned the wobble, then thought about bringing the clamps for weeks. The tools had been wrapped last Thursday, though he wasn't leaving until Friday afternoon.

"I'll do this while you're out."

"Come along if you want. You don't have to sit here working."

"I'd like to finish it."

Owen stood with him while he turned the desk. Its joints held except at the loose brace. Samuel asked him to lift one end and hold it while he fitted a support beneath. A mug was still on the top, empty now, and Owen caught it against his chest as it slid.

They both laughed. Tea splashed down Owen's shirt.

"Empty enough," Owen said, looking at the mark.

"You said it was empty."

"It mostly was. I'll use that for everything today."

Samuel passed him a cloth. The annoyance remained, though it no longer occupied the whole morning. Owen asked what he wanted for lunch and wrote the answer on the back of an envelope because he had forgotten it by the time he reached the kitchen.

* * *

The brace came away cleanly enough to be reset. Samuel had the desk clamped when Beth returned. She stood in the doorway looking at its legs, which pointed into the middle of the room.

"Oh. I meant have a look at it."

"I've found the problem."

"Can I use it?"

"Tomorrow would be best."

She put her bag down. "I needed it this afternoon."

"You were at the table last night."

"Because my books were all over here. I was going to spread them out."

He had seen how the desk could be fixed and gone on from there. The clamped pieces occupied the space where her chair had stood. He told her it might be possible to turn it earlier, then stopped. He would still advise anyone else to leave it.

"I'm sorry. I should have checked."

She drew a hand over her forehead. "Where are the pages?"

"On the sofa. The same order."

She sat beside them, turning the top few sheets. One slipped behind the cushion, and she swore under her breath as she retrieved it. Samuel wanted to show her the loose brace. He wanted her to see that the decision had been reasonable once the piece moved in his hand. She was reading a note in the margin, lips moving slightly.

"Could I put the lamp at the table?" he asked. "And bring the books."

"Yes. I'll move them. You can take the lamp."

He did. Its flex barely reached the socket, so he moved the table a little. She pointed to the place she needed left clear. He tested the chair there and moved it again.

Owen returned with sandwiches while they were carrying the last books. He asked what was happening and heard her explanation with his coat still on.

"We can eat in the front room," he said.

"I know we can. I wanted to have it set up before I got home. I've already lost the morning at work."

Owen started to say that Samuel was doing them a favour. Samuel interrupted him.

"I should have asked when she needed it."

"Well. It's done now," she said. "Can you both leave me to it for a bit?"

They ate sitting on the rolled mattress Samuel had used overnight. Owen had brought the wrong sandwich for himself and kept looking at its filling as though another inspection might alter it. He offered Samuel half. Samuel had enough.

"How was the collection?"

"They weren't there. We waited outside this place. Twenty minutes, maybe. Then the bloke came and said..." Owen stopped to catch something falling from his bread. "I've forgotten why. Anyway, we got it."

"What was it?"

"A cabinet."

"Does it wobble?"

Owen looked at him, then at the overturned desk, and began laughing with his mouth full. Samuel had to turn away to finish his own bite. From the kitchen came a request for them to lower their voices. They looked at each other and ate the rest without speaking.

The bicycle ride began after two. Owen needed to adjust the borrowed bicycle's saddle. Samuel held it and said that this would have delayed the morning as well. Owen agreed too readily, having been expecting him to say it.

Beside the water the wind drove through their clothes. Owen tried to tell a story from work and lost his breath halfway through. At the next gate he began again, then asked where he had got to. Samuel gave him the last sentence. It was easier to listen while his legs still held the effort of the ride.

They bought ice creams near a playing field. Samuel's began leaking down one side. Owen found a tissue in his pocket with a small bolt folded inside it. They shook the bolt free and decided that the edges would do.

On the way back they passed storage buildings behind a fence. Owen slowed and pointed at the entrance.

"That reminds me. There's one of those near you looking for people. Same company, I think. Regular hours."

"Doing what?"

"Stores work. Customers, moving things. I'll find the message."

"I don't drive the trucks."

"I don't think you need to. Ask."

He sent the vacancy that evening while they were in the same room, with the sound of Beth typing at the kitchen table. Samuel read the duties and opened the part about hours. He saved the page. Later she came in carrying three mugs and asked him whether the desk would be ready

before he left tomorrow. He said it would. She drank half her tea standing, then returned to the table.

In the morning she let him move the lamp back while she brought her papers. She checked the desk by leaning on its edge, then sat and began writing. Samuel waited beside the door for a moment, watching the line stay where she intended it.

"Thank you," she said, without lifting her head. "It's much better."

Owen was looking through the book Samuel had returned.

"Did you finish it?"

"Nearly."

"You can keep it for another six years, then."

He put it back in Samuel's bag. At the station they made no definite plan for the next visit. Owen said he would send his shifts when he had them. Samuel said he could come for a day, if a weekend was awkward. They stood talking about possible trains until the board changed and he had to go.

* * *

The application asked why he had left his previous permanent work. Samuel wrote that he was seeking a different role, stared at the sentence and removed it. He was using Ruth's table because his laptop lost its charge quickly and her socket was convenient. She was preparing food for a catering job, which had spread from the kitchen to every usable surface. A tray touched his elbow.

"Move that a bit, love."

He shifted the laptop.

"What's the question?" she asked.

"Why I left June's."

She kept dividing pastry. He waited, hoping she would supply a description he could use. She cut another piece and set down the knife.

"I don't know what they want you to say. Why did you?"

"I resigned after a disagreement about how I worked."

"Put that. If that's what it was."

He wrote it. Under skills he could offer practical work, keeping records, lifting within sensible limits and dealing with customers. The page filled. Ruth needed the table for the cooling trays before she left. He submitted the form and unplugged the laptop, then stayed to wash the bowls while she counted portions twice and found she had enough.

At the interview a supervisor showed him the depot. Metal doors stood along indoor passages, with numbers large enough to read from a distance. Trolleys had to be returned to marked spaces. Customers needed help finding units; deliveries needed checking. Samuel asked about the hours and was shown a rota.

The supervisor asked about Ellis. Samuel said he had disagreed with rules about recordings and chosen to leave. The man looked up from the form.

"We have rules about phones here. Customer information stays private. You'd need to follow them."

"I can."

"If something happens, report it. We write it down."

Samuel nodded. There was more he could explain about the workshop. The man had asked about this job, and was waiting to hear whether he could start early on a Monday. He could. Two days later they offered him the position.

During his first week he misread a unit number and took a trolley down the wrong passage. A colleague showed him how the numbers changed at the junction. Samuel wrote a reminder in his pocket notebook and brought the trolley back. The customer had been waiting by the lift. He apologised and held the door for her.

The first regular pay covered the rent and new work trousers. He bought a box of decent screws for private repairs and rang Owen on his walk home. The desk was steady, Owen said. The assignment had gone in. He began describing something she had read aloud to him, lost the point of it and called into the next room for help. Samuel waited while they argued about which paragraph he meant.

Then she came on the phone herself and told him.

Chapter 24

The clearance

On Monday a woman who had hired a storage unit for six months arrived with enough possessions to fill a second one. Samuel stood beside her trolley while she considered the narrow passage remaining between her boxes. At the far end, a rolled rug had begun to lean.

"I thought the square footage would go further," she said.

"Do you need to get at all of it?"

"Eventually."

"I mean while it's here."

She looked at a carton marked Christmas, then at another marked Kitchen but containing books. She complained that her husband had packed that one. He was waiting in the car with their dog, she said. Samuel asked permission to move three boxes so the rug could lie safely against the wall. She agreed and helped with the lightest one.

By the time they had finished, the woman could reach the small chest she needed to open each month. She tried the lid, caught it against a handle and asked Samuel to move the box above it another inch. Then it opened. She stood looking inside and said she had forgotten what she had wanted from it. Samuel returned the trolley to its marked space, checked that the brake held and wrote the completed move on the desk sheet. He had been at the depot almost a year. At twenty-five he knew which doors needed a firmer pull and which customers would return five minutes after leaving because they had forgotten something essential.

His phone vibrated in his locker during the lunch break. He had missed a call from Peter. Beneath it was a short message asking him to ring when he had a minute. Nothing in the words indicated a problem, but Samuel read them twice before sitting down with his food.

Contact had become irregular without ending. Peter called on birthdays, sometimes a day early, sometimes after Ruth reminded him. He passed on news about people Samuel remembered only as someone who once owned a car Peter had repaired. Occasionally they met for tea. They could discuss work for half an hour if Samuel accepted a sufficient number of suggestions he had already considered. He usually left with a question unasked and an impression that his father believed the meeting had gone well.

Samuel ate half his sandwich, then went outside to make the call. The traffic beyond the car park was loud. He moved away from the fence until he could hear.

Peter answered on the third ring.

"You at work?"

"On my break."

"I'll be quick. I've decided to put the house up for sale."

Samuel looked across the parked cars. A van's rear doors stood open. Someone inside it was moving a washing machine with short, controlled pulls.

"When?"

"Soon as I can get it straight. I'm looking at something smaller. Too much room for one."

"Right."

"There's stuff of yours here. School things, boxes. I don't want to get rid of anything you want."

He had not pictured his possessions still occupying the house. Exercise books, unfinished projects, toys he might feel embarrassed to recognise. His first impulse was to tell Peter he could throw it all away. He remembered a tin of marbles whose lid had to be pressed at one corner before it would lift. He had no use for it and wanted it at once.

"I could use a hand with the shed. You've got a better eye for what's worth keeping than some of the people offering to help. Half of them would put a working tool in the bin because it's dirty."

"What needs moving?"

"We can go through it when you're here. A few things upstairs too. No hurry this minute. I thought Saturday."

Samuel went inside to look at the rota pinned beside the lockers. Saturday was clear. He had been thinking of finishing a drawer for a neighbour of his mother's. He could do it on Thursday evening. The woman wanted it by Sunday and had said she would collect.

"This Saturday's all right," he said.

"Ten?"

"Ten."

"Bring some boxes if you've got any. Bags for the rubbish. I'll have a few, but you know what it's like once you start."

"How much of the shed?"

"We'll see. I'm doing it over the next few weeks."

There was a pause. Samuel could hear the radio in the background at Peter's end, followed by the clink of a cup. The sounds made the house abruptly available: the kitchen table, the back door, the route through the hall to the front. He had been there since leaving, though seldom for long. The rooms had continued arranging themselves around Peter's habits.

"You might find something you want," Peter said.

"I'll come and look."

"Good. It'll be useful to have you."

Samuel remained by the lockers after the call ended. He wrote Saturday, Dad, ten in his phone, then rang about the drawer. The woman said Thursday was fine. He had arranged his week around the visit before telling anybody else about it.

When his shift finished, he unlocked his bicycle. He had a longer ride home than he once had from Ellis. Usually the first stretch left him thinking about food and what he had in the fridge. That evening he kept picturing the shed door, how its lower edge had scraped across the yard when Peter pulled it open.

* * *

That evening he checked the cupboard under his desk for boxes. There were two flat cartons saved from deliveries. One had a torn bottom edge. The other would hold books if he kept the load modest.

From the broad window he could see lights coming on in the houses across the gardens. Someone was taking washing down despite the dry weather, pulling each item sharply from the line. Samuel's own work shirts hung on a rack near the radiator. He moved them so he could reach the shelf in the cream-painted recess.

The old camera sat in its case beside a tin of removable cards. Its battery had become unreliable. He used the phone now and had copied the old files to his laptop, some carefully named, others keeping the numbers the camera supplied.

Peter might ask what he wanted to keep. It would help to see what he already had. Samuel switched on the laptop and opened a folder containing photographs from Ruth's first year in the flat. A table with a repair laid across it. A mug occupying the corner of the picture. Owen looking towards the camera with his mouth open, about to object to something. Samuel enlarged one photograph and recognised a screwdriver he had lost years ago.

He watched a short clip of Owen testing a bicycle. Wind beat against the microphone. The white rag rose behind Owen's saddle, and Samuel laughed before his recorded laughter began. He knew the point where Owen would glance round and lose the pedals. He played that part again, remembering Owen wanting to repeat the attempt until he had a better one.

The next folder contained the recording from the evening Peter emptied his work box. He recognised the first picture before he opened it fully. The camera had kept the lower part of the room, some movements clearer in sound than in view. His father's voice arrived, younger without sounding young. Samuel let it continue until the later denial. Then he stopped it.

He sat with his hand on the laptop's edge. The relief had once been enough to let him close the camera and return to something else. Now he reached the denial and listened for a sentence that was never going to be there. His father kept doing what he had done. Samuel paused him with his hand still visible at the edge of the table.

The sale might make a difference. Peter would have to handle the objects, decide where they belonged, empty the spaces where things had happened. Perhaps asking Samuel to help meant he was ready to discuss something. There had been a pause before he said it would be useful to have him. Samuel tried to remember the exact length of that pause and found himself replaying the call in his head, though he had made no recording of it.

He imagined a conversation at the kitchen table with the boxes already packed. He could begin with one incident, something plain enough to avoid a dispute about the whole of childhood. He could ask a direct question and give Peter time. An answer spoken without amusement would be something he could take home.

From downstairs Tom called his name. Samuel had left the wooden spoon in a jar beside the draining board, where Tom had looked twice and missed it. Samuel went down to show him. There were onions in the pan, getting darker while he searched.

"That's the only one that doesn't scratch it," Tom said. "Can it go in the drawer?"

"It was wet."

"When it's dry, then. I keep thinking I've lost it."

Samuel held the jar while Tom freed the spoon. He had been looking for somewhere to keep his paintbrushes and nearly asked about the jar, then saw the other cooking things inside it. He put it back. Upstairs, the paused picture remained on his laptop. He closed it and fetched the drawer he meant to finish by Thursday.

* * *

Ruth was choosing tomatoes when he told her. They had met outside the shops after her shift, and he was carrying a bag containing potatoes and a loaf. She picked up a packet, checked the underside, and set it down again.

"He's mentioned selling it before," she said.

"He says he's doing it now."

"Where's he going?"

"Somewhere smaller. He hasn't said where."

She chose the tomatoes, then changed them for loose ones. "What are you doing there?"

"Getting my stuff. Helping with the shed. Saturday morning."

"All right."

Ruth moved towards the checkout, counting the items in her basket. She had chosen the quick queue and already had too many. Samuel followed, waiting for more.

"Do you know what things are mine?" he asked.

"I took what I could when we moved. There might be school books upstairs. Some things were already in the shed."

"You left your things?"

"A few. There was a serving dish I liked. It isn't worth a trip for a dish."

"I can look."

She considered it. "Blue around the edge. If it's there and you have room. Don't spend the day hunting for it."

At the checkout she realised she had forgotten milk. Samuel went back for it. He had thought of saying he wanted to talk to Peter as well. Ruth would ask what about, and he disliked the prospect of beginning beside the supermarket doors, with her milk going warm and people pushing past.

They walked towards her flat with the bags divided between them. Ruth shifted a bag against her hip. She had been on her feet since the early shift and kept choosing the smoother parts of the pavement.

"Has he said anything else?" she asked.

"About what?"

"About wanting you there."

"He said I know what's worth keeping."

"You do."

"It might be easier to talk while we're doing things."

Ruth adjusted the bag in her hand. "It might."

"You don't think it will."

"I didn't say that." She stopped to get the bag handle out from under her sleeve. "I don't know, Samuel. You've spoken to him. I haven't."

"He asked me."

"Then go and see him. I can't tell you what he meant on the phone."

They walked a few paces without speaking. She touched his arm with the back of her hand. "I hope it's all right. I do."

They reached the turning for her building. She offered to take his bag because he could catch a bus straight home from there. He kept it until they reached her door. She was relieved to let him carry it upstairs and said so, sitting for a moment on the chair inside the flat.

"You can come here afterwards if you want," she said. "I'm out in the afternoon, but I'll be back by six."

"I'll see how long it takes."

"Do. Ring before you come so I know how much to make."

He put the milk in her fridge and left her unpacking. On the stairs he made a note of the serving dish. Blue around the edge. He could begin with that.

On Friday, at the end of his shift, he took home two clean cartons the depot was disposing of. He asked first, and the supervisor said yes as long as the customer labels were removed. Samuel peeled them off at the desk and folded the boxes under his arm. They were awkward on the bus. A man moved his shopping so Samuel could stand them against the seat.

Back in his room he packed tape, gloves and two large bags. He checked the bus time for the morning and set an alarm. Peter sent a message confirming ten, followed by another asking whether Samuel took sugar. He hadn't taken sugar for years. Samuel typed no thanks. He began a second sentence about having a talk while he was there. The words looked too much like an announcement. Peter might ask what he wanted, and the whole conversation would happen before he arrived.

He removed the second sentence and wrote that he would bring the boxes.

His father replied almost at once. Good. See you at ten.

PART FOUR

The return

Chapter 25

The cupboard

Peter had left the front door on the latch. Samuel pushed it, expecting the strip of carpet to catch underneath, and the door struck the rubber stop. Someone had cut the carpet back. A pale crescent showed on the floor.

"In here."

At ten on a Saturday the hall still had the same narrow quantity of light. Samuel set his empty cartons beside the stairs and took the bags through to the kitchen. His father stood at the table with three envelopes and a mug. The photographs above him had gone, leaving darker rectangles on the wall.

"You found it, then."

"Door was open."

"I meant the time. Tea?"

Samuel said yes. Peter stacked the envelopes and moved them away from the kettle. The window lit the thinning hair across his crown. Near his trouser pocket a repair in pale thread had begun to pull loose.

"People coming to look?"

"They want photographs first. Apparently everybody needs to see your bathroom on a computer."

"Saves them coming if they don't like it."

"Bathroom's a bathroom."

Peter gave him a mug with a spoon standing inside. Samuel stirred, though there was nothing to dissolve. The list on the top envelope said Upstairs box. Shed cupboard. Drawers. Each item bore a heavy tick on its left.

"You've done those?"

"Those are what we're doing. I've marked the important ones."

"All three."

Peter looked at the envelope, then gave a short laugh. "Well, they are."

For several seconds they could have been starting a job anywhere. Samuel laid the gloves from work beside his mug.

"Mum asked about a blue-rimmed serving dish. Have you seen it?"

"Can't remember one. She took most of the kitchen things."

"She said to ask if it turned up."

"I haven't seen it."

Upstairs, his old room smelt of paper and the sweet odour of a plug-in freshener. An airer leaned against the wall; closed boxes occupied the place where his bed had been. Peter pointed to one on a chair.

"I put your name on it."

SAM was written on the lid. The thick pen had run dry on the final stroke. Samuel found exercise books, a folder of certificates and loose cards held together with a rubber band which broke as he lifted them. He knelt beside the chair. In the first exercise book he had drawn wind as straight horizontal lines, with a tree obligingly leaning away from them.

"You can put those out," Peter said. "I only kept them in case you asked."

"I'll have a look."

"That's what I'm saying."

Samuel turned a page. He remembered the rings on his teacher's hand as she held his book open, although her name wouldn't come. At the bottom of the box lay a small blue tin. Inside, marbles were cushioned in an old sock. He rolled one across his palm, following the white spiral through its glass.

"Worth something, those?"

"I doubt it."

"People buy anything."

"I'll keep them."

Peter took two empty boxes downstairs. Samuel began separating the clean papers from those with damp edges, then returned them to one pile. He could make those decisions at home. Under the chair was a long shallow cardboard box secured with parcel tape. Something rattled when he drew it forward.

"Give us a hand outside," Peter called.

Samuel pushed the shallow box back. He already had more paper than he had expected, and two serviceable cartons waiting downstairs. He packed the books and certificates into one, using the loose cards to fill a gap along the side. The blue tin went into his bag.

In the front room a low chest stood beneath the window. Objects removed from its top had left their outlines in the dust. Peter came to the doorway while Samuel was setting his carton beside the bag.

"That'll need the pair of us eventually. I've told someone they can have it once I've found the key and emptied it."

Samuel looked at the chest's turned feet. One would have to clear the rug before they tried the doorway. He almost suggested doing it now, then remembered the box upstairs and the whole shed awaiting them. His father was already heading along the hall.

The shed door scraped across the yard. Peter lifted the bottom edge with his foot and held it while Samuel went through. Tools hung above the bench, with a carton of folded cloths underneath. The cupboard at the rear was painted green, so dark beneath the dust that it might have been black. Samuel remembered standing on a box to reach its upper shelf.

"Everything at the bottom can come out."

Peter stationed himself in the yard to decide what went where. Samuel passed him a broken fan, two paint trays stuck together and a bag of electrical leads. The fan went beside the door. The trays went by the drain. The leads came back.

"Half those won't fit anything now."

"One might."

"That's how you got a cupboard full."

"And when somebody wants a lead, who has one?"

Samuel set the bag on the bench. He could see three plugs for things Peter no longer owned. He had no wish to spend the morning establishing that he knew what a plug fitted.

The upper shelf held a biscuit tin, folded curtains and a carton bowed by damp. Samuel supported the carton underneath as he lowered it. Christmas decorations pressed against its weakened bottom. A brittle bell snapped from its string and struck his shoe.

"Careful with that," Peter said.

He put it on the bench and retrieved the bell. Behind it was a cloth shopping bag. He hooked one handle and drew it towards him. Something broad caught on the shelf's lip. Reaching inside to free it, he touched a smooth curve covered with grit.

The mask came out sideways.

He held it by an ear, with its hollow face towards him. The black strap lay across the back like a loose line through an empty space. He turned it. Dull pink, broad snout, two small openings above. Dust stood in the moulded crease beneath the mouth. One edge had been pushed inward by the bag. It moved back slowly under his thumb.

Peter dragged the fan across the concrete.

"What's that lot?"

Samuel stepped into the doorway. His father glanced up, saw the mask, and looked towards the carton on the bench.

"Old rubbish. Put it with the rest."

"You said you'd thrown it away."

Peter straightened with one hand on his knee. "Did I?"

"At the café. When you brought my things. You said it had gone in the bin."

His father picked up a paint tray and knocked its corner against the other. They remained joined.

"I probably thought it had. There's a whole cupboard here. I don't keep a list."

The elastic dangled against Samuel's wrist. Tiny pale fibres showed through the black covering.

"Why was it in the bag?"

"Because somebody put it there."

"You put it there."

"Then I put it there. What difference does it make? Are you having these curtains? Your mum might want them."

Behind the shopping bag was the cupboard's bare painted wall. Samuel looked back at it, as though there might be something else to bring out. Peter shook the curtains to their full length. One corner caught in a nail on the bench, and he stopped to release it.

"I want to take it," Samuel said.

"Take what?"

He raised the mask.

"Have it. I don't want it."

"You're saying I can have it."

"That's usually what 'have it' means."

Peter carried the curtains inside. Samuel remained by the bench. Through the eye openings he could see two patches of green. He touched one rim with his little finger. The edge was smooth. He had expected a ragged join, a defect he could put under another person's finger and ask them to feel. His own finger was bigger now. He turned the face over, finding only costume material, dusty and slightly sticky where the bag had pressed against it.

From the kitchen Peter asked whether he wanted the curtains or not.

"No."

"Then say so."

Samuel returned the mask to the shopping bag. He put it inside the kitchen door and went back for the next carton.

They finished the cupboard before lunch. Peter found a packet of hooks he had been looking for and held it up in triumph. Samuel laughed once, from habit. His father began telling him where the things had come from: curtain rails from the old front room, an appliance a customer had never collected, a box of brackets bought when a shop closed. He remembered who had borrowed a tool and the wall which had crumbled around its screws. Samuel passed him one object after another, waiting for him to mention the bag they both stepped past.

The last tin was full of upholstery tacks. Peter shook it and offered it to him.

"No, thanks."

"June use them?"

"You'd have to ask her."

Peter lowered the tin. For a moment Samuel thought he would ask about the workshop, the departure he had never quite understood. He put the tacks with the things to keep.

At the table they ate cheese sandwiches from a loaf with thick slices. Peter complained that the slices made it go too quickly. When Samuel declined a second sandwich, his father wrapped it in paper.

"Take it for later. You'll be buying something otherwise."

Samuel accepted it. He was hungry enough to want it, although he disliked being expected to want it. He put the parcel beside the blue tin.

"Have you found anywhere yet?"

"Looked at a few. One had stairs so steep you'd need ropes."

"You'd keep a set in the cupboard."

Peter laughed. "Then you'd be glad of them."

They agreed on the following Saturday for the work area. Peter went upstairs to look for another folder while Samuel taped his carton shut. He had brought two large rubbish bags; one still lay folded on the kitchen chair. Most of what they had removed was awaiting some other decision.

Peter returned without the folder. "It'll turn up."

Samuel lifted the shopping bag. His father saw it and reached past him to open the front door.

"Ten again?"

"Ten."

"Good. We got somewhere."

The pavement was busy with the small motions of Saturday. A boy rattled past on a scooter. At the bus stop Samuel set the carton down and flexed his fingers. The mask's snout pressed through the bag against his leg. Nobody looked at it.

* * *

In his room he put the books beside the bed and the blue tin on the pine shelf. He ate the sandwich standing at the window. Peter had spread the butter unevenly, leaving a thick ridge near one crust. Samuel picked a fragment of wrapping from the cheese and finished it.

The mask stayed in its bag until he had cleared a place beside the camera equipment. He rested it against the wall of the cream-painted recess. The old camera was in its case, wrist strap tucked beneath the zip, with a coiled lead alongside it.

In the better light the mask was worn in several separate ways. Grey dust filled the nostrils. A pale scuff crossed the rounded cheek, and the inner edge had a yellowish patch where it had rested against something. Both ears were intact. Samuel drew the elastic between his fingers and released it. It fell without springing back.

He dampened a clean cloth and wiped the surface. Dirt made a grey streak. He worked around the eyes and underneath the chin, holding the whole face in one hand. At eleven it had seemed almost as broad as his shoulders. He remembered having to turn his head to bring one opening in front of an eye, losing the other half of the room.

Samuel held it towards the window, where his reflection was faintly visible over the gardens. The strap hung loose. He brought it closer, enough to smell the enclosed bag and the damp cloth, and lowered it before it touched him.

His phone was on the bed. He took a photograph of the mask beside the camera case and checked the edges of the picture. There was the scuffed cheek, the slack black elastic, the lead he had moved out of the way. He enlarged it until the little eyeholes filled the screen, then drew them back to size. He thought of sending the photograph to his mother. She might look at it while standing in a shop or waiting for the kettle, unable to tell at once what he meant to ask.

He closed the picture and wrote to ask which evening she was free.

Chapter 26

Ruth's account

Ruth was using the blunt end of a knife to open a packet of peas. Samuel took it from her and pulled the seam apart. Several peas scattered across the worktop. One rolled into the gap beside the cooker.

"Scissors?" he said.

"If you can find them."

He tried to reach the missing pea with the knife. Ruth put a pan where his elbow wanted to go.

"Leave it. I need to get these on."

The sitting room was warm from the oven at its other end. On the table lay a theatre programme and a pair of shoes with folded tissue pushed into the toes. Samuel moved his bag to a chair.

"Are those yours?"

"I'm taking them back tomorrow. They were fine in the shop. I've walked up and down in them here and they're no good."

"You can get them stretched."

"I can get my money back. I haven't worn them outside."

She took the shoes off the table and put them beside the door. Samuel had bought her a meal for her birthday once and spent the first ten minutes explaining where they ought to sit. He recognised the same little excess in himself now. She had already decided about the shoes.

"How was the play?"

"Couldn't hear half the first bit. We were behind somebody who kept explaining it to her husband."

"Did you ask her to stop?"

"My friend did. Then we could hear both of them discussing whether they'd been asked nicely. Anyway, it got better. I'm going again next month, to something else."

She fetched two plates. He had meant to show her the mask immediately. Now the pie was ready and the peas were heating and it seemed increasingly difficult to make an appropriate space.

"I found something in the shed."

"Oh, my dish?"

"No. He says he hasn't seen that."

Samuel took the mask from the bag. Its elastic caught on the handles, and he had to free it with both hands. He placed it face up beside the salt.

Ruth stopped with a plate in each hand. He watched her look at it, then at him. Her mouth moved before she spoke.

"Where was it?"

"Green cupboard. In a shopping bag behind some Christmas things."

"Oh, Samuel."

"He told me he'd thrown it away."

She set the plates down. One struck the edge of the other. He reached to steady it and she moved her hand clear.

"It's a horrible thing to bring out like that."

The mask lay where he had put it. He felt the rebuke in his face, an immediate heat.

"I wanted you to see it."

"I know. Seeing it, I mean. I wasn't expecting it."

She turned off the ring under the peas and held the pan handle through a cloth. Samuel waited for her to touch the mask. She put the pan down again.

"Can you put it away? I don't want it on the table with the food."

He had cleaned it. He almost said so, then picked it up. A little of the dust remained in one crease. He lowered it into the bag and pulled the handles together.

"And your phone. I'd like it to stay in your pocket."

He brought it out and laid it on the cabinet by the door, screen dark. "It isn't on."

"Thank you."

The pie's top cracked under the serving spoon. Ruth's glasses misted as she leaned over it. She pushed them up with the back of her wrist and served herself the browned edge. Samuel moved

the programme to the other chair. The place where the mask had rested was empty now; he put his glass there.

"It was cruel," Ruth said as she sat. "Finding it hasn't changed what I remember."

"It looked smaller."

"You were eleven."

He broke a ridge of potato with his fork. The white sauce beneath was still too hot.

"I kept turning my head, trying to get the holes in the right place. I thought there'd be something wrong with the edges when I looked. Something sharp."

Ruth watched him. She had a small straight burn on one knuckle.

"You were frightened," she said. "I remember trying to lift the strap without catching your hair."

"He told you it was a joke."

"He said a few things. None of them made it all right."

Samuel pushed a pea into the sauce. He had come with questions about the order of things, how long she had stood in the doorway, whether Peter had laughed before speaking to her. Sitting opposite her, he could hear how those questions would sound. She had answered them before, to the limit of what she remembered.

"Can I see what you wrote?"

"Yes. After this. I've got it in the bedroom."

He nodded. Ruth ate a mouthful, then frowned and looked towards the oven.

"Could have done with another five minutes on top."

"It's good."

"The other end's paler. The oven's getting worse."

Samuel offered to look at the seal. She said the landlord was sending someone on Friday and asked him to leave it. He ate a piece of fish and discovered the egg beneath it, which always surprised him although she had made the pie the same way for years.

"Did you think about it when we were here?" he asked. "After we'd moved."

Ruth rested her fork on the plate. "Yes."

"You seemed all right."

"Sometimes I was. We liked being here. You liked being here."

"I did."

"I know I waited too long. I don't think a flat wipes that out."

He looked at the lamp behind her, the green shade with its seam turned to the wall. There were still things in the room he remembered buying. On the sill a plant stood in a pot she had said would be far too large and had since grown to fill.

"You did get us out," he said.

"Yes."

For a while they ate. She asked him to pass the water. He filled her glass before his own and caught the drop running down its side with his finger. Her acknowledgement left him unsure what to say next. He had prepared answers to defences she hadn't made.

"How was he with you on Saturday?" she asked.

"Mostly normal. Telling me where all the stuff came from."

"He's got to decide what he's doing with it."

"He remembered things he bought before I was born. Which shop. Which bus he carried them home on."

Ruth put a hand against her forehead, briefly. "He always did like telling those stories."

"When he saw the mask, he called it rubbish."

"I'm sorry."

"It's only rubbish now he's got to clear the cupboard."

She looked at the bag beneath his chair. Samuel wanted to go on, then found he would be saying the same thing again. He took another mouthful. Ruth finished first and waited until he had put down his fork before going to the bedroom.

He cleared the dishes. The serving spoon had fallen into the remaining pie and he washed its handle, standing at the sink while Ruth opened a drawer in the next room. When she came back she was carrying a folder and the scissors.

"Here they are. I was cutting a label out."

She put them in the kitchen drawer. He moved the last plate so she could lay the folder on a dry surface.

The exercise book's blue cover was soft at the corners. Ruth opened it and turned it towards him. He recognised her older handwriting, the narrow letters pressed firmly into the paper. The account began with her arrival home. There was the mask, his distress, what Peter had said. Below that was a separate passage headed with words explaining that Samuel had told her the following part. Further down she had added his recollection of being ordered to keep his hands on the table, with a later date beside it.

He read the page twice. At the bottom the ruled space continued, empty except for a mark the pen had made when she stopped writing. He turned the leaf. On its reverse was a shopping list in faint pencil.

"That's all there is about it," Ruth said.

Samuel returned to the account. "Why did you put this separately?"

"Because that bit was what you told me. I hadn't seen it."

"He could say I'd made it up."

"He could say anything. I wanted to know what I'd actually seen."

He read the short account of what he had told her. She had left room for his words without pretending she had been there. He understood that much. Still, the division made it possible to put a finger on the page and call half of it doubtful. He imagined Peter doing that, then had to remind himself that his father wasn't in the room.

Ruth sat in the chair beside him. She held a tissue in one hand, turning it over without using it.

"I wish there were more," Samuel said.

"So do I, sometimes. I thought if I got the main things down I could get on with the day."

He looked again at the faint list on the other side. Bread, milk, washing powder. She had needed those things that week.

"Could I take it with me on Saturday?"

"To show him?"

"He'd have to read what you said then. Before any of this."

"He doesn't have to read it, Samuel."

"I could put it in front of him."

Ruth moved the folder closer to her chair. "I don't want him handling it. It's mine."

He withdrew his hands from the page. The wish to argue came quickly enough that he felt ashamed of its speed. She had brought the book without making him ask twice. He looked towards his phone on the cabinet. A photograph would preserve the writing, though it would have to include the distinction he disliked.

"Will you show it to him yourself?"

"No."

She said it before he had finished settling in his chair.

"You wouldn't have to stay."

"I don't want to go there. I don't want to ring him about it either."

Samuel stared at the line about his crying. "You said you'd told him it was wrong."

"I did tell him. Several times. I'm tired of telling him."

Her voice had risen. She pressed the tissue to her nose, then set it beside the folder.

"You can read it here. I'm glad I found it for you. That's as much as I want to do with it tonight."

He let the page fall shut. He had the words in his mother's handwriting, her memory alongside his, and her sitting within reach. He wanted to ask what he was supposed to do with all of it. The question would make her responsible for finding an answer, and he could already hear her say she didn't have one.

"All right," he said.

Ruth held out her hand for the book. He passed it across. For a moment her fingers rested over his on the blue cover; then she slipped it into the folder.

They washed up together. She asked how many of the school books he'd kept and he said all of them so far. When he told her about the tin of marbles, she remembered the noise they had made in the washing machine. He didn't remember losing them there. She said it had been a small number, enough to make a terrible noise, and went on drying the plates.

"You were going to tell me something else," he said. "Before I showed you."

"Was I?"

"The play next month."

"Oh. We can't get the seats we wanted. We're trying to decide whether it's worth sitting upstairs. My knees aren't fond of all those steps."

She explained the two performances and her friend's work rota. Samuel listened, at first with an effort and then well enough to suggest the matinee she had overlooked. Ruth dried her hands and went to check the programme. He scraped the serving dish, filled it with hot water and stayed until the potato had softened enough to wash away.

At the door he collected his phone. Ruth was putting the shoes back in their box. She asked whether he thought they would notice the tissue wasn't the original tissue.

"I doubt they keep a record."

"Well, I've got the receipt."

She found it in the programme and laid it on top. He picked up the bag. This time he kept the mask from striking his leg as he moved through the doorway.

"Ring before you come next week," she said. "I'll probably be out Thursday."

"I will."

On the landing he turned to say he hoped she got the seats. She was still holding the shoe box, and for a moment she seemed surprised that he had remembered.

Chapter 27

He remembers

By the second Saturday Peter had moved a folding table into the yard. Three shallow cartons stood on it, marked KEEP, SELL and OUT. Samuel read the words while his father searched for the pen, which was tucked behind his ear.

"You're wearing it."

Peter touched his head. "Saves losing it."

Inside the shed the cupboard showed patches of unfaded green where things had rested. Peter had cleared a place in front of the bench, enough for them to stand together. He pulled out a drawer and set it between them.

"You can start with those."

Samuel found a plastic tray and began sorting screws. Some were bent, others new and still joined by a strip of paper. He picked a hinge pin from the hollow handle of an old screwdriver. Peter had spent an afternoon looking for that, he said, when he was fitting a cupboard door for a neighbour.

"It's travelled, then."

"You see what happens when people put things away anywhere."

"Who else has been in here?"

Peter looked at him, then grunted. "Fair point."

He turned on the little radio. It hissed, found the middle of a song and lost it again. Samuel suggested moving it nearer the door. Peter did, and the song returned at once. Through the open doorway came the sounds of someone washing a car, water splashing and an occasional voice calling along the street beyond the houses.

The work took half an hour from them. Peter tested tools in his hand before setting them down. Samuel used a broken catch to keep the short screws separate from the longer ones. He had left the mask in his room. The bag had stood ready by his door the previous evening, and he had removed it before going to bed. His father had seen the thing a week ago. He should be able to remember it without another showing.

A deep drawer had jammed beneath the bench. Peter pulled each side in turn, making the contents knock against the wood. Samuel crouched and reached round the back.

"Dowel's caught above the runner. Hold it where it is."

"It's always been stiff."

"I've got my fingers in there."

Peter stopped pulling. Samuel worked the dowel free and helped him lower the drawer. Folded invoices lay beneath a scatter of fittings, their edges grey with dust. His father put them in a separate pile.

Samuel recognised a surname. "Is she still there?"

"Daughter's got the place. She wants the back gate looking at. The dog keeps getting through."

"You're selling your tools."

"I've got enough for a gate."

Peter flattened an invoice with the heel of his hand. He had promised to go on Tuesday, he said, when the woman was home from work. She couldn't afford a whole new gate. He would see what could be done with the hinges and the post.

Samuel remembered carrying a toolbox to that house and being given a biscuit. He had eaten it over the open box, trying to keep the crumbs out. He could remember his father telling him to finish it before they carried on. They had been there to work, he had said, although he waited while Samuel ate.

"You've found somewhere smaller?" Samuel asked.

"Looking at a flat next week. Good-sized kitchen, from the picture. No shed."

Peter put the invoice down and examined the pile he had marked to keep. A spanner protruded at an angle. He pushed it flat.

"I don't want two spare bedrooms. Costs enough keeping the damp off walls nobody looks at."

Samuel could imagine his father's tools stored in a kitchen cupboard, the heavy ones on the bottom, the smaller things making a drawer difficult to open. He would have to choose more carefully than the three cartons suggested. Samuel picked up the broken catch and dropped it into OUT.

Peter immediately retrieved it. "Spring in that."

"For the flat with no shed."

His father considered the catch, then put it on the bench.

Samuel wiped his fingers on a cloth. "Mum recognised the mask."

"I expect she did."

"I showed it to her. She found the book where she wrote down what happened."

Peter was rubbing a mark from a spanner. "Your mum does like keeping things going."

"I asked to see it."

"There you are, then."

He put the spanner with the tools to keep. Samuel wanted him to leave his hands empty for a moment.

"She remembers taking it off me. You calling it a little lesson."

"And she remembers exactly what everybody said, does she?"

"She wrote what she saw."

"We were having a bit of nonsense over your dinner."

"You remember doing it."

The song ended. A voice began talking about traffic. Peter reached to the radio and turned it off. Samuel felt the small preparation in his stomach, the empty space waiting for his father's voice. Peter picked up another tool and tested its edge with his thumb.

Samuel took out his phone.

"What's that for?"

"I'm recording what you say."

"Course you are."

"You've said different things before."

Peter looked towards the open shed door. "So now I need an audience in my own shed."

"It's for me."

"If you think I'm performing for it, you've got the wrong idea."

Samuel started the recording and rested the phone against a carton at the end of the bench. The screen held Peter's upper body and part of the doorway, with a hanging rag in one corner. He adjusted it once. His father watched, then turned back to the drawer.

"Did you make me wear the mask?" Samuel asked.

Peter breathed out through his nose.

"Yes, I made you wear it. You'd made a mess and I was trying to get through to you. It was a bit of nonsense."

Samuel's next question left him. His father put down the tool and took another. The sentence had arrived between those movements, in the same voice he had used about the drawer.

"You made me."

"I've just said that."

"And you wouldn't let me take it off."

"You were told to sit at the table for five minutes. Your mother came in and made a great business of it."

Samuel closed his fingers round a brass fitting. He set it down because the edge was pressing into his palm.

"I couldn't see properly. I was crying."

"You cried if your socks were wrong. You were a sensitive child."

His father was sorting tools again. Two screwdrivers went into the carton, one with a handle Samuel remembered against his own small palm. He watched Peter test a third and wished it would break, something abrupt enough to arrest his hands. The thought embarrassed him. He moved the brass fittings away from the phone.

"Look at me a minute."

Peter looked up. There were grey hairs at the corners of his mouth and a patch of jaw the razor had missed.

"Mum had to take me upstairs. You knew I wanted it off."

"She took it off. You went upstairs. It was finished."

"Was it wrong?"

Peter set both hands on the bench. "If you want me to say I was the world's worst father, you're wasting your morning."

"I'm asking about one thing."

"There's always another thing underneath. I fed you, kept this place going, taught you how to use your hands. You've done all right with that."

"I'm asking whether you're sorry."

His father glanced at the phone. "I didn't think it was a hanging offence."

From the yard came the splash of water emptied from a bucket. Peter shifted his weight and winced, a hand going to his lower back.

"I wouldn't bother with it now," he said. "Too much trouble. Satisfied?"

Samuel had expected to feel something loosening when his father admitted it. He tried to recover that moment, the yes still close enough to hear again in his head. Peter remembered. The question Samuel had brought had an answer. Yet here was his father waiting for him to move aside so he could lift a carton.

"You wouldn't bother."

"That's what I said. Can we get on?"

Peter reached past him. Samuel shifted to let him through. He kept the recording running while his father carried the carton into the yard. The bench was empty where Peter had stood, and Samuel watched the doorway until he came back.

"Want that little vice? You'll have a use for it."

Samuel knew it was a good one. It would clamp to his table without taking much space, and he had occasionally wished for exactly that. He looked at the screw and the clean edge of the jaw.

"No."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Peter put it with the things to sell. Samuel began pulling nails from a cracked strip of wood. When he had finished he collected each nail from the bench and put it in a tin. His father wrote a price on the tools, showed him, and changed the amount when Samuel said it was too high. That disagreement lasted less than a minute.

Samuel stopped the recording. There was a long stretch at the end of movement and scraping, with neither of them saying anything about the mask.

At one he helped carry the sale cartons to the front room. Peter offered food. Samuel said he had something at home and went to wash his hands. His father followed, rubbing his back.

"Can't do next Saturday. Somebody's coming about the larger stuff, then I'm looking at that flat. Week after, if you're free. Get your last box and shift the chest."

"All right."

"I'll ring when I know."

On the list he drew a line through work area. Samuel dried his hands and hung the towel over its rail, folding the wet part inside without thinking. Peter was looking out at the yard.

"Leave those boxes where they are," Samuel said. "If your back's bad."

"I'll manage."

"You can do them another day."

His father nodded, already putting the pen away.

* * *

On the way home Samuel bought milk and a short length of black elastic. The woman in the shop offered two widths. He put a finger beside the narrower one and said it was for a strap. She cut it a little beyond where he pointed, folded it into a paper bag and went to serve somebody waiting behind him.

At home he set the phone against a book. The recording began with his father's shoulder too close to the lens, then settled into the view Samuel remembered. Voices from the street were clearer than he had noticed at the time. Someone asked for a bucket. A laugh came through the open door while his own first question sounded from the phone.

He watched until Peter said yes, then stopped and moved it back a few seconds.

"Yes, I made you wear it."

His father looked at the tool in his hand. Samuel enlarged the image until it blurred. Peter's mouth and the missed patch on his jaw became soft squares. He returned the picture to its original size.

The mask rested beside the camera case on the pine shelf. He brought it to the desk. White threads broke through the flattened strap. When he pulled it, something inside gave with a faint dry crackle.

He took the new elastic from its bag. The old length curled as he removed it and laid it straight. He cut the replacement a little longer, threaded it through the side openings and secured it. One end twisted. He undid it and tried again, keeping the strip flat between finger and thumb.

The phone showed Peter halfway through a breath. Samuel moved it to make room for the scissors. With the new strap fitted, he drew it across the back of his hand and let it go. It returned to shape. He put the old elastic and the cut ends in the bin.

He tucked the strap clear of the eyeholes and set the mask on the shelf, with its face towards the room. Then he sat on the bed with the phone.

This time he played through the admission without stopping. He was waiting for the question about being sorry.

Chapter 28

A paid repair

June rang on Monday while Samuel was eating a sandwich outside the depot. A van was reversing across the yard, its warning sound repeating between the buildings. He moved towards the fence to hear her.

"Have you got a minute?"

"Yes."

"There's a sewing box I can't collect. Hinges pulled loose, something going on with the bottom. The customer's near you. Do you want to have a look?"

"What sort of box?"

"Wooden, flat lid, one tray inside. I've seen a picture. You'll need to agree the work and the price yourself."

He said he would. She asked permission to give the customer his number and waited for his yes before continuing.

"Fit it round your hours. If you can't do it, tell her. I can't keep ringing round for her."

"I can do Wednesday evening."

"You arrange it with her."

He heard the sound of tape being pulled from a roll. Somebody at the workshop asked June a question and she answered away from the phone. He could picture her standing with one hip against the bench, looking at what needed wrapping.

"Are you busy?" he asked when she came back.

"Yes. That's why I can't collect it."

"I meant generally."

"Generally as well. The work's coming in. Getting it out again is the problem."

Samuel had nothing prepared to follow. June waited a moment, then said she would pass his number on.

"Thanks for thinking of me."

"You can do a box. Let me know how you get on."

The call ended. He put the phone away and returned to his sandwich. The van had finished reversing, and its driver was standing by the office with a delivery sheet held against his forehead to shade his eyes. Samuel went over to show him where to unload.

* * *

On Wednesday the customer met him with a ball of wool under her arm. She had been emptying the sewing box and discovered a knitting needle caught under its tray. It took them both a minute to work it free.

"That's the trouble," she said. "Everything's got somewhere to catch."

She cleared knitting from the chair and asked him to sit. Samuel crouched by the box. A rear hinge had lifted, bringing the lid up crookedly. The thin bottom panel had worked loose along one edge. Near the corner somebody had added a screw and split the wood around it.

"My brother," she said when he touched it. "He said it would hold."

"The lid's pulling on that corner. I can put the hinge back properly and secure the bottom. You'll still see a little of the crack."

"It's under the wool. I'm not entering it for anything."

He worked the lid through a small movement and inspected the other hinge. That one was sound. He gave her a price, including returning the box, and waited while she considered it.

"June said you'd tell me if it wasn't worth doing."

"It's worth doing if you want to keep using it. The lid and the sides are good."

"I do. It's the right height beside the chair."

She put her hand on top to show him where her cup usually stood. He suggested a mat, then wished he had let her finish. She lifted one from the chair.

"I have got one."

"Right. Sorry."

"It's all right. I know what people do to wood."

They agreed Saturday for its return. She could be home before eleven, she said; after that she was taking a neighbour shopping and didn't want to be left waiting. Samuel checked the bus times and offered half past ten. He wrote the work, price and time on a piece of paper.

"Could I take a picture of the damaged corner?"

"Of course. Do you need me to hold it?"

"It's fine there."

He took a close picture and one of the whole box. She found a bag large enough and helped tuck a cloth around the lid. There was a tangle of thread still caught beneath the rim. He freed it and gave it to her, and she wound it round two fingers while he packed.

At the door she looked again at the note. "You don't want anything now?"

"When I bring it back."

"Good. I'll have it ready."

At home the box took up most of the desk beneath his window. He moved the lamp and spread a cloth before setting out the tools. Beneath the lining was an old repair, a thin strip of hard glue holding the bottom in the wrong position. Cleaning it away took longer than he had allowed. By the time the corner fitted together properly, he was hungry and irritated with whoever had done it before him.

A knock came at the door. One of the other tenants stood outside with a shirt over his arm.

"Have you got an iron? The one downstairs smells like it's cooking itself."

"Unplug it."

"I have. I need another one."

Samuel had already begun explaining what might be wrong with it. He stopped. "Sorry. No."

The man looked at the sewing box. "You do that in here?"

"Small things."

"Right. Don't get glue on your shirt."

After he went, Samuel heard him on the landing asking somebody to bring an iron round. He left the sewing box fitted together without adhesive and went downstairs to eat. Returning to it an hour later, he found a little piece of old glue he had missed. It came away under his thumb, and the edge settled as it should.

The box stayed clamped overnight. Samuel worked on it between his shifts, giving the repair time to set before refitting the hinge and the lining. He kept the displaced wool and thread in the

bag to return. By Friday evening the lid opened evenly and the bottom held when he put a few small tools inside and carried it across the room.

He took the tools out. He wished for a larger bench and somewhere to leave two jobs at once. There was room for this one if he moved his dinner to the bed; it had been worth the inconvenience.

On Saturday he arrived a few minutes before half past ten. The customer came to the door with her purse in her hand. He asked her to try the lid before paying. She opened it slowly, shut it, then opened it fast enough to make him look up.

"It used to stick just there."

"The corner was lifting. It should move freely now."

She looked at the base. He showed her the mark he had left underneath because removing it would have meant taking more wood away. She didn't mind. It faced the carpet.

While she returned her needles to their case and the wool to the box, he put the cloth and bag together. He had written the completed work on a clean note. She compared it with the first one, counted out the money and passed it to him.

"Tell June thanks for finding you."

"I will."

"Have you got another card? My neighbour's always saying she's got a drawer that won't shut."

"I haven't got cards. She can use that number."

He pointed to the note. The woman tucked it inside her sewing tray where she said she would find it. Then she looked at the clock and began getting her shopping bags together. He carried the empty bag out and let her get on.

June's reply to his message came while he was choosing apples: Good. Thanks for letting me know. He read it twice, then put the phone away. He bought bread, milk and the biscuits he usually left on the shelf after looking at the price. At home he wrote the payment, the cost of materials and his hours in the notebook. After the extra work on the old repair, he had earned less per hour than he had expected. He would allow more time for that when he priced another one.

Downstairs the man with the shirt was making toast. The shirt hung over a chair, smoothly pressed.

"Found an iron, then."

"My sister's. She wants it back tomorrow."

"Fair enough."

"She's borrowed my suitcase for three weeks. I didn't point that out."

Samuel laughed and put a pan on the hob. They moved around each other, passing a clean knife and making space by the sink. The other man wanted the oven later; Samuel said he only needed the hob. When he carried his dinner upstairs, the desk was clear. He spread his elbows on it and ate while the first rain struck the garden paving.

* * *

Owen called on Sunday afternoon to ask whether Samuel had his tape measure.

"Which one?"

"Grey case. Red tape round the end."

"Mine's yellow."

"I know yours is yellow. I'm asking about mine."

"Why would I have it?"

"You were here. Things go in pockets."

"Months ago."

"I've been looking for months."

Samuel opened the drawer anyway. He reported his own tape measure, a pencil worn too short to use comfortably and a screw whose purpose he had forgotten.

"Screw might be mine," Owen said.

"Describe it."

"Metal. Twirly."

"I'll need more than that."

Owen laughed. Beth asked him to move a chair. He said he was doing it, then forgot while explaining the bookcase they wanted to order. Samuel heard the request again.

"Hang on."

There was a scrape and a thump. Owen returned, breathing harder.

"We're putting it where the chair was. If it fits. Apparently 'about that' isn't a recognised measurement."

"You could use string."

"Then I'd be looking for string."

Samuel lay back against his pillow. He had done the washing that morning, and a row of shirts hung near the radiator. Owen described a job involving a noise that vanished whenever anybody else listened. Halfway through he stopped to ask someone where the coffee tin had gone, then resumed with a different part of the story. Samuel lost track of which vehicle he meant and let him finish.

"I did a sewing box this week," he said. "June passed it on."

"How is she?"

"Busy. She couldn't collect it."

"That worked out, then."

Samuel picked at a thread on the pillowcase. "I'm helping Dad clear the house as well. He's selling it."

"That shed alone. Remember trying to get the bikes in there?"

"You put yours across the door."

"Only till I could reach the other end. Then we couldn't reach either end."

Samuel laughed. They had lifted one bike over the other, scraping the saddle against the roof, and Peter had made them put everything back before they left. He remembered Owen's solemn face while promising to return the shed to its previous condition.

"Most of it's done now," he said. "He's keeping half what he said was going."

"Sounds right. Oh, there it is."

"The tape?"

"Behind the coffee tin."

"Where you left it."

"Where somebody put the coffee tin in front of it. Different thing."

He went to measure the wall. Samuel listened to him repeat the numbers to Beth. When Owen came back he had forgotten what they were discussing.

"Your dad. Sorry. How long have you got left?"

"One more Saturday."

"Nearly there, then."

"Yes."

Owen told him the bookcase would fit, provided they didn't put it together inside the room and then try to get it through the door. Samuel said that was usually the best place to put a bookcase together. Owen began to explain what he meant, stopped, and laughed at himself. They ended the call while he was still trying to recover the sensible part of the plan.

* * *

Peter rang on Thursday. The chest had a definite collection time: Tuesday afternoon, after Samuel's visit. There would be two people to carry it. They wanted it ready near the front door.

"It's downstairs already," Samuel said.

"Out where they can get it. I've emptied most of it. I'll finish before you come."

"And the box upstairs?"

"Still under the chair. That's the last of yours."

They agreed ten on Saturday. Samuel wrote it on the paper beside his work rota. Peter asked whether he still had the tape from the first visit, then remembered finding a roll in the shed. He said there was no need to bring anything special.

After the call Samuel opened the shed recording. His father's shoulder filled one corner before he stepped back. The rag hung beside the carton. Beyond the door somebody called for the bucket, and Samuel moved the recording forward until he heard his own question.

Peter said yes. Samuel watched his mouth, then the glance towards the tools. He let it continue through the silence following the question about being sorry. He knew what came next, and still felt a small impatient lift in his chest before his father answered.

Chapter 29

Saturday morning

He put the mask in the bag and took it out again. The snout made a hard corner beneath the canvas. He had wrapped it in a tea towel, with the new black strap folded inside, and the towel slipped when he tried to settle it at the bottom. For a moment the face looked up from beside his shoes.

Samuel knelt and folded the towel around it properly. His fingers found the small eye openings through the cloth. He had left a space on his shelf for whatever papers remained at the house. The space looked too large now. He moved a book across it, then put the book back where it had been.

The phone was charged. He checked without unlocking it and put it in his coat pocket with his keys. On the desk stood the cup he had used with breakfast. He carried it down to the shared kitchen, rinsed out the tea and left it upside down on the drainer. Someone had put a wet spoon in the sugar. He lifted out the brown lump with the point of a clean teaspoon and rinsed that too.

His work trousers hung over the chair upstairs. He would need them on Monday. He took his bag, pulled the room door shut and tried the handle.

Outside, the pavement was drying in strips along the houses. A man dragged a wheelie bin over the wet part, his other hand full of letters. At the bus shelter Samuel turned the bag so the smooth back of the mask rested against his knee. He had arrived early on the first visit. Today he watched the clock in the bus until it changed. Ten had been agreed.

Peter opened the door before Samuel had finished knocking. His blue working shirt was tucked into his trousers on one side, loose on the other.

"Good. Give me a hand with this first."

Samuel stood his bag beside the stairs and hung his coat on the hall peg. Through the front room door he could see the low chest, emptied now, with its drawers stacked on the rug. A pale rectangle showed where a picture had hung.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning. Take that end, will you?"

They lifted far enough to discover that one foot had caught the rug. Peter put his end down and pulled at the trapped edge. Samuel waited with his hands beneath the lip of the chest, an old screw head pressing into one finger.

"On three," he said.

"I know how to lift something."

Peter pulled before he was ready. Samuel caught the weight, knocking his knee against an empty drawer space.

"Wait."

His father looked over the top at him. Samuel adjusted his grip and nodded. This time they rose together. At the doorway Peter began turning too soon. Samuel drew his end back into the room until the corner cleared the frame.

"There," Peter said. "Got it."

They set the chest along the hall wall, beyond the sweep of the front door. Samuel walked past to check the space. His bag would fit through without his having to turn sideways. Peter worked a folded scrap of cardboard beneath one foot, stood and pushed down on the top with both hands.

"They'll inspect every bit when they come. You'd think I was selling them something."

"Tuesday?"

"Between one and four. I said they could have it if they took it away. Apparently even that needs an appointment."

Samuel went for the drawers.

"Brush them out first," Peter said. "There's years in those corners."

The kitchen looked larger with so much removed. The table remained beneath the rear window, two everyday chairs beside it and a third pulled across from the wall. A shallow tool tray lay on the counter near a roll of brown tape. It held a wooden mallet, a screwdriver, a measuring tape and some loose screws. Above it the short fixed shelf had been cleared except for a biscuit tin and a folded cloth.

Samuel found the dustpan brush under the sink. Through the back door glass he could see the open shed and the cupboard's bare shelves. A clean patch of wood marked where something had stood for years.

He brushed the drawers out over the dustpan. In the bottom one he found a small white button, a dry rubber band and the paper sleeve from a packet of batteries.

"Anything useful?" Peter called.

"A button."

"Keep it."

Samuel laid it on the chest. Four holes and a chipped edge. His father brought two mugs from the kitchen and set them beside it, then frowned at the damp rings.

"Take yours through. I'll put the drawers back."

Samuel sat nearest the kitchen doorway. His tea was too hot. He had already taken a mouthful and had to keep it there while it cooled enough to swallow. Peter came in with the brown envelope that had been under the drawers.

"Your box is in the back bedroom. Everything left up there is yours. Unless you find a fortune."

Samuel swallowed.

"You can laugh," Peter said.

"I know."

His father opened the envelope and looked inside. "How's work?"

"All right."

"Still at the storage place?"

"Yes. I did a sewing box last week as well."

"What was wrong with it?"

"The hinge was pulling out. Bottom coming loose."

Peter nodded. "Those screws are always too short."

"Someone had split the corner."

"Well, there you are."

He put the envelope in a kitchen drawer. Samuel had wanted to say that the woman had tried the lid several times, that she had already begun filling the tray before he left. He could hear how much he would be asking his father to make of a sewing box. He left his mug and went upstairs.

The long shallow carton still lay beneath the chair in the back bedroom. The wallpaper had faded around the place where a bookcase had stood. Samuel squatted and peeled the tape from the flaps. There were more schoolbooks, loose drawings and a folder with its elastic gone slack. A pencil case had been packed along one side. Its zip caught on a ruler, and the smell of old shavings rose from the lining when he freed it.

His name on a schoolbook was written in careful capitals. Beneath it he had drawn a rectangle around the class number. Inside, a teacher had written Please use a ruler under a diagram drawn with one. He turned the page and smiled at the heavy line under the next heading.

A drawing of a house had too many windows. Samuel had put a table in each one and given every table four visible legs. On the back, in Owen's hand, was a little man struggling to carry an enormous chair. He studied the face, three dots and an open mouth. You'd have to put your dinner on a ladder. Something like that. He remembered laughing, though the exact sentence escaped him.

He put the drawing on top of the folder to keep it flat. Beneath it was a school trip form, folded into quarters and never handed in. Packed lunch, suitable shoes, waterproof coat. He had no memory of wanting to go. The paper had survived with its boxes empty. He put it aside, then returned it to the folder. There was no need to decide here.

The chair shifted when he leaned against it. One rung was loose. His thumb had begun testing the joint before he heard Peter on the stairs. He took his hand away and sat back on his heels.

"It can all go if you don't want it."

"I'll take it."

"You'll end up shifting it again."

Under the folder lay a wooden pencil box with a sliding lid. Samuel had forgotten it. He pulled the lid and it caught halfway. A folded piece of paper had swollen against the underside. He eased it clear with a fingernail.

"That was mine," Peter said.

Samuel looked up. "You gave it to me."

"I let you use it."

"It has my name inside."

He turned the lid over. The letters were pressed deep with a ballpoint pen, much less careful than those on the schoolbook. Peter leaned against the doorframe.

"You put your name on plenty of things."

"It was in my room."

"Take it, then. I don't want a performance over a pencil box."

Samuel kept it in his hands. A tiny pin repaired one corner; the wood around it had darkened. He remembered standing the lid upright to keep a page open. The gift itself had no clear place in his memory. His certainty had arrived ahead of any picture.

"Did your dad make it?"

"No. Bought it somewhere."

"I thought you said he made it."

"You can have it, Samuel. I've just said."

Peter went downstairs. Samuel tried the lid again. Without the folded paper it moved freely. He wanted to call after his father and settle the question of whether it had been given or lent. He could hear performance waiting in any reply. He put the box among the books and folded the flaps over.

Downstairs the chest had all its drawers back. Samuel left the carton near his bag at the foot of the stairs. He could manage both on the bus, with the carton under one arm. His father was standing at the back door, pulling on a pair of old gloves.

"Just the pots, then."

In the yard Samuel held a sack open while Peter dropped in cracked pots. A sharp edge caught the plastic. Samuel moved his hand and his father stopped pouring until he had doubled the torn part over. They finished without speaking. Two lengths of wood went against the shed wall to be kept. A strip of hardboard rested beside the gate.

The last question concerned a folding stool. Peter tested it with one foot, lifted it and handed it across.

"Want that?"

Samuel opened it. The canvas sagged and one rivet moved in its hole. "No."

"Useful for something."

"I don't need it."

Peter put it with the rubbish. Then he stood with his gloves dangling from one hand, looking into the shed. Samuel waited for another job. His father peeled a loose thread from the glove and let it fall.

Back in the kitchen Peter emptied their cold tea and filled the kettle. Samuel went for his bag, setting it on the spare chair. He fetched the phone from his coat and laid it face down beside his mug.

"Have we finished?" Peter asked.

"With the sorting."

"That's what you came for."

Samuel drew the bag towards him. His hand stopped on the canvas above the wrapped mask.

"I wanted to talk about what you said last time."

Peter turned the kettle off before it boiled. "I thought you might."

"You said you remembered making me wear it."

"I do remember."

"You said it was finished when Mum took me upstairs."

"It was."

The answer came so quickly that Samuel had nothing ready. On the bus he had arranged pauses between the questions, time in which his father would have to think. Peter was already lifting the kettle.

"I was frightened of you," Samuel said.

Peter poured into one mug, then the other. "Plenty of children get frightened when they're in trouble."

"When I wasn't in trouble. I used to listen when you came in."

"For what?"

"To hear what sort of mood you were in."

His father rubbed the bridge of his nose. His glasses lay beside the tool tray. Samuel could see the red dents they had left.

"You make it sound as though the house was dreadful every minute."

"I haven't said every minute."

"There were holidays. You had your friend here. I took you out, taught you things."

"I know what else happened."

"Well, remember some of that."

Samuel set his palm flat on the table. There were small ridges in the varnish beneath it.

"I remember this too."

Peter picked up his mug and blew across the tea. "What do you want me to do about something that happened when you were little?"

Samuel wanted him to put the mug down. He wanted the glance towards the sack in the yard to stop. He had pictured an answer he could take home, yet here he was waiting for a change in the face across from him, for the words to cost his father a breath.

"I want you to understand it."

"I've heard you."

Samuel opened the bag and unfolded the tea towel on his knees.

Chapter 30

The conversation ends

Peter saw the edge of the pink cheek and put his mug down.

"Oh, for God's sake."

Samuel unfolded the rest of the towel. The fresh elastic lay black against the old material. He lifted the mask onto the table, face upwards, with the towel beneath it.

"Look at it."

"I can see it."

Peter stood with his hands against his hips. His shirt had come out farther at the back while they were carrying the chest. Samuel could see a strip of white vest. Once, before a school meeting, he had told his father his shirt was untucked and Peter had thanked him. The memory brought an absurd wish to say it now.

"You made me sit here wearing it."

"Yes. I know where I was."

"And you laughed."

Peter drew out the chair by the window and sat down. Samuel pressed a fingertip against the mask's forehead until the thin material flexed.

"What else do you want me to say?" Peter asked. "You asked if I remembered. I told you. You wanted the thing, I let you have it."

"I want you to say why it was wrong."

"I thought you'd be embarrassed and remember. That's what I thought."

"That isn't why it was wrong."

Peter reached for his tea. Samuel picked up the phone. His father's hand stopped short of the mug.

"Leave that alone."

"Say it again. What you thought."

"You heard me."

Samuel selected the front camera and held the phone low over the table, its screen angled upwards towards Peter. Looking down across it, he could see his father's face against the window and a corner of the mask. He touched the recording button. His father leaned sideways and then sat upright again.

"Are you filming me?"

"Yes."

"Well, stop."

"Tell me you understand."

"Put it away and speak to me properly."

Samuel lowered the phone to the table. The recording continued, its picture filling with ceiling. He left his hand beside it. Stopping would give his father something he had asked for. The answer Samuel wanted remained somewhere ahead of them.

Peter glanced at the screen. "Off."

"I'm listening."

"You aren't. You're waiting for me to say whatever sentence you've worked out."

"You could say you're sorry."

His father sat back. A car passed outside, its engine briefly loud between the houses. From the yard came the knock of the shed door in the wind.

"All right," Peter said. "I'm sorry it upset you."

Samuel's fingers pressed into the table edge. The sentence had arrived too easily. Peter had put it down like a receipt, his hand still around the mug.

"You knew it upset me then."

"Well, I'm sorry, aren't I?"

"You're saying you're sorry I was upset."

"What difference does it make?"

"It makes a difference."

Peter looked at him for a few seconds, then got up. He opened the cupboard above the counter, took down a plate and put two slices of bread on it.

"Do you want one?"

Samuel shook his head.

His father fetched a packet from the fridge. He laid it beside the plate and took a knife from the drawer.

"There's enough."

"I don't want a sandwich."

"All right. You can say no without sounding like that."

The packet stayed unopened. Peter picked it up again, held it at arm's length and reached for his glasses. He examined the printed corner through them. Samuel watched him turn the packet towards the light. His mother had begun doing the same thing with washing instructions. Even with his glasses on, Peter had to bring it closer and try again.

"Do you hear how it sounds?" Samuel asked.

His father looked over the frames. "What?"

"When you say you're sorry."

"It sounds like someone apologising."

Samuel tried to picture something he could accept. Peter might set down the knife and say his name. He might look at the mask long enough for his face to change. Samuel could imagine tears, and the thought embarrassed him because he had no idea what he would do if they came. There had to be some sign he would recognise without asking whether it was true.

"You want it said in a special voice now?"

"I want you to mean it."

Peter laid the knife across the plate. He came back to the table, took off his glasses and put them beside his mug. Samuel began to explain the difference between being sorry for something and being sorry somebody had minded it. His father let out a breath through his nose.

"I do know what the word means."

"Then use it."

The chair scraped backwards.

"I've got things to do, Samuel. I've got to ring about the chest. I need my shopping. I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

"They're coming on Tuesday."

"I know. I need to make sure they know about the step. It's awkward getting something that size down it."

On the fridge was a list beneath a magnet. Samuel could see gas and meter in his father's sloping hand, each with a square beside it. The last square opened into the torn edge of the paper. There were shelves still to take down, pale marks to cover. Peter followed his glance.

"It doesn't happen by itself. I've still got to live here while I'm doing it."

"I've been helping you."

"And I appreciate it. That's done now. Take your box and leave this with me."

"Leave what?"

Peter moved his hand over the table without touching the mask. "The talk. All of it. Let me get on."

He took his mug to the sink, poured away the tea and rinsed it. The last drops fell with a soft patter. He set it on the drainer and wiped his hands on the tea towel hanging from the oven handle.

Samuel lifted his own mug. His drink had gone cold again.

Peter picked up the bag from the spare chair and held it open by the handles.

"Put it in, then."

Samuel took the bag. "Don't."

"I'm helping you."

"I can do it."

"Then do it."

The bag stayed empty in Samuel's hands. His father rubbed a patch of dry skin beside his thumbnail, then bit it off and made an irritated little sound when he pulled too far.

"You can keep the pencil box. I don't want it."

"This has nothing to do with the pencil box."

"I was telling you."

Samuel dropped the bag onto the chair.

"I'm asking you to go home," Peter said.

Through the doorway Samuel could see his carton, one flap standing up where the tape had lost its hold. He pictured carrying it to his room and laying the drawings on the shelf. Then he would listen to this recording. I'm sorry it upset you. His father's voice in his room again, and his own thumb moving backwards to the same place.

"You could give me five minutes."

"I've given you more than five minutes."

"Without trying to get away from it."

"I'm allowed to finish a conversation."

Samuel stood, close enough to smell the soap on Peter's hands. His father stepped towards the counter, one palm lifted between them.

"Just go, Samuel."

He went into the hall. Behind him Peter drew a breath and pushed a chair beneath the table.

Samuel folded the carton flaps and carried it towards the front door. Its bottom bowed slightly. He set it clear of the door's sweep and fetched his coat. With the sleeve in his hand, he saw the little scrap of cardboard beneath the chest foot. A neat job finished. Peter would make his sandwich and get on with the list. In an hour he might tell someone Samuel had been round to help.

Samuel gripped the sleeve and went back.

His father had picked up the mask. He held it by an edge, examining the black loop behind it.

"You've been mending it?"

Samuel crossed the room and took it from him.

"The old elastic was gone."

"Why would you do that?"

Samuel laid his coat over the chair he had been sitting on, nearest the hall. Peter was still looking at the mask.

"Why keep spending time on the thing?"

"You kept it all those years."

"I forgot it was there."

"You told me you'd thrown it away."

"I thought I had."

"You could have said you were wrong."

Peter rubbed his eyes. When he lowered his hands the lids were red.

"I don't know what you expect me to remember saying nine years ago. I don't know."

Samuel lifted the phone from the table and turned it towards him.

"That's why."

Peter reached out. Samuel drew the phone against his chest before the fingers touched it. His father let his hand drop.

"I'm going through to the front room. Collect your things and let yourself out."

He moved towards the hall. Samuel stepped across the doorway.

"Move, please."

The please caught Samuel unready. He moved one foot back, then set it beside the other. His shoulder still occupied the opening.

"You haven't answered."

"Move out of the door."

Samuel lifted the mask. Peter turned his head as the pink face approached. Samuel lowered it again, embarrassed by the movement. For a second they stood with the mask between their chests.

Peter tried to pass on his left. Samuel put his forearm across the opening. His father's shirt brushed it, a slight contact, and Peter stepped away with his shoulders raised.

"Don't do that."

Samuel lowered his arm. His father rubbed the place on his sleeve once. He was looking at the width of the opening now, at Samuel's shoulder beside the frame.

"I'm asking you one thing."

"You've asked me ten things. I want you out of my house."

His voice had become loud enough to carry into the yard. Samuel glanced towards the shed. Peter followed the glance and then put a hand in his trouser pocket. It came out empty.

"Where's your phone?" Samuel asked.

"That's none of your business."

"You don't need to ring anyone."

Peter stared at him. "I didn't say I was ringing anyone."

The edge of Samuel's phone pressed into his palm. He set it screen upwards on the end of the table, within reach of the doorway, and shifted back before Peter could pass. His father's mouth tightened. Samuel saw his eyes follow the movement of his feet.

"Sit down," Samuel said.

Peter took hold of the chair by the window and moved it a few inches, making space beside the table. He kept his hand on the back.

"Samuel. Listen to me."

His father used his name differently, with a small pause after it. Samuel waited for the next words. Peter rubbed his free palm against his trousers, leaving a darker patch where it was still damp from the mug.

"You've frightened me. Is that what you want?"

Samuel's fingers tightened around the mask. Peter had said it while looking directly at him. The room became easier to see: his mug on the table, the bare shelf, the shed door beyond the glass. He let his shoulders settle. His father was watching for what he would do, and for a moment Samuel wanted nothing to move.

"I want you to know what it was like."

"Then I know. You can move."

Peter's eyes had already gone towards the gap beside him. Samuel felt the small ease leave his chest. Another sentence, given so his father could get away. He held up the mask a little.

Peter flinched before it came near him. Samuel held still. He could feel his own face changing, his mouth drawing tight, and disliked that his father might see it.

"Put that down," Peter said.

Samuel slid his thumb beneath the new elastic. He drew it away from the inside of the face and felt its pull against his skin. Peter watched him open the loop.

Chapter 31

Wearing it

The elastic caught a few hairs as he pulled it over his head. Samuel put his fingers beneath it and settled the band lower. The mask touched his forehead, his cheeks, the bridge of his nose. His chin rested against the lower edge. Through the small eye openings he saw the table as two pieces before he lifted the face a fraction and brought them together.

Peter stepped back.

"Take it off."

Samuel let go of the elastic. The mask stayed where he had put it. He could smell the old material and the clean cloth he had wrapped around it. Each breath warmed the space in front of his mouth. At eleven he had tried to find room inside. Now it held closely enough that he had to turn his head to see the counter.

"Samuel."

His father said the name sharply, then lowered his voice.

"Please take it off."

Peter held the chair between them with one hand. His other hand hung open beside his leg. Samuel could see the white line above his father's upper lip and the movement of his throat. His own mouth had begun to tremble. The snout hid it. He stopped pressing his lips together.

"Look at me," he said.

His voice sounded enclosed and larger inside the mask. Peter blinked. He was already looking, and Samuel knew it, yet the sentence had come out before he found another.

"I am looking."

Peter pulled the chair towards himself. Its feet made four short sounds, carefully separated.

"Sit down," he said.

Samuel looked at the chair. His father took his hand from it, showing that it was available. There was something awkward about the offer, as though a stranger had come into the kitchen and Peter was working out how to receive him.

"You sit down."

"I will. Just take that thing off first. We can talk."

The mask slipped a little. Samuel adjusted his head until he could see through both openings. Peter watched each small movement with an attention he had never given Samuel's face.

"What will you say?"

"I don't know. Whatever you want to talk about."

"You know what."

"Yes. I know."

His father swallowed and looked at the tap.

"Can I get some water?"

Samuel moved his hand. He had meant it as permission and saw Peter shrink from it. He lowered the hand.

His father went to the sink, keeping close to the counter. He filled the mug he had rinsed and drank with both hands round it. A little water spilled down his shirt. He smoothed the wet patch, put the mug on the drainer and returned to the chair. The tap was dripping. Neither of them moved to stop it.

"This is my kitchen," Peter said.

The words were almost too soft to hear. Samuel breathed in the warm space behind the face.

"I know."

He turned towards the phone on the end of the table. Its screen showed the ceiling and a corner of the window. He had meant to keep his father's face in the picture. Through all that time he had recorded a pale patch above their heads.

He stepped into the room and picked it up. Peter shifted towards the doorway. Samuel looked back, and his father stopped with one hand on the chair.

"Stay there."

"I want to go through."

"In a minute."

Samuel crossed to the counter. The shelf above it was firm beneath his hand. He moved the folded cloth down beside the tool tray, rested the phone against the biscuit tin with the screen

towards the room, and adjusted it until the picture held the table and some of the space alongside it. The chair nearest the hall was cut off at one edge. Peter's sleeve showed, with half his chest. Samuel pushed the tin farther back. His father's face entered the picture, turned away from him.

Peter moved.

Samuel caught it at the edge of the eye opening. His father had left the chair and was walking quickly towards the hall, one hand against the table to guide himself round the corner. Samuel stepped across his path.

Peter stopped so abruptly that his shoe squeaked.

"Get out of the way."

He raised both hands. Samuel lowered his chin to see them. The fingers were spread; there was a small red cut beside the thumbnail where Peter had bitten the skin.

"You can go when we're finished."

"We're finished. I'm saying we're finished."

Peter tried to get round him. Samuel put a hand against his father's chest. Through the shirt he felt warmth and the movement of a body breathing. Peter caught his wrist and pushed it away. Samuel seized the cloth near the shoulder.

"Let go."

The words came out thin and high. His father pulled back, and Samuel tightened his grip. A button strained against its thread. He could see the small white disc tipped sideways.

"Dad."

"Let go of me."

Peter caught the edge of the mask. Two fingers slipped beneath the cheek and dragged it sideways. For an instant Samuel saw pink on one side and a narrow strip of cupboard on the other. The rim pressed painfully beside his eye. He pulled Peter's hand away and shoved him backwards with both hands.

Peter struck the table. It moved across the floor with a hard scrape. The chair behind him tipped and he fell through the gap, his elbow catching the seat. His head hit the floor. The sound was small and solid, almost lost beneath the chair coming down.

Samuel stood where he had pushed him. He straightened the mask. His father's feet were visible beneath the table, one shoe turned outwards. The rest of him lay beyond the fallen chair.

"Dad?"

Peter moved. His knees drew up and his right hand went to his head. He made a sound through his teeth. Samuel heard a sharp intake of breath, then several smaller ones.

He took a step closer. His father raised his free hand.

"Stay back."

Samuel stopped.

A triangle of sun lay on the table. The mug near its edge had shifted in a puddle of tea. Outside, the shed door knocked against the wall. A woman's voice came from beyond the yard, too far away for words. Samuel looked towards the back door. He could go there and call. The phone stood on the shelf within reach.

Peter lowered his hand from his head and looked at his fingers. There was blood on them. He wiped them against his trousers with a confused movement, as if he had found something wet while doing a job.

"Get me a towel."

Samuel looked at the oven handle. The towel hung where Peter had left it after washing his mug. Its lower edge was damp.

"A towel," Peter said again. "Please."

Samuel took it from the handle. His father watched the cloth, his eyes following it. It was the first thing Samuel had done that seemed to be wanted. He brought it over, holding it by two corners so Peter could take the middle.

His father took it quickly and pressed it to the side of his head. He shut his eyes. Above the collar of his shirt, a pulse moved in his neck.

"Ring someone."

Samuel looked at the phone. The red mark was visible on the screen, with moving figures beside it. He could stop the recording with one touch and make a call. He could say his father had fallen after he pushed him. The whole sentence was available. There was no word in it he did not know how to say.

"Samuel. Ring for help."

His father's sock had slipped into his shoe. The skin above it looked pale against his trousers. Samuel found himself staring at the dent left by the elastic. Peter bent that leg and tried to move his weight, then closed his eyes again.

"Keep still," Samuel said.

"I can't lie like this. My arm."

One arm was caught beneath his side. Samuel crouched and reached towards his shoulder. Peter flinched, his free hand coming between them. Samuel stopped with his own hand open in the air.

"I was helping."

"Don't touch me. Ring."

Samuel stood. His knee clicked as he straightened, an ordinary little noise his body made while working or getting out of a chair. Peter worked his trapped arm free and gave a long, shaking breath.

"There's a phone in the front room," he said. "On charge."

"I've got mine."

"Then use it."

Samuel looked at the shelf again. The person who answered would begin speaking before he was ready. His father would be here, listening to what Samuel said, able to call out from the floor. Peter shifted behind him. Samuel turned back.

He stood beside the counter with its edge pressing into his hip. His hand found the shallow tool tray. He rested his fingers on its cool metal lip.

"Are you sorry?"

Peter stared up. "What?"

"For what you did."

"Yes. Yes, I am."

The answer broke with his breathing. Samuel leaned forward to catch the last word. His father pushed against the floor with one arm and lowered himself when the movement hurt.

"I was wrong," Peter said. "I shouldn't have done it. Please help me."

Samuel's mouth opened behind the mask. Those were the words. The breath he had been holding came out, and his hand lifted from the tray as if he were about to offer it.

Peter was looking towards the doorway. He drew his feet nearer, preparing to move. The towel slipped and he caught it against his shoulder. Samuel waited for his eyes to come back. The

small release in his chest tightened again. His father was going already, taking the words with him.

Only because he was frightened. Samuel could hear how that would sound when he played it later. He had wanted the fear in Peter's face; now it spoiled the sentence. His hand stayed empty beside his leg.

His father got an elbow beneath himself and looked up. His eyes went quickly from the mask to Samuel's hands.

"Leave me alone," he said. "Just leave me alone, then."

He began turning towards the hall. Samuel wanted him looking back, held there as he had been before the fall. He reached behind him into the tray.

The wooden mallet came up with a short rattle of the screwdriver against its side. The handle lay across his palm. Peter saw it and stopped trying to rise. His eyes came back to Samuel's face.

"No."

Samuel held the mallet where his father could see it. He had the look back. He stayed there for a breath, then stepped round the fallen chair.

Peter pushed with his heels, moving a few inches until his shoulder met a table leg.

"No, Samuel. Put it down."

He held out the towel, as though showing it could explain what had already happened. Samuel could see the mark on it. His father let it fall and raised both arms.

Samuel lifted the mallet and struck him on the head.

The impact jolted his hand. Peter folded against the table leg and made a cry Samuel had never heard from him. His arms moved across his face. His mouth opened and shut without a word coming.

Samuel drew the mallet back. The mask had shifted down, bringing its edge into his line of sight. He pushed it higher with his free hand. Peter was trying to move along the floor, his shoulder scraping the table leg, one shoe slipping in the spilled tea.

"Please."

Samuel hit him again.

The table shook. His mug rattled against the wood. He heard it above another sound he did not want to identify, and struck again while his father's arms were still moving. The mallet glanced

against a chair leg and left a pale notch. He looked at the mark for an instant, then at Peter, who had turned onto his side and was pulling his knees towards himself.

Samuel took a step nearer and continued. He could see what his hand was doing. His father's body moved beneath the blows and then ceased trying to escape.

He stopped with the mallet raised beside his shoulder.

His arm trembled. He lowered it slowly. His own breath filled the mask. He opened his mouth wider and found the air hot against his lips. One eye opening had a blur at its edge. He wiped at it with the heel of his free hand and made it worse.

Peter lay on his side between the table and the fallen chair. His hand had come to rest near the towel, fingers partly closed. Samuel watched them. They had caught the cloth, gripped his wrist, reached for the mask.

"Dad."

The word came out too loudly. He waited.

He set the mallet on the floor. It rolled a little and stopped beside the chair. His hand kept the shape of the handle. He opened his fingers one at a time.

He went to put the chair upright. A leg caught beneath his father's shoe. Samuel held the back and looked down at the contact. Peter's foot remained where it was, resisting through its weight. He let the chair settle. There was no adjustment from the other person, no shifting to give him room.

Samuel crouched, holding the counter edge because his legs felt uncertain. The lower angle brought his father's face into view. He looked away and then looked back. He put his fingers against Peter's wrist, where the sleeve had drawn up. The skin was warm. He held on, waiting for some small movement beneath his touch.

"Peter."

The name made the room unfamiliar. He could find no instruction to put after it. His father's hand stayed where it was when Samuel let go.

He sat back on his heels. The mask pressed into his chin. Behind it his mouth made small movements, preparing sentences that never reached words.

The phone remained steady against the biscuit tin. Samuel could see the upper part of the table on its screen and a narrow piece of floor. From where he crouched he was beyond the picture. Most of his father was below it too. The recording time kept changing.

He stood too quickly. His sight darkened round the eye openings, and he caught the counter with both hands. The tray rattled. He waited with his head bowed until he could see clearly again.

The plate with the bread was in front of him. Two slices, one turned across the other. The packet from the fridge lay beside them and the knife rested on the rim. He remembered Peter offering him a sandwich, reaching for the glasses to read the date.

The glasses had fallen near the table leg, one arm folded and the other open. Samuel bent towards them, then stopped. His father would never need them to read anything else. His knees weakened and he held the counter harder.

Chapter 32

Afterward

Samuel tried to lift the mask by the snout. The elastic pulled against the back of his head. He let go, reached behind his ear and slipped his fingers beneath the strap. It came free with a sting where hairs caught in it.

Air touched his forehead. Holding the mask away from him, he could see the hall doorway and the sink together, the table and the floor beyond it. Nothing had moved while he took the face off.

He lowered his eyes to the mask. The inside was wet. A drop ran from the edge onto his thumb. He turned the face towards the counter and set it on the folded cloth he had brought down from the shelf.

His ears felt cold. There was a sore place above his cheek where Peter had pulled the mask sideways. He touched it and held his finger in front of him. His hand shook.

He put both palms on the counter. A tiny raised seam pressed beneath one thumb. He had stood here with a wet plate, a bag of shopping, a drawer that needed mending. Each occasion had included some next thing to do. In the tool tray the mallet's place was bare except for two screws.

The mallet was on the floor. He left it there.

He needed to sit. He went to the chair nearest the hall and lifted his coat from it. One sleeve had been hanging almost to the floor. He gathered it onto his lap as he sat down.

For several breaths he could hear only the movement in his chest. He tried breathing through his nose and felt a dry pain in his throat. On the table, a dark crescent of tea showed below the rim of his mug. He reached for it. The handle faced the wrong way for his right hand, and turning his wrist hurt. He used his left.

The tea was cold and bitter. He swallowed, felt his stomach tighten and put the mug down quickly with both hands.

"I don't know," he said.

The words had no one attached to them. His father had said them earlier, rubbing his eyes beside the counter. Samuel looked at that place. The packet from the fridge had begun to curl at one corner.

He held the coat against his stomach. There was weight in the pocket. His fingers found the keys, the teeth of his room key resting against his skin. He took them out and put them back. The phone had been there too. He had moved it to the table and then to the shelf.

He stood, letting the coat slide onto the seat behind him.

On the small screen the room was a picture again. The table occupied most of it. Part of the fallen chair showed at the bottom and one of Peter's shoes beyond it. Samuel's arm crossed the screen as he reached up. He drew it back. The recording time continued to change.

He touched the stop control.

For a moment the screen held the last image. Then it returned to the camera view. Samuel took the phone down, displacing the biscuit tin a little. The metal made a hollow sound. He held the phone in both hands and opened the newest file.

His father was alive at the beginning.

He was seated at the table with the window behind him. Samuel watched his mouth move before turning up the sound. Peter's voice came from the phone, smaller and thinner than it had been in the kitchen.

"Are you filming me?"

Samuel stopped the playback.

One eyebrow was higher than the other. The picture had caught Peter between expressions. Samuel knew the next words because he had said them. He moved his thumb towards the control and held it there. The little waiting face remained on the screen. Behind the phone, beyond his own hands, his father's shoe lay on its side.

The line beneath the picture offered the rest of the morning. Samuel could move it past the ceiling to where the phone stood on the shelf. The sentence he had wanted was farther on. He remembered hearing it and lifting his hand from the tool tray. His thumb hovered over the line. There would be his own voice first, asking, and his father trying to breathe. The phone shifted between his palms. He tightened his grip to keep from dropping it. The picture stayed at the beginning.

He closed the picture. The newest file appeared among the others. He scrolled far enough to see a photograph of the sewing box and the earlier recording from the shed, then went back. There were work photographs he knew, a label he had needed to read later, the corner of something he had repaired. The new recording had joined them without asking him what it was.

He turned off the screen and put the phone in his coat pocket. The pocket button defeated his fingers twice. He left it open. The phone stayed inside.

His father had died. Samuel tried the sentence without speaking it. He had struck him and continued striking him. Peter's shirt was pulled tight across the shoulder beneath the table. Samuel remembered the cloth gathered in his fist, the heat through it, the button straining.

He went as far as the end of the table. There was room to kneel where he had knelt before. He stayed standing, with his sore hand resting against his thigh. A thread had pulled loose from his father's cuff. Samuel followed it to the open hand and looked away.

Something rolled along the alley behind the yard. A bin, perhaps. The wheels rattled, stopped and started again. He looked towards the back door. Its glass held a pale square of sky and the top of the shed. Air came through the gap where the door did not quite meet its frame. The house had always had that draught.

The wheels moved away. Samuel had held his breath while he listened. Letting it out brought a cough that hurt his throat. He coughed again into his elbow and waited for it to pass.

His bag stood open on the spare chair, the handles folded against the canvas. He lifted it and felt how little it weighed. The tea towel he had brought from home lay on the table where he had unfolded it.

He took the towel to the counter. For a few seconds he could not remember how he had arranged it that morning. The corners had tucked in so that the strap stayed inside. He spread it flat beside the other cloth and put the mask in the middle. The black elastic fell across the pink face. He moved it behind, folded the towel over the broad snout and gathered the loose ends underneath.

The bundle kept the shape of a face when he lowered it into the bag. He pressed one corner down and removed his hand. The strap was inside. He brought the handles together above it.

He put the bag back on the spare chair and laid his coat beside it. The phone made a solid little weight when the pocket met the seat. He checked with his hand that it had stayed there, then left the coat alone.

From the kitchen doorway he could see the carton by the front door. He walked into the hall and stopped at the foot of the stairs. His footsteps sounded louder here. The low chest stood against the wall with the chipped white button on top. One drawer remained open by the width of a finger. He pushed it and it caught on its runner.

He left it.

He heard the tap, the slow fall of water into the kitchen sink. His father had left it dripping after he drank. Samuel went back through the doorway.

From the hall he saw Peter's shoes first. From the counter he saw the bent shape beneath the table. There was no new view from which the room became manageable. He stayed by the sink,

looking at the mug Peter had used for water. A little remained in the bottom. The handle pointed towards him.

He looked at the kitchen clock above the doorway. Less time had passed than he expected. He tried to account for it. He had sat down, watched the phone, put the mask away. Between those things he had stood in the same places for minutes he could not remember using.

The tap needed two attempts before his hand gripped it properly. He turned until the dripping stopped. The fridge hum came forward in the space it left. Samuel rested his fingers on the metal and looked through the window at the yard. The sack of broken pots stood beside the shed. He and Peter had rolled its torn top over to stop pieces spilling out. Nearby the folding stool lay with one leg through the frame.

His father had been here deciding what to keep. Samuel remembered waiting with the sack open while Peter pulled one glove back over his wrist. There had been dirt on the fingers. He could see that, though he could no longer see the gloves through the window.

He wanted water. He looked at Peter's mug, then went to get his own from the table. The route took him round the fallen chair. He placed his feet carefully, avoiding the mallet, and lifted the mug with both hands.

At the sink he poured away the cold tea. A faint stain remained inside the cup. He turned on the tap and let water run into it, watching the colour loosen from the bottom. The water rose almost to the rim before he remembered to tip it out.

Behind him the body remained beside the table. His coat and bag rested on the chair, holding the phone and the wrapped mask. When he turned his head he could see the edge of the tea towel through the open bag. He looked back at the cup. There was a small mark near its handle that would need his thumb.

He rubbed it once beneath the water. The mark came away. He turned the tap off, tilted the cup and let the last clear water run out.