

FOR LIFE

by Sue Hampton



INTRODUCTON

Sue Hampton is an author and rebel who set up Extinction Rebellion in December 2018, around the time she was invited to speak at the fracking site at Preston New Road. Having already created activists in some of her books, she said on the mic that she now felt the only subject worth writing about was the climate crisis. Soon after Christmas she began FOR LIFE, which she released chapter by chapter, free, on her website. It's about rebels, skeptics and avoiders, and it spans from August 2018, just before the rebellion began, through to the end of the April uprising or occupation of London. In it Sue translates her own experience into fiction. Neither Manda nor Gem is her, but she's been everywhere they go – including a cell at a police station.

Sue would love it if FOR LIFE inspired outsiders to join the rebellion and hopes that as an e-book to download it can raise some money for XR.

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PART ONE

One

August 2018, Libby

Libby just wanted to be normal. When she was still at school that meant embracing the make-up and fashion her mother rejected, and choosing heels her mother called *silly*. It meant clubs and pre-loading, magazines to flick through, diets, and acquiring all the *things* her mother didn't want or need.

"I'm sick of hearing about climate change," she told Manda at fourteen. "I don't know why people like me have to have our faces rubbed in the shit because it's not our fault. We only inherited this mess."

With her friends, and sometimes her father, she turned her mother into a running joke, one her big, easy brother never laughed at. Manda was the *hippie*, the *tree-hugger* and the *Earth Warrior on wheels* (two). At university Libby told her best friend Bee that her mother made her sick because even though she never went to any kind of church she was so *full-time holy* – and determined to lay guilt all over her, like concrete. So Libby tried to feel angry instead. What did her mother expect? The world was in trouble whether or not she did a road trip across the States with Bee as soon as she passed her test. And sin of sins, flew there first. As a student, she thought of Manda every time she loaded her shopping into plastic bags in spite of the recycled sari and jute alternatives she'd given her. Even once she started work, her mother

haunted her when she threw another takeaway coffee cup into a bin and pictured the thoughtful bamboo *keep cup* Manda had provided, sitting unused in her kitchen cupboard.

People always remarked on the likeness between the two of them. This grieved Libby given the time she spent on her own hair – cuts, straightening and focused conditioning regimes – while Manda just let hers grow until it weighed more than she did. It was the dark grey of a practical, flecked carpet, and looked almost as tough. Rob's had been the same and sometimes Libby thought it was part of their connection, symbolised when two heads of hair became one in an embrace. But Libby was taller than her mother, even in flats, and curvier too. Her style was understated, pastel and discreetly coordinated; Manda's was random, and crumpled. She informed Libby that she'd started to wear everything at least three or four times if possible, to reduce washing, so must be forgiven if she smelled a little riper than she used to.

Libby quoted that development to her dad one Sunday afternoon in the summer of 2018. He used to roll his grey eyes at what he called Manda's *fanaticism* or *excesses*. But he had been quieter since the split over what he called a *stupid fling* at a rock choir he'd joined on Tuesday nights, and Manda's *hard-line* response. Libby felt sorry for him, mostly – when he wasn't being a sexist male less than fully aware of his white privilege.

That afternoon was Mediterranean again but Libby chose to sit in his small, untamed garden to top up her tan. Her father kept manoeuvring himself into the shade, which required regular shifting.

“So how is your love life, poppet?” he asked, once she'd closed her eyes under her sunglasses.

Wasn't there an expiry date on 'poppet'? Libby sighed, and drained her glass of Pimm's. She knew he'd run out and bought the bottle after her call; he was sweet like that, and never preached – even in her smoking days.

"I'm tired of relationships," she said. "Were you tired of Mum? Because she really is tiring. Which is not to excuse your behaviour."

"I wouldn't expect you to."

"But you hoped Mum would."

"I did, yes. I thought honesty... well, I thought she deserved that. And practises it, after all."

"To doctorate level and beyond," Libby muttered. "I would have kept quiet. Not that I would cheat." There had been a boyfriend who was with his childhood sweetheart but that didn't count, or last.

"Your mother is principled..."

"No kidding."

"And it's all about love. I just didn't measure up."

"Who could?"

Libby was thinking about her mother's love – for all species, which made her vegan. For the earth, which made her sell the car and start pedalling – and protesting. For her brother Rob, who never really died but was there in her mother's world and conversation. For humanity, apparently. So much love to withstand; it was hard to return.

"I've been wondering whether I... looked elsewhere... because of the grieving. Not that I'd shaken off my own grief – far from it – but I couldn't live it like your mother. I needed some kind of distraction or light relief."

Libby sat up straight and reached for the sunblock after all. "Dad, do we have to debate which of you was more to blame? I'm not sure any jury would acquit you."

James removed his sunglasses and gave her a look that worried as it fixed her. "It's the grief I'm talking about, sweetheart. And I think that as a family we got it wrong."

Libby felt everything tighten inside. This was why she wasn't visiting Manda today, so she wouldn't announce, "*Rob's birthday tomorrow,*" as if she was pretty sure Libby had forgotten to send a card. She'd thought she and her dad would duck it together, as rational beings who knew dates changed nothing.

"Manda needed to express hers and I shut it down," he told her, his voice thinner, higher. Might it crack? "Because it shut me down. And I think yours is locked away too, with no words to name it and the lid bolted tight."

"It didn't go so well when Pandora opened the box," mumbled Libby, but he didn't hear and she declined to repeat it.

His hearing was no sharper than his eyesight and he was only fifty-five. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen him look old before – and it shocked her that every day he'd be older again. She didn't know how anyone bore being seventy, eighty. And she supposed it was time she visited Grandma in the home where she had to wear nappies, even though, frankly, dying would be the lesser of the two evils.

"Evasion's never healthy, love. Nothing big and painful goes away. When Rob died I had no idea what to do."

"No one does." She still didn't, after three years.

She'd been at university when he called. "*It's about your brother,*" he'd said, his voice half worn away but also full of something she hadn't heard before. Rob, killed in a car that wasn't even his, and cut out of its old metal as it lay upside down. "*Why does he have to be so downright irresponsible!*" Manda had wailed, as if he was still alive and she'd give him a talking-to when he came home. Libby didn't say so but that was what she liked best in him: that

spontaneous, why-not side of him that breathed life into the easy, mostly-absent side. Five years younger, she didn't really know who he was inside the loose walk and the "*Sure, whatever*" and the "*Mm, maybe.*"

Now her father was looking ahead as if something beyond the hedge compelled him.

"Rob never liked me," Libby said, and as she heard the words, believed them with conviction.

"That's ridiculous, poppet," her father told her. "He doted on you when you were little. He was so patient and caring..."

"Yeah, sure."

Libby had seen the photos to prove it – Rob pushing her in a wooden truck, or holding her hand on a cold British beach – but it didn't feel true. She must have been annoying; toddlers were. She didn't want children of her own because she wouldn't be *patient* or *caring* enough. That was just the truth and nothing to do with her mother's grief for all the unborn children who would suffer climate chaos and were better off without living.

A blue tit flew into the box Manda had nailed to the tree long before she left. Libby poured herself more Pimm's.

"Don't say Rob didn't like you, poppet. He's not here to contradict."

"Really?!" Libby looked around theatrically. "You sure?" She sipped her drink. Really he was everywhere Manda went, like a fellow-peddaller on a tandem. He was the hidden meaning in her words and the pauses between them.

"Libby..."

Libby apologised to her father and said she was in a funny mood. He smiled and she wished she forgave so easily.

"Rob always defended you..."

"When I was bad?"

“When you were wilful.”

Libby supposed that was what she was being now. Without explaining, she rose to go inside to the bathroom where she’d discovered the first menstrual blood on her knickers, and six years later shared a risky post-coital shower with a boyfriend while her parents were out. The décor hadn’t changed. The loo roll holder still rattled to the floor unless she outwitted it – as she did this time, remembering the way Rob never bothered to slot it back into place, which made her swear from behind closed doors. Once she threw the whole roll and holder into his bedroom to make a point – which backfired when it was still there twenty-four hours later, and had to be shoved back into place while he slept in spite of her shouting.

Libby had always felt small beside him and now she would never be his equal. “*One of the last things he did was campaign for the university to divest,*” Manda had said at the funeral, adding, “*from fossil fuels*” for the benefit of the climate illiterate. Libby had recognised the patronising change of tone; she was used to it, being one of the apathetic mass who didn’t even try to keep up.

On the landing, Libby stopped at the door to his old bedroom. It was ajar, and as she stepped in she felt the temperature drop. In novels that meant a ghost but Rob would never go along with such things. “*It’s just Mr Willis from the church,*” he whispered, when she was afraid of Santa in the grotto James had thought would be fun.

Her brother’s room might have belonged in an old B and B, except that being minus a stainless steel tray with kettle, tea and coffee, it was even barer. No trace of Robert Liam Craig. But the curtains were the same ones he’d kept drawn half the day during uni holidays. The same ones they’d pushed aside after bedtime when they were small, to look out for James when he worked late. “*I can’t sleep until Daddy’s home,*” she would tell him, because of the

creatures that filled her dreams. Rob tried to ward them off with robot dancing, which worked up to a point, but it was Daddy who made the difference. And now she had no idea why.

Sitting on Rob's single bed, she thought of Gem, the girl he'd been seeing when he died, but never once mentioned. Gem who looked like a slightly rebellious Girl Guide but was really an older woman. *"Oh, only a few weeks,"* she'd said when Manda asked. So no one knew what it meant, what they meant to each other. Everyone cried but Gem seemed awkward through hers, like an interloper with no clearance. *"They couldn't be that serious or they'd have been together that night. Maybe he'd just ended it,"* Libby reasoned, but part of her feared Gem had been closer to Rob, known him better in those few weeks than she had in a whole life. *"Soulmates,"* Manda had called them, when it came out that Gem was vegan and Rob had just made the same *commitment.*

Gem had vanished from all the platforms Libby used after the funeral and Libby hadn't messaged her since. She stared at her phone screen, not sure why or how. The number was still there. She tapped in, *Hi Gem. How are you doing? X*

She waited but no reply came by return. Gem was probably tied up at some protest. Or married with a job and a baby and trying to think who Libby was. Maybe all she remembered about Rob was the shock. Libby realised his death had swallowed up his life and spat it out in a few messy, incomplete bits she called memories but the final scenes were so much bigger than the rest.

She hadn't kept in touch with Gem because they had nothing in common except the dying, and – she supposed – because she was jealous. In case Rob loved skinny, straggly, earnest Gem more than her. Now she couldn't delete

what she'd sent. With luck Gem would think it confirmed what she thought of her – that she was crass, frivolous and unfeeling – and ignore it.

At the funeral, whenever Libby circulated with a tray of food vegans couldn't eat, Gem had been with Rob's longer-standing uni friends like Nick Gorski, but apart too, pale and silent in charity shop black. At the beginning and end, when they hugged, she felt model-thin, all bone and scentless. Maybe she was broken now, by grief for the doomed world and Rob too.

Relieved by the absence of a reply, Libby pocketed her phone and smoothed Rob's bed before she left it. She looked back into the room, trying to picture it plus teddies, trains or film posters, but the cool emptiness defeated her. A ray of sunlight illuminated the dust on the chest of drawers. She imagined Rob's soul like a snake skin, tucked between his old underwear and socks, and drifting out thin as a cobweb. But if it hung around anywhere, perhaps it was at a fracking site, or in Gemma's bed.

Her father opened his eyes as she returned to her garden chair. "I'm thinking of getting some bereavement counselling, Lib."

"Good for you." She pulled her sunglasses down from her forehead. "I mean, that will be good for you. It's not what I want."

"I know, poppet, but it might be what you need."

Libby nearly said what she wanted was another drink but she knew her mother worried him about that, as if drinking away two nights at the end of the week wasn't absolutely normal, and just an alternative response to the state of the world. _____

"What do you think a soul looks like?" she asked James. "Don't say a tea light."

"Maybe it depends whose it is."

It always depended with James, who practically lived on the fence as far as Libby could see. And from that vantage point he seemed to think Manda's head was in a dream world, a Utopia, when Libby thought it was way too dark and scary to venture anywhere near.

"Tell me what Rob was like," she challenged him.

"Libby, why don't you tell me?"

"I'm asking, Dad. It's not a test."

Her father's head tilted up as if he were listening for something he couldn't quite identify. Libby waited, remembering how Manda used to complain if she used her phone during what she called conversations but feeling tempted to scroll through the silence he'd let in.

"He was a good person, I think. Kind. Well meaning. He thought the best of people but not so highly of himself. A bit chaotic and vague at times. Funny, in a wry, deadpan sort of way."

Libby repeated key words in her head. "Thank you," she said. "Wish I'd known him." She saw her father look troubled, about to protest. "I'm not dissing him, Dad. I just have this yawning gap I want to fill, you know? Everything's fuzzy. And I want to fill him in, seeing as he towers over the rest of us in his... deadness."

"I understand." But she could tell from his voice and the anxiety in his eyes that he didn't. Perhaps she was a mystery too, but she didn't dare ask for the same kind of character study.

"Death and birthdays don't mix," she told him instead. "And I have too much alcohol in my bloodstream." She put down her glass, and watched next-door's cat jump the fence and eye them defiantly.

That was when Gem's message sounded on her phone. *Libby, what a surprise. I'm heading north tomorrow but maybe we can arrange something when I get back.* No kisses.

Libby didn't want to arrange anything now. It would be painful. "Oh shit," she muttered.

"Anything I can help with?" asked James.

"Thanks but I'll have to do my own clearing up."

"You were always good at that. You thought the brush and dustpan in the kitchen was a great toy. And you hated sand or dirt in your nails. Even when you were a teenager your CDs were stacked straight in alphabetical order." He smiled. "I've never known anyone smell as good as you."

"Fussy to the point of OCD but fragrant," she summed up. "I'll take that over good and kind any day."

"I didn't mean... Come on, Lib."

"Yeah, prickly too. No wonder the love life flat-lined."

She heard the landline ringing from the kitchen long before he did.

"That'll be your mother."

He hurried, almost eager. Libby decided not to reply to Gem, who would probably want to eat vegan sludge in a place with salvaged scrap for décor. Another impulse led her to check Gemma Lovelock's profile picture, which must exist somewhere even though she'd be the kind to scorn Facebook. Finally she found her, with a straggly-haired child in her arms.

Not Rob's?! Libby reasoned with the part of her that had absorbed the shock and gone into freeze-frame. Not old enough, surely. But conceived not long after the accident either, so Gem had moved on fast.

Then again, the photo could be an old favourite rather than the latest. She looked back at the child's face. The hair was wild enough.

She would never contact Gem again.

Two

Manda

Hearing that Libby was there with James, Manda asked after her.

“Sun-worshipping in the garden,” he said. “Don’t quiz me about boyfriends. Subject closed, total shutdown.”

Much like climate change, thought Manda. “Still drinking too much?”

“Oh, you know, she’s young. They do.”

Manda didn’t think Rob used alcohol to deaden reality, even though his grasp of that had been more detailed and harder to stomach. “I hope she’s all right but it’s difficult to tell. When I ask she always says, *Yeah, fine* as if she’s just run up an escalator.”

James said she had a good job and a social life he called “prodigious”. Manda knew her sigh must be audible down the phone. Was he jealous?

“Anyway, James, I rang because I want to do something in memory of Rob. For his twenty-fifth birthday.” She waited. “James, are you there?”

“I’m here.” But she heard the doubt in his voice.

“I thought of trees, planting twenty-five of them, to capture carbon. I thought of spending twenty-five days protesting somewhere...”

“Don’t get arrested, Manda.”

“I don’t know why not! But what I want to do is make a film. Use photos of him, and things he wrote – you know, in tweets and posts – and give him a voice again. Share the hell out of it on social media.”

“I see.”

She didn't suppose he saw at all but she let that go. “I wondered whether you wanted to be in it at all, as narrator.” She waited, knowing he'd pause before he told her. “I couldn't just do it and not include you.”

“You go ahead, Manda. It's your kind of thing.”

He was using his ever-so-kind, patient voice. She knew what that meant, but why? People were hard to understand, and that included the man who'd shared a quarter of a century with her. This was what Rob would have wanted, to keep campaigning. Shining a light, she liked to call it, and God knew there was so much darkness. She didn't know whether her boy was lost in it now or free of it forever.

“Will you ask Libby? Or put her on so I can explain?”

“I think we both know...”

“Yes.” And denial was a kind of darkness too. “Give her my love and tell her I'll call her later. I keep getting her answerphone.”

“She'll be all right, Manda. Libby's stronger than you think.”

Manda said she hoped so. Libby had always been a daddy's girl.

“Good luck with the film.”

“No luck needed. Thanks,” she said, and almost mentioned her technical adviser – who was due soon – but decided there was no need to stir anything up. There didn't seem much more to say, but she asked after his sciatica, which he said was giving him respite. For a long moment there was a silence that felt awkward, in spite of the many they'd shared in their marriage.

“Are you sleeping, Manda?”

“Not so you'd notice.” She winced at that, since that was something he was no longer in a position to do.

“You should. You run too fast. Get some pills or Scotch or something.”

She made a noise that wasn't quite a laugh. "You should set up as a life coach." Looking at the time, she hoped Nick wouldn't let her down. Ending the call with a motherly, "Bye, James. Take care," Manda thought about the roses in her old garden and tried to remember their different scents. For a moment she feared James would be abandoning them to the heat, although with talk of a water shortage, people must come first – people, who didn't realise how many shortages there would be, before too long, if governments didn't understand words like *urgent* and *radical* and *systemic* when applied to change.

Now that Nick Gorski ran his own business, he might have less time for activism, but he wouldn't have forgotten. Besides, the film would remind him. The two of them had been like brothers after all. Close enough to share a car.

"But he cycles everywhere!" she'd yelled at him: a protest, an accusation, the skin on her face tight with tears.

"He wanted to pick up something from Thornbury – a present for your silver wedding. From an artist guy with a workshop. Stained glass?" Poor Nick, usually so affable, so pretty. He hadn't slept and his eyes were burning. Staring at him, she understood – remembering the last weekend with Rob in Bristol once finals were over, and a café where she'd overstated her *love* for a clock framed in a riot of coloured glass. Sometimes the stupid words waited below the surface like little land mines.

A month later, as their silver wedding approached, James laid the Eurostar tickets on the kitchen table. *"We can still go,"* he told her. *"Rob would want us to."*

Manda stiffened and shook her head. *"He wouldn't. He knew me. He wouldn't be that cruel."*

Now Manda sliced the fruit loaf she'd baked specially. She'd made it when Rob brought his new mate home with him for the first time, term was a month old and they were already so much in synch it made her smile.

The doorbell rang and she realised what she felt was excitement. Hours later, the air still too warm for pyjamas or even a sheet, Manda couldn't sleep. Snatches from the conversation with Libby looped around her head: key quotes like, "You do know about Miss Havisham, right? Because honestly, Mum, this isn't – like – healthy," and "He'd be so embarrassed," and, "You always do what you want whatever I say and however I feel."

Manda had refrained from pointing out that flying – to Malaysia because she *deserved a break* and Barcelona for a colleague's hen night – wasn't healthy either. Or that doing what she wanted regardless of anything climate scientists said and felt was Libby's own M.O. She sometimes wondered why she held back for fear of fracturing what was already brittle between them. Manda supposed the film would be a way of waving a banner in her face – assuming Libby watched it. It would say, *You break my heart too. There's more than one way to grieve for a child.*

Maybe it would make a difference if Libby saw her weeping, or heard the soundtrack of that loss in darkness. But perhaps it would only confirm her status as the emotional obsessive of the family. Libby lived without the truth because the truth was a bullet that blew stuff away. And in the face of truth, stuff was such a comfort.

"Oh, I lie low these days," Nick had said, when she asked him about that truth and his relationship with it. So she'd told him she was glad to help him surface. She liked to think the film he'd edited would make a difference to him too. It was a shame he was so short of time, and not really hungry. Things changed, but she hadn't expected him to be so... business-like. It turned her

into the dense pupil who tried her own patience with the tricky bits. “Manda, do you mind if I finish this now?” His kindness felt like the cool, polite kind and that was disappointing after so long, but the result...

“Happy?” he asked, and she assured him it was everything she’d imagined. He batted away her gratitude and when she hugged him at the door she had a sense of receiving less than she gave. It was only as he’d headed off to the station with the train ticket she’d bought at quite a price that she thought he might be crying after all.

Eleven fifty-four. She rose out of bed to open the window wider, and kicked back the sheet as she lay down again. Still the images she’d chosen kept breaking in. Two days she’d given up to family albums. But Robert Liam Craig’s Facebook wall, still open, offered reminders of his understated outrage and equally low-key hope. She was just his curator, compiling and presenting. No need to speak when he, in his own quiet, hesitant way, had the eloquence of conviction. When he was so alive.

There were other scenes that she imagined as much as remembered, but they were all the kind of time that was untraceable, unrecorded, with no substance or shape, no order and little colour. Rob crying for the turkeys at Christmas. Rob who tried to prove he could dance like a snowman or a road drill. Rob on his bike without a helmet, his hair like a plume of smoke around him. Rob who hugged her when his granny had the first stroke.

“I’ll go,” said James, when someone had to identify a body that was *quite severely damaged*.

“I want to see him.”

“You don’t, Manda. Stay here.”

So she couldn’t say goodbye. It occurred to her that the film said it now.

"No point in getting angry," Rob told her, that last weekend in Bristol, when she was helping him with the shopping and some woman ahead of them loaded hers in plastic bags. And there she was thinking the rage she felt was secret and controlled. *"Some people don't change until legislation forces them, or the Sun tells them to."* *"When hell freezes over, then,"* she said, and he told her the day would come, sooner than she thought, when the young would rise up.

They'd have to do it without him, but in the film he'd inspire them all the same, in the film. She might as well post it now. The minute hand was past midnight so his birthday had begun. What was there to wait for?

Three

Gem

Gem had been meaning to get up to the site for ages, and moving to London made it a bit more viable. Manda Craig had been; she'd seen her in a video live from the gate. And if Rob were still alive he would probably have been lorry surfing to stop the drilling equipment making it through. She remembered him saying, in that low voice of his, that fracking would never happen because the people wouldn't stand for it. But now they planned to start in the autumn. So it was more important than ever to go. And it would recharge her more than the package holiday everyone else seemed to take each summer.

Looking at the blank-faced child who joined the train in a buggy at Swindon, she felt sorry to be leaving Skye – even though she was so excited about staying with Auntie Iz that it might have been Christmas. Skye's face was never blank, even in sleep. Part of Gem was dreading three whole nights apart, even though she could call each day before bedtime. Part of her felt guiltily elated.

But when she came back they'd have the best time: green, forest time and field time, with mud and trees, and birdsong to listen for.

The young mother unstrapped the child and sat her opposite Gem. With her dark red lipstick, pumps and brand new halter-neck dress, the woman reminded her of Rob's sister Libby, and was about the same age. Gem had never had that reality show celebrity style, and her own loose T-shirt had looked better before the peg marks from the line and the iron that caught the wording with a smear. The child was fixing her with a stare that might have noticed both, but remained empty.

"Sorry," said her mother. "She's at that curious age. Three and a half. Don't stare, Ellie."

"Don't worry," said Gem. "Hello, Ellie. I'm Gem."

Without reacting, Ellie pulled a Barbie by the hair from a little pink satchel. The plastic blonde, who couldn't have stood on the tiny feet shaped for stilettos without falling flat on her cute little nose, had a belt around her preposterous waist, and the child was pointing at it, eyeing her mother with a secret message.

"Gem like Barbie's," explained her mum. The gem in question was pink and in the middle of the buckle. "That's right."

"Yes, my parents named me after Barbie's belt," said Gem, but she was the only one who grinned. She grimaced. "Deviant sense of humour."

The mother, who introduced herself as Carly, produced a pink-framed tablet for Ellie. "Why don't you play that game Barbie likes too?"

Gem wondered whether that related to shopping or shopping.

"Too hot, isn't it?" said Carly.

“It really is,” said Gem. “Climate change. It’s happening all over Europe.” She noticed Carly was suddenly more interested in the game Ellie held. “It’s a wake-up call.”

Carly made no comment, remarking to Ellie instead about the pink pig on screen.

“I have a daughter too,” said Gem. “She’s staying with my sister. She’s nearly two now. Skye.” *She has no devices, I never dress her in pink and Barbies are banned.*

She showed Carly a recent photo on her phone, proud of the green dungarees and vegan boots from the charity shop, and Skye’s unruly hair. Proud of the butterfly she’d crouched down to watch.

“Aw,” said Carly. She picked up her own phone while Gem looked back to her paperback copy of *This Changes Everything*, and wondered whether Carly would have heard of Naomi Klein. “You’ll miss her.”

Gem told her where she was heading, adding that it was “Not much of a playground.” Carly looked as blank as Ellie now. “The fracking site, you know?”

“Sorry, you lost me.”

Gem had supposed there might be a few people in the UK who hadn’t heard of fracking but never expected to meet one. She explained, remembering Rob’s way of keeping it simple. He’d have done this nicely; she hoped she wasn’t patronising.

“Right,” said Carly when she’d finished. It wasn’t an invitation for more.

“I’m going to support the protestors,” Gem told her. “They’re incredible. They’ve been climbing on lorries, locking on to the gates, doing whatever they can to stop the equipment getting on site.”

“I don’t agree with wasting police time getting arrested like that, trying to stop people doing their job.”

“Really?” Gem didn’t hide her surprise. People were extraordinary. “Not to safeguard the future of kids like Ellie and Skye?”

“I leave it to the government to know what’s best.”

At that point Carly asked Ellie if she needed a wee, but Ellie didn’t seem to hear.

“I can’t,” said Gem. “Because I’m afraid they don’t.”

“I steer clear of politics anyway,” muttered Carly. “Come on, Ellie, I’ll take you to the toilet.”

Ellie didn’t want to break off from her game but Carly put it in her bag, which she slipped over her shoulder. Then she followed Ellie, who held Barbie upside down by the hair as if it was her fault, and wobbled down the carriage. Gem realised they weren’t going to come back. Carly would find seats opposite a Daily Mail reader who wouldn’t bother them with the question marks over Ellie’s future on Planet Earth.

Gem wished she knew how she could have done better. Smiled more, maybe, like Rob would have done, and made her tone gentler? But wasn’t it strange that people could be more alarmed by someone like her and the information the media never provided than by climate breakdown? It reminded her of Libby Craig, who was probably earning a fat salary by now and spending it on crap. It struck her that it would be funny if she bumped into Manda. For someone who shared her world view, and had loved him too, Rob’s mum was oddly distant, but Gem supposed that might be a good thing, in a way – might allow them both to mend faster.

Gem had often wondered whether Libby spied on her Twitter activity but left no trace. She didn’t trust her, even before the message out of nowhere.

Was there a man, she wondered, in Carly and Ellie’s world, a smooth one with sharp shoes? People didn’t ask about Skye’s father and Gem never

offered. Rob loved kids but he wouldn't have been remotely ready. She knew that much about him, after two curry dates, at least six or seven walks, a film, a demo and six nights – two in her bed, two in his and one in a tent at Seed Festival. Who knew whether they'd be together now, in spite of everything? Not if Libby could have helped it. Gem wasn't much of a romantic; he'd teased her about that but he made up for it in his not-very-verbal way. She liked it when he stopped to look at flowers, in a wood or a suburban garden. He enjoyed their nicknames – fox and cubs, love in a mist – and laughed when she accused him, in her ignorance, of making them up.

"Was he your toy boy?" Libby had asked, at the funeral, after a few glasses of wine. Her shoes, which were ridiculous, were obviously painful too.

"There are seven years between us," Gem had said. Present tense. And now that she was thirty-two, the gap had grown and always would, until she was old enough to be his grandma.

Gem wanted to say, *"We were madly in love. It happened fast. I never expected it, or even believed in it."* But that day words were harder than usual to come by. And Rob was equally dead whether he was a commitment-free fling or the love of her life.

Manda would have understood but it wasn't fair when she was so much in love herself, her face grey and her eyes livid with mourning. *"She's got me on a bit of a pedestal,"* Rob had said, the first time she saw a photo of mother and son together. *"What about Libby?"* Gem asked. *"She hasn't,"* he said, with that crooked smile of his.

Looking out of the carriage window, Gem imagined the landscape covered with fracking wells, and felt a chill inside. As if someone was walking on her grave! Such a strange phrase, but people had no idea how to handle death, or

word it ether. And it turned out that in the case of Rob's death, she was no exception.

If she willed hard enough, she could just about see him in the glass with the fields behind him, as if he was sitting next to her right now. Which was where he would be, ready to risk arrest, giving her courage.

Daddy died. That was what she'd tell Skye. *But he still loves you.* She'd show her pictures, wishing there were more. It was the best kind of truth.

Soon Crewe had been and gone, offering up a group of students who could be heading for the same place as Gem, but they didn't spot her and she didn't mind the anonymity. Rob would have raised a hand, shown them a peace sign with his fingers and a little smile.

The world was full of assumptions. She and Carly had made them about each other and so many of them would be wrong, like the Cabinet Minister who dissed fracking protestors and had cosy chats with the fracking CEOs.

Libby Craig assumed it had been casual with Rob, because she wanted it to be. Gem supposed they were all remembering more than usual today. It had been Rob's birthday a couple of weeks after they met and if anyone was fazed by age it was her. *"Maturity's a good thing, right?"* He didn't assume that because she'd been a user she'd never be clean for long, and he didn't skirt around her orphan status and treat her like a waif and stray. Once he told her, as if he was complimenting her on her hair or shoes, that she was probably the most incredible human being he'd ever met and she told him not to be such a sappy arse. *"See what I mean,"* he said.

For the first time that day, Gem turned on her phone and scrolled down Twitter. Yesterday's crowd at the site looked vivid and creative, just what she needed. @mandalost had retweeted some pictures. And posted a film, a tribute, for his birthday...

One Rob morphed into another – baby, child, teenager, student activist, hers. Like quotes from Martin Luther King, his words appeared, intercut with Rob and his home-made placards that used to be cardboard boxes: REFUGEES WELCOME made way for CLIMATE JUSTICE NOW and then, PEACE WILL COME. LET IT BEGIN WITH ME. Manda's voice, narrating, was low and thick with emotion subdued, and accompanied by text on screen. The last image was a birthday cake with one candle, iced blue and green like Earth.

Gem closed Twitter and almost shut down her phone. Then she returned, found it again, replayed and retweeted. There should be a law against resurrection. This was like a dog digging up a grave.

Maybe for the first time, she'd be in synch with Libby, because she'd hate this, wouldn't she? She'd hate Manda.

"I love you," she said, combing Rob's hair one morning – their last morning. It was a jungle.

"Be gentle with me," he pleaded.

"Aren't I always?"

"I should have said before – I love you too."

Looking at her own reflection, and her hair with its kinks and freedom, Gem thought she looked more like Manda than Libby ever would. And Skye looked like Rob, which was just as it should be. He was a rubbish driver; Nick was crazy to lend him the car. And all these thoughts she reran, all these feelings that never settled, were scooped up now like leaves in a gale. But how could she blame Manda when she herself was an obsessive mother now, leaving three pages of instructions pretending to be notes?

A slick, scented man around her age boarded and took the seat next to hers without apparently seeing her, talking on his phone as he brushed against her

backpack. No assumptions, she told herself. No judgement. He could be a human rights lawyer.

“Get tough,” he said. “Don’t take any shit, all right? They’re trying it on, the wankers. I knew the manager was a fucking asshole. We need to score on this one!”

Her world was free of this now, and largely free of men. Would Libby Craig fancy this one, with his sexy suit and silky, styled hair? Gem felt glad of her own world, the one she was returning to, with its trees and silences, its banners and songs. The word LOVE stitched and chorused. Maybe even guys like this could be saved there.

Gem thumbed her phone and imagined the film she didn’t want him to glimpse. Manda should have kept Rob safe from eyes like his. It told her that lying low had been wise after all because the Craigs were not to be trusted.

Four

Pru

Pru had overslept. That happened now, after all those decades of jumping out of bed and scuttling out of the house twenty minutes later. Two hours it had taken her this morning, to get to the bus stop. But she was on her way. The others knew she wouldn’t miss, not without saying. Or dying! She couldn’t go on for ever but she mustn’t pass before they’d seen off the frackers. After that she could die happy.

If she saw that so-called police officer who’d grabbed her arm hard last week she’d demand an apology, better late than never. Maybe the film footage had made him reflect. Pru’s long cotton skirt felt cool around her ankles but the forecast was threatening thirty degrees by the afternoon. It was grand having

all the youngsters around, though. She liked the excitement, the energy in the air.

"You're famous," some of them said. They called her an internet sensation. Well at ninety she didn't mind being humoured now and then.

The sky through the dirty glass was a fierce blue already and the sheep must be longing for a haircut. There were people who wouldn't wear wool because the shearing wasn't natural and the animals could get hurt or distressed, but she'd only just investigated the ethics of honey after decades of assuming the bees didn't mind, and she had some lovely jumpers that had kept her warm outside the gates last winter – too good to throw away, especially as she'd knitted most of them herself before her fingers and eyes got together to put a stop to that. She wished she'd known things long ago. It seemed unfair on the youngsters that they'd grown up with the truth nobody told people like her.

"You have the carbon footprint of a mouse," her son Ed said at Christmas. Relative to his, that was, but she kept her lip buttoned. He knew why she came to the site most days, why she switched her energy supplier, bought her veg from the local farm, hadn't flown for twenty years, fuelled her activities with a plant-based diet. Ed signed petitions when she sent them to him, or said he did to keep her happy. He was dead against fracking because of the films she'd tagged him in, from the US and Australia, and he loved Lancashire: the fields and hills and old villages as well as the cricket. But could she get him to use the train? *"Too expensive!"* he objected, with a mortgage to pay. And his idea of a good meal started life with four legs, chewing the cud – just like the cows the bus was passing now, a group of them looking hot and bothered.

Pru was a bit jealous of the women with daughters who came along at weekends now and then and took a turn at holding their mams' placards. She

couldn't see Ed joining her there unless she dropped dead at the next bit of police manhandling and he came to identify the body.

"You know your dad would approve," she'd told him, but he reckoned he knew better, said Tom was always *law-abiding*. It made her laugh! *"What kind of law says you can destroy the countryside, poison the water and rattle the earth – but you can't put your body in the way to stop them?!"* Never mind the methane – more than any number of those cows could make.

Some of the husbands moaned and groaned but Tom wouldn't have tried to stop her any more than he stopped her running the W.I. or singing Gilbert and Sullivan. Most of all he liked to see her dancing – in the house, just for him or for herself when she didn't know he was watching. The best memories she had were of the Tower Ballroom with Tom and the only fancy dress she ever wore, with the red flounces just right for Latin.

Enid climbed on at the next stop, waved and paid without having to say where she was going. She sat next to her, lurching into her with a laugh as the bus moved off.

"Oy, steady on!" she protested to the driver on Enid's behalf.

"I nearly bunked off today," said Enid, fanning her face with a hand. "But I didn't want to miss the party."

"Too right," said Pru.

"My neighbour says we're fighting a losing battle," said Enid, wearily.

"Then get your neighbour to come along and help us win," said Pru.

Enid told her she was going away to Scarborough with her sister next week and asked Pru whether she ever had holiday.

"Not for years," said Pru, thinking that it might be hard, anyway, even if Ed asked her to tag along, to abandon ship. In case that was when it sank.

Time to press the red button. As they made their way down the road towards the site, arms and placards waved. It looked like quite a crowd for ten forty but then lots of them would have slept overnight at the farm.

Pru heard her name. It was nice to be welcome. As the bus rolled on past the gates it honked. So did the van behind, and from the next car a bare arm held up a thumb.

They'd only just arrived when Mia introduced Pru to a young woman who'd come alone and seemed shy. It was embarrassing being called a *legend* and having to say she just kept showing up. And she didn't catch the name.

"Gem," the girl repeated. Not a girl really but fragile-looking. She was older than Mia, who taught at a primary school – in Manchester, if Pru remembered rightly. "It's good to be here at last."

The music was loud today, its rhythm thudding fast, but Pru wasn't going to complain about that. Gem looked all around her at the fence, with its banners tied on, its rainbow colours threaded through.

"Is it what you expected?"

"It's bigger – the site, but the protest too. More creative, more fun." She grimaced. "More police."

"Most of them are human," Pru told her, "with notable exceptions. My arm's got quite a bruise." She showed her. "Excuse the batwings!"

Gem winced. "The police should be serving the community, not proving free security for the frackers."

"You tell them!" said Pru, but this Gem didn't seem the type to cope with conflict. She had the look of someone who'd been on the receiving end of trouble.

"I hear you're a great-nana?"

That had to be repeated after the bus had gone past. Nearly all the traffic seemed to be honking its support today. It gave Pru heart in spite of everything.

“I am. The youngest is eighteen months.”

When Gem asked to see a picture, her eagerness told Pru she was a mother herself. They both smiled at “Skye with an e.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

Gem nodded and her smile wavered.

“Has anyone offered you food? There’ll be vegan hot dogs in the shed. You look like you could do with some. And there’s always tea.” Pru glanced towards the urn and mugs.

“I have water, thanks.”

“Good thinking.” She looked through the fence at the site that used to be calm and green. “They’re getting ready. But for now we have the numbers to stop them.” She turned back to the young people dancing in spite of the heat. “I’m a bit creaky for lorry surfing myself.” She remembered the child, Skye with an e. “No need to get arrested though. No one will judge you here. We’re just glad when people come.”

Someone took the microphone and the music was chopped. The speeches were going to start. Pru tapped the road with her stick. It was obvious Gem had a story she wasn’t going to tell anyone; she reminded Pru of herself before she met Tom: a bit awkward, prickly at times but soft as putty underneath. Straight in the old sense of the word.

It was hot already.

James wasn’t the only partner who hadn’t quite adjusted to his four-day-week. It always made Mondays a little strange but this morning he’d received one apology for contacting him on Friday and another for *not* checking with him. In

both cases he said, “No problem”, because he hadn’t worked out yet whether he objected to the office butting in on his day off or enjoyed being needed in spite of it. James felt lucky. Fifty-five might be old enough to apply for a house in the retirement village near the golf course, but it was young enough to keep a respectable handicap – and, in the case of Evan, a semi-retired solicitor he sometimes outclassed, a girlfriend under thirty.

That lunchtime he probably wouldn’t have left the building, or eaten more than a bag of crisps, if it hadn’t been for Manda’s film, and Jacquie saying how touching it was to find it on Twitter and how impressed she was with Manda’s IT skills.

James told his PA that he avoided the whole worldwide web as much as possible, outside the context of work.

“Oh, you’ve not seen it? You should, James. Rob looks so full of life it’s hard to imagine... Three years!”

Jacquie had worked with him for twelve years and was a few years closer to sixty. She was also quite possibly closer to Manda than him. He remembered how upset she’d seemed at the funeral. In fairness to Manda he explained that he’d been told about the film, censoring the word *warned*.

“Just going out for lunch,” he added briskly. “I won’t be more than an hour but I might turn my phone off.”

Five

James

James clicked off his phone in the lift before he left the building. Why the hell would he want to see Rob looking alive on a flat screen when he’d never be 3D

again? It was Manda's own variation on fake news and she was spreading it all over. Maybe he should have checked how many followers she had these days. Maybe he should have told her the blindingly obvious truth that it wasn't what Rob would have wanted, not being egotistical or maudlin either. It was her tribute, and she needed it more than he needed any three-day weekend, but she might be better off with a flotation tank, jewel therapy, or even an averagely unhealthy intake of booze.

Remembering the tender concern on Jacquie's face, he wondered whether she might have consented to sex, however pitying, if she'd been single – instead of a still-happily-married grandma. Not that he'd been lusting after her for the twelve years she'd worked for him – not often anyway – but he'd dreamed it rather vividly, which was disconcerting. Libby thought he should sign up to a dating agency, but he wouldn't know how to start, not after three years of celibacy. He must progress beyond up-market dinners in foil containers.

People talked about being stunned by grief. And when he thought of animals in abattoirs – which Manda had done a lot, before she went vegan like Rob – that was how it still felt, sometimes: knocked cold and out of it. Except that sometimes he was much too awake and everything was too bright and real and normal, as if it never happened.

James was heading for the coffee shop in the mews opposite when he rerouted, picturing too many customers on their phones, and Omar who would probably put a kind arm around him before he'd even ordered. Omar, who'd only run that café for a year or so but was an online friend of Manda's for reasons no one had explained. Instead he crossed the road to the small park where bees buzzed around the lavender. Apart from a couple of teenage lads spread out on the grass and smoking what might be weed, and a slow old man

walking an ever slower dog, it was quiet. James made for the recently installed water fountain and drank like a schoolboy, wiping his jacket and shirt collar with his hand before he realised it would dry in seconds under the sun.

A young mum walked past, pushing a buggy where a child wailed. "I know, hun, it's too hot," she muttered, her tone tight.

For some reason he thought of wispy Gem, who cried so silently at the funeral that he almost didn't see the tears. He took off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder like a model from a TV ad, Sixties-style. Already his head seemed to be soaking up the heat, leaving his hair damp at the edges. Not the day for a walk after all. Squinting ahead at a pub he could already hear, he imagined a pint of lager, spilling foamy and cold from a tankard. Rob's drink, when he wasn't downing kale smoothies. There were people sitting outside under sunshades; the salty scent of fried food raised his hopes of chips, thick ones. The place would be heaving but no one would know him. If he chose, he could watch that film of Manda's unnoticed.

Once inside, waiting to get close to the bar, he started to watch the clock. He had a big client in the diary for two thirty. Even though he was only half a mile or so from the office, he didn't normally venture this far and felt oddly out of his orbit as he tried not to assess the earning potential of the other suits, some of them half his age. Then he saw Nick. Rob's Nick, his best mate and co-owner of the car that Rob wrote off...

"James? Mr Craig?" Nick rose from a table beside an open window and beckoned him over. He was holding a beer, but looked longer and leaner than ever. No suit, just jeans and a loose, cream linen shirt. Nick was a photographer, a creative. His hair length proved it.

"What are you doing here?"

“I’m on a job.” Nick checked the time on his phone. “Good to see you, but weird that it should be today – you know, after Manda’s film.”

“I think everyone’s watched that but me.”

Nick didn’t hide his surprise – or was that incomprehension? Recovering, he said he gave Manda a bit of technical support. James made an “Ah” noise, feeling like the one boy in the class who wasn’t invited to the party.

“You can’t face it?” Nick asked, not so hearty now.

James shook his head and without warning his mouth wobbled. Nick laid a hand on his shoulder.

“I know,” he said. “I still can’t believe he’s gone.”

Soon James was in the seat Nick insisted on vacating in spite of his resistance. Then Nick was taking drinks orders. The short, curvy woman now looking straight at James with disconcerting openness said, “Pineapple juice for me, thanks,” and added, “I’m Tanya.”

“Tanya, this is James Craig, the architect. Rob’s dad.”

Her “Ah” had a softer edge. “I work with Nick, on and off,” she added as Nick joined a queue. He noticed the black varnish on her nails and the perfect shape of her long fingers. Safer, he thought, to look at those than her distracting chest with its sunburned freckled cleavage. Her hair was a colour he might call magenta and he couldn’t estimate her age with any confidence. “I’m sorry you lost your son,” she said.

He pulled a straight sort of smile and nodded repeatedly. “Thank you.”

“Nick showed me the film and told me all about him. He was a cool guy. Nick says he’d never have sold out like him.”

James couldn’t imagine what that meant but he had to agree. “Rob never had any money,” he said, remembering how grubby he used to feel, towards the end, on account of being well off.

“You must have been proud of him,” Tanya said. “I mean... everyone’s so focused on all that, and status and spending. Sounds like your Rob knew what really matters.”

“He got all that from his mother,” he told her, and realised he sounded sad. Tanya looked more interested than pitying, and her mouth was full and red. “Look... the thing is...”

“You don’t want to talk about it. I get that. So what’s your favourite movie?”

He didn’t answer exactly, but by the time Nick came back with drinks, they’d discussed Kubrick, Kieslowski’s trilogy, the Coen brothers and her own great love, Mary Poppins. He was laughing at her Dick Van Dyke impression when Nick, noticing a free table outside, led the way to it.

The wall of heat sapped his spirit just when it had been reviving. He needed to drink up and make a getaway from Nick but he’d be sorry to part from Tanya. And suddenly, as the two colleagues’ bodies brushed together in the act of sitting at the wooden picnic table, he imagined them as lovers. Hoping he wasn’t sweating too visibly but afraid to check his underarm for a dark patch on his best shirt, he squinted into the urban distance.

“James, I did ask Manda...” began Nick.

James doubted whether he wanted to hear the rest. Tanya’s sunglasses, produced from a bulging denim handbag, made her look... stylish, yes, but also complete.

“But she hadn’t heard from Gem. I don’t suppose you...?”

James hadn’t expected that. “I’m afraid Gem didn’t keep in touch with any of us. Libby had her phone number but they didn’t really hit it off. Sorry. Did you need...?”

“Ah, no, it’s O.K.” Nick pushed back his hair. “How is Libby?”

James mentioned the job but not the boredom, the social life but not the boyfriends, the smartness of the new flat but not the emptiness of the fridge. Not the unhappiness he had just realised she felt, or how sad that made him. Needing firmer ground, he explained about his four-day-week in the rundown to retirement, and trying to keep his heart fit.

“Happiness is more important for health than going to the gym,” said Tanya. “Or diet. I read that but it’s obvious, isn’t it?”

James felt read. “I guess it is.” But he hadn’t really felt its absence before. This was an unsettling day. He wasn’t even sure that Rob had been happy when he died, but he hoped so, and if it was true then that was down, at least in part, to Gem. As a family they should have been more grateful. They should have made sure she was... what, O.K.? But she barely spoke. She gave them nothing, so how could they tell?

Nick and Tanya talked work and debated when they should leave. James watched a dog apparently sleeping in the shade under the neighbouring table while its tail wagged slowly. Would Manda have been happy, if he’d lived? Would their marriage have held? He doubted it. Manda would still be grieving, for humanity, the earth, the lost species. He couldn’t imagine where she found the energy.

Nick took a call. Tanya mouthed that they should be heading off. They began the “Nice to meet you” routine and he thought about kissing one or both cheeks but instead she hugged him. Not a perfunctory hug but no gapping, like a good waltz, and for a few very warm, slightly damp seconds. James felt moved. Then Nick shook his hand, explaining that he was “probably too sweaty for that”, and gave him his business card. They walked away in step, talking and purposeful but relaxed too.

James looked at the lager tepid now in his glass. He checked the business card. Nick Gorski was based in Highbury so the chances of their paths crossing again were remote, there was no mention of Tanya and no one had used her surname. He remembered how the hug had felt and hoped someone had offered Manda the same kind of gift today. Libby too.

He turned on his phone and found the film on Twitter. Environmental groups were sharing it. There was an arrow he could click on to begin viewing but he didn't. Not yet.

Instead he called Libby, more than half-expecting her answerphone.

"Dad, I was going to call you. I mean, what the actual... how could she?"

"It's her way of remembering. A tribute. And we were told..."

"She knew how I felt but she did it anyway. I mean, he wasn't Bowie! The world didn't have to be invited in on it. He was ours. The loss was ours, right? A private thing. She has no self-control."

James sighed. "That's unfair, Lib. She's made it public because she wants his life to inspire people." No response. "Libby?"

"You always defend her these days."

I wouldn't have to if you didn't attack. "I just met Nick. He was her technical adviser."

Libby wanted to know what Nick was doing and he wished he had a clearer idea. He remembered she used to have a crush on him at one time. At any rate, she seemed to have cooled down.

"Have a good afternoon, poppet," he said, but she'd gone with a quick "Bye". He was certain she was good at what she did, whatever exactly that was. Manda thought market research was a way of propping up capitalism and when he'd suggested it was better than pole dancing Manda wasn't sure.

"You weren't an eco-warrior at twenty-two," he'd pointed out. "No," Manda agreed. "Sadly. Shamefully. But we know better now." She wouldn't accept that the majority of people still didn't look beyond their day to day realities, even though Libby was one of them and she probably included him in the same category.

It was heartening that Tanya admired Rob; everyone should. But did that mean she was an activist too? Because he wouldn't want her to make him feel bad. In the early days with Manda the way he'd felt was attractive. *Suave* was what she'd called him, her *own Roger Moore*. She'd been a bit of a hippy herself, declaring a hatred of shoes, but a well brought-up grammar school girl with manners to pass with his parents. And a sense of humour that meant a laugh he called *dirty* although it was really just abandoned.

He supposed the world gave her little to laugh at now. But there were concerts and exhibitions and some good dramas on TV, and he hoped Tanya might want to experience some of them with him. Maybe he was still attractive for his age, as long as hers wasn't unacceptably different. And she didn't prefer Nick.

What was selling out, really, and had he been doing it all his life?

Six

Manda

Chocolate biscuits, sponge puddings in custard and steak and kidney pies couldn't stop Manda's mother wilting into six petite stones, but she was well presented, and always looked at Manda on arrival as if she *let the side down*. It was one of her phrases, most of which could be categorised under The Importance of Being Respectable.

Manda had felt cooler on her bike but now she wiped sweat from her top lip and forehead. Her mother wouldn't like a damp kiss. To Manda, her small room, overheated in winter, felt stifling – but then she had a bit more flesh on her bones.

“Hi, Mum.” She bent down and kissed her cheek. Her mother winced from the touch of her hair, as if it was the *Brillo pad* her dad used to call it. “It's Manda,” she added, just in case.

“Amanda,” said Evelyn. “Always in a rush.”

“Cycling isn't rushing, it's leisure. Shall I open a window?” *Stuffy* would have been a euphemism for the atmosphere. She feared she needed changing, and told herself she could do that if she had to, roles reversed.

Evelyn frowned. “No dear, don't.” She shivered convincingly.

Manda pulled her aluminium water bottle out of her backpack and drank. She felt watched.

“They do tea and biscuits here, you know.”

“Mm. I know you love your tea. How are things?” she asked her mother, not sure what things there were to evaluate, apart from tea, TV and colouring books. Evelyn didn't like anything that involved joining in anymore and Manda knew she must feel self-conscious about the incontinence.

“I lost all my things, the nice things. She probably sold them.” Manda didn't ask who; she was the only suspect. “Can I go back to the house now?”

“Not until you're stronger, Mum. It's nice here. Snug, you said.”

“I did not! That's a silly word. I have a perfectly good house – if she hasn't sold it.”

“This is comfy for now, though. You agreed it will do nicely. The people are kind.” Manda admired them; their pay was a scandal. No wonder they didn't stay long.

Her mother's skin was thin on her face, her cheekbones too pronounced and her eyes always watery. The staff said she ate well, so what was consuming her? Something powerful inside. Was it just entropy, or a loss more emotional than physics?

"Has Libby called you?" she checked, because she'd promised under duress.

Evelyn squinted at her. "Who?"

"Libby. Elizabeth. My daughter. Your granddaughter." Manda had a photo in her purse; with a struggle she pulled it out from behind her library card and CND membership. Then she realised it was too small, apologised and put it back.

"Rob came."

"Sorry?"

"Rob came to see me. Such nice manners. Needs a haircut though."

Manda smiled. "His dad kept telling him that. I never understood why."

"Well you wouldn't. Tell him to come again."

Manda had told her more than once: "*Rob died, Mum,*" but it broke her every time – sometimes for fifteen minutes of repeating what she wouldn't believe, sometimes ten, five. *Don't contradict*, the doctor said. Manda smiled and agreed to tell Rob his gran would like to see him. It was funny the way she mostly deleted Libby but asked for Rob, with stories of his visits and what he'd brought her, all of it edible but sweet.

"Rob's a good boy," Evelyn said, with a fond smile, as if he was all hers. "But you should get his hair cut."

"Rob wouldn't be Rob with a short back and sides, Mum."

"It's a wonder the teachers don't send him home. It'll be because he's their favourite. Top of the class again!"

Manda thought that would amuse James. Rob was more intuitive than academic, more creative than Libby but less of an achiever. He'd scraped by. "Do you remember when his painting was displayed in the school reception for a whole three years?" That was until the Sixth Form, when Rob organised a protest against a recruitment visit by British Aerospace and returned to school next day to find his artwork replaced at last. "*He can quit now and do his exams privately if he still wants to,*" she told James, who was appalled by the idea that school and exams were just options. And Rob stayed on, with a peace badge pinned to the label of his blazer.

Her mother was repeating the fake news of Rob's visit. "Next time he comes he can get his hair cut here in the hotel. They've got a salon, you know. Why don't you ask them to give you a shampoo and set to calm yours down?"

Manda laughed. "They'd need a steamroller."

"It makes him look like a tree hugger." Evelyn always smiled with pleasure when she used a phrase she considered up-to-date.

"We should all hug more trees, Mum. People too." On impulse she put her arms around her mother, shocked again by the absence of her. So little left. Manda wondered what she would say if she produced her phone and showed her the film. She could hardly be more confused, but wouldn't it make her happy to see "good boy" Rob? On the other hand, what would she make of his message, given that she always turned the subject of climate crisis round to a *dirty man* who'd frightened her as a child with his sandwich board warning that the end of the world was nigh? "*And here we all are!*" she'd ended the story last time, triumphant enough to make a small fist.

One of the nicest carers appeared at the open door to say it was bath day, hair wash too.

“Oh good,” said Manda. “You enjoy your bubbles. Have you still got that zero waste shampoo bar I gave you for your birthday?”

Her mother had no idea what she was talking about, so she said she hoped it would turn up because the sea was clogged up with the stuff and until the government forced manufacturers to think again everyone had to use consumer power to force their hand. Then she smiled, kissed her mother’s cheek and said goodbye, promising to be back soon.

Once outside in the car park, she breathed deeply and sat on a low wall to check Twitter. The stats. There was the film, at the top of her page, because just for a day or two she wasn’t going to share any injustice – or even any good news, should she find it – and below... retweets 346, likes 2K. Feeling like a child greeted by a crowd at a surprise party, she put a hand to her mouth and began to read the comments. *Sorry for your loss and RIP Rob and You must be so proud and, her favourite so far, If only the world’s leaders had your son’s integrity and commitment to the future of humanity! Hugs.* Manda soon stopped Liking for the protection of her arthritic fingers. There were good people in the world who understood.

The only shade the clinically tropical front garden could offer was courtesy of a tall yucca. Manda moved into it and watched the film again before retweeting with thanks for all the kind comments. She looked back at the longest and most accurate tweet and saw that its writer had just retweeted again, with the text: *Don’t miss this inspiring and moving tribute.* In his photo Adam Browne was wearing a denim jacket and embracing a large dog. His profile info said, *Fifty-something optimistic greenie. Love and peace man.* Manda smiled, and followed him.

The newly shared film was attracting more retweets. She was checking how many when she saw: *So long hippy dupe, climate change is fake news wake up*

leftie bitch and move on. your precious son was probly a pothead anyway and whats with the hair black blood in this #snowflake

Feeling the colour deepen in her cheeks, Manda breathed slowly and looked at the guy's page, expecting a Texan Trump supporter, fat with a rifle. But @TruthTells had a Union Jack as his profile picture, with a clenched fist overlaid. Clearly she was one of many targets for his rage, most of them female. It wasn't personal. So why did it feel like that fist of his had struck her stomach?

"Well yeah Mum, surprise surprise" she heard Libby say. Rob had warned her long ago; she just hadn't considered the possibility...

She blocked @TruthTells and saw that Adam Browne had followed her back. A glance at her watch told her that even though her Twitter troll would tell her to get a job she'd better pedal back to hers fast or she'd lose it.

At the vegan café where she'd made the tablecloths and painted the walls she found Farah with an unlikely crowd of customers for a Monday morning.

"Hey! I told you not to come in today," Farah told her as Manda put on her apron and tied back her hair in a wild pony tail.

"Hey! I said try and stop me." And in a few days' time she'd work on the anniversary of Rob's death too. It was necessary, however Farah argued.

"As long as you don't expect to be paid," muttered Farah with a grin.

"Pay? What's that?"

"No good asking me."

Farah winked, and moved over to a couple of guys taking a break from a building site with large slices of Manda's plum cake. However exhausted she was and however little money she'd actually earned so far from Peace Café, she never looked less than serene. Farah was tiny and graceful. Beside her Manda felt a mess.

“More tea for the lads,” Farah muttered as she joined her behind the counter. “Are you OK? Manda, your film – you had me sobbing.”

Manda apologised and told her she was fine. In fact she felt unsettled – not so much by @TruthTells but by Libby, who hadn’t retweeted, by the thousands who had and by the gaping silence from James. By the cakes she’d baked that weren’t for her birthday boy. By the heat, which was unnatural and frightening, and the way the phrase *climate change* was passed over in the media as if it might require gardeners and farmers to modify their practice and wildlife to adapt as wildlife does.

That was even before a regular customer who always chose chai tea and baklava looked up from her phone screen and reached a hand out towards Manda, who was behind her – to ask, “This is you, Manda? I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

Soon after half past two she had her lunch break at a corner table where she found that @CallMePowell and @BrexitBoy had taken exception to the reference to Rob’s work in Bristol with a charity supporting refugees. And @libbyjcraig96 no longer had a Twitter account.

Manda took a series of breaths that could have been deeper. Then she deleted the film, not just from Twitter but Facebook too. *All right, over*, she told herself. She imagined Rob’s hug. Then she saw a message notification. Adam Browne: *Take no notice of the shits. Your Rob’s worth a thousand of them. I hope we meet at a demo. I’d like to talk over coffee sometime. Call me.*”

On another day she would have shown a come-on like that to Farah with a *Yeah, right*. Today she re-read it, left it sitting unanswered and called Libby’s answerphone, her voice low.

“Hi, darling. Look, I’m sorry you feel the way you do about the film. I’ve pulled it so if you want to go back into the jungle, well... up to you. I seem to

have upset some fascists and climate deniers so that's a plus." She paused. "Seriously, Lib. I should have made it for us, not social media. Nick asked after you, by the way – he helped me. Nick Gorski." Libby had been smitten the first time Rob brought him home. Maybe her anger would be muted by his involvement. "I promise next September to let the day pass quietly. And 7th too." She wasn't absolutely sure whether Libby would remember the date Rob died, or had buried it like kids who'd been abused. "In fact, let me cook you dinner on 7th. Love you."

Seven

September

England had cooled and paled in her absence and no longer felt Mediterranean. Libby knew her own colour would soon drain too but for the moment the white dress made her look the kind of bronze she'd paid for on a sunbed in the past. Bee, who'd slept through most of the flight with a few murmured moans, was hungover and grumpy, but then she was back to work at the bar in a few hours. As they waited for their luggage, she muttered that she was desperate for a cigarette and would sneak one in the loo if her violet case didn't appear on the conveyor belt soon.

Like Lanzarote itself, Bee had been a lot less fun than Libby expected. When she'd told her she wouldn't be repeating the experience, Bee had called her *jealous*, which provoked Libby into telling her that *your average Cabinet minister* was sexier than the guy she'd been *shagging* all fortnight. So Bee called her *frigid*.

When Libby's yellow suitcase bumped its way onto the conveyor belt she strode off to intercept it while Bee was occupied with her phone, and then

carried on walking towards Customs. She wondered what her friend would do if she jumped into her dad's saloon and told him to step on it like the getaway driver at a heist. On reflection she shouldn't have abandoned him to a laptop that announced GRIEVING MUM DELETES VIRAL TRIBUTE TO ACTIVIST SON – even though it was a massive exaggeration. She could have got drunk with him instead, without lads in football shirts trying to grab her breasts to the sound of Ariana Grande. But three weeks later no one cared anymore. The only activists anyone talked about were the guys they called the Frack Free Four, who were apparently up in court soon: a date in her mother's diary.

She heard Bee running behind her, dragging her case behind until she caught her, swore and drew the glares of an elderly couple. Libby saw their point. But at the pick-up spot where James was waiting, he seemed relaxed and genial.

“How was the holiday?”

Libby had never felt lonelier but there was no one to tell. “Ask Bee.”

“Great thanks, James. Sun, sea and sangria.” Bee was a nice girl now. She'd even got rid of her gum. Libby resented everything she said and did, the way she looked, her friendly smile.

“You didn't go near the sea.”

“Not with you!” Bee winked at James but to give him credit, he either missed or ignored it.

“How have you been, Dad?”

“Oh, same old same old.”

She hoped his sciatica hadn't been giving him what he called *gyp* but he didn't like to talk about it, preferring to keep the negatives to himself – for which Libby was grateful. She supposed there were loads of those at her parents' age.

“No more drama?” she asked with a wry smile. She wouldn’t have been surprised if Manda had posted an anniversary film that started with wedding pics and ended with Rob’s biodegradable pod being lowered into the ground. The music could be one of the rock choir hits James used to sing alongside his bit on the side.

“None at all,” said James, eyes ahead as she fastened her seatbelt. James could see the girls had fallen out again and opted for some classic BonJovi. As he drove away, Bee took a call that seemed to be from a boyfriend. He grinned at the fake Geordie accent she was using to tease him.

“Don’t ask,” muttered Libby. “So have you seen Nick Gorski again?”

“No.” He smiled. “Would you like to see him yourself?” he risked and gathered from her raised eyebrows that the answer was not as much as he’d like to see Tanya. He hadn’t been able to say, when the counsellor asked, what was so hard about calling Nick’s business number and asking for hers.

“Dad, I’m not in the mood.” Pulling down the mirror, she noticed how tense she looked. “How’s Mum? Still at large?”

“Oh, busy at the café I guess. They open on Sundays now.” He’d sent her flowers for their anniversary and she’d been touched; he could hear it in her voice. He wanted her to know things were all right, even if he’d never fully understand. He liked to think they were friends, or would be. “No Arms Fair this year so less chance of her calling from a police station to be rescued.”

Libby said Manda’s singing was a crime whether she was sitting in the road or her bath. Her impression of her mother chanting Give Peace a Chance made him smile.

“So, nothing you want to tell me?” he asked quietly, aware there was nothing he wanted to tell her. About one counselling session with a large, nervy woman in fringes that wouldn’t be followed by a second. Erotic dreams of

Tanya interrupted by one of Manda. How he'd bunked off work one day to stand in the woodland where they buried Rob, and cried hard enough to scare himself into silence.

In the back, Bee let loose a laugh he'd call extravagant. Libby began a lacklustre account of poolside novels and cocktails. It seemed the geology of the island had passed her by. There were times when James suspected Manda was right about flying. In fact he'd been considering a break in the Lake District or Cotswolds this autumn. Given how much fun Libby hadn't had with booze by a pool, maybe she should do the same. But he'd let Manda be the one to suggest it.

Maybe she was chilling out because the foot on the end of her crossed leg swung to the music. Behind them Bee lowered her voice as if she was saying something dirty but he couldn't catch it.

"Hi, Tanya. It's James Craig." Would she remember? *"I was wondering whether you'd like to meet up for dinner/a show/ an exhibition."* He'd check the listings and make the call.

The Quaker women seemed disappointed that Skye was asleep in the buggy when she arrived at the Meeting House.

"Gem! So glad you came back," whispered the one who greeted her with a handshake, her eyes bright. She was elderly but looked pleased with her memory – which Gem couldn't match. "You didn't need to leave." She looked down at Skye and smiled. "Bless her. Don't worry at all if she wakes up and chatters. Just do what you need to do."

Gem thanked her and wheeled the buggy in, parking it behind the two concentric circles of dark red chairs. They were the only colour in the muted grey and white room. People who knew her ten years back would be shocked

to see her in The Religious Society of Friends but she liked it last time – the welcome, the silence, the space to be herself without beliefs to sign up to.

She left Skye sleeping and sat down in the larger circle within reach of the buggy. Already a dozen people sat still and quiet. Looking up at the arch-shaped window, she liked the way the view was different in every pane as it framed a gnarled old tree with young leaves. The blue of the sky was pale today but the light behind it felt strong.

Some eyes were open, other closed; most hands rested on laps. A couple of people read from a fat red book called Faith and Practice but Gem just wanted to wait. To connect with something bigger than the days that came and went – something more hopeful than the world. Just for a while to feel whole. Or acceptably broken.

A middle-aged woman in jeans and a plaid shirt rose, hands clasped in front of her. Gem wasn't sure whether she was meant to look at her or keep her eyes down. The woman read about diversity and not judging others, about forgiveness and understanding. Gem repeated the last sentence in her head: "Remember that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God."

God was a strange idea Gem had never understood, but the trees changed everything. Along with sunsets and rainbows and clouds, they came from a place that was mysterious and wild but pure. And so had Skye. *The luminous numinous*, Rob called it. People met it here; you could see that. Without fuss. And she'd met too many Quakers at protests not to give it a try.

The silence knitted back the moment the woman sat down. Gem thought most people never experienced its softness. A kind of expanse, full of promise. She didn't know whether she was meant to think or clear everything so truth could break in, or even whether the people around her were praying or

meditating. But it felt safe. Looking at Skye, who hadn't moved – not even to close the mouth that hung just slightly open – she was glad she'd come.

She didn't need magic. She didn't even need to stop missing Rob because love and sadness were the same under the skin. And she wasn't sure whatever she needed had a name.

Farah told Manda to stop watching the door; it was early yet. Manda had shown her Adam Browne's picture, warning her – and herself – that he might be using one a decade old for his profile. A glance at her watch suggested that Libby would be home from the airport by now but unlikely to call until the café closed at four – by which time this blind date she'd helped to engineer would be over. A safe bit of recklessness given the public setting and Farah's new Mother Hen routine, but still... it felt out of character, frivolous. A diversion.

The place would need to fill up quickly or Farah would rethink Sunday opening. Manda turned to see two very middle-class women who might be Anglicans straight out of a service; they chose the corner table with a street view and looked around at the décor as if it was all rather a change from the church hall. The family that followed was led by a boy who informed everyone in the café that he wanted a Mocha with cream and marshmallows, and wasn't happy when his pony-tailed father had a few quiet words about veganism.

Manda was making discreet *what a brat* eye contact with Farah when a bearded man pushed the door open and looked straight at her. Adam Browne was rather fuller in the figure than she'd imagined and his beard had more grey but his smile was the same. He recognised her too, and raised a hand. Now none of this seemed the reckless anymore, not in the least.

"Do you want to serve this gentleman?" Farah suggested.

"Hi, Adam. I'm Manda. And I've just realised you're my anagram."

“I know.” He smiled. “It’s great to meet you at last. I’ll start with a black coffee if I may.” He chose a table facing the counter and took off his linen jacket, which was crumpled. That seemed endearing until she realised there was no other way for a linen jacket to be.

While she served the church women, who said they’d *live dangerously* with almond milk in their coffees, she felt watched. But when she turned he seemed absorbed in his phone.

“Excuse me,” said one of the women, “but are you vegan yourself?”

“Yes. For a few years now.”

“Why is that? Is it an animal rights issue?”

“Well yes, they have the right to live, same as us.” She knew he’d be able to hear. “But even if I approved of slaughterhouses and factory farming” – which would make her a psychopath, in fact – “I’d still be a vegan. It’s better...” She hated that lame phrase *the environment*. “It would cut greenhouse gas emissions dramatically” – she never remembered figures – “if everyone ate less meat and dairy.”

They were making *ah* faces as if this was new to them.

“It’s one of the ways I’ve reduced my carbon footprint,” continued Manda. “And I recommend it.” They looked a little awkward now; for all her edits she was being evangelical again and Farah would shake her head.

“Thank you, dear,” the older one said. Pulling the plug.

Manda stopped at Adam’s table. He looked up from his phone and smiled. “I’ll never eat a hog roast again.”

“I should hope not.” He’d said he was veggie but ate too much junk food she she’d boasted about their menu.

“Can you sit with me a few minutes or do I really have to wait until your lunchbreak?”

She looked back at Farah who nodded. Manda sat, smoothed her apron and felt slightly shy. Which was odd given that on the phone she'd already told him things Libby didn't know.

"You're a long way from home," she said.

"Only twenty-odd miles. It's good to get away on a Sunday – from the pile of books to mark." He showed her with his hand how tall that was.

"I suspect you of exaggeration."

"You don't know many teachers."

Flirting now. Manda didn't think she'd ever been any good at this, but after the best part of thirty years she really didn't remember. She told him Geography was her worst subject.

"You liked Art and English best."

"Am I that transparent?!"

"No, you told me, in your second PM on Twitter."

"And you said you didn't like Shakespeare. I nearly blocked you on the spot."

She turned towards the door as a couple walked in, along with teenage Ahmed who arrived for his lunch shift with headphones in. "I'd better go. Sorry."

"I'll watch you work."

"You'll get back to your phone."

He picked it up, the other hand making a fair cop gesture. And then, did he take a photo – of her?

She hoped not.

Eight

October 2018

Pru was writing her third letter to the lads in jail. The Frack Free Three they called them, and she'd ordered her Free the Three T-shirt, which she'd wear with pride and outrage. Not that it was T-shirt weather anymore but she could layer up underneath and as winter drew in, they'd all have to. One of the men claimed to have worn seven up at the gates of hell but she wasn't planning to beat that or she'd be too solid to jiggle when her leg allowed.

The letters had to be A5 for some reason and she supposed the lads wouldn't be the first to read them, in case she was sending details of the escape plan. She'd emailed the details to people who'd be writing too – like young Gem in London and Manda who lived somewhere expensive where they had vegan cafés. Chance would be a fine thing in Lancs.

To the victims of a miscarriage of justice! She underlined her heading. I am no less angry as the days go by. You have a right to be angry too but I know you'll be model prisoners, the three of you. You'll be making the best of it. I hope knowing you did the right thing gives you peace. We're all so proud of you. The crime is fracking and by jailing you so unjustly they've made a good few protestors out of people reading the news and crying, "What!" but it can't be any fun and I'm sure you miss your loved ones like they miss you. What you did was brave and it inspired people. You're still inspiring us now and they've got another think coming if they think we'll give up now. Lots of love, Pru. (One of the old girls at PNR) x

She hoped that was legible because her handwriting wasn't as neat as it used to be now her hand didn't hold the pen as still as it should. They'd be getting hundreds of letters and quite right too. That was more than conscientious objectors like her Uncle Jim ever had in the war, unless you counted hate mail through his letterbox and the odd bit of saliva aimed his way in the street. Pru remembered growing up with him as her favourite, and a kind of stand-in dad

after hers died of T.B. And how in the family people were proud of him – same as Uncle Ted who was in the Navy, same respect. There was a difference, though, because the Navy fired torpedoes and guns and Uncle Jim wouldn't use a weapon against anyone, so she thought the biggest hero was him.

She'd like to think the young had learned from all the wars the West tangled with, and all the mess that followed. Gem was light years ahead of the mum she'd been at that age. The young joined everything up and it was heartening.

Pru didn't dare dwell on the appeal against the sentence that had put the lads behind bars when they should be on that spare plinth in Trafalgar Square. There was always hope and she didn't let it go but at the same time it was a mistake to focus too hard on miracles or the law. She hadn't believed they'd actually start drilling but they said that would begin tomorrow in spite of everything – the crowds, the celebs and the injunction on top of the evidence.

And she'd be there for the darkest day because they had to face that together. No other way.

Looking around the living room with all its clutter – years of the Ecologist, books she started but didn't always find time to finish, and letters she might as well keep now as a record of who she was and cared for – she supposed she should do some sorting, find some surfaces, neaten things up a bit and shake a duster round the place. That'd please Ed, who was always saying, *“Isn't it getting a bit much for you to manage?”* when she could keep it spick and span if she wanted to. If she thought that was the best use of the time she had left.

She'd just finished her third letter when a message popped up on her new ethical phone – from Gem, with a photo of Skye. Pru chuckled at the child's plaits, which stuck out at angles and were no tidier than her old writing desk.

What a hopeless mother! Does she look like a naughty girl in a cartoon? x

Pru's fingers were a bit slow and stiff for messaging but it was quite fun.

Cute as ninepence I'd say. I had bendy ones too when I was a girl. Ma called them my pipe cleaners. X She knew how to add a green heart; Gem had taught her all the tricks.

Are they really going to start this week?

Until the first earthquake. I give them two days.

I'll write to the prison tonight. Are you allowed to send in your ginger cake?

With a breakout kit baked inside? A file for the bars and a rope to swing over the walls? Haha.

Gem told her to enjoy her day off because she had to have one now and then. So she put a cassette on, of Vaughan Williams and his lark, which would do nicely for her funeral. Good job she never switched to CDs in spite of Ed's remarks because they were all piled up on landfill now. It was funny that Gem and Mia and the other young ones received her just as she was when her own family wanted to update her relentlessly, every birthday and Christmas. The latest this and handiest that. And it all became old hat in five minutes, obsolete, waste.

Gem could probably write her biography after all the chatting they'd done that summer but the lass kept her own story to herself. No mention of Skye's father so Pru didn't ask. She had resolved a while ago not to use her old age as an excuse for sticking her nose in where it wasn't required.

While the lark ascended she found a duster she hadn't meant to bury, and started with the photos. In the black and white wedding one she appeared to be laughing her head off at something Tom said and she wish she could track it down, whatever it was, and laugh again, because that would help her to bring back the sound of his laugh, which she couldn't hear anymore, not properly. Her mother didn't think it was decent or something; brides were meant to be demure. But the picture was her favourite. It made her happy. And so had

Tom, mostly. There had been moments when they scraped against each other, but that was life. When young Mia brought her girlfriend along, she couldn't help wondering whether, on account of them both being school teachers with nice manners, their garden would be all roses without the thorns. Because for all her *spirit* as Tom called it, what he shared with her wasn't equality. These days young women like Gem expected that, and quite right too. And thanks to social media they knew more about the world than she ever had, which made living hard but at least they knew exactly what had to change.

She was still holding the photograph, lingering over it as if she'd never seen it before. The truth was she didn't really remember Tom at twenty-two, with those boy's cheeks that thinned and dropped in the end. Not the way she remembered his hand on his stick: the shape of his fingers, his nails cut straight across, the raised veins and brown spots, the yellow and purple and thin white. Or the hang of his trousers, loose over the backside that used to be so soft and firm she didn't suppose a baby's could be... what? More charming.

"Tom, love," she said, "I can't recall much but I haven't forgotten your bum!" Not that she'd seen it before the wedding night. In the old days she stuck to the rules!

She hadn't talked to him for a long time – as if she'd decided he was best off not knowing what was going on in the world, and up the road. "Still miss you," she told him, so quietly she didn't hear it herself.

"*Is it teatime?*" he used to ask on a Sunday afternoon, any time after half-three, however many roast potatoes he'd eaten for lunch. She'd make him wait but now she didn't put much store by the kind of time the clock showed.

Her leg was being a nuisance today but it wouldn't stop her swinging her way into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

Three days later, she felt like the most popular person on the ward. Everyone rang in case she hadn't heard, but Gem was first.

"Hey Pru, are you outside the prison? You must be so excited!"

She didn't like to spoil things so she just said, "No, I couldn't make it. Are they out?"

"Any time now. I'm keeping an eye on Twitter. No one minds at work – they all want to see. I can't believe it – justice for a change! I feel like standing up and telling everyone on the bus."

"Wonderful!" said Pru, and she thought she might cry. "I shall imagine you and Skye doing a freedom dance when you get home."

Someone rattled in on a trolley and the loudest, breeziest nurse seemed to be trying to make the place sound like a holiday camp. Pru preferred the shy young Romanian who put a hand to his heart when he showed her his kids.

"Where are you?"

"Oh, in hospital. I had a silly fall on Sunday and they kept me in because I live alone." No point in mentioning the heart that wasn't behaving itself. "I'll be home soon, like the Frack Free Three." She heard in the silence that Gem was worrying now. "We needed good news here."

Gem knew what she meant.

"If the tremors get bigger, they'll have to stop, won't they? For good?"

"Or a quake can damage the well and then all those toxic substances they use down there can leak into the water supply." Pru had raised her voice in case anyone needed educating.

"Don't! How is this even legal?"

Pru heard Skye needing Mummy. "You go, love. I'll let you know when I'm freed like the lads!"

"I'll call you tomorrow, Pru."

She said there was no need. Soon Enid called, elated, and told her to make sure she saw the six o'clock news. She promised not to miss it. And her T-shirt hadn't even arrived yet. She couldn't waste it so she'd have to get a fabric pen and edit the slogan from a demand to a cry of triumph.

It was lovely to think of families reunited. She felt a bit weepy, and tired. It didn't suit her being out of action and if they didn't discharge her tomorrow she'd vote out with her feet.

Nine

mid-October

Eager to watch the release of the prisoners, Manda had barely arrived home from the café when the messaging began on Twitter. Adam had seen the footage from outside the prison and wanted to know how she felt, so she told him, *You can imagine* because he sounded like an emotionally illiterate on-the-spot reporter with no actual news.

I'm imagining YOU. But I'd rather see you. Shall I take you out to dinner to celebrate? x

On a Wednesday night? I thought you were too overworked to go out to play on a school night.

Good point. I could get to you for ten, if that'd be worth staying up for. A late takeaway?

Manda frowned, and not just about the unnecessary foil – or worse still, Styrofoam. There was a teenage side to him that was only appealing when she wasn't exhausted. And since they hadn't had sex yet, she couldn't really tell him that was really what he wanted. Besides, she wasn't sure she did, not at this point, when there was so much about him she didn't know or understand.

Not tonight, Adam. It's a nice thought. I'll see you on Saturday.

Twitter seemed to Manda a strange way to conduct a relationship if that was what they were in together. She suspected that when anyone on Facebook announced that they were *in a relationship* it meant they'd just had sex, whereas up to this point all she'd enjoyed with Adam – and she really had enjoyed it – was kissing. Snogs: increasingly long and adventurous ways to say goodbye when really they were bed kisses now. So when she mentioned her day off on Saturday, she couldn't blame him for assuming he could stay over, but she held the invitation back, reserving the right to choose.

For now, she was going to make a salad, catch up with emails and then read in bed at a ridiculously early hour. She might even allow herself a gin and tonic in honour of the country's most celebrated lorry surfers.

While she ate she tried to call Libby, impatiently cutting off the answerphone because she hated to hear her sound so upbeat, like a kids' presenter, when she could be so morose face to face. The day they met, Adam had asked how close they were, mother and daughter, and she'd felt so sad all of a sudden. He'd read it at once. *"I don't want to talk about it now,"* she said, afraid of what she might verbalise. Not that he could object to that because he said so little about people or feelings. But he kissed her cheek instead – the first kiss, which felt kind.

Libby was a mystery but she couldn't give up. Shouldn't Rob's death have brought them closer? Mightn't James's infidelity have created some kind of solidarity, regardless of differences?

It was almost six o'clock now and she must catch the TV News in case they saw fit to report an item related to climate breakdown – even if they only ever called it change: neutral and to be expected. She was extracting some rocket from her teeth when her phone rang. Libby.

“Mum, sorry I’ve been quiet but work’s shit. I can’t stand it any longer. Can I see you at the weekend? You said on a message a while back that you had a day off coming, on a Saturday?”

Ah. Yes she did. “Um, yes. But don’t do anything reckless, darling...”

“Coming from you that’s like a joke, right? Ironic? I’m off out soon but I’ll come round on Saturday, yeah? About two?”

Manda said that would be lovely. Libby wouldn’t stay long; she’d have plans for Saturday night. Like Adam.

On Friday she called as she left the café to let him know.

“Sorry to mess you around,” she added at the end.

“She messes you around.”

“Sorry?” Sometimes he spoke quietly on the phone, and there was a fair bit of rush hour traffic on the high street but he sounded cross.

“I’m talking about your daughter, Manda.” He might be talking to a student with behaviour issues. “We had a date. And you haven’t told her about me, have you?”

“Not yet. Look, Adam, I can see it’s not a good time. If you still want to see me and the eco-house you were so fascinated to investigate, come at four – no, four thirty. If you’re too annoyed with me to come at all, then you’re probably not much of a father.” She’d suspected that anyway, because he hardly mentioned his grown-up kids.

She waited as she unlocked her bike. It was starting to rain but she didn’t want to cut him off or she’d be the unreasonable one.

“I’m sorry. Ignore me. End of the week grumps. See you at four thirty tomorrow.”

But he’d gone with no goodbye so she didn’t really feel forgiven. As she straddled her bike the phone rang.

“Why don’t I come at ten, and then disappear by two – I know a nice café where I can hang out and do some marking – but come back when you call with the all clear?” He sounded chirpy again. “I’m sorry, Manda. I’ve been looking forward to spending time with you.”

“Mm, me too,” she said, more upbeat than she felt but relieved all the same. It was just the sex getting in the way. Maybe he’d been celibate for even longer than her; she’d have to ask. “Sounds like a plan.”

Now that made two of them who hadn’t been themselves.

She didn’t sleep well, and then spent too long next morning cleaning the bathroom and changing her sheets before walking to the market to search for veg with no air miles AND no plastic. Arriving back at the house with a bulky backpack she’d be glad to discard, she saw a substantial figure in a long black coat looking the place over and peering around the side.

“I’m not selling,” she called.

Adam turned and held up both hands, smiling. “I’m a bit early. I hope that’s all right?”

He kissed both her cheeks and she told him it was. “I hope you noticed the solar panels are oriented south.”

Once inside, he asked for the tour while the coffee brewed, and took dozens of photos: the condensing boiler “and TVRs on all radiators, I’ll have you know”, the sunpipe that served the landing where she made him stand , and the mechanical ventilation with heat recovery “which is way more exciting than it sounds.”

She barred the bathroom door. “Even though it’s ultra low flush,” she told him, “no need to photograph the loo.”

She added the solid wall insulation and censored a remark she almost made about how sexy this stuff was. Adam wanted explanations more detailed than

she could manage with conviction. In the kitchen he viewed the glass jars full of nuts, seeds, pulses and grains like an art work to be captured from different angles. She smiled as he made notes on his phone, and said she was glad he approved.

“You live it,” he said.

“With plenty of compromises. And thanks to James’s money. What I earn in Peace would pay for diddly squat.”

“It’s impressive. You’re impressive.”

“I’m trying, that’s all.” She smiled. “And Libby would second that.”

She poured coffee and they sat on the sofa, a small space between them. Manda felt suddenly awkward. This was such a strange way to spend a Saturday morning, the pace both slow and rushed. People did this with alcohol inside them, in darkness.

Adam reached down to sit his mug on the carpet and as he leaned to kiss her she had to do the same.

“Is there any reason,” he asked, almost like a Victorian with a marriage proposal, “we can’t go to bed now?”

Manda was sure her mother would supply a few but if it was going to happen, and the doubt seemed to be ebbing away now, then it might be easier...

The second kiss was deeper. Perhaps she should feel something else, besides the panic that kept the elation at bay. Perhaps her body, cooperative as it felt, should know better than this, because what was there to wait for? Who? And maybe when it began, she would need it – in practice as well as theory. Because she didn’t want to pretend.

“Let’s,” she said, and as he followed her upstairs she couldn’t quite imagine his face.

She'd already determined not to apologise for her body, since she didn't suppose it would occur to him to do the same. Trying to banish memories of James declaring love well before he saw her naked, she hurried under the duvet before Adam Browne could lie. It was good to feel skin against hers. He was warm, and he'd washed his hair for her, which was touching. Like the way he found her so much more interesting than she felt.

"I want to know everything about you," he murmured. "Afterwards."

Not as much, she thought, as she wanted to know who he was. They kissed, and touched, and quickly, quickly, he was heavy on top of her, big inside her. So she let go and when she came, a moment after him, her smile overwhelmed her.

The last time she'd felt this was the evening Rob died, all those miles away. James had wanted it unexpectedly, for the first time in weeks, and she had been worried that it wasn't love anymore – and he'd known, accused her of *going through the motions*. And Rob crashed the car while she lay there wishing one of them was a different person, maybe both.

There were things Adam wouldn't want to hear, not now. They laughed, disbelieving, at the two hours that had passed before they returned to the kitchen and she found him a knife to prepare salad.

"So you don't actually know the people behind this Extinction Rebellion?" He'd known about the rally in Parliament Square at the end of the month; it was already in her diary.

"I know them to identify in a line up. They're not my friends. And there won't be any leaders."

He seemed doubtful about that. "And civil disobedience is built in? What will that mean?"

Manda smiled. "I don't know yet. But it will be non-violent."

“To start with.”

She turned, shaking her head. “How can it be anything but peaceful? This will be a movement of people who want a better world. And if it takes off, it could be global by next year, massive. I’m trying not to get too excited...”

“You succeeded upstairs.”

His smile was a little too late and she hoped she didn’t sound wounded. “You like me for being authentic.”

“I do,” he protested. “And I don’t blame you. I worked until two a.m. to get things out of the way. So I’m not at my best – in any department. And you’re quite obviously way too good for me.” He put his arms around her. “I’ll come with you to this declaration of rebellion. It’s Half Term.”

Pulling away, she said, “Great.”

“Rob would have been there.”

“Oh yes.”

“But you won’t get Libby along?”

Manda shook her head. “Not even for Hollywood royalty.”

“I’d like to meet your Libby.”

“Brave man,” said Manda, and reached for the pasta as the water began to boil.

Ten

October 31st 2018

Gem’s wasn’t the only buggy and Skye wasn’t the youngest member of the crowd. Parliament Square was colourful already. Some of the home-made banners were arty; others were simple, their messages penned or painted on

cardboard cut from a box. She moved closer to the lavender beds by the low wall, and the space where the PA indicated the speakers would be.

A woman with a pile of cloth cuts was offering her a bright green rectangle printed with the Extinction Rebellion logo, complete with safety pin. She nodded towards Gem's forehead, where she'd recreated the same symbol with an old kohl pencil she never used on her eyes anymore.

"Like it!"

Gem smiled and attached the badge, which hung like a medieval favour from her jacket. The woman winked at Skye, crouched down and pinned a turquoise piece to her favourite red coat. Then she carried on working the crowd, while a couple of others sitting on the wall cut more cloth into sections.

A white-haired woman beside her asked Skye's name and said her name was Gaynor. Chatting, they agreed the numbers were going to be impressive. A man weaving through gave them both a handout that said Declaration of Rebellion.

"Have you seen this?" asked Gaynor. "I wept my way from beginning to end. I've been waiting for this for twenty years."

Gem hadn't read it yet and couldn't without her glasses, which she'd left at home. "It looks inspiring," she said.

"Talking of inspiring..."

Gaynor nodded towards a girl in plaits standing close to them with a long-haired man who was obviously her father.

"Greta Thunberg!" Gem felt a frisson.

"I'm star-struck," Gaynor admitted.

The girl, who was diminutive, looked serious. Gem had read that she'd travelled from Sweden without air miles. With her father she made way

towards the 'stage', where a few faces Gem also recognised greeted her with enthusiasm.

"By next year there will be school strikes all over the world," Gem told Gaynor. Then she grinned wryly. "I'm not always so positive but I try to be, for Skye."

"I have grandchildren," said Gaynor. "So ditto. And it's my generation that messed up."

Gem found Skye's cup. The sun was growing warm; she removed the woolly hat she'd pulled onto her daughter's curls. Meanwhile Gaynor had been greeted by a group her age; much embracing began. Gem pushed the buggy a little closer to what would be the action and found herself hailed by Enid, who'd stayed in London overnight but said a coach was on its way from Blackpool. Gem felt touched to be remembered.

"How's Pru?" she asked. "She says she's doing fine but I'm not sure that's exactly true."

Enid agreed. "She's home but she'll need help now and you know how independent she is. We miss her at the gate."

Gem almost said she missed her too but it would sound implausible, soft. As an outsider she didn't like to make that kind of claim. Enid said hello to Skye, made her smile and hurried away in search of someone *from a past life*.

When Gem had booked her day off a couple of the others in the office had said they'd do the same, but she hadn't spotted them yet. Working for a charity like hers meant she didn't need to have the kind of conversation she found hard to begin. Here she was among friends and that felt comfortable, even to someone who mostly liked to keep a distance. "*I can't do parties,*" she'd told Rob. He didn't notice the difference, being equally and quietly at ease with one person or forty. She envied him, but more than that she liked

the way he didn't change, or even modify. He had one voice, one vocabulary and one self for all contexts. It made him seem strong as well as true. And he didn't override her like other guys she'd known, as if her feelings were silly, a weakness or flaw. He listened, and that helped her know herself.

There were lots of film cameras around. The closest to Gem, with a clear view of the speakers, was a sleek guy so tall that she had to move or see nothing. The woman with him had magenta hair and peace earrings: a style Gem would choose if she valued style, or had a hope of achieving it. There were plenty of police about; they'd been informed. Maybe they'd be calling for back-up now the crowd in the square was so dense. *Civil disobedience* was the plan but she didn't know exactly what form that would take, or how long Skye would stay happy.

She crouched down and asked, "Do you want to climb to the mountain top?" Skye was definitely up for that and reached her arms up high. Gem was unstrapping her and lifting her onto her shoulders when one of the faces she'd recognised took the microphone. He was eloquent and emotional. The mood he created was silent, and intensified. This was *humanity's darkest hour*. He cited the loss of 60% of the world's species in his lifetime. Gem had grown up fighting tears but this was different; they were necessary, appropriate. Around her she saw the same response on other faces and she felt a kind of awe.

Could Skye tell, up there? Did she feel the urgency as well as the mourning? She was quiet, her body still. What if no one could protect her?

Applauded and spent, the speaker made way for others and sat, body and soul overwhelmed, on the wall. There were politicians, Green and red; a TV presenter Gem had always liked for not being girlie; speakers from different cultures at imminent risk.

When she clapped, Skye clapped too, and wobbled. Then Greta was introduced to loud applause. She began, clear and direct. When she was eight she'd learned about climate change and couldn't understand why adults weren't talking about it all day every day on her TV, in school and all around her. Why the governments weren't acting to ensure a future for people on earth. And the crowd echoed her sentences, clause by clause.

There was a point when Gem glimpsed Manda Craig, just long enough to be sure she hadn't been spotted herself. Then someone squeezed through, past Gem, and by the time her view settled Manda had moved, or someone taller had shifted in front of her. Gem wondered why a kind of panic undermined things, important things she wanted to give herself to, and not just in the moment. She couldn't lose focus; that would be personal turned petty. But she'd set the film aside and held no grudge. Manda loved Rob too.

Now Skye wanted to come down. Clipping her into the buggy, Gem passed her a sandwich that for a moment she didn't take. Skye was occupied, making eye contact with another child, a couple of years older and free standing. He was running around his father's legs, using them as a slalom course. Skye was enthralled and the boy was putting on a show but Gem didn't want to miss a word of this speech. Some of the clauses were so long and complex that repetition by chorus was a challenge, but she needed to get them right.

The tall guy turned his camera a moment to capture the reaction of the cheering crowd as Greta ended her speech. Gem saw his face – or part of it – before he left her staring at his well-groomed hair. After three years and two months, it was Nick Gorski.

Gem told herself he hadn't seen her. It was about scale and panorama, not individuals. He was at work. She was probably more forgettable than she realised. Motherhood had rounded a few spikes deep down and sometimes

she thought it showed. What she needed was that Quaker space where peace and stillness held.

“Come on,” she told Skye, who was draining her cup. “Let’s go to the station for a wee.”

*

Everyone was singing as they moved into the road between Parliament and the square like a slow wave on a shore:

“If you want to know where the power lies, turn and look into each other’s eyes.”

Manda looked again and again, from face to face. Eyes looked back, reflecting the same spirit. Of sadness, yes, and a rebellion, but also love. She felt exhilarated. Assuming Adam was at her shoulder, she was about to sit down on the tarmac in front of the halted traffic when she lost him. Then, sitting anyway while the chant continued, she found him again, and saw on his face something other, something less. He wasn’t part of this, not really. The song wasn’t inside him. He’d joined in the Declaration of Rebellion, with its demands of the government, like a guy who’d ended up at Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, not knowing the form, the words or tunes but trapped by embarrassment. Now with a yard’s distance she saw that he would rather not be here.

He sat down too, awkwardly, as if concerned about the cost of dry cleaning his coat. The road was blocked by a thousand people, maybe two. She looked up at the cocooned tower where Big Ben should be, at the men at work on the scaffolding and the blue sky beyond them. Such a beautiful day.

Someone was talking to the female driver of the nearest vehicle. Then he shouted, “There’s a new-born baby in the car.” Everyone stood and backed

away just long enough to let the baby's mother drive through with a smile and a wave, then filled the space again.

"Are you OK?" Manda asked Adam. For someone who wasn't comfortable he was taking a lot of photos.

"Sure." He straightened his coat underneath him. "What happens now?"

"More speeches? More singing?" she guessed. "More cake?"

It was the first time he'd refused her baking. But he couldn't spoil this. As Caroline Lucas arrived from the Commons, Manda stood to whoop. A young Muslim woman sang a prayer in Arabic; a Catholic priest offered another. Every time police officers warned, "You're obstructing the highway. I'll have to ask you to move," there was a chorus of "Shh."

A haunting tune with the chorus, *This is an emergency*, was delivered by a young woman who must sing professionally, her voice clear, pure and strong. From time to time someone thanked the police, invited them to join the rebellion and asked the crowd to show with raised hands whether they wanted to stay in the road another half hour. Each time Manda was part of the consensus to stay; Adam wasn't.

She leaned in as if to rest her head on his shoulder, but turned towards him.

"I'm sorry my friend," she sang, not very well, "I didn't mean to trouble you... *But this is an emergency.*" She grimaced at the way the tune had derailed.

Adam nodded, his mouth in a firm line. "This is cloud cuckoo land. Religious fervour meets political fantasy."

"Our connection to the earth and all living things is spiritual – how can it be anything else? And no one's playing politics except the mob over the road!"

She nodded towards the heavily policed building and remembered the time she'd got in to lobby her MP, had to turn her T-shirt inside out because of the

slogan, and shuddered at the machine guns. That was before she spoke to him and found no connection at all with that particular living thing.

“They won’t change because people sit in a road.”

“The demands have to be met or it’s over. So no point pussy footing around at the edges. Only radical will do. This is just the start, Adam!”

He smiled. “I’d like to see you pussy foot.”

Manda rolled her eyes, rather like Libby did with her. “Why are you here? Are you serious about anything except your GCSE targets?”

“I’m serious about you.”

“Then leave me to drink this in, OK?”

“We agreed to leave at two. You know I have work to do...”

“You go. I’ll call you later and tell you what you missed.”

She saw him consider before kissing her cheek; he was warm and damp.

“Don’t be angry with me. I have some catching up to do, that’s all.”

She said she understood, and waved when he looked back and found her in the crowd where she belonged.

“You’ve been shagging some guy! On a Saturday morning!” Manda had no idea how Libby knew, until she remembered the state of the bed after Libby had gone up to the bathroom. And his toothbrush! *“I’ll get used to it. To a new mother. But don’t shove my face in it. I don’t do that to you.”* She was defiant but reasonable, mother to child. And guilty. And now she wondered what any of it was for.

But it hardly mattered. She was here, with or without him, and it was happening at last, because it had to, and the cops could arrest her whenever they liked because this was unstoppable.

*

“Gem?”

Somehow Nick had found her, and just when she was leaving. After an unexpectedly long nap, Skye was awake and dismayed.

“I thought you were filming?”

“I have an assistant. She’s finishing off. There are lock-ons now.”

“I heard.”

“The first arrests of the rebellion I guess.” Nick looked down at Skye, who didn’t smile. “Who’s this? Introductions please.”

“Skye. She’s had enough. I need to take her home.”

Nick talked to Skye, and somehow made her grin. He straightened up. “Her father isn’t here? Gem, is Rob...?”

“I don’t talk about her father, not to anyone. She’s not the only child in the country being raised by a single mum and we do all right.”

He held up a hand. “Sure. I can see that.”

“I didn’t mean to be...”

“Fierce?” He grinned. “You were defensive. It’s not my business. But it’s a lovely surprise to see you here – where Rob would be.”

Gem heard a hymn, thin behind them. Gem thought about telling him she was a Quaker now but held back. Rob would have understood what that meant but Nick was always different, some way behind. She used to think what united them was good humour. Not the imbalance between Rob’s passion and Nick’s willingness to back him up, without details or certainty.

His humour did seem good, better than hers could be. As if he really was happy to see her. But she couldn’t deal with him and his pretty face and advert-worthy hair, his long legs and boy band boots. He looked too successful. He was everything Rob would never have been.

“Let me buy you coffee. A treat for Skye. Don’t say no.”

“You’re working...”

“I get a break. Boss’s perks. Tanya can join us if she packs up.”

He was on his phone, messaging fast while Gem talked to Skye, sounding out her tolerance, doubting her own. Except that part of her was curious. And part of her was unsure how to feel. Three years. There were memories she’d shelved under Do Not Access and here he was, all joie de vivre and zero complications, no clue.

They walked past Gandhi at the back of the square. *Pick of the crop*, she thought, but kept silent.

“I know a coffee shop that’s close but unlikely to be heaving with other rebels.”

“So that’s what you are?” she checked as he led the way across the road and she rebuffed his offer to push the buggy.

“A rebel?” asked Nick. “Two star, one – if Rob was five.”

She supposed he thought his honesty was endearing. “This is your job, filming protests?”

“Not really. I do commercial stuff for money. The enlightened press will be interested in this.”

Gem said she wasn’t aware of any enlightened press but supposed everything was relative and the BBC had to be woken fast. He let it go. Or lost it in the traffic.

“Bus!” she cried for Skye, and told him she loved them. “Not tubes, though. She scowls at the tunnel when the darkness starts to shake. And when they arrive and stop she looks at me as if to check they’re safe.” The adjective seemed so sad; she thought he felt its power.

He asked about her own work, and seemed to approve although it meant nothing to him.

“With charities, small is good,” she told him. “Agile is the word, although I hate that business talk.”

“I bet Skye’s pretty agile now? Climbing? Into everything? Past the stage of putting everything in her mouth, though, right?”

“Yeah.”

Maybe her look asked how he knew. He said he had a nephew now, a little younger than Skye, and talked animatedly: how affectionate he was, how funny. If he’d been trying to prove how *nice* he was he couldn’t have done a lot better. But she remembered that anyway.

“Gem,” he said at the funeral, touching her bare arm and looking at her empty glass. “*I’ll get you another. No one should have to do this sober.*”

But she was, and she wanted to hold on to the clarity. Nothing blurred or smooth. Nothing lost. Not now she was clean and everything was fresh again, as grief should be – like air at the top of a mountain, so rich and full-bodied it was hard to stand.

“*Manda’s on the edge,*” he said, returning with a large glass. “*And James is being affable enough for two. Libby’s pissed and a bit hostile. I don’t blame any of them. There’s no way to be right now.*”

Gem didn’t argue. He sat next to her at the side of the dining room where the table held the remains of the buffet. Some guests had left. Most were in the lounge where photos of Rob filled one wall she needed to ignore however it compelled her. She didn’t have the right, the history. Whether she featured – a last minute extra – or not.

“*We’re allowed to be gutted too,*” he said. “*We’re eligible.*” He said they appeared in one photo each. “*He loved you.*”

He’d loved Nick too but she hadn’t said, because the words were no use. She couldn’t find a way to make them real.

Now, the focus was on walking the busy pavement. Gem had hated the way the air tasted since she'd seen the data: one of the most polluted cities in Europe and no progress made. They were past Westminster Abbey, where tourists gathered, queued, took photos, but it was Westminster Hall Nick pointed out on the right.

"Mum's a Methodist. She bought me lunch in the café a while back. Dad's an atheist – been to church once since they met, for their wedding."

The café was down in the basement. In the lift the sudden quiet felt like pressure to speak. Not that Nick needed prompting. He was down on his haunches again, amusing Skye by speaking for her hedgehog in a dialogue.

"Good hedgehog," he said, tried to stroke him and yelped. Skye chortled.

Upright again as they exited into the café, he asked, "Did you see the film before Manda pulled it?"

Gem nodded.

"I edited it but I didn't interfere. She knew what she wanted. I couldn't really say no."

Gem knew she must be frowning. She had no idea he was still in touch with Manda. And *no* was what she should have said herself, three years back.

"Stoke Spike!" cried Skye.

"I'm sorry if it... upset you, Gem."

"I've been trying to heal."

"I know. I mean, of course you have."

"You have to swear you won't say a word to Manda about Skye – or me. I mean it, Nick."

"Sure, sure! You can trust me, swear to God."

They'd reached the front of the queue now and he asked what they wanted.

"Stoke Spike!" cried Skye.

Nick stroked the toy and looked up at Gem. She stared at the counter, the menu, and then Nick. His bright, open face: a blank canvas.

“We need to get back, Nick, really. I’m sorry.” She began to turn the buggy round. “Don’t try to persuade me.”

“All right...” He followed as she pushed a complaining Skye towards the door. Gem was angry now, with herself, for being weak all over again.

“Here’s my card,” he told her. Gem took it, tucked it into the back pocket of her jeans. “You don’t have one?”

“Not on me.”

“You won’t give me your number?”

The lift arrived. The door opened. “I can’t. Sorry.”

As she pushed Skye into the lift she kept her eyes ahead, her body stiffening inside at the thought of his body tall behind her. The door closed, and she turned. He’d let her go. But she hadn’t wanted to feel like this.

“It’s all right, sweetie,” she said, stroking Skye’s hot hair. “We’re going home.”

*

Manda had turned off her phone. Switching on she found three messages from Adam.

You’re angry with me. I’m sorry for whatever I did. Remember I’m new to all this. Give me a chance. X

Are we still on for Sunday at the café? I’m worried I’ve blown it. I want to make it up to you. And come with you next time and keep my reservations to myself. I didn’t mean to spoil anything. X

Speak to me, Manda. I can’t work for worrying. X

It wasn’t his fault. He never pretended more than interest. He was just a passenger, an observer, his phone capturing things he didn’t feel. And she’d

snatched at something convention declared she needed when she should have been rebuilding with Libby instead.

It's me who should be sorry, she told him. I'll explain on Sunday. See you then.

X

She left a recorded message inviting Libby to supper on Sunday. Six o'clock, after she'd ended it with Adam. She'd have to tell him face to face, kindly, with respect. And then somehow she must prise Libby open. She'd ask James along too, for family counselling of a streamlined kind, minus the middle woman.

"Don't expect Dad to keep up, Mum," Rob told her once. "He does too well out of capitalism to fancy the idea of change. Just keep telling the truth. Everyone will have to face it one day soon. And he loves you. He pays more attention than you think."

Had she loved James then, as much as Rob? *Nowhere near*, James would say. There were truths she couldn't tell because she couldn't keep hold of them. But they were trivial, arguable, flotsam. She spread on the kitchen table the Declaration the crowd had read together in Parliament Square.

This is our darkest hour.

Humanity finds itself embroiled in an event unprecedented in its history. One which, unless immediately addressed, will catapult us further into the destruction of all we hold dear: this nation, its peoples, our ecosystems and the future of generations to come.

She leaned on the table, her hands on her hair, her eyes filling until she wailed.

Eleven

November 2018

James realised he was nervous, which seemed amusing in its way. There'd been no actual dates with Leanne at the rock choir – just kisses in her car, or his, after a quick drink when rehearsal ended. Fumblings. And some talk too, the first two Tuesday evenings, because Leanne was so sad about Rob, so patiently sympathetic it made her tender. Not enough to end a healthy marriage, but when it came to relationships, health could be a subjective thing, no tests available. He imagined it would be different with Tanya, although what *it* would turn out to be was very much an open question. Maybe just a coffee and debrief after they'd been around the exhibition? *Oceania* at the RA was her choice but he'd been enthusiastic; he liked not really knowing what it would offer – although he'd like to know what she'd understood from his briefest of emails, because he'd hardly been open about his hopes and yes, a good few dreams.

Remembering Manda's news that she'd ended her own relationship, almost before his source informed him it was happening, he couldn't be sure how Libby would react if he began something with Tanya. Manda had a theory that their daughter's development towards maturity had been stunted by grief and she was stuck at a flammable nineteen. But as far as James could see, everyone was still a kid at twenty-two; it was just that no one admitted it until they were heading for fifty. Manda's family lunch had been about as relaxing as a cross-country run through sleet at boarding school.

"So if you've finished with this Adam guy you'll have time for me now?"

"I always had time for you, love." Manda passed her the salad.

"Between the café and trying to get arrested in your time off?"

"We all need to talk more. We're still a family. And that includes Rob – in the sense that he's still part of us and always will be."

“He’s gone, Mum! Get hold of it! I don’t want to talk about him. I want to talk about me. And you, and Dad, and... stuff! Like life!”

It would have been funny, given Libby’s reluctance to talk about anything much at all, except the on-off feud with Bee that – like Brexit – he’d stopped trying to follow.

“Your dad agrees that it would be worth investigating counsellors.”

Libby turned accusingly to him. Thanks, Manda. “Well yes, if you feel ready, sweetheart.”

Clearly she hated it when they agreed about something for her supposed benefit.

“I don’t, thanks.”

Libby had perfect theatrical timing in these situations. Manda seemed to think progress had been made by the time they’d finished what was a surprisingly splendid vegan meal, but he couldn’t really see how or where. They were a family made to be four, not three. Rob had changed the dynamics; it was a fact. He was the superglue son, binding the three of them together for all their tugging. In fact, James understood the climate activists were using superglue now, in this *rebellion* Manda had embraced. Doubtless she’d stick herself somewhere soon; it made his skin creep to imagine it.

He was meant to be meeting Tanya outside which wasn’t the best idea given the recent drop in temperature. Reliving his astonishment when she called him back after he left a message with Nick, he wondered what colour her hair was now, what she’d be wearing. And expecting. He didn’t even know her age.

It was foolish to be so early, he thought as he arrived in the courtyard and saw what seemed to be the house from *Psycho* parked there in a Tate Modern sort of way. He’d better not make any derogatory remarks about modern art to Tanya or he’d be showing more than his age. His conservatism, as Manda

put it. *“You’re part of the Establishment, James, and it’s not done humanity much good.”* Since he didn’t ask his parents to send him to private school, or ask for the salary he commanded, it didn’t seem entirely fair – especially as these days he suspected his partners considered him something of a snowflake.

He ran a comb through his hair, aware that it was still good and that Libby was glad she’d inherited it, given the wild alternative Manda passed on to Rob.

“It’s fine,” he heard.

Tanya was behind him, and her own hair was vivid blue. Her tights were purple and her coat a kind of patterned artwork in itself. Her shiny Doc Martens looked too big for someone her height. The exuberance of it all made him smile.

“Tanya! You caught me, banged to rights.” They exchanged cheek kisses, double. “Tell me about this exhibition.”

“Oh, the captions will do that, and they’ll have audio to tell you all you need to know.”

But headphones, he thought, would exclude the person he wanted to know, and block the space between them. They walked inside to join the queue.

*

Manda was surprised, during her late lunchbreak, to see a message from Nick Gorski asking her to call him.

“Ah, Manda, thanks for getting back to me.”

She expressed curiosity and asked what she could do for him.

“It’s... um... a bit awkward. I got tipped off by a guy I know, an editor on one of the less enlightened broadsheets. He’s a mate, what can I say? So he knew I edited the film about Rob...” Manda waited. “There’s someone touting an inside story about you and climate activism. Not much of a story. My mate

thinks he's quite sad, you know? But he claims he's been... in a relationship with you, and you're a reckless revolutionary."

Manda's throat made a noise that wasn't quite a laugh. "Adam Browne."

"No, that wasn't it. Maybe he's using another name. Been watching too many spy movies. Anyway, my mate sent him packing but the tabloids might not be so picky so he thought..."

"I should be pickier myself, about who I sleep with." She knew she sounded calmer than she felt. There was something ridiculous about it, about her. It was a truth she could have understood if she'd been *woke* as the kids of America seemed to say now. And it wasn't a death.

"It's a shitty, creepy thing to do."

"So he's not a teacher?"

"A writer, he calls himself. Ex-cop, he claims, but that might be fiction too. I'm sorry."

"I should know better at my age. And stupidly, part of me did." She thanked Nick and said she must get back to work.

"Don't let him stop you. The rebellion... it's necessary."

Surprised, she told him it wouldn't, and yes, she knew. So Nick was back on track and that, at least, was something to celebrate. Now, though, she needed a shower. She must wash her hair. But she couldn't clean inside, where he'd been, where she'd let him into her world, her beliefs, her grief, and he'd ransacked it all for what he could sell.

*

James had had no idea. Ten thousand islands on the map around the wall! Impatient to explore the artworks he could see ahead in the next room, James would happily have skipped the poem delivered on film by an earnest young woman from the Marshall Islands who was labelled a climate change activist. /

lived with one of those, he could have told Tanya with a smile that was wry and worn.

“Did you hear?” Manda had announced rather than asked on Sunday. *“An island has just gone under! East Island in the French Frigate Shoals, washed away by hurricane Walaka .”*

He looked back to the cascading textile tsunami that fell to the floor and dominated the octagonal hall, and supposed that it wasn't simply beautiful, but a warning. Was that the message here – not art but politics?

“Tell them about the water,” Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner said, “how we have seen it rising flooding across our cemeteries gushing over the sea walls and crashing against our homes. Tell them what it's like to see the entire ocean level with the land.”

Tanya seemed rapt. He might as well not be there. As the film finished ready to begin again, she sighed.

“Shit,” she said. “This is real, isn't it?”

“The artworks look wonderful,” he said, playing dumb really. “I had a Ladybird book about Captain Cook when I was seven or eight but I suppose he'll be the villain here.”

“I'm more worried about the future than the past,” Tanya said.

James had read that the two hundred works, small and huge, illustrated five hundred years of history. “But what a past!” he cried.

There was a soul canoe presumably rowing to the afterlife, and many paddles that looked too heavy to lift. A Tahitian mourner's costume that looked too heavy to wear. Something seven metres long that reminded him of his university rowing days but turned out to be a ceremonial feast bowl from the Solomon Islands. Some of the ornaments were made of shell, some greenstone

and some ceramics. Tanya seemed fascinated, studying the captions and moving slowly and rather independently. He felt surplus to requirements.

“Am I the only person here who knew nothing about all this?” he asked her as she looked at him and smiled, as if remembering his existence.

“I thought this was your area?”

Had he given that impression? “Well, not really, but it’s good to learn.”

“I don’t know much about anything,” she said. “But my great grandmother was Tahitian, and ended up in California.”

James looked at her afresh and in spite of the colours he thought he could see something he might have called exotic. “Ah,” he said. “I understand. It’s personal.” With women it seemed things always were.

“I’d like to go, but when you hear that poet... this is serious, isn’t it? Do you think we really should be flying around the world?”

“It’s your heritage.” He imagined going with her to Tahiti. “I think you’re entitled...”

“Yeah, but entitlement, you know? Isn’t that the cause of the trouble we’re in?”

They moved into the next room, where some of the god images were tall and pretty ferocious.

“I like this one,” said Tanya.

The wooden figure of the Tahitian god Ti’i was smaller. He had two heads cocked at right angles from his fat little body and was frankly gruesome but when James suggested as much with a pulled face, she told him, “He’s serene though!” She said she wished she knew whether Ti’i would mean anything at all to her great grandmother. “I mean, I don’t know jack shit about archbishops or saints, but this was really part of people’s lives.”

She admired the Hawaiian god Ku with his mother of pear eyes and razor-sharp teeth – a gift to Cook when he first arrived. “That must have scared the shit out of him. But what a gift! I mean, this was generous and respectful.”

James wasn’t sure he could buy into the *paradise defiled* narrative. Life wasn’t usually as black and white as that, and these people weren’t all love and peace. No one was, in spite of Manda’s dreams. They came to some drawings by a Tahitian priest who joined the Endeavour and Tanya said she hoped Cook and crew gave him celebrity treatment.

“Meghan came to open this exhibition,” she told him. “I like her. A feminist of colour, right? Did you see the wedding?”

Since he hadn’t, James feared he was disappointing her at every turn, but he hadn’t expected her to be a royalist. Shouldn’t that be him?

“I hope she stops Harry hunting,” she murmured, bending to look closely at some cloth, and James decided there was no need to mention that he used to ride with the hounds, like his father, until he met Manda at university. “And she’s gorgeous too.”

James didn’t disagree, although personally he found Tanya more attractive. Her purple legs were very distracting. When they reached the panoramic video that shamed Cook and co, she sat on the floor to watch, and soon muttered, “The world’s so unfair. White men have done so much damage.”

Although this was hard to dispute, she did seem to be putting a negative spin on a stunning exhibition.

“Have there been no good white men in your life?” he asked with a smile, wishing he’d kept up his RA membership so he could take her to the lounge. “Or good men, full stop? Because that seems hard to believe.”

At that she stood, with more speed and ease than he could manage. Had he said the wrong thing?

“I was giving you a clue with Meghan, in case. I thought you were excited about this exhibition too but it’s not a date. I’m thirty-six. Plus I’m a lesbian, James.”

He hoped his smile wasn’t awkward. “Cool.”

He could say he’d like to be friends while privately blaming Nick Gorski for passing her contact details over without as much as a hint. He could pretend he’d only wanted her to film something for the practice, and then say the other partners overruled. And he would very much like to advise everyone around them who had presumably heard her less-than-muted speech to focus on Captain Cook.

Twelve

November 2018

It had been fun on Waterloo Bridge, a kind of party. But this was different and Gem told herself she should have known. And worn more layers. This strategy was meant to be *swarming* but that sounded warmer and wilder.

Banner first to block the road, they filed across. The guy with the old-fashioned kind of tannoy began to explain, “We are sorry to hold you up. We won’t be here long. We are Extinction Rebellion and we are here because this is an emergency. The IPCC report says we have twelve years left to make radical changes or...”

Gem had been asked to take flyers to the drivers they were delaying – not a role she would have volunteered for – but they weren’t winding down their windscreens. Most looked fiercely ahead, deleting her. Some shouted – and some got out of their vehicles to gesticulate, swear and yell. Just about all of

them kept their engines running, as if poisoning protestors was an act of revenge.

No, she told herself. Not sides. Not enemies, however hostile. Something of God in everyone. No one was beyond reach. And most of these people simply didn't understand what was at risk

"We're sorry to inconvenience you," she began, to a guy who'd wound his window down.

"Then fuck off!"

"Our leaders have left us no choice," she continued as he wound up again as fast as he could, his face twisted. "Petitions are not going to save us. We face an existential threat."

Gem walked on down to the next vehicle, and the next. Along with the flyers, she was carrying home-baked vegan cookies, but no one seemed to be hungry. Outside a white van ahead a guy stood far from still, his arms in the air. He jerked a fist towards her as she approached.

"What the fuck are you doing, you wankers?"

She began, trying to make eye contact, her voice low and reasonable. A mother's voice, explaining. He interrupted but she didn't stop. Then she used the phrase *climate change*.

"Oh!" He lowered his arms. "This is about climate change!"

"Yes... it's a crisis we are facing..."

His shoulders dropped and he saw her now. "Right, yeah. I know." He leaned in towards the two guys in his van. "Climate change," he said.

"Ah, OK."

"Good on you, love."

Gem offered the tub of cookies and all three of them took one. There were smiles now. “Thanks, love,” they said, and one gave a thumbs up at the first mouthful. She could have hugged all three of them.

All around her, horns were honking. She walked back to the crossing and sat down on the ground, picking up the placard she’d left there. She mustn’t look at her watch and wish it all over, because it had to be done if London was going to be gridlocked, if a headline or two was to be made, and the politicians were going to wake up.

“Let’s go,” called the guy in charge.

They withdrew, huddled and waited for the next blockade, watched by police officers. Soon they’d step out again.

“You all right?” asked a student who’d come down to London from York to swarm for three days. “Do you want to give me the flyers for the next one?”

“I’ll keep going a bit,” she said, trying not to shiver. “Thanks.”

“You’re frozen! Want some coffee?” asked an older woman called Liz who’d brought a flask, but Gem declined. “What time have you got to be at work?”

“I said I’d be in by ten thirty.” Gem would make up the hours at home once Skye was asleep, and no one would disapprove exactly, but at the same time, it was harder to justify than holding the bridges on a Saturday afternoon because this was rush hour and ordinary people were stressed. But she told the others the story of the guys in the van because it made a difference. People cheered and the student gave her a high five.

Time ran out so fast. The lights changed and they moved into the road again.

*

Someone in Libby’s office was an hour late. Hearing about the *climate hippies* blocking one of the busiest roads into the centre of London, Libby shook her head, rolled her eyes and hoped her mother wasn’t one of them.

"Tell me about your childhood," the counsellor had said. Predictably.

"I was happy. I think I was. Kids are, right?"

"Not necessarily. What made you happy? Did your brother make you happy?"

"He didn't make me unhappy. He was nice. But he was the favourite. Mum's favourite anyway."

So it was about Rob again. He was still centre stage. She didn't know how anyone talked about their childhood in any detail without photos as prompts. That Libby Craig who loved Busted didn't feel like her, so how could she know how she felt? She wasn't sure she'd bother to go back for a second session. The woman was so composed it made Libby feel a mess and she wasn't. She had a good job and a healthy bank account. Her hair and figure were both... good. There were too many people trying to undermine everything, like these idiots sitting in the road, making life hard for ordinary people trying to get to work – and the counsellor was the same. She wanted her to dig up something really bad and admit she was damaged. But she wasn't. She was doing fine and if only people would leave her alone she'd do better.

"What would you say if I told you the majority of people who have siblings believe that they were their parents' favourite?"

"I'd say I don't suppose their siblings are all dead."

"What would you say to Rob if he walked into the room now?"

"Rob was a saint, not Jesus... Sorry. I'd say... I don't know. I'd say," She wasn't expecting her voice to crack like that. *"I missed you."*

Her mother would probably think the money was well spent if it made her cry. Now, looking out of the office window as if she might see London at a standstill, Libby would tell Rob something else. *"I wanted to BE you."*

That was her jealousy – not of his politics but his freedom to be himself, to be heard, to be whole, and a fit. To be enough.

*

It couldn't really be getting colder. Gem was sitting in the road, one hand holding a placard. Someone had said the traffic was backed up for miles. It wasn't surprising that the drivers were more abusive. Her body stiff and her lips numb, she tried to screen out the noise, the fumes, the tension. All she had to do was find the place she arrived at on Sundays at Meeting, the place where only truth mattered, and beauty. Where peace filled the inside of everything until the world seemed held in it. *I'm sorry my friends, I didn't mean to trouble you... when you were having such a hard time...* The movement's anthem had been haunting her.

"We act out of love," said the guy with the tannoy.

There'd been a motorcyclist at the last blockade who'd removed his helmet and shaken out long, glossy hair. "Bless you," he said. So like Nick. She'd wondered whether he'd be here to film but the only footage was being transmitted live from people's phones. Sooner or later, she'd be bound to see him again, wouldn't she, if he cared enough to join the rebellion as well as document it on film?

"Get a fucking job!" she heard from one passer-by. But another came across the road to join them, and was embraced. She'd feel less guilty now, when she had to leave. But when they cleared the road again, a coffee break was agreed, and they all headed for the nearest café, shedding the police officers who moved off in another direction. Gem bought a coffee and sat quietly, while the others chatted, reporting on the other road blocks and making introductions. Sometimes she'd rather message someone she loved.

How are you doing Pru? x

Oh not too bad dear. Better for hearing from you.

I'm sitting in the road this morning with Extinction Rebellion and it's pretty tough but not as tough as you! x

Hero! But yes I can imagine. You take care of yourself. Skye needs you.

When do you go home? Have the doctors said? X

Well they don't seem sure I can manage on my own but I will get help an hour or two a day and I'll be fine. I can't give up my freedom just yet.

Don't! Resist. x

“Have you thawed out?” one of the older guys asked. Answering, Gem found her lips were mobile again. She sent love to Pru and put her phone in her pocket.

They returned to the traffic in an even busier spot, only this time with no police escort. As Gem moved towards the island on her left, a large black saloon kept moving too, the wing mirror brushing her as it passed – but stopped when Liz stepped in front of it. Within seconds guys were out of their vehicles and marching towards them. Someone was shoved. The guy on the tannoy appealed for calm and reminded drivers that the protest was peaceful. A short middle-aged man in a woolly hat stride towards Gem and picked her up. All right, she thought, remaining still and silent until he deposited her at the side of the road, muttering, “Sorry love,” so quietly that she wondered whether she'd imagined it. Now the police were back and drivers argued but were sent back to their vehicles. One officer had words with saloon man.

“I never thought I'd feel grateful for police protection!” Liz told her as she sat down again. “When it comes to the arms trade they protect the dealers, not the protestors. Are you all right?”

Gem was fine. Years back she would have struggled, sworn. Rob had changed her, before and after he died. And now she lived up to her badge, *Quakers for Peace* – or tried, anyway. But perhaps, looking at the time, she'd make this her

last blockade. She wouldn't be sorry to stop. For the last time she tried to find that peace again, and remembered that phrase someone had quoted in Meeting on Sunday, so full of meaning it moved her, all of her: *Put the centre of yourself outside.*

Seven minutes up. Walking away with the others she saw a tall guy with hair caught by the cold wind, approaching them. Approaching her. No camera, just Nick.

"Gem," he said, puffed. "I saw you on Twitter."

"I'm going to work now, Nick."

"On the tube? Can I come with you?"

"O.K.," she said.

Thirteen

The short walk to the tube was busy but it didn't stop Nick trying to talk.

"You look cold."

"Yeah. It wasn't fun."

"I've been wanting to see you since that day in Parliament Square. I kept thinking about you. And I know you're going to work but I need to talk to you."

Suddenly Gem would rather be sitting in the road. She walked on but the traffic lights were red.

"About Skye," he said. "Is she Rob's?"

"I don't know."

He was looking at her now in a way she'd dreaded. "You don't know because there's another possibility? Because you weren't too drunk to remember what happened after the funeral?"

Gem bit her lip and shook her head. She hadn't wanted to hold on to it but she'd never quite erased it all. Leaning her head against his in the taxi they'd shared to the hotel where they'd both booked rooms. His hand holding hers. Pressed together at his door. Stroking his hair, while his crying shook his chest.

"We made love, Gem."

"We had sex."

"It was loving. We both lost Rob."

The light changed. They walked, in step now. He reached for her hand but she couldn't let him take it, not this time.

"We were *both* drunk. Maybe you don't remember as much as you imagine."

"I didn't... when I woke and you'd gone, I thought I'd dreamed it. How could it be real? And if it was, I thought you'd be sick with.... And blame me."

"With guilt. Yeah. I blamed myself more."

They stepped down into the tube station.

"We didn't take precautions?" he asked, his voice low.

She swiped her Oyster Card. "I don't know. Do you? But I'm guessing neither of us took condoms to Rob's funeral."

She was first on the escalator but he stood close and tall behind her. She gazed up at the ads without seeing them.

"But you and Rob..."

"Not the last time." The pack had been empty; she'd been the one to insist they took a chance, not caring if she fell pregnant with his child because thanks to him she was ready now to be a mother, with or without a father around. Forgetting the world that wasn't fit to give a child a future.

Stepping off the escalator, they entered the tunnel and saw a tube, its carriage doors opening. Instinctively, she rushed for it, and they both fitted in.

Now they stood holding the same yellow rail. She looked at his hand above hers, just as smooth and pretty as his face.

“So it’s fifty-fifty?”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

“And you didn’t need to know?”

“Nick, try to understand. I didn’t want to be smothered by the Craigs. And I didn’t want to ask anything of you. How could I? It wouldn’t have been fair.”

“On me, or you?” Still his voice was quiet, kind.

“Either?” Had it mattered, a few weeks after the funeral, when she took the kit straight from the counter at a department store into the Ladies, and the line was blue? She’d only known that she wanted her baby, and life after death. “I hadn’t seen you since. I didn’t expect to see you again.”

“I didn’t think you’d want me to call.”

“No.”

“We hardly knew each other. Without Rob...”

“Yes. So the only thing that made any sense was raising Skye alone. And I am, and she’s happy.”

“She’s great.” His smile was sad. “And you left Bristol to be sure you didn’t bump into me...”

“I left Bristol because Rob would always be there.”

“You still love him?”

She nodded. It kept her alive.

“And you hope Skye is his?”

“I always have.”

Her stop had already been announced. He looked out as the tube slowed to a halt. “This is where you work.”

“Yes.” She reached up to kiss his cheek. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“Can I see you?” he called as the doors slid open. “One weekend? No claims.”

Gem stepped onto the platform but looked back. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Call me!”

The doors closed. Gem walked towards the exit.

*

The café was quiet. Manda cut up her latest bake, thinking through the wording she would use at closing time, but beginning to hope she didn’t have to wait that long because the more she thought, the more decided she became. The three customers drinking coffee were all regulars and she usually enjoyed chatting with them, especially brave, quivery Viv, who walked with a stick and looked a generation older than she was, but today the only person she wanted to talk to was Farah.

She arranged the ginger cake with its label and looked into the kitchen where her boss was chopping carrots as if they’d offended her.

Farah turned and read her. “You’re going to tell me you’ve considered it carefully and you’re going to jump ship.”

“Yes. I thought maybe after Christmas.”

“What if this rebellion comes to a standstill?”

“It won’t. It will grow.”

“I dare say it could grow without you. But I know, you have to be there. You’d be blocking London right now if you weren’t trapped here.”

Manda nodded. She had to give everything to this movement or it wouldn’t be enough. She kept Farah up to date with developments, but not via Twitter, because she’d left that – in case some sleazy online news outfit ran Adam’s *story*, or in case he messaged her again, under that name or any other.

She was aware that Farah couldn’t quite believe she was in a position to manage without income, at least until the summer.

“I should be grateful to James,” she said, because he’d always been the serious earner, and a bit of a miser with it. Her Home Economics teaching, never more than part-time, was always a hobby in his eyes.

“The benefits of capitalism for the few,” teased Farah, and Manda held up her hands. “It won’t be the same without you here. That’s if I can keep afloat.”

Manda blew her a kiss; Farah was less huggable with a sharp knife in her hand. A group, probably from a nearby office, walked in together. They were loud and Manda thought she knew what they were complaining about, but she kept listening to be sure while they ordered drinks in turn.

“I think you’ll find,” she said, as they moved to sit down, “that these *eco-warriors* are motivated by the fact that the world is experiencing climate breakdown, as declared by experts from umpteen countries in zillions of scientific papers in the recent IPCC report. These people are *bringing London to a standstill* because signing another petition might not be enough to save our children.” She smiled. “I call them heroes myself. I’ll bring your drinks over in just a minute.”

She mouthed at Farah, “*Sack me!*” and smiled as her boss tried to copy the emoji that slaps a hand to one eye. Not that she had scored any points over the loudest guy in the group, who interrupted a woman who told him Manda had a point, insisting *this kind of irresponsible activism* was counter-productive. In spite of her irritation, Manda was afraid it might be, but she hoped Rob would approve – of her words, smile and delivery, but also her commitment. Because she loved this job, and Farah, and the feel they’d created together here. It was a place where Rob would have felt at home.

*

The youngest of the partners, who had seen images from the road blockades, joked with James, “I haven’t spotted your ex.”

The partner who wasn't back from a meeting yet might not see any humour in the situation and James couldn't blame him. Manda's idea of giving up work for this rebellion was madness and Libby, who already called her mother *an extremist*, would be appalled – but what could he do?

He could do with a break himself, a sabbatical. Not for the purposes of civil disobedience but to broaden his horizons with some personal development. Perhaps some art history, or world religions. He'd been thinking a lot since the exhibition with Tanya, about how narrow one could become, and how much more there was to learn. *"Ah, James, there are more ways to be human than you realised."*

His phone rang unexpectedly and he saw *Libby* on screen. Some personal emergency, he supposed, and hesitated before picking up.

"Dad, I saw Gem sitting in the road with those Extinction Rebellion nutters. She looks out of it, a mess. And... thing is, Dad, she's got a child."

"She's sitting in the road with a child?"

"I mean she *has* a child. And I think it's Rob's. And she's an irresponsible mother. She looks like she could be doing drugs. So you might want to claim your grandchild."

James put a hand to his head. "Libby, you're jumping way head of yourself." He didn't dare say he liked Gem. "We can't talk about this now."

"What if she gets arrested? If she goes to prison?"

"I don't think obstructing a highway carries a custodial sentence, darling. Look, I have a meeting to go to," he lied. "Let's talk at the weekend."

Libby sounded deflated. "Good luck getting there!"

James searched Twitter until he found her. Rob's Gem, delicate-looking as ever, and yes, straggly and scruffy just the way Rob used to be. Her expression was sad, in fact. It reminded him of the face of the poet from the Marshall

Islands. Suddenly he knew what Tanya would say, if he told her – which was hardly likely, given that he didn't expect to see her again. She'd say, *Leave her alone*. And he wasn't quite sure how Tanya became his touchstone, his new lens on the world. But he supposed that was in the pub, when he fell in love with her.

What Manda would say, for once he couldn't guess.

*

Trying to listen hard, and watch carefully, Pru realised she had a lot to learn.

"It's very sensible," Mia said. "You'll be a silver surfer."

"I thought you'd be the person to teach me," Pru said, thinking how ridiculously young Mia looked, for a teacher. "You must need a lot of patience in your job and you may need even more with me!"

Gem had offered to come and visit after Christmas, and bring Skye, but she couldn't expect her to do that. Besides, now that Pru had decided to go online and keep up with things she'd miss, she couldn't wait to start. It might be fun. Ed had warned her it could be *addictive* but she wasn't going to allow that, and she wasn't going to allow him to do the teaching because he'd make her feel like a fool.

"So I need to follow Twitter and Facebook and it would be nice to send some emails," she told Mia, using the chair to make her a coffee like a proper hostess, and prove she was mobile and doing fine.

"Sure," said Mia, "but maybe not all in one lesson." She asked Pru how it was working out with the carers.

"Oh, we'll get on like a house on fire once we get used to each other's funny ways. I'm determined not to be a stickler or a whinger."

"You'll be their favourite!"

Pru was finding it hard being a burden to people, even though she paid them to put up with her, but she kept that to herself because she didn't need people to feel sorry for her. And that included herself.

"I miss everyone," she said. "So I need to keep an eye on what they're up to. Any more earthquakes today?"

Mia nodded, and shook her head too, but couldn't remember the frequency of the latest one.

"That's why I need to be on that internet, to find these things out. But if they go on like this they'll have to stop for good, surely? It's madness."

Mia said she hoped so but the *dirty frackers*, as Pru called them, wanted the government to relax the regulations so they didn't have to stop at all, even for the rest of the day, after any tremor.

Pru was afraid the dirty frackers had the government in their pockets and she didn't like to be cynical but the evidence was pretty strong. Apparently there were diagrams; she'd be able to find them now. She'd be more informed than ever, as long as she didn't fall for any fake news.

"There's been more civil disobedience in London," Mia told her, fiddling with the wires at the back of Pru's new computer. It was like waiting for the curtain to go up at the theatre. "And I think the school strikes are going to take off soon, maybe after Christmas. I need to talk to my Head about that."

While she was setting up the computer, she passed Pru her flat little phone to look at. "Gem, see, in the green hat?"

The screen was so small, it could have been anyone sitting on the road with a placard that said, THIS IS AN EMERGENCY. But she felt proud anyway. And one day, Skye would be proud too, and grateful.

"Thank you so much for this, Mia," she said. "It's going to be an adventure."

Fourteen

December 6th 2018

It was Manda's last day off, not counting Christmas. Following signs to City Hall, Westminster, she reflected that so far, bar a few dozen mince pies, she'd been detached from the consumer bingefest. An achievement. And she intended to stay that way up to what they called the wire. Note to self, she thought: the language of war was everywhere and it was a kind of infiltration, like the way the forces had a hold in churches and schools. Everyday militarism.

The curved glass building, swelling out by the river, was impressive. She couldn't help thinking that assembly members might be forgiven if their sense of importance swelled too, breezing with lanyards past security. But history wouldn't forgive them if they voted NO today.

Was she too early? Pinning her XR logo on her coat, she gazed around for others and smiled at three police officers waiting too. She wondered how Libby's counselling was going, or whether she'd secretly stopped. They hadn't even discussed Christmas arrangements yet, and Manda suspected Libby of planning to fly away to escape it.

Looking at the river to the inner tune of *Waterloo Sunset*, she found it oddly moving. Loss made everything so beautiful, even before it was lost. Would the assembly vote the right way and if they did, would they commit to action that was swift and radical? Frankly, Stroud, Totnes and Bristol were pushovers; this would be a coup.

Hearing voices she turned to find a group, mostly young, advancing with kit. She recognised a few faces. Soon banners were unfurled, and Manda helped to hold the one that said TWELVE YEARS TO SAVE THE EARTH. Passers-by, mostly on their way to work, were offered flyers, and it was heartening to see how

many accepted them and signalled or expressed support. Soon the singing had begun, thinner than in Parliament Square but affecting all the same. Manda tried to join in, but joked with the young woman one place along the banner that no one would hang around to find out more with her wailing in their ear. It turned out that Manda was double her age with half her qualifications. Manda found herself mentioning Libby.

“Is she in the rebellion?” asked Shani, brightly. She was wearing enough clothes for August, her tight midriff and tattooed arms bare.

Manda pulled a face Libby wouldn't like. “I failed there. I seem to be a deterrent rather than an inspiration. But my son was an activist.” Her voice thickened with no warning. “He died...”

Shani's face was even brighter now. “You made that film! I saw it. You must be so proud. He'd be glad to see this, right? It's only just beginning but we're rising up at last.”

Manda smiled gratefully. “Yes. He would, and we are.”

As if on cue, a new song began: “We are the change, we are the ones we are waiting for. We are dawning, we are rising up.” Its rhythm was less daunting than the ethereal anthem's harmonies. Manda sang enthusiastically, stamping her feet and moving her hips as much as the banner allowed.

A young guy was preparing to talk with a basic PA, his back to the water. The chorus ended for the last time and Manda watched him looking at the script on his phone the way speakers could nowadays.

She realised that a tall man with dense, tight curls had stopped to watch and seemed to be looking straight at her, but because of his sunglasses, she couldn't be sure. He was dressed casually, like a creative – as colourful and free as James was neat and grey.

He accepted a flyer, read it, nodded and gave them a thumbs-up. Then he took off his sunglasses, and headed towards her. Manda opened her mouth wide.

“Leo?”

“Manda!”

She looked at Shani and explained, “I’m going to have to let go for a moment, just long enough to hug this man – who was my first serious boyfriend!” Close-up he glistened and smelled wonderful, spicy but citrus. He was lean but firm. And this was ridiculous!

“You look just the same,” he said, and they covered where she lived and her divorce, his early retirement and songwriting. He was in a band when they started dating at school, and so much more interesting than anyone else in the town. *“So his mother’s black and his father’s white?”* her mother had asked, the same way she’d ask whether one was a prostitute and the other a vicar who’d strayed off the straight and narrow.

“Do you still worship Hendrix?” she checked.

“Oh, man, who else?”

“And you... do you have children?”

“Sure, three. But we lost their mother to cancer.”

“I’m so sorry.” She produced a picture of Rob and was explaining when they heard, “Good morning. We are Extinction Rebellion and we are here to encourage the London Assembly to declare a Climate Emergency...”

“Look,” Leo told her, “I need to go. I’m meeting my son for breakfast – five minutes ago, in that café right over there.” He pointed, named it and gave her a card with an electric guitar on it. “I’ll be there until ten so if you finish, come on over. If you can. I mean, no pressure. You have important business here.”

Manda felt the grin on her face; it had been there a while. He leaned down and kissed her cheeks. She watched him walking away, a kind of a loping walk with a swing. Why had they split up? She didn't even know. Turning her attention to the speaker on the mic, she heard him finish the Declaration of Rebellion, and joined in the cheering.

"Climate justice now!" he began.

Manda echoed with the rest. Somewhere in an old notebook she had lyrics she'd scribbled a year or so ago, for a song about Rob.

*

Gem had been on the point of making contact so many times. Every time, in fact, that she'd done the tube journey he'd shared with her that day of the swarming. This morning she found Nick Gorski's card in her wallet where she'd kept it, looked at her face in the carriage window and pictured his. A seriously nice guy. Rob's best friend. Perhaps a rebel too. And Skye's father, maybe. Maybe not.

Hey Nick. It would be good to meet up and talk properly. Gem

She checked her reflection. Did she look excited or nervous, or just like a single mum who'd left the flat in a rush and wasn't bothered about reflections in train windows?

Gem, hi. I've been thinking hard about everything and I think I'm awake at last. Do you have a lunch hour?

Yes, in theory. Now she was alarmed. She thought of a coffee shop she couldn't afford to use as a habit, and gave him the address. But didn't he want to see Skye? Wasn't that the point, just like it would be the Craigs' point if they knew?

If she could open the door on a hotel room in the same chain, with the same colours and layout, and the same smooth, wide bed, would she remember

more than the panic that followed her home, and the shame? Rob would understand, if anyone would, but she hadn't understood it herself – how loving and grieving and red wine could have led her, unsteady, to Nick's bed.

"I've never been in love before," Rob told her, the first time. He never asked her how many guys she'd had so she didn't have to count, or wish them away. And they didn't count, when she was using. She wasn't herself and she didn't know herself.

Gem didn't kid herself that Nick was in love – except maybe with the idea of having a kid he could play with once a week. But what harm would that do her, or Skye? If it added something warm and smiley to Skye's life, why would she reject it – as long as the truth was served? The truth might matter more than anything, and it wasn't always easy to see – although Nick didn't seem to need it. She guessed some people made up their own.

*

The Green members of the assembly who'd proposed the motion didn't want the protest to move inside and jeopardise the vote, and no one was arguing. They'd been optimistic when they stopped to chat on their way in, and stood behind the banner for photos – and now, as the singing stopped, the mood felt flat but confident too.

Manda said her goodbyes as the group broke up. Feeling the superglue in her pocket she wondered if she'd need it anytime soon, and whether next year when the movement spread all over the world there'd be a global shortage. Libby would be appalled but when it felt right, she'd do it for Rob, and the grandchildren she'd probably never have.

"Gem would have told us. Forget it, Libby. It's a wild goose chase."

"What kind of grandma doesn't want to find her grandchild?"

She looked at her watch. She used to be mad about Leo when she was sixteen, and not just to annoy her parents. They'd lasted until he went to university a year ahead of her, which made the relationship long and, given the sex they managed mostly in his car, grown-up.

She imagined Farah telling her to be careful, found her bearings and set off for the café.

*

Hello Gem this is Pru on the worldwide web! I promise not to be a nuisance though and bombard you. Mia set all this up and taught me basics. She says hi. No news really but I follow what's happening in the world and it's very exciting. Change gonna come like Sam Cooke sang. Will you be protesting at the BBC who really should know better? You can email me pictures of Skye now, with attachments. I am fine and as Enid says, hell on wheels.

Pru x

*

James felt uneasy. If the crisis was as huge as the activists said – and Attenborough, and the Secretary General of the UN, and the scientists of course – then why wasn't it everywhere, dominating all media all day all over the world? Why were the Tories talking Brexit, which was a disaster in itself but hardly on the same scale? No mention of climate *change* in the latest budget, never mind *breakdown* or *emergency*.

Then again, hadn't people always thought the end of the world was nigh? Simple folk, religious nuts, but not scientists, perhaps, with access to the most sophisticated technology. He couldn't understand why he'd ignored Manda for so many years, or humoured her by taking the line of least resistance, when he could have found out for himself. He supposed that would be because he was busy at work (which he no longer wished to be) and because he was used to

Manda's passions, which were once more attractive and became more wearing. Because he liked travelling the world, and cars, and steak – but no more, apparently, than the world leaders at COP24. Which seemed rather hopeless.

He used to have a head for science. Perhaps he should read the IPCC report.

*

Libby was feeling Christmassy now, and there were parties ahead, and drinks, and dinners, and she'd told Dad what she wanted, sending links. So it would be a slimmer's milk shake for breakfast and lunch in between. Looking at the small pink can in her bag made her long for a MacDonald's.

She turned on her phone and found Bee sounding excited.

Lib, what would you say to a weekend in Vienna for the Christmas market? Gluhwein by the bucket?

Libby checked the dates, grinned and replied: *Yeah baby! Book it. Bargain.* It would be great for Christmas shopping by day and then they could drink the nights away. Manda would never need to know. After all she said she didn't want a present.

*

Gem showed Nick the latest pictures of Skye, and filled him in on the kind of details only mothers usually asked, about birth weight and milestones like crawling.

"There were nine days between..." She didn't want to spell that out. "You and Rob. So the birth date doesn't make it conclusive because she was a few days early. But if you want a paternity test..."

"I don't need that." He touched her hand in the centre of the table, between their coffee cups.

Gem stared. "You just want to be..."

“In her life.”

“She’d like that.”

Gem thought she’d like it too. “Do you think it’s wrong to have children, knowing what we know? Because her generation will inherit...” Her voice cracked. “Chaos. I don’t want to think about it, but...”

“It drives you.”

“Yes. How can it not? But what if it’s too late?”

“You love her. And you’re doing all you can.”

“I want to...”

Nick took her hand in both of his. “So do I.”

PART TWO

Fifteen

early April 2019

Telling people made all the difference. Until Libby heard herself, three drinks down, muttering to Bee that being with Marc was ‘getting boring’ after two whole months, she hadn’t labelled her feelings. And even then, the word she meant was *hollow*. That was how she felt it as she woke beside him, wondering what possessed her to allow him into her space and fill it – with his biceps and his smokiness, his toiletries and shoes. With underwear in her washing machine that counted on surfacing clean for his return.

Libby watched him sleeping, his chin spiking with stubble and his chest model-tight. Bee had said she wouldn’t mind being bored out of her brains by him but that was a sex thing and for Libby that side had worn first, slipped into familiar choreography that was all placement and no flair.

“Kew Gardens would be nice,” she’d said, wanting blue above and air with bite, but Saturdays meant football and lager and all the fags he couldn’t smoke in the week. And she hadn’t minded at first, because of the gifts that arrived at the office and the way the others gathered to see what he’d sent her this time. And because Bee had said ‘a regular guy’ was what she needed, someone to give her ‘a good seeing-to’. Which was what he thought he did, sometimes twice a night.

Still, she thought, as she smelt the Marc-ness of his breath, he made her feel clever – which was a first. Told her she was too good for him. Was amused by jokes about her eco-extremist mother – who’d want to meet him, if she knew he existed, but not if she heard him laughing at her expense. And Libby might have called it enough, for now, if she’d stuck with the old job. Marc had lain in her bed, watching her dress for the interview, in a new and expensive little suit with leg room, and told her he’d employ her on sight – making the verb into innuendo.

He didn’t guess what she thought about when he was on top of her. Or rather, who. And he didn’t ask. For Marc, questions were just foreplay. He didn’t need to know how she functioned, inside, any more than she needed to know what lifted an aeroplane off the ground. And he’d taken her for an expensive weekend in Barcelona, was talking now about hot white sand in Croatia for Easter.

At that moment he woke quite suddenly, as if an alarm had sounded and a survival instinct kicked in hard. He reached out an arm soft with coppery hair, and smiled as if he thought, washed and dressed as she as, that she must be willing right now.

“Don’t go.”

It was her cue and she knew she had to work it somehow.

“Thing is, in fact... I need *you* to go. As in, it’s over, you know, run its course?” He was staring, shocked, and making her feel cruel when it was just realism really. She softened her voice, hoped it transmitted to her face. “Just life, you know? Nothing lasts, right?” Somehow she held eye contact and wished it felt more powerful.

His jaw clenched as if his teeth met hard inside. There was a furious reflex force in the way he exited her bed, sheets thrashed. He reached for his clothes, hanging in her wardrobe, knocking a dress of hers to the floor.

“You’re a bitch, a fucking bitch.”

She used to tell her mother that, in her teens, but it wasn’t true and she really hoped he was wrong too. “If I am, you’re best out of it.”

Now she was glad she never told him anything, not about Rob or counselling. Not about anything that mattered, like the feelings she’d named for the counsellor. Part of her wanted to say she was sorry but that was a word that made her small. He’d been pestering her for a key but something in her always knew the narrative would work its way to this.

“You’re welcome to breakfast before you go.”

“Not hungry.” He made the two words sound like an accusation, or threat.

Marc’s usual morning routine was careful and scented. Now he was heading for her door. She pictured him tying his red shoelaces before she heard him rattle the door shut with a final clash.

“You deserve to be loved,” her mother had told her at Christmas.

“Why?”

“Because you’re human, darling.”

It wasn’t the answer her mother would have given Rob. Because he was brave and principled, and funny and soft. Everything Libby wasn’t. How human

was she, really? What if Rob got every bit of humanity that mattered and she was left with the dregs?

Now her mother loved hip old Leo almost as much as she loved the planet, and sat with him like a conjoined twin on the sofa, their hands playing each other's fingers like messages or tunes.

"Of course it's your choice when you stop," said the counsellor. *"But have you considered why you want to?"*

Wasn't the wanting enough? Even love was just wanting, and needing to be wanted. And she was no good at loving, or hadn't been up to now. She'd been waiting for the counsellor to tell her so.

"Is it because we're not making enough progress, or because the progress is real and challenging?"

Libby liked to think she'd been challenging herself. *"Isn't that a loaded question?"*

Maybe she was better at asking questions than answering them. She knew she hadn't told the truth, since she didn't know what that was, but wasn't she paying the counsellor to shine a light on it?

Well this was the truth here, whether Marc could face it or not. Libby tugged the sheet from the bed and bundled it into the washing machine along with his pillow case.

She didn't know why she was crying.

*

Gem read the email from Mia a second time, as if the words would arrange themselves into a different meaning.

Gem, I am very sorry to tell you that Pru died on Thursday night. It was sudden but peaceful. Her son has asked for an inquest but if she could she'd say she just wore out. I said that as the person who made her a silver surfer I'd go

through her Contacts and let everyone know. It's a short list and almost all what he would call troublemakers.

I will let you know about the funeral but it's a long way for you to come and she wouldn't expect it. You know that.

Hope you and Skye are well. She really loved you.

Mia x

"I really loved her too," Gem told the screen.

Looking at the time in the bottom right corner, she shut down the laptop and went to wake Skye. Her hair was wild around the cot, and warm on her forehead when she stroked it. Gem didn't know anyone more alive.

"Hey, sweetpea. Time for another day."

Skye pressed her lips to Gem's cheek in a moist kiss as she lifted her. Gem thought there was a question in her eyes. Maybe she heard it in her voice: the loss, Pru gone. The cold space opening up around her.

Would she have gone up to Preston at Christmas, if she and Nick hadn't been... connecting? Pru had wanted to meet him. *In the spring*, she'd told Pru, *before the International Rebellion*.

So are you and Nick what they call an item? Pru had asked, more than once.

We're friends, Gem had told her, *and Skye loves him*.

It might be hard for a guy with a big, noisy family to understand what Pru was to her: a surrogate grandma, a role model, as open and giving as Gem had learned to be reticent and safe. But not with Pru, because Pru seemed to know straight away who she really was, the first time they met at the gates to the site where they hadn't fracked now since December. *Whoop whoop*, her texts said, every time Cuadrilla took more equipment away. Perhaps Pru had died happy.

Skye filled the potty, her eyes sleepy but curious. Then she followed Gem through to the kitchen and lifted her arms to be placed in her high chair. It seemed wrong to be reaching for a pan to make her porridge when the woman who doted on her from a distance was dead, and would never live for her, any more than Rob could.

“See Daddy today?”

Gem turned. It was a first and Nick would be... elated, moved. He didn't press, didn't talk tests, just enjoyed. Gem was grateful. But for her Rob did live, and always would, where it hurt most, not in the car upside down off the road but beside her, his hand in hers. And she wasn't ready. It made her doubt...

Taking her time, she stirred the oats into the rice milk as if she needed to concentrate. She couldn't correct her; it wouldn't be fair. Then she said, gently, “Nick's working today.”

They needed to talk about the Rebellion but no one could say how long it would last, or hold. She'd booked three days unpaid leave and wished she could take more; he didn't seem sure whether he'd be there to film it. There'd be four key sites but she liked the idea of a garden bridge.

She would see him tomorrow, after Meeting. He was interested in what being a Quaker meant. Gem knew he was in love – with Skye, with holding her high above his head and pushing her buggy. With her too, maybe. It was kindness and she couldn't let it go. He was Rob's best friend after all.

“Porridge ready,” asked Skye as if it was an assumption, as Gem added some raisins and reached for the Tigger bowl.

James realised he might have to invest in an apron.

“Why don’t you bring Leo to Sunday lunch?” was so easily said, with a kind of bravado that declared maturity, generosity, confidence in his culinary skills as well as his single status. A sign that he was unintimidated by the flamboyance of Manda’s romance or plant-based menu.

The hardback book he’d bought just before closing the day before was propped open with his phone and glasses case, and spattered with greasy smears. He wished Libby hadn’t declined but then she was probably spending Sunday in bed with this Marc she hadn’t mentioned to Manda. James knew he wasn’t good at secrets after half a bottle of wine, and as Leo didn’t drink and Manda might not be satisfied the Shiraz was vegan, he could be obliged to put away rather more. Especially if they banded on about the International Rebellion that according to the press was intended to wreak chaos in the capital tomorrow.

Not that he cared the way he would have done, before the sabbatical. Maybe he should spend some of the time that stretched ahead of him on cookery classes.

The sauce seemed too thin and oily. Perhaps he’d misread something. What would Manda add to thicken it, without lumps? He’d ask Libby but if she wasn’t eating out she took her meals home from M and S. Besides, he wouldn’t want to interrupt anything. And he hoped Manda and Leo... well, they weren’t teenagers, for God’s sake.

Aware that he was feeling grumpy now, James searched online for ideas and tried ground almonds, hoping the result tasted better than it looked. He wondered whether Leo was a new or reluctant vegan and had allowed Manda to show him that Cowspiracy film he’d successfully refused to watch himself.

He’d forgotten the salad! And the oranges the recipe claimed went so well with baby spinach!

“So what?” he challenged aloud. Manda improvised; she called it ‘imagination’ and the secret of her success.

Was that the doorbell? Were they early and what did that mean? Too much sex had made them hungry? James washed his hands too quickly and splashed his new jeans, anticipating Manda’s smile.

He opened the door and saw that with his pale, torn jeans, single earring and patchwork sweater, Leo was shabby-cool. Was that a phrase? Manda would think it should be. His greying hair gleamed and his smile was wide.

“Hey, James. Good to meet you.”

And had he in fact heard so much about him? He didn’t like to guess at the exact words she’d use. No hug, thank goodness – just a hand to shake that caught him off guard a moment before he took it. Remembering that Leo was a musician, he hoped he wasn’t too good – at that or anything else. But Manda’s face suggested otherwise. Then she kissed both his cheeks and he felt the familiar texture of her hair flung against his skin. She was too warm for the weather.

Behind them James saw two bikes with helmets over the handlebars. According to Libby, she lived mostly at Leo’s place now.

“A good clean ride on a Sunday,” Leo said.

“Relatively clean,” said Manda. “Did you know in London kids’ lungs are actually smaller now, as in shrinking?”

“That’s pretty shocking,” he admitted. “If it’s true.”

“Google it,” Manda suggested. “Do your own fact-check.” But he didn’t think she was irritated. She was losing weight, though. Leo took her hand.

James suggested that they hid the bikes round the side into the back garden, even though their combined value didn’t really warrant such a precaution. Leo grinned but wheeled them both, one on each side. Manda watched him a minute, like a proud mother, then stepped inside.

“How are you?”

James wanted to ask her how anyone could answer that question meaningfully, but instead claimed, “Fine,” and echoed it back as revenge.

“Me? Excited more than anything. You know we’re going to block London tomorrow, bring it to a standstill?”

Kicking off her Doc Martens, she hadn’t made it further than the hall.

“So I gather,” he said. “I’m glad I won’t be disrupted.”

“Tell me a better way of achieving the goals, James. Seriously. Everyone would love to know how to make headlines and force the government to their senses without disrupting poorly paid workers at rush hour.”

She ran her fingers through hair that had been crushed, and shook it out. It used to be more resilient, and vivid too. The thought made him feel old and rather sad.

“Of course the well paid workers deserve all they get,” he deduced. There had been a time when she loved the character of this unnecessarily spacious house almost as much as the garden and its tulips.

“Let’s not make it political,” she suggested brightly. “This is about the survival of humanity and everything else. In which context, a few delays...”

“Good luck explaining that to Libby.”

Leo returned in his young dude’s sneakers and shone a smile around. James noticed the way Manda touched him at once: just a quick, light hand on his thigh. Leo reached for her hand and they followed James together, their socked feet padding in unison behind him in a silence that left him imagining looks, squeezes...

At least Leo hadn’t brought a guitar.

“How’s the sabbatical, James?” he heard as he turned into the kitchen, which looked a lot messier than he’d thought he’d left it.

“Oh, I’m adjusting,” he said. “I’d forgotten how to sleep. I’m reading a bit. Investigating classes. I did sign up to a gym.”

He could tell Manda knew what that meant: more or less diddlysquat.

“You could join us,” she said. “Rebel for life.”

As he focused on pouring drinks, Leo asked him about the courses he was considering. James sounded vague, forgetting most of them. He thought better of apologising for the food before he had served it.

“Smells good,” said Manda.

She could still read him and now it made him awkward. All those years they were married, he cooked for her once a year maybe, on her birthday. What had he been trying to prove, playing host? Maybe he’d just tired of waiting for them to invite him to the love nest.

“You two can go and canoodle on the sofa while I focus in here,” he suggested.

“It’s a great garden,” said Leo.

“I’m managing to fit weeding into my hectic schedule,” James told them. “The tulips seem to be thriving.”

Still her favourite, he wondered, especially the straggle-topped ones? She didn’t say because they’d gone.

*

Regent’s Park was bright, its perfect grass a deep, slightly damp green, but in spite of the sun Gem felt shivery. She’d need more clothes on Waterloo Bridge. Nick never wore enough. She glanced at the snatch of bare skin between his jeans and hoodie as he pushed the buggy and imagined him as a stringy boy, his feet and chest bare on a bitter British beach.

Gem preferred the park in the summer when the delphiniums rioted deep purple and cobalt blue, but Skye liked the ducks and geese and looking down on water. In fact she had nodded off, her head tilted and her hat slipping. Gem smiled with Nick at the small mouth hanging open and shiny with dribble. Sometimes the newness of it, of her skin and fingers, made her soft inside – a softness she’d resisted for years, to be alone.

Nick spread out the picnic blanket and they sat. She'd brought a flask of coffee and poured him a cupful.

"I know you're disappointed but I can't turn down paid work," he said.

She wanted to ask why. Some rebels had given up jobs for this. He looked good in his sunglasses but she couldn't tell whether he was disappointed too.

"But you'll come on Wednesday?"

"Sure, if I can. I want to be with you."

"But you're not sure about it, are you?"

"It's beyond ambitious. Four sites to hold all week! Do they think the police will just give them up?" He paused, retrieving hair brushed free by wind. "And do they really think there's the remotest chance the government will meet those demands?" He touched her hand a moment. "I'm not trying to burst your bubble."

"I believe in this," she told him. "Time's running out, Nick. I know the whole thing is ridiculously big and bold but it has to be."

"What love requires of you?" He smiled at her favourite Quaker phrase.

She nodded.

"But don't get arrested."

"How can I, with Skye?"

"I'd cry if I had to watch them carry you off."

She looked at him, surprised. A pigeon landed in a flurry even before she had thought about the sandwiches in her backpack.

"You won't have to," she said.

"Ducks!" cried Skye, straining in the buggy.

Seventeen

April 15th 2019

Waterloo Bridge

Beyond the lorry and its emerging stage, the trees in their central avenue had to be sandbagged against the wind. While Leo helped with the lifting, Manda walked towards the north end, watching the potted plants and chalked artwork erase the blacks and greys. New tents billowed; flags flapped. Banners hung from metal and branches. Below, the Thames flowed on as if nothing had changed. The skyline remained as the tourists expected it. But Waterloo Bridge was a garden growing fast.

In spite of the ROAD CLOSED sign and police lethargy, both ends had to be securely held. Behind the banner a big drum beat a rhythm through a chant. "What do we want?" someone called. "Climate justice!" Manda joined in. "When do we want it?" "Now!" she yelled. And again, and again.

After some dancing, Manda offered to relieve one of the guys holding the banner. He thanked her and asked whether there was a skateboard park.

"Not yet but give them half an hour! It's like a top hat full of magic spilling out. We'll have rabbits next."

Manda wished she'd been more involved in the strategic planning that left her awestruck. But there would be veg to chop any time now and this brand new community would need feeding. She couldn't tell whether the police officers close enough to scrutinise were thrown by what had happened on their watch, unfazed or entertained, but they only stood, observing and unthreatening. Unless they had their own even more brilliantly strategic plan...

Already cameras were busy but she hadn't spotted Nick Gorski – just hundreds of guys his age, people who might have met Rob, young women who might have been glad to be Gem, all of them here for their future. And what had she done, really, all these years, with the truth? Not enough. Not nearly enough.

*

Gem could smell hot food and realised she hadn't needed lunch at home before she set off. Crossing the bridge from the north side she smiled at the flowers, the messages, the faces that met hers. Coming to a kind of printing table with wood-cut letters, she chose the strip of cloth that read Conscientious Protector and picked up some safety pins with it.

"Not so easy to do your own arm," said someone around her age who apparently didn't need a coat, just a stripy jumper that might have shrunk in the wash and a denim mini skirt. "Let me." She introduced herself as Lois and admired Skye, who was watchful but quiet.

"She's mesmerised," said Gem. "It's beautiful here."

She looked up at the lorry stage where a cool guy old enough to be her father was playing guitar rather well.

"You know there's a family area behind it, right?" Lois checked. "Past Inductions, before Wellbeing."

"Great. All this since ten?"

"Not long after. And you know about the church, for toilets, and time out. Restores my faith in religion – or should that be people?" Lois looked around. "Feels like home."

Gem agreed.

"You're from the South West?"

"No, but I used to live in Bristol."

Lois explained that most of the people who'd taken the bridge were in affinity groups from Cornwall, Devon and Somerset. "Totnes is punching above its weight. Stroud too. I just met a permaculture guy with the carbon footprint of a mouse. Don't you love it here already?"

Gem nodded. Lois swayed her hips to the guitar, which was funkier now. Then she said, “Did you write a Letter to Earth? I’m reading mine later – although I might be crying by the end. See you, Gem. See you, Skye.”

Skye waved shyly. Lois left for a series of embraces. Gem wished she’d written that letter, joined an affinity group – rather than feeling like a part-timer, constrained too.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Nick would tell her. He insisted she was a great mother, but when she’d tried to tell him it would have been better for Skye if she hadn’t been born into this climate emergency, he’d asked her not to say that, not to even believe it. Of course she could argue that it was rationally, objectively true – as well as impossible to think at all when Skye raised her arms in love and trust because they belonged around her. As she was doing now.

“Mama!”

Gem unstrapped her, carried her with one arm and began, rather unsteadily, to park the buggy with her free hand, beside a wheelbarrow full of potted herbs.

Someone reached for the handles and did the rest for her. In wind-tugged, harem pants and a knitted coat of many colours, she might have looked unconventional somewhere else – including Waterloo Bridge on any other morning. Her hair was tied with wool in a wide, heavy kind of pony tail.

“Gem!”

“Manda. I wondered if you’d be here.” Skye filling her arms made the question of a hug null and void. But it meant the gap between them felt tangible – until Manda leaned in with a kiss for her left cheek, then the right.

Gem smiled. “This is Skye,” she said. She’d rehearsed this moment but still had no script.

“Hello, Skye, gorgeous girl! What do you think of this wonderland?”

Gem realised that since they had only spoken at the funeral, she had never seen Manda look or sound happy. And maybe this was a kind of wake for everything that was dying too. Skye was watching Manda’s painted beads.

“Want to touch them, Skye?” She held them out for Skye to reach and feel. “They’re made of recycled paper,” she told Gem.

“Great.”

“Beautiful,” said Skye. Her new favourite word.

“So are you, sweetheart.”

Surprised by emotion, Manda looked from Gem to the child and wondered how to ask whether she was her grandma. “Gem...” she began.

“I don’t know whether she’s Rob’s,” Gem told her, too quietly, as the music ended and the seated audience in front of the lorry clapped and cheered enthusiastically.

“Sorry? I missed that.” Manda pressed because she had to know, didn’t she? Although suddenly she wasn’t certain she needed to...

Gem raised her voice a little. “I don’t know who the father is. It could be Rob; I wanted that from the start. But there was someone else, someone kind who comforted me, soon after... So I don’t know for sure. I’m sorry.”

Manda nodded. “I see. But if you want her to be Rob’s, and I do too...” Her voice broke without warning. “Well, if you’re willing to let me get to know her a little, babysit even, if you like... I’d love to. Just as often or occasionally as you like. The offer’s there but don’t see it as any kind of pressure or claim.” Manda was conscious that here, now and unexpectedly, she could be her best self. It was liberating. “It’s wonderful to see you here,” she added, her voice thickening. “Family anyway, all of us, all over the world.”

“Thank you, Manda.” Gem was moved. It made words inadequate. “Thank you. That’s really... so kind.”

“I’ll be here for as long as it holds – unless I’m in a police cell of course. And you’ve been listening to my partner, Leo.” Manda had sensed that he was close and turned to find him with his guitar on his back, smiling.

Gem smiled too. “I enjoyed your set,” she said, because she had, although now it seemed a long way back in the past.

“Leo, this is Gem,” Manda told him.

“Ah,” he said. “Lovely to meet you. And this?” He held out a hand to Skye but she hadn’t got the hang of high fives yet, which made her laugh most.

“Skye,” said Manda and Gem together.

“Cool,” said Leo. “Like all this, yeah?”

“Cool!” cried Skye.

“I think I’ll take her to the children’s area...”

“Good idea,” said Manda. “I’ll be cooking again so I’ll be easy to find. Don’t leave without saying goodbye.”

“Sure.”

Now Skye wanted to walk so Gem led her away by the hand, knowing they were watching. It was news she would have messaged Pru to share. As it was, the person she wanted to call and tell might not be the best audience for the story.

*

Libby hadn’t realised that Trey would be at a meeting until the afternoon. Wearing a new dress she expected him to notice, she hoped the climate protestors wouldn’t delay his arrival even longer. Since coffee time people in the office had been moaning about the disruption, calling it *counterproductive* and blaming *hippies* but she’d kept her head down. As her computer screen

showed almost two thirty, she heard his voice in reception, crossed her legs and sat up straighter at the screen. Her lipstick still felt fresh.

Making sure she didn't turn her head as he spoke to a couple of the others, she waited until he was almost behind her before she looked up and smiled. She was sure he danced at weekends; the energy and grace were in his walk, his body.

"Libby," he said. "Any problems?"

"No, all good," she told him. "I hope the protest didn't cause you any. Problems, I mean."

"Extinction Rebellion? They've brought London to its knees according to the press. The tubes are fine, though. I'm guessing your mother..."

Libby felt the kind of flush she'd grown out of a decade ago. Who told him that? It wouldn't surprise her if the video that went viral followed her everywhere and forever. She winced. "Probably, yes. Well, definitely in fact."

"Good on her." Trey smiled, checked his phone and looked back up at Libby, running a hand through his fair curls. "Really. I mean someone's got to bring government to its senses, right? All power to them. Screw the inconvenience; climate breakdown be a lot more disruptive if the world doesn't act."

She stared and made an assenting sort of noise. Her smile felt unconvincing.

"You should be proud of your mum. I would be."

She made a faint, wordless noise Trey didn't hear because he was answering a call on his mobile as he headed for his office.

Eighteen

April 16th 2019

Glancing at the church at the south end of the bridge, Gem thought of Manda bedding down in the crypt. She felt guilty about her own good night's sleep, but grateful for Skye's and glad to be back. The press had no idea how much people were sacrificing but at least a Canon understood, which touched her somehow. "Such a blessing," someone had said, "a real gift."

"I love the spiritual roots supporting us all," she'd told Nick on the phone the night before. "The way differences don't matter. And the hugs."

"I can do hugs," he said. And he could: long ones that strengthened and understood. He'd fit in fine, but she couldn't push. He had to choose to be there.

One of the rebels sitting outside the faded old church greeted her with a raised hand, and she waved back. On days without Skye her body seemed so loose and spare and unsettlingly alone. *"I can take her to nursery and pick her up too. Leave you free to be rebellious! I'd be there too if I could."* And had she wondered for more than a few seconds whether she knew Angel next-door well enough, after a few months of chat on adjacent doorsteps? Gem reminded herself how easily Skye had accepted the idea. She was independent, strong: a cause for celebration but unsettling in its way, because she was so small and the world so hostile, so terrifying, that without the protective cocoon of their mutual dependence she didn't know how they'd come through.

Approaching the banner behind the ROAD CLOSED sign, Gem smiled, returned a peace sign and looked for familiar faces.

"Hey," said a bearded guy with NON-VIOLENT printed on his jeans. "Welcome back."

Gem asked about arrests since she left.

“They came in waves and picked people off. It was kind of random. Not sure anyone was charged though.”

Gem nodded, imagining Manda being carried away, triumphant and defiant, thinking of Rob and his approval. Wondering how many hours people might spend in a police cell, she reminded herself she mustn't allow time to swell and lose all shape and meaning just because here the living felt so new.

Someone was watering the plants gathered behind the banner, in front of the bee sculpture with its big, firm wings. And someone in a woolly hat was being interviewed, possibly for TV. Manda! She was shivering and rubbing her hands, her nose a little red, her hair splaying out and whipped by wind across her face. No sign of her new man.

Gem crossed to the right, alongside the National Theatre, and wished she'd brought a hat herself.

*

Manda was too tired to plan it. But the guy from a channel James had insisted he needed right at the start, complete with satellite dish – when she'd said BBC2 was the only one that didn't disable her brain cells – was the pushy kind, so she'd better focus. The cold air should have been enough to clarify everything but her body felt stiff and old, like the crypt.

“So what's brought you here?” the reporter asked, furry mic thrust her way as if there was some kind of rush. The camera focused on her looked heavy duty.

“Climate catastrophe,” she said. “An existential crisis according to the Secretary General of the UN.” She could never remember his name. “Governments aren't listening so it's a very gentle, non-violent way of waving the shocking truth in their faces. In everyone's faces.”

“I’m sure you’re aware that some of our viewers are angry...” He sounded as if he might be angry himself, all of a sudden.

“Not as angry as they’ll be with our leaders when they realise their kids’ future is at risk and no one’s protecting them. That’s what we’re trying to do here.”

Someone next to Manda sat down with a bowl of thick porridge and a tin mug of coffee.

“So you don’t consider yourself a criminal?”

Manda’s eyes widened. *I’d as soon call Farage a saint*, she thought – briefly conscious that Jane Austen went everywhere with a woman like her. No wonder Rob used to tease her...

“I consider myself a grandmother,” she said, surprising herself. Oh yes, apparently she did. She tried to rerun inner footage of Skye’s face, and hear her strong, sudden voice. “That’s reason and justification enough. Have you read the IPCC report? Your viewers have a right to know what it says.”

“But you’re breaking the law...”

“The government’s inaction is criminal. They’re guilty of ecocide, along with BP and Shell...” The list was too long to begin. The reporter’s eyes wandered up over her head. Was she boring him?

“And you’re willing to be arrested?”

Determined. “Oh yes,” she said, and he lifted the mic, turning away.

“You’re welcome,” she muttered to his back, and for the first time imagined Libby watching, jumping up from the sofa at the word *grandmother*. As if she expected her delinquent mother to cut her out of her will and leave every last piece of pre-loved hospice shop furniture to Skye.

A police liaison officer arrived nearby, greeted by a woman who'd slept better than Manda and hadn't stirred when she crept and stumbled her way to the loos.

The channel wouldn't show it anyway. They'd look for someone younger and prettier, or grungier and less coherent. No blaming and shaming was one of the XR principles and she knew she'd sounded angrier than she should, on two hours' sleep. It was a good decision by Leo to safeguard his back in his own bed – their bed – but he'd said he was on his way.

She hadn't expected to miss him like this. And Rob would have loved him too.

*

Gem smiled up at the guy with the big hair on top of the lorry. Bypassing the porridge, she went round the other side to face the banner low along the chassis. ACT NOW, it said. From behind it, she heard singing, pure and sweet but with a fierce commitment: "I stand for love, even with a broken soul. Even with a heavy heart I stand for love."

There was no one on the stage but technicians setting up. The voice came from below. Gem remembered the young woman her age who had locked on underneath. Still there, in her sleeping bag, and attached to what? An axle?

Wondering what, if the singer peered out, she could ask or say, Gem felt shy, not big enough to bother someone like her, someone brave. She could see from the empty plate and mug beside the banner that she had already been served breakfast. But did she need someone to take her place while she went for a wee, or did she have some kind of nappy? Gem supposed she'd sound like a child if she asked.

The song ended. A couple of young guys sitting on a grassy sheet playing chess looked up and clapped. In Gem's head the song continued. Her soul, her heart. Perhaps not quite the tune she'd heard but something kept soaring and

she didn't want it to stop. People were gathering by the steps up to the lorry stage. Someone emerged from a tent, hair in a top knot, and squinted into the light, which looked brighter than it felt. He smiled at Gem.

"Another great day," he said, and padded off barefoot.

*

A flag with its egg timer logo beat itself in the wind. Stepping up from Oxford Circus tube, James heard the rhythms a moment before he saw the pink boat rising above human waves. The roundabout was occupied and surrounded by onlookers, some of them police. The energy felt young, and he saw as he approached that most of the protestors were exactly that. Plenty of hair around, making his seem thin. Some of it belonged to a slight youth dressed for summer, dancing on the deck as he led a chant: "Extinction!" which was met from below by an emphatic, "Rebellion!"

James wondered whether his oldest brother Tim would tell him it was like 1969 all over again. Being a stockbroker hadn't stopped him admitting when drunk that it was his favourite year. And towards the end he'd been drunk a lot.

Edging through towards the centre he could see that a number of people were lying under the hull with its message TELL THE TRUTH. Glued, presumably. If he were Cressida Dick he'd issue orders to delay the solvent and let them stew. Although to be fair, they must be frozen as well as stiff.

The boat is where the heat is, Tanya had told him when he messaged to ask if she was filming the protest – mainly to show he'd dealt with her own truth and could be friends of an occasional kind. And once he'd decided to observe what was going on he'd had to be prepared to see her there without taking a hit.

Closest to the boat, people were sitting in an arc, not all of them hairy. One, balding and mature, might have been a chartered surveyor or a civil servant.

There were girls as well as women, younger than Libby. Now the dancing dude led them in singing, “People gonna rise like water, gonna turn this system round. In the words of my great-granddaughter, climate justice now.”

No sign of Tanya amongst the film crews. James had been standing for a few minutes, glad of his best wool coat and scarf and oddly conscious of the shine of his polished shoes, when the police who’d seemed as neutral as him up to that point began to move in – a dozen of them, twenty. Like defenders marking strikers they attached themselves, one on one, and began to issue what he took to be warnings while the singing continued, the same song again and again but the rhythm stronger. Then a boy with dreadlocks, probably a student, was lifted and carried out, and above the song he heard shouts of “WE LOVE YOU! WE LOVE YOU!” with whoops and cheers.

An older woman, grey and churchy, was escorted off, one blue plastic police glove light on her arm. Next to her, with an officer leaning down to her, sat a pink-haired girl looking so confused he wondered whether she spoke English. People he suspected were legal observers were scribbling on notepads and talking to the arrestees, but did she even understand? Maybe she’d only been curious like him. Either way he watched her taken, loudly assured of the crowd’s love. A tall man in a hooded Parka jacket was next, his body flopping to make the load harder to bear. As four officers carried him away James saw his eyes were closed, his face calm, almost beatific. James had had enough.

A few more vanloads and they could clear the place, and that was their job, whether or not the tabloids told them to do it. But it was more disturbing than he’d imagined and he didn’t exactly know why.

*

As Libby and Trey left the office for the West End she hoped her elation at being on his team didn’t show. It was a biggish client, a show of faith in her.

“If we’ve got time shall we stop off at Oxford Circus?”

She was probably staring now. “Why?”

“Just to see. Show respect. They’re making a load of arrests.”

Libby shook her head. “Let’s not.”

“You’re afraid your mum might be one of them?”

She nodded. Trey looked at her as if he understood. Could he possibly understand what she didn’t? She nodded.

“Do you want to have dinner when we finish?” he asked. “You choose where. I think you need to talk to me about your mother.”

Nineteen

April 17th 2019

Gem’s hand felt the heat of Skye’s forehead. Everything was redder than it should be: her cheeks, her eyes and nose. Whimpering, she put her arms around Gem’s neck.

“We’ll have a quiet day here, sweetheart,” Gem told her.

“I like the bridge!”

“So do I, my love, but we have to take care of you.”

She could try to stop Nick coming but she didn’t want to. Maybe there’d be a livestream they could watch together. She was reading Skye a story when she heard him at the door and for a moment Skye looked too excited to be ill.

He kissed Gem’s cheeks and, ignoring a health warning, leaned down to Skye’s too. Gem thought maybe, just so he knew, she should talk to him again, properly – about Birth Strike. In case he was hanging in there for something she couldn’t give.

They shared what they knew between them: Piccadilly Circus lost, Marble Arch *permitted* for now, police officers caught on film dancing with rebels on the bridge. Arrests clogging up the system.

“Go back if you want,” Nick told her. “I can stay with Skye.”

“Oh, that’s... Thanks, but...”

“She needs her mother.” *Not a might-be father.* It wasn’t fair on him. “You go, get some footage, and come back and tell me everything.”

He hesitated, and made sure the hedgehog got a laugh before he left. Then he kissed her goodbye and Gem followed him into the hall.

“There’s something I want to tell you,” he said. “You know I love you. You must know.”

Gem nodded.

“And Skye, whatever. Mine or Rob’s, why would it make any difference? We could be a family.”

Gem tried to smile but it didn’t feel whole. “I shouldn’t have had a child. No one should, not now. It isn’t fair to bring kids into a world that’s dying.” Her voice faltered, fracturing.

He took her hand. “You don’t want any more...”

“It’s not about wanting.”

He waited, but she had no more words.

“Look, never say never. I love you. I know you still love Rob but hey, so do I. And we’re doing this the wrong way round.” It was Gem’s turn, puzzled, to wait. He still held her hand and she didn’t like to tug. “Talking about having kids together when we haven’t even kissed.”

They must have done that too, after the funeral, but it seemed neither of them remembered. Now Nick kissed her mouth. Not a sex kiss, but warm.

“Have a good day,” she told him. Like a wife.

She smiled as he hurried to his van, because she didn't know anyone with legs as long as his.

*

Today the afternoon sun felt seriously hot. Manda might have to remove her thermal vest in the crypt. With police numbers and raids on the increase, she intended to leave the cooking to someone who couldn't put their job at risk, and sit on the heart line as an arrestable. But first she watered some of the plants gathered in a garden behind the banner, checking the soil with a finger in case another rebel had thought of it first. Most of them were thriving; a few needed T and C. She rubbed the herbs between her fingers and inhaled: mint, rosemary. There were forget-me-nots, begonias... So much colour and life she could cry. And she needed sunblock as much as sleep.

Putting down the watering can, she squinted ahead, feeling a stirring around her. Police vans at the end of the bridge. "Could we have any arrestables to the heart line now!" she heard over the loudspeaker. "And legal observers please."

Manda made for the front row, where the banner was laid down so that everyone holding it could sit behind. Someone made way for her, a boy-faced young gardener who'd been drumming during the arrests the night before. Shuffling, she made herself as comfortable as her bones allowed.

On her right, a woman with more muscles as well as flesh pushed a kind of kneeler towards her as cushion, saying someone had left it behind when they came for her. Manda thanked her, wondering whether she looked old as well as scrawny. A young tourist had given up his seat on the tube for her last week...

She'd lost Leo again, hadn't seen him since he arrived for late breakfast, and didn't really expect to spot him now as she turned to look through the crowd. He was probably playing or waiting to go on stage. A number of police officers

were advancing in a kind of formation that must be meant to intimidate but she couldn't believe they'd signed up for this. Behind, someone from the Wellbeing team began a chant, the hushed, religious kind: "Peace, love respect". The tune, such as it was, defeated Manda, but personally she knew she needed *de-escalation*. She liked to think her heart was healthy but this... now was the time and there'd never in human history been anything bigger. And she wasn't scared, just overwhelmed by the truth and its demands.

The first arrestee of the run walked, and made a peace sign with her free hand. Manda looked back again, and to both sides, in case Leo had gone to the church for a pee and arrived back in time. Because at breakfast they had agreed to sit together on the heart line this afternoon – although admittedly the idea was hers. "*We could glue our hands together,*" she'd said, "*so if they take one, they'll have to take both.*" Leo hadn't taken that seriously but he'd said he didn't want her getting arrested without him.

The young gardener whose name she'd lost gave her a smile as if he knew she was anxious now. She smiled back, grateful. This was the kind of guy Libby needed, not some slick suit with no ideas, never mind ideals.

She could tell that on the other side of the bridge nearest the National Theatre, more arrests were happening. But with film crews following the departures it was hard, from the ground, to see who'd been taken. Joining in with the chant for *Climate Justice Now*, she realised she needed water and Leo had their aluminium bottle in his backpack. She asked the gardener, who was just unscrewing the lid on his own when a policeman targeted him. He passed her the bottle and she drank hastily, watching. As he zoned out his final warning with what seemed to be prayer or meditation, she offered the water back but he meant her to keep it, because he wasn't going to need it for a while. It took four officers to carry him away.

“WE LOVE YOU!!” shouted Manda, meaning it.

Now Claire, the sporty woman on her right, was next. Manda sang as loudly as she could beside her. Soon Claire had been lifted too, carried rather awkwardly so that they had to put her down and try again. If only she could contact Leo, he could fill that space. On her left, a girl in sunglasses had already stepped in where the gardener’s water bottle stood glinting. The Wellbeing team passed sun cream round, but the police hadn’t finished yet. Manda pulled out her phone, remembering the legal training advice that it was best not to carry one when arrested because the cops could download the contents. And she didn’t want them looking through her gallery at Rob, Rob, Rob... But if the cops were apple picking, she was the one they left on the tree. Too many bruises, maybe.

Where are you? No response. If he was on the bridge he’d know where to find her, so what had happened? Had he been tempted into the Diane Arbus exhibition at the Hayward like he’d teased he might be? There was something casual but impulsive about him that made him hard to know completely and she didn’t know how it had happened, this feeling that overcame her sometimes, because she should know better.

Still her screen was blank. But she wasn’t going anywhere. Having removed a guy in a CHOOSE LOVE T-shirt two places away from Manda, the police seemed to have abandoned her end of the line.

“Manda.”

Nick Gorksi, plus camera. She was glad to see him. He said he was taking photos, portraits really, probably black and white, and would she mind?

“Not right now, Nick.” She produced her phone and scrolled... “You haven’t seen my partner, have you?” She showed him an image from Monday, of Leo on the stage with guitar – and enlarged it as much as she could.

Nick's mouth opened. "He was over there." He pointed towards the theatre side. "He was arrested."

*

Manda's boyfriend's been taken. She's a mess. She ran down to the vans looking for him and he just smiled and blew her a kiss. I filmed it. Maybe I shouldn't have, it felt like intruding. x

Gem nearly replied, *She must be in love.* Instead she wrote, *Manda holds on tight. X*

I think she's frustrated too, that it wasn't her. She's been trying hard. They say people are being taken as far as Luton and Brighton because cells are full. She's gone to the NT bar to call the XR action line for news of him. X

It must be tough. X And Manda wasn't, not really.

I'm glad it's not you. I'd be in bits too. X

He said these things. How did she know he meant them, or whether she wanted him to?

Poor Manda. X

Her turn will come. The Met are going to step up the pressure now.

He had a way of talking as if he knew the things he only supposed.

So's XR. No let up, even once this is over. x

Did you mean what you said about Birth Strike? Xxxx

I think I did.

He didn't answer that. Gem pictured his face as he read it, and felt sad. But there was a difference between accepting the truth, with his intellect, as the experts told it, and knowing deep inside where he was wholly and purely himself – in what people always called the heart: the part of him that wanted to be a full-time lover and father and made no room for melting ice, forest fires and cities under water.

Skye was asleep. Gem pushed back the hair from her forehead as she slept. She felt cooler now. Maybe at the weekend she could take her to Marble Arch, if that was still safe. But she'd rather be on the bridge; she missed it.

She didn't suppose Manda would ever want to leave.

Twenty

April 18th 2019

Lots to tell you, show you and I'd like to see you both. How Skye is. Is it too late to come? x

No. Come. X

And now they had, together, at 4:48: the start of another day. But before, until Skye's temperature fell as fast as it had risen, Nick had given her what she wanted just as badly, more. His arm across her chest, his breath on her cheek, his feet joined to hers, the first and longest kiss. And the certainty that he cared now, about what he'd seen and why it had to happen – almost as much as he cared about her and Skye.

He laid the same arm back across her breasts.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, I can't say. Thoughts aren't like sentences in books. So much. A muddle of things.” Rob. Waterloo Bridge. An ambulance she thought she might have to call. The moment they came as one. Rob. Waterloo Bridge. The world on fire, the ice melting. Skye.

“But you're not sorry?”

Gem smiled. “No. How can I be? But...”

“You hope I understand what this means and doesn't mean. I do.” He stroked her arm. “Today's job should end by mid-afternoon. I'll go back to the bridge.

And on Saturday, if they're still holding it and Skye's bouncing again, we can go, the three of us. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Gem nodded. It was.

*

James looked down on the clouds that hid Britain now. It was probably thirty years since he'd done anything so... heedless. Manda used to laugh when his vocabulary relocated to a different age but she wouldn't laugh at this. A package holiday, long haul: a V-sign to the hippies. She wouldn't believe it was just a whim, a kind of medication, a bolthole, an ejector seat. She wouldn't care that he hadn't felt so guilty since he touched a breast that wasn't hers that first time after rehearsals ended.

Maybe this would be his last, frivolous, selfish impulse – or the last to involve a runway anyway. Manda didn't take fun seriously enough. And it wasn't as if he was going anywhere at the sharp end of climate change, like the Maldives. He'd seen a photo of people walling round a white-sand shore with rocks against a turquoise sea. Desperation. And someone should be doing something fast; Manda was right about that. Even if it was all a bit alarmist and OTT, it wasn't worth taking risks with paradise.

His own break would be cultural, increase his understanding more effectively than a study course. It was what they used to call a getaway without robbing any bank.

A curvy hostess wondered whether he'd like anything to drink.

"Whisky please," said James. "And dry ginger."

He might get seriously drunk.

*

Waking up in Leo's bed, Manda felt guilty, even though the mattress had never felt so perfect, nor her body so warmly and languidly clean. He slept on and

she wouldn't wake him, but she wouldn't wait either. She was needed on the bridge.

"You're cross," he'd said, on the way back to the flat. *"Should it have been you? Did I steal your thunder?"*

As if she hadn't held him tight at the police station! As if she hadn't made a fool of herself, blubbing ridiculously, while he was playing it cool in a cell with a story ready for telling! He was teasing but it felt unfair, because he wouldn't have been rebelling in any shape or form without her. And he'd done the male thing, independent and spontaneous, in spite of what they'd planned – and enjoyed it, apparently, while she lost her mind to a kind of grieving with precious little reason.

"Of course not," she'd denied, but he wore that half-smile that meant he knew better.

His custody sheet said *Released subject to further investigation*, like a good few hundred others so far. Everyone at the station had been *nice*, he'd told her more than once. *"I thought I might be the one they charged, or kept overnight,"* he added. *"You were lucky,"* she told him, reluctant to believe that police racism was a thing of the past, any more than coal mining or fracking. Aware of her own negativity, she'd asked about his back but apparently an hour on a hard slab of a couch-bed had done him no harm.

He was sorry she'd been worried and upset, but she could see he didn't understand why. *"It just happened. They needed arrestables and I sat down – like you did."*

Manda couldn't justify herself and hadn't tried, but withheld the love she could have declared to make sense of it all. He looked so peaceful anyone might have guessed he'd spent the previous day on a beach. Or an Eden of a bridge.

She dressed as quietly as she could, in a long summer dress. He didn't stir. Her hair needed a whole lot of brushing but she could do that on the tube.

You were sleeping like a baby, she wrote in the note. I've gone ahead but maybe take it easy today, hero. Call me. Xxx

She'd like to be as careless of her phone as he was of his. It was odd how little communication there was, for days or weeks, between him and Nathan, but when they were together they were so easy, with their shared walk and gestures and the same grin, that she wondered whether she could ever be as close to Libby as Leo was, regardless, to his son. Whether, taking bed out of the equation, she could be as close to Leo himself.

In the NT bar she'd almost called James – in fact, had tried, although now she couldn't explain why. It was a faintly disturbing memory. But he hadn't called back, so she didn't need to tell him how long it took to find out which police station had housed Leo, and how alone she felt, away from the bridge, in the quiet of that soft red space where no one talked but only tapped away on keyboards. How out of place she felt in the church where she tried to charge her phone and a young, unfamiliar rebel somehow knew she needed a hug, even though it made her cry. How relieved she was to be back on the bridge, encouraged to talk, eat and breathe.

She'd told Leo but her narrative was the thin, dull one laced with excess emotion while his had detail, characters, a kind of arc. His day, not hers. Well, today might be different.

She was walking to the tube when a text landed. James.

Just wondering whether you've been arrested yet? I hear the police are going to toughen up so look after yourself. X

A thumbs-up seemed the obvious and most ambiguous response.

*

Looking at her reflection in the tube window made Libby smile. Anyone would think she'd had sex with Trey – literally rather than imaginatively – instead of just dinner in a Turkish restaurant. A long dinner. She must have talked more over that meal than through weeks plus nights with Marc.

Hey Mum. I know you're busy breaking the law but I have a new boyfriend. You won't approve of him being American but he despises Trump so forgive him. He's full of admiration for you but otherwise he's quite normal. x

Her smile widened again as she pictured her mother's reactions, sentence by sentence. Her dad would like Trey's suits, but be unsettled by attitudes he wouldn't expect. And why was she even thinking like this, after one date?

Because this must be what love felt like. And somehow she had to deserve him.

She looked forward to a reply at some point but it didn't matter much anymore. With Trey beside her she'd be able to listen. She'd feel loose and warm, without the snags and ladders that might unravel things. It was how she felt already, remembering her hand inside his.

Hey Dad. You can ask about my love life if you like. I promise not to ask about yours. X

For the first time, she realised she wanted him to be happy – him, Manda and Leo, Bee, everyone. Watching her mouth dance around in the glass, unable to hold any line or shape, she almost laughed.

Twenty-One

April 19th 2019

Good Friday. Gem remembered her mother calling it a *day of tears and agony* and getting through it with whisky. Although the office was closed, Gem needed to work from home, and make sure Skye was really well.

“I could do some editing here,” Nick said, making the coffee, “if that’s O.K.”

“Don’t you want to be on the bridge, in case?”

“They won’t be able to take it today. They’ll have officers on leave, won’t they? Wouldn’t you expect them to ease off for Easter, and then come in hard on Tuesday?”

Gem shook her head. “I’d like to think so.” She told him the Home Secretary was agitating for the force to use their full powers, whatever that meant.

“Boris’s water cannons?” Nick grinned, and added that things would be quiet for a few days. “With no one trying to get to work why would they bother?”

Gem expected the holiday weekend to bring a crowd of new people to the rebellion: some well-informed, some curious, some just looking for a place to hang out in the sun with free music and food. She was afraid something would change. The non-violence felt like a kind of dream, too pure for reality. Suppose it didn’t hold?

“Don’t worry,” Nick told her. “We’ll be there tomorrow, all three of us.”

Gem knew he misunderstood her faith, such as it was – a delicate and tenuous thing that labels wouldn’t fit – and thought trusting in the Light was meant to give Quakers peace. As if the world made that easy or even reasonable. All the same she wished she could, for Skye’s sake. She’d tried explaining that the Light could illuminate the darkness, flag it up, give it shape... only to run out of words, telling him that was the point: experience over doctrine or theory. But being part of this rebellion, in solidarity with those already living through climate chaos and defence of the children, was her

certainty now. And she could live in the light of that, however much doubt swirled around it.

*

Beaches like this were overrated really. Seen one, seen them all. Same old white sand and palms, predictable cocktails and tuneless rhythms in the bars. Same litter and dog poo butting in on shots of paradise. The wind blew hot and gritty against his pale legs. James lit his first cigarette for more than thirty years and narrowed his eyes behind his sunglasses as he sat on a flat rock and wondered whether his body was fit for public scrutiny. Or whether the water would turn out to be flavoured with sewage or thick with plastic.

Once, before the kids came along and decades before Manda's epiphany, they'd made love on a beach like this – her idea, one his flesh had given in to in spite of what she called his *propriety* – and he'd wondered why a girl like her, with so much energy and fire and appetite as well as hair, was with him at all. Well, now she had her exciting, guitar-playing dude with earrings and a flat brown belly. And they probably had sex in places and ways he'd never imagine.

"So what are you going to do with the rest of your life, James?" That was Tanya. A fair question but not one he could begin to answer. He stubbed out the unfinished cigarette, and kicking sand over the butt, brought others to the surface.

He was glad for Libby – as long as she wasn't heading for tragic rejection. People didn't seem to be very good at love, especially the kind that was meant to last a lifetime. He couldn't have gone to Tanya's birthday party, and met her lover Angelique, however beautiful Tanya claimed she might be. So many adjustments necessary, one after another. He was too old for it.

Looking around, James saw other white hedonists who didn't know or care about carbon footprints, lying oiled on loungers and anonymous behind their shades. So Manda was with her tribe and he'd found his.

His phone took him by surprise.

"Dad, where are you?"

"Taking a break. Tell me about your new man."

"He's American but prefers it here. Funny thing is he's kind of left-wing." Libby laughed. "But not by Mum's standards. He's persuaded me to go to Waterloo Bridge to check it out. We're on the way now. He wants to do some interviews for a blog. He says people are fascinating. Even me!"

"He sounds very bright." James felt emotional picturing her face. "Enjoy. You're breaking up a bit..." He raised his voice: "I'll be home in a few days."

James thought how terrible it must be to be young and believe the worst. What if his was the last generation to live a normal life? He'd seen the school kids on their Friday strikes with their placards: WE'LL BE LESS REBELLIOUS IF YOU'LL BE LESS SHIT. And they didn't seem to be angry, just convinced they could save the world.

He wondered about a cocktail or two before lunch.

*

On the bridge the heat was building. Manda was glad she'd thought better of refusing a big, floppy-brimmed straw hat from the top shelf in Leo's wardrobe. Nathan's mother obviously had curls that would have filled it too. In a long, strappy dress without a bra to make her breasts sweat against her midriff, Manda felt younger than her arms looked. On the heart line someone was making boat-shaped paper hats and passing them along.

Leo had taken Manda's place in the food tent, chopping veg for early supper. Some of the friends she'd made were heading back to the South West for

family Easters so there were goodbye hugs that felt sad. Every time she saw a small child she wanted it to be Skye, but maybe she'd scared Gem by coming on too strong – offering, in so many words, to love the child if she couldn't save her.

Many of the faces around Manda were unfamiliar but the mood was the same: chilled but resolute. In a way, the police seemed to share it – although their layered uniforms must be steaming. Now that it was clear there'd be no easing-off, it was just a matter of time. And here time felt new and still. No tension, just readiness. If they didn't arrest her today she might sob. The sun's intensity made the flowers blaze and the river flecked light like Van Gogh's stars.

One of the Wellbeing women she'd come to love was offering to refill water bottles. Manda tried not to resent the single-use plastic one tipped back by a boy of around twenty who'd just sat down behind her.

“Are you arrestable?” she checked, because now at the end of the bridge the vans were discharging officers in a thick black stream.

“Uh... yeah, I guess.”

She told him her name. He was Stu from Hackney; he hadn't known *all this* was happening until a few days ago but he'd been vegan for a while. His T-shirt, splashed with water and tight to his skinny chest, said, NO PLANET B. Finding that he'd only just arrived with no induction and no legal training, she talked him through what to expect and his choices. He listened intently, his eyes on the police line covering ground faster than she could. A legal observer, who seemed to be new herself, appeared with a note pad and pencil and crouched down, asking him if he was all right and sure he was arrestable. He nodded, his eyes on the officers now very close to the heart line. Laying a quick, motherly hand on his arm, Manda hoped her smile was encouraging. A

new, wispy kind of song had begun behind them: “Police, we love you. We’re doing this for your children too.” Hesitantly, because the tune was hard as well as gentle, Manda tried to join in.

Not Stu, she told them silently. He wasn’t really ready. A female officer moved across to her space, chose her. *Yes*, she thought, because she had been moving towards this since Rob asked her after school one day, “Why are humans pumping carbon and methane into the atmosphere and destroying EVERYTHING?” and James wanted to complain about his earnest young class teacher scaring their son, but Manda only wanted to stop, immediately and forever, destroying anything.

“I’m hanging in there, Rob, darling, doing this for your little girl,” she imagined telling him. *“You’d love her.”* Talking to him, seeing him, made sure she didn’t listen to the policewoman, who wasn’t much older than Libby but sounded tired, as if she’d rather be anywhere else than here right now. Behind the arrestees the singing swelled. Someone started drumming. The policewoman reached for her but Manda wasn’t going to walk. Even though she’d been rubbish at it in training, she willed her body to flop, heavier than the scales said, with no give and no yield. Black-trousered legs were all around her. Their boots were so big, so robust. And she was small now, limbs spread but no weight at all, like flotsam to be cleared from the water – carried fast, her hat floating to the ground behind her.

“WE LOVE YOU! WE LOVE YOU!”

Manda smiled as her eyes brightened with tears. Closing them a moment, she imagined Rob’s hand on her shoulder. The police weren’t rough but business-like, and her body didn’t enjoy the long, awkward ride to the south end of the bridge, where they took her to a van and she stepped inside where

the air was cooler. As her arresting officer took her backpack, she realised that she was off-grid now, and Leo wouldn't know, hadn't seen.

Sitting, she tried to relax her muscles with the kind of warm-up exercises she used to do at over-50 contemporary dance class – until Stu was brought to the door to the van and told to step inside. He looked disbelieving – as if he'd woken to a truth he'd forgotten – but stirred. She reached out for a high-five with young skin. He took the seat in front of her while four officers stood outside the van.

“They should have left you alone.”

“It's worth it though,” he said. “I mean, someone's got to do this, right?”

“Right. They showed David Attenborough's climate change documentary at Marble Arch last night. I guess Cressida Dick wasn't watching. Probably went to bed early with an XR-shaped headache.”

A tall older guy with a fulsome grey beard and loose jeans was next on board, nodding to Manda and Stu but saying nothing. A small silver cross swung from his neck as he stooped towards the seat opposite Manda. Not quite the spit of the ex-Archbishop now rebel, but he could fool a few in the robes. Saying nothing, he looked shaken, and probably ached. Then he crossed himself quickly and shared a small smile.

The last arrestee was a girl Manda ought to know by name, a beautiful Buddhist who stopped and breathed out with eyes closed before sitting.

“Hey,” she said quietly. “Love and rage.”

One of the police officers outside the van was using what probably wasn't any longer referred to as a walkie-talkie. Manda remembered Leo's account of a very long wait to find a police station with enough room for another four. The silence in the van felt delicate but maybe that was her, a step beyond bravado now.

“I’ve just realised,” said Stu, his distress breaking through. “My mum will think I’m messing about. She doesn’t get it.”

“She will,” said Manda. “Everyone will. But sooner’s way better than later.”

Glancing out of the window, she saw a couple walking onto the bridge with two small children. Watched them pause, understand, and look into the van. Manda read “Thank you” on the lips of the young mum who placed both hands on her heart and lifted them out towards her.

Moved and elated, Manda smiled. She hadn’t made a peace sign for decades.

Twenty-Two

April 19th 2019

Libby was quiet on the tube and didn’t mean to be. If she could, she would have oozed wit and intelligence – casually, without appearing to intend any such thing or even recognize how fascinating she must appear. Trey didn’t seem to mind. There were a few minutes when his hand was so close and pretty that she hoped he might hold hers, which would mean more than sex. If it was a choice between any position in the Karma Sutra and feeling understood, well, Bee might find her preference hard to believe.

Her mother would be disbelieving too, if she messaged, *See you soon. Heading for Waterloo Bridge*. Part of her liked the idea of a surprise that would be close to shock, but then part of her felt a panic she couldn’t exactly explain, because she didn’t want anyone making assumptions. Putting in an appearance at a climate protest didn’t make her Rob.

It was galling to find as they took the steps down from the station that Trey knew more about the whole *occupation* than she did, pointing out the church

where protestors slept and referencing a newspaper quote from the Canon that they were like Jesus.

“That’s way over the top,” she said, withholding *sackable*.

“Some of the media does want to nail and spit on them,” Trey pointed out. “Wow. This is something up close.”

Libby thought he looked excited. “Will you interview Mum first? She’ll love it. You might have no battery left by the time she’s finished.”

But she began to wonder, at her first sight of the crowd ahead, whether they’d even find her. Smiling, Trey took her hand.

*

Manda placed the wipe-down pillow at the end of the equally thin plastic mattress – on a long metal shelf that stood in for a bed. It ran all along one side of the cell, while on the other a bright panel of light would prevent anyone sleeping. She hoped not to return to the seat-less, lid-less pan of a toilet in the corner before she was released. The ceiling carried promos for a high-tech Met doubling as warnings to prisoners. And behind her head there was a wall that paid a kind of homage to a window with bars. *Grim* was the word Leo had used and she wouldn’t disagree. It was a space that assumed and declared that anyone spending time in it was unworthy of comfort or dignity.

With no phone Manda found it hard to judge how long she’d been gone, but tried to calculate. Maybe forty minutes stationary in the van awaiting a destination; the same again on the road through rush hour; an hour at least at the back of the nick, with the doors open while the police ate ice-creams and fetched the four of them disposable cups of water it was too hot to refuse. Another hour or so in a holding cell, talking amongst themselves about Greta, Attenborough, climate strike and the science: communication that was meant for the officers standing there with them. Not that they said much, apart from,

“You’re all a lot nicer than our usual clients,” and “Not like the lot on the Brexit march.” “You’re all so polite.”

Just a few minutes to go through the items in her backpack, explain her rights and ask a few basic questions. She’d complied silently with the fingerprinting and the DNA swabs and rearranged herself obligingly for mugshots from three angles, minus smile. And she would have liked, in a way, to chat and be as affable as they allowed, as chirpy as Leo, because it wasn’t their fault, but she felt too serious for that. This felt big, heavy, memorable. More than an experience, it was a travesty, of course, because the criminals were in government and board meetings. And even though she wasn’t religious she felt a sense of something deeper than she usually recognised in the rightness of it. There was truth to serve.

The statement she’d written with the paper and pen she’d requested lay at her feet. Unable to lie down comfortably, she sat up and reached for it. An appalling scribble, it was almost as hard to reconnect as the jigsaw puzzles her mother used to like, but she tried, faltering, to deliver it quietly as a kind of rehearsal. Maybe she shouldn’t have mentioned losing Rob – they might see that as a plea for pity. She decided now to cross out *for my granddaughter*. All the personal stuff was irrelevant anyway; the science should be enough. But she’d called herself a Conscientious Protector, written it in capitals. It would be her mantra.

When she heard from a disembodied voice that she could take her phone call, she’d had to work out how to use the panel on the wall. The XR action line would have contacted Leo and whatever he felt it couldn’t be surprise. Did one person in each couple always love a little bit more than the other, and could that change? And had the intensity of her mother-love alarmed Rob almost as much as Libby?

Manda realised she never had this kind of thinking time, with no phone to hand, butting in with notifications. No kitchen tempting her to bake if not to eat. No emails to delete or save for later. How long since she'd been alone with trees and breeze and felt open as well as alone?

"Rob," she murmured suddenly because that had been a grieving thing, finding him where he loved to be, in a forest or by a lake. "You know what this is like. I wish you'd been held here, in this station, in this cell. I'd love to feel you with me but I can't." Maybe the custody sergeant would be listening with the volume turned up but she didn't care. "Whatever I do I feel as if I'm losing you all over again. Already my memory isn't good enough and I'm scared that one day I'll forget you completely, and then I won't know how to live or why I should. Because right now I'd rather you walked through that door – literally, as a ghost – than anyone else."

"Manda, love isn't like a music chart. It's not a competition." Leo said that, months ago. *"You love Libby too – not less, just differently."* And he didn't seem to need the number one slot, which was touching but hard to comprehend.

If he had managed to reach Libby with her news, how would she react? She imagined her rolling her eyes like she used to as a teen.

"Rob, sweetheart, I have to do better."

The cell door opened noisily. Something smelt less than delicious and it was in a plastic tray.

"We got you some vegetarian food. It's not vegan."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I can't."

"I'll leave it with you in case you get hungry."

She'd been hungry for hours. The door closed again, and she hadn't asked what time it was or how long they would keep her.

Not that it mattered.

*

Trey was interviewing Leo, asking how he felt about his partner being arrested. Libby watched, heard this brand-new stepdad of hers talking about her mother's *fearlessness* as if he loved her for that.

"She's very passionate about the truth we need to tell. I'm here because of that passion. She woke me up and she's counting on all this, and arrests like hers, waking others up."

Libby wandered away. Passing another cardboard sign that warned DRUG and ALCOHOL-FREE ZONE, she thought she could do with a few drinks. The heat had ebbed away since they arrived and dusk would fall in the next hour or two. She untied the cardigan from her waist and pulled it on.

A woman smiled from a tent that seemed to be a quiet space with chairs and cushions. "You're Manda's daughter? How are you?"

"Fine, thanks."

"She'd be sorry to miss you but so glad you're here."

"It wasn't my idea."

"I'm Amelie. And you're Libby."

Libby could guess what she said about her. A climate denier, head in the sand, a carbon footprint double hers. A party girl dancing on the Titanic.

"Would you like some herbal tea?"

"You're all right, thanks."

She tried to smile and walked on, reading the signs but avoiding eye contact. The stream of cyclists heading home from work had pretty much dried up but some families seemed to be leaving – after a day out at what felt to Libby like a festival for the sober. Amelie looked like a healer who'd dangle crystals over your belly and sing to the moon, but Libby had to admit that some of the

people here seemed quite normal – or would do, if she saw them in a pub or on a tube platform on the way to work.

She noticed people washing plates in a series of bowls and draining them upside down on a tray.

“Still some curry left,” offered a thin lad from the so-called kitchen.

“I had some, thanks.” Manda would have done better but it was O.K. considering. “You know when people are arrested, how long do they keep them?”

He shrugged. “They can be back in five or six hours but it could be twelve or more. Mostly they’re not being charged and they’re well treated, generally.”

“Thanks.” Libby noticed something change around her. A stirring. People were looking in the same direction and Leo was ending the interview.

“Talking of which,” said the boy in the apron, “they’re back.”

Libby stared, frowning incredulously at the numbers. Vanloads of them! Around her people were making their way to the front as singing began.

“Let’s go.” Leo was playing protective stepdad and she didn’t mind. It was scarier than she’d imagined. “Come on.”

Libby didn’t argue.

Twenty-Three

April 20th 2019

Manda supposed she’d slept a little. Searing, the light on the ceiling reminded her of movie interrogations. Her stomach felt achingly empty and her head throbbed but she told herself they couldn’t keep her much longer now. The confinement was tough but the solitary part harder. It made nights in the crypt seem warmly appealing in their solidarity.

Was it morning yet? Her mouth was so dry it had new adhesive qualities. She could do with a coffee. The sound of the cell door opening made her sit up, run her fingers through her hair and wipe dust from her eyes.

Holding the door open stood a young man in jeans who might have fitted in fine on the bridge if he swapped his shirt and pullover for a block-printed T-shirt. She wondered whether it was true about one female cop going home from her shift, changing and joining the rebels – presumably at Marble Arch. She hoped so.

The plain clothes officer looked a lot fresher than her solicitor had in the wee small hours. It was obvious everything was stretched to capacity, beyond.

“You can go now,” he said.

“Great,” she mumbled. She could do with a wee but not now, not here.

She followed him to the desk where she’d been processed on arrival and stood silently, less than focused, as they told her that her release was subject to further investigation and that if she didn’t hear anything in six months then well, she’d hear nothing. That there might or might not be a letter.

“If I were you I’d forget about it,” said the sergeant.

“I don’t think I can,” she said, but no more words came.

There was more electronic signing to do as she reclaimed her backpack and was invited to check everything was intact. She wasn’t sure about that. Something in her felt changed and she wasn’t sure what.

“There are people waiting outside for you,” the officer said.

XR were good at that. “What time is it?”

“Four fifteen, almost.”

Four fifteen! Leo would be home in bed and so he should be, with that back of his. Manda felt an end-of-term surge as she was escorted to the door – not

the back where she'd been admitted but the front, where in a kind of lobby people were waiting. As one they turned and stood.

Leo held back behind Libby.

"Darling!" Manda didn't mean to blub but self-control was impossible. She embraced Libby, felt how cold she was, under-dressed in summer office clothes. "You didn't need..."

"Like you didn't need to get arrested."

"Don't start that now," said Leo over her shoulder as he held her. He sounded so tired.

Libby pretended she hadn't heard that. Her mother looked pale, a mess. With her eyes only slightly less wild than her hair, she could have auditioned for one of Macbeth's witches. "All right?" Libby asked her.

"Hungry and a bit sleepless but perfectly fine."

Libby was never convinced by her mother's breeziness. As a cover it was thin.

"There'll be food on the bridge," said Leo. "But I brought you a banana."

Manda grinned and hugged him again. When he broke its neck, peeling it back for her as if she was Skye, she took a greedy bite. Someone from the official arrestee support team, a guy called Harry with all his hair gathered in his beard, asked if she was treated well.

She nodded as she ate. "But what about the others? The lovely young Stu? He'd only just sat down when they took him, poor baby."

Libby thought she sounded drunk as well as old.

"All out last night. You're the last one released from here," Harry told her. "For a while, anyway."

"They know a dangerous criminal when they see one," joked Leo as the four of them stepped outside into darkness.

Manda would have loved to give Stu a long, emotional hug. She hoped his mother would surprise him with one.

"I wasn't charged," she said. "I made a written statement."

"You go, girl," murmured Leo.

The pavement wasn't wide enough for Manda to walk arm in arm between them. In any case Libby had stepped ahead, following Harry. Calling back, he assured them all the buses would still be running even though the tubes wouldn't *come alive* for a while.

Manda wanted to ask Libby, "*So tell me what you think,*" but she'd need to feel stronger before she could risk the answer.

Libby had questions that could wait until it was just the two of them, and life was normal again. She supposed Trey would be fast asleep but he'd told her to message so she did: *She's out. They kept her most of the night.* It would have been nice if he'd stayed. But no need for him to get embroiled in this kind of drama after one date and a couple of nice-boy kisses.

Watching her daughter walk briskly but huddling against the cold, Manda thought she should say sorry for the timing. Her arm tight in Leo's, she whispered, "What's she even doing here?"

"Long story," he said. "It can wait till morning."

"I hope it's a good one." She stopped, gripped, and raised her voice: "I know Oxford Circus is over but tell me they haven't cleared the bridge?"

"We held the bridge," Harry called.

Manda waved her free arm, and danced in the street.

"Food before jiggling," Leo told her.

"They should have kept her in for psychiatric assessment," Libby muttered, just as Harry shouted that the bus was coming and if they crossed the road fast they'd catch it.

Manda wasn't sure how much running she could manage, but it turned out to be enough.

Twenty-Four
still April 20th, 2019

As soon as she could after Skye woke her, Gem checked Twitter. She didn't want to see the photographs from Oxford Circus of the pink boat surrounded. Of officers daring protestors to break their thick black chain. But at Waterloo Bridge the resistance continued after a day of more arrests.

She smiled at Skye in her high chair. Was it safe for her at the bridge? Wouldn't the strategy mean taking that too?

Nick appeared, rosy from the shower, drying his hair with a towel. He kissed her cheek and Skye's forehead.

"Tell the Truth has gone," she told him, *"and the police have finally found a strategy to deal with protestors according to the Telegraph."*

He knew, and he'd seen a photo of Manda being arrested. Gem wasn't sure she wanted him to find it for her on his phone.

"It'll be fine, don't worry. There'll be families picnicking. Easter Saturday! It'll be the biggest crowd yet. We can keep out of trouble even if Manda can't."

Gem wasn't convinced. *"I don't want Skye traumatised."*

He considered. *"Then you go. We'll chill in some shade at the park. We can meet up later. It's going to be a scorcher."*

Gem thanked him, sat him down and rubbed his hair dry.

*

Saying goodbye to Libby on the first tube of the day, Manda ignored her advice to stay away, rest, keep out of trouble. A few quick cheek kisses and she'd gone. Manda waved but she once out of the carriage she didn't look back.

"You'll sleep first, won't you?" Leo checked.

"First?"

"Before you head back."

"I'll try, but..."

"I know. You're hard-core. I'm taking a break. I didn't sleep either..."

She stroked his hair. "I know."

"And I could say you've done enough but I'd be wasting my breath."

"You would."

"But sleep first."

Manda might do that right now, against his shoulder.

*

Gem hadn't expected the heat to rage like this. It seemed to subdue everything yet the air felt tight, wary. Above, the sky was vivid, the blue unbroken. Was that a bird of prey oblivious up there, its arc fast and cool? The crowd picnicking behind the stage included families; maybe she'd been over-cautious. Checking her phone she found a message that Nick had taken Skye home out of the sun. If the temperature rose any higher Gem might have to join them. Time to head for the church to refill her water bottle and breathe in some old-stone air while she was there.

*

Bee was always in a good mood when she could top up her tan; she wasn't interested in the shade Libby suggested. Feeling pale and still less than wide-awake, Libby let her talk about the guy she'd dumped for being too serious, and held back her own storylines.

“He wanted me to meet his parents. I know what that means and I’m not ready.”

Libby nodded sympathetically. She was trying not to feel disappointed about Trey not coming with her to the police station but she supposed that would have been a pretty heavy way to introduce her mother after one date. Still, he’d cried off and even though she knew she shouldn’t expect too much, it was unsettling. Especially as all she’d heard from him since was *Hope your mum is home OK. Enjoy the Easter break. X* As if she was just another colleague and he was relishing the holiday when it meant she wouldn’t see him until Tuesday.

Bee paused to drink, swearing at a fly that seemed to have the same idea.

“So tell me about Trey. It’s funny cos I know a Trey Marshall who’s American and in your field. Blonde curls. My friend Amy was at uni with him; they dated for years but cheated on her. He’s got a live-in girlfriend and a two-year-old boy.”

Libby narrowed her eyes behind her sunglasses. “Is that meant to be a joke?”

Bee put down her drink. “Can there be two of them? Show me a picture.”

Libby had been intending to show her the selfie she’d taken as they arrived at the bridge, before they found out where her mother was. She shook her head.

“You had to know. I mean, a girlfriend’s one thing but a baby’s something else.”

Libby drained her glass. “I’m going now. And I’m not sure I’m forgiving you.”

“Me? What about Trey Marshall?”

“Him either.” Libby stood. A group of guys at the next table laughed so loudly it almost hurt.

“Libby, come on! Don’t shoot the messenger.”

It was what her mother said about the climate. Libby didn't want to leave; she'd rather drink herself into oblivion. But she'd need to look for jobs. Or make sure he did.

"It's his M.O. Tea and sympathy. I've done you a favour, Lib. You know I have."

"It might be years before I thank you." Libby sat down. Sometimes anger was the only way through.

"Shall I get us a bottle of Prosecco? Then you can tell me about Mad Manda and the rebels."

Libby nodded. As Bee made for the bar she worded a message: *You too. Hope your little boy enjoys his Easter eggs!*

It was years since Manda had bought her one of those.

*

Gem stayed longer in the church than she'd intended but the space had never felt so airy and comforting. She was sitting facing the altar and lost to the peace when something made her turn. Noise outside? Stepping out onto the blazing street she saw more police than she'd seen in her life, a fleet of vans, and a couple of officers with tape, the kind they used to cordon off the site of a crime. And she supposed this was a crime...

Approaching the bridge, she understood. The lorry was surrounded. The police were targeting the stage – circling it, thick and firm without a chink to break through. At their feet people were sitting, as if to guard something that was already lost, and all around her bodies were being lifted away. But what about the singer, and the others locked on underneath? Maybe they needed water.

Gem made her way around to the front of the lorry where a flag still waved and the sound system pumped out *Waterloo*. Although no one was going to

surrender! Rebels were presenting themselves for arrest on that side too, one of them lying down completely covered by a black umbrella, others sitting patiently absorbing the heat while the police facing them took no interest. Wasn't this kettling? Trying to see through the black human barrier they made, Gem realised she could go no further. As the music ended she heard a shout.

"Gem!"

"Manda!"

Rising from the ground next to the umbrella, Manda looked exhausted. With her eyes on Gem, she placed a hand on her heart. A hand that might be shaking.

"Are you O.K.?"

"As O.K. as it's rational to be."

Gem tried to make eye contact with the officer in her way as she pressed forward. "Please let me in. That's my mother in law."

He shook his head. "No one's allowed in."

Gem stepped back, her heart tight. They were going to clear the bridge – and the stage was its heartbeat. It made such perfect sense; why hadn't they tried before?

She had no idea what to do. "*Come home,*" Nick would tell her. "*It's over.*"

The heat shouldn't be this savage. She wandered slowly down the pavement. Behind the garden and the banners the arrests continued, and all she could do was witness and honour everyone taken, holding each of them in the light, face after face, in their silent resistance. Thankful, because they did it for Skye. She wanted to sit down with them, and trust – or not care – because after all she might not even be charged. But no, she could only watch, until the blonde singer from under the lorry was carried away to a surging swell: a kind of family pride, a deep respect.

“WE LOVE YOU!” Gem cried, her stillness stirred.

Picturing Manda, she wished her strength, peace, hope. She turned away and stepped up her pace to be gone, willing the breeze to come off the water and find her. She wanted to be with Skye now, and forget this. But never forget.

As she walked she brought back the song from between the wheels of the lorry: *I will stand for love. Even with a broken soul. Even with a heavy heart I stand for love.*

Twenty-Five

April 21st, 2019 Easter Sunday

Manda looked out of the window.

“I knew she’d be late,” she muttered.

“Chill,” Leo told her. “Nathan didn’t even give me a time. He could cancel. He could even forget again.”

“I hope not. You guys have a lovely day.”

It galled her really, that he’d been stood up while she was roasting in front of the lorry. That he hadn’t come and joined her. But Nathan was a sweetheart; they both were. As Leo had already remarked, she was grumpy, and she couldn’t say, “So would you be, after a week without sleep,” because he never slept well with that back of his, and he wasn’t.

She looked back at the clock on the wall, the goofy wooden one Nathan had made him.

“You can’t really *be* late for your mother,” he pointed out.

She sighed. “I know. That’s what makes it pointless. She wouldn’t know the difference if I didn’t go. Or went next Sunday.” He was right. Time meant nothing. After all, in her world Rob was still alive.

She supposed in the home it would be some kind of special family day and thanks to Libby she'd have a family of a kind to show for it. And Leo was right about the bridge too, because it was just a matter of time and maybe being there to see the end was more grieving than she could handle.

Her phone rang.

"Nowhere to park except Tesco's. Sorry."

"No worries. I'll run."

"You don't have to!"

Leo held her when she placed her lips quickly, lightly, on his. She felt his tenderness but he was free with that. Tenderness for Nathan. For the neighbours he liked to help, especially the women. Everyone on the bridge. Even the wife who'd left her hat behind in the wardrobe, never expecting it to be confiscated by police and listed on a custody inventory. Nathan was a tender guy – except when he was absent, the lone male following his own star and not looking back.

"It's good of Libby. Enjoy her."

She nodded, withdrew and hurried down the stairs.

*

The sun shone in through the Meeting House windows. On Gem's skin it felt not fierce but welcome, a gift. It made her smile inside. On the table in the centre of the creamy white room a small glass vase held three tulips, each one beginning to cup open, their red bleeding to warm yellow. Gem drew their outlines in her mind, felt the smoothness of their petals, and then recreated them with her eyes closed. Flowers only gave. No harm, no tooth and claw. Maybe ministry would come. Maybe she would talk about the tulips lying limp on the bridge, like the remnants of a wake. Was it God she waited for? She wasn't sure it mattered.

Gem remembered a song, *Back to Life*. It would be different now, because she might not be Manda, giving everything till she had nothing left, but she'd been there. It was home. And so was Nick, now. She should let him in where only Rob had been. No harm, no tooth and claw. He only gave.

She picked up *Advices and Queries* from beside the tulips. *Remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way. A pathway to walk. A way of being, inside where no one knew. A way to live out there in the world.*

She stood. "Friends." She paused. "On Waterloo Bridge I found a different way to live. It's what we all have to find if we are to live at all. In love, in communion, in peace. Serving the truth as we serve each other. As we worship the protest there may be over but I believe the awakening has just begun."

*

"Nice to have a proper chat," said Libby sardonically when her mother woke in the car park of the nursing home. Which was unfair on a mad sleepless activist but the traffic had been worse than expected and she could have done with a bit of stress relief. Not that Manda had ever supplied that.

"I'm sorry," Manda said, feeling guilty and barely awake. "I'm catching up."

"I thought we could do that."

Manda thought Libby should understand that she didn't intend or foresee a nap and would have assumed that distress would keep her wired. She led the way along the familiar route up to her mother's room, but at the lift her brain temporarily deleted the code, which provoked a swallowed sigh.

"Shit! I know this!" Manda wasn't sure which of them was more impatient. But in the end she had to ask a member of staff, and try not to feel embarrassed under Libby's gaze.

With Libby's heels a step behind her on the corridor, it struck Manda that no one wished anyone Happy Easter except inside church walls. These days

Hallowe'en was more visible and *better for the economy*. No inflatable bunnies swaying above doors or plastic chicks lighting up in shop windows, just chocolate by the ton and most of it packaged with abandon. She remembered Libby complaining when she bought her an egg at about thirteen, and then when she didn't the following year.

"Will she know who I am?" Libby asked, suddenly imagining the grandmother she hadn't seen for six months or more, and feeling selfish.

Manda shrugged. Libby's offer had been generous but perhaps she shouldn't have accepted it. "She might."

"But she remembers Rob, right?"

Manda winced. *I'm sorry*. "She does."

Libby supposed everyone did – even, thanks to her mother, the Twitter followers who'd met him posthumously in a tribute she'd hated her for.

"Manda," said a member of staff approaching with a smile. Blanking, Manda tried to read her name badge without her glasses. "You were on the news!"

"Really?"

"Good on you. This must be...?"

Manda felt suddenly moved, astonished. "My daughter Libby."

"Your gran will be thrilled."

Manda could see that Libby shared her doubts about that. Her mum's door was ajar so she peered round it as she knocked.

"Mum! I've brought you an Easter present."

Libby felt set up and bound to disappoint but she smiled at both of them.

"Hello, Nana."

Evelyn stared. "Where's Rob?"

"Mum, you remember Libby. Rob's little sister." *Badly done, Manda.*

Libby stooped to kiss her grandmother, hoping she would never smell so old. She could hardly picture her when she was solid and brisk and full of plans for outings and sticky treats. Now she was... flimsy. Drained of everything that counted. Decaying. It was horrible and she'd rather die in a car crash at sixty.

"Rob'll be on the way," said Evelyn. "You've put on weight."

"Mum, she has *not*!" interjected Manda. "Did you have a nice dinner today? Roast potatoes?"

"You should eat meat, Manda," Evelyn told her. "You're all skin and bone. You promised to get that hair cut nicely too."

"I'm vegan for the animals and the planet, Mum, and I didn't promise any such thing. You know what a rebel I am."

Smiling because her mother had always called her that, Manda moved magazines so Libby could sit down but she chose to look out onto the garden instead. And Manda couldn't blame her. She realised she really wanted to tell Evelyn about the bridge and the police cell, and perhaps she could, because any anxiety it caused would be short-lived. But none of it would connect with the mother she used to know, who only ever approved of James, not her. She hadn't dared bring Leo along, more than forty years after she rejected him for reasons she didn't admit were racist, snobbish, and generally reactionary – in case the *unsuitable boyfriend* clung on in her brain cells while poor Libby was part of the clear-out.

Libby picked up a trash newspaper lying on her grandmother's tray and held it for Manda to see, with its front page about mass arrests and a picture of Emma Thompson at Oxford Circus.

"Good woman," murmured Manda.

Libby's eyes rounded. "Just because you love her in *Sense and Sensibility*! She flew in from the States! Hypocrite."

“Who flew where?” asked Eleanor. “I’d like to go to Africa and see the elephants when they let me out.”

“Mum doesn’t believe in flying, Nana.” Libby couldn’t resist.

“Oh, she doesn’t believe in anything that’s fun,” said Eleanor. “No meat, no elephants, no cigars.”

Libby looked at Manda and Manda looked back. They laughed together.

“No cigars!” echoed Manda. Libby’s laugh was ending but hers was long and slightly out of control.

“You never smoked did you, Nana?”

“No but if I fancied starting it wouldn’t be up to her.”

Libby nodded emphatically. “I feel the same, Nana. Shall I see if I can get us all some tea and cake?”

*

Over coffee the Quakers wanted to know all about Waterloo Bridge and Gem didn’t know where to start, but she tried. They were glad she hadn’t been arrested but some of them seemed to understand when she said she wasn’t, really. The youngest attender apart from her, a motherly Buddhist called Sylvie, said she was going to Marble Arch tomorrow.

“I don’t know how long the police will leave it alone,” Gem told her. Looking through the open door, she was happily surprised to glimpse Nick with the buggy. But what was he holding in the air? Something he wanted her to see? His phone?

“Excuse me, everyone,” she said. “I need to go. See you next week I hope.”

Hurrying out of the building, she saw Skye was asleep in her sunhat, shaded by the hood. But something was wrong. It was in Nick’s face, the way he stood, his shoulders down.

He handed her the phone, its volume low but loud enough. A livestream. The end of the bridge – to the sound of *Amazing Grace*, pure as a church choir. Arrests among flowers. And people holding on to each other, not letting go.

Nick reached for her hand with a squeeze. Gem had no idea why she felt so shocked, so emptied. As the film scanned the remaining rebels she looked for Manda but perhaps she'd been arrested again. Gem hoped so, because she'd choose that over not being there.

She handed back Nick's phone. "It's not over."

"I know," he said.