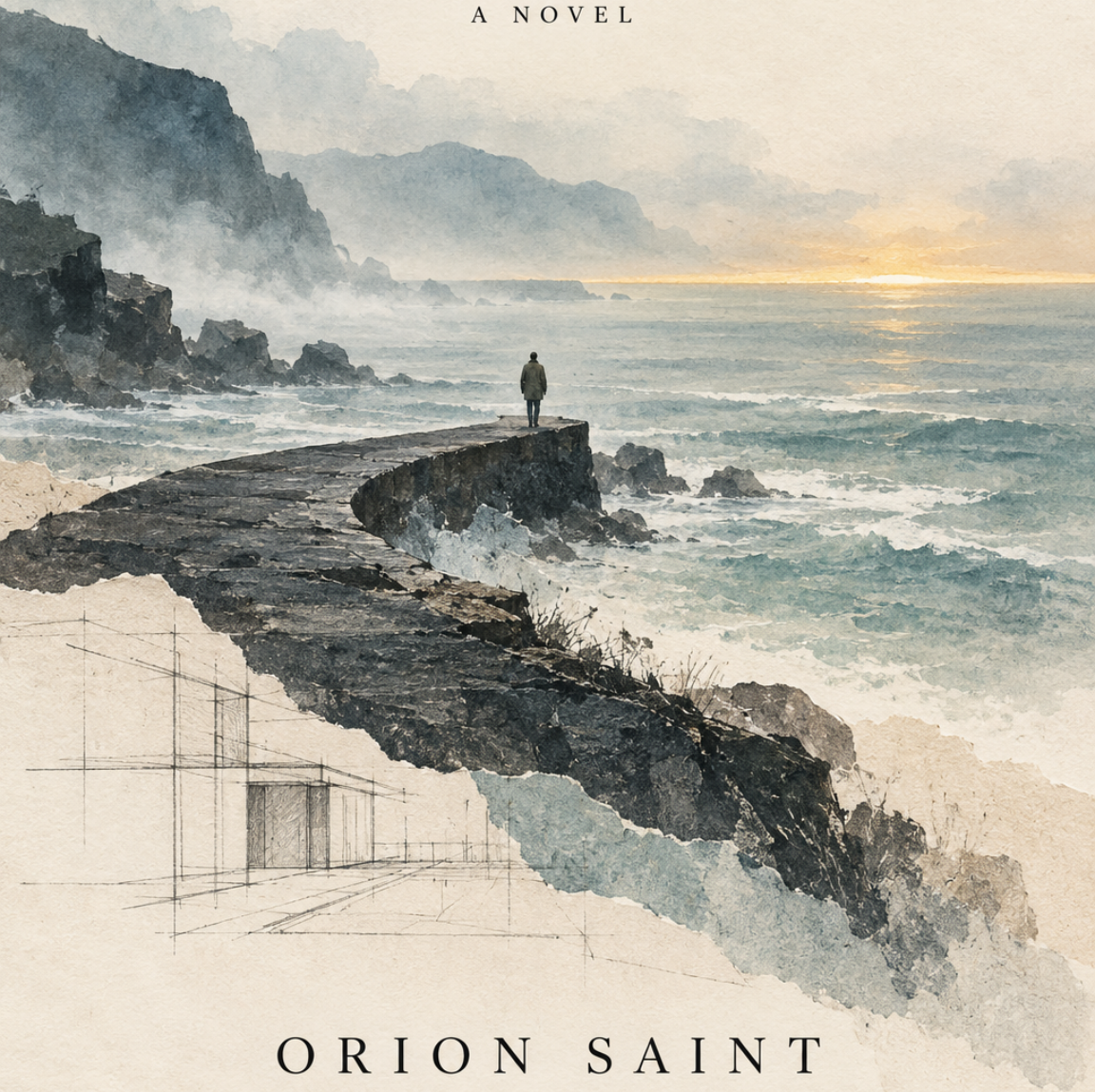
BEYOND THE HORIZON

A NOVEL



ORION SAINT

Beyond the Horizon

A Novel

Orion Saint

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Contents

Prologue: The Place Where Maps End 3
1. The Last Day 6
2. An Address for the Person Leaving 15
3. The Key That Opened Nothing 19
4. What the Wall Was Holding Up 24
5. The Wrong Side of the River 30
6. The Hand in the Photograph 35
7. The House Without a Roof 40
8. The Price of an Hour 45
9. The Room Kept Ready 50
10. The Road That Was Removed 55
11. The Repair Table 60
12. The Place He Avoided 66
13. The Journey Back 71
14. The House They Had Lived In 76
15. An Open Door Is Still a Door 80
16. The People in the Picture 84
17. What Could Be Finished 91
18. A Room of the Right Size 96
Epilogue: The Beginning of the Answer 100

PROLOGUE

The Place Where Maps End

The old man at the station sold maps that no longer matched the world.

On the map spread before him, a lake occupied the site of an industrial estate he knew from the Bristol ring road.

“They drained that in 1986,” he said.

“I know.”

“Then the map is wrong.”

“The lake might agree with you.”

The man sat behind a folding table in the concourse at Bristol Temple Meads, beneath the departures board. He had arranged his stock between a tin of pencils and a cup of tea with a skin on it. Beside his chair stood a plastic bag full of sandwiches. Adrian found this reassuring. He had no patience left for mysterious people who appeared to survive on knowledge.

“Do you have anything current?”

“The sandwiches.”

Adrian put the map down.

He had spent thirty years drawing buildings. He knew how far a beam could span, how water found its way through a wall, how to hide a service duct from a client who believed plumbing happened by agreement. There was a ruler in his backpack. He had packed it without deciding to.

Above them, the board changed Adrian’s westbound train from DELAYED to PLEASE LISTEN FOR ANNOUNCEMENTS.

Nobody announced anything.

“Where are you going?” the old man asked.

“Bellwether.”

“That road’s gone.”

“I’m taking the train.”

“The station’s gone too. You get off at Marsh End now. Bus from there, if the driver feels the road is participating.”

Adrian opened the notebook. The first entry was still there, underlined twice in his grandfather’s crowded handwriting.

BELLWETHER. ASK FOR MARA. TAKE THE KEY.

He drew the little brass key from his coat pocket, turned it once, and set it beside the notebook. He had found it in an envelope taped inside the back cover. On the envelope, in different ink, his grandfather had written: Do this properly.

“Visiting someone?” the old man asked.

“Possibly.”

The man waited. Adrian had become unused to people who could wait without looking at a screen.

“My grandfather knew a woman there. A long time ago.”

“She might have moved.”

“He might have mentioned that.”

“Is he coming?”

“He’s been dead for eleven years.”

“Then I wouldn’t count on updates.”

Adrian laughed. It surprised him enough that he stopped.

The old man turned a map over. The back was blank apart from a printer’s mark in one corner. He placed it in front of Adrian and added a pencil.

“Write the bus times down when you get there. They don’t bother printing them anymore.”

“How much?”

“For the map, two. Pencil’s yours.”

Adrian paid. Forty-seven pounds in cash became forty-five. He still had a bank account, though considerably less enthusiasm about opening it.

On the blank paper he wrote MARSH END. Underneath, BELLWETHER. He connected them with a line, then rubbed the line out. He did not yet know what lay between.

The board clicked. His train had acquired a platform.

He folded the paper and slipped it into the notebook.

Only as he stood did he notice the old man watching the brass key.

“Workshop?” the man asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Used to be a boatyard down there. Your woman might know it.”

“Do you know her?”

But a family had arrived at the table, arguing about which mountain they had climbed in 1994, and the old man was already unfolding a different country.

Adrian pocketed the key and picked up his bag.

For once, he left a question unanswered and caught the train.

CHAPTER ONE

The Last Day

Six weeks earlier

The email arrived at 9:17 on a rainy Tuesday, while Adrian was trying to persuade a toilet to fit inside a room the client insisted on calling a wellness suite.

The room was four feet wide. Its opportunities for wellness were limited.

Subject: Corporate Restructuring Update.

He read the first paragraph, which thanked him for his contribution. The second explained that his contribution would no longer be required. The third invited him to a meeting about the opportunities arising from this development.

Across the office, someone laughed at a video.

Adrian saved the drawing. Then, because he had been trained thoroughly, he saved it again.

At ten, he sat in a glass room with a woman from Human Resources and a director whose graduation party he vaguely remembered attending.

“This isn’t a reflection of your value,” the woman said.

She had a folder in front of her. Adrian had nothing. He had considered bringing a pen, but it seemed presumptuous to assume his departure required his contribution.

The director nodded with an expression Adrian recognised from photographs of people visiting flood damage.

“The practice is moving in a different direction.”

Through the glass wall, Adrian could see the firm’s model of the new riverside development. He had

designed its first version. There had been a public courtyard, a sheltered bus stop, and a small room for the neighbourhood association. None remained. The courtyard was now a residents' terrace. The bus stop had become a planting feature. The small room was storage for the terrace furniture.

He had approved each change.

At the time, each had seemed too small to resign over.

"What direction?" he asked.

The director glanced at the folder.

"A more agile model."

Adrian looked down at his knees. They had been troubling him on stairs.

The woman explained the settlement. Pay in lieu of notice, unused leave, the separate redundancy payment. She spoke carefully and was not unkind. Once, when the director interrupted her, she held up a finger and finished explaining a benefit Adrian would otherwise have missed.

He wanted someone in the room to be a monster. It would have given him something useful to do with his hands.

Instead he asked who would take over the community centre roof.

"We've arranged the handover," the director said.

"The survey doesn't show the drain behind the east parapet. There'll be water in the cavity if they follow the old drawing."

"We'll make a note."

Adrian waited while the woman wrote it down.

At his desk, he put thirty years into a box that had originally contained printer paper.

A chipped mug. A photograph of his daughter, Lucy, aged seven, holding a fish she had refused to let anyone

cook. Three notebooks. A stone from a beach where he and Helen had once argued about whether they should move closer to the sea.

He could no longer remember his argument. He remembered winning it.

His junior colleague, Daniel, stood beside the desk.

“They told me this morning,” Daniel said.

“I know.”

“I didn’t ask for your projects.”

Adrian had not known that part.

Daniel was twenty-eight. His wife was expecting their first child. There was dried plaster on his sleeve from a house he was renovating in the evenings.

For a moment Adrian wanted to say something memorable and vicious. He could feel several excellent sentences arranging themselves.

Instead he took the community centre drawing from the box and unfolded it.

“Come here. There’s something about the roof.”

They spent twelve minutes over the drawing. Daniel asked good questions. This annoyed Adrian, then relieved him.

“Thank you,” Daniel said.

“Don’t thank me until it rains.”

At reception, his security card made a small red light appear.

The receptionist had to let him out.

Outside, the box softened in the rain before he reached the car.

* * *

Helen was in the kitchen when he got home.

For half a second he forgot she no longer lived there.

She had come for the blue serving bowl and the box of seed packets she kept in the drawer beneath the oven. They had agreed on Tuesday. He had put it in his calendar as HELEN COLLECT THINGS, beside the dentist and a meeting about fire doors.

“You’re early,” she said.

He placed the box on the table. A corner sagged and released a paperclip.

“I’ve been made agile.”

She looked at the mug, the photograph, his wet shoulders.

“Oh, Adrian.”

That was worse than the meeting.

She took the kettle to the sink. He nearly told her where they kept the tea now. Then he remembered she had bought it.

Three months earlier, sitting at this same table, she had told him she was moving into her sister’s spare room. He had responded by describing the spare room’s damp problem.

Even now he could feel the reasonable shape of that response. There was damp. It would affect her breathing. He had been trying to help.

“Have they given you time to finish?” she asked.

“Apparently I’ve finished.”

She made two mugs and sat opposite him.

He told her about the meeting. She listened. He repeated the phrase about his value, improving his imitation of the director on the second attempt. She smiled, and for a moment they were on the same side of something again.

He reached for it too quickly.

“Maybe this is what we needed.”

Helen put her mug down.

He heard himself continuing. He would have time now. They could take the trip they had talked about. He could fix the back room. Things might be different once he was no longer exhausted every night.

“I am sorry about your job,” she said. “I don’t want to make this worse.”

“You’re not.”

“But I didn’t leave because your office was busy.”

In the garden, the washing line knocked against the post. Adrian watched it through the window.

“You asked me how I was every day,” she said. “And before I’d finished telling you, you had an answer. A better job. A different mattress. A walk. A spreadsheet when my mother was ill.”

“The spreadsheet helped.”

“It did.”

She said it so readily that he had nowhere to put the rest of his defence.

“I needed other things too.”

He picked up the paperclip and straightened one loop.

“What happens with the house?” he asked.

She was quiet for a moment. Then they talked about the house.

There would be an agent. They would divide what remained after the mortgage and expenses. Neither had enjoyed living in it enough to justify keeping it. They spoke more gently about the sale than they had about most holidays.

When she left, she took the blue bowl. She forgot the seeds.

Adrian found them an hour later. He put the packets in an envelope and wrote her name on it.

He did not throw them away because she had forgotten them. He was pleased with himself for this, then embarrassed that it counted as an achievement.

* * *

His grandfather's notebook was in the cupboard beneath the stairs, under a broken lamp Adrian had been meaning to repair since Lucy was at school.

He had gone looking for property documents.

The notebook was wrapped in an old shirt. Beside it lay a photograph of his grandfather standing outside a timber workshop with a woman whose face had been partly cut off by the photographer. She was holding one end of a long plank. His grandfather held the other. Both were laughing at someone outside the frame.

Adrian had never seen him laugh like that.

At family lunches, his grandfather had eaten slowly, asked about school, and fallen asleep in a chair with his shoes on. When Adrian chose architecture, he had given him a steel ruler. He had also tried, once or twice, to tell him a story about the coast.

Adrian had been busy becoming someone worth telling stories to.

He opened the notebook.

On the first page, beneath a ring left by a cup, was a sentence he remembered from childhood.

When you no longer know where you are going, walk towards the horizon.

Below it, in smaller writing, his grandfather had added:

Take a coat. People leave that part out.

Adrian smiled.

The next page was headed THE TWELVE HORIZONS.

He expected reflections. His grandfather had reached the age at which families bought men notebooks and

encouraged them to reflect safely away from conversation.

Instead there were places. Bellwether. A quarry road. A ferry landing. A street Adrian recognised from a city where he had once changed trains. Some entries had dates. Others had names. Several had been crossed out and written again.

At Bellwether, the ink had pressed almost through the page.

ASK FOR MARA. TAKE THE KEY.

He turned to the back and found the envelope.

The brass key inside was small enough to close in his fist. There was a second piece of paper: a receipt for twelve lengths of oak, paid in cash more than forty years earlier. On the reverse was a phone number too short to work anymore.

He called it anyway.

A recorded voice explained that the number was not recognised.

“That makes two of us,” he said.

The house did not laugh. He had never designed its acoustics for an audience of one.

* * *

At eleven, Lucy called.

“Mum told me.”

“I was going to ring.”

“I know.”

There was no accusation in it, which made him wonder how many times he had said the same thing.

She asked about the money. He said he was fine. She asked what that meant. He gave her the figures.

“All right,” she said. “That’s something we can work with.”

We.

He had expected to hate being spoken to like that. Instead he sat down.

He told her about the notebook.

“Are you going to find this woman?”

“I don’t know if she’s alive.”

“You could find out.”

“There’s the house. Applications. Things to arrange.”

“Then arrange them.”

He looked at the key on the table.

“It’s a ridiculous reason to go somewhere.”

“You once flew to Chicago for a meeting about a lobby.”

“It was quite a large lobby.”

Lucy laughed. He closed his eyes to listen.

Before hanging up, she asked him to call on Sunday. He agreed.

“Even if nothing’s happened,” she said.

Afterward, he took a fresh page from one of his office notebooks. He wrote down the agent’s number, the date his final salary payment was due, and the bills that needed to be moved. Then he wrote LUCY, SUNDAY and drew a box around it.

Below that he wrote BELLWETHER.

The notebook beneath his hand still carried the office logo. On the next sheet was a list of decisions from a meeting he would not attend. He had written CHECK WITH DANIEL beside the most difficult one. In the margin, almost hidden by the spiral binding, was a drawing of a bird he had watched through the conference room window while somebody explained the new reporting structure. He had given it four attempts at a wing.

He turned the sheet over. For years he had kept these books because they proved how much there was to do. Looking through one now, he found appointments he could no longer place and problems that had ceased to exist without being solved. He could remember the bird more clearly than the meeting.

He did not tear anything out. The drawings and the decisions belonged to the same day. Instead he put a clean sheet beneath his list, found the pencil he preferred, and checked that it had a point. It was a small preparation, and for the moment he could manage it.

He looked up the trains. There was a journey with two changes and a replacement bus service. It would cost less than the shoes he had bought for client meetings.

He did not book it that night.

But he left the page open on the table, beside the key, where he would have to see it in the morning.

CHAPTER TWO

An Address for the Person Leaving

Leaving took six weeks.

This disappointed the part of Adrian that had imagined walking out at dawn with a backpack while the world reconsidered its treatment of him.

The world required a forwarding address.

He gave notice on subscriptions he had forgotten he possessed. One asked whether he was leaving because of price, quality, or lack of use. There was no box for having become frightened by the amount of life he had arranged to happen automatically.

He selected price.

The estate agent photographed the house with a lens that made the narrow kitchen look capable of hosting a modest wedding. Adrian almost objected. Then he remembered how often he had done the same thing with a drawing.

Helen came for the seeds.

“I put them in an envelope,” he said.

“I can see that.”

He had also labelled the varieties, checked the dates, and noted which needed to be started indoors. He watched her read the instructions.

“I did it again.”

“A little.”

She took the envelope anyway.

They agreed to sell. The mortgage payments would continue while he was away. An agent would hold a key. Lucy would take the boxes of family photographs, but

declined three sets of obsolete computer cables and the responsibility of storing an exercise machine no one had ever seen him use.

He applied for four jobs. Two firms replied automatically. One wanted experience with software released eight months earlier and twenty years of senior responsibility. He considered explaining the difficulty of this combination, then closed the window.

The fourth offered an interview after his return.

He kept it.

On his last evening, he walked through the house with a screwdriver, tightening handles for people whose names he did not know. At the back bedroom he stopped.

Helen had wanted yellow walls.

He had brought home twelve samples of grey and explained how the light would change them.

There was nothing useful he could do about that now. Painting the room yellow would be a message she had not asked to receive. He tightened the door handle and left it.

At midnight he packed his bag. He removed half the clothes, added a raincoat, and put the notebook in the inside pocket. His grandfather’s steel ruler lay beside it. He hesitated, then packed that too.

In the morning he left Helen’s key with the agent and sent Lucy the address of the small room he had booked in Bellwether for two nights.

Her reply arrived while he waited at the crossing.

Remember Sunday.

He typed I will, then deleted it. He set a reminder instead.

* * *

By late afternoon the bus had brought him to Bellwether, on the south coast of Cornwall. The main street appeared to have been repaired by people who disagreed about what year it was.

The road followed a creek that disappeared beneath mud at low tide. Above it, slate roofs stepped uphill in close rows. Several houses had narrow doors on the first floor, left from the days when sail lofts occupied rooms now advertised as mezzanines. At the harbour, a black line on the granite showed the height of a winter flood. A newer restaurant had painted over its portion of the line.

He had spent the last hour holding his bag on his knees because the luggage rack was full of somebody else’s shopping. A jar kept knocking against a tin with each bend in the road. At first he had counted the knocks. Then the sea appeared between two houses, vanished behind a warehouse, and returned as a broad grey surface he could look at without having to identify anything on it.

At the final stop, the owner of the shopping reached for her bags. Adrian lifted one down and waited while she checked which were hers. She thanked him, took everything, and went into the post office. He was left on the pavement with no further part in her afternoon.

The room he had booked stood over a shop that sold fishing tackle and birthday candles. He carried his bag upstairs, opened a window that moved only three inches, and put the train ticket beside the bed. The return journey was not booked. That felt less like freedom than an item he would have to remember.

His landlady pointed him towards the harbour.

“Mara’s boatyard? Follow the wall until it falls down.”

“And then?”

“That’s the boatyard.”

The wall curved past three blue winch housings, only one still connected to anything. At the bend, a drain discharged into the harbour with the tide. Adrian had to step over the runnel. On the other side someone had scratched WAIT FOR IT into the stone.

He found a woman on a ladder, trying to pull a sheet of tarpaulin across a roof. She wore red gloves and had a length of cord between her teeth. The wind kept lifting the sheet out of reach.

“Mara?” he called.

She said something around the cord.

“I’m sorry?”

She took it out of her mouth.

“Hold the ladder.”

He did.

After a minute she came down, slowly, testing each foot before shifting her weight.

“What do you want?”

He gave her his grandfather’s name.

Her expression changed. She looked at his face, then at the notebook in his hand.

“He was supposed to come back,” she said.

“He died. Eleven years ago.”

“I heard.”

Adrian waited.

“He was supposed to come back forty years ago.”

The wind lifted the tarpaulin again. Somewhere behind the wall, water struck hollow wood.

He took out the key.

Mara stared at it for a moment, then reached past him and put a coil of rope in his hands.

“If you’re staying for the story,” she said, “you can help with the roof.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Key That Opened Nothing

The woman who came to help with the tarpaulin was carrying a toolbox in one hand and half a pear in the other.

“You went up the ladder,” she said to Mara.

“I came down it too.”

“That isn’t the part we agreed on.”

She put the pear on a windowsill and introduced herself as Nia. Her dark hair had been clipped away from her face with something that might once have belonged to a desk lamp. She looked at the rope in Adrian’s hands, then at his shoes.

“You staying?”

“For a couple of days.”

“Then take those off before you come inside. The mud gets everywhere.”

For the next hour, nobody asked what he did for a living.

Nia went onto the low scaffold along the sound side of the building. Mara passed things up from the ground and disagreed with her about knots. Adrian fetched, held, and moved. When he suggested a different arrangement, Nia looked at the roof and asked whether he had seen the rotten section behind the gutter. He had not. They continued with hers.

The rain reached them just as they finished.

Inside, the workshop smelled of damp timber, warm dust, and the sharp sweetness of a recently planed board. There were two boats under repair. One lay upside down like a beetle considering its position. Along

the wall stood workbenches, some large, some low enough for children. Above them, a clock had lost its minute hand but continued to make an effort.

Mara put a saucepan on a small stove.

“Soup?”

“Thank you.”

“It was a question about whether you brought any. We’ve got bread.”

Nia opened a cupboard and took out three cans.

“Don’t encourage her.”

They ate beside the overturned boat. Mara held her spoon with a hand whose knuckles had thickened around old work. Her other hand rested on the table. Adrian noticed the slight tremor only when she lifted it to brush a crumb from her sleeve.

He put the key between them.

“Leon Ward was my grandfather.”

“I worked that out when you said it outside.”

“I didn’t know about this place.”

“Neither did quite a lot of people who should have.”

She took the key and studied its teeth. Then she stood, crossed to a narrow door, and tried it in the lock. It would not enter.

“Changed it in 1991.”

She returned the key to him.

“That saved us a great deal of symbolism,” Nia said.

Mara sat again. Through the roof, the rain made a sound like people shifting impatiently in a hall.

Forty years earlier, the building had housed three small businesses and a Saturday workshop for apprentices. Mara repaired boats. Leon designed and made cabinets, doors, and whatever else people needed. A third partner, Sam Bell, maintained the engines. They

had wanted to take over the next shed and turn it into a training room.

“He drew it beautifully,” Mara said. “Your grandfather could make you want to stand in a room that didn’t exist.”

Adrian looked towards the low benches.

“They were for that?”

“Some of them.”

Leon had collected deposits for fittings. Mara had signed for timber. There had been a date for the first group of trainees. Then Leon’s wife had become ill, and he had gone home to look after her.

Adrian nodded. His grandmother had suffered a stroke when he was thirteen. He remembered being told to keep quiet in the house.

“That must have been difficult for everyone,” he said.

Mara’s spoon stopped halfway to her mouth.

“Don’t start there.”

“I only meant - ”

“I know where you’re starting. I’ve heard people start there for forty years.”

Nia put the bread nearer him without looking up.

Mara had offered to postpone the training room. She had asked for the accounts, the cabinet key, and an explanation of which deposits had been spent. Leon said he would come on Friday. Then the next Friday. Then he stopped specifying a day.

“His wife being ill was terrible,” she said. “I sent food. I drove over twice. I am not confused about which part was terrible.”

The timber supplier still wanted paying. So did the people who had ordered work. Mara sold a boat she had been rebuilding for herself and took commercial repairs through two winters.

“Did he take the money?”

“Some of it. He said it was temporary. I couldn’t afford the kind of conversation that ends with a lawyer telling you how expensive the next conversation will be.”

Adrian felt a familiar impulse to collect the facts into a fairer shape. He wanted dates, amounts, other witnesses. He also wanted the old man who had taught him to hold a ruler steady.

“He never told us.”

“I imagine he didn’t enjoy telling it.”

After lunch, Mara showed him the pattern room. The old door had been kept after the lock was replaced; it leaned against a wall behind several sheets of plywood. She found it by touch and moved a board aside. A square of pale wood marked where the original lock had been.

Inside the room were drawings, templates, receipts, and a surprising number of biscuit tins containing things that were not biscuits. Leon’s name appeared on a roll of plans tied with cord. Adrian recognised the slope of the lettering before he read it.

HORIZON WORKSHOP.

He unrolled the paper. High windows. Wide doorways. Workbenches arranged around an open centre. A place to make things with people who did not yet know how.

It was good.

He wished it were bad. That would have made the rest easier.

“What happened to the shed?”

“Collapsed eventually. There are flats where it stood. Very inspiring views, according to the brochure.”

Adrian touched the drawn window with one finger. Beneath the title, in smaller writing, was a line of names. Mara. Sam. Owen. Faye’s father, Ellis.

“Are any of them still around?”

“Owen is. He lives inland, above the quarry. Ellis died. His daughter runs the little ferry at Reed Crossing.”

Two more entries in the notebook.

He asked whether Mara would let him photograph the drawing. She said yes, provided he did not put it on the internet with a sentence about his grandfather’s beautiful dream.

“I wasn’t going to.”

She looked at him until he stopped being certain.

Before leaving, he inspected the roof from the ground with Nia. The temporary sheet would hold through ordinary rain. Permanent repairs needed money, scaffolding, and a roofer who had promised to come when his larger job finished.

“I could help,” Adrian said.

“With what?” Nia asked.

“The building. Plans. Costs. Whatever you need.”

“That’s three different offers.”

He took out his notebook, the one from the office rather than Leon’s. Nia waited while he opened a fresh page.

They agreed on a small task. He would measure the damaged room the next morning and draw what was there. Nia could use it when seeking prices. He would not draw the café, gallery, or accommodation he had already begun to imagine.

At the door he turned back to Mara.

“I’m sorry.”

She was washing the bowls.

“You weren’t there.”

Outside, the harbour smelled of diesel and wet rope. Adrian walked back to his rented room with the key in his pocket. It had become heavier without changing size.