the real life remarkable autumn story was about Ambriel's story

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the real life remarkable autumn story was about Ambriel's story of her life

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WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH LANGFORD 2026

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For Ambriel, who found her voice, and for every loyal subject of Under-Leaf who answered.

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CHAPTER 1

A Name Out of a Library Book

The Notebook on the Kitchen Table

The ledger is on my kitchen table as I write this, propped against the teapot so the spine doesn't crack any further than it already has. It's a blue A4 hardback from the Spar on Church Street. I paid £2.49 for it in September 2017, meaning it for spellings, and it has never once had a spelling test in it. The cover has gone soft at the corners, like a dishcloth. There's a ring on the back from a mug of Horlicks I put down on it in about 2019 and have felt guilty about ever since.

Inside are ninety-two leaves. They were red and yellow and a sort of startled green when they went in, and now every one of them is brown. Some have kept their shape and some have gone to lace. A beech leaf from early October has crumbled almost entirely, so all that's left on the page is a faint stain and a line of purple felt-tip underneath, which is the opposite of how I'd have expected it to go. The leaves faded. The words didn't.

I open it carefully now. Two fingers, never the thumb. If I'm honest I'm frightened of it, the way you'd be frightened of holding somebody else's newborn, and it smells of the airing cupboard where it lived for six years before I brought it down.

There's a page I turn to more than the others. It isn't one of the important days. Nothing happened on it except that it rained and the apples kept falling, as apples do in September whether anyone's watching or not:

Day 12, 15 September. The Windfall Court had a meeting. Nobody was throan away.

I could tell you what that meant. I couldn't have told you at the time. At the time I thought it meant my granddaughter had been out in the wet again in her school shoes, and I said as much, and she looked at me as though I'd turned up to a funeral in a paper hat.

People have asked me before to write this down. Sue Anstey asked, more than once, over coffee after the Thursday service. Glyn Pritchard asked in the Six Bells and then bought me a half of cider by way of pressure, which I drank and still said no to. A woman from the WI in Clun said it would make a lovely talk, with slides. I said there were no slides. There's a notebook and a Quality Street tin with forty-one letters in it, and I wasn't going to stand up in a village hall in front of a projector and read out a seven-year-old's private business to people eating flapjack.

So why now. Partly it's my age. I'm seventy-one, and last winter I put the electric kettle on the hob and stood there wondering why it was taking so long. Nothing came of it but a smell. But it frightened me, and I thought: the day I forget which leaf was the sycamore, this story goes with me, and the only other person who knows it properly is fifteen and has her own life to be getting on with.

The other part is Ambriel. In October she came back to the orchard with a young tree in a pot and a spade borrowed off Glyn, and when the job was done she sat down at this table with mud to her elbows and said I ought to write it all out. 'Before you start telling it wrong, Nan,' she said, which was cheek, and also fair.

She's right that I'll get things wrong. I already have. Where I'm guessing I'll say so, and where our Jess remembers it differently I'll put that in too, because she will certainly tell me if I don't.

The kettle's on. The proper one, on its stand.

Six Pounds Two Ounces

Ambriel was born at ten past four in the morning on Sunday the twenty-first of March, 2010, at Birmingham Women's Hospital, and she weighed six pounds two ounces. I know the weight because Ron wrote

it on the back of the parking ticket and kept the ticket in his wallet until the day he died. I still have it. It cost £7.20 to leave the car there for most of a day, which he also wrote down, with a question mark after it.

We'd driven over from Bishop's Castle when Dean rang at half past ten the night before. Ron drove. I sat with my handbag on my knee the whole way, as though somebody might need a tissue on the A49, and by the time we got to Edgbaston it was too late to be any use and too early to be let in. We sat in the car park and ate a packet of Hobnobs. Ron listened to the football results on the radio, even though they were the same results he'd heard at five o'clock. That was Ron.

When they let us up, our Jess was sitting propped against the pillows with her hair stuck to her forehead, looking about twelve. The baby was in one of those clear plastic cots on wheels, like a fish tank. She had a lot of dark hair and a cross little face, as if she'd been woken too early and wanted to see the manager. I'd held a fair few babies by then. I'd never held one that was ours in quite that way. Ron didn't hold her at all for the first ten minutes because he said his hands were too cold, and he stood blowing on them by the window until Jess told him to stop being soft.

Then I asked what they were calling her.

Jess had a book on the bedside table, a library book in one of those crackly plastic jackets, from Kings Heath library, with a date stamp inside that she'd already gone over. *A Little Book of Angel Names*, it was called, or something very like it. She'd folded the corner down on a page, which I remember noticing because I'd brought her up not to do that to library books. She'd been reading it on the bus to her antenatal appointments, she said, all winter.

'Ambriel,' she said.

I'll be honest. I had been up all night, I'd eaten nothing but Hobnobs, and I hadn't learned yet what I've learned since, which is that new mothers are not asking for your opinion. They're telling you a fact. I said it sounded like something you'd buy at the chemist for a tickly throat. I said, 'Ambriel. Two to be taken every four hours.'

Ron laughed. Dean laughed, I think, though he's never admitted it. Jess did not laugh.

'It's an angel,' she said. 'It's in the book.'

'I'm sure it is, love,' I said. 'So's Gabriel. Nobody's going to ask Gabriel if he's got a sore throat.'

That was the wrong thing to say twice over. I knew it the moment it was out, the way you know you've dropped a whole tray of custard before you hear it land. Jess turned her face to the window. Ron went over to the plastic cot and finally picked the baby up, cold hands or not, and stood rocking her and humming 'Blue Moon', which was the only song he knew all the words to, and nobody said anything else about names for the rest of the visit.

Jess has never forgotten it. She brings it up at Christmas, usually after the second glass of wine, and she brought it up again when I told her I was writing this. 'Put the cough sweet in,' she said. 'Put it in exactly as you said it.' So I have.

For the record, I've come round to the name. It took me about a fortnight. By the time they brought her to Bishop's Castle at Easter I'd stopped hearing the chemist in it, and I'd started saying it slowly, all three bits, the way you'd say a place you meant to visit.

The library book went back eleven days late. Jess paid the fine. Forty-four pence.

Grandad's Orchard

The orchard was always Ron's, though the deeds have both our names on them. I liked it well enough, the way you like a neighbour's dog. Ron loved it. He'd go out after his tea in April to look at the blossom with his hands in his pockets, and come back an hour later with nothing to show for it but wet slippers.

There are seven trees inside the wall, and the summer Ambriel was three, which would be 2013, Ron decided she ought to know every one of them by name. I thought she was too young. She could just about say 'banana'. He took no notice of me, which was his habit, and walked her round the orchard holding her hand, stopping at each trunk as though he were introducing her to his brothers at a wedding.

The old Bramley first, by the back wall, because it was the biggest and the oldest and Ron said you always say hello to the eldest. Then the two Egremont Russets side by side, which he called the Twins, and told

her their apples felt like a cat's tongue. She licked one to check. Then the Worcester Pearmain, the Cox and the Discovery, which he said was the show-off because it ripens in August when everybody else is still thinking about it. I could hear him from the kitchen window doing all this in a voice he never once used on me in forty-one years of marriage.

Then he got to the seventh tree. He stood in front of it a while.

'And this one,' he said, 'nobody knows.'

That was perfectly true. It's in the corner by the gate, smaller than the others, with a lean on it towards the church as if it's trying to hear the bells. Its apples are yellow with a red streak down one side, like somebody's dabbed them with a lipstick, and they taste faintly of pear drops. They keep until about Christmas and then go soft all at once. When we moved in, in 1988, the old lady we bought the cottage from said her husband had planted it and never told her what it was, and he'd been dead a good while by then, so that was the end of that.

Ron tried, mind you. He took a carrier bag of them to an apple show at Ludlow one October, and a man with a penknife and a magnifying glass cut one in half, looked at the pips and said 'Ah,' and then said nothing useful at all. Another year Ron wrapped three in newspaper, put them in a padded envelope and posted them to the National Fruit Collection in Kent, who'll identify an apple for a fee. I think it was eighteen pounds. It might have been more; he didn't tell me the full amount, which tells you something. A letter came back about five weeks later. It said the specimens were 'not consistent with any variety held in the collection' and suggested he might like to try again next season with fresher fruit. Ron pinned it to the inside of the shed door. He was proud of that letter. I think he'd have been disappointed if they'd known.

Ambriel stood in front of the seventh tree with her head tipped back and her mouth open. She was wearing a pair of red wellingtons that had been Jess's, two sizes too big, stuffed at the toes with kitchen roll. She looked at the tree for so long that Ron crouched down to see what she was seeing.

'Does it know?' she said.

'Know what, love?'

'What it is.'

Ron thought about that properly. He never fobbed a child off, I'll give him that.

'I should think so,' he said. 'It's only us that don't.'

She seemed to find that satisfactory. She patted the trunk twice, the way you'd pat a horse, and stumped off towards the Discovery in her big red boots to see whether the show-off had dropped anything.

What the Trees Were Told

Ron died in the second week of February 2015, in the hospital at Shrewsbury, on a Tuesday afternoon when I'd nipped down to the WRVS shop for a newspaper he wasn't going to read. I'll come back to his illness later in this book, because our Jess and I have never agreed about those months and I'd rather set it down once, properly, than in bits. For now it's enough to say he went quicker than they told us he would. I was gone eleven minutes.

The funeral was at St John the Baptist's, ten days later. Cold and bright, with frost still on the churchyard grass at eleven o'clock. The Reverend Sue Anstey did the service and got his name right all the way through, which you'd think was the least anybody could ask, but I'd been to two funerals that winter where it hadn't been managed. Ron's brother Keith read the bit from Ecclesiastes about a time to plant and a time to pluck up. I hadn't chosen it. Keith had, and I didn't have the energy to argue, and in the end I was glad.

Ambriel was nearly five. Jess had bought her a navy pinafore dress from Next for the day, and she sat between her mum and dad in the front pew swinging her legs and looking at the coffin as if she was waiting for it to do something. She didn't cry. Children often don't, at funerals. They save it for a Wednesday in March when you've given them the wrong cereal.

Afterwards we had people back at the cottage. I'd done ham sandwiches, egg sandwiches and a Victoria sponge from the WI that I couldn't have told you who made. There were thirty-odd in a front room built for six. Somebody's coat ended up on the cooker. I spent most of the afternoon in the kitchen washing cups that didn't need washing, because if I stood still people came and held my hands.

That was where Ambriel found me. She came in sideways round the door with a sausage roll in each fist and stood by the sink.

'Nan,' she said. 'Has anybody told the trees?'

I had my hands in the water. I remember the exact feel of it, gone lukewarm, with a skin of washing-up liquid going flat on top.

'Told them what, love?'

'That Grandad's dead.'

I'll be honest. I said, 'Trees don't need telling, sweetheart,' and I went back to the cups. I said it the way you say 'Mind the step' to somebody you're not really looking at. I had seventeen more cups to do and Keith's wife wanted to know where I kept the Sweetex.

Ambriel stood there a moment longer. Then she put both sausage rolls down on the draining board, very carefully, side by side, and went out of the back door in her navy pinafore with no coat on.

It was Jess who went after her. I watched through the kitchen window with a tea towel in my hand. The light was going by then, the sky over the church tower that cold green it goes in February. Ambriel walked round the orchard exactly the way Ron had taken her, eldest first. She stopped at the Bramley and said something to it with her hand flat on the bark. Then the Twins. Then the Worcester, the Cox and the Discovery. Jess followed a few steps behind with her arms folded against the cold and didn't interrupt once, which I'd never in my life known her manage.

At the seventh tree, the one nobody knows, Ambriel stayed longest. I couldn't hear a word. I could only see her mouth going, and her head tipped back the way it had been in those red wellingtons, and the tree leaning towards the church as it always does.

When she came in her hands were frozen. Jess rubbed them between hers by the Rayburn.

'What did you tell them?' I said.

Ambriel looked at me. She was deciding something. I didn't know then that I'd see that look a great deal, two and a half years later, when she'd stopped answering anybody at all.

'That it was only us that don't know,' she said, 'and they should be nice to you.'

CHAPTER 2

The Summer Everything Went Quiet

Kings Heath, July

Twelve words, and one of them was 'unfortunately'.

The rest of the report was lovely, I'll give them that. Three pages on stiff cream paper with the school badge at the top, telling us Ambriel could count in fives and tens, knew her number bonds to twenty, read 'with real expression' and had made a thoughtful contribution to a class display about the Romans. There was a gold star printed next to Art. Then, halfway down page two, under a heading that said Speaking and Listening, there was a box big enough for a paragraph, and in it one line:

Unfortunately Ambriel has not spoken in class at all since early July.

That was it. No full stop missing, nothing crossed out. Somebody had typed that and moved on to Science.

I read it standing at the kitchen side in Jess's terrace off the Alcester Road, on the Friday before the schools broke up. I'd come down on the train from Craven Arms for a week to do the school runs, because Jess was on nights and Dean had moved out at the end of June. His things were still by the back door in four Lidl bags-for-life, waiting for him to fetch them. One had a football boot sticking out of the top. I remember thinking, ridiculous, that he'd want that before winter.

Jess was asleep upstairs with the curtains pinned shut. I wasn't supposed to have opened the envelope. It had come home in Ambriel's book bag and I'd opened it the way you open anything with a school badge on when you've spent twenty-six years in a school kitchen,

which is to say without thinking it might not be yours. I'll be honest, I'd have opened it anyway.

Ambriel was at the table eating Shreddies, dry, one at a time, the way she did that summer. Each one got picked out of the bowl with a finger and thumb, like she was counting stock. She was in her school polo shirt with a bit of yesterday's paint on the collar, blue.

'Your report's come, love,' I said. 'It's ever so good.'

She nodded. Shreddie.

'It says you've stopped talking in class.'

Nothing. Another Shreddie. I'd known, in the way you know things nobody has said to you outright. Jess had mentioned on the phone that Ambriel was 'a bit quiet at school' and I'd said all children go quiet, our Jess was quiet for a whole year after we moved her to the juniors, and Jess had said, 'Mum, it's not like that,' and I'd talked over her. I did a lot of talking over that summer. I got that wrong.

'Does your teacher ask you things?'

A nod.

'And you don't answer?'

She put the Shreddie down and looked at the bag of football boots. Then she leaned across the table, close enough that I could smell the milk she hadn't had, and whispered. It was a proper whisper, all breath, the kind children do when they're telling you the name of a boy they like.

'I answer in my head.'

I said, 'Well, that's a start,' which was a stupid thing to say and I knew it as it left my mouth. She sat back. We heard Jess turn over upstairs, the bed creaking through the ceiling, and both of us went still, the pair of us, like burglars.

When Jess came down at half past two in her dressing gown, I had the report on the table with the teapot holding it open at page two. She read the line. She read it again. Then she folded the whole thing in half, and in half again, and put it in the pocket of her dressing gown with her hand over it.

'You opened my post,' she said.

The Doctor's Phrase

Jess got the appointment for the following Wednesday, the twenty-sixth. I think it was the twenty-sixth. Jess says the twenty-seventh, and as she was the one who rang at eight o'clock every morning for three days to get it, she may well be right.

I went along. Nobody asked me to. I sat in the waiting room of the surgery on the Vicarage Road with Ambriel between us on a plastic chair that had been designed for somebody's knees but not a child's. There was a fish tank with one fish in it. Ambriel watched that fish for forty minutes as if it owed her money.

The doctor was young, younger than Jess, with a lanyard and a cardigan and very clean trainers. She was kind. I want to say that before anything else, because what I'm about to say about her makes me sound like an old woman with a grudge, which I suppose I am. She got down on her heels to talk to Ambriel. She asked about school, and about the fish, and whether Ambriel had a favourite colour.

Ambriel looked at Jess. Jess said, 'Purple,' and the doctor smiled and wrote something down.

Then she sat back in her chair and talked to the two of us over Ambriel's head. She said a lot of sensible things about stress at home, and changes, and how common it was. Then she said it.

'What we might be looking at is something called selective mutism.'

She said it gently, the way you'd tell somebody their car had failed its MOT. Jess nodded. She'd already read about it, I found out later, at four in the morning between calls. I didn't nod. I sat there with my handbag on my knee and felt my face go hot.

It was the 'selective' that did it. I'd spent twenty-six years watching children choose. Chips or mash, custard or the yoghurt, who they sat by. Selective meant picking. It sounded like Ambriel had looked down the menu of things a girl might do that summer and gone for silence because she fancied it. I know now that isn't what the word means. I didn't know it then. Then, I said, 'She's not being awkward, if that's what you mean,' and the doctor said, 'No, nobody's suggesting that,' and Jess put her hand flat on my arm. Not a pat. A press.

Ambriel was still watching the door, where the fish was.

There was talk of a referral, and a waiting list, and a leaflet. The leaflet had a drawing on the front of a child with a zip for a mouth. I put it in my bag so Ambriel wouldn't see it, and Jess saw me do it, and neither of us said anything about that either.

I went home on the Friday. Train to Shrewsbury, change, then Craven Arms, then the bus, two hours and fifty minutes door to door if you're lucky with the connection, and I wasn't. By the time I got in it was after seven and the cottage smelled shut up. I didn't take my coat off. I got Ron's laptop out of the sideboard drawer.

He'd bought it from Currys in Shrewsbury in 2012 for £349 and only ever used it to look at the Shrewsbury Town results and photographs of other people's caravans. The password was still on a yellow Post-it on the lid, in his capitals. I typed the doctor's two words into the box, one finger each hand, and pressed the button.

I read for maybe ten minutes. There were long pages from hospitals with diagrams. There were forums, mothers in Leeds and Ohio and New South Wales, writing at all hours about children who hadn't spoken to a teacher in four years, in six. Somebody's son was nineteen. There was a list of 'signs' and I went down it like a shopping list, ticking things in my head, and I didn't like how many I ticked.

Then I shut the lid. Not hard. I just closed it, and put my hand flat on the top of it, on Ron's Post-it, and left it there until the kitchen went dark.

Ten O'Clock

Jess rang at ten. Not every night, but often enough that by the second week of August I'd stopped watching the end of the news in case I missed her. It was the only gap she had: Ambriel in bed, the woman two doors down sitting in with her telly on mute, and Jess in the mess room at the ambulance station with a cup of something out of a machine, waiting for the radio. I could hear it behind her sometimes. A crackle, a voice saying numbers. Then she'd say, 'Hang on, Mum,' and be gone for a minute, and come back.

I sat on the stairs for those calls. Ron had always meant to put a chair in the hall by the phone and never did. Seven years I've been

meaning to do it myself.

The first time she asked, she didn't ask. She said, 'I've been looking at the school up the hill from you. Their website. They've got a nice field.' I said it was a very nice field, Ron used to walk the dog past it, and what had she been doing looking at the school's website at ten o'clock at night. She said, 'Nothing. Just looking.' I let it go. I shouldn't have.

The second time was the Thursday after. She talked about her rota for a long while, and the exams, and how Dean's money hadn't come through yet because of something to do with the agency in Aberdeen. Then she said it straight out.

'Could she come to you for the autumn? Just the term. Till Christmas.'

I'll be honest. What she said and what I heard were two different sentences.

- She said: *for the autumn.* I heard: *for as long as it takes, and nobody knows how long that is.*
- She said: *I can't do nights and the course and her.* I heard: *I can't do her.*
- She said: *it'd be quieter for her, Mum, it's so quiet where you are.* I heard: *you've got nothing else on.*

That last one stung, and it stung because it was true. Since Ron, my diary was the WI on the second Tuesday, the chiropodist every six weeks and the bins.

So I asked questions, and they were the wrong ones. Had she thought what it would do to Ambriel, being moved? Had Dean been asked? Was this the doctor's idea? Jess answered every one of them patiently the first time and less patiently the second. On the Sunday call she let slip that she'd already rung the school. Not to enrol her. Just to ask whether they had room in Year Three.

'You rang them before you rang me,' I said.

'I rang them so I'd know whether to ring you.'

'That's the same thing, Jessica.'

There was a long pause, with the radio in it. Somebody in Moseley had fallen off a ladder. I remember that because I sat on the stairs feeling sorry for him, a man I'd never meet, rather than for my own daugh-

ter, who was crying very quietly on the other end and trying to make it sound like a cold.

Jess remembers that call differently. She says she wasn't crying, she was tired, and that I hung up on her. I don't think I did. I think the line went. But the phone was in my hand and not hers, so I'll leave it standing as her version, because she may be right.

The Tuesday after, she rang at ten past ten. No hello. I could tell from her breathing that she'd been sitting with the phone in her lap for those ten minutes, working out the words.

'I'm not asking you to fix her, Mum,' she said. 'I'm asking you to have her.'

Yes

I said yes before she'd finished breathing out. I'd like to say I took the night to think about it, or rang somebody, or went and stood in the orchard the way Ron did when he had a decision to make about the car. I didn't. I said, 'Course she can, love,' and then, because I can never leave a thing alone, 'I did twenty-six years in a dinner hall, Jess. I think I can manage one little girl.'

There was a silence on the line. Not the radio this time.

'That's not what this is,' Jess said.

She was right, and I knew she was right while I was still saying it. That's the first thing I have to set down plainly, because Jess will read this and she'll look for it. Part of why I said yes was pride. I'd watched my daughter come apart in that flat in Kings Heath, with her rota on the fridge and the lunchboxes and the leaflet with the zip, and some mean little part of me thought: **I'll show her how it's done.** As if her child were a queue of Year Fours who wouldn't eat their peas. As if there were a way it was done. I got that wrong, and I'd go on getting it wrong for a good while yet.

That was part of it. It wasn't the main part.

The main part was the house. Since February 2015 I'd been living in four rooms and using two of them. I'd stopped cooking proper dinners because a pie for one is just sad, and a pie for one eaten over the sink is sadder. The spare room had Ron's exercise bike in it, which he'd bought

from Argos for £89 the January before he got ill and ridden about six times, and I'd been hanging my ironing off the handlebars for two and a half years. Some days the only person I spoke to was the man at the Spar. Some days not even him. I'd go to bed at half nine because there was no good reason to stay up, and lie there listening to the Bramley creak.

I wanted to be needed. Plain as that.

It's not a nice thing to admit, that your granddaughter stopping talking was the best news you'd had in two years. That's not how I felt it. But it's near enough that I won't pretend otherwise.

The ledger is open in front of me now, at a page from the second week, and I've had it open there all the time I've been writing this. The leaf is a hawthorn, small and brown, gone thin as tissue.

Day 9, 12 September. Nans house is to quiet. The Queen likes it.

She saw the quiet straight off. She'd been in the place a week.

The rest of August went in lists. I moved the exercise bike into the shed and the ironing onto the back of a chair. I bought a purple duvet cover from Dunelm in Shrewsbury for £14, because Jess said purple, and then worried for a fortnight that it was the wrong purple. I rang the school myself, to be on equal footing, and was told very kindly that Mrs Jessica Hale had already sorted everything and they were looking forward to meeting Ambriel on the fourth. I wrote *Sunday 3rd, Jess bringing her, about 2* on the calendar in the kitchen, in pen, and then went over it again so it was darker.

On the last Saturday of August Jess rang in the afternoon, not at ten, which threw me. She said there was someone who wanted a word. Then a lot of rustling, and a long gap, and breathing that wasn't Jess's.

I said, 'Hello, my darling. It's Nan.'

Nothing for a while. I could hear their kitchen tap dripping. I nearly said something else to fill the gap, and for once in my life I didn't.

Then, so soft I had to press the phone into my ear until it hurt:

'Are the trees still there?'

CHAPTER 3

A Wheelie Case on Church Street

A Freezer Bag and a Running Engine

Jess never turned the engine off. That's the first thing I remember about Sunday the third of September, and I've had nine years to think of something better.

They were late. The calendar said *about 2* and at ten past three I was still at the front window with the net curtain pinched back, like every nosy woman on Church Street I've ever complained about. I'd made a Victoria sponge. I'd also made a second one, because the first sank in the middle, and then I ate the sunk one in slices while I waited, so by the time the little silver Corsa came round from the High Street I was full of jam and not in the best of moods.

Jess pulled up half on the pavement outside the cottage and left it ticking over. I could hear it from the hall. That Corsa had a sound like a sewing machine with a cold.

I opened the door before anyone knocked. Jess was already round at the boot, lifting out a purple wheelie case with one wheel that didn't spin, so it sort of limped up the path behind her. Ambriel came after it. She had on her school shoes, though it was a Sunday, and a pink anorak zipped right up under her chin in what was a warm afternoon. She was holding a sandwich bag.

It was a freezer bag, if I'm being exact, the Sainsbury's kind with the zip-lock. Inside was a toothbrush with a cartoon dog on the handle, a squeezed-thin tube of strawberry toothpaste and two hair bobbles. She

held it out to me in both hands. Very formal. It was how you'd hand over a passport at the border, and I took it in the same spirit.

'Thank you, love,' I said. 'I'll put that somewhere safe.'

She didn't say anything. I hadn't expected her to, not really, but I'll be honest, after that phone call in August some daft part of me had been hoping.

'Her reading book's in the front pocket,' Jess said. 'And her inhaler, which she hasn't needed since March, but. And there's a list.'

'I've got a list.'

'Well, now you've got two.'

She went back to the car and leant in through the driver's window, and I thought she was getting something else out. She wasn't. She was checking the engine was still going, I suppose, or checking the clock. Her shift started at seven in Birmingham. It's an hour and three-quarters on a good day, and that road out past Craven Arms is never a good day.

'You'll come in for a cup of tea,' I said.

'I can't, Mum.'

'Five minutes. I've made a sponge.'

'I said I can't.'

I took that as rudeness and I let her see I took it that way, which was a mistake I'd make more than once that autumn. Jess told me years later that she'd left the engine running on purpose. She said if she'd turned the key and stepped into my kitchen and smelled the sponge she'd never have got back in the car, and Ambriel would have watched her cry, and she'd promised herself on the M54 that Ambriel would not watch her cry. I didn't know any of that on the step. I just saw a daughter who wouldn't come in.

She crouched down in front of Ambriel and did up the top of the anorak, which was already done up. She whispered something into her hair. I didn't catch it and I've never asked. Some things you leave alone.

Then she kissed me on the cheek, quick, like a bird pecking, and got in the car. The Corsa coughed off up Church Street towards the church and the bend, and the indicator was still going after she'd turned the corner.

Ambriel didn't wave. She'd already turned round. She was looking past me, down the side of the cottage, at the top of the orchard wall where the old Bramley leant over the coping stones with its first apples showing.

Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down

The primary school is up the hill, which in Bishop's Castle is like saying the sea is wet, because everything is up a hill except the bits that are down one. On the Monday morning I walked Ambriel up there at twenty to nine with her book bag and a new cardigan from the Shrewsbury Marks and Spencer that I'd bought a size too big so it would last, and which she'd buttoned wrong. I didn't fix it. I thought that showed restraint.

I'd been a dinner lady for twenty-six years, at the old school in Lydbury North and then in Craven Arms, so I knew how a playground sounds at ten to nine. It sounds like gulls on a tip. Ambriel walked into it holding my hand so hard my wedding ring dug in, and she didn't look at a single child. She looked at the drainpipes.

Mrs Okafor met us at the Year 3 door. She was younger than I'd pictured from the phone call, with her hair wrapped up in a green scarf and a lanyard full of keys, and she crouched straight down to Ambriel's height without making a performance of it. Some teachers crouch like they're being filmed. She didn't.

'You must be Ambriel,' she said. 'I've been told you like drawing. I've saved you the seat by the window, because that's the best one for drawing, and I'm not giving it to anyone else.'

Ambriel looked at the keys on the lanyard.

Then Mrs Okafor took something out of her cardigan pocket. It was a piece of card about the size of a playing card, laminated, with the corners rounded off. On one side somebody had drawn a yellow hand doing a thumbs-up. On the other, the same hand doing a thumbs-down. The felt-tip had gone a bit streaky under the plastic.

'This is yours,' she said. 'If I ask you something, you can show me this side, or this side. Or you can keep it in your pocket and not show me anything, and that's allowed as well.'

I'll be honest, my first thought was that it was a gimmick. I'd seen a lot of laminated things come and go in schools. Traffic-light cards. Golden-time charts. A thing called a Feelings Fan that lasted one term in 2009 before the Year 6 boys turned it into a weapon. I said something like, 'She can nod, you know,' in the voice I used to use on supply teachers who wanted the chips kept warm past quarter past twelve.

Mrs Okafor looked up at me. She didn't stand.

'She can,' she said. 'But a nod's quite a lot to ask of somebody on their first morning. You have to move your whole head.'

I didn't have an answer to that. I still don't.

Ambriel took the card. She didn't show either side. She turned it over twice, as if she was checking there wasn't a third side somebody had forgotten to tell her about, and put it in the pocket of the too-big cardigan. Then she went in. She didn't look back at me, which I told myself was a good sign and felt like a slap.

I stood by the railings until the bell went, which is not allowed, and a mother with a double buggy gave me a look. I gave her one back.

At quarter past three I was first at the gate. Twenty minutes early. Ambriel came out last of her class, holding Mrs Okafor's hand, with a painting of something brown that was either a tree or a horse. Mrs Okafor said she'd eaten all her lunch and sat by the window all day and done some lovely work on the number line.

'Did she say anything?' I said.

'Not yet,' said Mrs Okafor. 'Not yet' is a phrase I learned to love that autumn.

Halfway down the hill, outside the bakery, I asked Ambriel whether she'd had a nice day. I didn't expect anything. She stopped on the pavement, put the brown painting under her arm, got the card out of her pocket and held it up to me, thumb pointing at the sky.

Then she put it away again, carefully, the way you'd put away a bus pass.

Fish Fingers on a Tuesday

Twenty-six years in a dinner hall teaches you three things, and I tried all of them on Ambriel in the first forty-eight hours. None of them

worked. I'm putting them down anyway, because I've promised myself this book will have my mistakes in it as well as hers.

The first was talk. In a dinner queue, if a child goes quiet you fill the gap, because a quiet child holds up the line and a held-up line at ten past twelve is how you end up with cold peas and a deputy head in your kitchen. So on the Monday evening I talked. I talked while I peeled the potatoes and while I wiped the table. I told her about the Spar and how they'd put the milk up to 89p. I told her about Mrs Hulme at the WI who'd entered a shop-bought Victoria sponge in the summer show and been found out by the doily. I told her which of the neighbours had a cat and which had a cat that thought it lived with me. I'll be honest, I couldn't stop. Every time the kitchen went quiet I heard it.

Ambriel sat on the stool by the Rayburn with her knees up and the thumbs card in her lap, and watched my mouth the way you'd watch a tap that won't turn off. At about seven she slid down and went upstairs. I found her on the spare bed with the light off and the curtains open, looking out at the orchard wall.

'Am I too much, love?' I said.

She held up the card. Thumb sideways. I hadn't known there was a sideways.

The second thing was bribery, which I'd rather call incentives, though Ron always said that's just bribery in a tie. On the Tuesday after school I bought a Curly Wurly from the Spar, 25p then, and put it on the kitchen table between us like a hostage.

'That's yours,' I said, 'for one word. Any word. You can say "bum" if you like.'

I was pleased with "bum". It had worked on a Year 2 boy called Kieran in 2004 who wouldn't tell me whether he wanted custard. Ambriel looked at the Curly Wurly, and then at me, for a long time. Then she pushed it back across the table with one finger, slowly, until it was on my side. It wasn't rude. She did it the way you'd hand back change somebody had given you by mistake. I ate it myself at half past nine with the news on, and felt about two inches tall.

The third thing was fish fingers, and I had real faith in the fish fingers. In all my years serving them I never once met a child who'd turn down a fish finger. I'd seen children refuse chips. I'd seen a girl in

Craven Arms refuse jam roly-poly on religious grounds, and she was C of E. But fish fingers went down like a tide. So on Tuesday I did Birds Eye, ten in the box for £1.85, with oven chips and peas, and I drew a face in ketchup on the side of the plate. A smile. Two dots for eyes.

Ambriel ate the chips. She ate the peas, one at a time, with her fingers, which I let go. She ate the breadcrumbs off all four fish fingers, very carefully, nibbling round the edges, until there were four little bare white bars of cod left on the plate. Then she lined them up side by side, straight, like a fence. She put her knife and fork together at half past six, which is what Ron always did and which she can't possibly have remembered.

The ketchup face she left alone. It sat there smiling at the fence.

'You don't like the fish?' I said.

She shook her head. A whole head. Mrs Okafor would have called that progress.

Afterwards she didn't go upstairs. She went to the back door and stood with her nose against the glass, where you can see the first three trees before the light goes, and she stayed there while I washed up, breathing a little round fog onto the pane and letting it fade, and breathing another.

Two Nights Under Delia

I've left something out of that Monday, and I only noticed it just now, with the Ledger open on the kitchen table and her date at the top of the first page. It belongs here. Mrs Okafor had sent Ambriel home with a slip of ten spellings, all 'sh' words (ship, shop, shed, fish, which makes me smile now), and a note in round handwriting saying a little notebook would help with practice at home. So on the way down the hill, after the thumbs-up outside the bakery, we went into the Spar.

They had three kinds. There was a pink one with a unicorn on the front for £3.99, a spiral pad with pages that would have been confetti by Thursday, and a blue A4 hardback, plain as a gas bill, for £2.49. I bought the blue one. I'll be honest, it was the price.

I gave it to Ambriel to carry so I could manage the milk and the bread and my purse, and she held it flat against her chest with both

arms, the brown painting squashed underneath. She didn't hand it back at the door. That was the first sign, though I didn't read it as one.

Three houses up from mine there's a sycamore that leans over the wall of the old saddler's and drops its leaves on everybody's car. Ambriel stopped under it. She crouched in the gutter and picked one up, a big one, gone yellow at the edges, with a hole in the middle where something had eaten its way through and a black blotch beside it.

'That one's had a caterpillar living in it, love,' I said.

She stood up and carried it home by the stalk, at arm's length, like something hot.

In the kitchen she pulled a chair over to the dresser and got down my Delia Smith, the big one, the *Complete Cookery Course*, which I have had since 1983 and which weighs about the same as a bag of potatoes. She opened the blue notebook to the first page, laid the leaf in the middle, smoothed it with the side of her hand, shut the book, and put Delia on top. Then she looked at me. I understood I was not to touch it.

So the spellings went on the back of an envelope instead. Ship, shop, shed. She wrote them all correctly, in pencil, without a sound, and I said 'Well done' in the voice I used to use for children who'd finished their greens, and she gave me the card. Thumb sideways. Fair enough.

The leaf stayed under Delia for two nights. I cooked on the Tuesday from memory, which accounts for the fish fingers.

On the Wednesday morning, before school, she lifted Delia off with both hands and opened the notebook. The leaf had gone flat and papery and a bit see-through, the way they do, and it had stuck itself very slightly to the page. She found a purple felt-tip in her pencil case, took the lid off with her teeth, and wrote under the leaf, pressing so hard I heard the nib squeak:

Day 1, 4 September. The Queen is sad. Nobody nos why.

It went through to page two. You can still see it, a purple ghost of every letter, back to front.

I very nearly corrected 'nos'. Twenty-six years of dinner-hall instinct, and a granddaughter of mine on the brink of a spelling test, and I had my biro out of the drawer before I'd thought about it. Then I saw her hand flat on the page, holding it down. I put the biro back.

'Which queen's that, then?' I said.

She put the lid on the felt-tip. She closed the notebook, and on the front cover, in the white box meant for your name and your subject, she drew a small crown with five points. That was all the answer I got.

At ten past three that afternoon she came out of school, walked down the hill beside me without the card, went through my front door and straight out the back one, no coat, into the orchard. I watched from the sink. She went past the Discovery and the two Russets without stopping, and stood a long time under the old Bramley at the far end, looking up. When she came back in she had a leaf held flat between two fingers, like a ticket, and she went to the dresser for Delia.

CHAPTER 4

The Kingdom Under the Leaves

The Map on the Shed Door

Ron's shed has a door that sticks in wet weather, and you have to lift it on the latch and give it a shove with your hip, the way he always did, swearing at it mildly as if it were an old dog that wouldn't come in. I went out on the morning of Saturday 16 September for the secateurs. I lifted, shoved, and stopped.

There was a map on the inside of the door.

It was drawn on the back of a sheet of my WI minutes from August, which I'd left on the sideboard and assumed had gone in the recycling. Four drawing pins held it up, one of them green, which meant she'd been through Ron's tin on the shelf, the one with the screws and the fuse wire and the keys to padlocks we haven't owned since 1996. I don't know how long it had been there. A week, possibly. I'm not a great one for secateurs.

She'd drawn the orchard from above, as a crow would see it. The wall went all the way round in grey felt-tip, and each of the seven trees was a green cloud with a brown stick under it. The two Russets were labelled THE TWINS. The Discovery was THE EARLY ONE. The seventh tree, the one nobody has ever put a name to, Ron included, had a question mark drawn inside its cloud. Fair enough. At the bottom, by the far wall, the old Bramley was twice the size of the others, with a little purple crown at its foot and the words BRAMLEY TOWER in capitals that got smaller as she ran out of room.

Along the bottom ran a wobbly blue line. THE RIVER WEEP.

That's our drainage ditch. Ron dug it in the wet spring of 1998 because the bottom of the orchard used to turn to porridge every February, and he laid a length of clay pipe under the brick path so you could walk across without getting your slippers wet. The ditch is about a foot deep and full of nettles. I had never once thought of it as a river. On the map, where the blue line met the path, Ambriel had coloured a fat blue blob, and next to it, in pencil, she'd written:

It floods here. Bring boots.

I'll be honest, I laughed. Out loud, in the shed, on my own. I thought it was a nice bit of make-believe, the kind of detail children put in because rivers in books always flood.

Then it rained on the Sunday night. Proper Shropshire rain, sideways off the hills, the gutters going like taps. On the Monday morning, after I'd walked her up to school, I put my wellies on and went down the bottom of the orchard to look.

The pipe under the path had silted up. I hadn't cleared it since Ron died, and he used to do it every October with a bit of bent coat hanger. The water had backed up and spread out across the bricks in a brown puddle, and the puddle was exactly where she'd put the blue blob. Not near it. Exactly there, the same lopsided shape, wider on the Bramley side because the ground dips.

She'd been in my house thirteen days. She'd known, before it ever rained, where my own ditch was going to fail.

I stood there with water over my toes and thought about all those afternoons I'd watched her from the sink, standing under the trees, doing nothing at all as far as I could see. She'd been surveying. Like the council, only more thorough, and in purple.

That evening I got the ledger down from the dresser while she was in the bath. I wasn't snooping, or not much. I wanted to see if she'd written anything about it. She had.

Day 15, 18 September. The River Weep came over the bridge. The Queen did not go out. She is tired of wet.

Underneath, smaller, as if she'd added it later:

Nan has boots.

The Windfall Court

September is windfall month in our orchard. The Discovery drops first, then the Worcester, and by the third week you can't cross the grass without something going soft under your heel. Every year since we came here I've gone round with the red bucket on a Saturday and cleared the lot. The good ones go in the fruit bowl. The rest go on Ron's compost heap behind the shed, two old pallets wired together, which he called the Crematorium. He thought that was hilarious. It was, the first forty times.

On Saturday 23 September I took the bucket out as usual. I'd got about a dozen in when Ambriel came down the path in her pyjama bottoms and wellies and stood in front of me. She didn't say anything. She held her hand out for the bucket.

I gave it to her, thinking she wanted to help. She tipped it out on the grass.

Then she went through them one by one, the way I used to check dinner tickets in the queue at Mount Pleasant, and laid them out in rows along the brick path. It took her the best part of an hour. I went in and made a cup of tea and watched through the kitchen window, and when I came back out with a biscuit for her there were four rows, and the apples in each row were roughly the same size, and at the front of them all, on its own, sat a big Worcester with a red cheek and a wasp hole in its side.

She'd made little flags out of cocktail sticks and the backs of Post-it notes. I'd bought those cocktail sticks for a WI buffet in 2014. They'd never been opened.

The flags had names on. I wrote them down that afternoon, on the back of an envelope that's still in the Quality Street tin:

- SIR WASP (the one at the front, with the hole)
- LADY SPECKEL
- THE DUKE OF GRASS
- SIR LOPSIDE
- TWO SQUIRES, BOTH CALLED TOM
- a whole back row labelled simply SOLDERS

It was the Windfall Court. Every apple that came off a tree had a rank and a job, and the ledger, when I looked later, had the full list with duties. The Duke of Grass was in charge of the lawn. The squires carried messages. Lady Speckel did the Queen's hair, which I would have liked to see.

What I hadn't understood, standing there with my red bucket, was that the bruised ones were not rubbish. They were wounded knights. You didn't throw a wounded knight on a heap of potato peelings. You buried him properly.

So at four o'clock that afternoon, with the light going yellow over the Long Mynd, I found myself walking behind my granddaughter down the length of the orchard while she carried Sir Wasp on my best blue saucer, the one from my mother's wedding set. He had a dock leaf over him. She went very slowly, one step and a pause, one step and a pause. When I tried to walk normally she turned round and looked at me until I slowed down. I'll admit I hummed. Something from the funeral, probably, because it's the only slow tune I know all the words to. She didn't object.

At the pallets she lifted him off the saucer with both hands and laid him on top of the heap, wasp hole upwards, and put the dock leaf back over him. Then she stood there with her head bowed. So did I. A woman of sixty-two, in a fleece from Mountain Warehouse, paying her respects to an apple.

It was the most serious funeral I'd been to since Ron's. That's not a joke.

Afterwards she went in and wrote it up. I've got the ledger open at the page now, and the leaf above it is a Worcester leaf with a brown edge where it had started to turn.

Day 20, 23 September. Sir Wasp was berried with onners. He was hurt but he was still a nite.

My mother's saucer has never been used for anything since. It sits on the dresser with a crack across the glaze I don't remember being there before that day.

The Laws of Under-Leaf

I found the laws the same night, because once I'd started reading the ledger behind her back I didn't stop at the page I'd gone looking for. I'm not proud of that. I turned it over to put it back on the dresser and the back cover fell open, and there they were, on the inside of the board, written so hard the felt-tip had soaked into the cardboard and gone fuzzy at the edges.

They're still there. The ledger is open at them in front of me now, and I've copied them out exactly, spelling and all, because Ambriel says if I tidy them up they stop being laws.

THE LAWS OF UNDER-LEAF by order of the Queen of Russets

1. *The Queen is the Queen. Nobody can be Queen insted.*
2. *No one is thrown away for being bruised.*
3. *You do not have to talk in Under-Leaf. Nodding counts.*
4. *Wellys on for the River Weep.*
5. *Wasps are alowed but not in the castel.*
6. *Every day gets a leaf even if it is a ugly one.*
7. *Nobody cuts the trees. Not even for a good reeson.*
8. *If the Queen is sad you sit with her. You dont ask why.*
9. *Visiters bow at the Bramley.*
10. *Nan is alowed in.*

Ten of them. She'd numbered them in a column down the left and drawn a line under each, which is how Mrs Okafor taught them to set out sums. You can see where the laws stop being done all at once. The first six are the same bright purple, written in one go, I'd say, while she was sitting on her bed. Seven and eight are fainter, as if the pen was starting to go. Number ten is in pencil.

I read number two and thought of Sir Wasp on my mother's saucer, and felt a bit of a fool for not having guessed it was written down somewhere. Of course it was. A kingdom has to have rules. Ron would have said the same about the offside law.

Number three I read twice. Then I sat down at this table, in this chair, and read it a third time.

I'd been at her for a fortnight by then. Not unkindly, I hope, but steadily, the way you'd keep tapping a barometer. Did she want toast, did she like her teacher, had she seen the robin, was she warm enough, had she had a nice day, love. Every question with a little gap after it for her to fill. She never filled one. I'd been treating those gaps as something she owed me, and here was a law that said she didn't. Nodding counts. It does, too. She'd been nodding at me since she arrived.

Number eight I didn't take in properly at the time. I've learned since that I often don't take things in until about a week after they'd have been useful.

Number ten I'll be honest about. I cried. Not much, and not for long, because the bath was emptying upstairs and I could hear the plughole doing its gargle. But it was in pencil, which meant it could be rubbed out, and it hadn't been. I'm still not sure when she wrote it. The pencil has gone silvery now, the way pencil does, and it catches the light from the window if I tilt the book.

The next morning I went down the garden in my dressing gown before she was up. I walked to the old Bramley with my tea going cold in my hand, and I felt ridiculous, and I bowed anyway. Only a small one, from the neck. Then I looked round to make sure Mrs Pugh next door wasn't at her bedroom window.

She was. She waved.

'How's the Queen today?'

It was the Monday after, the twenty-fifth, and I was waiting at the school gate up the hill with the other mums and a couple of grandads, and I'd got my question ready the way I always had. Had a nice day, love. I could feel it sitting in my mouth like a boiled sweet. Out she came, last as usual, with her book bag held flat against her chest and her coat done up wrong by one button. Mrs Okafor was behind her in the doorway. She gave me a thumbs-up, which I took to mean nothing had gone badly. Then Ambriel reached me and looked up, and I heard myself say something else.

'How's the Queen today?'

I don't know where it came from. Law number three, I suppose, working on me overnight. Ambriel stopped on the pavement. A Year 6 boy nearly walked into the back of her and had to go round. She looked at me for a long time, long enough that I started to think I'd trespassed, that the Queen was private and I'd been told about her by reading a book I shouldn't have read.

Then she nodded.

One nod, quite firm. Then she took my hand, which she hadn't done once on the way home in three weeks, and we walked down past the Spar without saying anything else. I didn't push my luck. I've stood behind enough dinner-hall queues to know that when a child finally takes a potato you don't offer them the cabbage.

That was the first question in nearly three weeks she'd answered at all. I've thought about it a good deal since. For a fortnight I'd asked after her, and she'd given me nothing, and the minute I asked after somebody else she told me straight away. Jess says this is obvious. Jess says she could have told me that in July if I'd asked her instead of reading leaflets. She may be right.

After that I asked every day. I got quite good at it.

- 'Is the Queen tired?' Nod.
- 'Has she had her tea?' Head shake, then a point at the fridge.
- 'Is she still sad?' A long wait. A very small nod, more of a tilt.
- 'Would she like it if we didn't go to the Co-op in Craven Arms on Saturday?' Big nod. We didn't go.

I started keeping the answers in my head and checking them against the ledger at night, and that's how I found out the two things matched. On the day the Queen was 'tierd' Mrs Okafor told me they'd had a fire drill and Ambriel had stood at the back of the line on the field with her hands over her ears. On the Tuesday, when the Queen was 'a bit les sad', Jess had rung at teatime and Ambriel had held the phone to her ear for six minutes without speaking, listening to her mum tell her about a man in Selly Oak who'd fallen off a ladder into a wheelie bin and was fine. That evening the leaf in the ledger was a Cox leaf, a good one, still green.

Day 22, 25 September. The Queen had fish fingers. She ate the fish this time.

I'd made fish fingers that night. She'd eaten the fish. I hadn't said a word about it, in case I jinxed it.

By the end of the month I'd stopped thinking of the Queen as a game I was humouring. I'm not saying I thought there was a small woman in a crown living under my Bramley. I'm saying I asked after her the way I'd ask after a neighbour who'd been poorly, and I meant it, and I'd stand at the kitchen window at dusk looking down the orchard to see whether the light was on, so to speak.

Which is how I came to be at that window on the Wednesday, the twenty-seventh, just gone seven, with the tea towel over my shoulder. The light was going blue over the wall. Down by the compost pallets, where Sir Wasp had been laid to rest with honours four days before, the dock leaves were moving. There was no wind.

Ambriel was standing beside me. I hadn't heard her come down. She had her nose almost on the glass, and she'd gone very still, the way she went still at the school gate.

Something small and round came out from under the dock leaves and had a go at Sir Wasp.

CHAPTER 5

Mister Hob

Something Rustling by the Compost

Hedgehogs, it turns out, don't much care for apples. I know that now. What I saw from the kitchen window that night looked very like an assassination, but the volunteer from Craven Arms told me later that he'd have been after whatever was living inside Sir Wasp, which in late September would have been a fair crowd. At the time, all I knew was that a small brown lump the size of Ron's slipper had come out of the dock leaves and was worrying at the remains of a wounded knight like a man at a pork pie.

Ambriel's breath was making a little cloud on the glass. It came and went, came and went. Then it stopped coming.

'It's a hedgehog, love,' I said. 'He won't hurt anyone.'

She looked at me as if I'd said something very stupid, and I suppose I had, because hurting anyone wasn't the point. Sir Wasp had been buried with honours. You don't let just anybody turn up and eat him.

I'd have left it there, I'll be honest. I'd have finished the tea towels and put the news on. But she was already at the back door with her wellies on the wrong feet, so I followed her down the garden in my slippers, which was a mistake, as the grass by the shed holds water like a sponge in a bucket. The light had nearly gone. The pallets smelt of what compost smells of, sweetish and rotten at once, and of the wet cut grass Ron used to say was the secret, though he never said what it was the secret of.

The hedgehog didn't run. That should have told me something, and it didn't.

He curled up halfway, the way they do when they can't be bothered to do it properly, and we stood over him. Even in that light I could see he was small. Not a baby. Just small, with a dent along his side where there shouldn't have been one, and spines that looked dusty. Ambriel crouched down and put her hands flat on her knees. She didn't reach for him. She just looked, the long, careful look she gave the windfalls before she gave them a rank.

Then she turned her head up to me and whispered, 'He's too thin.'

It was the most she'd said in two days, and it was about a hedgehog.

I'd watched a programme once, years before, with Ron asleep beside me, about hedgehogs needing to be a certain weight before winter or they don't wake up in the spring. I couldn't remember the weight. I could remember the presenter's jumper. That's the sort of thing that stays.

'Right,' I said. 'Wait there.'

I went back up to the house and got Ron's gardening gloves off the hook by the door, the leather ones he wore for the brambles, still bent into the shape of his fingers. I got the washing-up bowl out of the sink and tipped the suds into the drainer, and I rinsed it, and then I stood in the kitchen holding a wet plastic bowl and wondered what on earth I thought I was doing. I was sixty-two. I'd once had to fetch the caretaker to move a spider from the serving hatch at Castle Primary.

When I got back down the garden Ambriel hadn't moved an inch. The hedgehog had uncurled a bit and was looking at her. I'm not saying he was. I'm saying that's how it was.

He weighed nothing in the gloves. That frightened me more than anything. You expect a thing with that many prickles to have some heft to it, and he had about as much as a bag of sugar that somebody had been at. I put him in the bowl and he sat there in an inch of leftover water and sneezed.

Ambriel walked beside me all the way up to the house, one hand on the rim of the bowl, as if he were a crown.

Later, when he was settled and the scales were back in the cupboard, she wrote:

Day 24, 27 September. A stranger came to the Court. He is hungery. The Queen says let him in.

Four Hundred and Ten Grams

I should explain about the scales, because Jess has asked me twice why on earth I put a wild animal on the thing I weigh flour with. The honest answer is that they were the only scales in the house. Ron's bathroom ones went to the charity shop on the High Street after the funeral, and I wasn't going to stand a hedgehog on those anyway.

So I put the empty washing-up bowl on the kitchen scales first and pressed the little button to make it say nought, which took three goes because the button sticks. Then I put the bowl back on with him in it. Ambriel stood on the step stool to see. The numbers jumped about while he shuffled round, and settled.

l0.

I wrote it on the back of an envelope from the water board, because that's what was nearest. Ambriel took the pen off me and wrote it again underneath, bigger, and drew a box round it. She was right to. My handwriting was all over the place.

I didn't know if 410 grams was good or bad. I knew it was less than a pound, and I knew that bag of sugar I'd been thinking of was a kilo, so he was something under half a bag of sugar. Beyond that I was guessing. I looked up 'hedgehog rescue Shropshire' on Ron's laptop, which took its usual four minutes to wake up, and found a number for a woman near Craven Arms who ran a rescue out of her garage. It was gone eight. I rang anyway.

She was called Maureen, and she answered on the second ring as if people rang her about hedgehogs at eight at night all the time, which I expect they do.

'What's he weigh?' she said, before I'd finished saying who I was.

'Four hundred and ten grams.'

There was a little breath down the line. 'Right. That's light for the end of September. Is he out in the daytime?'

'No, it was dusk.'

'Good. Any flies on him? Any eggs, little white ones, like grains of rice?'

I hadn't looked. I put the phone down on the worktop and looked, with my reading glasses on, and Ambriel held the torch. No flies. A tick behind one ear the size of a split pea. Maureen said to leave the tick alone and she'd talk me through it another time if it was still there in a week.

Then she gave me the rules. I copied them onto the water board envelope:

- No milk. It gives them the runs, and that can kill them. (I'd have given him milk. I'd have given him a saucer of Gold Top and felt very pleased with myself.)
- No bread.
- Meaty cat food, or cat biscuits, the meat sort, not fish.
- A shallow dish of water, every night.
- Weigh him once a week, same time, same scales.

'And what's he got to get to?' I said.

'Six hundred,' Maureen said. 'Six hundred grams and he'll see the spring. Under that and I wouldn't put money on him. He's got two months, maybe a bit more if it stays mild.'

I said thank you and she said, 'Ring me if he gets worse. Ring me if he gets better, come to that. I like to know.'

Ambriel had heard all of it. I hadn't meant her to, but my phone's loud and I'm slightly deaf in my left ear, so I'd had it on speaker without thinking. She took the envelope off the worktop and studied the list. She went over the 6 in 600 with the pen until it nearly came through the paper.

The next morning, before school, we went to the Spar. It was ten to eight and Kath was still putting the papers out. A box of cat biscuits, chicken flavour, was £1.89. I don't own a cat and Kath knows it, and she raised an eyebrow at me over the *Shropshire Star*.

'Hedgehog,' I said.

'Course it is,' she said.

Ambriel carried the box home against her chest. When we got in she went straight up to her room, and when she came down for her coat I

saw she'd written a new number on the inside back cover of the Ledger, in purple, with a box round it and a crown on top.

600.

Lord Chancellor of Under-Leaf

He came back the next night, and the one after. By Friday he was turning up at the dish before I'd got the back door shut, which Maureen said on the phone was a good sign and also a bad habit, and I wasn't to tame him. I said I'd do my best. It wasn't me she needed to tell.

On the Saturday morning there was a card propped against the kettle. It was the back of a Weetabix box cut into a square, and on it, in purple:

MISTER HOB LORD CHANSELLOR OF UNDER-LEAF SWERING IN 6 OCLOCK. NAN TO READ

Underneath was the oath. It ran to four lines, and I'll copy it out exactly, because I've read it aloud more times than the Lord's Prayer since:

> *I will keep the Court safe at night. I will eat my biscuits. I will not go on the road. I will get to 600.*

I asked her where the name had come from, and she shrugged, which is what she did when the answer was obvious and I was being slow. Later I found it in one of Ron's old paperbacks of folk tales on the landing. A hob is a household spirit that does the jobs while you're asleep. Ron had underlined it, goodness knows why. I don't know if she read it there or if it just arrived in her head. I've stopped needing to know that sort of thing.

At ten to six she went through my cutlery drawer and took out a teaspoon. Not any teaspoon, either. It was the silver-plated one with *Llandudno* on the handle and a little enamel crest, which Ron's mother brought back from a coach trip in 1968 and which nobody had stirred a cup with in my lifetime. She held it up to me with her eyebrows raised. Asking permission. I said yes. What else was I going to say?

She'd laid things out at the foot of the Bramley. The dish of chicken cat biscuits sat on my mother's saucer, the same one Sir Wasp had gone

to the Crematorium on, so it was getting quite a career. Six windfalls stood in a curve either side of it as the Court. A Russet sat on an upturned flowerpot, which I understood to be the Queen, attending in person.

Then we waited. It was cold, properly cold for the first time that autumn, and I'd brought a cardigan out for her that she wouldn't put on. At about twenty past six there was a rustle in the dock leaves, and he came out the way he always did, nose first, as if he were checking the room before committing himself.

He went straight to the biscuits. Not a glance at the Court.

Ambriel nodded at me. I unfolded the Weetabix card and read the oath out in my best voice, the one I used to save for announcing that there were no more chips. My voice did something odd on the last line. I covered it with a cough.

She knelt down then, very slowly, and held the Llandudno teaspoon out over him. She didn't touch him. I'd told her about the prickles, and Maureen had told her about the ticks. The spoon hovered over his left side, then his right, about an inch above the spines, and he went on crunching chicken biscuits as though people knighted him every evening. When she'd finished she laid the teaspoon on the grass beside the dish, handle towards him, like a sword at a funeral.

Over the wall I heard Mrs Pugh's back door close. Very quietly.

Ambriel stayed kneeling until he'd emptied the dish and gone off again into the docks. I stood there with the card in one hand and the cardigan over my arm and my knees aching, and I thought: I have just sworn in a hedgehog. Ron would have laughed until he had to sit down.

That night, in the Ledger, under a small ragged leaf from the Bramley:

Day 27, 30 September. Mister Hob is Lord Chanseller now. He did not say no.

The teaspoon stayed out there all night. I went to fetch it in the morning and found it on the grass with dew on the crest, exactly where she'd put it, and I left it where it was.

Through the Kitchen Window

It was the following Wednesday, the fourth of October, and I was doing the washing-up. I mention that because it matters where I was standing. My sink is under the back window, and the window looks straight down the garden to the orchard wall and the Bramley beyond it, and in all the years I've lived here I have done more looking out of that window than I have done washing up, if I'm honest. Ron used to say I could spot a magpie on the far wall through a sinkful of suds. He wasn't wrong.

I'd opened the top pane a crack because of the steam. Fish pie. She'd eaten the mash off the top and left the fish in a neat pile at the side of the plate, which I'd decided to count as progress.

The light was going. It goes quickly at that time of year; one minute you can see the colour of the apples and the next they're just shapes. Ambriel had gone out with the dish at half past six, the way she did every night now, with the box of chicken biscuits under her arm and the Llandudno teaspoon in her coat pocket. She'd taken to carrying it. In case of ceremonies, I suppose.

I saw her kneel by the Bramley. I saw him come out of the docks, a dark lump in the grey. I went back to a roasting tin that wasn't going to clean itself.

Then I heard it.

I thought at first it was the Pughs' radio. That's the truth. It was a girl's voice, low and quite matter-of-fact, carrying across the grass in the cold the way sound does at dusk, and my brain went looking for every explanation except the right one. I turned the tap off. I stood there with my hands in the water.

'You have to eat all of it, because of winter.'

There was a pause. Crunching, probably, though I couldn't hear that far.

'The Queen says you're doing very well. She's not cross about the road. Nobody's cross.'

I hadn't heard her voice since July. Not her proper voice. On the phone in August she'd asked about the trees, but that was a whisper down a bad line, and since she'd come to me there'd been nods and thumbs and shrugs and one or two words breathed so quietly I wasn't

sure I hadn't imagined them. This was different. It was an ordinary voice. A bit hoarse, as if it had been in a cupboard. She sounded about seven, which she was, and I realised I'd forgotten what seven sounded like.

'My mum works at night as well,' she said. 'Like you. She drives an ambulance. Well, she's in it. Somebody else drives.'

I didn't move. I'll be honest, I didn't dare. I had a mad idea that if I so much as put a plate on the rack the whole thing would stop, like a robin when you open the door. So I stood there with the water going cold round my wrists and the fish pie dish going cold beside me, and I listened to my granddaughter explain the laws of Under-Leaf to a hedgehog. Law three, she told him, was the important one. Nodding counts. He could nod if he wanted. He didn't have to talk.

That nearly finished me off.

She came in at ten to seven with the empty dish and her cheeks red from the cold. I'd dried my hands by then and was pretending to wipe the cooker. She put the dish on the side and looked at me, and I looked at the cooker. I didn't say a word about it. I've wondered since whether that was right. Jess thinks I should have rung her that minute, and she may be right about that too. But I had the strongest feeling that the voice wasn't mine to make a fuss of. It belonged to the orchard for now.

'How's the Queen tonight?' I said.

She nodded. Then she went up to bed without being asked, which had never once happened.

The Ledger was on the table in the morning, left open, which I took to mean I was allowed. A yellow leaf from one of the Twins, and under it:

Day 31, 4 October. Mister Hob lisened. The Queen will rite to the town.

When I asked her at breakfast what that meant, she pointed out of the front window, past the Spar, at the church tower. Then she held out her hand for the drawing pins.

CHAPTER 6

Letters in the Church Porch

Four Drawing Pins

The porch of St John the Baptist's has a noticeboard that nobody reads. I say that with some authority, having pinned the WI raffle results on it for six years running and never once had anyone mention them. In October 2017 it held the flower rota, a card about bell-ringing practice on Thursdays, a faded poster for a quiz night that had happened in March, and a photograph of a ginger cat called Biscuit who had been missing since the summer. Nobody had taken Biscuit down. I think we'd all decided it would be bad luck.

Ambriel wrote the proclamation at my kitchen table on the Thursday morning, before school, with her coat already on. She wouldn't use the Ledger for it. She wanted proper paper, so I gave her a sheet of my Basildon Bond, the blue one I keep for sympathy cards, and she held the felt-tip in her fist the way she did when something mattered. It took her twenty minutes. Her porridge went cold. I didn't say a word about the porridge, which tells you how far I'd come in a month.

I have it here. It's in the Quality Street tin with the others, and it's softer than it was, because it hung in that porch through a good deal of damp. Here it is as she wrote it, crown and all:

> *BY ORDER OF THE QUEEN OF RUSSETS*
> *To the peple of the town.*
> *There is a kingdom under the leaves in the orchard by the church. It is called Under-Leaf. The Queen is sad. Nobody nos why.*

If you are a loyal subjeckt of Under-Leaf you must report. Rite a letter and leve it HERE.
Mister Hob is Lord Chancellor. He is 440 grams.
Signed, the Queen (she does not do her name)

Underneath was the crown, five points, same as on the Ledger cover, coloured in so hard the paper had gone furry.

I'll be honest, I had two worries, and neither of them did me much credit. The first was that people would laugh. The second was that nobody would answer at all, and I'd have to watch her walk past that porch every morning for a fortnight, looking. Of the two, the second frightened me more. Children can stand being laughed at. Being ignored is worse.

'Are you sure about "HERE" in capitals, love?' I said. 'It's a bit shouty.'

She looked at me as though I'd suggested the Queen wear a tracksuit. The capitals stayed.

We went down Church Street together at twenty past eight, her with the paper held flat against her chest so it wouldn't crease, me with the drawing pins rattling in an old Tic Tac box. Four of them. Three brass and one red, because the red was all I had left from Ron's calendar days. Kath was putting the newspaper board out in front of the Spar and said good morning, and Ambriel lifted her hand, which was more than Kath had had from her before. Kath noticed. She told me so, later.

The porch smelled the way it always does, of stone and old hymn books and the lilies somebody had left too long. Ambriel stood in front of the noticeboard and considered it. She took her time over this. Then she moved Biscuit the cat about four inches to the left, very gently, so that he wasn't covered up, and put the proclamation in the middle of the board, exactly level with her own eyes. Which meant level with nobody else's. I nearly said so. I didn't.

She pressed each pin in with her thumb. Red one at the top left, where it would be seen first.

Then she stood back, nodded once, the way Ron used to nod at a fence post he'd just driven in, and walked out of the porch and up the hill to school without looking back. I stayed a minute longer. I read the thing twice over. I'm not a churchgoer, not really, but I did think some-

thing in that porch that was halfway to a prayer, and it went something like: somebody, please.

The Ledger that night had a beech leaf, copper-coloured, and one line:

Day 32, 5 October. The Queen has rote to the town. Now we wate.

The Bell-Keeper Answers

Friday nothing. Saturday nothing. She checked on the way to school and on the way back, and on Saturday she checked twice, once before her Shreddies and once in the afternoon when there was no reason on earth to be walking past the church except that one. Each time she came home and weighed Mister Hob's biscuits out to the gram, which I took to mean the porch was empty. I'll be honest, by Saturday night I was composing a letter myself. I had the Basildon Bond out. I put it away again, because she'd have known my handwriting, and because it would have been a lie of the sort she'd never forgive.

On Sunday the 8th she was down the hill before I'd got my shoes on.

I found her in the porch with an envelope in both hands. It was cream, thick, the kind that comes in a box from Smiths at about four pounds for ten, and it had been pinned directly beneath the proclamation with a brass pin of its own. It was addressed in fountain pen: *To Her Majesty the Queen of Russets, Under-Leaf (by the church).* She hadn't opened it. She held it out to me and waited.

I knew the hand straight off. I'd spent six years squinting at it on the flower rota. Sue Anstey writes her capitals like little scaffolding poles. I said nothing, opened it with my thumbnail, and read it to her there on the bench, quietly, because the ringers had started up above us and the whole porch was humming.

> *Your Majesty,*
> *The Bell-Keeper of the Tower of St John reports for duty. I have kept the bells of this town for eleven years and have never once been asked to report to a queen, which I consider an oversight on the part of previous queens.*
> *The bells ring on Sundays at a quarter past ten. If Your Majesty hears a wrong note, it is Derek. He is doing his best.*

I am sorry the Queen is sad. Bells are good at sad. They ring for that too.
My respects to the Lord Chancellor. 440 grams is a fine start.
Your loyal subject, The Bell-Keeper

At the bottom there was a little drawing of a bell with a face on it. It was not a good drawing. That made it better.

Ambriel took the letter back off me and read it again herself, lips moving. Then she pointed up at the ceiling, where the ropes were, and then at the church door, and then at me.

'You want to go in?' I said.

She nodded so hard her hood fell down.

So that is how I came to attend the half-ten Eucharist at St John the Baptist's for the first time since Ron's funeral, in my gardening fleece, at the back, next to a seven-year-old sitting bolt upright with a letter on her knee as if it were a ticket. Mrs Pugh was two rows in front. She turned round once. I gave her the face I used to give Year Six when they pushed in at the chips.

I held up until the notices. Then Sue, at the front in her white robe, looked over her glasses straight down the aisle and said, 'The bells this morning were rung in honour of a visiting head of state. I'm told Derek apologises.'

There was a polite little laugh from the congregation, the sort people give when they don't know what the joke is. I did know. I bit the inside of my cheek until I tasted it. Then we stood for 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', and I got as far as 'each little flower that opens' before I had to pretend to a coughing fit and blow my nose on the Order of Service. Ambriel didn't sing. She didn't need to. She stood there with the envelope pressed to her chest, staring at Sue as though Sue might at any moment ring something.

At the door afterwards Sue shook my hand and said, 'Morning, Elizabeth,' perfectly ordinary, the same as she'd say to anybody. Then she looked down at Ambriel and gave the smallest bow from the neck. Ambriel bowed back.

I walked home with sore cheeks and a pain under my ribs that I'd quite forgotten the feel of. It was from laughing. She had a red oak leaf

for the Ledger that night, picked off the churchyard path.

Day 35, 8 October. The Bell-Keeper has reported. Derek is doing his best.

The Royal Messenger

Glyn Pritchard came up the path on the Tuesday, the 10th, at twenty to five, wearing his old Royal Mail satchel across his chest like he'd never handed it back. Which, it turned out, he hadn't. He'd done thirty-eight years on the rounds out of the sorting office on the Craven Arms road, and when they retired him in 2011 he said the bag had been his longer than any of the managers had, and nobody had the nerve to argue. He used to bring Ron the racing pages. After the funeral he stopped coming. I'd never held it against him. Some people can't do kitchens with a gap in them.

He knocked on the front door, which nobody does, and stood back to the regulation distance. I know that because he told me.

'Delivery for the palace,' he said. 'Is the household in?'

The household was under the kitchen table, as it happened, building something out of clothes pegs. I said I'd see. When I turned round she was already behind me, holding the back of my cardigan in her fist.

Glyn didn't look at her straight away. I noticed that. He looked at his satchel instead, undid the buckle very slowly, took out an envelope, and checked the address on it as though there might have been some mistake. Then he held it out at the height of a seven-year-old's hands. Not one inch higher.

It had a stamp on it. A real one, second class, the Queen's head in that sort of browny-plum colour. Fifty-six pence, they were then. It hadn't been through any post office in the land. He'd simply stuck it on.

'You've put a stamp on it, Glyn,' I said.

'Course I have. A letter without a stamp is a note.' He sniffed. 'Second class, mind. Her Majesty's not in a rush, I hope. First class is for gas bills.'

Ambriel took it. She went off to the table with it and I let him in, and he stood in my kitchen in his anorak for the first time in two and a half years and said the place smelt of Ron's pipe still, which it doesn't, and we both pretended to look at the clock.

The letter was in biro, in capitals, the way men of his age were taught to fill in forms.

TO THE QUEEN OF RUSSETS
MADAM,
I UNDERSTAND FROM THE PORCH THAT YOU ARE SHORT OF A MESSENGER. I HAVE CARRIED THE POST OF THIS TOWN SINCE 1973 AND I KNOW EVERY LETTERBOX ON IT, INCLUDING THE ONES THAT BITE. I AM RETIRED BUT NOT FINISHED.
I HEREBY APPOINT MYSELF ROYAL MESSENGER UNLESS YOU OBJECT. IF YOU OBJECT PUT A STONE ON THE PORCH BENCH.
COLLECTIONS FROM THE PORCH MONDAY WEDNESDAY FRIDAY. DELIVERIES TO THE PALACE SAME DAYS, AFTER FOUR. NO SUNDAYS. I HAVE ALWAYS HELD WITH NO SUNDAYS.
G. PRITCHARD (ROYAL MESSENGER)

Underneath he'd drawn a tiny sack with *R.M.* on it. Better than Sue's bell, if I'm honest. Not by much.

Ambriel read it twice. Then she went to the dresser, took a sheet from my Basildon Bond without asking, which I let pass, and wrote something in purple felt-tip with her arm curled round it so neither of us could see. She folded it into three, very carefully, and came and stood in front of Glyn. She held it up. Then she held up her other hand, flat, palm out, and waited.

He looked at me. I hadn't a clue.

Then he got it. He went into his anorak pocket, found a book of stamps (second class, naturally), tore one off and put it in her palm. She licked it, which the new ones don't need, and stuck it on upside down.

'Upside down's a love letter,' Glyn said. 'In my day.'

She went scarlet to the ears and turned it the right way up with her fingernail, which tore the corner. He took it anyway, buckled it into the satchel, and touched two fingers to his forehead. At the door he stopped.

'There's another one in that porch, Elizabeth,' he said. 'Pinned under hers. Grey envelope. Not mine and not the vicar's.'

'Whose, then?'

He did the buckle up again, slowly. 'I didn't read it,' he said. 'I'm a postman.'

The Grey Fox

I went down for it myself the next morning, Wednesday the 11th, before school, with Ambriel trotting beside me in her coat and her book bag banging on her knees. It was where Glyn said. Pinned under the Queen's proclamation with its own drawing pin, a brass one, older than mine. The envelope was grey, the thick sort you get in a proper stationer's and not the Spar, and on the front, in black ink that had been blotted, it said *Her Majesty*. Nothing else.

Ambriel opened it on the bench. She let me read over her shoulder, which was a privilege and I knew it.

> *Madam,*
> *I am told you keep a court of the fallen and do not throw away the bruised. I approve. I have been bruised in my time and nobody held a funeral.*
> *I live at the edge of things, as foxes do. I see a good deal of this town at night and most of it is asleep. You may send me questions. I will answer the ones I can.*
> *Tell your Lord Chancellor the slugs are fattest under the water butt by the vestry.*
> *Your servant, at a distance, The Grey Fox*

She read it four times. On the fourth she put her finger under *bruised* and kept it there.

I'll be honest: I wasn't charmed, or not only. I was rattled. Whoever it was knew about the Windfall Court, and the funerals, and that we had a hedgehog, and none of that had been in the porch. Glyn knew some of it. Sue knew some. But this person knew it all, and wrote like a magistrate. Somebody had been watching my orchard. I wanted a name.

So I went looking. I'm not proud of the next fortnight.

- **Mrs Pugh next door**, obviously, because she'd seen me bow to a tree. I asked to borrow her recipe for damson cheese so I'd have a sample

of her writing. It came back in round blue biro with hearts over the i's. Not her.

- **Kath at the Spar**, who knew about the cat biscuits. I watched her write a price on a box of Weetabix. Capitals, like Glyn's. Not her either.
- **Mr Morris the butcher**, because he'd once said a fox had his chickens and he admired its cheek. He signs his invoices with an X. I am not making that up.
- **Mrs Okafor**, briefly, until I remembered she'd only been in town since Easter and didn't know a vestry from a vest.

I compared the blotted black ink against the parish magazine, the WI minutes book, the sympathy cards from Ron's funeral, which I still had in a shoebox and which I sat up reading until gone one in the morning, and which was the worst idea I'd had all year. Nothing matched. I even asked Sue outright, after evensong. She looked at me with great kindness and said, 'Elizabeth, I genuinely don't know, and if I did I think I'd want to keep it.'

Glyn wouldn't be drawn at all. Monday, Wednesday, Friday, there was a grey envelope in his satchel among the others, and he'd hand it over and say, 'Couldn't tell you,' before I'd opened my mouth.

Ambriel never once tried to find out. That should have told me something. She answered every letter, kept them in the Quality Street tin I'd emptied of the green triangles (I ate those, every one), and fed Mister Hob slugs from under the water butt by the vestry. He put on thirty grams that week.

The Fox's third letter came on Friday the 13th, which I thought was laying it on a bit. It was short.

> *Madam,*
> *I understand there is to be an Apple Day in the square tomorrow. Foxes are fond of apples. I may come. You will not know me.*
> *G.F.*

Ambriel read it at the kitchen table, then turned and looked at me. Straight at me. It was the look of a child who knows exactly what her nan's been up to with the sympathy cards.

That night's leaf was a russet one, off the Twins.

Day 40, 13 October. The Fox is coming to market. Nan is not to look for him.

CHAPTER 7

Apple Day

Trestle tables and a borrowed gazebo

A gazebo is not a thing you can put up with a seven-year-old and a retired postman at a quarter to eight in the morning, whatever it says on the bag. This one belonged to the bowls club. Glyn had borrowed it on the strength of having delivered their post for thirty-one years, and it came with a sheet of instructions in four languages, none of which, he said, was the one the gazebo spoke.

'Leg A into socket C,' he said, reading. 'There is no socket C. There's never been a socket C.'

Ambriel found it. She didn't say anything, just pointed, and Glyn said, 'Well, I'm sacked,' and she nearly smiled. I saw it go across her face and away again, like a bird past a window.

We'd been up since six. I'll be honest, I'd hardly slept, partly from nerves and partly because the Fox's letter was still on the dresser and I kept getting up to look at the handwriting again, which I'd been told not to do. The apples were in two washing baskets by the back door. Russets off the Twins, picked the evening before, a hundred and sixty of them, counted twice because Ambriel didn't trust my first go. She'd gone through them one at a time on the kitchen table and put eleven aside. Not for sale. Wounded knights. They stayed in the fruit bowl under a tea towel, and I wasn't to touch them.

Glyn had got two trestle tables from the church hall, the heavy wooden sort with the hinges that take your fingers off. He wheeled them down Church Street on a sack truck, one at a time, saying good

morning to everybody, which at that hour was mostly the milkman and a man walking a spaniel. The square was filling up already. There was the cider press from Clun way, the WI with their chutneys (I'd been let off my usual pound of damson on account of being otherwise engaged, and Brenda made sure I knew it), a woman selling apple-wood bowls at prices I won't repeat, and the juicing stall, which was already sticky.

Our pitch was by the Town Hall steps. Not the best. The wind came round the corner and lifted the tablecloth, which was Ron's mother's and had a burn mark on it from 1974 that I put an apple over.

This is what the Kingdom of Under-Leaf had to sell:

- **Russet apples**, 20p each, in a Pyrex bowl with a cardboard crown stuck on the side
- **Maps of Under-Leaf**, a pound each, drawn by hand on the back of my old Christmas card list paper, twelve of them, no two the same
- **Nothing else**, though Glyn tried to argue for a tombola and was overruled

The maps had taken her four evenings. I'd offered to take the first one up to the library and photocopy it at 10p a sheet. She'd shaken her head so hard her slide fell out. Each one was done fresh, River Weep and all, and on every single one the Bramley Tower had a little flag on top that she coloured in last, purple, with her tongue between her teeth.

Glyn set out a float in a biscuit tin: two pounds in twenties and a fiver in coppers he'd saved in a jar. He'd brought his old postman's satchel too, slung across him.

'For official correspondence,' he said, when I raised an eyebrow. 'Never know.'

The last thing to go up was the sign. Ambriel had made it the night before on the back of a Weetabix box and wouldn't let me see it until we were in the square. She stood on the bottom step of the Town Hall and held it up for me to read, very solemn, and then propped it against the Pyrex bowl where nobody could miss it.

THE QUEEN IS NOT AVALABLE FOR FOTOGRAFS.

Twenty pence a Russet

The first customer was a woman in a waxed jacket who wanted to know if they were organic. Glyn said they were Church Street, which was as good as, and she bought two. Forty pence. Ambriel took the coins off her with both hands, the way you'd take a hymn book from the vicar, and put them in the biscuit tin in their own corner, away from the float.

'Treasury,' Glyn said to me, out of the side of his mouth. 'Separate accounts. She's sharper than the Post Office.'

That set the pattern for the morning. Glyn did the talking, because Glyn can talk the way other people breathe, and Ambriel did the money. She wouldn't let either of us touch it. If somebody handed over a pound for one apple she'd stand there working out the change with her lips moving and no sound coming, and then count four twenties into their palm one at a time, and nobody, not one person, hurried her. I watched a man in a Wolves shirt wait the best part of a minute for his eighty pence. He didn't even look at his watch. I've seen grown men nearly come to blows in a dinner queue over a missing spoon.

The sign did more trade than the apples. People stopped to read it, laughed, and got their phones out to photograph it, and then caught Ambriel's eye and put the phones away again, a bit sheepish, as if they'd been told off. She hadn't done anything. She'd just looked at them. A lady from Montgomery asked whether the Queen might make an exception for the sign itself, and Glyn said he'd put in a formal request, and wrote something in a little notebook from his satchel. I never found out what.

The Russets were slow, I'll be honest. Everybody in that square had a tree of their own at home dropping apples on the lawn, and twenty pence for one more was a hard sell in October in Shropshire. A chap from the cider stall came over at about half ten, turned one over in his hand, sniffed it and said, 'Egremont?'

Ambriel nodded.

'Good keepers,' he said, and bought three, and told her she was undercharging. She didn't put the price up. I asked her later why not and she pointed at the sign on the Pyrex bowl, where 20p was written in purple, and that was the end of it. The law was the law.

The maps went better. People who wouldn't spend twenty pence on an apple spent a pound on a drawing of an orchard they'd never set foot in, and I've thought about that a good deal since. One went to a couple on holiday from Leicester. One went to Kath from the Spar, who'd sold us the notebook in the first place and said she felt involved. Each time one sold, Ambriel rolled it up and tied it with a bit of green garden twine from Ron's shed, and gave a little nod over it, like a blessing.

We counted it that night at the kitchen table, after the tea things were cleared, with the float counted out first and put back in Glyn's jar so there could be no muddle. Ambriel made two piles. I'll set it down the way she did:

- **Russets:** 28 sold, £5.60
- **Maps:** 9 sold, £9.00
- **Total in the Treasury:** £14.60

She counted it three times. The third time I said, 'It's not going to change, love,' and she gave me the Shrewsbury Town look and counted it a fourth. Then she wrote it in the Ledger under the leaf for the day, which was a Russet leaf off the Twins, gone the colour of a digestive at the edges.

Day 41, 14 October. The Treasury has £14.60. The Queen is not poor any more.

She put the money in a jam jar with a sticky label that said TREASURY and stood it on the windowsill next to the clock. It's still there. The coins aren't, but the jar is, with the label, and a bit of green twine round the neck.

The Bell-Keeper's map

I've got ahead of myself, though, because one of those nine maps went to the Church of England, and I ought to tell it properly.

It was just after eleven. The bells had rung the hour, which they don't always on a Saturday, and I remember thinking somebody must have gone up the tower specially. Five minutes later Sue Anstey came across the square from the direction of the church with her anorak zipped to the chin and her dog collar showing over the top of it like a

bit of icing. She had a brass handbell in one hand. I'd never seen it before and I haven't seen it since. I think it was off the font, or from the Sunday school cupboard. Sue says she can't remember, which I don't believe for a minute.

She stopped a good yard short of the table and rang it. Twice. Half the square turned round.

'The Bell-Keeper of Saint John's,' she said, 'presents her compliments to the Treasury of Under-Leaf.'

Ambriel went very still. She'd had three letters from the Bell-Keeper by then, kept flat under the Ledger, and she knew the handwriting as well as I did. But she'd only ever seen Sue in the pulpit, in white, saying the Eucharist. Here she was in a Regatta anorak with a handbell, in front of the cheese stall. I think it took her a moment to fit the two together. Then she nodded. One deep nod, the sort you'd give a bishop.

Glyn, who'd been waiting for this all morning, stood up and touched his cap.

'Royal Messenger,' he said. 'Reverend.'

'Messenger,' said Sue. 'I've come on a matter of property. It's been brought to my attention that the Queen's lands adjoin the churchyard.'

That was true, as it happens. My back wall and the churchyard wall share about twelve feet of stone, and Ron and the old vicar had a running argument for years about whose ivy it was.

'I'd like a map,' Sue said. 'For the parish records. So we know where the border is.'

She chose one with great care. She lifted the corner of each in turn, peered at it over her reading glasses, put it back. Ambriel watched her hands the whole time. In the end Sue picked one where the River Weep had come out a bit wider than usual and run off the edge of the paper, and she tapped it.

'This one floods,' she said. 'I'll want that noted.'

She put a pound coin on the table. Ambriel picked it up, turned it over to check the Queen was on it, which made Sue laugh out loud, and put it in the Treasury corner of the tin. Then she did something I hadn't seen her do all day. She took the purple felt-tip out of her coat pocket, pulled the lid off with her teeth, and wrote across the bottom of the map in capitals before she rolled it:

BORDER AGREED. NO FIGHTING.

She tied it with Ron's twine, gave her little nod over it, and held it out with both hands.

Sue took it the same way, with both hands, and bowed. I mean properly bowed, from the waist, in the middle of the square, in front of the Women's Institute jam table and a man selling wooden spoons. Mrs Pugh was at that jam table. I saw her see it.

'The bells are at the Queen's disposal,' Sue said. 'Within reason. Not before nine on a Sunday.'

Then she rang the handbell once more and walked off towards the Six Bells, and I'll be honest, I had to look at the Russets for a while.

That map is framed now, in the vestry at St John's, on the wall by the cupboard where they keep the candles. Sue sent me a photograph of it in 2019. Underneath, on a typed card, it says *Boundary agreement, Church Street, October 2017*, as if it were the deeds to something.

Ambriel was still looking after her when Glyn leaned over.

'She's not the last,' he said. 'You'll see.'

The boy and the bruised apple

He came at about half past two, when the square had gone quiet and the man with the wooden spoons was packing up. A little lad, four or five, in a red wellington and a blue one, which I noticed because I used to see a lot of that in the dinner hall and it always meant a mother who'd given up arguing at the door. His mum was at the cheese stall with a pushchair. I never found out her name. Not from Bishop's Castle, I'm fairly sure, or someone would have told me by now.

He didn't want a Russet. He wanted the box under the table.

I should explain. Ambriel had brought the wounded knights with her, eleven of them, the windfalls too knocked about to sell. She'd laid them in a Walkers crisp box lined with a tea towel, and she wouldn't leave them at home. I'd said, 'Nobody's going to buy those, love,' and she'd given me a look that settled it. So there they sat by Glyn's boots all day, brown and squashy, one of them with a hole you could have put your thumb in.

The boy crouched down and pointed at that one.

'What happens to that?' he said. 'It's all bad.'

I opened my mouth. Forty years of dinner halls and I can't keep it shut when a child asks a question. I was going to say something about the compost, kind and quick, and I'd got as far as breathing in when Glyn put his hand on my arm. Just rested it there. He didn't look at me.

Ambriel got down off her chair. She knelt on the cobbles, which were wet, and lifted the apple out of the box in both hands, the way she'd handed Sue the map.

'He's a wounded knight,' she said.

It wasn't a whisper. It was quiet, and a bit hoarse, like a voice that's been in a cupboard, but it was out loud and it was to a stranger, in the town square, with people walking past.

The boy said, 'Why?'

'Because he fell off fighting. You don't throw them away for being bruised. That's the law.' She turned the apple round so he could see the hole. 'He goes to the Crematorium with honours. Then he goes into the ground. Then the tree eats him and makes new ones.'

The boy thought about that. 'Does it hurt?'

'No,' said Ambriel. 'He's brave.'

Then she gave it to him. Didn't charge him. I watched twenty pence go out of the Treasury and I've never been gladder of anything. His mum came over with the pushchair, saw her son holding a rotten apple like it was the crown jewels, and said, 'Oh, Jacob, put that down,' and he said, 'I can't, it's a knight,' and she looked at me, and I said, 'He can't, it's a knight.' She laughed. Off they went towards the Spar, the apple held out in front of him in both hands.

Glyn took his hand off my arm. He still didn't look at me. He got his handkerchief out and blew his nose, longer than he needed to.

I didn't say anything to Ambriel. That was the hardest bit of the whole autumn, and I include the storm. I wanted to pick her up and swing her round the square and ring Jess from the phone box. Instead I said, 'Shall we pack up, love?' and she nodded, and we did.

There's a thing I've never told her until now, because she'll read this. On the way home up Church Street, pulling the trolley with the empty crisp box rattling in it, the wind had got up. You could hear it in the churchyard yews. When we came through the gate into the orchard, the

old Bramley was going at the top, a slow creak, like a door somebody keeps meaning to oil.

Ambriel stopped and listened to it.

'The Tower's talking,' she said.

CHAPTER 8

The Storm Called Brian

Saturday Night

Somebody at the Met Office decided to call it Brian, which tells you most of what you need to know about the Met Office. You can't be frightened of a Brian. I'd been to school with a Brian. He sold double glazing in Ludlow and wore a cardigan to his own wedding.

It came in on the Saturday, a week to the day after Apple Day. The radio had been going on about it since Thursday, amber warnings for Wales and the west, gusts of seventy miles an hour on the coast, and I'll be honest, I took about as much notice as I take of the WI committee when they say the raffle needs rethinking. I brought the bins in. I put the garden chairs in Ron's shed and wedged the door with a brick, because of the sticking. That was the extent of my preparations for Storm Brian.

Ambriel went to bed at half seven with Mister Hob's weights written up for the week (470 grams, and she'd drawn a small crown over the seven). The wind was loud by then but it was an ordinary sort of loud, the kind that rattles the letterbox and makes the fire draw too hard. I sat up with a cup of tea and the crossword. Couldn't get seven down. I remember that because I still had the paper on the arm of the chair on Sunday, and the clue was something about a ship's mast, and I never did finish it.

By ten it had changed. A wind on Church Street usually comes over the top of the town from the west and then rushes off down towards the Six Bells, but this one seemed to have found its way into the orchard

and couldn't get out. It went round and round. The yews in the churchyard were roaring, a long sound like the sea at Barmouth, and every so often something would bang. Somebody's wheelie bin, I think. Possibly Mrs Pugh's gate, which has never shut properly since 1998.

Under all that was the Bramley.

I'd heard it creaking the week before, coming home from the square. This was different. It was a low groan that went on longer than a breath, then stopped, then started again, and I found I'd put the pen down and was sitting very still, the way you do when a child coughs in the night and you're waiting to hear if they'll cough again. Ron used to say that tree had been talking to itself for forty years. He said it fondly. He wouldn't have said it fondly that night.

I went to the back door at about twenty past eleven. I don't know what I thought I'd do. Hold it up, perhaps. I had the big torch, the yellow one Ron bought from the garage at Craven Arms for £6.99 and complained about ever after, and the beam went out into the dark and showed me nothing except rain going sideways and the Twins thrashing about like a pair of drunks at a wedding. I couldn't see the Bramley at all. It's right at the far end, by the wall.

I shut the door. I didn't sleep. Nobody sleeps through a storm with a child in the house, whatever they tell you.

It went at ten to two. I know the time because the clock radio was by my bed and I looked at it straight after, as if it might want writing down. It wasn't one sound. First a crack like a rifle, which made me sit bolt upright, and then a long tearing noise, wet and slow, like somebody ripping a bedsheet down the middle, and then a thump that I felt in the floorboards more than heard.

Then just the wind again.

I got up and put my dressing gown on inside out. When I opened my bedroom door, Ambriel was already on the landing in her nightie, with both hands flat against the little window that looks over the orchard, and her face close to the glass, looking at nothing, at the dark.

Sunday Morning

I got her back to bed somehow. I said there was nothing to see till it was light, which was true, and that the trees had been through worse, which I had no way of knowing. She let me tuck her in. She didn't close her eyes. When I looked in at four she was lying exactly as I'd left her, with the duvet pulled up to her nose, listening.

By seven the wind had dropped to something you could stand up in. The rain hadn't. I put my wellies on over my pyjama bottoms and Ron's old wax jacket over the lot, and before I'd got the back door properly open Ambriel was past me in her school mac and bare feet. I shouted about the feet. She didn't stop. I went back for her red wellies and followed her down the path with them in my hand like a waiter.

The Bramley had split from the top almost to the ground. I've tried since to describe it to people and I always make it sound tidier than it was. The trunk had a fork about five feet up, where Ron used to hang the bird feeder, and the whole of the left-hand side had torn away down that line and come over the wall into the churchyard. The right side was still standing. Just. It leaned out over the orchard at an angle that made my stomach turn, and the wood where the two halves had been joined was pale and wet and stringy, the colour of the inside of a parsnip. It smelled of apples. That surprised me. The whole end of the garden smelled like a cider press.

There were branches everywhere. One had come down across the River Weep and dammed it, so the ditch had backed up and flooded the bit by the compost, exactly where Ambriel had written *It floods here*. Another had gone through the cold frame. The bird feeder was in the nettles, still full.

And the Court was gone. That's the part I hadn't thought of. For a month Ambriel had kept the windfalls in their ranks along the foot of the Bramley wall, the knights at the front, the ladies-in-waiting on a slate, the wounded knights on my mother's saucer waiting for their turn at the Crematorium. Now they were all over the grass. Some had rolled into the ditch and were bobbing about with the leaves. Some had been flattened by the branches. The tree had dropped every apple it still had, dozens of them, hundreds possibly, so you couldn't tell any

more which were the Court and which were just apples. The saucer was in two pieces.

Ambriel walked into the middle of it and stood there.

I said, 'Love, your feet.'

She stood with her toes in the wet grass and her hair plastered flat, among the branches, in front of the tower that wasn't a tower now, and she didn't cry. I kept waiting for it. I had the wellies in one hand and a tissue ready up my sleeve, which is a dinner lady's reflex, and I kept waiting, and it didn't come. She just looked. She looked at the half that was standing and then at the half that was down, slowly, the way you'd read a notice twice to make sure.

Mrs Pugh was at her bedroom window with a mug. I saw her lift it, a sort of half wave, and then think better of it.

I put the wellies down next to Ambriel and she stepped into them without looking. Then she bent and picked up one apple from the grass. A Bramley, big as a fist, with a split down one side where it had hit something on the way. She turned it over and held it up to me so I could see the damage.

She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. I knew a wounded knight when I saw one.

I went to the shed for the wheelbarrow, and found the brick had held the door all night, and the garden chairs were dry as a bone.

'Did Grandad Plant It?'

We spent the day carrying apples. Glyn came round at eleven with a bow saw and a flask, without being asked, and took the worst of the branches off the cold frame while Ambriel and I sorted windfalls into two buckets, Court and not-Court. I couldn't tell the difference. She could, or said she could, which comes to the same thing. By teatime the buckets were full and the saucer was in a freezer bag on the dresser, waiting for the Araldite.

She had her bath at seven. I washed her hair with the jug because the shower attachment had been playing up since August, and there were bits of bark in it, little pale flakes like dandruff. She sat with her knees up and let me get on with it. I was talking about nothing, the

price of a bow saw at the hardware place on the High Street (£14.99, Glyn said, daylight robbery), and I'd got as far as rinsing when she said it.

'Did Grandad plant it?'

A whisper, but a clear one. Her first question about Ron since the wake, and I was holding a plastic jug over her head.

I'll be honest, I didn't answer straight away. I poured the water. I folded a towel round her hair the way my mother used to fold mine, like a turban, and I sat down on the lid of the toilet because my knees had gone.

'He looked after it,' I said. 'He loved that tree.'

She waited. She was very good at waiting by then, better than me.

So I told her. I told her Grandad had planted the Bramley the summer before her mum was born, that he'd dug the hole himself in the hot weather and watered it every night with the washing-up water because there was a hosepipe ban. I told her he'd hung the bird feeder in the fork the year she was born, so the blue tits could have their dinner where he could see them from the kitchen. I told her he'd said a Bramley would see the lot of us out.

Then I was crying, and she was looking at me from under the towel.

Some of that was true. The bird feeder was true. The washing-up water was true, but it was the Discovery he watered, in 1976, the summer of the drought, which was the year before Jess. The Bramley was there when we came. It was old when we came. The woman who sold us the cottage said her father had put it in after the war, and Ron spent the best part of forty years propping it and pruning it and swearing at canker, which is a kind of planting, I suppose, if you squint. I didn't know I'd muddled it until Jess read this chapter and said, 'Mum, that's the Discovery.' She was right. I'd stood in that bathroom and given my granddaughter the wrong tree.

Ambriel didn't know that. She took it all in, very serious, with the bath going cold round her.

Then she said, 'Would he be cross?'

I asked her who with. I genuinely didn't follow. I thought she meant the storm, as though you could be cross with weather, which Ron could, as it happens, he once wrote to the Met Office.

'With me.'

'Why on earth would he be cross with you, love?'

She looked down at the water. 'I put the Queen in it.'

I understood it then, or a bit of it. She'd built a castle in her grandad's tree and the castle had come down, and somewhere in her seven-year-old reckoning the two things had got tied together. I don't know how long she'd been carrying that. Since ten to two, at least. Possibly since breakfast the day before, when the radio first said *Brian*.

'He'd have been made up,' I said. 'He'd have wanted a map.'

That was true. I'm sure of that one.

She stood up in the bath, all at once, water everywhere, and held her arms out for the big towel. When I'd wrapped her up she didn't go to her room. She went downstairs, dripping, to the dresser, and came back with the Ledger and the purple felt-tip, and the Bramley leaf she'd picked off the grass that morning and kept, flat, inside her school mac.

Day 48

She sat at the bathroom stool with the towel still round her like a cape and opened the Ledger on her knees. I didn't help. I'd learnt that much in seven weeks. The leaf went down on the left-hand page without its two nights under Delia, which was against the rules, her rules, and it was still a bit damp and had a curl to one edge. She held it flat with the heel of her hand for a long time. Long enough that I wondered if she'd forgotten I was there.

Then she uncapped the felt-tip.

Most days she wrote a full line, sometimes two, and on Apple Day she'd gone right down the page and round the corner with the Treasury sums. I expected the same. I expected the Tower, or the Court, or something about Glyn and his bow saw. What she wrote, in letters bigger than her usual ones and pressed so hard the pen squeaked, was this:

Day 48, 21 October. The Queen cryed.

That was it. She put the cap back on with a click and closed the book.

I've counted since, because I'm the sort of person who counts. Ninety-two entries. The longest runs to fifty-three words, not counting

the crossings-out. This one is three. It's the shortest in the book by some distance, and it's the one people ask to see when they come to the house, Sue and Glyn and a woman from the WI who'd heard about it third-hand and turned up with a lemon drizzle as an entry fee. I don't always show it. I'll be honest, there are days I don't want to look at it myself.

The Ledger is open at that page on my kitchen table as I write this. The leaf has gone brown at the edges and the curl never did flatten, so the page above it sits proud, like a door left on the latch. There's a water mark across the bottom corner where her wet hair dripped. And the felt-tip went through, the way it always did, so on the back of the page, if you turn it over, the words are there again in reverse, faint and purple, on top of Day 49.

She hadn't cried. I'd watched her all day in the orchard and she hadn't, not once, not when the Tower was lying across the cold frame and not when Glyn sawed through the branch with the bird feeder still wired to it. I'd done enough for both of us. And then she'd gone and given it to the Queen, who could manage it, I suppose, being royal.

I didn't say anything about the spelling. I've never corrected one word in that book and I wasn't going to start on Day 48.

She went to bed without a story. I left the landing light on and the door open the width of a hand, and I sat on the top stair for a bit, listening to the wind, which by then was nothing much, just the ordinary October sort that rattles the letterbox. The orchard was black from the landing window. I couldn't see the gap where the Bramley had been. I knew exactly where it was.

At ten I rang our Jess, the way we did every night. She was on a break somewhere off the Pershore Road, I could hear a radio going in the back of the ambulance. I told her about the tree. I didn't tell her about the bath, or the wrong tree I'd given away, because I didn't know yet that it was the wrong tree. I told her about the three words.

There was a long gap on the line. I thought she'd been called out.

'I'm coming,' she said. 'Fifth of November. I've swapped a shift.'

'There's no need, love.'

'There's every need, Mum,' she said, and then the radio went, and she was gone.

CHAPTER 9

Bonfire Night and the Telephone

Sparklers on the Green

Kath at the Spar had sparklers on the counter by the scratch cards, ten in a box for £1.29, which I thought was a lot of money for something that lasts about forty seconds and then goes in a bucket of sand. I bought two boxes. I'll be honest, I bought them for Jess as much as for Ambriel. I wanted the weekend to have something in it that went right.

She turned the engine off this time. I noticed that from the front window, before she'd even got out of the Corsa: the little shudder as it died, then Jess sitting there with both hands on the wheel for a good half a minute, the way you sit outside a dentist's. It was gone three on Sunday the fifth. She'd come straight off a night. She had a carrier bag from a Tesco Express on the passenger seat with a bottle of wine in it and a selection box, which was early, but that's our Jess.

Ambriel was in the hall with her coat already on. She'd had it on since dinner.

When the door opened she didn't run. I'd half expected her to, I'd sort of got the picture ready in my head, the child flying down the step and the mother kneeling on the wet path, like an advert for building societies. What she did was walk to Jess and put her forehead against her mum's stomach and stand there. Jess put a hand on her hair. Neither of them said anything.

'Hello, my Bee,' Jess said in the end.

Nothing back. Not a whisper.

I'd like to say what I felt then was sorry for Jess. Some of it was. But underneath, and I'm not proud of this, there was a small hard warm feeling, like a hot-water bottle you've forgotten is in the bed. She talks to me. She talks to a hedgehog. She'd talked to a little boy called Jacob over a bruised apple in the square. She didn't talk to her mother. I had no business being pleased about any of that, and I was, and I put the kettle on so I wouldn't have to look at it.

We walked down to the green after tea, the three of us, about half past five, when it was properly dark and the air smelled of everybody else's bonfires. There were a dozen families there with the same idea, dads with lighters cupped against the wind, a little girl in a pink bobble hat screaming because she'd held hers by the wrong end. Somebody further off was letting rockets go from a milk bottle. Each one went up with a sound like a zip.

Ambriel held Jess's hand the whole way. Her left hand in Jess's right, and her right hand in her pocket, round something. I knew it was a Russet from the Twins. She'd been carrying one about since the storm.

Jess lit the first sparkler off mine and held it out.

'Write your name, Bee. Go on. Like we did at the Lickeys.'

Ambriel took it and held it very still, straight out in front of her, and watched it fizz down to the wire without moving it at all. She didn't write anything. When it went out she gave it back to Jess, handle first, the way you'd hand over a pair of scissors.

'Shall I do one?' Jess said. 'I'll do yours. A for Ambriel.'

She did a big looping A in the dark and then a wobbly M, and lost it on the B because the sparkler ran out. Ambriel watched the lines hang in the air and fade. Then she looked at me. Not at her mum. At me, as if I was the one who'd know what to do about it.

I looked at the rockets.

That night in the Ledger, under a leaf from the Worcester that had gone the colour of a blood orange, she wrote:

Day 63, 5 November. Mum came in the car. The Queen held her hand. The Queen did not tork.

Jess read it over her shoulder. She didn't say anything either. She went and stood in the back doorway for a long time, looking out at the

dark where the Tower used to be, with the bottle of wine still in its carrier bag on the side, unopened.

A Voice from the North Sea

The phone went at eight minutes past eight. I know that because the oven clock in my kitchen has been eight minutes fast since about 2009 and I'd just looked at it and done the sum, the way you do, and thought: he said eight. He was early, or he was on time by my clock, which in all the years I knew Dean was the only time he managed it.

It was Jess's mobile, not my house phone. She'd told him to ring her, which I was a bit put out about, and then I wasn't, because she put it face up on the kitchen table between the teapot and the salt and pressed the speaker so we'd all be in it together. That was decent of her. She didn't have to.

'Hiya,' Dean said. 'Can you hear me? Jess? Is she there?'

There was a noise behind him like a tumble dryer full of trainers. Jess told me afterwards it was a generator, or the sea, or both. The line had a lag on it, a little hitch of half a second, so everything he said arrived slightly after he'd said it, like a dubbed film.

'She's here,' Jess said. 'She's sat right next to me. Say hello to your dad, Bee.'

Ambriel was on the bench by the window with her knees up and the Russet still in her hand. She looked at the phone. She looked at it the way she'd looked at the sparkler, very still, as though it might go off.

'Hiya, princess,' Dean said. 'Your mum says you've got a hedgehog.'

Nothing.

I'll say this for Dean, because I haven't always said much for him. He kept going. He told her it was blowing a gale out there and the canteen had done a roast with Yorkshires the size of dinner plates. He told her he'd seen a seal from the walkway on Thursday, a grey one, lying on a buoy like it owned it. He asked if the hedgehog had a name. He asked what he ate. Every question went out across the North Sea and came back with nothing on it. You could hear him listening. Then he'd start again.

Jess had her hand flat on the table near the phone, as though she could hold the call down. Her jaw was doing the thing Ron's used to do when Shrewsbury were two down at home.

'He's called Mister Hob,' I said, in the end, because I couldn't stand it. 'He was four hundred and seventy grams on Wednesday. He's Lord Chancellor.'

'Lord what?'

'Chancellor,' Jess said. 'It's a long story, Dean.'

'Right.' A pause, and the lag on top of it. 'Is she all right, though? Is she nodding or what?'

And she was. That's the bit I want to get down properly. While her dad was talking about the seal, Ambriel had nodded. When he asked if the hedgehog was eating, she nodded again, twice, hard. Law three of Under-Leaf. **Nodding counts.** It was pinned up in Ron's shed in purple felt-tip and I'd built my whole autumn round it. But a nod doesn't travel down a phone line to a rig a hundred-odd miles east of Aberdeen. It just stays in the kitchen.

'She's nodding, Dean,' I said. 'She's nodding at you.'

There was a long gap then, longer than the lag.

'Is she,' he said. 'Okay. Okay, good. Tell her that's brilliant.'

Jess turned away and filled the kettle that didn't need filling. He said he'd have to go, there was a queue for the phone, and he loved her, and he'd ring next Sunday at the same time. Ambriel nodded at that as well.

I'm ashamed to put this next part down, but I said I would. When the call ended, a small part of me was glad again. Glad she'd kept her words for the orchard and for me. Then I saw Jess's back at the sink, her shoulders up round her ears, and the gladness went sour.

Ambriel reached over and touched the phone screen with one finger. It lit up: *Call ended. 6:41.* Then it went dark, and she left her finger there on the black glass for a while, as if it might still be warm.

Over the Sink

I washed and Jess dried. That had been the arrangement since she was tall enough to reach the draining board, and neither of us thought to change it. Ambriel had gone up for her bath with Mister Hob's weight

chart under her arm, and I could hear the pipes knocking overhead and the tap running too long, the way she always let it.

There was the roasting tin from the sausages. There were three plates, three mugs and the pan I'd done the beans in, which had caught on the bottom. I put it to soak. I was making a lot of noise with it.

'You could have said something sooner,' Jess said. 'On the phone. You didn't need to sit there letting him go on.'

'I did say something.'

'After six minutes, Mum.'

'Well, it's not my job to talk to Dean.'

She put a mug on the shelf, the wrong shelf, and I moved it, and she watched me move it. I'll be honest, that was the first thing I did wrong that evening, and it was only a mug.

'You were pleased,' she said. 'When she wouldn't talk to him. And to me. Don't say you weren't. I saw your face at the bonfire.'

I said I didn't know what she meant. I knew exactly what she meant. I scrubbed at the bean pan, which hadn't soaked long enough, and said that Ambriel was settled here, that was all, and children who were settled didn't always want things stirred up.

'Stirred up,' Jess said. 'I'm her mother.'

'I know you are, love.'

'You don't, though. You think I sent her off. You've thought it since August.' She folded the tea towel in half and then in half again. 'Same as with Dad.'

And there it was, sitting in the kitchen with us. We hadn't said Ron's name to each other in that tone for nearly three years.

When Ron was in the Royal Shrewsbury in February 2015, Jess came twice. Once on the Sunday, with Ambriel in the back of the car, and once on the Wednesday, on her own, straight from a shift, still in her uniform. That's two visits in eleven days. I'd counted them at the time, God forgive me. I'd counted them the way I used to count the dinner tickets at the end of a week, to see who owed.

'You weren't there,' I said. I said it to the bean pan. 'At the end. You weren't there.'

'Because you told me not to come.'

The water had gone cold. I hadn't noticed.

She was right, and I've known she was right since about four o'clock that Saturday morning, when the nurse with the Welsh accent drew the curtain round us. On the Friday night I'd rung Jess and told her he was comfortable. I'd said the doctor reckoned a week, maybe two, and that she should stop where she was, keep Ambriel in her routine, come at the weekend. None of that was a lie, exactly. The doctor had said a week. He'd also looked at Ron's hands and said not to go far.

I didn't pass that bit on. I wanted Ron to myself. Forty-one years married, and I wanted the last of him with nobody else in the room, not even our Jess. Then he went, and I was the only one there, and I'd been angry at her ever since for leaving me on my own when I'd made sure she would.

That was what the bean pan was about. It was never Dean.

I didn't say any of it that night. I said, 'The doctor said a week,' which was the coward's version, and Jess put the tea towel down on the side next to the unopened wine.

'You always do this,' she said. 'You pick the bit that's true.'

Upstairs the tap went off. The pipes knocked twice and stopped, and the whole house went quiet enough to hear the oven clock, eight minutes fast, ticking on.

In the Margin

Jess read this chapter at my kitchen table three weeks ago, on a Sunday, with a mug of tea going cold beside her and Ambriel's old felt-tips still in the jar on the windowsill. I'd printed it at the library because my printer only does pink now. Twelve pages, 10p a sheet. She read it twice. She didn't say anything for the first read, and on the second she took the pencil I keep for the crossword and wrote in the margin beside the bit about the doctor and Ron's hands.

I've got the page in front of me as I write this. Her handwriting is smaller than mine and leans backwards, the way it always has, the way the teachers at Lydbury could never cure.

> *You were glad for longer than one evening, Mum. You were glad till about Christmas. And you didn't only want Dad to yourself. You wanted to be the one who'd been there. That's not the same thing. J.*

I read it while she was in the toilet. Then I read it again. I'll be honest, my first thought was to rub it out, and the rubber on the end of that pencil is worn down to the metal, so I couldn't have done it neatly anyway. I've left it. She may be right. She usually is about me, which is the trouble with daughters.

When she came back I said, 'Christmas is a bit steep.'

'Christmas is generous,' Jess said. 'I nearly put Easter.'

Then she put the kettle on, the same kettle, and we didn't argue, which in our family is how you know something's been settled. She's forty-eight now. She's seen more than I ever will from the back of an ambulance on the Pershore Road. She told me once that she sits with people at the end more often than their families do, and that it's nearly always the same thing they're worried about. Who's coming. Whether someone's been told. I didn't ask her what she says to them.

What the Ledger Said

That night in 2017, after the pipes stopped, Ambriel came down in her pyjamas with her hair still wet and the Ledger under her arm. She'd heard nothing, or she'd heard everything. With her you couldn't tell. Jess and I were standing a good yard apart at the sink, both pretending to dry things that were already dry.

Ambriel climbed onto the chair, opened the Ledger at a new page and pressed a leaf in that she'd picked up at the bonfire. Oak, I think, scorched brown at one edge. She'd been carrying it round in her dressing-gown pocket all evening. She wrote underneath while we watched, her tongue between her teeth:

Day 63, 5 November. Two Queens in the kichen. Nobody talking. Mister Hob 470.

Jess looked at me. I looked at the felt-tip. Neither of us asked which two Queens. I suspect we both thought we knew, and I suspect we were both wrong, because Ambriel turned the page over without waiting for it to dry and wrote again, on the back, which she'd never done before and never did again.

It went straight through to the next page, of course. It always did.

She pushed the Ledger across the table to her mum, not to me. Jess had to tilt it to the light from the cooker hood to read it, and I read it upside down, which is a skill you pick up in thirty years of school kitchens.

The Queen is going to have a feest. Evryone is invited. Even the ones who are cross.

Jess put her hand flat on the page, over the words, the way Ambriel had put her finger on the phone.

'When?' she said.

Ambriel held up two fingers, then five. Then she went to the dresser, took four drawing pins out of the saucer where I keep the spares, and lined them up on the table in front of me, one by one.

CHAPTER 10

The Leaf-Fall Feast

Catering for Twelve

Fifty-eight. Glyn counted them in at the orchard gate with a clicker he'd kept from his Royal Mail days, and he did it twice because he didn't believe it the first time either. I'd catered for twelve.

I'll be honest, twelve was generous. The invitation went up in the porch on Sunday 12 November, four drawing pins, one in each corner, on my blue Basildon Bond, and it said the Queen of Russets would hold a Leaf-Fall Feast in the orchard on Saturday the 25th at two o'clock, 'all loyal subjects welcome and the cross ones too'. I did the sums the way I'd done them for thirty years of school dinners. Sue Anstey, Glyn, Mrs Okafor if she could get away, Kath from the Spar, Mrs Pugh because she'd watch over the wall anyway and might as well have a cup. Jess, if she could swap another shift, which she couldn't. Two or three from the church. Possibly the Grey Fox, who by then had written four letters and still hadn't put a foot wrong.

Day 70, 12 November. The invitashun is up. Mister Hob says sit down Nan you are fusing.

I was fussing. I bought two packets of Mr Kipling Bakewells, a Melton Mowbray pork pie for £3.20, a sliced loaf, a jar of Branston and a tub of Celebrations that I told myself was for Christmas. I made one Victoria sponge. Ambriel inspected it and moved it six inches to the left, which I took as approval.

The butcher arrived at twenty to two. I won't name him, because he'd hate it, but he had his white coat on under his anorak and three

trays of sausage rolls balanced on his forearm like a waiter at a wedding. Sixty of them. Still warm.

'Saw the letter,' he said. 'Thought the Queen might be short.'

'There's only meant to be a dozen of us,' I said.

He looked over my shoulder at the lane. 'Is there,' he said.

There wasn't. They'd started coming up Church Street in twos and threes, children from Mrs Okafor's class in wellies, their mums and dads behind them with Tupperware, a man I'd never seen before carrying a crate of Bramleys from somewhere out Clun way. Sue came through the lych gate in her cassock with the handbell. Mrs Pugh came through her own gate, which wouldn't shut behind her, as it hasn't since 1998.

The tea was the real problem. My kettle does six cups if you overfill it, and I'd already been told off about that once this year. Glyn rang round, and by half past one Brenda from the WI had delivered the big urn from the Methodist hall, the forty-cup one with the dent in the side and a tap that drips no matter what. We ran it off an extension lead out of the kitchen window. It took twenty-five minutes to boil. I stood beside it with a tea towel over my shoulder and a stack of borrowed cups, and something in me just clicked back into place.

The queue went from the urn, past the Twins and the Discovery, all the way down to what was left of the River Weep. Children first, then the old, then everyone else. Nobody pushing. I hadn't run a queue since I retired, but it turns out it's like riding a bike, or like Ron's knee, which always told him when rain was coming whether he wanted to know or not.

'Milk and sugar, love?' I said, about forty times.

Ambriel walked up and down the line with the Treasury tin, the old Quality Street one before it held the letters, and she wasn't collecting money. She was handing out pressed leaves, one each, from a pile she'd been saving since Day 50. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to.

A girl from her class, a red-haired one with her coat buttoned wrong, took her leaf and held it up to the light.

'Is this one real gold?' she said.

Ambriel nodded, very seriously, and moved on to the next person.

The Royal Messenger

At five past two Glyn put his clicker in his pocket and took out his satchel. It was the real one, red canvas gone pink at the corners, with ROYAL MAIL still showing in white if you knew where to look. He'd carried it round Bishop's Castle for thirty-one years and kept it, he once told me, because nobody had asked for it back.

He rang Sue's handbell. She let him, which tells you something about Sue.

'Letter for Her Majesty,' he said, loud enough for the queue to hear. 'Came by special delivery.'

The urn chose that moment to drip on my foot. I didn't move. Nobody did.

Ambriel came back down the line with the Treasury tin under her arm. Glyn went down on one knee in the wet grass, which at seventy-three cost him something, and held the envelope out flat on both palms. It was grey. The same grey as the others, thick paper with a soft edge, the kind you don't buy at the Spar. I knew because I'd looked. I'd been to the Spar, to the paper shop and to the stationer's in Ludlow, and I'd come home with nothing but a pad of lined A5 I didn't need.

'Where did it come from?' I said.

Glyn didn't look at me. 'Porch,' he said. 'Half past seven this morning. Under the Biscuit poster.'

Biscuit, I should say, had been found in October in a shed on Union Street, fat and unbothered. Nobody had taken the poster down.

Ambriel took the envelope and turned it over twice. Then she held it out to me. This was the arrangement by then: she chose, I read. The Grey Fox's letters were always written for reading aloud, as if whoever wrote them knew there'd be a grandmother doing it.

I wiped my hands on the tea towel. The queue had gone quiet right down to the River Weep. Even the butcher had stopped arranging sausage rolls.

> *To the Queen of Russets, by the hand of her Messenger,*
> *I am here today. I have been here every day, more or less, and you have not seen me, which is as it should be. A fox who is seen is only a dog with ideas.*

I have heard about the Tower. I am sorry. I knew it longer than you did and I thought it would see me out. It turns out trees are like people and do not ask permission.
A kingdom is not a tower, Your Majesty. It is whoever turns up. Look behind you.
I will not sign my name. You would not want me to.
Your loyal subject, The Grey Fox

I'll be honest, I read the last lines badly. My voice went at 'whoever turns up' and I had to start the sentence again, and Kath from the Spar passed me a napkin with a robin on it.

Ambriel didn't turn round straight away. She folded the letter along its creases, slowly, the way she pressed the leaves, and put it in the Treasury tin. Then she looked behind her.

Fifty-eight people looked back. Children in wellies. Mrs Okafor in a purple bobble hat. The man from out Clun way with his crate of Bramleys. Mrs Pugh by the wall with her arms folded, giving nothing away. And somewhere among them, according to the letter, the Fox.

I broke the law. Ambriel's law, I mean, the one from the Ledger that forbade Nan to look for him. I looked at every face over the age of fifty and tried to decide which of them had known the Bramley longer than a seven-year-old had. That was most of them. That was the trouble.

Ambriel tugged my sleeve. She pointed at the stump of the old Tower, sawn level by Glyn a fortnight before, with the bird feeder hook still screwed into the side of it.

Day 83, 25 November. The Fox is here. Nan is looking. Stop it Nan.

She wrote that later. At the time she just held my sleeve and pointed.

'Now?' I said.

She shook her head. Then she nodded. Then she pulled a folded sheet of Basildon Bond out of her coat pocket, held it against her chest, and walked towards the stump.

The Throne

The stump came up to just above her knee. Glyn had sawn it level with the bow saw and then gone over the top with sandpaper, which nobody had asked him to do, so that it was pale and smooth in the middle with

the rings showing, dark and close together near the bark where the tree had been old and slow. There was still a dent on one side where the bird feeder used to hang. I held out my hand to help her up.

She didn't take it. She put one wellie against the side of the stump, grabbed the hook, and climbed up on her own. She wobbled once. Glyn half rose off his knee and then thought better of it.

Then I held out my hand again, for the paper this time. Habit. She chose, I read, that was the arrangement, and I'd done it for eight weeks without once wondering whether it would change. Ambriel looked at my hand. She pulled the Basildon Bond tighter against her coat and shook her head.

I put my hand in my apron pocket. It seemed the safest place for it.

The sheet is in the Quality Street tin now, the second-from-bottom item, soft as cloth along the folds, with a smear of something that I think is sausage roll. I've copied it here exactly. I haven't corrected a spelling in the Ledger and I wasn't going to start with this.

A PROCLAMASHUN from the Queen of Russets of Under-Leaf
The Tower fell down in the storm. The Queen was in it. She is alright.
The Queen has been sad since before September. Nobody nos why. She nos a bit now but she is not telling.
These are the things the Queen has desided.
1. Under-Leaf is not the Tower. It is the trees and the river and evryone who turns up.
2. No one is thrown away for being bruised. Not apples and not knights and not peeple.
3. Mister Hob is Lord Chancellor for ever even when he is asleep.
4. The Bell-Keeper and the Royal Messenger and the Fox and evryone here are Lords and Ladys of Under-Leaf now. You do not have to do anything.
5. The Queen has to go away in Desember. She has not desided about after yet. She will rite.
6. Grandad is alowed in. He always was.
Signed, the Queen of Russets

Those are the words. They don't tell you how it sounded.

The first line came out so small that the girl with her coat buttoned wrong, who was standing right at the front, leaned in. Somebody near the urn said, not unkindly, 'Can't hear her, Bev,' and somebody else said 'Shh.' Ambriel stopped. I thought that was it. I thought, I'll be honest, *well, she got up there, that's something*, and I started composing in my head what I'd tell Jess on the phone at ten.

Then she took a breath that lifted her shoulders right up to her ears and started again from the top.

'A proclamation from the Queen of Russets of Under-Leaf.'

It was the loudest I had heard her since July. It wasn't loud, mind. It was about as loud as a child asking for a second helping at the hatch when she's not sure there are seconds. But it carried, because nobody in that orchard was making a sound, not even the urn. She had Jess's vowels. I hadn't noticed that before. *Evryone* came out flat and Birmingham, the way our Jess says it, the way I used to tell her off for saying it.

She read the bit about the Tower without stopping. She slowed down at *nobody nos why*, and the Bell-Keeper, beside me, put her hand over her mouth. At number two the butcher said 'Hear, hear' under his breath and then looked embarrassed about it. At number four some of the children from Mrs Okafor's class started nudging each other and whispering *Lady*, *Lord*, *I'm a Lord*, and a small boy in a dinosaur hat bowed to his own dad.

She got to number six and she didn't slow down at all. She read it straight off, the same as the others, as though it were a rule about the river or the compost. I was the one who had to hold on to the wall.

Then she folded the paper along its creases, twice, and stood there on the stump with her hands at her sides, looking at the fifty-eight of them.

By the wall, Mrs Pugh unfolded her arms.

The Last Apple

Nobody clapped straight away. I've thought about that a lot since. Fifty-eight people stood in a muddy orchard in November and didn't know what to do with their hands, and for a good three or four seconds the

only sound was a wood pigeon on the church roof and the urn starting to tick as it cooled.

Then Glyn, still on one knee, said, 'Long live the Queen.' He said it quite plainly, the way he used to say 'Morning' with the post. And the Bell-Keeper said it after him, and the butcher, and then everybody, ragged, the children loudest and a beat behind like the back row of a hymn. Ambriel climbed down off the stump on her own, the same way she'd gone up, one hand on the hook. She came straight over and stood against my apron. She didn't say anything else that day. I didn't need her to.

People drifted after that. It took the best part of two hours. The sausage rolls went, and the Russets, and most of a Victoria sponge that I'm fairly sure was Kath's from the Spar, though she denied it. The girl with the wrong buttons asked if she could visit Mister Hob, and Ambriel took her to the box under the shed and lifted the flap a quarter of an inch, which was a bigger honour than either of them knew. I collected forty-one paper cups. I counted. I was looking at faces, too, every one, thinking *is it you, is it you*, which is exactly what I'd been told not to do. I didn't find the Fox. I'm sure he was there. Or she.

By half past four it was nearly dark and it was only us and Glyn, folding the bowls club trestle. He stopped by the Discovery and pointed up with his chin.

'You've missed one, Elizabeth.'

There was a single apple on it, high on the side nearest the wall. It had no business being there. A Discovery is an August apple, early September at the latest; Ron used to say if you hadn't eaten them by the time the children went back to school you'd left it too late. Every other one on that tree had been picked or blown off or knighted weeks ago. This one had gone wrinkled and dark red, like a hand that's been too long in the washing-up, and it was still hanging on through Storm Brian and the frosts and fifty-eight people tramping underneath it all afternoon.

Glyn could have reached it with the trestle. He's six foot two. He looked at it, and then at Ambriel, and then he went on folding the table.

'I'd leave that,' he said.

I hadn't told him Ron planted the Discovery. I hadn't told anyone, that autumn, apart from getting it muddled with the Bramley in the bath. Glyn just knew the way he knows which houses on Union Street have a dog.

So we left it. It hung there all the next week while the Queen of Russets did her deciding, and every morning when Ambriel went out with the cat biscuits she looked up to check it. I did too. I'll be honest, I didn't know which of us I'd have been more upset for if it had fallen.

I rang Jess at ten that night and told her about the stump and the fifty-eight and the voice. She was quiet for so long I thought the line had gone.

'In front of all of them?' she said.

'All of them.'

'She's never read out loud for me,' Jess said. 'Not once.' Then: 'Nine days, Mum.'

I knew. The Queen had said so in number five. She had to go away in December and she hadn't decided about after.

Day 84, 26 November. One apple left on the Erly One. It is Grandads. Nobody pick it. Nine days.

CHAPTER 11

Day Ninety-Two

The Queen's Last Laws

Kingdoms, it turns out, need minding when the Queen goes away, and the Queen of Russets hadn't given it a thought until the Monday after the Feast. I know because the Ledger tells me. Up to then the lines under the leaves had been weather and moods and Mister Hob's weight. From Day 85 they read more like the notes I used to leave for the relief cook the year I had my bunion done: who does what, where the keys are, don't let anyone near the big oven. Lists. Instructions. Names.

Day 85, 27 November. The Queen is making rules for when she is gone. Nan does Mister Hob. Glyn does the River. Nobody moves the Court.

She wrote it at the kitchen table after school, tongue poking out the side of her mouth, and then she slid the Ledger across to me and tapped my name with the felt-tip. I said, 'Yes, Your Majesty.' She tapped it again, harder, leaving a purple dot on the N. I said, 'Every night, love. Biscuits and fresh water, and I'll weigh him on Sundays.' Then she took the pen away. Contract signed.

They kept coming all that week, a new one most evenings, and by the Thursday they'd outgrown the Ledger and gone onto the back of the shed door, under the map, on a sheet of my Basildon Bond held up with four drawing pins. I copied them out at the time because I had a feeling I'd want them. I wasn't wrong. Here they are as she wrote them, spelling and all:

- The River Weep is to be cleerd of leaves by the Royal Messenger on Sundays.

- The Windfall Court stays where it is till Spring. Wounded knights can go to the Crematorium with honers but Nan has to say the words.
- Nobody sits on the Throne except visiting kings.
- The Bell-Keeper rings for the Queens birthday which is 21 March.
- The Grey Fox can come in the orchard when he likes. Nan is not to look out of the window.

That last one made me laugh out loud, standing in the shed in my slippers, and then it made me a bit cross, because she'd got me bang to rights. I had been looking out of the window. Most nights.

Glyn, I should say, had not been asked about the Sundays. I told him on the Friday, outside the Spar, and he put his bag of rolls down on the pavement and said, 'Every Sunday?'

'That's what it says.'

'In writing?'

'On the shed door.'

He picked his rolls up again. 'Well then,' he said. He has done it ever since, near enough, though the pipe was relaid in 2020 and the River Weep hasn't flooded in years. I've stopped telling him he needn't.

What she didn't put on the door was who would be Queen. I noticed that straight away, the way you notice a gap on the dresser where a plate used to be. Every other job in Under-Leaf had a name beside it, and the Queen's had nothing. On the Wednesday night, with her in the bath and me sitting on the lid of the toilet with the towel, I asked. I'd learned by then to ask the Queen and not the child, so I said, 'And who's in charge of the kingdom while Her Majesty's in Birmingham?'

She looked at the taps a long while. The water was going cold. I thought I'd overstepped, the way I had at the wake when she asked about the trees and I fobbed her off, and I was just reaching for the plug when she whispered.

'Nobody. It goes to sleep.'

I said, 'Like Mister Hob?'

She nodded, and slid down until the water was over her chin, and blew bubbles at me. That was the end of the conversation as far as she was concerned. I wrapped her in the towel and didn't push it.

It was in the Ledger the next morning, under a hawthorn leaf she must have picked from the churchyard hedge on the way back from school, because there's no hawthorn in my orchard.

Day 87, 29 November. Under-Leaf is going to sleep for the winter. It is not ending. Mister Hob is the gard. When the Queen comes back she will knock on the Tower three times and it will wake up. If the Tower is gone she will knock on the stump.

Six hundred and twenty grams

Maureen had warned me back in September that hedgehogs don't take instructions, and I'd said I'd spent thirty-one years serving dinners to Year Six, so I knew the type. She was right, though. Under-Leaf could go to sleep whenever the Queen said so. Mister Hob would go to sleep when he was good and ready, and he had to be heavy enough first or he wouldn't wake up again.

I rang her on the Friday night. She said the box was the main thing, and the weight. Six hundred was the line. Under that and she'd want him at Craven Arms for the winter, in a pen in her garage with the others. I didn't tell Ambriel that part. It would have meant two departures in one week.

We built the box on the Saturday, Day 90. It was a wine box Gareth at the Six Bells let me have for nothing, twelve bottles of Rioja according to the side, and I cut a doorway in one end with the bread knife, which I shouldn't have used and which has never been the same. Maureen had said a tunnel, so the cold couldn't blow straight in. Ambriel made one out of the cardboard dividers and a lot of Sellotape. We filled the box with shredded *Shropshire Star* and a bag of hay from the pet shop on the High Street, £3.50, and pushed it under the back of the shed where Ron used to keep the paraffin. Ambriel put a stone on the lid. Then a second stone. Then, after some thought, a Russet.

'For the Queen,' I said.

She shook her head.

'For if he's hungry.'

I didn't tell her hedgehogs don't eat apples. Some laws are above my pay grade.

On the Sunday it was bitter, a proper frost by four o'clock and the grass gone stiff and grey. I had the washing-up bowl ready on the kitchen scales and Ron's gloves on the side, and we waited at the back door with his yellow torch, the £6.99 one, which by then had needed new batteries twice. Ambriel had her coat on over her nightie. Half five came and went. I started making a speech in my head about how sometimes animals just stop visiting and it doesn't mean anything, which I'll be honest was mostly for me.

Then the dock leaves moved.

He was slower than he'd been in October. He'd got round, if that's a word for a hedgehog, and he waddled now rather than scuttled. I lifted him into the bowl, and he curled up tight. The scales took a moment to settle. I watched the needle go past five hundred and fifty, which was where he'd been the Sunday of the Feast, and past six hundred, and stop.

Six hundred and twenty grams. I said it out loud. Ambriel said nothing at all, just put her hand flat on the side of the bowl as if she could feel the weight through the plastic.

We carried him down the garden together, me holding the bowl and her holding the torch, which meant I saw mostly her feet and the frost. I set him down on the grass about a yard from the box. Maureen had said not to put him in. 'He's got to choose it,' she'd said, 'or he'll just walk off in the night to find somewhere he likes better, and you'll never know.' So we stood back and switched off the torch and waited in the dark, both of us freezing, while he uncurled and had a good sniff at the Russet and ignored it and went round the side of the box twice.

Then he went in. The hay rustled, and kept rustling for a long time, and then stopped.

Ambriel knocked on the shed wall three times, very quietly, with one knuckle.

I wrote the date on the lid in biro afterwards so I'd know when to start worrying. She wrote the Ledger.

Day 91, 3 December. Mister Hob is 620 grams. He is 20 more than Maureen said. He has gone to bed in the Rioja box and he is the gard now. Nobody is to wake him up not even Nan. He did not eat the apple.

Leaf ninety-two

There was a problem with the last leaf, and I'd not thought of it until we were back in the kitchen with the kettle on. Every leaf in that book had spent two nights under Delia before it went in. That was the rule, never written down but never broken either, not even the week Storm Brian had us picking twigs out of the guttering. Jess was coming for her at two the next afternoon. That gave us one night.

I suggested the iron. I'd seen it done on *Blue Peter* years ago, a leaf between two sheets of greaseproof paper, and I said so. Ambriel looked at the iron on its shelf and then at me, and I put the idea away again. Some things you don't rush.

We went back out with Ron's torch at nearly seven. She had her wellies on over bare legs now, nightie tucked into her coat, and I didn't argue because I wasn't going to win. There were next to no leaves left anywhere. The Twins were bare. The Cox had a few brown ones stuck in the fork that crumbled when she touched them. She went past the stump without stopping, which surprised me, and straight to the Discovery, Ron's tree, where the one wrinkled apple was still hanging from the Feast. Just beside it was a leaf. One leaf. Yellow going on brown, with a curl at the tip like a fingernail.

She couldn't reach it. I couldn't either, not without the stepladder, and the stepladder was in the shed with a hedgehog asleep against the back wall. So I did what I'd not done since she was about four. I put my arms round her middle and lifted. She weighed a good deal more than six hundred and twenty grams, and I'm sixty-two, and my back told me about it for a week. She took the leaf by its stalk and left the apple where it was.

'Not that,' she said, when I nodded at it. 'Glyn said.'

Indoors we laid it on a sheet of kitchen roll inside Delia, at the page for Christmas cake, and closed the book. Then Ambriel put both her hands flat on the cover and looked at me until I put mine on top of hers. We stood like that, leaning on a cookbook in my kitchen, for longer than I'd care to admit to the WI. After a while she took her hands out from under mine and went to fetch more weight. Ron's AA road atlas went on top. Then the 2009 *Yellow Pages*. Then the big Bible that was my mother's, which I thought was a bit much, but I wasn't asked.

It was still slightly soft in the morning. Not flat the way the others were, with a bit of give in it when you pressed. She didn't seem to mind. She opened the Ledger at the last clean page, and I held the book open with the heel of my hand because the spine was so fat by then it kept trying to close itself. Ninety-one leaves will do that. She laid the leaf down. I tore the Sellotape. We each did a corner, then the other two, and she smoothed the middle with her thumb while I kept the page still.

The purple felt-tip was on its last legs. She'd been shaking it since about Day 80. She wrote slowly, pressing hard, and the line went pale halfway through and came back when she licked the nib, which I've told her not to do since she was three.

Day 92, 4 December. This is the last leef. It is from Grandads tree. Nan helpd. Under-Leaf is asleep now and the Queen is going home. She is not sad today. She is a bit sad.

Then she put the cap back on the pen, and pushed the Ledger across the table to me, and kept her hand on it.

The Corsa at the gate

Jess was early, which she never is. I heard the Corsa before I saw it, that rattle it had from the exhaust that she kept saying she'd get seen to, and I looked at the clock on the cooker and it said twenty to two. I'd planned on another twenty minutes. I'd planned on a lot of things.

Ambriel was ready. She'd been ready since eleven, sitting on the bottom stair in her coat with the purple wheelie case beside her and the sandwich bag with her toothbrush in it zipped into the front pocket. I'd washed the toothbrush. I don't know why. It wasn't dirty.

I'd assumed, all morning, that the Ledger was going home with her. I'll be honest, I'd made my peace with that over the toast, the way you make your peace with a dentist's bill. It was hers. She'd made every page of it. I'd only bought the thing for spellings, and at £2.49 I'd hardly a claim. I'd even found a carrier bag from the Spar so the cover wouldn't get scuffed in the boot, and left it folded on the side.

Jess didn't keep the engine running this time. She got out and stood at the gate with her hands in her fleece pockets, looking up at where

the Bramley had been. There's a gap in the sky over our wall now. You notice it from the street.

'Bloody hell, Mum,' she said. 'You said half. That's not half.'

'It was half,' I said. 'Then Glyn came.'

Ambriel came down the path pulling the case, and it caught on every flagstone the way it had in September. She stopped in front of her mother. I was behind her on the step, so I didn't see her face, only Jess's, and I want to set down plainly that I don't know what was said. Ambriel leaned up and Jess bent down, and something passed between them at about the level of Jess's ear. It took no time at all. Jess straightened up and looked at me over Ambriel's head, and her mouth was doing something it hadn't done since she was a girl.

I've asked her since what it was. She says it's hers.

Then there was the business of the case into the boot, and my coat not being warm enough, and Mrs Pugh's gate swinging open in the wind as it has since 1998. Halfway through Ambriel said, in her ordinary voice, that she'd forgotten her hat, and went back in. I didn't think anything of it. She came out with the hat on, a bit crooked. She hugged me round the waist, hard, the way she'd hugged the Bramley stump at the Feast, and got in the back.

Jess wound the window down. 'Ten o'clock?' she said.

'Ten o'clock,' I said.

I stood at the gate until the Corsa had gone round the bottom of Church Street and past the Six Bells, and then a bit longer, because Mrs Pugh was at her window and I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of seeing me go in quick.

The kitchen smelled of toast still. The Spar bag was on the side where I'd left it, folded, empty.

The Ledger was on the table. Dead centre, squared up with the edge the way she squared up her fish fingers that first week. On top of it was a sheet of my blue Basildon Bond, folded in three like a proper letter, and on the outside, in pencil because the felt-tip had finally given out, it said FOR THE KEEPER.

I sat down before I opened it. I'm not ashamed of that.

> *By order of the Queen of Russets. The Ledger stays in Under-Leaf because that is where it lives. Nan is the Keeper. She is not to put it in a drawer. She is alowed to read it now. The Queen will come back for it when the new tower is grown.*

There was a crown drawn at the bottom, five points, the same as on the cover. I read it four times. Then I put the kettle on and didn't make any tea.

It isn't in a drawer. It's here, on this table, with the tin of letters beside it and a mug ring on the back cover that I'm afraid is mine. I've read it, as I was told I could.

She came back for it in October 2025. She brought a spade.

CHAPTER 12

What Grew Afterwards

Speaking and Listening

'Hang on, I've got to find my glasses,' Jess said, 'because I'm not reading this to you wrong and getting told off for it.'

It was a Thursday in July 2018, ten o'clock, which is when I ring. I'd been ringing at ten for so long by then that if I'd missed one she'd have sent the police round. I could hear her moving about the kitchen in Kings Heath, and a cupboard door, and the radio going quiet. Then paper.

'Right,' she said. 'End of Year 3. I'm skipping the maths. You don't care about the maths.'

I did care about the maths, as it happens, but I let it go.

The report from the summer before had been twelve words, and one of them was 'unfortunately'. I'd opened it without asking and I've been told about that more than once. This one Jess opened herself, at the table, with a cup of tea she said went cold while she read it twice. She'd been saving it for me all day. She told me that afterwards, which I thought was kind of her, and also a bit cruel, because I'd rung at four about something else and she'd said nothing.

I should say what I knew and what I didn't. Ambriel went back to her old school after Christmas, in January 2018. I wasn't there. I know she didn't speak in class for the first fortnight, because Jess told me. I know she answered the register in a whisper some time towards the end of January, because her teacher rang Jess at work to say so. Jess was in the back of an ambulance on the Pershore Road at the time and

had to ring back. I know that after half-term she put her hand up. What she said when she put it up, nobody has ever told me. I've asked Ambriel and she says she can't remember. I think she can.

None of it was mine to see. I'll be honest, that stung. I'd had her for ninety-two days and the first words to a hedgehog and the first words to a stranger at Apple Day, and then the best part happened eighty miles away while I was doing my ironing. Selfish. I knew it at the time, too.

'Here it is,' Jess said. 'Speaking and Listening.'

'Go on, then.'

She cleared her throat like she was reading the banns.

'Ambriel has found her voice this year, and the rest of us have had to find our patience, because she now has a great deal to say about everything, especially maps. She led the class discussion on rivers and corrected me twice. She was right both times.'

Neither of us said anything for a bit. I could hear the fridge at her end. My end, the clock Ron's sister gave us in 1979, which has never once kept time.

'Corrected the teacher,' I said.

'Twice.'

'That's not from our side.'

'It's entirely from your side, Mum.'

I let that go as well. It's true, and she knew I knew. My mother corrected a bishop once, at a confirmation in Ludlow, about the date of a hymn. She was also right.

Then Jess said there was more, a bit on the back in different handwriting, from the head. Just a line. *A pleasure to hear.* She read it twice, the second time slower, and her voice went on the word 'hear'. I won't pretend mine didn't.

I wrote both lines down afterwards on the back of a gas bill so I'd have them. The gas bill is in the Quality Street tin now with the porch letters, which I suppose makes it the forty-second letter, though Ambriel says it doesn't count because nobody wrote it in character.

Before we rang off I asked whether Ambriel was still up.

'She's drawing,' Jess said. 'She's drawing Kings Heath. She says the Pershore Road floods here.'

Maps in the Margins

I have a birthday card on the dresser from my sixty-fifth. On the front there's a cat in a party hat, which Jess chose, and inside there's a map of my own kitchen, which Ambriel didn't ask anyone's permission to draw. The kettle is marked with a skull. Next to it, in small capitals: NAN FORGETS THIS ONE. She was nine. She wasn't wrong, either, though it took me another five years and a scorched worktop to admit it.

That was how it went after she went home. The maps got into everything. Jess would send me photographs of her exercise books with the margins full of rivers, little roads running down past the sums, islands where the crossings-out had been. One teacher wrote 'Lovely, but please use the margin for working' and Ambriel drew a tiny bridge over the comment. Jess says she got a detention for that. Ambriel says it was a 'conversation'. They both still bring it up.

I kept the Ledger, as I'd been told to. Every so often, when she rang, she'd ask me to look something up in it, the way Ron used to ring his brother to settle an argument about the 1977 League Cup. Usually it was the map from September.

Day 13, 16 September. The Queen has a map now. Nan is not to fold it.

I never have. It's still on the shed door, gone the colour of weak tea.

The sketchbook arrived when she was twelve. A proper one, black cover, elastic band round it, from an art shop in the Custard Factory that charged Jess £14 and wouldn't let her pay in coins. After that the exercise books got a bit of peace. The sketchbook went everywhere. It came to Shropshire every Easter and every August and it sat on my kitchen table next to the fruit bowl, and I learned not to open it without asking, which is a rule I was never given in writing but understood all the same.

When I did ask, she'd turn it round to face me and say nothing, and wait. The old silence, almost. Not quite.

There was Bishop's Castle in it, the whole town, done from memory. The Six Bells was there, and the Spar with a tiny figure behind the till who was obviously Kath. Church Street ran down the middle with the orchard as a green square, seven circles, one with a question mark still.

Across the road by the Town Hall she'd drawn a little warning triangle with a hedgehog in it.

'There aren't hedgehog signs in Bishop's Castle,' I said.

'There should be.'

I mentioned this to Glyn. I don't know what Glyn did about it. There's a hand-painted one now on the lane behind the church, and nobody on the town council will say who put it up. I've stopped asking people in this town who did things.

At fourteen she told me what she wanted to be, and she said it at my table, eating a crumpet, as if she were telling me the bus times.

'I want to do the maps at the front of books.'

I didn't know that was a job. I said so. She went upstairs and came down with a paperback of Jess's from 1990-something with a map inside the cover, all forests and a mountain with a silly name, and she put her finger on the bottom corner where someone had signed it very small.

'That's a job,' she said. 'Somebody did that.'

I'll be honest, my first thought was money, because I was a dinner lady for twenty-six years and that's where my mind goes. My second thought was that I'd stood in a dinner hall for twenty-six years watching children who couldn't wait to grow out of things. This one was growing further in.

She drew me a map that Easter of a country that doesn't exist, with a coastline that took her three evenings. In the bottom corner, very small, she'd signed it. Underneath the signature, smaller still, a five-point crown.

A Spade in the Boot

She came in October 2025, on the Saturday of half-term, and the first thing out of Jess's car wasn't a bag. It was a spade. A new one, with the cardboard label still flapping off the handle, £22 from the garden centre on the Stratford Road. Ambriel carried it up the path over her shoulder like a soldier in a film, and behind her Jess carried the tree.

It didn't look like much. I'll be honest, I thought they'd been done. A bare-root Bramley, two years old, about as tall as Ambriel's shoulder,

with its roots wrapped in damp sacking and a plastic tag that said MALUS DOMESTICA 'BRAMLEY'S SEEDLING' and £34.50. It was a stick, really. A stick with ambitions.

'It's early for bare-root,' I said. 'They don't usually lift them till November.'

'I rang the nursery,' Ambriel said. 'I asked them specially.'

She was fifteen and a half and taller than me by then, which isn't hard, and she'd cut her hair short over the summer so she looked more like Jess at that age than I was ready for. She had the sketchbook in her coat pocket. Of course she did.

I'd put my wellies on before they arrived. I had Ron's old spade out of the shed, the one with the handle he'd mended with tape in about 1991, and I'd been out at eight o'clock marking a spot with a bamboo cane. A yard or so to the left of the stump, where the ground was soft and you'd get the morning sun off the church wall. I'd thought about it for a week. I was quite pleased with myself.

Ambriel looked at the cane. Then she pulled it out and laid it on the grass.

'Not there,' she said. 'There.'

She pointed to the other side of the stump, closer to the River Weep, which Glyn had cleared that same week like he'd cleared it every Sunday for eight years. I opened my mouth to say the drainage was better on my side. She took Ron's spade out of my hands, gently, the way you'd take scissors off a toddler, and leaned it against the shed.

'You're not digging, Nan.'

'I've been digging this garden since before your mother was born.'

'I know. You're not digging.'

Jess was standing by the back door with her arms folded, not helping. I looked at her for support. She looked at the sky. I found out later they'd agreed it in the car somewhere round Church Stretton, after the business with the kettle and the worktop in the spring, and a hospital appointment I hadn't told either of them about until it was over. They'd decided I was going to sit down. So I sat down. On the bench Ron made, with a cup of tea Jess put in my hands, like a bloody visiting dignitary.

It took her an hour and twenty minutes. The ground by the Weep is all clay and old roots, and twice she hit something big. The second time

it was a stone with a bit of brick stuck to it, and she held it up to show me and said, 'Treasury,' and put it on the stump. She dug the hole wider than it was deep, the way the nursery had told her, and she teased the roots out over a little mound in the bottom with her fingers. She didn't ask me a single thing. I'd have told her all of it.

Mrs Pugh came out to her gate, which still doesn't shut, and stood there the whole time without pretending to do anything else.

When the tree was in, Ambriel heeled the soil down round it, stamping in a slow circle. Then she stopped. She went over to the old stump, the one she'd stood on to read the proclamation, gone grey and soft now with a green fur of moss along the split. She wiped her hand on her jeans.

She knocked on it. Once, twice, three times.

Nobody said anything. Over the wall, in the churchyard, a blackbird went off like an alarm clock.

The Last Letter in the Tin

We had soup after, leek and potato, and Jess washed up without being asked, which I noticed and didn't mention. Ambriel sat at the end of the table drawing the new tree in her sketchbook. She gave it a little flag. She wouldn't tell me what was written on the flag.

At about half past four there was a knock at the back door, and it was Glyn, in the anorak he's had since the Royal Mail let him keep it. He's eighty now. He still bows. He bowed to Ambriel, and then, because I was in the way, to me, and he held out a grey envelope.

'Porch,' he said. 'Wasn't there at dinnertime. Was there at four.'

'Who put it there?' I said.

Glyn looked at me the way he's looked at me for nine years. He didn't answer. He never has.

There are forty-one letters from that autumn in the Quality Street tin. I've counted them more times than I'd like to admit, usually at night, usually with the radio on. Five of them are from the Grey Fox. This one makes six, and it isn't from that autumn at all, so I've kept it at the bottom, under the rest, the way you'd keep a receipt you might need one day.

Ambriel opened it at the table. She read it to herself first, and then she read it out, in a plain voice, as if it were the bus times again.

> *To Her Majesty the Queen of Russets, on her return. The Fox watched the new Tower go in this afternoon, from a respectful distance, as is proper. It is a good spot. Closer to the river than some would have put it. Foxes live a long time in this town. Longer than people think. Long live the Queen. The Grey Fox*

'Closer to the river than some would have put it,' Jess said, and looked at me, and laughed so hard she had to hold the sink.

I'll be honest, I went straight to the window. Mrs Pugh's gate was hanging open as usual, and Mrs Pugh was nowhere. The churchyard was empty. Down the street a car was reversing out of a drive with its lights on, and I couldn't see who was in it. My heart was going like I was nineteen.

'Nan,' Ambriel said.

I turned round. She was holding the letter out to me, folded back along its own creases.

'It goes in the tin,' she said. 'You're the Keeper.'

'I could just compare the writing. With the others. Just to see.'

'You could,' she said. 'You won't, though.'

She was right, and she knew she was right, and that's Jess's face doing it, and Ron's, and if I'm truthful mine. I put the letter in the tin. I put the lid on.

I've had suspicions since. Of course I have. There's someone in this town who was at the Feast and on the square at Apple Day and who walks past the church at four o'clock most afternoons, and who knew where I'd put the cane. I've narrowed it down to two people. Some days, three. I'm not going to write their names. I'd only be wrong, and the one I'm wrong about would never forgive me, and the one I'm right about would stop.

It's March as I write this, nearly Ambriel's birthday. She'll be sixteen. The Ledger is on my kitchen table, open at the last page, where her purple felt-tip went through the paper:

Day 92, 4 December. Under-Leaf is asleep. Nan has the key.

There isn't a key. There's never been a key. The tin is next to it, lid on, the colour coming off the corners where my thumbs have been. Out of the window the young Bramley has two buds swelling on the top branch, and one of them has gone a sort of pink, and Glyn was out there on Sunday clearing the River Weep without being asked.

On the old stump, a bit of brick with a stone stuck to it. The Treasury. Nobody's moved it.

I keep meaning to.

About the Author

Elizabeth Langford wrote this memoir in 2026, drawing on the Leaf Ledger, the letters from the church porch and her own memories of an autumn she has never forgotten. It is the account of the season she spent with her granddaughter, Ambriel, in a cottage beside an orchard of old apple trees. In telling it, she has tried to be as honest about her own mistakes as about the kindness of the people around her. She still does not know who the Grey Fox was, and she has decided she would rather keep it that way.