

1

THEY UNLOADED THE COFFIN LAST: GRAY PLASTIC, OF THE KIND HOSPITALS have for mass-fatality incidents. It had been at the far end of the C-17 aircraft when it landed at Brize Norton an hour ago, bare, untagged. Six men carried it into the cargo bay. It wasn't clear to anyone present what procedure to follow, because no one had any idea who it contained.

Flight Lieutenant Trevor Hughes was responsible for the loading and unloading of all aircraft. He had walked through the plane's stale air, checking equipment and coordinating its discharge. It was only when the tents and packs had been cleared that he'd seen the coffin, secured by webbing at the back. A sealed box of possessions sat beside it.

"Picked it up at Cape Verde when we refueled," the aircraft's warrant officer said. "Nothing's written on the docket. I was told there'd be someone here to meet it."

Hughes shook his head. He took pride in his job, but it depended on clear lines of communication.

"Got a contact? A regiment?"

"Nothing."

"What am I meant to do with it?"

"Unload it, I guess."

Brize Norton was the sole airbridge to all British forces serving internationally. It was a portal through which the UK military could inject itself into the world, and whatever remained of those missions at the end flowed back. It was a border, and, as at any busy border crossing, a settlement had grown, with its own hotel, fire station, medical center, and post service. It ran like clockwork, never more so than surrounding a repatriation.

No one had told Hughes about a repatriation.

Usually there would be a hearse waiting, a chaplain, flags at half mast, wreaths for the bereaved. The flight lieutenant didn't feel qualified to receive the dead alone. Something had gone wrong, but not as wrong as to

whoever lay inside the box. Hughes had a ritual he performed when bodies returned, and he performed it now: He touched the coffin and said, “Welcome home.” Then he added, “Whoever you are.” He turned to the warrant officer. “Find something to cover it.”

The warrant officer removed a sheet of burlap from a broken refueling hose and draped it over the plastic. With the help of four other men, they moved the coffin swiftly out of the plane, onto a luggage truck. Hughes was painfully conscious that the everyday noise of the airfield continued, oblivious. Once inside the cargo bay they placed it on a gurney with the box of possessions on the rack beneath it.

Hughes checked his messages and emails but there was nothing about a corpse returning. He made calls, steadily moving up the chain of command. A squadron leader radioed back, equally puzzled.

“No ID?”

“No, sir. I’d appreciate it if you could ascertain who’s responsible and notify them of the situation.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

No one came. It couldn’t stay among the cargo. Hughes remembered the gymnasium once being used as a temporary morgue—a row of nine arrivals from Helmand, stately enough on the parquet floor—and he made the decision to transfer the anonymous coffin there while they sought its owner. He enlisted the help of twenty-year-old Jack Trafford, a leading aircraftman from the specialist reserves, and they wheeled it through the back corridors together.

People stopped playing as they entered the sports courts. Games concluded and the place emptied. The two men waited.

Both were tired at the end of a long shift. Trafford had been hoping to get to the staff bar. Hughes had a six-month-old daughter at home. But the coffin lent their evening a solemnity that eclipsed those concerns. It spoke of events far away, a reminder that this was no normal airport.

Hughes radioed again. Again, a message came in: Guard it for now, someone would be tracked down.

No more flights were due in that night. The clank of gym equipment could be heard next door, occasional grunts and laughter. The negligence became an increasing source of anger for Hughes: that a corpse might become misdirected mail. The vast machine of the military was nothing if it forgot the meaning of these deliveries.

He checked the blank docket again as a morbid curiosity grew. Hughes

took the knife from his belt and levered the top of the coffin open. He stood back as the gases dispersed, covered his mouth and nose with a hand.

The corpse belonged to a man in his midforties, six foot something, with long ginger hair and stubble. His eyes remained partially open but clouded. He wore shorts and a T-shirt. Nothing about him seemed military. No more than two or three days dead, Hughes guessed, but his face was blue-gray and swollen, with hemorrhaging around the eyes and also around the throat, where purple marks had begun to blacken in the shape of a ligature.

A spook? Caught up somewhere? Had the RAF done someone a favor by bringing him home? The mystery seemed bound to the absence of anyone to receive him. But it didn't solve the problem they faced. Hughes replaced the lid, then opened the cardboard box and looked through the dead man's belongings.

They were divided into clear evidence bags marked POLICE PROPERTY. No indication which police. Included among them were several meters of thin yellow cable. It took Hughes a second to realize what it was. The cable had been severed twice: once above the knot, once across the noose, exposing copper wiring inside. He tutted.

Other bags contained more clothes, a small guitar that Trafford said was a ukulele, and finally a wallet. Governmental ID in the wallet gave them an identification at last: Rory Bannatyne, Engineering Consultant, UK Government Infrastructure and Projects Authority.

"Works for the government," Hughes said.

"On time travel?" Trafford asked. "Look at this."

Money had spilled from the clothing: small change and one crumpled note. Trafford flattened the note in his palm.

A young Queen Elizabeth II gazed up. The paper was cherry red. It looked like money from the 1940s or 1950s: Elizabeth II with her life and half the twentieth century ahead of her. On the reverse, the ten-pound note bore a technicolor sunset and two old sailing ships cruising toward the watermark.

"He's come from the past."

The coins, likewise, were definitely sterling, but unlike any Hughes had seen before. The ten-pence piece was larger than current ones, and had dolphins on the tail side. A two-pence piece bore the image of a donkey carrying wood on its back.

Finally, among some books and toiletries, they found a postcard, stamped and addressed to a “Nicola Bannatyne” but with no message written. The front showed a landscape of black rock and the name *Ascension Island*.

“Where’s Ascension?” Trafford said.

But his colleague had been distracted by the rapid clip of a woman’s heels. They turned to see her enter: tall with an air of civilian seniority, her long brown hair tied back, flanked by two Force Protection officers.

As she drew closer you could see she was flustered, looking ahead of her to the coffin as if late for an appointment and ready to burst into apology.

None came their way. The older of the accompanying officers told Hughes and Trafford they were dismissed. Trafford raised an eyebrow at Hughes and marched off. Hughes looked at the coffin for a final time. He didn’t feel confident the body was about to get the respect it deserved. But this was not his problem anymore.

It was only once outside the building that Hughes realized he still held the ten-pence piece with the dolphin. It looked even more magical in the airfield’s floodlights. He returned to the gymnasium, wondering how best to return it, and saw the woman standing very still beside the coffin. The lid had been removed again. Her guards remained a few meters away, eyes averted, so there was something oddly intimate to the scene. She held the blank postcard, and Hughes wondered if she was able to discern some message that had escaped him, a message that the man had carried all the way from Ascension Island and that had survived his own will to live.

2

KANE PAUSED WITH THE MARKER IN FRONT OF THE WHITEBOARD, THEN wrote *Ecstasy*. Beneath it, to form a triangle, he wrote *Finding* and *Being*. He turned to check the faces of the nine individuals who had chosen to spend the last hour of a sunny Monday afternoon listening to him rather than absorbing the beauty of Oxford outside. The turnout was low again, but then he'd made the lecture as niche as possible: "Sufi Influences on the European Tradition." The room was in a remote corner of St. John's College, because he wanted to see who would find it. More people found it each week, and he no longer knew each attendee by name. But still he had noticed the man at the back as soon as he arrived.

He was young, dressed smartly, with the fine features of eastern Africa and a deep, attentive gaze. Kane hadn't seen him before. Newcomers turned up, of course, in spite of Kane's bid for obscurity—sometimes lost, sometimes merely misguided. But instinct told Kane this was an employee of the Secret Intelligence Service.

For the last year Kane had been the subject of an inquiry under way deep within the entrails of Vauxhall Cross, MI6's headquarters. After ten years working undercover on behalf of the British government, it wasn't about to let him leave without a fight. His exit hadn't been made any easier by a final escapade in Central Asia that broke a lot of rules. And while Kane knew that he had saved more faces and more bloodshed than his bosses would admit, he carried an aura of danger now. Hence he was currently at risk of being found guilty of appropriation of operational funds, disobeying orders, and the magisterially nondescript "unauthorized absence," which was one way of describing a battle for his life in Kazakhstan. He was forbidden to leave the country and no doubt monitored while he was here, all pending a decision as to whether to press charges. This hypothetical prosecution was insurance against him speaking out. It meant there was always the prospect of a decade in a high-security prison if

residual loyalty wasn't enough to keep him onside. The god they worshipped was not the law, but silence.

This humiliation remained invisible to his students. Kane was reduced to traveling the world through its languages, just as he had done twenty years ago — a hunger for losing himself in other cultures that had led him into intelligence work in the first place. His doctorate had begun well. The college had been surprised by his existing range of knowledge and had pressured him into teaching a couple of courses. His former bosses at MI6 even had the audacity to suggest Kane keep an eye out for potential recruits. And if he had taken down the maps of the Middle East from the walls it was simply to help him remain focused on the present. An acknowledgment that beneath the bandage of his new life, old wounds refused to heal.

The students weren't sure what to make of him. In self-conscious moments he wondered if they detected a fracture. When Kane had been working undercover, he knew what to wear. Now he didn't. He knew that they believed something had gone wrong in his life, but also that there must be something they could glean from his lectures for their own self-advancement. These were bright kids. They wanted a ticket into their future, the perpetuation of achievement that had borne them this far, oblivious that others would use this for their own ends. So as a secret favor, Kane gave them something beautiful and useless: a history of poetry. And they wrote it down as if it would help them.

“While Europe saved its love for God, the Middle East was articulating the spiritual complexities of human romance. That's why we're looking at Persia today, and in particular at the knot of ideas within this word *wajd*. Sufi writers believed that it had its roots in *wa-ja-da*, which means devotion but also discovery and even being itself.” Kane picked up the board marker again, then added *Grief* at the bottom. “Alternatively, *wajd* can mean ‘grief’ or ‘pain,’ because the experience can only arise through separation.”

Students typed sedately, filling their MacBooks with thirteenth-century mysticism. Kane kept his focus on the regulars. He had allowed himself to believe that if he conformed enough to this new cover, the intelligence service would forget he was here. But they never forgot.

The man at the back was a few years older than most of the audience, but it was his clothing and physicality that made him conspicuous. He leaned back in his seat, leg crossed, tie neatly knotted. He nodded appre-

ciatively when his eyes met Kane's, writing occasionally in a black notebook. As Kane began to wrap up, he returned the notebook to his jacket, withdrew a phone, and punched in a message.

"Let's leave it there," Kane said. "Next week we'll touch on the Cathars. For those who've not come across them before, they were a Christian sect who believed that any God responsible for creating this world must be an evil one. They refused to have sex because reproduction perpetuated existence. You'll like them. Take a look if you're keen."

His audience stared uncertainly. A few students ventured a smile.

"We're done," Kane said. "I appreciate your attention." Laptops slammed shut. Bags unzipped. The suited man eased himself forward. A few students thanked Kane as they left. Next time, he thought, he would ask them why they returned. If there was a next time.

"You didn't have to subject yourself to that," Kane said when it was just the two of them. He collected up his notes. "You have my number."

"I'm Daniel. Pleased to meet you, Elliot."

Kane shook his outstretched hand. Up close, he seemed younger — not so far off the students after all. The suit had been misleading.

"Pleased to meet you, Daniel. What do you want?"

"Kathryn Taylor is outside. We have a car."

"Kat Taylor?"

"That's right. Okay to say hello to her?"

They walked through the corridors in silence. Kathryn Taylor had been a colleague of Kane's in Oman, a one-off job, seven or eight years ago. They'd got on well, not seen each other since. It didn't make much sense.

Taylor stood beside a silver Audi across the road from the college entrance. Seeing Kane, she flicked her cigarette into the gutter and approached, caught between a smile of reunion and the anxiety of whatever necessitated it.

"Elliot."

"Kat, been a while."

"You're okay?"

"I was."

"I know. I realize this is a bolt from the blue. I could really do with a moment of your time. I apologize for gate-crashing this scholarly refuge. Are you up for a drive?"

"How long are we talking?"

“Couple of hours. We’ll talk when there, if that’s okay.”

No suggestion of where “there” might be. No suggestion he might decline the invitation. Surely not back to Vauxhall Cross. Taylor was already climbing into the driver’s seat.

Kane stood for a second amid the flow of students and tourists imagining the protest he might make, the appointments he might have had. But he had no appointments; perhaps they knew that. The facade of his new life was already crumbling. He got in the back of the Audi and Taylor started the car.

“He was fascinating,” Daniel said, once they’d set off. “Did you know, Arabic has at least eleven different words for *love*, and each of them conveys a different stage in the process of falling for someone?”

“I had no idea. That’s beautiful. How are the students, Elliot?”

“Very young.”

“Isn’t everyone these days?”

Taylor drove cautiously, one eye on the mirrors, continuing out of town. Kane wanted to get some purchase on the situation.

“How have you been?” he asked.

“Up and down,” she said, tightly.

“Where are you working now?”

“South Atlantic desk. I run it.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

Kane thought through world affairs: the newspapers he’d tried not to read, and, when he did succumb to a browse, not to decrypt. Nothing pertaining to the South Atlantic came to mind. It had certainly never been his domain. He wasn’t as up to speed with world news as he used to be, but then his job no longer fed a hunger for omniscience.

The three of them lapsed into silence. Kane watched Oxford slip away. They didn’t drive east to London, as he’d expected, but west, onto the A40. He checked Taylor in the mirror and saw anxiety.

The job on which they’d worked together involved tapping a cable running from Seeb in Oman under the Strait of Hormuz to Iran. Taylor had led a team of three—herself, Kane, and an eccentric technical specialist by the name of Rory Bannatyne. Bannatyne was an expert on the discrete diversion of fiber optics. But he needed to get into the facilities that housed them, which demanded insider knowledge. Kane had gone over for two months to run an asset inside the Omani security services

who had access to the information they needed: computer systems, building security, and personnel. Kane was essentially a conduit for this intelligence while something complicated happened at high-security junction points.

He received a commendation for the work without knowing much about what had been achieved, and the success earned him a posting to Libya as the country began to implode. He remembered Taylor as ambitious. A year or so after their job together he heard she'd stabbed someone in Algiers. According to who you spoke to it was an agent or a fixer who'd turned on her or got overfriendly; one person had described it as an abduction attempt, another as a sexual assault. Either way, she put a knife in his throat. Kane assumed that was connected to her being in HQ now. It may also have been connected to her marriage falling apart, although from what she'd said in Oman it hadn't been in a great place to start with. And now apparently she was running the South Atlantic desk. Not one of the prestigious departments, but it wasn't teaching poetry to undergraduates, either.

They continued improbably into the Cotswolds. Then he realized where they were going.

Kane sometimes walked in this area, but he tried not to venture west of the A34. Too many classified places: the ley lines of military intelligence webbed and thickened in this corner of England. He knew of at least ten sites of various levels of secrecy, but none like the one they now approached.

Government Communications Headquarters appeared out of the landscape like a vast space-age tumulus—a stadium landed among the Cheltenham suburbs, with half a mile of tarmac between its secrets and the rest of society. The processing and monitoring hub of a surveillance empire, GCHQ and its network of satellites and ground stations eavesdropped on every square inch of the globe. It was classified to an extent beyond anything in MI6, but then, it was more effective.

They passed the first discreet security camera, then reached an entrance ringed by barbed wire. A guard checked Taylor's pass, peered at Kane, raised a barrier. A few seconds later they paused as another camera stared through the windscreen, and then two metal posts sank into the ground and they drove down a ramp into the visitors' car park.

Kane had only been in once before, and that was more than ten years ago. A familiar curiosity returned, with a familiar caveat: being let into se-

crets is one thing, being let out, another. The car park had its own security center, where they handed in their phones. Kane signed a visitors book and took his temporary pass. They received a guide, a young woman in a cardigan and heels who said “Follow me” and led them up a flight of stairs into the largest secret intelligence headquarters outside of the US.

A veneer of normality was now allowed to present itself. Beyond an atrium with sofas and potted palm trees, the HQ opened out into two levels of communal seating lit through a glass ceiling. A floating walkway circled the space, ivy creeping up its supporting columns. The architectural theme, without trace of irony, was openness.

Kane had been given a tour after the terrorist attacks of July 2007, in the spirit of encouraging cooperation between the services. Barriers were being forced down between the traditionally rivalrous MI5, MI6, and GCHQ, with the idea that joint teams could work together and share leads. GCHQ was the last of the three to emerge from the shadows, and some were surprised to discover it was twice the size of MI5 and MI6 combined. It emerged reluctantly, highly protective of its techniques, not wanting to compromise its ingenuity.

Kane hadn't expected ever to return. Now the four of them strode through the headquarters, with their guide angling her face toward various cameras in order to open doors. No one paid them any attention. Plenty of staff still wore casual clothes: not quite the vibe of ten years ago — no shorts and flip-flops — but the Starbucks was still surreally there, and some staff carried gym bags and squash rackets. And in the empty center of the circular building was the garden with its memorial to dead colleagues, a reminder that in the new era of warfare, there were software engineers on the front line too, that hackers sacrificed their lives with increasing frequency.

On that first visit, Kane had been led down a few flights of stairs, past an underground road to the cavernous computer halls that made the offices on top seem like a thin disguise. They didn't go down this time. He tried to remember the layout of the ground floor. There was a section devoted to math and cryptanalysis, a separate wing for activities that fell under the opaque banner of “Enterprise” — new technologies, biometrics, AI — and a busy department dedicated to linguistics and translation. But they went to none of these. Two more punch codes led them away from the natural light to an anonymous department with its own reception desk.

The guard stationed there lifted a receiver, called through, told them to wait one moment. Their guide departed with a smile. Daniel spoke to Taylor and took a seat at the side. It was the last time Kane would see him that day. Taylor turned to Kane.

“Elliot, before we go in, I need to tell you: Rory Bannatyne’s dead. That’s partly what this concerns. He killed himself.”

“Rory?”

“I didn’t want to speak in the car. I’m sorry.”

Rory Bannatyne was the officer who’d worked with them on that job. Kane recalled him more vividly now, a tall, ginger-haired man with intense green eyes—soft-spoken, watchful, gentle, charismatic. He was what they called a tailored access officer, which meant his background in the special forces had been put to use alongside advanced electronics and computing skills: that is, he could break in to places and then understand the wiring inside them. He was housed in the National Technical Assistance Centre, a rarely sighted subunit of the intelligence service that worked on intercepting signals data. There was something else, Kane now remembered: a minor upset Taylor had covered up, involving a girl in his hotel room. This had never entirely fit with Kane’s direct experience of the man, but then, they hadn’t known each other well.

“Is this to do with Oman?”

“No, not exactly. They don’t know anything about that. For now.”

“What happened?”

“I want to see what you think. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“And I’m connected?”

“Not yet.”

The guard lifted his phone again, then pressed a button.

“Dominic’s waiting for you.”

The door opened. A small, bright-eyed man stood on the other side, clean-shaven in a tight white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He had a laptop and papers under his left arm. He shook Kane’s hand vigorously.

“Dominic Bower. Thanks for coming in. Please, this way—grab a seat.”

He directed them into a conference room with glazed glass walls and a long table set with sparkling water and pens. At one end of the room was a projection screen. Bower shut the door, dropped his belongings at the head of the table, plugged a cable into his laptop. In Kane’s experience, men who had built a career in the shadows were either predictably pallid or, like Bower, they acquired a proud flush as if swollen with secrets and

the status this bestowed. Kane glanced at the paperwork he'd dropped, saw his own signature.

"Formality first," Bower said. "Wanted to be double sure — you're read into Echelon, is that right? Strap 3 clearance?"

Echelon was the data interception program that spied on the world's communications. Strap 3 clearance meant that you knew the access points at which GCHQ tapped in to the global fiber-optic system, one of the most classified projects they ran.

"That's correct," he said.

"Inducted 2014."

"Yes."

Bower studied Kane's authorization again.

"You worked with Kathryn in Oman."

"Briefly."

"A great success."

Taylor shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Even without the eventual complications, these things were never straightforward. But the tap got put on the cable, and, for all Kane knew, it was still whispering secrets into ears within this very building. And from the point of view of those individuals at their workstations, no doubt it was a success.

"I'm glad you think so."

"It's that background that made us think you might be able to help."

Bower opened the laptop and clicked. A map appeared on the projection screen. Kane thought it was the Isle of Wight at first, then saw military bases marked.

"Ascension Island," Bower began. "Familiar with it?"

"South Atlantic."

"That's right."

Familiar would have been an overstatement. Kane knew it as an obscure bit of UK territory, a surviving outpost of empire: one of Her Majesty's rocks in the middle of nowhere. It had been a military stepping-stone during the Falklands War, and housed a joint GCHQ-NSA listening station. That was the extent of his familiarity.

"One of the most remote inhabited islands in the world," Bower continued. "Roughly halfway between Africa and Brazil. Been ours since 1815. The airbase is rented out to the Americans, but there's a few RAF around as well. We share its signals intelligence facility with the NSA, and there's a BBC Relay Station. That bit's ours."

“Busy little island.”

“About to get busier.” He clicked and the display changed. The title now was OPERATION VENTRILOQUIST. The screen showed a line across the South Atlantic, captioned *TA3 Meridian subsea cable*. “As of 2022, Ascension will be a landing point for a new transatlantic fiber-optic cable. It has some history in this role—the island’s provided landfall for communication cables since 1899, when the Eastern Telegraph Company exploited its position for their first transatlantic line. But Meridian will be a game changer. There’s never been so much data set to travel through one cable.

“Rory Bannatyne was over there to draw up plans for interception, to establish how we might achieve equivalent access as we’ve enjoyed elsewhere. Superficially, he was a UK government telecommunications consultant, liaising between the island administration and the cable company. In reality, he was drawing up proposals for a restricted processing facility. The cable company isn’t one of the cooperative ones, so the process of establishing access is a little more complex. But it hasn’t stopped us before. By all accounts, the assessment went smoothly. Bannatyne got us comprehensive intelligence on the company, the island, the individuals there, and he drew up plans for access that will work, we believe.” Bower sat back, as if this was where his concerns ended and the responsibilities of MI6 began. “I’m not sure how much Kathryn has told you.”

“The day before he was due to return, he hanged himself,” Taylor said. “Close to where he was staying.”

Bower watched Kane for his response. Kane merely nodded, trying to picture the melancholy end of a man he’d barely known.

“I’m sorry to hear that. What’s it got to do with me?” he asked.

“We need to move to the next phase,” Taylor said. “That means we need to know Rory wasn’t compromised, and that he didn’t encounter any complications that may or may not connect to his death.”

“So you can proceed with tapping the cable.”

“Yes.”

“Are you saying you want me to go out there?”

“I’m not comfortable committing more personnel to the project without some investigation,” Taylor said. “I’d like someone to take a look.”

“We’re ready to go,” Bower said. “The engineers are selected. The operation is poised to start.”

Kane studied the map of the island again, which was taking on new

import. He had come here braced for questioning of some kind. It seemed there was only one question: *Will you go?*

“Are you aware,” he said, “that I’m not currently allowed to leave the country?”

“We know,” Taylor said. “Leave that side of things to us.”

This created the first itch of temptation. But Kane was conscious of being steered fast into a scenario no one knew very much about.

“Any suggestions that Rory did have trouble over there?”

“No, nothing.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to leave,” Kane suggested.

Taylor and Bower both stared at him.

“Maybe,” Taylor said. Bower glanced at his watch. Kane got the impression that in GCHQ things operated with a technological efficiency that didn’t allow for glitches such as suicide. And there was something unspoken in the room. Taylor hadn’t confided about Rory’s previous mishap, he thought. Now he saw why. This was one reason she’d come to Kane: for discretion.

“If we are going to send someone else out there, I wanted an officer already read into Echelon,” Bower said. “Which I think is reasonable enough. And you had some acquaintance with the man. Perhaps that will help the two of you come to a conclusion regarding what happened. We have a fortnight, then the window for installation becomes trickier since the cover we’ve established won’t work. I’m getting considerable pressure over this, as you can imagine. People want the data flowing yesterday.”

A fiber-optic cable between Africa and Latin America. Kane considered what this would give them: all traffic between two continents set to shape the next century. Thousands of calls in any single second. That meant serious intelligence product. At the heart of the intelligence world was a competition between the agencies: Each morning the prime minister got separate reports from MI5, MI6, and GCHQ, and the quality of these insights determined budgets and careers. GCHQ had a lead it needed to maintain. The human factor was a rare inconvenience.

“Have you ever been to Ascension Island?” Kane asked.

“Me?” Bower looked amused by the question. “No.”

“You?” Kane turned to Taylor.

“No.

He nodded again, looked at the map.

“How long was Rory over there?”

“Nearly six months,” Taylor said.

“Regular communication?”

“Regular enough. We had an encrypted satellite link. Neither of us wanted to be on it daily, but he was in touch. There was nothing to suggest this was going to happen.”

“I assume someone on the island investigated it.”

“To a basic level. The conclusion was as you’d imagine: straightforward suicide. And of course they may be right. Either way, it’s not clear why this happened. And there are additional questions around his belongings, whether everything got returned, if there might be something he left behind that could tell us the tiniest bit about what happened.”

“Who’s in charge over there?”

“Technically it’s the governor of Saint Helena, which is an entirely separate island around eight hundred miles away. But it’s part of the same territory, as the FCO defines it. The governor’s represented on Ascension by an Administrator. The island has two full-time police officers, assisted by a couple of volunteers. It’s not set up for a thorough investigation of any kind. Obviously, the RAF and the American military base have their own security, but they deal with military matters.”

“Anyone else there know the real reason Rory was on the island?”

“No,” Taylor said. “This was way beyond any potential clearance. There’s only six people in this building that know, and three in Vauxhall: me, my assistant, and the Chief.”

Kane had been in high-level, compartmentalized secrecy before, but nothing like this. He could see how it left you with little room to operate, reduced your own outlook, tied your hands.

“How many people live on Ascension?”

“‘Live’ may not be the word. There’s eight hundred people stationed on the island at the moment: three hundred Americans on the base, fifty UK military, some BBC and cable engineers. Most of the others are contractors — maintenance, catering, the usual — and those tend to be workers who’ve come over from Saint Helena. They often bring their families. But no one’s given permanent residency. And there’s very few tourists. Until a few years ago, civilians weren’t allowed on at all. So, we’re fairly sure we know who’s on there.”

Kane’s mind drifted briefly to the library in which he would have been sitting if it weren’t for this, to the concluding lectures in his account of secular poetry.

“How long would I be over there for?” Kane asked.

“No more than a month,” Bower said.

“I have commitments at the university,” he said. Bower looked puzzled, then realized what Kane meant.

“The PhD,” he said. “Yes, we appreciate that. I’ll leave it between you and Kathryn to make any necessary arrangements. A sabbatical, perhaps.” He smiled flatly. “There would be a full briefing later this week. You would be paid at the rate of external contractors, which I believe is considerably more generous than for staff. Kathryn will sort your cover and handle any logistics. Obviously this would retain the same level of security. I’m assured your assistance here will help offset any ongoing disciplinary concerns.”

Kane failed to hide a mixture of disdain and incredulity. Bower seemed taken aback.

“I understand disciplinary proceedings are ongoing,” he said, more hesitantly. “You are still technically under investigation. Is that not right?”

Kane had stopped expecting the worst of everyone, he realized; stopped seeing the world as interlocking power games.

“That’s right,” he managed to say.

“You’d be doing us a favor, is what I’m saying. And, of course, with a project of this significance . . . we wouldn’t forget.”

Bower closed his laptop, then excused himself and left Kane and Taylor to catch their breath and shake their heads.

“I had no idea he’d do that,” she said, quietly, as they headed back toward the outside world.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. Let me drive you back.”