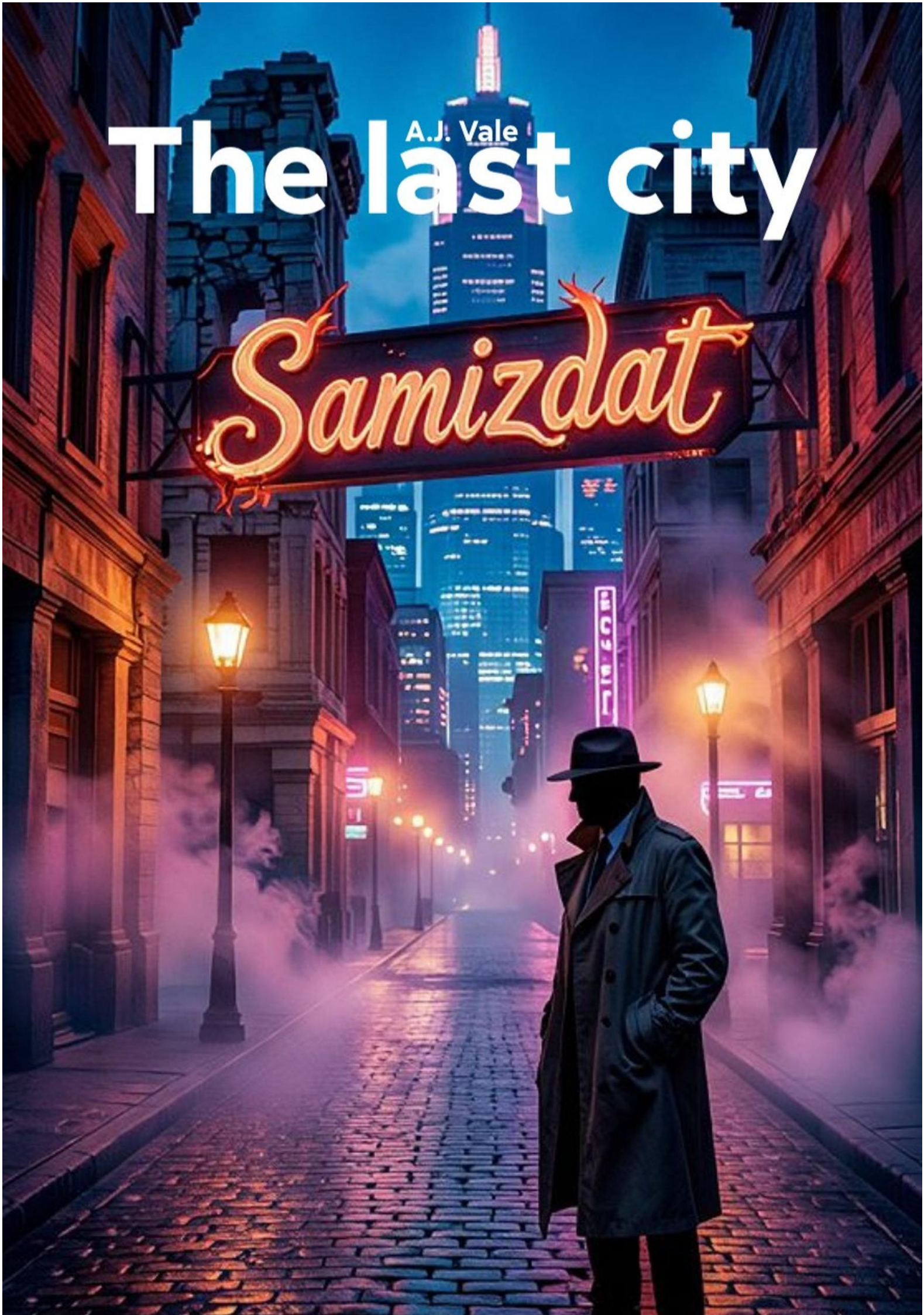
A.J. Vale
The last city
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«Автор»
2026

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The first work that should not leave attention in the fantasy novel genre

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A.J. Vale
The last city

THE LAST CITY
A novel by A. J. Vale
EXPANDED EDITION — WORKING MANUSCRIPT
Part I: Signal
Installment 1: Chapters 1–4
CHAPTER ONE
THE VOICE AT 03:17

At 03:17, every clock in Adrian Vale's apartment stopped.

He knew the time because he was awake, and because he had been awake at that hour for thirteen years. He had tried sleeping pills, long walks, warm milk, cold showers, a therapist who spoke softly and a second therapist who did not speak softly at all. He had tried leaving Saint-Veron for a year, then returning as if the city might have changed in his absence. He had tried pretending that 03:17 was only a number on a clock.

Nothing had worked.

The rain had begun shortly after midnight, ticking against the windows of his third-floor apartment with the steady insistence of someone who had been told to wait outside. Beyond the glass, Saint-Veron lay in the dark: narrow streets shining beneath streetlamps, old façades pressed close together, the harbour cranes standing like black skeletons against the clouds. The sea was invisible from Adrian's kitchen, but he could smell it whenever the wind turned north. Salt, wet stone, diesel from the fishing boats. The city had always carried the sea inside it, even in rooms far from the water.

He sat at the kitchen table with a set of architectural plans spread before him. The project was ordinary enough—a conversion of a former textile warehouse into apartments, with a public courtyard and a roof garden no one would use in winter. He had drawn the same staircase four times and still disliked it. The pencil lay between his fingers, its point pressed so hard into the paper that it had broken through.

The client wanted glass balustrades, pale timber, and a lobby that looked expensive without seeming to try. Adrian had written three notes in the margin: *more light*, *less dead space*, *ask about the foundations*. The last note had been circled twice. He had learned to distrust anything built over ground he could not see.

His phone lit up with a message from Claire Moreau, sent at 01:42.

You still awake?

He had typed *Yes*, then deleted it. He had typed *What is it?*, then deleted that too. Claire had a talent for asking questions that seemed casual until one realised she had already noticed the answer. They had met six months earlier when she interviewed him about the city's flood barriers. She had come to his office with a recorder, a notebook, and a raincoat that dripped onto his floor. The interview had lasted twenty minutes. The argument afterward had lasted two hours.

She believed Saint-Veron had been quietly rewriting its own history. He believed she was confusing administrative neglect with conspiracy. She had asked why the city's oldest maps showed streets that no longer existed. He had replied that streets were demolished every day. She had asked why the demolition records were missing. He had told her that old municipal offices lost documents. She had smiled without amusement and said, "You're very good at building explanations that don't require you to look at anything."

He had not spoken to her for eleven days. He had noticed every one of them.

He put the phone facedown.

Then the refrigerator stopped humming.

Adrian lifted his head.

The silence that followed was not complete. Rain still tapped the window. A pipe knocked somewhere in the wall. From the street came the distant hiss of a passing car. Yet those sounds seemed to have moved away from him, separated by a distance that the room had not possessed a moment earlier.

The clock above the stove read 03:17.

The digital display on the microwave read 03:17.

His phone, lying beside the plans, vibrated once. When he turned it over, the screen showed 03:17 and no signal.

He stood slowly. The apartment had a strange, airless stillness, as if someone had closed a door on the world outside. He crossed to the kitchen shelf, where an old black radio sat between a chipped mug and a jar of loose screws.

He had not used it in years.

His father had bought the receiver when Adrian was a child, back when the harbour still broadcast weather reports and shipping notices on a dedicated frequency. Daniel Vale had liked machines that could be repaired with a screwdriver. He distrusted anything sealed in plastic. When the radio broke, he opened it on the kitchen table, lined its screws in a neat row, and explained the function of each component to his children. Elena had listened for approximately three minutes before asking whether the radio could pick up ghosts.

Daniel had laughed. Adrian remembered that laugh more clearly than he remembered the words that followed.

He took the radio from the shelf. It was heavier than he expected, its casing cool against his palms. The tuning dial resisted his thumb. He turned it on.

Nothing.

He adjusted the frequency, hearing a low wash of static, then the thin, faraway chatter of a station from across the water. He turned the dial back, trying to find the harbour band. The needle trembled at a frequency he did not recognise.

A click came from inside the radio.

Then a woman inhaled.

Adrian stopped breathing.

“Adrian?”

The voice was faint and frayed, as though it had travelled through miles of wet wire. But he knew it. He knew the slight upward turn at the end of his name, the breathy impatience, the way the second syllable softened.

Elena.

He set the radio on the table too quickly. Its casing struck the wood with a crack.

“No,” he said.

The static thickened. Beneath it, something tapped in a steady rhythm: three knocks, a pause, then three more. Adrian stared at the speaker grille. He had spent thirteen years trying not to hear his sister’s voice in crowds, in dreams, in the pause between a kettle boiling and switching off. This was not memory. Memory did not come through a radio that had no power cord plugged into the wall.

“Adrian, if you can hear me, don’t let him open it.”

He grabbed the radio with both hands. “Elena?”

A breath. A crackle. Somewhere in the background, a metallic groan like a ship turning in its berth.

“Listen to me. You have to find the light.”

“What light? Where are you?”

“Not the one above the door. The one underneath.”

He leaned close enough that his forehead nearly touched the radio. “Elena, where are you?”

There was a sound that might have been a laugh, but it broke in the middle. “You always ask the wrong question.”

The voice sharpened for a second, suddenly close, suddenly so unmistakably hers that his body reacted before his mind could intervene. His hands began to shake. He saw Elena at seventeen, hair cut badly by her own scissors, leaning over his desk to steal a pencil. He saw her at twelve, standing on a seawall with her arms spread as if she could balance the entire horizon. He saw the last night he had seen her, thirteen years earlier, when she had told him she would be back before midnight and he had called her a liar because he wanted to make her stay.

“Tell me what happened,” he whispered.

“Not yet.”

“Where have you been?”

“Adrian—”

The signal broke into a shriek. Every bulb in the kitchen flashed white. The room seemed to contract around him. For an instant he saw the kitchen as it had been when he was sixteen: yellow curtains, a bowl of oranges, his mother’s red scarf hanging from the chair. Then the image vanished, and he was alone with the radio.

A second voice came through. It was male, older, exhausted.

“Do not open the gate.”

Adrian recoiled so sharply that the chair toppled behind him.

The voice spoke again, each word clipped by interference. “Whatever she says. Whatever you see. Do not open it.”

“Who is this?”

The static settled for half a second.

“It’s you.”

The radio went dead.

Adrian stood in the kitchen, waiting for the world to explain itself. The clocks still read 03:17. Rain hung on the windowpane in perfectly still beads. Outside, the passing car had stopped in the middle of the street, its headlights frozen in the wet dark. A man beneath an umbrella stood on the opposite pavement with one foot lifted, caught in the act of stepping off the curb.

Adrian went to the window and touched the glass. It was cold. The man did not move.

Then the clocks clicked forward together.

03:18.

The car surged through the street. Rain began to run down the glass. The man stepped off the curb and disappeared behind a bus shelter, unaware that anything had happened.

Adrian sank into the chair and pressed both palms against his eyes. He counted to ten. He counted backward. He checked the radio’s power switch, the batteries, the wall socket. The radio had no batteries. The socket was empty. Its back panel had been held shut by two screws and a strip of old tape. There was no plausible explanation, and he had made a career out of plausible explanations.

He looked at the clock. 03:19.

On the table, his phone buzzed again. A message from Claire.

I found something about Elena. Call me when you see this.

He called immediately. It went to voicemail.

“Claire, it’s Adrian. Call me back. Now.”

He almost hung up, then forced himself to continue. “I heard her. I heard Elena. I know how that sounds, but I heard her on the radio. She said something about a light underneath a door. And someone else—someone who sounded like me—said not to open a gate. Call me.”

He ended the call and stared at the phone, embarrassed by the sound of his own voice. He had not told anyone what he heard the night Elena disappeared. Not the police, not his parents, not the therapist who had asked him to describe the guilt he carried. At sixteen he had heard three knocks

beneath the lighthouse floor, then a voice calling from the darkness below. He had told himself it was the wind, the tide, a pipe, anything but a voice. By morning Elena was gone, and he had become the only person in Saint-Veron who remembered that the lighthouse door had been locked from the outside.

He crossed to the living room and opened the bottom drawer of his desk. Inside lay a cardboard envelope, its corners softened by years of handling. He had moved it from apartment to apartment, telling himself that keeping it was not the same as believing in it.

The envelope contained a photograph taken at the northern lighthouse two days before Elena vanished. Elena stood on the stone steps, grinning into the wind, one hand raised to hold her hair down. Adrian stood beside her, sullen and narrow-shouldered, looking away from the camera. Their father had taken the picture. In the background, the lighthouse door stood ajar.

Adrian turned it over. On the back, in his mother's handwriting, were the words: *Elena and Adrian, October 2011.*

He had looked at the picture hundreds of times. Now he noticed something he had never seen before. In the dark glass of the lighthouse lantern room, a third figure stood behind them.

He tilted the photograph toward the kitchen light. The figure was indistinct, long-coated, with one hand pressed to the glass. The face had been lost in a blur of reflected sky.

A second photograph slid from the envelope and landed on the floor.

It showed the same lighthouse steps, the same iron railing, the same storm-dark sea. But the stonework was cracked, the railing bent, and weeds grew through the joints. The sky was black, though the sea below was bright with daylight. Adrian's own face appeared in the lower corner of the image, older by at least twenty years, looking directly at the camera.

He picked it up with trembling fingers.

On the reverse was a date stamped in blue ink.

24 OCT 2039.

The image had not been in the envelope when he last checked it. He was certain of that—not because he had a perfect memory, but because he had been afraid of the first photograph for so long that he had memorised its every flaw.

His phone rang. Claire.

"Where are you?" she asked. No greeting, no preamble.

"At home. What did you find?"

"I need you to promise you won't go to the lighthouse alone."

"That's a strange thing to ask before telling me why."

"Adrian."

"I heard Elena."

Silence. He heard a car horn on her end, then the soft clatter of a door being closed.

"What exactly did you hear?"

He told her. The radio, the stopped clocks, the two voices. He described the photograph and read the date on its back.

Claire did not interrupt. That frightened him more than disbelief would have.

When he finished, she said, "I have a photograph too."

"Of what?"

"Of you. At the lighthouse. It was delivered to the newsroom this afternoon in an envelope with no return address. You're standing in front of the door. You look older than you do now. The date on the back is tomorrow."

Adrian looked down at the photograph in his hand. The man in the corner had his face. Not a resemblance, not a trick of shadow. His face, with the same scar through the eyebrow and the same crease between the eyes.

"Tomorrow," he said.

“I know.”

“Then we go together.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Where are you?”

“Outside the municipal archive. I was trying to get a night guard to let me in.”

“Why?”

“Because the first record of Elena’s disappearance has been altered. I found two versions. In one, she vanished on the twenty-fourth of October. In the other, she never existed.”

Adrian looked at the photograph again. The future version of himself had a hand raised, palm outward, as if warning whoever stood behind the camera to stop.

“Meet me at the north bridge,” he said. “Twenty minutes.”

“Adrian, one more thing.”

“What?”

“The envelope had a note in it.”

He waited.

“It said: *If he remembers the first sound, the city will remember the door.*”

The line went quiet.

Adrian placed both photographs in his coat, shut the envelope, and turned off every light in the apartment. He did not know whether he was leaving to find his sister or to prove that the impossible had not happened. He only knew that, for the first time in thirteen years, the hour after 03:17 had a direction.

At the door he paused, listening.

From somewhere inside the wall came three soft knocks.

He did not answer them.

CHAPTER TWO

THIRTEEN YEARS

The north bridge was built from dark iron and old civic pride. It crossed the canal where the river widened toward the harbour, connecting the old town to the district of warehouses and municipal offices. In daylight, tourists photographed its lamps and the fishing boats tied beneath it. At night, the bridge belonged to delivery vans, gulls, and people who had reasons to avoid the main roads.

Adrian arrived first. He parked beneath a dead streetlamp and stood with his hands in his coat pockets, watching rain collect in the ironwork. He had brought the two photographs, the radio’s dead batteries—there were none, but he had checked again anyway—and a small flashlight. He had also brought the brass key to his father’s old toolbox, though he could not have said why.

At 03:36, Claire came down the steps from the archive quarter. Her hair was damp, her cheeks pink from the cold, and a canvas bag bumped against her hip. She walked quickly, eyes scanning the road behind her. When she reached him, she did not ask whether he was all right. She took his face between her hands and examined him as if looking for evidence of injury.

“You look terrible,” she said.

“You look like you’ve been breaking into public buildings.”

“I’ve been trying to. There’s a difference.”

She let go, but her hands lingered at his shoulders for a second longer than necessary. Neither of them mentioned it.

They crossed to the shelter beside the bridge. Claire pulled a photograph from her bag and passed it to him. It showed Adrian in front of the lighthouse, older, with a streak of white at one temple. His coat was torn at the shoulder. Behind him, the lantern room glowed from within, though the lighthouse had been decommissioned for decades.

On the back, written in block capitals, were the words: *24 OCT 2039. DO NOT LET HIM REMEMBER.*

“Who sent it?” Adrian asked.

“I don’t know. The envelope was waiting on my desk when I arrived at the newsroom. The receptionist swears nobody came in. There’s no security footage of it being delivered.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“I did. They said it was a prank. Then I showed them the second version of Elena’s record and they asked whether I’d been sleeping.” Claire folded her arms. “You know what that means in this city. Once someone decides you’re unstable, every fact you bring them becomes evidence against you.”

Adrian knew. At sixteen, he had been questioned for hours about Elena’s last night. He had told the police she had gone to the lighthouse. They asked why he had not stopped her. He said he had tried. They asked whether they had argued. He said yes. They asked whether he had touched her. He said he had grabbed her wrist when she tried to leave, and that she had pulled free. They wrote down only the part about his hand.

The next day, the official report described Elena as a runaway with a history of impulsive behaviour. She had no such history. She had a drawer full of school notebooks, a list of universities she wanted to visit, and a habit of writing tomorrow’s weather in the margins of her homework. But those things were not useful to the report.

“Show me the records,” he said.

Claire opened her bag and took out a folder sealed with a red elastic band. Inside were photocopies, handwritten notes, and two pages from a database printout. The first listed Elena Vale, date of birth 4 May 1994, missing since 24 October 2011. The second listed no Elena Vale at all. It contained a line for Adrian’s family: Daniel Vale, Marion Vale, Adrian Vale. Three people. No daughter. No sister.

“Where did you get this?”

“The public archive is not as public as it claims. I found an old index card in a drawer that had been marked for disposal. It pointed to a restricted file number. The restricted file points to a room beneath the archive building.”

“A room?”

“Not on the plans. Not on any plan I could find.”

Adrian stared at the pages. “Maybe someone altered the records after she disappeared.”

“That was my first explanation. Then I found a death register entry for you.”

He looked up.

Claire turned to a final photocopy. The paper was thin and yellowed, as if it had been copied from an original older than either of them. It contained the names of people recorded as deceased during a municipal emergency. Most were unfamiliar. A few belonged to families Adrian knew from childhood. At the bottom of the page, typed in a neat line, was his own name.

VALE, ADRIAN DANIEL. DECEASED. 24 OCTOBER 2039. LOCATION: NORTHERN LIGHTHOUSE.

The date was sixteen years in the future.

“That’s impossible,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Could be a projected list. A scenario. A draft.”

“Then why does the paper smell like saltwater?”

He touched the page. The fibres were stiff and slightly warped, as if it had been dried after being submerged. A faint brown tide mark ran along one edge.

Claire watched him. “I need you to tell me what happened in 2011. Not what you told the police. What you remember.”

Adrian’s first instinct was to refuse. The memory was a room in his mind with a door he had kept shut by leaning his whole body against it. He had built a life around not opening it. But he had

heard Elena’s voice. He had seen his own face on a photograph dated sixteen years in the future. Whatever was happening had found the door anyway.

“We argued,” he said.

“About what?”

“She wanted to go to the lighthouse. I told her it was dangerous. She said I was acting like Dad. I told her she was being childish. She said I only cared about being right.”

“Were you?”

“About the lighthouse? Yes. The north stairs were unstable. About everything else…” He looked toward the canal. “Probably not.”

“What time?”

“Just after eleven. She left the house. I followed her as far as the seawall. She knew I was behind her, but she didn’t turn around.”

“And then?”

“I went home.”

Claire said nothing.

“I went home,” he repeated, harder. “I thought she’d come back. She always came back.”

“Did you see her again?”

He closed his eyes. “At the lighthouse. Later. I was already home when I heard the knocks. Three knocks from somewhere beneath the floor. I went back out. The lighthouse door was locked. I could hear her calling me from inside.”

“Why didn’t you break it down?”

“I tried. I broke two fingers on the frame. I ran to the keeper’s cottage for a tool. When I came back, the door was open.”

“What was inside?”

“Stairs. They weren’t there before. Stone steps going down below the foundation. I heard Elena at the bottom. I went down maybe six steps, then the water came up from below. Not a flood. It was black, and it moved against gravity. I saw a light under a door. Then I heard my father calling my name from behind me.”

Claire’s expression changed. “Your father was there?”

“He said he’d take care of it. He told me to go home. I didn’t. We fought. I don’t remember everything. There was a flash of light, a sound like a train passing through the earth, and then I was on the rocks outside the lighthouse. It was morning. Elena was gone. Dad was gone too, for three days. When he came back, he said he’d been searching the coast.”

“Did you believe him?”

“No.”

“Did you tell anyone about the stairs?”

“I tried. The police found no stairs, no water, no broken door. My father said grief had made me confuse a nightmare with the night itself. My mother looked at me like I was sick. After that, I stopped talking about it.”

Claire’s face softened. “You were sixteen.”

“I was old enough to go back.”

“You did go back.”

“Not far enough.”

For a moment the rain seemed louder. Claire looked down at the papers, then at the photograph of his future self.

“I think the records are changing because the city can’t decide which version of that night is real,” she said. “And I think the lighthouse is where the versions meet.”

“That’s a very large conclusion from a few missing files.”

“I’ve been working on this for two years. I started with a list of streets that vanished from the city map. Then I found photographs where buildings had changed between copies. A school class with one extra child in one version and no record of the child in any register. A hospital wing that appears in an aerial photograph from 1978 but never existed on the planning map. At first I thought it was fraud. Then I interviewed people who remembered relatives nobody else remembered.”

“People forget things.”

“Of course they do. But they don’t usually forget the same people in the same order.”

She handed him a notebook. Its pages were crowded with dates, arrows, and small maps. Adrian recognised the precision of a person who had learned to make her fear useful. The notes were not the work of someone chasing a ghost story. They were an attempt to build a system from evidence that refused to stay still.

At the back of the notebook, a list of dates had been circled in red. Every entry was the twenty-fourth of October, spaced thirteen or fourteen years apart. Beside each was a time: 03:17.

“Every time the city changes?” Adrian asked.

“Every time I can prove it changed. The dates aren’t exact because some of the records are missing. But the pattern is there.”

“Why didn’t you come to me earlier?”

“I tried. You refused to speak to me after the flood-barrier interview.”

“That was not a refusal. I said I had work.”

“You said, ‘I don’t have time for stories about a city that eats its own past.’”

“I was being metaphorical.”

“You were being rude.”

He almost smiled. It felt unfamiliar, like using a muscle that had been left idle for years. Claire noticed, and for a heartbeat her own expression eased. Then a light flickered in the archive building across the canal.

A figure stood behind a high window.

The figure was too far away for them to see its face, but it was standing perfectly still, looking down at the bridge. When Adrian stepped forward, the light went out.

“Someone’s in there,” he said.

“Someone is always in there,” Claire replied. “The question is whether they’re supposed to be.”

She closed the folder and tucked it beneath her coat. “Victor Laurent runs the archive. He’s been there since before Elena disappeared. He knows the restricted file exists, and he knows I’ve been asking about it. I’m going to see him when the doors open.”

“He’ll refuse.”

“Probably.”

“Then I’ll come with you.”

She searched his face. “You don’t have to do this because I asked.”

“I’m doing it because she called me.”

“And because you want to know whether your future self is trying to save you or frighten you.”

“I don’t know which would be worse.”

“Good,” Claire said. “At least we’re being honest.”

They started across the bridge. Halfway over, Adrian stopped. On the far bank, beneath a streetlamp, a girl stood in a yellow raincoat. Her hair was dark and cut unevenly at the shoulders. She held a red umbrella closed at her side, though the rain was falling hard.

“Elena?”

The girl looked up.

For one impossible second, Adrian saw his sister as she had been at seventeen: the crooked smile, the small scar on her chin from falling off a bicycle, the impatient lift of her left eyebrow.

Then a tram passed between them, its windows full of pale faces. When it had gone, the pavement was empty.

Adrian ran to the far end of the bridge. He searched the alley, the steps, the narrow passage beside the bakery. There was no one there. Only a red umbrella lay in the gutter, its fabric torn and its metal ribs bent inward.

Claire came up beside him, breathing hard. She looked at the umbrella but did not touch it.

"Was that her?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"You knew her face."

"I knew a face that looked like hers."

He picked up the umbrella. Water ran over his fingers, cold as the sea. A small white label had been sewn into the handle. On it, in faded blue ink, was a name.

ELENA VALE.

The first tram of the morning rattled along the boulevard behind them. The city was waking up, and Adrian understood with a certainty that frightened him more than the radio had: Saint-Veron was not merely hiding what happened to his sister. It was trying to decide whether she had ever been there.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HOUSE ON THE BOTTOM

The municipal archive opened at eight, but Victor Laurent arrived at seven twenty-three.

Adrian and Claire waited across the square in a café that served burnt coffee and croissants too flaky to eat without making a mess. Claire had bought a newspaper and held it open between them, though neither of them read it. Every few minutes she glanced at the archive entrance. Adrian watched the clock above the counter.

At seven twenty-three precisely, a tall man in a charcoal overcoat crossed the square. He carried no umbrella. His silver hair was combed flat, and he walked with the careful balance of someone who had spent years navigating rooms where a misplaced gesture could be recorded against him.

"Victor Laurent," Claire said.

"He looks like a man who alphabetises his dreams."

"He probably does."

They waited until he had unlocked the archive's side door, then crossed the square. Claire reached the entrance before it could close.

"Mr Laurent?"

He turned. His eyes moved from Claire to Adrian, and something in his face tightened.

"Miss Moreau. I believe I've already explained that the records you requested are restricted."

"You explained that the records don't exist."

"I explained that no records matching your description are available to the public."

"That's not the same thing."

"No," Laurent said. "It isn't."

His gaze remained on Adrian. "You should not have come here."

Adrian felt his jaw clench. "You know who I am."

"Everyone in this city knows who you are."

"That's not what I meant."

Laurent glanced at the square. The early commuters moved past without looking at them. "Come inside. Both of you. And do not touch anything unless I tell you to."

He led them through a narrow corridor lined with framed photographs of mayors and civic ceremonies. The building smelled of paper, dust, and something mineral beneath it, like a basement after a storm. At the end of the corridor, Laurent unlocked a glass door and ushered them into a reading room. Rows of tables stood beneath green-shaded lamps. A wall clock ticked with a sound too loud for the size of the room.

Laurent removed his coat and laid it over the back of a chair. “Tell me exactly what you found.”

Claire put her folder on the table. “Two versions of Elena Vale’s record. A death register entry for Adrian, dated 2039. A photograph of the lighthouse that shouldn’t exist.”

Laurent did not look at the papers. “And what did you hear?”

Adrian felt a cold pressure behind his ribs. “Why do you assume I heard something?”

“Because the clocks stopped at 03:17. Because the radio transmitted a voice. Because the dead have begun to use the old frequencies again.” Laurent folded his hands. “I had hoped we had more time.”

“You know about the radio?”

“I know about the signal.”

“What is it?”

“A warning. A symptom. Sometimes an invitation. It depends on who is listening.”

Claire leaned forward. “Who is sending it?”

Laurent looked at her for a long moment. “That is not a question with a safe answer.”

“I’m a journalist. Safe answers are usually the least useful.”

“Yes. And journalists sometimes mistake the danger of a question for proof that the question is important.”

“Are you going to answer me?”

“No.”

Adrian struck the table with his palm. The sound echoed across the reading room. “My sister is in those records. My name is in a death register sixteen years in the future. A photograph of me is dated tomorrow. If you know what’s happening, stop talking like a clerk and tell us.”

Laurent’s face did not change, but his fingers tightened together. “Your father said you would come back.”

“My father is missing.”

“No,” Laurent said softly. “Your father is where he chose to be.”

The clock on the wall ticked once, twice, then stopped.

Adrian looked up. Every hair on his arms rose.

Laurent closed his eyes, as if he had heard a familiar voice calling from another room. “It has started earlier than I expected.”

He stood and walked to the back of the reading room, where a tall cabinet stood between two shelves. He removed a ring of keys from his pocket and selected one small brass key. Behind the cabinet, he pressed a section of wood paneling. A latch clicked. The entire cabinet swung inward on hidden hinges, revealing a narrow stairwell descending into darkness.

Claire stared. “That isn’t on the building plans.”

“No,” Laurent said. “It isn’t.”

He switched on a wall lamp. The light reached only the first six steps. Beyond them, the stairwell bent to the left and vanished.

“Where does it go?” Adrian asked.

“To a room that was built before this archive existed. The city’s official history says the building was erected in 1891. The foundation beneath us is older than the harbour itself.”

“Who built it?”

“People who knew there were things in Saint-Veron that should not be given names.”

Laurent handed Adrian the flashlight from his coat pocket. “You will see records that contradict one another. You will hear things that sound like people you love. Do not follow any voice unless you can see the person speaking. And if you hear three knocks, do not knock back.”

“Why?”

“Because something below may answer.”

He descended first, moving carefully, one hand against the damp stone wall. Adrian followed, then Claire. The air grew colder with every step. A smell of saltwater rose from below, although the archive stood nearly a kilometre from the shore. At the landing, Laurent took a second key from the ring and unlocked a steel door.

The room beyond was larger than the building above it should have allowed.

Metal shelving covered the walls. Each shelf held boxes, ledgers, glass plates, reels of tape, and bundles of maps tied with string. A long table stood in the centre. Above it, a single lamp burned with a steady amber glow. The floor was stone, but not the grey granite used in the archive's foundations. This stone was black, glossy in places, and cut with narrow grooves that converged at a circular mark in the centre of the room.

Adrian stepped across the threshold and felt pressure in his ears, as if he were descending beneath water.

"What is this place?" Claire whispered.

"The room beneath the record," Laurent said. "The city keeps what it cannot explain here."

He moved to a shelf marked with a brass plate: VALE, 2011. The label had been scratched through and rewritten several times. Beneath it, in smaller letters, someone had engraved: *ORPHEUS / INCIDENT 07.*

Adrian reached for the box.

"Wait," Laurent said.

"Why?"

"Because the file may not be the same every time you open it."

"That makes no sense."

"It makes less sense to pretend otherwise."

Laurent set the box on the table and opened it himself. Inside lay a school photograph, a folded map, three audio cassettes, and a thick envelope sealed with dark wax. Adrian recognised the school photograph immediately. It showed his class at Saint-Veron Secondary, taken in the autumn of 2011. He was in the back row, looking bored. Elena was not in the picture. He remembered that day: she had skipped the photo session to meet a university recruiter at the library.

But in this version of the photograph, Elena stood at the centre of the second row, smiling at the camera. Her hand rested on Adrian's shoulder. Everyone around them had their eyes closed.

Claire leaned close. "Look at the date."

The date printed in the lower corner was 24 OCT 2011, though the photograph had been taken weeks earlier. In the background, through the school's glass doors, a dark sea was visible where the courtyard should have been.

Adrian turned the photograph over. The back was covered in handwriting, most of it crossed out. He could make out fragments:

…first sound…

…do not let Daniel…

…the girl remembers…

…the city will choose…

A noise came from the far side of the room. Three knocks, slow and deliberate.

Claire's hand closed around Adrian's wrist.

Laurent went still. "Nobody speak."

The knocks came again, this time from beneath the table.

Adrian looked down. The circular mark in the floor had filled with a thin layer of water. It spread through the grooves, following their lines like ink through a map. The amber lamp flickered.

From somewhere under the stone, a girl's voice called, "Adrian?"

He nearly answered. The sound of his name was perfect. It carried the same impatience, the same faint rasp, the same familiar breath. Claire's fingers tightened around his wrist until it hurt.

“Don’t,” she whispered.

The voice came again. “Adrian, it’s cold down here.”

He shut his mouth so hard his teeth clicked.

Laurent took a cassette from the box and pushed it into a battered recorder. “We need to hear this before the room changes.”

The tape began with a wash of static. Then a man spoke.

“If you are hearing this, the first barrier has failed. You have reached the archive beneath the archive. You may believe that you are investigating a disappearance. You are not. You are approaching a door that has been opened before, and every time it opens, the city loses a piece of itself.”

Adrian recognised the voice. It was his own, older and roughened by exhaustion.

“Do not trust the records. Do not trust the photographs. Do not trust the people who claim they remember the same history you do. The city is not lying to you. It is trying to survive.”

The tape hissed. A chair scraped in the background.

“If Elena is still calling you, do not mistake the call for rescue. She may be alive. She may be an echo. She may be the only part of the city that remembers what happened. None of those possibilities gives you permission to open the gate.”

Adrian reached for the recorder, but Laurent caught his hand.

The voice continued.

“Find the light beneath the door. Find the room where the first sound was made. And when you see me, do not believe that I am the version of you who knows the most. I am only the one who has lost the most.”

The tape clicked off.

No one moved.

Claire was the first to speak. “How many times has this happened?”

Laurent looked at the dark water in the floor. “Enough times that I have forgotten which memories belong to me.”

“Who is Orpheus?” Adrian asked.

Laurent took a long breath. “A project. A theory. A mistake. The official account says it was a coastal-resilience programme designed to model flood conditions and preserve the city’s records during an emergency. That account is true, as far as it goes.”

“And beyond that?”

“Your father was an engineer on the project. He believed that a city could be saved by preserving every possible version of it. If one future drowned, perhaps another could be found where it survived. The experiments began with maps and sound recordings. Then they began to involve memory.”

Adrian stared at him. “My father opened the gate.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because your mother died.”

The words landed without drama, which made them worse.

Adrian had been told that Marion Vale died of a sudden cerebral haemorrhage in the winter of 2008. He remembered the hospital corridor, the rain on the window, his father sitting with both hands folded around a paper cup he never drank from. Elena had cried openly. Adrian had not. He had believed that if he stayed still enough, grief would pass through him without finding a place to settle.

“He wanted to bring her back?” Claire asked.

“He wanted to reach a version of the city in which she had never died. He found one. Or thought he did. But the gate does not distinguish between a person and the memory of a person. It opens onto whatever has been preserved strongly enough to answer.”

“And Elena?”

Laurent’s gaze shifted to Adrian. “Your sister went looking for him. You followed. The gate opened again.”

Adrian could not seem to draw a full breath. “You knew this for thirteen years.”

“I knew part of it. I did not know where your father had gone. I did not know whether Elena had crossed the threshold or been taken by it. I did not know which records were still true. Every time I tried to preserve the evidence, the evidence changed.”

“You could have told us.”

“I did tell your mother. She begged me to let the city forget. She believed that if the records were sealed, the door would remain closed.”

“Did it?”

Laurent looked at the water. “No.”

A sound came from the steel door behind them. The latch turned by itself.

Claire spun around. Beyond the doorway, the stairwell was no longer dark. It was flooded with pale daylight. A street ran down the steps where the stairs should have been, lined with houses Adrian recognised from childhood. At the far end stood a woman in a red scarf.

His mother.

She looked exactly as he remembered her from the last morning of her life, her hair pinned loosely at the back, her expression gentle and tired. She lifted one hand to beckon him.

“Adrian,” she said. “Come home.”

His feet moved before he could stop them. Claire caught his coat. Laurent seized his other arm.

The woman in the red scarf smiled. Behind her, the street filled with water.

“Come home,” she said again.

Adrian forced himself to look at her face. It was perfect, but there was no reflection in her eyes. He remembered his mother’s last words to him in the hospital: *Look after your sister.* The woman in the doorway did not say them. She had forgotten the one thing that made her his mother.

He stepped back.

The doorway slammed shut.

The water in the floor vanished, leaving the black stone dry and gleaming. The lamp steadied. Somewhere above them, the archive clock began ticking again.

Laurent let go of Adrian’s arm. “Now you understand why I told you not to follow a voice.”

“No,” Adrian said, though his voice shook. “I understand why you’re afraid.”

“That is the beginning of understanding.”

He returned the cassette to its box and closed the lid. “There is one more file you need to see. It is kept at the lighthouse. I have never been able to move it here, and I have never been able to destroy it.”

“What file?”

“The first photograph. The one taken before Elena disappeared. The one that shows who opened the door.”

Adrian took the two photographs from his coat. “This one?”

Laurent studied the image of the ruined lighthouse, then shook his head. “That is a later version. The first photograph is in the lantern room. It has been waiting for you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“Because you would have gone there alone.”

Adrian looked at Claire. She looked back at him, fear plain on her face, but beneath it was something steadier: not confidence that they would survive, but a decision not to abandon the question.

“Then we go now,” she said.

Laurent locked the file box away. “You may go to the lighthouse. But you must understand one thing. If the gate opens, it will offer each of you something different. It will know what you regret. It will know what you would sacrifice to undo it. And it will make the offer sound like love.”

Adrian turned toward the stairs. “Then we won’t listen.”

Laurent’s expression was almost pitying. “Everyone says that before they hear the voice.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WOMAN WHO REMEMBERED

The road to the northern lighthouse ran between the sea wall and a row of abandoned customs houses. In daylight, it was a popular walking route. At night, with the storm moving in from the west, the path seemed to narrow toward the lighthouse as if the city were drawing a breath.

Claire drove. Adrian sat beside her with the two photographs on his knees. The dashboard clock read 04:12. It had not stopped again, but he found himself checking it every few minutes. The road shone beneath the headlights. Beyond the barrier, waves struck the rocks and withdrew in long white sheets.

“You’re quiet,” Claire said.

“I’m trying to decide whether Laurent is telling the truth.”

“About which part?”

“All of it.”

“That’s sensible.”

“He said my father opened a gate to find my mother.”

“Do you think he did?”

“I think he was devastated. I think he would have done almost anything to see her again. I also think grief doesn’t explain a room beneath an archive or a photograph from the future.”

Claire glanced at him. “Sometimes grief is the reason people build impossible things. It doesn’t make the things less impossible.”

He turned the future photograph over in his hands. “If that is me in 2039, why am I trying to stop myself?”

“Maybe because you know what happens if you don’t.”

“Or maybe it’s a warning designed to make me do exactly what I’m being told not to do.”

“Which is why we should investigate instead of obeying it.”

“You say that as though we’re going to a council meeting.”

“I’ve been to council meetings. They’re much more dangerous.”

He laughed once, unwillingly. The sound startled him. Claire smiled without looking away from the road.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“You can ask. I reserve the right to refuse.”

“Why did you start investigating the missing streets?”

Her smile faded. She took a longer stretch of road before answering.

“My brother,” she said. “His name was Luc.”

Adrian turned toward her. She had never mentioned a brother.

“He was eight when he drowned,” she continued. “We were on holiday. There was a river near the house, shallow in summer, fast after rain. My mother was inside. I was supposed to be watching him. I looked away for maybe a minute. He slipped from the bank. I jumped in after him, but the current pushed me against a tree root. A man pulled me out. By the time anyone found Luc, he was gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I used to hate that phrase. It sounded like a door closing. But I know people say it because there isn’t anything else to say.” She tightened her hands on the wheel. “Two years ago, I found a photograph in my mother’s attic. It showed me and Luc at a birthday party. He was older than he had been when he died—maybe twelve or thirteen. He was standing beside me, holding a cake. My mother was in the background, laughing. I thought it was a dream or a composite. Then I found a school report with his name. A library card. A letter from a boy who signed himself Luc Moreau.”

“What did your mother say?”

“She said I’d had a brother, but he hadn’t drowned. He’d been sick. Then, a week later, she said I was an only child and asked why I kept inventing stories. The photograph vanished from the attic. The school had no record. The library card was blank. But I remember him. I remember the way he chewed the ends of pencils and the fact that he was afraid of moths. I remember him asking me to teach him how to swim, and I remember the river.”

“Do you think he’s alive somewhere?”

“I think there is a version of my life where he is. I think I have seen the evidence of it. I don’t know if that means he exists now, or ever did. But when I found the first map with a street that wasn’t there, I recognised the feeling. The city was doing to itself what it had done to my family.”

Adrian looked at her hands on the wheel. She held the car steady even as the road curved and the wind pushed against them. He had thought Claire’s investigation was fuelled by ambition, by the thrill of finding a story everyone else had missed. Now he understood the quiet desperation beneath it. She was not chasing a mystery for its own sake. She was trying to discover whether memory could be trusted when everyone around her insisted it was a lie.

“Do you ever think,” he asked, “that remembering him keeps you from living?”

“Every day.” She gave a small, rueful smile. “And every day I think forgetting him would be another kind of death.”

The lighthouse appeared ahead, a white tower rising above the rocks. Its lantern room was dark. The keeper’s cottage beside it had been boarded up for decades, but one window glowed faintly yellow.

Adrian sat upright. “Someone’s there.”

Claire slowed the car. “Could be a reflection.”

“It isn’t.”

They parked beside the sea wall and approached on foot. The wind was stronger here. It pushed salt spray across the path and tugged at their coats. The cottage window went dark as they reached the gate.

The lighthouse door stood closed. Adrian tried the handle. It turned freely.

Inside, the circular chamber smelled of damp stone and old metal. A spiral staircase climbed to the lantern room. Beneath it, a smaller door led to the keeper’s storage room. Adrian swept his flashlight across the floor. There were footprints in the dust—fresh, wet footprints leading toward the stairs.

Claire crouched beside them. “One person. Barefoot.”

The prints began at the door and continued up the steps. They were too narrow to belong to Laurent.

“Could be Elena,” Adrian said.

“Could be someone who wants us to think it’s Elena.”

He nodded. The distinction mattered, even if he could not bear it.

They climbed. The staircase was narrow, the handrail cold and slick beneath Adrian’s fingers. At the lantern room, the windows were clouded with salt. The great lens stood dark in its iron frame. Someone had set a small table beneath it. On the table lay a tape recorder, a stack of photographs, and a single white envelope.

Claire approached the table slowly. “This is the file Laurent mentioned.”

Adrian picked up the top photograph. It showed the lighthouse door on the night Elena disappeared. The image was grainy, washed out by a flash. His sixteen-year-old self stood in the foreground, one hand pressed to the doorframe. Behind him, his father stood with his back to the camera, holding something long and metallic. The lighthouse door was open. Below the threshold, a strip of white light cut across the floor.

In the glass of the lantern room, a third figure was reflected.

Adrian turned the photograph over. There was no date, only a line written in black ink.

The first sound was not a voice.

“What does that mean?” Claire asked.

“I don’t know.”

He set the photograph down and lifted the envelope. Inside was a key made of silver, thin as a strip of wire, and a note folded into quarters. The handwriting was his father’s.

Adrian—if you have found this, then I failed to keep the door closed. I am sorry for the years I let you believe that your sister’s disappearance was your fault. You were a child. I was the one who chose to open it.

Below that, in a different ink, another sentence had been added:

But you were the one who answered.

Adrian felt the room tilt. He gripped the table.

Claire read the note over his shoulder. “What does ‘answered’ mean?”

Before he could reply, the tape recorder clicked on by itself.

A woman’s voice filled the lantern room. Not Elena’s voice from the radio, not the voice that had called him from the archive. This voice was close, clear, and tired.

“Adrian, if you are listening, you have reached the place where the city first learned to lie.”

The recording crackled. A second voice, male and older, spoke over it.

“You must not let the girl cross.”

Then the woman again: “He will try to save her. He will think that is the same as loving her. It isn’t.”

Adrian reached for the stop button. It would not move.

The recording continued. “There are two things beneath the lighthouse. One is the gate. The other is the sound that made it possible to open. The gate can be closed. The sound cannot be undone. You must learn the difference.”

The tape stopped.

A knock sounded from below.

Three knocks.

Claire stepped away from the table. “We need to leave.”

Adrian looked at the silver key. It was warm in his palm.

“Adrian,” Claire said, sharper now. “We need to leave.”

A voice rose through the staircase. “Adrian?”

He turned toward the stairs.

Elena stood at the bottom, just beyond the reach of the light. She looked seventeen, with damp hair and the same yellow raincoat Claire had described. Her face was pale but alive. She lifted one hand, and the little scar on her chin caught the light.

“I’ve been waiting,” she said.

Adrian took a step toward her.

Claire caught his arm. “Look at her feet.”

Elena was standing on the first step. Her bare feet were dry. Behind her, the staircase descended farther than the lighthouse foundations could possibly extend, the steps vanishing into black water. The light from the lantern room stopped at the edge of her coat.

“Adrian,” Elena said again. “Please.”

He wanted to believe her so badly that the wanting itself felt like proof. He remembered her at twelve, laughing at the kitchen table. He remembered her at seventeen, slamming the front door. He remembered the years after, when he had begun to hate the sound of siblings arguing in the street because it suggested that the world could take something from you and then carry on as if nothing had happened.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

Elena’s expression shifted. For an instant she looked frightened, and the sight nearly broke him.

“I went where Dad went,” she said. “I thought I could bring him back.”

“Where are you now?”

“Between the things that happened and the things that might have.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“It’s the only one I have.”

She looked past him, at Claire. “You remember a boy by the river.”

Claire went white.

“Don’t listen to her,” Adrian said, though he did not know whether he meant Elena or Claire.

Elena’s eyes filled with tears. “I remember him too.”

Claire took a step forward before she could stop herself. “Luc?”

The name moved through the room like a breath of cold air. The lantern lens began to turn, though no power fed it. The windows darkened until the sea outside disappeared.

Elena held out her hand. “You can see them. All the ones who were lost. They’re not dead. Not exactly. They’re waiting for someone to remember the way in.”

Adrian stared at his sister. “And what happens if we do?”

Her fingers curled. “The city comes back.”

“Which city?”

“The one we were meant to have.”

The phrase sounded so gentle, so reasonable. Adrian felt the temptation of it: a life where his mother was alive, where his father had not vanished, where Elena had returned home before midnight. He could see the house as it had been, the yellow curtains, the bowl of oranges, his sister’s shoes abandoned by the door. He could hear his mother calling them to dinner.

Claire’s hand was shaking against his sleeve.

“Adrian,” she whispered, “you have to decide whether you believe the person standing in front of you or the thing she wants you to do.”

He looked again at Elena. Her eyes were still wet, her mouth trembling. But beneath the emotion, there was a terrible patience. She was waiting for him to make the same mistake he had made thirteen years earlier: to answer a voice because he could not bear the possibility that it might be the last time he heard it.

He stepped back.

Elena’s face crumpled. For a moment she looked exactly like his sister.

Then the expression emptied.

“Soon,” she said. “The city is running out of versions.”

The light beneath the stairs flared white. A rush of cold air climbed the staircase, carrying the smell of the sea and the distant thunder of a train. Elena disappeared.

The lantern stopped turning. The windows cleared. Outside, the sea was still there, black and restless against the rocks.

Adrian looked down at the silver key in his hand. A faint line had appeared along its edge, like a crack in ice.

Claire let go of his arm, though she stayed close enough that their shoulders touched. “We need to find out what the first sound was.”

He nodded.

“And we need to find out what your father did after he opened the gate.”

“Yes.”

She looked at the staircase, then back at him. “And if she comes back?”

Adrian closed his fingers around the key. “We ask her a question only Elena would know.”

“What question?”

He thought of the school photograph, the kitchen, the last argument, all the little facts he had kept like stones in his pocket.

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “But I’ll find one.”

For the first time since the radio spoke, he felt something other than fear. It was not hope. Hope would have been too easy. It was the hard, painful beginning of responsibility: the knowledge that love could not be measured by how far he was willing to follow someone into the dark.

He put the photographs and the note in his coat.

Behind them, the tape recorder clicked on once more.

A whisper came from its speaker.

“Not the question you remember,” said the voice of Adrian’s future self. “The question you never asked.”

Then the recorder went silent.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROOM THAT WASN'T THERE

Elena stood in the doorway as if she had been waiting for them to arrive at the end of a very long appointment.

She wore the yellow raincoat Adrian remembered from the last morning he had seen her. The cuffs were dark with water. Her hair clung to her cheeks in thin strands, and one hand rested against the black doorframe. Behind her, the drowned street stretched away beneath a ceiling of moving water. Lamps glowed in windows where no electricity should have survived. A bicycle leaned against a wall. Farther down the street, a tram bell rang once, muffled and distant.

Adrian could not move.

Every year since 2011, he had rehearsed this moment in one form or another. In some versions he ran to her. In others he asked where she had been. In the cruelest dreams, he was the one who had to tell her that she was dead. None of those rehearsals had prepared him for the simple fact of her face.

“Ellie,” he said.

Her expression changed at the nickname. For a second she looked sixteen again, impatient with him, ready to accuse him of making a fuss. Then the expression slipped away, replaced by something older and more tired.

“You came back,” she said.

“I never left.”

“That isn't the same thing.”

Claire caught Adrian's sleeve. Her grip was firm enough to hurt. “Don't cross the threshold,” she whispered.

Elena looked at her. “You remember more than you think, Claire.”

“I don't know you.”

“You did once.”

The words landed with the weight of a fact rather than a threat. Claire released Adrian, though she did not step forward. Her gaze moved over Elena's face, searching for a scar or a familiar angle. The radio in the chamber crackled behind them. On its dial, the red needle trembled between stations.

Adrian took one step toward his sister. The floor beneath his shoes was dry. Beyond the threshold, the street shimmered with water that hung in the air like glass. The difference between the two spaces was so precise it seemed less like a doorway than a cut made through the world.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

Elena glanced over her shoulder. “Somewhere the city puts the things it can't keep.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you should stop asking questions as if answers are going to make this easier.”

The bluntness was so familiar that Adrian almost laughed. Instead, he reached for her.

The moment his fingers crossed the threshold, every lamp in the drowned street went dark.

A deep vibration moved through the lighthouse. Dust sifted from the ceiling. Claire pulled him back by the coat, and Adrian stumbled onto the dry boards. The lights returned beyond the door, one by one, but Elena had retreated several paces.

“Don't touch the frame,” she said. “Not until you know which side of it you're on.”

“Then tell me.”

“I can't tell you everything. Not while it's listening.”

Something moved in the water above the street. Adrian looked up. A shadow passed across the submerged sky, vast and slow, like a ship sailing over a city that had sunk beneath the sea. The hanging water bowed inward. For an instant he saw the underside of a hull, black with age, and rows of windows lit by pale human faces.

Then the image was gone.

Claire had gone very still. “What is listening?”

Elena looked past them toward the radio. “The first sound. The one that came before the signal.”

The radio speaker emitted a small click.

A man's voice filled the chamber. Adrian recognized it immediately, though it was older than the voice on the tape. His own voice, worn down by years and grief.

“Adrian, if you can hear this, you have already made the wrong choice.”

He turned toward the radio. “Who recorded that?”

Elena shook her head. “You did.”

The voice continued. “Do not believe the room is showing you what you want. It shows you what you have already lost. The door is not a way back. It is a way through.”

Adrian stared at his sister. “You said I came back.”

“I said you came back. I didn't say you came back in time.”

The radio clicked off. Somewhere inside the lighthouse, a clock began to tick. Each tick sounded like a footstep on a staircase.

Claire moved beside Adrian, close enough that her shoulder touched his. “We need to leave.”

Elena nodded, but she was looking at Claire now. “You should take the photograph from the wall.”

“What photograph?”

“The one where the three of us are standing outside the school.”

Claire's face lost its colour. “I've never been to Saint-Veron.”

“You were there the night the records changed.”

“I would remember.”

“That's what the city does best.”

The door behind Elena began to narrow. The edges of the frame drew inward, not physically but in the way a distant landscape seems to contract when a train carries you away from it. The drowned street flickered. A shop sign appeared above Elena's shoulder: MARÉES, in white letters on blue glass. Adrian knew the name. It belonged to the street where his family had lived before the disappearance, though every official map said the street had never existed.

“Elena!” He stepped forward again.

She lifted one hand. “Find the room beneath the archive. Find the original recording. And don't let Ward take the key.”

“What key?”

But Elena was already fading, the raincoat becoming a yellow blur in the dark. Her last words came from farther away than the street should have allowed.

“Ask Dad what he heard before Mum died.”

The doorway snapped shut.

The chamber plunged into darkness. Claire found Adrian's hand and held it until the emergency lamp above the stairs flickered on. He could feel his sister's absence like a pressure change in his ears.

On the wall beside the radio, a photograph had appeared in a frame that had been empty moments before. Three teenagers stood outside a school entrance: Adrian at sixteen, Elena laughing beside him, and a dark-haired girl with a camera slung across her chest.

Claire took one step toward it.

“That girl,” she whispered. “That's me.”

In the photograph, Claire was smiling as if she had not yet learned to be afraid of what a camera could remember.

Before the door had appeared, Adrian had thought grief was a single room: you entered it once, and then spent the rest of your life learning how to leave. Now he understood that grief was a city. It had districts, alleys, locked basements. Some streets led back to the same moment no matter which direction you took.

He stood in front of the black door long after Elena vanished. Claire did not urge him away again. She had learned that he needed a few seconds to understand a loss before he could move around it.

“Tell me something about her,” Claire said.

“I’ve told you things about her.”

“Facts. Not memories you use to punish yourself. Tell me something ordinary.”

He looked at her, irritated by the question until he realised he had no answer ready. He could recite the argument before Elena disappeared, the time on the clock, the weather, the route he had taken to the lighthouse. He could describe every detail of the search. But the ordinary things had become difficult to reach.

“She hated pears,” he said at last. “Not the taste. The texture. She said they were fruit pretending to be wet sand.”

Claire gave a small smile. “That’s good.”

“She used to steal the labels off jars and put them on the wrong ones. Salt on the sugar. Tea on the flour. Mum would spend ten minutes trying to figure out why her cake tasted like the sea.”

“Did your mother know it was Elena?”

“She always knew. She pretended not to, because Elena thought she was clever enough to fool everyone.”

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