



**THE  
ANTERAGRAPH**

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The Anteragraph  
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**Your future is haunted.**

## The ANTEROGRAPH

### 1.

I'm standing on my doorstep a few days before I meet Frankie and everything changes forever.

I'm not in the mood for any more meetings today. It's when I'm telling the guy to fuck off that I see them coming through the gap where my gate should be. I hope I never see him again and now I'm wondering who these other two are. I need coffee.

Maybe it's the stress of finding him upstairs snuffling through my underwear like a sweaty gorilla or my lack of sleep, but it takes me a few seconds to register: They look like they're in the navy. They're wearing blue shirts under dark blue jackets. The jackets have velcro shoulder straps, with no rank or insignia. Epaulettes, I think they're called, but military fashion isn't exactly my speciality.

They're both white, neat and look as if they don't smell of anything apart from fresh laundry. The woman's smile is as tight as her braided bun. At ease, love, you'll strain something. The man walks like his underpants are made of corrugated iron. He holds a black leather binder.

'Elizabeth Hobbs?' he says. He's careful, agile.

They both stop a safe distance from the front door, hands gently clasped. Mister StiffPants finally cracks a gentle smile. Miss BunHead takes a sneaky look at my hallway. I ease the door a fraction more closed. How dare thou.

'I promise all my tax is up to date,' I say, 'and there have only ever been two sailors through this door. And both of them left relatively unharmed.'

Mister StiffPants is not amused. In fact, they both look like a pair of tightly-squeezed ballbags.

They flash identification. Small cards with little Union Jacks and brightly-lit photos. Eyes forward, please. Royal Air Force. Okay, so I was close.

Miss BunHead checks behind her and then sort of nods her forehead over my shoulder.

'May we come in?'

I pretend I have a choice. They wipe their shoes, which is probably as cordial as this is going to get and then we hover in the hallway. Miss BunHead looks at the stack of boxes up against the bare wall.

'I've just moved in,' I say and the mentally kick myself for apologies in my own house.

It's true, though. Sort of. I've been in Margate for three months now. I didn't so much as have a piss before I unpacked my files, videos, computers and books. I quickly set up my study and the other room and got to work. Picture frames and scatter cushions can wait.

'Before we get to, uh, the subject, we're going to need to see identification and then we must ask you to sign this.'

Mister StiffPants opens the binder. Clinically sealed under laminated plastic is a document which reads 'Official Secrets Act 1989'.

I fiddle with my bag and nearly drop it. I unzip it, drop my purse, pick it up, give Mister StiffPants my driving license and then remember to breathe. He examines my ID, shows it to Miss BunHead and then gives me a black biro.

Harsh words jump off the pages. Disclosure. Guilty. Perjury. Imprisonment.

I sign it right away and these two tightly-bound entities suddenly relax, released from their bureaucratic curse. Their shoulders drop, they exhale with relief. They're two completely different people. I want to rename them.

'Well thank fuck for that,' says the artist formerly known as Mister StiffPants. 'Elizabeth, thank you. I'm an executive officer with the RAF. Whitley Marsh. Please call me Whitley. This is *senior* executive officer Jacqui Lewis.'

Now they've relaxed a bit, I can take in the full scene. I won't lie, I could have been in trouble. But it would appear I'm not. Not with them, anyway. Jacqui – can I call her that? – exhales small, calming breaths through her mouth. Whitley brings his hand up to his forehead. Despite wiping their shoes, they've tracked dried chunks of mud onto my carpet.

We go through to the lounge, which is as naked as the hallway except for a big green velvet sofa, worn around the edges and dappled with ancient dots of red wine. They sit. I perch on my old footstool opposite them and realise I've accidentally set up a rather comfy interrogation scene.

'Elizabeth, everything you're about to hear and see today is classified at the highest levels.'

'What is this all about–'

'The document you just signed is a ... super big deal.'

'I get that,' I say. 'Fine. I'm listening.'

'At around eleven last night,' begins Whitley, 'something was found near Blean Woods, about four and half miles north of Canterbury.'

'The only problem,' says Jacqui, 'is that nobody can remember what they're looking at.'

## 2.

It's not hard to trace what brought me to Margate three months ago, though honestly I hadn't been here before. I lived way over in the south west, about as far as you can get from Kent.

Mum had died quietly in hospital. Despite her denials, I found that she'd kept gran's notes and diaries. They were incomplete after the fire, but it was enough to take me on one massive nostalgic trip. I remembered a great deal. The kind of stuff only a kid would believe. The stuff the world teaches you to dismiss as soon as you hit the age of reason. And for most people, I reckon, it remains just out of reach, in a trustworthy orbit, along with your first awkward wank and fears of razorblades in halloween sweets.

Then something happens to make you think again, only this time with the mind of an adult. I was living a fraudulently neat life. When I smelled those smoky pages, I felt the ground give way to something else. Something steeper, rockier and far more exciting. I think this happens to a lot of people, but they don't take the chance.

I sold the house and decided to move to Margate. My family has history here. Another thing mum kept secret.

Jacqui, Whitley and I are in their car going down Thanet Way. Frayed high streets give way to tall terraced houses, then thatched country pads. You can always tell how rich an area is by the amount trees and the number of people out jogging.

We should be going faster. I'm belted up in the back and the windows are open. It's been a hot summer so far. Jacqui tilts her head back so I can hear over the wind and engine.

'It was your advert,' she says. 'How did you phrase it, again? Learn to travel in time using your memory. Adjacent phenomena... *deja vu*, ghosts, memory loss. Any takers?'

'You saw the latest one. I went to the loo mid-interview and caught him tugging one off in my bedroom. Anyway, people seem think it's some sort of creative project. My work, I mean.'

Who can blame them, really? My advert did mention '*deja vu*', plus a lot of other stuff. I'm thinking of replacing all the cliched bullshit with my own terminology. If you go looking for monsters, you'll find them. And I don't need any more sci-fi cosplayers turning up. That's not what my work is about. I feel unprepared for whatever today is.

'So did the MoD,' Whitley calls back from the driver's seat. 'Until we found your blog.'

Oh shit, I'd forgotten about that. Some babbling and theorising about nostalgia, hauntings and trauma. I really have to delete that. I'd been terminally *offline* for so long. I was far too excited to think of anything but getting my initial thoughts and ideas out there for anybody who'd listen. I keep all my notes on my hard drive now.

I might publish a website in time. But I'm still working everything out. Gran left a lot of stuff to dig through.

Whitley doesn't stop for any oncoming traffic. We take a sharp corner off the dual carriage way onto a country road with high hedges and farmland beyond. I pretend not to look as a woman begrudgingly pulls over to the side and shouts out of her window. After that, there's no more traffic. The road ahead is cordoned off to anybody but us.

We pull up by one of those big metal farmer gates. It's propped open with a metal pole, traffic cones trace a fluorescent border between the field and the road. Two soldiers stand guard, huge, greased guns primed and ready. I dig my nails into my palms.

A man in a flannel shirt and one of those awful puffed-up waistcoats is having a good shout at another man in a full dark blue RAF uniform. I can hear the words 'bullocks going mental,' 'fucking' and 'field'. RAF man is nodding and saying he understands his concerns. A woman who I presume to be the man's wife appears holding a cordless phone.

One of the soldiers scoops up the traffic cones and we drive a little way into the field. Jacqui waves a blue lanyard in my general direction which I'm to wear at all times.

'Do I really have to?' My jaw clenches whenever anybody mentions dress codes or uniforms. I must have signed away my bodily autonomy along with my freedom of speech. We get out of the car. The soil is baked hard, reassuringly firm.

'Unless you want to get shot at,' says RAF uniform man. 'Roeg. You're Hobbs. I wouldn't have had you here, personally, but then that's why I have Lewis to help advise me.'

His name rhymes with 'vague', which of course he is not. He has, after all, just informed me of my name, which is very helpful. I thought only 1970s newsreaders had had accents like Roeg's.

'Nice belt,' I say.

Jacqui and Whitley salute, which Roeg returns. The formality must be infectious, because I suddenly feel quite important. We walk up the gently sloping field.

'Hobbs, what I'm about to tell you -'

'Elizabeth. Please. I'm not in uniform today, *commandant*.'

Jacqui coughs into her hand.

'And I've already signed the thingy. Everything I hear will stay between me -'

'It is very important that happens.'

'- and these four hedges.'

God, I can't stand being interrupted.

As we get to the top of the field, I see the most marvellous, organised chaos. Five huge khaki trucks, one of which has a rotating radar on the top. People in berets and camo uniforms, more RAF, some in suits.

There are big khaki tents set up.

None of this surprises me, really. But I stare at the huge metal scaffolding which has been erected, draped with black sheets. It looks like a fifty foot tall cinema screen. Two more are positioned at right angles at either end. The black sheets have been secured taut with metal cuffs. I think of pirate ship sails.

Four soldiers stand guard around it. One of them has been crying. His eyes are red and his lips are dry. A herd of silent cows are huddled in the far corner of the field.

We stop in front of the ensemble. Nobody faces the huge screened-off area except us. There are so many guns. I keep my hands where everyone can see them.

'The most efficient way is to experience it for yourself.'

Roeg nods to Jacqui. She accompanies me past trucks and uniforms, within touching distance of the black sheet. I now see that it's more like a curtain, with a vertical slit about three metres long. Jacqui pulls it open and a cold breeze sweeps across the field. The air is thick with the smell of gunpowder and the sound of confusion. The confusion is a mix of the sound of the trucks and the sound of the guns. The confusion is a mix of the sound of the trucks and the sound of the guns. The confusion is a mix of the sound of the trucks and the sound of the guns.

Roeg reaches for my arm and I turn away to follow her.

Back on the other side of the screen curtain thing. Roeg looks at me with pursed lips. Whitley takes a few sheets of paper out of his leather binder. I have a very strong sensation of *deja vu*. It repeats and then fades.

'What did you see, Elizabeth?' says Roeg.

'I ... I have absolutely no idea.'

It's like when you walk into the kitchen and forget what you came in for. I know it was *something*. It's like a blackout, or falling asleep on the train and missing your stop. It's on the tip of my tongue. Jacqui stands just behind me and rests her hand on my shoulder. It's a kind, warm gesture. I look at the soldier who'd been crying.

'Take your time,' she says.

'Exactly,' says Roeg. 'Once you're no longer looking, you can't remember anything about it. We don't even know if it *is* an it. It could be multiple.'

'I know I saw something, but I can't even...'

Whitley hands me three printouts. It's a proof sheet of photos. Photos of trees and the slight bump at the top of the field. Now I can remember the treeline, the portion of field behind the screen. There was something else, but there's a hole in my memory.

He shows me another two sheets of paper. Normal A4 sheets with weak graphite squiggles drawn across the pages.

Whitley says, 'It won't photograph. And these are from a sketch artist. That's all she could come up with. Two of us went in with a tape recorder and described it to each other. Not only could we not remember what we said, but the recording was just gibberish noises.'

Roeg explains to me that someone went in with a digital video camera and the footage was blank. Eight minutes of blackness. They tried the same with videotape with similar results. Radar, nothing. Infrared was a mess. They used a LIDAR scanner, measuring tape (somehow) and x-ray. Only a living being can see it. It exists exclusively in the present. Or so they're theorising.

He also tells me how it/they was/were discovered in the first place. While driving his quad bike through the field, the farmer saw it/them. He noticed the cows huddled in the corner and when he turned to look closer, promptly forgot, hit whatever it is and flipped over. He was uninjured, but experienced the same maddening thing.

After that, he called the police, who then called the MoD. Apparently, they work in tandem with the RAF and fuck knows who else.

Roeg had said 'we do this when this kind of thing happens', but he promptly stopped himself, which I found quite funny. I wonder what goes on behind the scenes.

The farmer refused to sign any official secrets act and his wife was on the phone to the local newspaper. I think Roeg has his hands full there.

So now I stand between Whitley and Jacqui, looking at the huge black square in the middle of a field. Somehow, nestled between three screens, hidden from confused cows and angry landlords is something that makes even a trained soldier cry. Something which doesn't want to be seen or remembered.

'This,' I say, 'is going to change the world. It might answer some questions, but it'll probably pose a lot more.'

'I'm sorry,' says Whitley. 'I think we've given you the wrong idea.'

'This can never see the light of day,' says Jacqui.

'Quite right,' says Roeg. He shields his eyes from the sun and looks ahead at the screen. 'You're going to help us visualise it somehow and we have orders to neutralise it.'

Oh, fucking *am* I?

### 3.

'Look, I don't want to sound like a hippie or anything, but whatever this is, it's important. Neutralise it, indeed.'

We're in one of the tents now, a big old thing with tables and, thankfully, some food. I'm having a stand off with an RAF top brass while Jacqui and Whitley stand by. Roeg doesn't so much as flinch. Why would he? He's probably been in scarier situations than some mad redhead in a Blondie t-shirt squealing at him. But I'm not here to 'neutralise'.

'If I can be candid, for a moment, Elizabeth –'

'You've been nothing but.'

'– if you could make your enemy forget something existed, what's the first thing you'd apply that to?'

Your annoying voice.

Actually, I don't say that. I want to though. No, Roeg practically slaps his forehead when I suggest reconnaissance. Scientific curiosity. He stares blankly as I try to suggest anything but an attack, but reasoning with Roeg is like talking to a breadstick.

Whitley proceeds to lecture me on the 'geopolitical situation' which is 'tense, to say the least, Elizabeth'.

'We have to presume it's a weapon,' says Roeg. He's talking on his phone, one hand holding the flap of the tent up. Beyond, I see a triangle of daylight with people hurrying back and forth. 'Thank you, sir. I understand.'

He comes back over to me.

'Elizabeth, according to Lewis and Whitley, you've knowledge and experience with paranormal ... stuff and the like. I'm not normally inclined to that sort of thing, but if this isn't outside the realms of normality, then I don't know what is.'

'And then there's these *methods*,' says Whitley. 'Time travel using only the mind. Some sort of remote viewing? It's actually pretty amazing. To jolt yourself out of the present by focusing on a past trauma... and bam.'

'It's true,' says Jacqui. 'It's impressive what you've figured out.'

Bam? I haven't figure out anything. But what Whitley says is true, or at least I hope it might be. Gran died in the house fire. If her diaries hadn't been locked away in a cupboard, all her notes would have been completely destroyed. I wouldn't have remembered some of the more unusual aspects of my childhood. Afternoons spent crouched over rocks, trying to look through tiny time portals, as she called them, or watching her remake a scene from her childhood in the garden. She'd sit in it for hours. She told me that this is how you can see through time.

Granddad thought she'd developed a psychosis. So did mum. Of course, the words people used back then were far more cruel. Too brutal for her. Grandma was a flower. I often wondered about the fire.

I wasn't allowed to see her again.

'Whitley,' I say. 'I haven't put any of that on my blog and it wasn't in the advert. The stuff you're talking about is only on my hard drive. Password protected.'

Whitley looks to Roeg.

'You've been spying on me.'

I don't need to say any more than that. But of course, me being me, I do. After a sweaty rant at all three of them about digital privacy laws (of which I know nothing) and my right to sue the asses of them (which I don't think I have), I find myself outside the tent, wanting a cigarette for the first time in ten years.

I sometimes look up the field towards the screen and uniforms. Helicopters pass overhead, circling, disappearing out of view. I wipe furious tears off my chin.

Jacqui comes out of the tent. She loosens her jacket and shakes her dark hair out of the bun. It curls down to her chin and she opens the top button of her blue shirt.

'You're barking up the wrong leg, my love,' I say.

Jacqui rolls her shoulders and looks genuinely exhausted. 'Hmm?'

'Roeg's probably thinking I don't respond well to military bureaucracy. He probably thinks that I don't get laid much and that because I'm a wee bit butch and wear cargo pants, that you might have better luck if you shake your hair at me and loosen up your uniform.'

'Is he right?'

I look at the grass in front of me.

'Not entirely.'

Jacqui doesn't ask for clarification, but says, 'Actually, I'm off duty for bit. Whitley and I were here first yesterday. I haven't slept in thirty hours. I don't remember when I last ate.'

I cross my arms and watch another helicopter.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to... What do I do?'

Jacqui points a tiny, quiet finger ahead of her and gestures, so we walk together.

'We did access your personal computer.'

'For fuck's sake.'

'Well, not me, personally. It's easy to do.'

I run my tongue hard across the inside of my lower incisors. Tense jaw. Eyes focus on the yellowed grass.

'There's a few people around the country with similar work to yours. You were the closest *and* you'd gone a step further. Not just theorising about hauntology and nostalgia and stuff, but actually trying it and recording your results. Organised. Scientific. It's really good.'

'Thanks. But I'm confused. I mean, not that I want him to, but surely Roeg could point one of his big exploding toys at the general area and just go for it. Why do you need me?'

Jacqui looks back to the tent. Then she takes a glance around us. We've walked a fair bit and everyone around us is busy. She swallows hard.

'Roeg has orders to find out what it is, if possible, but to neutralise it even at the cost of knowing.'

A tiny gold crucifix catches the light. She does her top button back up.

And then she says, 'But I *need* to know. And I'm not the only one. We're not all robots in the forces.'

I can't believe I'm about to do this, but I need to know too.

'Okay, Jacqui. Can we get one of those big trucks back to mine?'

#### 4.

There's not enough time on the drive to explain the details. If Jacqui and Whitley have seen everything on my hard drive (a daunting thought for anybody, I'm sure), then they know all they need to.

This all comes from Gran. In turn, this comes from her gran. Beyond that, I don't know. It could all be very old. This is going to sound bonkers, but I'm way beyond caring about that. Here goes.

You can create a portal, fissure, or whatever you want to call it, through which you can view the past. Even, enter into it. I don't think it happens physically. When Grandma started building a replica of a childhood trip to the beach in her back garden, she started believing she was actually there. All I saw was her sitting on a pile of sand from the garden centre, while the neighbour stared out of his top window.

Gran used to say that our attachment to the past could be used as a tool. You could float free of the present and go whenever you wanted. All you needed to do was persevere, sometimes for years. You needed to lose yourself in a living *deja vu*. The stronger the memory, the greater the chance of being able to dissociate yourself.

Like I said, it sounds bonkers, right? Mum thought so too. She dismissed it all as the scary rantings of her mentally ill mother. So when she left me a confessional note with all gran's diaries, I knew there must be something to it. She'd just been too scared to find out what.

So I tried it myself. The journals said it can take up to two years, but for me, six months is all I needed. Because I'm an arsehole to myself, I recreated the worst day I ever had at secondary school. I got a school table from a skip, one of those awful plastic chairs and I laid out some of my old school notepads and my year nine pencil case. That was the key. You had to use authentic articles from the time you want to inhabit. If it ends up looking like a shoddy, miniature theatre set, you've done well.

Now, I stand here, watching three uniformed officers unload it all from the truck. It's jarring, the dutiful way they carry a modular recreation of an intensely sad time in my life. They set it up in front of the slit in the curtain. I arrange the pencil case and notepads myself.

Everyone except Roeg, Whitley and Jacqui goes back to whatever they were doing. I'm glad. This is a private moment between me, the cows, three RAF personnel, a tripod-mounted camera and whatever waits beyond the curtain.

I sit down on the chair. The summer sun is like a spotlight. Usually I do this in the dim, locked room at home. My ass is far too big for this chair. I wrap my arms around me and I put my elbows on the table. I take out a pencil and chew the rubber on the end. Cold, furry plastic. I smell the inside of the pencil case. Wood shavings, old grey ink.

Then I repeat the words back to myself, like some magical incantation. The cruelty of the classroom activates something. My eyes go briefly out of focus.

I want to get up and hide, but I stay with it. I want to lash out and break something, but I stay with it. I was just a kid. We were all just kids. Why did they hate me?

Then I feel like I'm falling. My stomach lurches like I'm in an elevator. I stop. In a blink, it is night time. The soldiers are gone, so are the curtains behind me. I'm not sitting at the desk any more. I'm on the ground. It's cool. It's silent.

I can see the streetlights down by road, the orange glare of what I guess could be Canterbury in the distance. Something's wrong with the light, too solid, too dead. It's always like this. The treeline is silhouetted against the setting sky. It's a clear evening. First stars. This is the night before. I think I could have gone further, but I don't need to.

I wonder what Jacqui and Whitley are seeing right now.

I hope I see it arrive, whatever it is. I have no idea if this is going to work or not, but since I'm not physically here, I might be able to see it and remember. It's a back-of-a-fag-packet theory, but that's all I have for now. It's all I ever have, really.

Time doesn't pass easily here. I don't move from the spot.

I look down and see I'm wearing the clothes I wore yesterday. Now that's something. Have I hijacked my past self somehow? I poke the grass with the inside of my foot, but it doesn't move at all. It's frozen in place. So I make myself remember the smell of the classroom, the English lessons which I loved, despite the taunts. I feel myself going upwards. Then the sky is a little darker.

Whitley said this happened around eleven. Last night, I went to bed at half past ten, read for a bit and then slept. So I look down at myself and imagine myself back in school again. Another rise. Same clothes. I do this over and over again, until I finally see myself wearing my cheap green dressing gown.

I'm going frame by frame. Either the past doesn't move like a video, or I'm not doing it right. This is precisely why I advertised for volunteers. It's so difficult to do *and* record. You can't bring anything with you. There'll be time to figure out the specifics later.

Oh my, is that it?

At first it's hard to see in the darkness because the thing itself is black. It moves closer. It's like a human-sized jellyfish. It has a black bubble, the size of my head, which hovers about six feet above ground, with several *tentacles*, I think you could say, trailing from it. They drag along the ground. It has some thicker, shorter appendages, writhing with a slow, rhythmic intelligence. Something crystalline throbs beneath its carapace. The way it hovers reminds me of a floating black balloon tied to a small weight with a ribbon.

It glides towards me as if in a breeze, but there's nothing incidental about this. It flexes with intention and determination. It perceives me. It's made of a glass-like black substance, flexible, shiny. One of its thicker appendages wriggles towards me ever so gently. We're face to face, so to speak.

I stay rigid. Once I realise it won't hurt me, I can't stop smiling. It's absolutely beautiful. A few of its longer arms wrap cordially around my ankles and another few slither round my waist. There is nothing aggressive about this. There's a distant crackling, buzzing sound.

I think I was right. Whatever defense mechanism it uses only works on the physical brain. I haven't figured out which part of us travels back in time, but it isn't affected by this. I make a mental note.

Okay, here I go.

'Well... uh. Fuck. Hi. I don't know what you are. And I don't know if you understand what I am or what I'm saying. But please understand this: they're going to destroy you.'

It continues to hover, the translucent bubble swaying side to side as if to music. The tentacles wash over my legs and shoulders. I reach out to touch one and it feels like plastic tubing. The end of its tentacle coils around my finger. It's the same temperature as my own skin.

'This is weird. Sorry. I don't mean you're weird. I mean... you are unusual. But then I probably look quite odd to you too. Um. I know you probably don't mean to, but you're scaring people. When most people get scared, they get angry. They're going to hurt you and I don't want that. Did you get lost? Or maybe you've always been here.'

Nothing.

So I do the only thing I can think of and I wave my arms like a lunatic and begin shouting at it. I feel bad, but it works. Its tentacles withdraw and I feel a current of cold air as it shrinks away from me. It wriggles off into the darkness and I don't see it again.

When I come round, I can feel the hot sun on my arms. It's a relief. I open my eyes and squint after what must have been an hour in the darkness of the night before Jacqui and Whitley steady me as I stand up. I feel somewhat ridiculous, a grown adult in a school chair. Then I feel fabulous. I did it.

Jacqui begins to speak, but I grab her by the arm, and practically drag the poor woman through the opening in the screen.

A flight of pigeons scatters from the treetops and swirl above us, the sun hits the ground like a miracle. I turn away and I can remember it all. I don't see the strange creature but I don't forget it either. Whitley comes through, followed by Roeg. We repeat: look, turn away, remember. But I know I'm the only one who remembers what was really there.

'It was beautiful,' I say.

I burst out laughing as the herd of ungainly cows comes trotting hesitantly across the top of the field.

'It's gone? It's *gone*,' says Roeg.

'It was connected to its past self. Untethered in time. I think. I scared it off. Harmless,' I say. 'It's safe.' I'm absolutely delighted.

'What was it? I'll need a full report. Also, in the interests of national security –'

I cut Roeg off. 'You, sir,' I say, 'can kiss my fanny.' As I stroll off down the hill, I call back: 'Invoice will be in mail.'

I turn back to see the black curtains drop to the floor and I requisition a handsome pair of soldiers to help pack up my childhood trauma and drive it back to mine, via the off license, if you please.

## 5.

Two days later, I don't need time travel or remote viewing to know who's driven half way across Kent to knock on my door.

I let Jacqui in and we sit on my sofa.

'You've unpacked,' she says. 'Room looks nice.'

She's off duty today. She's got her hair down and she wears a yellow dress and a grey cotton jacket. I have to look down to remember what I put on this morning. I'd been shifting boxes around all yesterday and nailing hooks to the walls. It's about time I made this place liveable.

'Did Roeg get my email? I sent him a report. I was just being a dick. I would've written one anyway.'

Jacqui smiles and says, 'He did. I popped round to see how you are, but also because he asked me to.'

'What, the commandant couldn't find time to come here himself?'

She frowns. Immediately I've missed the mark. I often do this.

'He's away. I've served under him for three years,' she says. She fiddles with the gold crucifix. 'He's a bit stoic. But he's a good man. He has absolute respect for what you did, putting it on the line like that. You couldn't have known how it would've played out.'

'I told him to kiss my fanny.'

'He also has a sense of humour. He likes you. He also wanted me to remind you that you signed the official secrets act and remain under oath for the rest of your life.'

'There's always a catch,' I say. 'Tell him I have a firewall now and to stop looking at my browser history.'

Jacqui takes a white envelope out of her bag and hands it to me with a smile. 'This is for you.'

I open it and inside is a cheque enclosed within a handwritten note. I get a tingle up my wrists when I see how much the cheque is made out for.

'You didn't send an invoice in the end, but this is standard pay for a one-off advisory role.'

I'd procrastinated. I'd spent weeks walking along the cliffs and beaches in this beautiful area and I hadn't made time to job-hunt yet. I don't even know what I could do any more. This would keep me going for months.

I misjudged Roeg.

After a while, I bring in two glasses of wine. I show Jacqui the house, the courtyard garden with the rusty chiminea, my workspace with piles of VHS tapes, files and its shitty carpet. Then we go out to the front and sit on the doorstep, with our legs in the sun.

'I haven't been able to read your report. What did you see?'

At first, I'm not sure how to answer. I could tell her about the innocent, strange creature. I could tell her about how the last two nights have been filled with dreams about the frozen frames of time, paused like degraded videotape. I could tell her what the thing looked like and how its coiling embrace had felt strangely parental.

Instead, I catch a glance at her crucifix and say, 'I saw that I have a lot of work to do. The surface of what we can see – this sunlight, this town, my garden, your dress – it's only the beginning. The top layer. Like that big curtain in the field, there's so much more behind it. I'm not a religious woman, but I always thought ... Well, whatever works.'

We talk more about gods and sunlight. When we finish our wine, Jacqui stands at the precipice of the front door.

'I don't want to set a bad example by breaking *my* oath,' she says. 'But take care, won't you? Because you're right. There's a lot going on right now, beneath the surface.'

I already watch the news. For once, I don't want to know more.

Jacqui goes to get the train home and I don't know if I will ever see her again. I don't even know if we're friends. In one hand is another glass of wine and in the other is the note from Roeg.

'Dear Ms. Hobbs,

Your courage is admirable and your fortitude an inspiration. This remuneration is on behalf of His Majesty's Government with thanks.

Listen to J. Our futures are haunted.

Please dispose of this communique by burning.'

I definitely got Roeg wrong. Either way, I have no intention of burning this. I'll file it away with all my other secrets.

Then, the young man comes walking down the path. He is about to change everything for me, but of course I don't know this yet. I slip the note into my pocket. I check my phone and see the date and time. Given the last few days, I think I can forgive myself for forgetting our appointment.

He's barely twenty five. He has a ragged topknot and skinny arms with a few scars, pearly white on tan.

'Elizabeth, right?'

'You must be Francis.'

'Yes! Frankie, actually. So, is this the time travel dating service? I'm five foot nine, built like a dandelion, I *don't* think you're mad ... and is there any more of that wine?'

And that's how I met Frankie and how everything changed.