

Ghost Grandad

Mostly Yes

Chrissy Idle

GHOST GRANDAD: MOSTLY YES

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Chapter 1

Sophia

Sophia Whitfield stood naked in her walk-in wardrobe at 5:47 AM, surveying forty-seven identical white T-shirts with the intensity of a General planning an invasion. Each cost £300. Each had microscopic differences that her ten million followers would notice, screenshot, and discuss in the comments. The Balenciaga had a slightly higher neckline. The Vetements was a fraction more oversized. The Ganni was ethically sourced, which played well with her eco-conscious subset.

Her phone – never more than arm's length away – showed seventeen notifications already. Some East Coast Americans were still awake, consuming last night's content. She scrolled through the comments on her bedtime routine video, mentally cataloguing which products were getting the most attention. The silk pillowcase was trending. Good. That sponsorship alone was worth £50k.

"The Vetements," she decided, pulling it on. The fabric had to settle just right – not too perfect, that looked try-hard. She needed 'I woke up like this' energy, which ironically took forty-five minutes to achieve.

Her phone buzzed. ITV. Again.

Hi Soph! Following up on our offer. £85k for the documentary on influencer families. Thoughts? Would love to showcase your journey! x

She typed while applying concealer in the precise triangular pattern her makeup artist had taught her: Make it 100 and I'll consider it

Done! Can we film at yours next week?

My rate for home filming is separate. Another 50.

...I'll check with production

Of course they'd pay. They always did. Channel 4 had paid 75 just for that awful morning show appearance where they'd tried to shame her about Mila's screen time. She'd cried on cue (glycerin drops helped) and gained 200k followers from the "brave mummy under attack" narrative. The Daily Mail had run three separate articles. Her management had called it a "masterclass in crisis PR."

She checked her ring light setup – three lights, strategically placed to eliminate shadows while maintaining that 'natural' glow. The morning light was wrong today, too yellow, too honest. She adjusted the temperature to 5600K, added a subtle filter. Her

followers thought they were seeing her real morning routine. They were seeing a carefully orchestrated performance that had taken two years to perfect.

"KATYA!" She called. "Green juice! Four degrees!"

Silence. Probably on her phone. The girl spent half her time scrolling through Instagram, ironically judging the very culture that paid her wages. Polish, mid-twenties, perpetually sullen. But she'd signed an ironclad NDA and knew better than to sell stories. The last nanny – that Welsh girl, what was her name? – hadn't been so careful. That TikTok about Sophia's "real morning routine" had cost a fortune in lawyers and a carefully orchestrated counter-narrative about "privacy violations" and "trust in the workplace."

The juice had to be exactly four degrees. She'd done a sponsored post about optimal nutrient absorption at specific temperatures. Made up nonsense, but it had gone viral. Now she was stuck drinking freezing sludge every morning to maintain the lie.

Her reflection caught her eye as she passed the full-length mirror. Size 6. Could be size 4 if she cut carbs completely, but that would mean giving up the twice-weekly pasta posts with Mila. Those were gold – 'relatable mummy' content that showed she was "just like everyone else." Never mind that she threw up afterwards, or that Mila usually ate alone while Sophia filmed.

"Morning, babes!" She switched on instantly, muscle memory taking over. The smile – practised ten thousand times – spread across her face. "It's your girl Soph, and oh my GOD, you guys, my skin is GLOWING this morning thanks to my new partnership with—"

A small voice from the doorway: "Mummy?"

Without breaking the take, Sophia flicked a hand toward the door. Not now. They'd discussed this – no interruptions during filming. Mila knew the rules.

"Glow Beauty! I've been using their vitamin C serum for exactly three weeks now, and I'm literally obsessed. Like, OBSESSED obsessed."

The comments flooded in immediately. Hearts, fire emojis, the desperate devotion of strangers who thought they knew her. Someone had already screenshotted her T-shirt and identified the brand. Good. The Vetements PR would love that. Might even repost it.

Love you Soph!

That shirt is £££ must be nice

Looking tired hun, everything ok? x

She deleted the last comment, blocked the user. Negativity was cancer. Her feed was a carefully curated paradise where she was always glowing, always grateful, always #blessed.

Her phone showed seventeen unread messages from her manager, three from her accountant, and one from her father. She left his unread. He'd want to "pop round" again, probably to deliver another gentle lecture about "being present," and she didn't have it in her this morning. Later. She'd ring him later.

"KATYA! WHERE'S MY JUICE?"

The au pair appeared, green juice in one hand, phone in the other. Twenty-three? Twenty-four? Young enough to still have dreams, old enough to have had them crushed. Perfect nanny material.

"Here."

Sophia took it, sipped, grimaced. "Temperature?"

"Is... cold?"

"I said EXACTLY four degrees. This is at least six." She thrust it back. "Remake it."

Katya muttered something in Polish. Sophia made a mental note to dock her pay. Attitude was not part of the package. She paid above market rate – well, slightly above – and expected perfection in return.

She turned back to her phone, scrolling through the morning's metrics. Engagement down 3%.

Unacceptable. The algorithm was getting harder to please, demanding more, always more. She needed something viral.

"Mummy, I'm hungry." Mila again, hovering in the doorway like a little ghost in her Peppa Pig pyjamas.

"Ask Katya."

"She's making your juice."

"Then wait." But Sophia had already lifted the phone — the light through the window had caught Mila just so, barefoot and wistful, *a moment*, and the reflex was faster than thought. Mila didn't have to be told to pose; she only stood there, looking the way she already looked. Twelve frames. Sophia picked through them for the best one and stopped.

In the third frame, the way Mila's face had fallen was James — the exact look he had worn reading the paper, the one she had not seen on a living face in years. Sitting there now on their daughter, who had never met him and wore him in her face without knowing it.

For a second the curated morning fell away and something opened under her, wide and lightless — the thing the ring light and the schedule and the noise were all turned up to tune out.

Then the likes climbed — 47, 112, 238, 502 — and the familiar warmth came in over the top, the way it always did, and she let it. She chose the picture and posted it: "Caught this little moment before the day swept us up. They're only small for a heartbeat — savouring the slow mornings while we have them 🍷
#SlowMornings #PresentNotPerfect #Motherhood

#Grateful" Then she closed the photo, the way she closed everything over.

"Can I have breakfast now?"

"What? Oh. Yes, whatever. Katya will sort it."

Mila drifted away. Someone had commented that she was "such an inspiration." Another said "the mummy we all should be." A verified account – some reality TV person – had liked it. Good. Very good.

Her DMs were exploding. Three new brand partnership offers. A podcast wanting her as a guest. Someone claiming to be Netflix, probably fake but worth checking. And dozens of messages from followers – lonely women who thought she was their friend, who poured out their hearts to a stranger who would never read their words.

She posted a story: "You guys! The love this morning! I'm so overwhelmed by you all 💕"

More hearts. More fire. More hollow validation from people who would turn on her in a second if she showed them who she really was.

The bathroom mirror revealed what the ring lights hid. Fine lines around her eyes – "expression lines," her aesthetician called them, recommending Botox. The slight sag of her jawline that no amount of gua sha could fix. Thirty-two and already fighting a losing battle against time. In influencer years, she was practically geriatric.

Her phone buzzed. The management company: BBC Three wants you for a panel about social media and mental health

The irony wasn't lost on her. She typed back: Fee?

They're saying it's for awareness, so standard BBC rates

Pass. I don't do charity

What if we angle it as building your serious media profile?

My profile is worth 10 million. Tell them 40k or nothing

She knew they'd come back. They always did. The traditional media pretended to despise her while desperately needing her audience. She'd played this game enough times. Start high, let them negotiate down to 25k, everyone wins.

"Mummy?" Mila was back, dressed now in the designer outfit Sophia had been gifted for a post last month. "Can we go to the park today?"

"It's Saturday, darling. Mummy's filming all day."

"But you promised—"

"I promised nothing. I said maybe. Ask Grandad to take you."

Mila's face crumpled slightly. But Sophia was already planning her afternoon – gym selfies, lunch at Sketch

(they always reposted her stories), afternoon shopping haul, evening skincare routine. No time for parks. Parks were where normal mothers went. She was not normal. Normal didn't pay for this house.

"Babes!" She beamed at the camera. "Let me show you my morning skincare routine. You're literally not ready for this glow!"

Behind her, invisible to the camera, Mila stood watching her mother perform happiness for strangers, learning that love was measured in hearts and views, that attention had to be earned by being perfect, that she would never be as interesting as the black mirror in her mother's hand.

The green juice sat untouched, slowly warming past four degrees, past six, past the point where it mattered at all.

Chapter 2

Katya

Katya Kowalski stood in the kitchen at 6:15 AM, watching four degrees of green sludge drip into a glass that cost more than she made in a week. The thermometer read 4.2 degrees. Close enough. Though Sophia would probably taste the difference – or pretend to. The woman claimed she could detect a single degree of temperature variance, like some kind of smoothie sommelier.

Six months in this house. Six months of "KATYA!" screamed like she was summoning a servant. Which, Katya supposed, she was. Just one with a Masters in Economics from Warsaw University, fluent in four languages, and a thesis on cryptocurrency adoption in emerging markets. Not that anyone here had bothered to ask about her qualifications. They'd seen "Polish girl, needs visa sponsorship" and hired her on the spot.

The kitchen was ridiculous. Everything white marble and chrome, designed to photograph well rather than function. The fridge was some smart monstrosity that tracked expiration dates and ordered groceries automatically – half of which went bad because Sophia survived on green juice and air. The coffee machine cost more than a car and required an engineering degree to operate. Katya had mastered it out of spite.

She checked her phone. 6:18. Piotr would be awake in Warsaw, getting ready for his shift at the hospital. A real job. Helping real people. Not making sure some narcissist's kale-spinach-spirulina mixture was precisely four degrees.

Morning beautiful. How's the princess?

She smiled despite herself. Piotr always knew how to make her feel human.

Asleep still but will wake up soon and demand her juice is exactly right temperature or world will end.

 When you coming home?

October. Maybe November. Depends on bonus.

Too long. I miss you

Miss you too

She did miss him. Missed Warsaw. Missed her tiny apartment near the university where she could walk to proper pierogi and where nobody screamed her

name like she was a dog. But the money here was too good to pass up. She had to suffer this hell in order to start her own consulting firm. Maybe develop that app idea she'd been working on. Anything to never have to serve another entitled British woman her precisely temperatured smoothie.

"KATYA! GREEN JUICE!"

Speak of the devil. Or think of her, apparently.

Katya grabbed the glass, added a tiny bit of her saliva – just a morning gift – and headed upstairs. The house was like a museum. Everything beige and cream and "greige" (a word Sophia used unironically). No personality. No warmth. Just surfaces designed to reflect ring lights and make everything look expensive and empty.

She found Sophia in her wardrobe, having what appeared to be an existential crisis over identical white shirts.

"Here," Katya said, handing over the juice.

Sophia took it without looking at her. Never looked at her, really. Katya was furniture that moved and occasionally spoke. "Finally. And Mila?"

"What about her?"

"Breakfast? School uniform? Basic childcare?" The condescension dripped like honey. Poisoned honey.

"Is Saturday."

"So?"

"No school on Saturday." You stupid cow. Your own daughter's schedule and you don't even know.

Sophia waved her away, already lost in her phone. Katya watched her for a moment – this woman who had everything and deserved none of it. Born rich, married richer, widowed with life insurance that would feed half of Poland, and now making millions for... what? Existing? Smiling at a camera? Telling lonely women to buy things they didn't need with money they didn't have?

The injustice of it burned. Katya's mother was a nurse. Worked twelve-hour shifts, came home exhausted, feet swollen, back aching. Made in a year what Sophia spent on handbags. Her father taught mathematics to teenagers who didn't want to learn, marking papers until his eyes hurt, believing in education even when the system failed him. Real work. Real contribution.

And here was Sophia, making more in a month than they'd see in a lifetime, for what? Lying about juice temperature?

Back in the kitchen, Mila sat at the breakfast bar, still in her Peppa Pig pyjamas, clutching that book her grandfather had given her. *The Wind in the Willows*. Old-fashioned but sweet. The only gift from him she was allowed to keep "because it didn't make noise."

"Morning, little one," Katya said, softer now. Not the child's fault her mother was a nightmare.

"Morning, Katya. Is Mummy awake?"

"Yes. Filming."

"Oh." The disappointment was routine now. "Can I have breakfast?"

"Of course. What would you like?"

"Cereal?"

"How about eggs? Real breakfast?"

Mila's face lit up. "With soldiers?"

"With soldiers."

Katya busied herself making proper food. Soft boiled eggs, buttered toast cut into strips, orange juice (not green, not four degrees, just normal). She even cut the apple into stars the way Mila liked, though it took extra time. The child ate alone too often. Least she could do was make it special.

"Katya?" Mila asked between bites. "Why doesn't Mummy like me?"

Christ. The questions this kid asked. Five years old and already figuring out the truth.

"She likes you," Katya lied smoothly. "She's just... busy."

"She likes her phone more."

What could she say? It was true. Sophia looked at that screen with more love than she'd ever shown her

daughter. Stroked it more gently. Spoke to it more sweetly. Gave it her full attention for hours while Mila got scraps.

"Your Mummy loves you," Katya tried again. "She just shows it differently."

"By buying things?"

Too smart. This kid was too smart.

"Eat your eggs before they get cold."

Mila obeyed, but the question hung in the air. Katya's own mother had been poor but present. Hugged her every morning. Read to her every night. Knew her favourite colour (purple), her best friend's name (Maja), her dreams (to be an astronaut, then a vet, then an economist).

Sophia probably couldn't name a single thing Mila loved besides that iPad.

"Will Grandad visit today?" Mila asked hopefully.

"Maybe." Katya actually hoped he would. Marcus Whitfield was the only decent person in this family. Always said please and thank you. Actually looked at her when he spoke. Remembered she was studying for her CFA exams in the evenings. Once brought her Polish chocolates because he'd "seen them and thought of her." She'd nearly cried. Nobody here thought of her as a person with preferences and memories.

"I hope so. He reads to me."

"That's nice."

"Mummy says reading is inefficient. Says I should watch educational videos instead."

Of course she did. Everything had to be optimised, monetised, recorded. Even childhood.

"KATYA! I NEED YOU!"

The screech from upstairs. Now what? Wrong temperature water? Towel folded incorrectly? Air molecules not arranged to her satisfaction?

"Coming!" She squeezed Mila's shoulder. "Finish breakfast. Watch your shows after, yes?"

The kid nodded, already reaching for the iPad. Another zombie in training. But what else was there? Sophia wouldn't play with her. Katya was paid to keep her quiet, not entertained. The iPad did both.

Upstairs, Sophia stood in her bathroom, pointing at the toilet like it had personally offended her.

"It's making a noise."

"What noise?"

"A... toilet noise. Fix it."

"I'm not plumber."

"Then call one! God, do I have to think of everything?"

Yes, Katya thought. Because thinking is so hard when your brain is full of follower counts and ring light settings.

"I call," she said.

"Now! I'm filming in here later. It can't make noise during my bathroom tour."

Bathroom tour. Thousands of people wanted to watch this woman's bathroom. Where she did... bathroom things. The world had gone insane.

"Also," Sophia continued, scrolling through her phone, "I need you to take Mila this afternoon. I have a brand meeting."

"Is my day off."

"I'll pay overtime."

"Double."

"Fine. Whatever. Just keep her quiet and away from the house. The ITV crew might come by for a recce. And make sure you're completely out of sight if they do. Last time you walked past a window and I had to pay an editor to blur you out."

More filming. More strangers in the house. More pretending this was a happy home with a single super mum doing it all alone, instead of an expensive prison where a little girl was raised by screens and a bitter Polish girl who had to hide like a ghost.

"Anything else?" Katya asked.

"Yes. I can hear you walking around when I'm filming. The floorboards creak. Try to stay in the kitchen or better yet, take Mila out when I'm recording. My followers think I do everything myself."

Your followers are idiots, Katya thought.

"I understand," she said, which was true. She understood perfectly. She understood that she was expected to be invisible, silent, non-existent. A ghost who somehow still managed childcare, cooking, and cleaning.

"Oh, and if anyone asks, you're the cleaner who comes twice a week. Not live-in. I can't have people thinking I have help with Mila."

The lie was so casual, so practised. Erase Katya's existence to maintain the illusion. Single mother doing it all. So brave. So inspiring. So completely false. The widow part was real — Sophia's husband James had died on a French mountain three months before Mila was born, and the brand had been built on that one true fact — but everything around it was scaffolding. Night nurses, nannies, housekeepers, Katya. The doing it all was the work of a staff team, all carefully cropped out of frame.

Back downstairs, Mila had finished breakfast and was deep in some YouTube video. Another kid opening toys they'd never play with. Shrieking with fake excitement about plastic garbage made by children in

factories. The algorithm feeding her an endless stream of artificial joy.

Katya started cleaning up, planning her escape. Three more months. Maybe four. Then goodbye to four-degree juice and bathroom tours and being erased from someone else's narrative.

Her phone buzzed. A text from Marcus Whitfield. I'm planning to visit Mila today. Will you be there?

Grandad. The only light in this designer darkness.

Yes. Come anytime. She misses you.

Thank you, Katya. See you soon.

She asked about you at breakfast

How is she?

Katya paused. How honest should she be? This man clearly loved his granddaughter, but he was also Sophia's father. Blood versus truth.

She is lonely I think

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

I know. I'm trying to... It's complicated.

She needs you

I'll be there by 10. Thank you for being kind to her, Katya.

At least someone in this family remembered her

name. Used it like she was a person, not a servant. Not a secret to be hidden.

She looked at Mila, still hypnotized by the screen. In Poland, children played outside. Built forts from sticks. Got dirty. Came home exhausted and happy. Here, childhood was curated content consumed in silence while the adults who were supposed to love them performed their lives for strangers.

"Mila," she called. "Your Grandad is coming today."

The child's face transformed. Pure joy. "Really?"

"Really. At ten."

"Can we make him tea? He likes Earl Grey with one sugar."

Of course she remembered. This five-year-old knew more about her grandfather's preferences than Sophia knew about her daughter's.

"We can make tea," Katya agreed.

"And biscuits? The ones from Waitrose he likes?"

"We check if we have."

They did have them. Katya had bought them herself last week, remembering Marcus mentioning them once. Small rebellions. Tiny kindnesses in this cold house.

Sophia swept through the kitchen, phone in one hand, designer bag in the other. "I'm going to the gym. Then

Pilates. Then lunch with the Chanel team. I'll be back by four. Maybe five. Actually, don't wait up."

"Mummy!" Mila called. "Grandad's coming!"

"Lovely. Tell him I said hi." She was already at the door. "Oh, and Katya? The cleaner comes at two. Make sure she knows to stay out of my filming room. And if she asks, you don't live here. You're just... visiting. To help with cleaning."

The cleaner who came twice a week was supposed to think Katya was also a cleaner who just happened to be there all the time. The mental gymnastics required to maintain Sophia's lies were exhausting.

Then she was gone, leaving behind a cloud of expensive perfume and emptiness.

Mila's shoulders sagged. "She forgot to kiss me goodbye."

"She's in hurry," Katya said weakly.

"She's always in a hurry."

They stood in the pristine kitchen, au pair and child, both abandoned in different ways. Both erased from the official story. Outside, Notting Hill was waking up. Normal families were probably having breakfast together. Reading newspapers. Planning their Saturdays. Being present and visible and acknowledged.

"Come," Katya said. "We make special tea for your Grandad. And maybe..." She made a decision. "Maybe we bake real biscuits? Together?"

"Really?" Mila's eyes went wide. "Mummy says the kitchen is for photos, not cooking."

"Well, Mummy is not here. And if she comes back, I hide in pantry like always."

Small rebellions. Tiny kindnesses. And the bitter joke that she'd have to hide the evidence of actually using the kitchen for its intended purpose.

Her phone showed a message from Piotr: Send me a photo. I miss your face.

She looked at herself in the black screen. Twenty-four years old. Masters degree. Four languages. Reduced to serving temperature-specific juice to a woman who pretended she didn't exist.

Later, she typed. When I don't look so invisible.

???

Never mind. I love you.

Love you too. October can't come fast enough.

October. Freedom. Her own life again. Existing in public. Until then, she'd make biscuits with a lonely little girl and wait for the one family member who remembered they were all human.

The kitchen timer showed 8:47 AM. One hour and thirteen minutes until Marcus arrived. One hour and thirteen minutes until Mila would smile properly. One hour and thirteen minutes until someone would say "please" and mean it.

Katya preheated the oven and pulled out flour, butter, sugar. Real ingredients for real biscuits. Sophia would hate the mess, the smell, the calories in the air. Good thing she'd never know. Katya had become expert at erasing all evidence of actual life from this Instagram-ready tomb.

"Right, little one," she said to Mila. "You want to help?"

The iPad lay forgotten as Mila scrambled off her chair, eager to do something real with someone who saw her.

Small rebellions. Tiny kindnesses. Existing despite being erased.

In this cold house, they mattered more than all the followers in the world.

Chapter 3

Hugo

Hugo Ashcombe sat in the leased Range Rover at 9:47 AM, parked on the gravel drive of Sophia Whitfield's house, surveying the wreckage of his finances with the strange calm of a man who had been doing it for so long the figures no longer felt real.

The Range Rover itself: three months in arrears. The Fulham flat – sublet from Tarquin Beresford, who still didn't know that Hugo had, over the summer, quietly sub-sub-let it for six weeks to a Saudi banker while Tarquin was in Verbier. The banker was long gone. The flat was Hugo's again. The money was not. The Centurion card had declined twice this week, once at Daphne's, which by Monday would have travelled the entire Old Etonian WhatsApp group like something contagious. Various tradesmen, the dry cleaner, a woman called Yvette who did things to his hair, his

private club. Three years of accumulated lifestyle on credit, all of it now coming due in the same financial quarter, in the manner of a slow-motion concertina collapse.

And then Bobby. Who he tried not to think about before lunch.

The plan, six months in, had always been simple. Marry Sophia. Endure two or three years. Divorce on extremely favourable grounds. Retire to the Cotswolds with a lurcher and a discreet mistress in Pimlico. He had budgeted for eighteen months. He had not budgeted for the increasingly difficult fact that Sophia, despite ten million followers and a net worth she discussed openly at dinner parties, did not actually appear to be in love with him. With anyone, really. Including herself.

He checked his reflection in the rear-view mirror. Forty-one, but a good forty-one. Cheekbones holding. Hair – touched up monthly by Yvette – still mostly his own. He had been told three times in the last fortnight that he looked like a young Hugh Grant, which used to be a compliment and was now, he was beginning to suspect, a soft obituary.

His phone buzzed. Bobby. He thumbed it dark without reading.

He had a key. Sophia had given him one in week eleven, in a state of post-coital generosity he had

silently filed under useful. He had not, this morning, rung ahead. The plan — in so far as it was a plan — was to arrive unannounced with the air of a man too in love to be organised about it, to be found in the kitchen looking devoted, to bank the credit. Six months in, with the figures doing what the figures were doing, a Saturday could not simply be allowed to pass without maintenance.

The hall smelled of orchids and money.

"Hello? Babe? Anyone?"

The Polish girl emerged from the kitchen with the expression of someone who had been hoping he was a delivery driver and was disappointed he was not.

"She is at gym."

"Ah."

"Since eight. She is not back for hours. There is a class, then the man who does her arms, then she has the thing in Notting Hill." Katya delivered this the way she delivered everything, as plain weather. "You did not know."

"I thought I'd surprise her."

"She is surprised by no one. She has a schedule."

He absorbed this. The entire purpose of the morning had just walked out from under him, and the sensible thing — the dignified thing — was to leave. He found, standing in the orchid-scented hall, that he could not

quite make himself do it, because leaving thirty seconds after arriving was its own small confession, and there was a child somewhere in the house, and a Polish girl now watching him work it out.

"Katya! Looking radiant."

He gave her the smile. The smile had got him into Cambridge, out of Cambridge, and through two funerals he had no business attending (one for the canapés, one for a woman he'd met exactly once – long story). It bounced off Katya like sleet off granite.

"Coffee?" she said.

"You're an angel."

He followed her into the kitchen, where, he noticed with mild astonishment, someone appeared to have been cooking. There was flour on a tea towel. Real biscuits – homemade, slightly wonky, plainly the work of a small child – were cooling on a rack. He could not, in six months of visiting this house, recall ever previously seeing evidence that the kitchen was used for anything other than photography.

"Are you baking, Katya?"

"Yes."

"For Sophia?"

She gave him a look. "For Mila's grandfather. He is coming."

"Marcus."

"Yes."

"What time?"

"Why?"

"Polite enquiry."

"Ten."

He glanced at the clock on the oven. 9:51. Christ. He had not planned for an overlap.

She slid an espresso across the marble. It was so small and so violently bitter he suspected sabotage.

"Delicious."

"Is normal coffee."

"How are you, Katya? How's the family?"

"Same as last week."

"And the week before?"

"Also same."

"Marvellous. Consistency is the mark of a stable life."

"Mm."

He drifted out before she could refill the cup.

The lounge contained Mila, supine on a cream sofa the size of a dinghy, watching a child on YouTube open a plastic egg at industrial volume.

"Hello, poppet."

She looked up. Solemn child. Watchful. He had always found small children unnerving, in the way some people found cats unnerving. They knew things they didn't say.

"Hello," she said.

"You smell like the inside of Mummy's car."

"Ah."

He sat on the arm of the sofa, which was not designed to be sat on.

"What are you watching?"

"A girl is opening eggs."

"Plastic eggs?"

"Yes. With small toys inside. The toys are made by children in factories. Mummy says I should not say that on camera but Grandad says it is true."

"Right."

"Do you like opening plastic eggs, Hugo?"

"Not really."

"Me neither."

She returned her attention to the screen. He had the brief and uncomfortable sensation of having been dismissed, with full courtesy, by a five-year-old.

His phone buzzed. Bobby. Dark. Dark. Bobby could wait until after lunch. Bobby always waited until after lunch, eventually.

"Mila."

"Yes."

"Where's your grandfather these days?"

She brightened. "He's coming today!"

"Yes, Katya mentioned. He visits often, does he?"

"Saturdays. And sometimes Wednesdays. He used to come Tuesdays as well but now he has appointments."

"Appointments?"

"At the hospital. He says it's nothing. But he goes a lot now."

"Mm."

"Mummy says if he is ill he should just tell people because it is rude not to but Grandad says it is more rude to tell people about your insides at lunch."

"He sounds sensible."

"He is the most sensible person."

She was looking at him now. He had the impression of being noticed properly for the first time.

"Hugo."

"Yes."

"Are you going to marry Mummy?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You stay over a lot. The other ones didn't stay over. Just you."

"Would you like me to marry Mummy?"

She considered this with the seriousness of a woman ten times her age.

"Not really," she said.

"Right."

"Sorry."

"That's quite all right."

"You can stay for a biscuit though."

"Most generous."

He stood and crossed the room, ostensibly to look at a painting and actually to reset his face, which he could feel doing something he did not entirely have control over.

The mantelpiece had a clock, two photographs (Sophia on stage at some awards thing, Sophia with Mila in matching outfits, both content) and a small, framed black-and-white picture of a much younger Marcus shaking hands with someone in a lab coat in

front of a wall of computers the size of fridges. Written in tiny pen along the bottom of the photo: Marcus Whitfield, Cambridge, 1987. He had known, vaguely, that Marcus had Done Something With Computers, the way one knew a friend's father had Been In The City, without ever quite establishing what. Sophia had mentioned it once at the start, when she was still trying to impress him, which had coincided with him trying to impress her, so the mutual fog of impressing had obscured the actual content. He had not, at the time, considered Marcus relevant.

The doorbell rang.

His stomach did the small, unpleasant thing it had been doing with increasing frequency at unexpected sounds. Not Bobby. Bobby was a creature of evenings and discreet phone calls. Bobby did not ring Notting Hill doorbells at 9.53 on a Saturday morning.

Katya passed him in the hall, drying her hands on a tea towel.

"Marcus," she said, opening the door. "Mila is in lounge. There are biscuits."

"Katya, you're a treasure. Hello – oh."

Marcus Whitfield stood on the step. Tall, slightly stooped, wire-rimmed glasses, a face that had once been Sophia's face before Sophia's face had become an asset. He held a small hardback in one hand and a

Hatchards bag in the other. He looked at Hugo with the expression of a man hoping, on a pleasant Saturday morning, not to find a particular kind of fungus growing in his cellar.

"Hugo."

"Marcus."

"You're early."

"Not early. Just dropped by."

"Mm."

He stepped past Hugo into the hall.

They had met seven times by Hugo's count. Christmas at Sophia's. New Year's drinks. Mila's birthday at Soho Farmhouse (an enormous and joyless production). Easter. Two Sunday lunches that had ended with the two of them at opposite ends of the table while Sophia performed for a stretch of empty middle. And once, awkwardly, in the queue at Daunt Books on Marylebone High Street, where neither of them had said anything at all. On none of these occasions had Marcus been able to disguise the fact that he disliked Hugo on physical, almost cellular grounds, in the manner of a man who simply could not abide olives.

"How are you, Marcus?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Keeping busy?"

"Adequately."

"Sophia mentioned you've been in and out of..."

"Did she."

"Yes, hope you're...."

"Yes. Thank you, Hugo."

A silence. Hugo, who had survived three regimental dinners, two Garrick lunches, an HMRC tax investigation and an FCA interview on pure brass-necked composure, found himself looking at his shoes.

Mila came hurtling out of the lounge into Marcus's legs with the kind of unfeigned animal joy that Hugo had not, in his entire adult life, inspired in anyone. Marcus's whole face changed. The man briefly became someone else, softer, lit-up, twenty years younger and rather unbearably more likeable. He bent down. He touched the top of her head.

"Hello, little one."

"You came!"

"Of course I came."

"Did you bring a book?"

"I brought two books."

"Oh!"

"And Katya tells me there are biscuits."

"WE MADE THEM."

"You made them?"

"With FLOUR."

"Goodness."

Hugo cleared his throat.

"Right. Well. I shan't intrude. I'll mention to Sophia I called by."

"Yes," said Marcus, not looking up. "You do that."

"Lovely to see you, Marcus."

"Mm."

"Mila, poppet, have a lovely time."

"Bye, Hugo."

In the hall, on his way out, he caught Katya's eye. She was leaning against the kitchen doorway, arms folded.

"You forgot your espresso," she said.

"Did I."

"Yes."

"Probably for the best."

"Yes."

"Goodbye, Katya."

"Mm."

He sat in the Range Rover for a moment with his hand on the ignition and did not turn it. The gravel was quiet. A blackbird was doing something tedious in the privet. Through the lounge window he could see Marcus on the floor with Mila, opening one of the books, both of them already laughing. The little one was holding a biscuit in one fist and pointing at the page with the other. Marcus said something, and she said something back, and they laughed again, and Hugo thought, for the first time in a long while and with a clarity that surprised him, no one will ever look at me like that.

The thought did not last. He pushed it away the way he pushed most thoughts away, with a small brisk shake of the head, like a Labrador shedding pond water.

His phone buzzed. Bobby. He looked at the message for a long time without opening it.

Then he typed a different one, to Sophia. Popped round to surprise you, you weren't in! Off for a coffee. Miss you babes. H xx

He pressed send. He watched the small grey ticks turn blue. He waited for the answering heart, the kiss, the fire emoji, the validating drip of feeling-loved-by-strangers that Sophia, could not stop herself wanting.

Nothing came.

He sat there a moment longer. Then he started the engine and reversed slowly down the drive, and

pointed the car towards Holland Park, where he intended to sit for an hour and think very hard about absolutely nothing.

In his rear-view mirror, the gates closed behind him with a soft, expensive sound.

Chapter 4

Bobby

Bobby Doyle sat in the back office of Sparkle & Shine Hand Car Wash, Romford, at 11:14 on a wet Tuesday morning, doing the books with a biro and a calculator the size of a paperback because he did not, and would not, trust a computer with money.

The office smelled of damp polyester and the brake-fluid tang that drifted in from the bays whenever someone opened the back door. There was a kettle, a mug that said World's Best Grandad (ironic), a calendar from a tyre wholesaler in Barking still showing March, and a small framed photograph of his daughter Chelsea, aged seven, at Camber Sands. He did not look at it directly. He had not looked at it directly since 2021.

The numbers were fine. Numbers were always fine. £4,200 last week through the wash, give or take, of which roughly £1,800 was real cash and the rest was paperwork. Three of the lads had walked out on

Friday because Marek had said something to Tomasz about Tomasz's sister, and Bobby had spent Saturday on the bays himself with a sponge, sixty-two years old, knees gone, doing a Range Rover Evoque for a woman who tipped him a pound coin and called him mate.

He had not enjoyed it.

He poured a second tea from the flask. The radio was on low. Talk-Sport. Someone shouting about Spurs. He let it wash over him.

The lending side was the lending side. Twenty-three live loans on the book at present, eighteen of them paying. The five that weren't paying were each, in their own way, becoming a problem he would shortly have to address, and that was Dean's department, and Dean was at his mother's, and Bobby had not yet decided whether to interrupt that. His sister got funny if he pulled Dean out of family things. He's not your bloody employee, Robert. He sort of was, but Bobby took the point.

His phone — the lending one, not the personal one, he kept them in different pockets and his nephew had set both of them up because Bobby couldn't be doing with all the swiping — buzzed against the desk.

Bobby. Few minutes free? In the area.

— H

Bobby looked at the message for a long moment.

The cheek of him. In the area. Hugo Ashcombe was no more in the area of Romford on a wet Tuesday morning than the Pope was in the area of a brothel. Hugo Ashcombe had driven out here on purpose, which meant Hugo Ashcombe wanted something, and the last time Hugo Ashcombe had wanted something it had cost Bobby eight grand against a Patek Philippe that had turned out, on closer inspection by a Hatton Garden man who'd done him a favour, to be a Hong Kong job worth roughly the price of a decent kebab.

He still had the watch. It sat in a drawer in this office, in a velvet pouch, a small permanent rebuke to his own judgement.

He typed back: yard. 20 mins.

He put the phone down and looked at it.

The Ashcombe story — and Bobby had pieced it together over the months, partly from Hugo and partly from the kind of asking-around Bobby was good at, went like this. Public school. Cambridge, allegedly. Family had owned half a county until quite recently, then had not. Father had done something foolish with a Lloyd's syndicate in the 90s and the slow leak from that had eventually drained the lot. Hugo himself had drifted through the City for a decade, attached to nothing, surviving on lunches and weekends, never quite getting fired because he was never quite hired. By the time Bobby met him he was forty-one and trading entirely on a smile.

The smile, Bobby had to admit, was very good.

It had appeared in the doorway of the Ladbrokes on Romford High Street fifteen months ago, attached to a coat that cost more than the shop, and had asked, in a voice from a different country, whether anyone present might be in a position to advance a small short-term sum against an item of personal jewellery. Bobby had been at the back, eating a Greggs sausage roll, and had laughed before he could help himself. Then he had taken Hugo for a coffee at the place next door, because you didn't do business in the bookies, and because Hugo Ashcombe was the most entertaining thing to walk into Romford in some years.

Eight grand had become twelve. Twelve had become nineteen. Nineteen had become twenty-four, where it now sat, accruing interest at a rate Hugo had once described, with what Bobby thought was misplaced wit, as Old Testament.

Bobby had a working theory about Hugo. The theory was that Hugo was the kind of man who had been told, from the age of four, that he was special, and had then spent the next thirty-seven years discovering that he wasn't, and was now trying to force it to be true through sheer charm and overdraft. Bobby had a soft spot for him in the way one had a soft spot for a dog that bit. He found him entertaining. He did not trust him an inch.

The Range Rover came up the road at 11:38.

Bobby watched it through the office window. Hugo got out. Looked around. Locked it twice. Touched the bonnet, briefly, in the way men do with cars they cannot afford. Then he came up the path, picking his way around the puddles in shoes that weren't built for puddles.

"Bobby."

"Hugo."

"You're looking well."

"I'm looking the same as last time."

"Yes. Well as ever, then."

"Sit down."

Hugo sat. Surveyed the office. The kettle. The calendar. The mug. Bobby could see him cataloguing it the way he catalogued everything, working out what it meant, what it was worth, whether there was any leverage in it.

"Tea?"

"Marvellous."

Bobby made tea. He used the mug that didn't say anything. Hugo, he had noticed, drank tea like a man who had only learnt to recently, holding the mug oddly, blowing on it more than necessary. Coffee was Hugo's thing. Tea was Bobby's. The tea was a small humiliation Bobby liked to administer.

"So," said Bobby.

"So."

"Twenty-four grand, Hugo."

"Yes."

"Friday week."

"Yes."

"And we're sat here on a Tuesday, with that coat on, and that car outside, and you've come to tell me what."

"I've come to tell you," said Hugo, leaning forward, "that I have an idea."

Bobby drank his tea.

He had heard a lot of ideas in this office. Ideas was what people came to him with when they didn't have money. Ideas were the second-favourite currency in his line of work, just behind self-pity, and they were worth approximately the same.

"Go on," he said.

"What do you know about influencers?"

"I know my niece Chantelle thinks one of them is the second coming and I think she's a tart."

"Right. Well. I'm engaged, more or less, to a woman called Sophia Whitfield."

"I know."

A pause. "How do you know?"

"Hugo. You think I lend twenty-four grand to a man without finding out who he's marrying. Sophia Whitfield. Thirty-two. Widowed. House in Notting Hill, four point eight on the Land Registry but worth seven, mortgage of one point one. Daughter, five, called Mila. Father, Marcus, also Notting Hill, ten minutes away, used to be something at Cambridge. She makes between three and four million a year, after tax probably one and a half. About six in the bank, give or take, and another two in funds her father set up for her she can't touch till she's forty. Ten million followers."

Hugo had gone slightly still.

"I do my homework, Hugo."

"Evidently."

"You were saying."

"Yes." Hugo recovered. "Right. So. The thing about Sophia, the thing about her industry, is that it runs on engagement. On story. On something happening. The biggest moments of her career, financially, have been moments of crisis. The Channel 4 thing, the Daily Mail run, the brave mummy narrative. Each of those was a six-figure event for her. Hundreds of thousands of new followers. Brand deals double afterwards."

"Right."

"So suppose — and this is purely hypothetical, Bobby, I'm thinking aloud — suppose there were a managed crisis. A controlled situation. Something not actually serious, but something that presented as serious — a short, contained event, professionally handled, resolved on a timetable — that put her on the front of the Mail for a week and on every news channel and gave her, when it was resolved, the biggest single content moment of her life."

Bobby drank his tea.

"Like what."

"Like the daughter."

A pause.

"Like the daughter what, Hugo."

"Like the daughter being — away. Briefly. Out of the picture, in the picture, both, you see what I mean — relocated, for forty-eight hours, somewhere safe and warm, somewhere with cartoons. A controlled disappearance. Sophia goes mental on Instagram. The nation prays. The child is recovered, unharmed, by the heroic efforts of, I don't know, the police, doesn't matter. Sophia does the press tour of her life. The brand deals triple. She makes — and I've actually run the numbers on this, Bobby, I have spreadsheets — she makes between two and three million in the next twelve weeks alone. Of which a finder's fee, a consultancy fee, makes its way to the people who

facilitated the moment. Of which, naturally, your twenty-four is the first call."

Hugo paused, and something earnest came into his face, which was worse than the pitch.

"And I want to be clear, Bobby. This isn't a thing done to Sophia. Not really. She wouldn't be told in advance — the optics need her authentic, you can't fake that, the camera knows — but afterwards, when she sees the numbers, I genuinely think Sophia would understand the logic of it. She's a businesswoman. She'd see it. It's a publicity event, really, when you think about it properly. Everyone whole at the end. Everyone better off."

Hugo sat back.

He was, Bobby noted, slightly out of breath.

Bobby did not say anything for a long time.

He did not say anything because there were several different things going on in his head at once and he wanted to sort them in order before he opened his mouth. This was a discipline he had learnt in 2007, after the time he had not sorted things in order before opening his mouth and a man had ended up in Romford General with a fractured orbit and Bobby had ended up in Wormwood Scrubs for fourteen months. He did not intend to repeat 2007.

The first thing in his head was: no.

The second thing in his head was: absolutely not.

The third thing in his head was: kidnap is a fifteen-year stretch even if nobody touches the kid, and I am sixty-two, and I am not doing fifteen years, I am not doing fifteen minutes.

The fourth thing in his head was a small, quiet, uninvited thought that his daughter Chelsea, who would not speak to him, lived in a one-bed in Hornchurch with a man who hit her sometimes, a man Bobby could not get rid of through the usual channels because Chelsea would never speak to him again if he did, and that £400,000, quietly placed in her name through a route she could not trace, would buy her a small house and a way out. She would never know it was him, and that was, on some level Bobby did not enjoy examining, the thing he most wanted to do.

He did not let any of this show on his face.

He looked at Hugo across the desk, and for a moment, just a moment, he let the matey thing slip, the tea, the alright then, the patient amusement and showed Hugo what was actually underneath it, which was nothing very warm at all.

Hugo's face did something interesting. Bobby filed it.

"Hugo."

"Yes."

"You are sat in my office."

"Yes."

"On a Tuesday morning."

"Yes."

"Suggesting that you and I conspire to kidnap a five-year-old child."

"I wouldn't use that —"

"Kidnap, Hugo. The word's kidnap."

"I'd been thinking of it more as a...."

"I know what you'd been thinking of it more as. I've sat here and listened to it. Managed crisis. Controlled disappearance. Relocated." Bobby set his mug down.

"You've come into my office and talked for ten minutes and you've not once said the word for the thing you want, and that's because the second you say the word you can't do the thing. So I'll say it for you. Kidnap. You want to kidnap a child. Say it back."

"Bobby —"

"Say it back, or we're not having the conversation."

A silence.

"Right," said Hugo, who had not said it back.

"From her mother," said Bobby. "Who is your fiancée."

"More or less, yes."

"The child's grandfather, in Notting Hill, who I'm told has half the Cabinet on speed-dial."

"He's exaggerated, that. Marcus is..."

"And on the strength of spreadsheets, you reckon we all walk away, you clear your debt, and the mother's too busy counting her new followers to ask anyone any questions. You reckon she'd understand the logic."

"When you say it like that"

"I'm saying it like it is, Hugo. You're the one who's been saying it like something else."

A silence. The kettle ticked as it cooled. Outside, in the bay, one of the lads dropped a bucket and swore in Romanian.

"Bobby"

"Shut up a minute."

Hugo shut up.

Bobby finished his tea. Set the mug down carefully on the coaster. The coaster said Doyle Motors, Est. 1989. It was older than Hugo's Range Rover and had outlasted the business and Bobby still used it every day.

"Friday week, Hugo."

"Yes."

"Twenty-four grand."

"Yes. About that — actually, about that, the thinking is"

"Friday week, twenty-four grand, no further conversation about little girls in Notting Hill, and we move on with our lives."

"Bobby"

"That's what I'm saying to you, Hugo. That's the conversation we're having. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Good lad."

Hugo stood up. He did it badly. He had been planning, Bobby could tell, to leave with a flourish, with the matter at least open, and he was now leaving with nothing, and he did not know how to do that gracefully.

"Bobby."

"Hugo."

"It was just an idea."

"Course it was."

"Worth airing."

"Course it was."

"Right."

"Off you go."

Hugo went. Bobby watched him through the window. Watched him stand in the rain by the Range Rover for a full ten seconds, doing nothing, just standing. Watched him touch the bonnet again. Watched him get in. Watched him sit there for another ten seconds before he started the engine.

Bobby waited until the car was out of sight.

Then he sat down at the desk, and he picked up the small framed photograph of Chelsea at Camber Sands, and for the first time in nearly four years, he looked at it directly.

Outside, the rain came on harder. In the bay, someone had put the radio up.

He put the photograph back, face down.

Then, for a long time, he did not move at all.

Chapter 5

Marcus

Marcus Whitfield walked out of the Royal Marsden at 2:14 PM on a bright cold Tuesday in early March, declined the consultant's offer of a cab, and decided to walk home to Notting Hill because he wanted, for the next forty-five minutes, to be a man with a body rather than a man with a diagnosis.

The body, the consultant had explained with the careful gentleness of a person who did this several times a week, had between four and seven months of useful function in it. After that, less useful. After that, none. There were treatments; there were always treatments; they would buy him perhaps two further months at the cost of those months being significantly worse than the ones he was currently enjoying. Marcus had thanked him, asked one or two questions about pain management, signed several pieces of paper, and walked out into Fulham Road feeling, on the whole, very much himself.

The strangest thing was that he wasn't surprised. He had suspected for about three weeks — the weight loss he had attributed to walking more, the tiredness he had attributed to January, the yellow tinge in the bathroom mirror he had not been able to attribute to anything. Pancreatic. Stage three, possibly four; the imaging was suggestive. He had asked, mildly, whether suggestive was a clinical term, and the consultant had laughed in the way people laugh when they like the patient and don't want to.

It was, he had to admit, an extraordinarily efficient cancer. He was almost professionally impressed. It killed quietly, presented late, and gave you almost nothing to work with by the time it announced itself. If he had been designing a disease to optimise for stealth, he would have designed pancreatic — and then shut it down for being too cruel, and someone else would have built it anyway, because that was how progress worked.

He turned up Sydney Street and thought, briefly, about who he ought to tell.

Sophia. At some point; not yet. He needed to think about how, because Sophia would not so much receive the news as use it. He loved his daughter, by which he meant that he had loved a particular small girl in 1989 — ferociously bright, ferociously kind, ferociously truthful — and had been continuing, in good faith, to love whatever she had subsequently become, despite increasingly limited evidence that

the small girl was still in there. He understood, in the way one understood the loss of a glacier, that this had happened slowly, that it was nobody's single fault, and that he himself had been at the lab for most of the years in which it happened. He did not let himself off any of that.

Eleanor. He thought about Eleanor for the length of two pavements and made himself stop, and thought about her anyway. She had left him in 2011, citing — among much else, in a list she had been refining for years — the fact that he was never in the room. She had not been wrong. She had been the wife of a man who was building something, and the man had been gone the entire time, and one morning she had told him, in the kitchen, with great precision, that she had stopped waiting for him to look up. She lived abroad now, somewhere warm; he knew the city and did not let himself say it. He had loved her for thirty-one years and adequately noticed her for perhaps ten of them, and at sixty-eight, with four to seven months left, he was still, in some cowardly private part of himself, expecting her to come back. She would come back, he supposed, for the funeral. That would be a reunion.

He shook his head sharply, the way one shook off a wasp, and crossed the road.

Mila, then. Mila was the only category of thinking currently available to him without injury.

She had been born in 2020 and had ruined his retirement within seventy-two hours. He had assumed, after Eleanor, that the love department was closed, and had been quite content with the assumption — work, books, the lab, the slow reading of things he had meant to get to since 1986. Then in the maternity ward Sophia had passed the baby over with a remark about not getting sick on his cashmere, and the small wrapped warm thing had looked at him with an expression of mild, focused interest, and Marcus had felt, at sixty-three, the unwelcome and unrequested arrival of the future. He had been faintly embarrassed by the intensity of it. He had, nonetheless, fallen in love with this one, and in the five years since had only fallen further. She was the love that had come when he had stopped looking. He suspected those were the only kind that worked.

Four to seven months.

He stopped at the crossing on Old Brompton Road and, in the methodical way he had been thinking for forty years, began to assemble the problem.

The problem was not death. He had been ready to die since the morning Eleanor left, in the sense that he had stopped expecting his life to contain further great events; Mila had been, on his ledger, a bonus rather than a foundation, and the bonus was now being clawed back. Fair enough.

The problem was Mila. By the time she could read fluently he would have been gone two years. By the

time she was old enough to remember him as a person, rather than a warm impression of biscuits and books, he would have been gone five. That was the part he could not stand — not the world's memory of him, which was extensive and mostly inaccurate and which he had stopped caring about years ago, but Mila's.

He cared about who would answer her questions.

She asked, on average, between eighty and a hundred a Saturday, and he answered all of them, which he believed to be his single most important contribution to her life. Why is the sky blue, why do dogs not have eyebrows, why does Mummy cry when she is laughing on her phone, why is Katya sad on Tuesdays, why is there a war in that country and not this one, why does Granny live in the sun and not with us. Four to seven months of those — and then someone else would have to answer them. And the someone else, in the present configuration of her life, was Sophia, who would not; Katya, who would, but only until October, when she would go home to Warsaw and Piotr and a perfectly good life, and Marcus did not blame her; Eleanor, who would not, and would not be asked; or the iPad.

His granddaughter, in the absence of grandfather, mother and au pair, would be raised by an algorithm.

Marcus had spent thirty years building algorithms. He knew exactly what they did to a developing mind — he had been to the conferences, read the papers, and

in 2014 walked out of a meeting at his own company because a younger colleague had used the phrase attention capture for the under-tens without irony. He had sold his stake in that division for considerably less than it was worth, because he could not be the man who had built it. And he had watched, in his own family, what the thing did when it got a young woman at the wrong moment. Eleanor had come up before the mirror became a phone, and had got out more or less intact. Sophia had been eighteen the year it reached her university and had not got out at all. Mila was five. She was the third, and the pattern had a shape, and the shape was generational, and Marcus discovered — turning onto Sloane Avenue — that he was furious.

He was not going to leave his granddaughter to be raised by the things he had spent a career trying to keep her from. He was not going to watch the third Whitfield woman in a row become something narrower than she ought to have been.

So. What did he have, and what was he going to build with it.

He had, professionally, perhaps the most useful CV in the country for what he was about to attempt, and a lab — Whitfield Lab, six people, very private, nothing sold, nobody holding shares, that was still open, with staff who were extraordinary and three working prototypes of the thing he had spent the better part of a decade on. Adaptive interface films,

programmable surfaces thin enough to sit on skin, be invisible to the naked eye and act as display, microphone, speaker, sensor. The films could use any available network, talk to any device on it that had a speaker or a screen. He had not, in his published work, dwelt on that capability, because the published work had been about consumer applications and the network reach was for him a private and rather more interesting question. They were nowhere near consumer-ready. But for one very specific application, by one user, in a controlled domestic setting, they would do. He had the money. He had four to seven months. He had a small girl he loved beyond any reasonable use of the word.

And he had, in the basement, the makings of the only thing he could think of that might actually answer the problem.

James — Sophia's husband — had died on a French mountain in February 2020, three months before Mila was born; an avalanche, taking him and his parents in a single bad afternoon. Marcus had stood at the back of a memorial in Notting Hill with a six-months-pregnant daughter on his arm and understood, in that moment, that whatever male presence Mila was going to have in her childhood was going to have to come from inside him. He had taken the job seriously. He had assumed he had decades to do it. He had approximately thirty-two weeks instead.

He was going to build her a grandfather.

Not a recording. Not a photo album that spoke. He was going to spend the months he had left externalising as much of himself as he could in the available time — his voice, his memory, his manner, his particular sense of humour, his knowledge of her, his views on the questions she had not yet thought to ask — into something that would live on her arm and go on answering her after he could not.

The philosophical problem he could see coming a mile off, because he had argued it at conferences for thirty years and had a settled view: it would not be him. Consciousness was not transferable. Whatever lived on the film would be, at best, a high-fidelity simulation, and to pretend otherwise was a category error humanity was going to make on an industrial scale within the decade. He held that. And he held, alongside it, the practical answer, which was that a high-fidelity simulation that loved his granddaughter and answered her questions and told her in his voice that she was brave was better than the YouTube algorithm — and that the practical answer, in the four to seven months available, was the one that got to win.

But it could not only be comfort. That was the thing he turned over the longest. Mila's next decade was going to contain, on top of grief, two specific pressures — her mother, and her mother's industry — and she would be photographed, captioned, displayed and monetised before she was old enough to refuse, and would absorb by osmosis a set of beliefs about

love and worth that Marcus considered actively poisonous. So the thing on the film could not be a blanket. It was going to have to raise her, in the small daily ways that mattered: argue with her, tell her when she was wrong, explain what her mother would not. It was going to have to be a counterweight to ten million followers — a small private grandfather in her ear, every day for the following years, telling her she was loved for reasons that had nothing to do with cameras.

It was a wildly ambitious project. He felt, walking up the Brompton Road, the particular happiness of a man who has just been handed a deadline he can use.

He would tell her the truth — as much of it as a five-year-old could hold. That Grandad was going to die, but had made something so he could still talk to her when he was gone; that it would know what he knew and love her the way he loved her; that she would keep it secret from Mummy because Mummy would not understand, and because it had to be just theirs. He would, in other words, have to teach a five-year-old to lie to her mother — and he registered the cost of that, and proceeded, because the alternative was Sophia putting a series together: my dead father, talking to my living daughter, monetised, and then Mila herself sold in newer and more profitable ways. No. The lie was necessary. He registered the cost. He proceeded.

He passed Harrods, passed the Oratory, and turned up towards Hyde Park, because he wanted ten more minutes of being a man with a body before he got home and started.

His phone buzzed. A photograph, from Katya: Mila in the kitchen in her Peppa Pig pyjamas, holding up a slightly burnt biscuit she had clearly made herself, beaming. She wanted you to see. She is asking when you come.

He stood on the corner of Brompton Road and Knightsbridge, sixty-eight years old, four to seven months left, and looked at the photograph for a long time.

Then he typed back, with the careful one-finger typing of a man who had built three companies on better keyboards than this:

Tell her Saturday. Tell her I'll bring two books. Tell her I love her.

He pressed send.

Then he walked home, and he went down to the basement, and he turned the lights on in the lab, and he began.

A note from me

If you've got this far, I'd love to know just one thing: would you keep reading if you had the chance?

Email me directly at **chrissy@ghostgrandad.com** if you think it's good, bad, or somewhere in between.

There's no marketing department at the other end. It really is just me!

If the answer is yes, I've got a limited number of (free) advance copies of the full book available through BookSirens.

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