H CRITCHLOW

THE TOMORROW PROJECT



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For Will, Rachel and Adam, always.

'It is necessary to see how the end of every affair turns out, for the god promises fortune to many people and then utterly ruins them.'

Herodotus, with an English translation by A. D. Godley.
Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1920.

PROLOGUE

London, 2050

Stunned silence falls on the city. The last train out has left, the soldiers have been overcome, but Marianne can still hear the machine-gun fire in her ears. Her hands shake and every few paces she jerks around, scanning the road, expecting an attack that doesn't materialise. Violence has melted into despair.

She takes streets laced with the dead and dying, averting her eyes from outstretched hands and pools of vomit. A small, huddled shape on the pavement catches her eye and she bites down on her lip, fighting the urge to cry. She can still feel the imprint of the last child's hand on her palm.

'I'm sorry,' she whispers, though they can't hear her. It's too little, too late.

Even the military-grade protector she wears over her head cannot mask the smell of death. Only weeks ago, there was still optimism about worldwide scientific co-operation, belief in more stringent measures, an attempt at calm. She was the one who stood at a podium and told the nation the government had it under control.

Sobs hiccough from her throat without warning. When she can't go further she rests at a bus stop, trying to catch her breath. Buses and tubes have not run for

weeks now. Only the trains for the evacuations. The stop is plastered with peeling emergency posters, relics of the government messaging she designed. The word 'humanity' snags her attention, making her gorge rise. What have they done?

As she crosses Trafalgar Square, ignoring the stagnant fountains and the rotting shapes in the water, Marianne realises she has come here automatically, like a magnet to metal. Limping down Whitehall, she aches for better times: clipping along in vertiginous heels to a briefing, fired up to spar with the reporters. Those days are already a lifetime away.

When the opening to Downing Street comes into sight, she halts abruptly. Fear sings in her ears. This is the heart of the nation. The control centre.

But the gates are wide open.

Spinning on the spot, Marianne scans the street. Nothing moves. Slowly, she advances to the wrought iron and steps across the threshold, ice fingers on her spine. No birds sing, no security officers shout to her, there is no cat perched on the step washing its paws. It's a ghost town.

Footsore, she shuffles along the street to the famous glossy black door of Number 10, the hairs on her neck rising. She knows the inside like the back of her hand; as the Prime Minister's Press Secretary, the protocols and etiquette in this doll's house of politics are second nature. But nothing has prepared her for this. The iconic door is ajar.

Fingers curling, Marianne peers inside. Blood on the tiled floor, drying at the edges, smeared in a long line. An animal groan escapes her lips. She pushes the door wider. Protection officers lie in pools of blood, the corridors of

power soaked with their deaths. One still with the gun in his mouth.

She stretches a hand to the wall, struggling for breath, vision clouding. When her breathing steadies, she sees there is one more horror. Collapsed on the bottom step of the curved staircase.

Helen.

Marianne rushes forward, dropping to her knees in the carnage. The prime minister is grey-faced, her protector ripped away, angular features exposed. Above her, a portrait of the Iron Lady stares down in judgement.

'Maz?' Even the deep rasping rattle of breath can't disguise the prime minister's distinctive tones. Helen coughs and retches onto the thick pile of the stair carpet. Her lips are cracked and bleeding. Like a slap in the face, Marianne remembers their past softness, her mind thrust into a stolen afternoon in a beam of sunlight on a tousled bed. Where was that? Paris? Oxford? Why has it come to her now? Her hand trembles, snaking to the protector that covers her own face, to the rubber seals, the breathing tube. The air here must be thick with the sickness.

'Go,' Helen croaks. 'Everyone else has.'

'I'm not leaving you.'

'Sentimental.' It isn't a compliment.

'Values aren't the same as sentimentality.' Marianne feels her anger reigniting, struck hard by the realisation that Helen's coldness is not the strength she once believed it was.

'We were never going to be able to save them all,' the prime minister says, when another wave of spasms subsides, even now unable to abandon the argument that severed them. 'I *had* to choose. I thought you would understand.'

Marianne pushes away the thought of the children Helen consigned to death because they didn't fit her vision of the future. 'It doesn't matter now.'

But this is a lie. What is there left, except how we act at the end?

'Anyway, it worked,' Marianne adds, biting down the anger she still feels about those choices. 'The trains. The evacuees. The camps. I don't agree with the way you did it, Helen, but you succeeded. Some of them have made it. There is hope.'

She is falling into a familiar role. *Confidante. Enabler.* Now is not the time to mention the collateral damage: train carriages locked and dumped in sidings, drivers fleeing and leaving their infected cargo to die. Children rotting. Others forsaken, waiting at home for help that was never going to arrive. She has a hollowing sensation inside, a terrible bleak sense of responsibility.

Helen shakes her head, the movements violent. 'You called me a monster,' she gasps, trying to grip the stair spindle with thin fingers, failing to pull herself upright. 'You were right.' A dribble of dark yellow liquid trails from the side of her mouth. Tears draw black lines down her face.

Tentatively, Marianne reaches out and touches her hair.

'It's done now. At least they'll be safe in the camps. That was the point.' Her mind flits to the last child, to their final moments together, the soft fingers on her palm.

Helen shakes her head. 'The scientists were right. It wasn't ready…'

Marianne's hand stills. 'What?' she whispers, somehow knowing but not believing.

'I rushed them through… the vaccinations.' The prime minister makes a frustrated gesture at her inability to push

the words from her throat. Marianne leans closer, her skin hot. They told her. She wouldn't listen.

'I don't understand.' Or doesn't want to.

A moment of silence. Helen's eyes meet hers.

'There are side effects.'

Dread bubbles up inside her.

'History won't be able to judge me,' Helen wheezes, gesturing at the abandoned halls, though her arm takes in more than that – a devastated nation, eviscerated world. 'At least that's something.'

Her distorted laugher makes Marianne's skin itch. The years of deferral and subservience grate as they have never done before. When she speaks, she doesn't recognise her own voice.

'Tell me. Tell me everything.'

It takes Helen a long time to die. Marianne stays with her. The prime minister vomits and curses and her lungs fill with fluid until she stumbles to the open doorway, desperate for air but finding none.

Helen has always been so strong, but no one is strong enough for this. When at last she goes still, night is falling over the decimated city. Marianne staggers backwards, taking it all in, seeing through new eyes.

The corpse is curled on its side, the windows above them are dark. As she lifts her face to the sky, she opens her mouth to scream but no sound comes. It is all trapped inside. Her gaze finds the forgotten Union Jack hanging limply from its pole above, not even flying half mast. There is no one left to observe protocol.