The Stilling

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This is a work of fiction. The novel imagines a governing system called Verdance. The author's real Verdance project is described in About the Author.

Contents

Book One 1
Chapter Zero: Zero Day 1
Chapter One: The Weight of the World 3
Chapter Two: The Mandate 5
Chapter Three: Testing the System 7
Chapter Four: The Return Arc 11
Chapter Five: Ignition 13

Book Two 15
Chapter One: Drift 16
Chapter Two: The Old Man 18
Chapter Three: Realisation 20
Chapter Four: Catcher's Code 24
Chapter Five: Breach 27

Book Three 30
Chapter One: The Briefing 30
Chapter Two: Path of Least Resistance 35
Chapter Three: The Assembly 39
Chapter Four: The Build 43
Chapter Five: The Breach Point 46
Chapter Six: The Only Way 52
Chapter Seven: The Fade of Democracy 57

Book Four 61
Chapter One: The Pull 61
Chapter Two: One Step Too Far 65
Chapter Three: A Simple Correction 68
Chapter Four: The Shape of Silence 70
Chapter Five: Something Moves 72

Chapter Six: The Closure Notice 74
Chapter Seven: The Last Entry 76
Chapter Eight: The Contact 78
Chapter Nine: The Outcry 80
Chapter Ten: The Pushback 83
Chapter Eleven: The Interview 85
Chapter Twelve: The Final Signal 86
Chapter Thirteen: The Disappearance 88
Chapter Fourteen: The Map 90

Book Five 91
Prologue: The Final Dataset 91
The Event 92
Chapter One: The Crack 94
Chapter Two: The Line 96
Chapter Three: The Fall 99
Chapter Four: The Yield 101
Chapter Five: The Fault 103
Chapter Six: The Chamber 105
Chapter Seven: The Nothing Days 108
Chapter Eight: Zone 8 111
Chapter Nine: The Ash Run 112
Chapter Ten: The Break Room 113
Chapter Eleven: The Count 115
Chapter Twelve: Standard Deviation 117
Chapter Thirteen: The Rhythm Age 119
Chapter Fourteen: The Last Open Sky 121
Chapter Fifteen: Continuation 122

Book Six 123
Chapter One: The Last Clean-Up 123
Chapter Two: The Rewilding 125

Chapter Three: The Quiet Cost 126
Chapter Four: A World in Balance 127
Chapter Five: A Future Born in Debt 129
Chapter Six: The Gift of Life 132
Chapter Seven: The Garden 134
Chapter Eight: The Gift of Death 135
Chapter Nine: The Full Circle 136

Book Seven 137
Chapter One: The Fryer Never Lies 137
Chapter Two: Good Cod, Bad Maths 142
Chapter Three: French Boats 148
Chapter Four: The Last Real Cod 153
Chapter Five: A Thousand Cuts 159
Chapter Six: The Van 163
Chapter Seven: The Beginning 166
Chapter Eight: The First Day 168
Chapter Nine: The Catch 169
Chapter Ten: The Still Line 174
The Science Behind The Stilling 176
About the Author 180

Book One

Chapter Zero: Zero Day

Geneva, 2059, before the Homburg emergency summit.

Kade stood with his back against the plate and breathed in time with the bar on the wall. The plate hummed through his shirt. The technician had told him to step away if he wanted her to stop. There was room to take two good steps before he reached the glass.

Two weeks earlier he had signed the consent form after a rehearsal in which there had been fuel for one waterworks. At the first works a man he used to know was waiting for a delivery. At the second there were twice as many people drawing from the pipes. He asked for ten minutes to see whether the delivery could be split. The operator let him try it twice. Neither plant could get through the night on what it received.

He had sent the fuel to the second works. It took him fifty-three minutes to give the order. When they ran it again and sent the lorry straight away, there was still pressure in a third of the first district's pipes when the tankers came. He had put that figure in the margin of his consent form. That night he lay awake hearing the man answer the telephone. In the call they'd used for the exercise, all the man wanted was a fitter for a broken pump.

"If you come off the plate now," the technician said, "we can leave it there."

"I'll remember which town got the fuel?"

"You should remember the whole call. The feeling may weaken. We can't tell you which memories it will affect, or whether it'll come back when the transmitter is off."

He had signed because of the fifty-three minutes. He had come back this morning because he wanted to sleep after the

next call. Through the glass he could see his coat on the back of a chair. He pressed his shoulders against the plate.

“Final calibration in progress,” said the technician.

When the plate stopped humming, he tried to bring the man’s voice to mind. It came back quite clearly. The man had asked what time the fitter got off work. There was a pause while he tried to remember the number to ring. Kade heard him find it and went on listening until he put the receiver down. Then he found he could think about something else.

He had built Verdance to find out how many people could live on what the land and water could renew. The first time somebody asked it which reservoir to fill, he’d made them wait while he rang the district engineer. She knew which pipe froze first. He’d said when he took the job that there must always be somebody he could ring.

When the plate let him go, he waited for someone to tell him he could leave. The door opened on its own. Outside, in the sealed upper rings of Geneva, the air came steadily through the filters. He could remember what wind had been like when it caught him unawares and got his hair in his eyes, though it was harder now to remember how much he had liked it.

In the corridor he took out his phone. He still knew which number had been his father’s. His sister’s last message was gone. He had deleted it at the end of a night when he’d played it often enough to hear her turning away before she said goodbye. He could hear her do it now. He set the phone on the windowsill while he put his coat on. It was a little while before he remembered to pick it up.