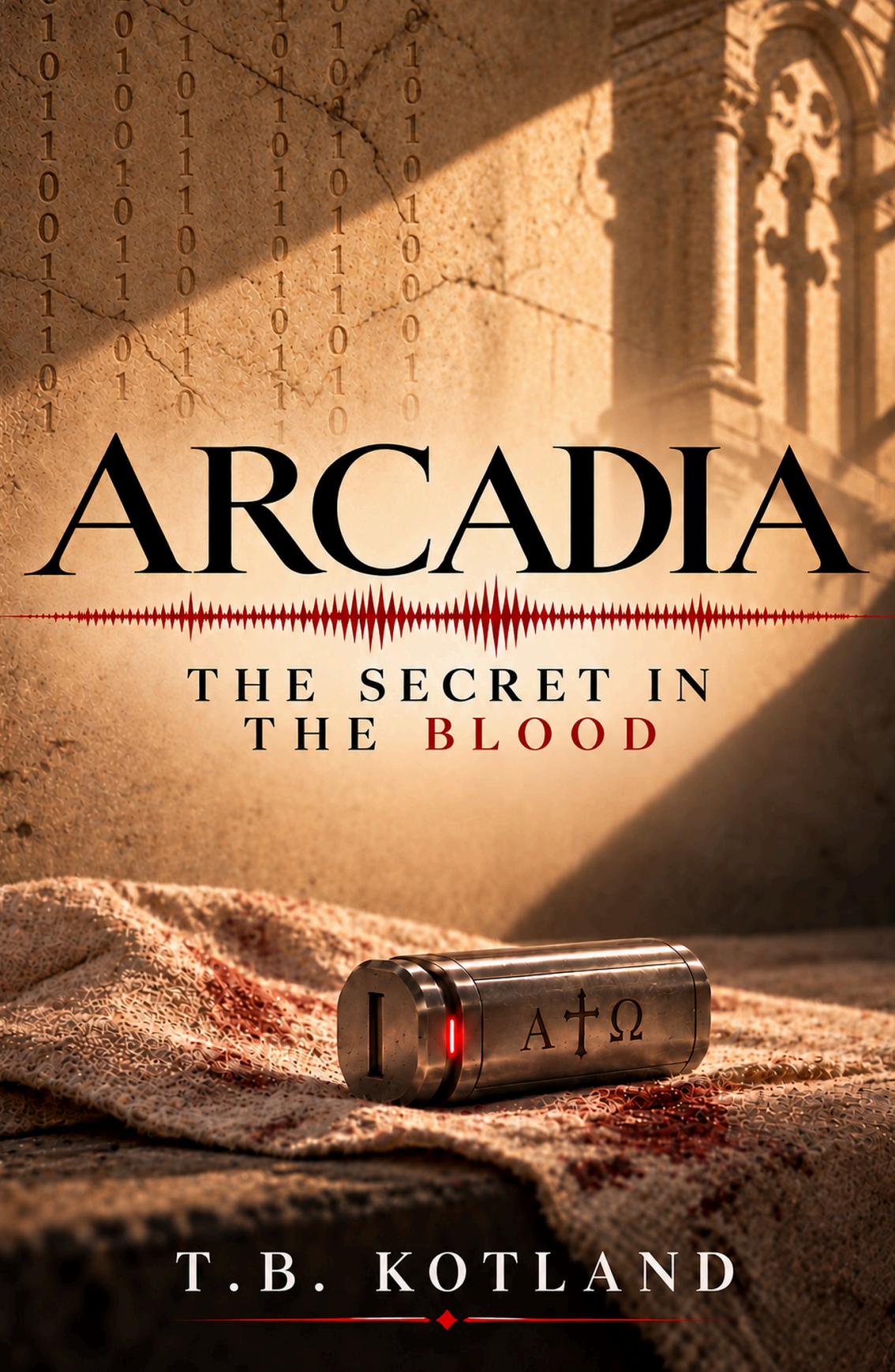


The background of the cover is a photograph of a church interior, showing stone walls and architectural details. Overlaid on the left side is a vertical column of binary code (0s and 1s). A red audio waveform is positioned horizontally across the middle of the cover. In the foreground, a piece of light-colored, textured cloth lies on the floor, stained with red blood. A small, cylindrical metallic object with a red light and the symbols 'A', a cross, and 'Ω' is resting on the cloth.

ARCADIA

THE SECRET IN
THE **BLOOD**



T. B. KOTLAND

ARCADIA

THE SECRET IN THE BLOOD

T. B. KOTLAND

Free sample: chapters 1 to 3

The complete novel is out on October 30, 2026

tbkotland.com

© T.B. Kotland, 2026. All rights reserved.

CHAPTER ONE



Boston · Saturday, November 21, 2026

When I found Andrew Mainport dead, I had just set two coffees down on a table in the hallway. I had gone across Boylston Street to get them. The senator had told me we'd have them before lunch. The invitation still stood when I left the building; when I came back, it didn't.

He was sitting behind his desk with a pistol in his right hand. The blood had reached a reproduction of a gold cross that hung on the wall behind him. The safe in the wall was open. Somewhere a telephone was ringing, old-fashioned and stubborn. I didn't touch anything. I called 911 from the hallway.

I had just hung up when my phone vibrated. A number from Luxembourg, no name. The voice message was the man lying dead on the other side of the door.

Bruce, listen to me. Don't hand over the object. If you hand it over, by tomorrow you'll be dead. Wait for instructions.

My back against the wall. He could have recorded it before he died. I made my living distrusting voices; that morning I didn't look for a single seam in his.

The patrol cars arrived eleven minutes later. Detective Ben Hall questioned me in the office they had assigned me the day before. I answered his questions about my schedule, about the men I had seen in the lobby, about Mainport's visit. All of it was true, until Hall closed his notebook and asked:

“Is there anything else I should know about your conversation with Mr. Mainport?”

In the inside pocket of my coat I was carrying a steel object not much bigger than a cigarette lighter. Mainport had entrusted it to me that same morning. All I had to do was put it on the table, show the detective the message, and ask for help. I wouldn’t have to keep it anymore.

In my pocket, my fingers found the steel. *If you hand it over, by tomorrow you’ll be dead.* Hall waited. I did the math in the time it took me to swallow. Between a dead man warning me and a stranger asking me questions, I believed the dead man.

“No,” I said.

Hall waited a second. Then he wrote down my answer.

The object stayed in my pocket.

They had given me that job, they said, because I was a man who didn’t lie.



Boston · Thursday, November 19, 2026

Two days before I lied to Detective Hall, I didn’t know who Andrew Mainport was. I had an interview on Boylston Street, and a gray suit I’d bought for the wedding of a coworker at Vocalis. The coworker had since divorced; Vocalis no longer existed. The suit, at least, was still mine.

SIBYL wasn’t listed in the lobby directory. The fourteenth floor, the email had said.

A receptionist asked for my phone before she said hello: no devices with microphones beyond reception, not even a watch, if it was a smart one. The company had the same name as the system it sold; nobody there distinguished between the two. They gave me a plastic token with the number seventeen on it.

Debra was waiting for me behind an empty desk. Gray bob, dark suit, red-framed glasses. She shook my hand as if she were taking my pulse.

“Sit down, Mr. Nowland. I’m not going to ask about your weaknesses. I saw them live, like the rest of the country.” She opened a thin folder.

“Nineteen million.”

Behind her, a sleeping screen let out a blue flicker every few seconds. I remembered the lights in the Senate hearing room, the heat they gave off, the drop of sweat that ran down my back while a senator asked me to repeat the figure. A cloned voice, the CFO of Halvorsen Shipping. The Vocalis system, mine, saying yes. Eleven minutes, and the money in Cyprus.

“Eighteen point seven.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Eighteen point seven,” she conceded. “According to the papers, you’d known for months.”

“I’d known it for weeks. The months part came from a journalist.”

I said it too quickly. Under the table, I wiped my palms on my trousers.

Eleven years earlier, a lab partner had asked me by email not to sign a report. I still had that message. I never answered it.

Debra took off her glasses and set them on the empty desk.

“Here we sell to people who can’t afford a Halvorsen. I need someone who knows how this breaks.” She paused. “And who says so when it does.”

I had been sending out résumés for fourteen months.

“May I ask what happened to the person who had the job before me?”

Debra folded her glasses on the desk.

“You can start tomorrow. Eight o’clock.”

I left the building with a contract waiting to be signed and my phone retrieved from locker seventeen.



Gem worked at the Boston Public Library, in Rare Books and Manuscripts, two blocks away. I arrived an hour early. I knew she didn’t like me visiting her at work, and that was why I did it.

I found her bent over a seventeenth-century Spanish atlas, her hair held up with a pencil. A student was waiting beside her.

“Until we know where it comes from,” Gem was telling her, “we can’t say what it is. It may be authentic, or a copy commissioned around 1890 for an impatient collector, or an original spirited out of some library in Prague, and

all three possibilities, I'm afraid, fit inside the same binding. Without provenance, a book never quite becomes a document: it's paper with opinions."

The student left with the atlas. Gem looked up and saw me.

"Bruce Nowland," she whispered. "I've told you a thousand times—"

"I got the job."

"SIBYL?"

"I start tomorrow. Office and everything."

She took off her gloves, tossed them in a wastebasket, and hugged me in front of a display case holding a thirteenth-century psalter. A guard cleared his throat. Gem waved at him without letting go of me.

We ate at the Chinese place on the corner of Dartmouth Street, our usual. She ordered duck; I ordered the first thing I saw on the menu. I told her about the interview almost word for word.

"And that doesn't worry you?" she said when I finished.

"What?"

"That they're hiring you precisely because of Halvorsen. That what they're acquiring isn't so much your work as your reputation as a witness."

"They're hiring me because I know how to do my job."

"They're hiring you because you were the only one who told the truth in public." She broke open a fortune cookie without reading the slip. "And I think that's wonderful, Bruce, really. It's just that in the archive..." She stopped and started unfolding her own slip of paper. "Nothing. I'm glad."

I drank some water so I wouldn't have to answer. Gem knew the testimony by heart. She had never asked me about a university job that didn't appear on my résumé.

She read me my fortune without opening it, the way she always did, making it up in the voice of a fairground oracle and a syntax any seventeenth-century preacher would have signed: *Unto the man who cannot lie shall be given employment among those who know not the truth, and he shall not be long in learning which of the two is better paid.* She laughed with her mouth full of duck, and for one second we were the only two people in Boston.

"I've got news too," she said afterward, wiping her fingers. "The Morgan called me, in New York. For the manuscripts curator position. It's only a first

interview, in December.”

“New York?”

“It’s four hours by train, Bruce. Don’t make that face.” She stole a shrimp from my plate. “I’ve spent six years cataloguing what other people choose to buy. I’d like to choose something myself, for once.”

“By the way,” she added, too casually, “do you remember what’s happening this weekend?”

An inn in Rockport, paid for in advance because Gem knew me. The following Thursday was Thanksgiving with her parents in Vermont. In the year we’d been together I had found an excuse for every visit. At least we were driving. She had given up on getting me onto a plane as long as there was a road.

“Gem, I start tomorrow. The sensible thing would be—”

“Bruce.”

“Fine. Fine. We’ll go.”

She smiled, and I knew that I would find a way not to.



That night, in her apartment in the Fenway, we opened the cava Gem had been saving *for when somebody in this house gets a paycheck*. It had been in the fridge for over a year.

The faucet had been dripping since the summer. I had taken it apart three times, always with a part left over. Gem kept them in a jam jar: *Provenance: faucet. Function: unknown. Donor: B. Nowland*. That night I tried a fourth time. Sitting on the counter, she read me the margins of a volume of sermons from 1689.

“Listen to this. Someone has written here, in the tiniest handwriting I’ve ever seen: *The preacher lies, but he preaches well*. And underneath, in another hand, fifty years later: *Both things are true*.”

“And what’s so special about that?”

“It’s a conversation, Bruce. Two readers who never met, arguing over the same page with half a century between them, like Abelard and Heloise

without the inconvenience of the uncle.” She turned the page carefully. “Look at the second one’s handwriting. He’s furious. I love it.”

I came out from under the sink with a wet face and another leftover part in my hand. Gem looked at it, slid off the counter, opened the jam jar, and dropped it in without a word. Then she kissed me, and she tasted of lukewarm cava.

Later she showed me her *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, in worn green covers. Her father had given it to her when she graduated: *So you know people wrote each other things like this before there were telephones.*

“You’re going to like my father,” she said. “He says what’s strictly necessary, which in Vermont comes to about one sentence a season, and he fixes things.”

“Does he fix them well?”

“He never has any parts left over,” she said, and winked at me.

I fell asleep before she did. The last thing I remember about that night is the faucet, still dripping, and Gem’s voice reading softly, to herself, a letter from Heloise she knew by heart.

CHAPTER TWO



Boston · Friday, November 20, 2026

My access card was waiting at reception. It had my photo on it, though I hadn't provided one. It was the one from my professional profile, the smile from before Halvorsen. I wondered who had downloaded it, and how many other things about me they had downloaded.

My phone stayed in locker seventeen, on the other side of the frosted-glass door.

Half the workstations were empty. At the far end, servers blinked behind a glass wall. Between the offices hung reproductions of Spanish religious paintings: a Zurbarán, a Ribera, a Velázquez Christ facing the coffee machine.

Debra was waiting for me by the door.

"Second on the right is yours. Team meeting in ten minutes. Be on time. I can't stand waiting."

"And the paintings?" I pointed at the Christ by the coffee machine. "They don't look like a software company."

"They're Mr. Mainport's." Debra looked at the Velázquez the way you look at a damp stain that won't come out. "All Spanish. Don't ask him about them unless you have the morning free: he'll start with a trip he took when he was young and end up in the seventeenth century."

From my office I could see the roof of the library. Gem might look out and wave. I felt ridiculous.

On the desk was a new laptop without a single sticker. When I turned it on it asked for a password nobody had given me and then, in a smaller window, for me to read a test phrase out loud: the one about the quick brown

fox jumping over the lazy dog, the one people use because it contains every letter. The screen took a second to recognize me.

My voice was already in their system. I didn't remember giving it to them either.

In one corner of the ceiling there was a smoked-glass dome the size of half an orange; there was another above every workstation on the floor. They didn't belong to the building: SIBYL had its own system. Continuous video, never sound, Debra would explain to me with pride that same morning.



In the conference room there was only Debra. Two folders lay on the table: one with my name and another with a name that still meant nothing to me. The second was more worn; on top of it sat her tablet, like a paperweight. She didn't sit down until I did.

"Welcome to SIBYL," Debra said. "There's no time for the guided tour, so here's the summary. Voice authentication with real-time synthetic-voice detection. It's nearly finished. In six weeks we pass federal certification and in the spring we go to market. The project has been mine from day one: if something fails, you tell me before you tell anyone."

"And me?"

"You get us through certification." Debra straightened the folder in front of her. "The board has changed the launch date three times. I've signed off on all three. This one has to be the last."

"The person who had my job..."

"Martin Reyes." Debra didn't lower her voice. "He died two weeks ago. An accident on I-93. He went off the road near Medford."

There was a short silence, the kind people leave because they think they're supposed to. Debra didn't look away.

"Martin designed the synthetic-voice detector and left the security dossier nearly finished," she went on. "He tested the complete system, including the first clients who were already using it. You have his notes, his tests, and the open tickets. Review what's missing and we sign."

"I'd like to see the code for the detection model."

Debra smiled without much enthusiasm.

“The model has no flaws. Martin trained it on four million synthetic samples. There isn’t a cloned voice in the world that—”

“Halvorsen had a model with no flaws too.”

Debra stopped smiling and put her elbows on the table.

“The source code and the model weights are seen by three people in this company, and you are not one of them. You work on the compiled system, the way an attacker would. Isn’t that what you’re good at?”

It made sense, and that was what annoyed me most. I nodded.

“If Martin had found a flaw in his own detector, where would it be?”

“In his notes. He printed out even the things that embarrassed him.” Debra stood, signaling the meeting was over. “If there’s something, you’ll find it.”

“One more thing,” I said. “Who is SIBYL’s first client?”

“The house.” She picked up her tablet. “The company’s chairman has a private archive. We’ve been protecting it with SIBYL for a year, as a trial before we put it on sale. If a system is good enough for Mr. Mainport, it’s good enough for anyone.”

“And if someone clones Mr. Mainport’s voice?”

Debra looked at me over her red glasses.

“That’s what we hired you for, Mr. Nowland.”



I spent the afternoon reading Martin Reyes.

Martin’s notes were orderly, almost obsessive. SIBYL had rejected laboratory clones, doctored recordings, and professional impersonators. It was good.

The last ticket he opened was dated three days before his death. It was titled *CLIENT A — critical vulnerability — DO NOT CLOSE*. It had no description. Only an attachment the system wouldn’t let me open for lack of permissions.

The ticket was closed. It had been closed the day after the accident. The user field read: *dmorrow*. Debra Morrow.

I told myself Debra had cleaned out a dead employee's queue. That I had been out of work too long and couldn't afford to invent ghosts. I didn't open a new incident.

At eight, she herself put her head around my door.

"I'm leaving. If you stay, be aware that at nine the security system arms itself. To get out you'll have to swipe your card and say your name at the terminal by the door."

"Say it?"

"SIBYL," she said. "We eat our own cooking."

"Is anyone here on weekends?"

"A security guard. Kingsley. You'll meet him if you come in tomorrow, though I'd advise you not to. Weekends are sacred at this company. It's one of the few things Mr. Mainport enforces personally."

I stayed until ten. When I left, I told a door my name and the door believed me.

Gem was waiting for me in the Fenway with two cups of cold tea. I told her about Martin Reyes. I didn't tell her about the ticket.

"Gem, about tomorrow..."

"I knew it."

"I need to get up to speed. The project wraps up in six weeks, the last analyst is dead, and if something goes wrong I'm the one who—"

"Who takes the fall. Sure." She stood and carried the cups into the kitchen. "I'm going to bed. Tomorrow I'm leaving early for Rockport. Alone. It's paid for."

I stayed on the sofa, listening to her turn the faucet off harder than she needed to.

CHAPTER THREE



Boston · Saturday, November 21, 2026

Gem was asleep when I left. I left her a note on the nightstand: *Forgive me. I love you. Look at the sea for both of us; on Thursday, in Burlington, I'll be on my best behavior ever.* I would have flowers sent to the inn.

I got in at eight thirty. On the fourteenth floor a tall, thin man with a trimmed white beard was reading in a folding chair. His accent sounded Scottish, softened by many years away. On his lapel he wore a tiny gold cross with two little pendants hanging from its arms. Between the fingers of his free hand he was turning over an old book of cardboard matches, worn at the corners, though smoking wasn't allowed on that floor.

"Mr. Nowland," he said, before I could introduce myself. "Kingsley. Debra told me you might come in."

"Did she also tell you I shouldn't?"

"She told me you wouldn't listen to her." He held out the tray for my phone. "Locker seventeen, as usual."

The *as usual* amused me. I had been there one day. My phone went into the tray and Kingsley set it on the little table beside his chair without getting up to lock it away; he had his book open in his other hand.

The floor was in half darkness. The only sound was the hum of the server room. In my office I went back to picking at the wound: Martin's ticket. Still closed by *dmorrow*, the attachment still out of reach.



At twelve minutes past ten that morning, Andrew Mainport stepped out of the elevator on the fourteenth floor and knew he would not ride it down again.

In twenty-six years in the Senate he had counted the votes before taking his seat. That morning he did the same count. Kingsley was in his folding chair beside the glass door, the paperback open on his knee. He stood when he saw him.

“Good morning, sir. Only the new man has come up. Mr. Nowland.”

“Thank you, Kingsley.”

He crossed the floor leaning on his cane. Through the slats of a blind he made out a man waiting in the dimness. A black coat hung on the back of a chair. Mainport knew that way of waiting and kept walking without looking at him.

He felt the weight of the canister in the inside pocket of his coat. He had taken it out of the drawer that same morning.

But the man behind the blind knew where his office was. And he knew how to open drawers.

There was one other light on in the floor. Just one, in a small office, second on the right.

Mainport stopped.

Nowland. The Halvorsen engineer, the one who had answered the Senate looking at the senators and not at his lawyer. Mainport had signed his contract Thursday night, and that same night he had set aside a book of proofs for him, in case someone from outside ever had to check what he himself had never dared to check. The device was not part of that plan: the device belonged to Kingsley and the drawer. But the drawer was no longer a safe place, and that engineer was the only man on the floor who owed nothing to anyone.

On the other side of the blind, the man in the black coat was still waiting. Mainport had counted on a few minutes alone in his office. He no longer had them.

SIBYL needed his voice and his breathing; as long as he was alive, they could force him to give both. He looked toward the blind and kept walking.

At the far end, the door of the small office opened. A man leaned out into the hallway with the face of someone who has heard footsteps on a Saturday on an empty floor.

Mainport adjusted his scarf, switched his cane to the other hand, and went toward him.



At a quarter past ten I heard the door. Slow footsteps, on an empty floor, on a Saturday.

I leaned out. An old man in a cashmere coat and silk scarf stopped in front of my office, leaning on an ebony cane.

“You must be Nowland.”

“Bruce Nowland, sir. I started yesterday.”

“I know. I signed your contract.” He held out a dry, cold hand. “Andrew Mainport.”

I recognized the senator, the philanthropist from the news. I hadn’t known he also owned that floor.

“I was told weekends are sacred at this company,” I said.

“They are. For everyone else.” He pointed at my office with his cane. “May I?”

He sat down in the only visitor’s chair without waiting for an answer. He laid the cane across his knees and studied me for a few seconds that felt long.

“Halvorsen,” he said.

“Sir, if you’re going to ask me about—”

“I’m not going to ask you anything. I watched you testify. You were the only one in that room who didn’t look at his lawyer before answering.” He made a vague gesture. “I’ve seen a great many people tell the truth. They almost always do it when they have no other way out. You told it while you still had several. That’s a good deal rarer.”

“It cost me my job.”

“It cost you a job. It brought you this one.”

I pressed my fingers against the edge of the desk.

He asked me about IBM, about Vocalis, about the Halvorsen failure. Only once did he wander away from me.

“My father sent me to Europe when I was nineteen. In a church in the north of Spain, a canon let me wait while it rained. He fell asleep beside an open book. Sometimes one reads things one shouldn’t,” Mainport said.

“What did you read?”

He looked at me as if I were the one who had woken him. Something shut in his face all at once, like a door.

“Accounts,” he said. “What they spent on wax. Nothing that would interest an engineer.”

He was silent for a moment, looking at his cane.

“My father used to say the only thing in a man that doesn’t age is his voice,” he said suddenly. “Your face falls, your hands shake, but the voice you give orders with is the same at eighty as it was at forty. Is that true, according to your science?”

“Partly. The timbre changes very little. What changes is the rhythm, the breathing. Small things.”

“Small things.” He repeated it as if he were writing it down. “Tell me, how long would one of those machines need to talk like me?”

“To fool a person? With three minutes of clean audio, these days, that would be enough.”

“And to fool SIBYL?”

“A great deal more. And even then, in theory, it couldn’t.”

“In theory.” Mainport’s face hardened. “I was a senator for twenty-six years, Mr. Nowland. There are hours and hours of my voice in the Congressional archives. Speeches, hearings, interviews. If someone wanted to talk like me, he wouldn’t be short of material.”

He reached into the inside pocket of his coat and took something out. He set it on the desk between us.

It was an object the size of a cigarette lighter, in matte steel. It had no brand and no visible connector. At one end there was a tiny grille, like a microphone’s, and beside it a dark point of light. On the top surface, finely engraved, was a Latin cross, its arms flaring at the ends and the lower one longer than the others, with two letters hanging from it that I couldn’t read.

“What is it?”

“A question,” Mainport said. “Keep it for me until Monday. Tuesday at the latest.”

“Sir, with all due respect, I’ve been here one day. I can’t keep anything for anyone without knowing what it is.” I pushed the object back across the desk toward him. “If it belongs to the company, let security hold it. If it’s yours, you have a safe thirty yards away.”

“My safe is opened by more people than I’d like, and the security in this building works for whoever pays it most.” He reached for the object. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have asked.”

Before he could pick it up, I put a finger on the steel.

“Does this listen to breathing too?”

Mainport withdrew his hand.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because of what you just told me. If they already have your voice, that would be the only thing they’re missing.”

He didn’t answer. He looked at my finger, still resting on the device.

“Until Monday,” I said.

“Don’t connect it to anything. Don’t take it to any technician. Don’t show it to anyone at this company. When the time comes, you’ll know whom to give it to. Only that person. If anyone tells you what’s inside, ask them to prove where it came from. That’s the first thing I should have done.”

“And the police?”

“The police will be the first to ask you, if something happens to me. They’ll want to know what we talked about. Don’t mention the device. My partners could claim it as company property. I don’t want it to end up in their hands.”

“Is something going to happen to you, Mr. Mainport?”

“I’m eighty-one, Mr. Nowland. Something happens to me every morning.”

“And if I don’t know?”

“Then throw it in the Charles and forget it exists.” He leaned on his cane to get up. “And now, if you don’t mind indulging an old man, go down to the

café across the street and bring me a black coffee. Kingsley can't make it and the machine on this floor is a heresy."

At the door, he added without turning around:

"If you have lunch plans, cancel them. You'll eat with me at the club."

When he left, I had the object in my hand. He had gotten me to keep it without answering my question. I could have caught him in the hallway; instead, I held the grille up to my face. The point of light glowed red, for barely a second, and went dark again.

It had heard my breathing. And it hadn't liked it.

It went into the inside pocket of my coat. I told myself I would give it back to him at lunch, at the club, over a bowl of soup, and we would both laugh about it.



Kingsley wasn't in his chair. The paperback was still there, face down, open in the middle, and beside it, on the wooden tray, was my phone, where I had left it at eight thirty. He had never put it in the locker. I picked it up without thinking much about it.

It vibrated in my hand before I reached the elevator. A notification from the bank: *You have received a transfer of USD 1,000,000.00.*

One million dollars, on top of an account in the red. Sender, *LEMAN CAPSA GENEVE*. Reference, *FEES*.

I would call the bank on Monday. For a moment, only a moment: what if nobody claimed it? The elevator didn't respond, and I walked down fourteen floors by the fire stairs, cursing Mainport's coffee.

In the lobby, the central elevator had just opened. Four men got in. I only got a good look at one, the last, because he turned to press a button: he wore a clerical collar and a long black coat, and he had the broad, pink face of a man who eats well. The doors closed before I saw more.

At the café across Boylston Street, while I waited for the two coffees, Gem called. I told her about the senator's invitation; she appointed me SIBYL's official teacher's pet. It was the first time I'd heard her laugh since Friday. I promised to call her later.

In the lobby I came face to face with the same four men. They were leaving in a hurry, not talking. The one in the collar said something into the ear of the man walking on his left, a thin, gray-haired man, who broke away from the group and planted himself in front of me, blocking my way to the elevators.

“Excuse me,” he said, with impeccable courtesy. “What floor are you going to?”

“Third. I have an appointment.”

There was a law firm on the third floor: I had seen it on the directory.

“It’s closed on Saturdays,” he said.

“I’d rather check for myself.”

He didn’t step aside right away. I held my phone to my ear, pretending to take a call. The man’s mouth twisted slightly; he turned and rejoined the others. They went out into the rain and got into a black car waiting with its engine running.



Kingsley still hadn’t come back. His book was still open beside the folding chair. I went into the darkened floor with the coffees in my hand. From the far end came the ringing of Mainport’s telephone.

What came after I’ve already told: the voice message, Detective Hall, my “no.” What I haven’t told is that while I waited for the police I called Debra, who ordered me not to touch anything, and that on the hallway floor, next to the two coffees, I checked the bank app. The million was still there. I didn’t tell Hall that either. The detective’s card ended up next to my phone, along with a promise to call him once I knew what had happened with the money.

“Do you know where the security guard is?” I asked then.

“We’re looking for him,” Hall said. “His book is still on the chair.”

Debra arrived soaked and without her red glasses. She talked to Hall. I heard *suicide, note, his own gun*.

She offered to drive me home. I told her I’d rather go alone. She didn’t insist, but she looked at me like someone who might have seen something.



Before starting the car, the bank app: the provisional credit was gone; I was back to owing two thousand three hundred dollars. I took a screenshot.

I got home with wet clothes and an empty stomach. I had called Gem from the car. I told her about the body; I didn't tell her about the canister, the audio, or the bank. She wanted to drive back from Rockport that afternoon; I told her no, I was fine, I just wanted to sleep. She didn't believe me, but she let me lie.

On the television, sound off, the news was already covering the senator. In a shot of the building's entrance I appeared behind a police officer, my coat over my shoulders. They didn't give my name. Gem would have recognized even the way I stepped off the curb. I turned off the screen and took out the canister.

Across the street there was a gray car. The driver had his phone raised toward my front door. He lowered his hand when I looked out. When I looked again, the car was still there. The last two digits of the plate went on the back of Hall's card: sixty-two. It might mean nothing. I didn't raise the blind.

Before examining it I ran the voice message through the Vocalis detector, the copy I had never deleted from my laptop. It was a messaging-app clip, compressed, recorded who knows where, and the program hesitated: fifty-four percent. Indeterminate. With another filter, fifty-one. I closed the program.

I examined the canister with the meticulousness I had learned at IBM, without connecting it to anything, as a dead man had asked me. It had no screws, no visible seams, no ports. The housing seemed machined from a single piece. The grille might serve a microphone and a tiny speaker. It had no keypad for a password.

It looked, absurdly, like the Vocalis token still sitting in the second drawer of my desk, right down to the LED that glowed red when you squeezed it. They had asked for it back twice by email after I was fired. Both times I pretended not to have received the message. It was the only thing I had taken with me.

I held it to my mouth and said, quietly:
"Andrew Mainport."

The point of light glowed red and went out.

Of course. It didn't want a name: it wanted a voice. Mainport's. And Mainport was in a refrigerated drawer at the Suffolk County morgue.

A safe that listens also counts. How many times you speak to it. How many times you get it wrong. Somewhere inside that steel a number had just gone down, and I didn't know from how many or to what. I didn't hold it to my mouth again.

Under the lamp, the cross engraved in the steel was the same one that hung on the wall of his office, behind his head. A cross with two letters dangling from little chains.

I was the last man to have seen Andrew Mainport alive, and all afternoon I had been carrying in my pocket something he hadn't wanted to leave in his own office.

I fell asleep on the sofa around four, with the light on.



Boston · Sunday, November 22, 2026

Gem called at one in the afternoon, furious because she had been calling me all morning. I swore I was fine, that I had slept, that I hadn't done anything stupid. She said she would be back that night and that I should wait up for her.

When I hung up, there was a new email. The sender was an institutional MIT address: *Paleogenomics Laboratory — Dr. Raymond de Piers.*

Dear Mr. Nowland:

We have received your résumé and would be interested in meeting with you today, at five p.m., at our facilities in Building 68, Cambridge. Kindly confirm your attendance.

I read it three times.

I had never sent a résumé to that lab. And I had no idea what the hell paleogenomics was.

Time sent: 9:41 a.m. The *Globe* website had updated its story on the senator at 9:27. The new version showed my face and mentioned my

testimony about Halvorsen.

Fourteen minutes.

The canister was still on the table, waiting for a voice that no longer existed.

I answered the email. I wrote that I would come.



CONTINUES ON OCTOBER 30

This is the end of the sample of *Arcadia: The Secret in the Blood*.

Bruce has just accepted an interview at a lab he had never heard of. The canister is still on the table, waiting for a voice that no longer exists.

The complete novel is published on October 30, 2026, as an ebook, paperback and hardcover, in English and Spanish.

tbkotland.com · tb@tbkotland.com