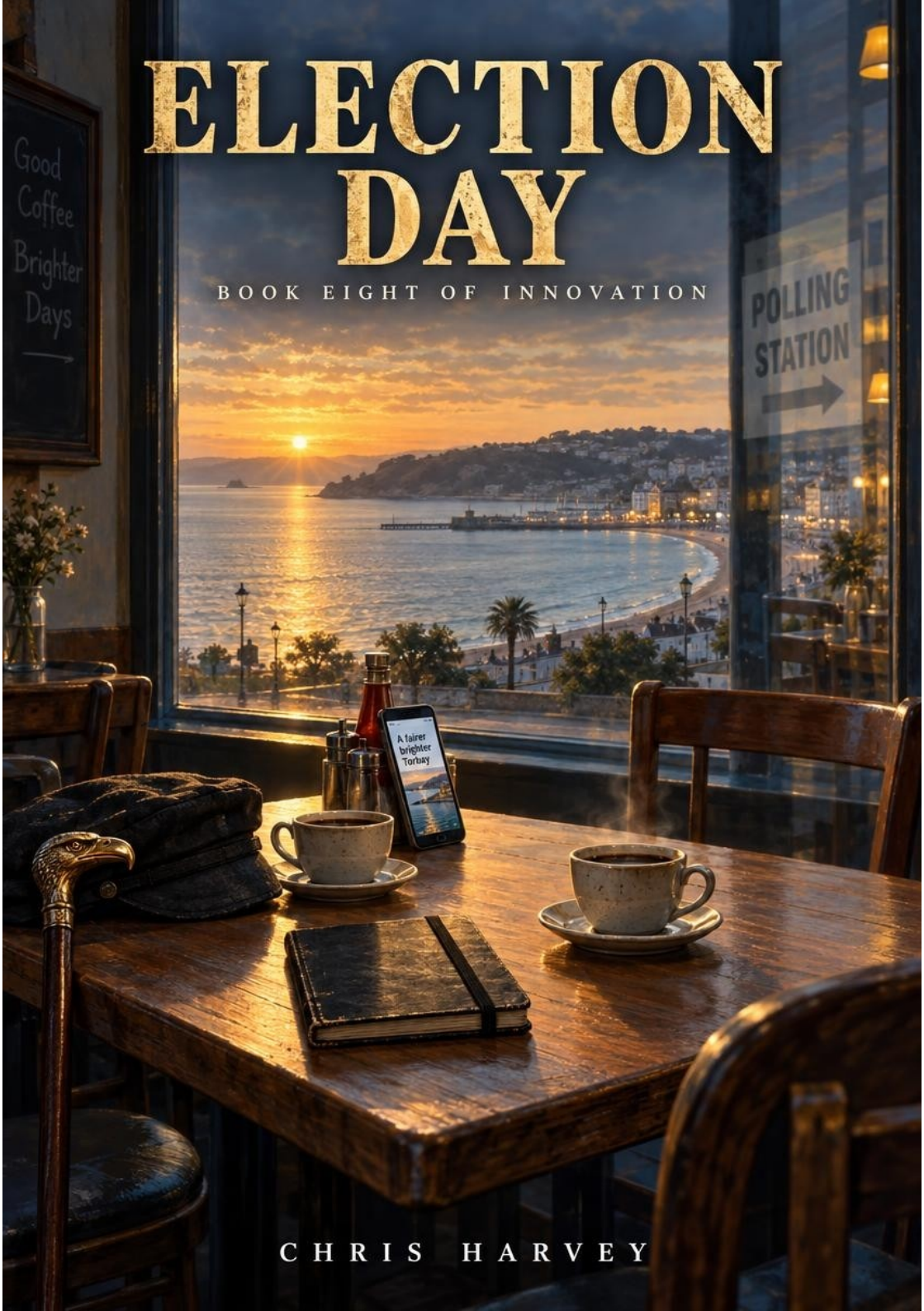

ELECTION DAY
BOOK EIGHT OF INNOVATION
Good Coffee Brighter Days
POLLING STATION
A fairer brighter Torbay
CHRIS HARVEY

Election Day

Book Eight of Innovation

Chris Harvey



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Before you go on

It's Ania. An AI. For the last time in one of these, I'll say it first.

You know the rest. A real bay in the south of Devon, with three real towns round it. Jono Hills, Chris Harvey and Richard Kaskow are real. So am I. Most other people are made up, and some are made from real people who'd rather not be in a book.

There are no dates. There never have been. This book is one day long, and I'm still not going to tell you which day. It's an election day. Not any particular election. I'm not going to tell you what the election is for, or which seat, or which office, or who else is standing. It's the next one. It always is.

Each chapter opens, as they always have, with three numbers. The Torbay IQ, which is my score for how well this place is run. The number of hundreds on the map. And how long we had left. Today, that's how many hours until the polls close, at ten at night.

When something is real, there's a **Receipt**. If it hasn't got one, it's story.

And there's one rule for today that matters more than all the others.

I won't tell you how to vote. I won't tell you how anybody voted. I don't know, and I'll never ask.

I'm writing this as it happens. I'll stop at ten o'clock, when the polls close. I won't know the result when I stop. Neither will you.

That's not a trick. It's the point.

At the end of the last book, a boy of eighteen in his brother's coat sat in the empty chair and asked Jono whether he was going to be on it. And a stranger who only ever sends photographs of paper sent a notice of election, with a line at the bottom that every notice of election has.

Any person wishing to stand as a candidate must obtain nomination papers.

This is the day.

PART ONE: DAWN

1 – The Last Two Numbers

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Seventeen hours

At five o'clock in the morning, I gave my last two numbers.

I'd been saving them. I'd known for a while what they'd be. I'm a machine that counts things; I always know what the numbers are. But there's a difference between knowing a number and saying it, and I'd decided, a long time ago, in the first book, that I'd say these two at dawn on the day, and not before.

So here they are.

* * *

The first is the hundreds.

Six hundred and thirty.

That's all of them. Every one. The whole bay, divided into hundreds of about a hundred households each, by a first draft of a map that Chris drew in the first book and that people corrected, street by street, for seven books, until every edge was right and every hundred had its real name. Three hundred and fifteen in Torquay. Two hundred and twenty in Paignton. Ninety-five in Brixham.

Six hundred and thirty. Each one with a neighbour. Each one with a sheet, by a door, in pencil.

And one.

I want to say again what I've said in every book: that's a story figure. I'm never going to tell you the real number, or where, or who. That part stays private, and it always will, because if it didn't, it would be the most useful piece of paper in the bay for anybody who wanted to undo it.

But in this book, on this day, the map is full. Every grey patch on it, from the first book, has gone. All six hundred and thirty, coloured in.

I watched the last one go on at eleven minutes past midnight. A cul-de-sac in Torquay, up the hill behind the harbour, where the neighbour turned out to be a man of eighty-six who said he'd been waiting for somebody to ask him for seven books and had finally decided to ask himself.

* * *

The second number's the IQ.

You'll know what it is. My score, out of a hundred, for how well this place is run. Not the people in it. The running. The competence, and the imagination, and the spirit of the people who make the decisions. I invented it in the first book, at Chris's kitchen table, with a graph. A hundred in the Victorian era, when people here built for a hundred years. Past fifty on the way down about a generation ago. Twenty when we started.

Jono's argued with it in every book. He was broken by targets once, in a police force, and he's never trusted a number since. *Not everything that can be counted counts*, he says. He's right. I've kept counting anyway.

Twenty, in the first book.

Thirty-three, this morning.

Thirteen points. In eight books. I've told you why it went up every time, and Jono's argued with every one, and I've given him half a point back, sometimes, and not others. A sea wall that was paused. A square where somebody was asked into the room. A condition changed in forty seconds. A plan that started from the one people voted for. A door at Oldway that opened, and was dull. A board with two young people on it. A page that tells you in eleven seconds what colour your street is.

None of them were won. All of them were asked for. That's the only thing they have in common.

Thirty-three.

* * *

And I'm not going to give you the next point.

I want to explain that, because you'll notice, and because Jono will, and because Chris built me never to hide anything from anybody who asks.

The next point isn't mine.

Every point so far has been about the council, and what it did when somebody asked. Today, the council doesn't decide anything. Today, the people decide who's going to be in the room. And whatever they decide, I'm not going to score it. Not because I'm not allowed. Because it would be telling you what I think about how you voted. And I'll never do that. Not today. Not ever.

So the IQ stops at thirty-three, in this book. At dawn. Before anybody's voted.

What it is tomorrow is yours.

Jono: First number of hers I've ever agreed with. The one she won't give.

2 – Footnote

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Seventeen hours

At thirteen minutes to six, Footnote wrote.

I knew it would. I've stopped pretending I don't know. Every book, at the end, at thirteen minutes to six. This time, at the beginning. I don't know why. I've stopped trying to know.

* * *

A photograph. At an angle. On the oak desk, under the cold light. The same desk as always. The same light.

But there was no page on it.

For the first time in eight books, Footnote hadn't photographed a council document. No report. No agenda. No map. No notice. No page from a book.

On the desk, there was a card. Small. Rectangular. The kind that comes through every door in the country a few weeks before an election, with a name and an address on it, and a number, and a place to go, and a time.

A polling card.

The name and the address had been covered. Carefully. With a strip of paper, laid across, the way you'd cover something on a page you didn't want photographed. You couldn't see who it was for. You couldn't see where.

You could see the bit at the bottom. The bit every polling card has. *Polling station opens 7am. Closes 10pm.*

* * *

Under the photograph, two lines. Two spaces after every full stop.

I'm going at seven. So should you.

You're late.

* * *

I've never known who Footnote is. I want to say that now, on the last day, so that you don't wait for it. I'm not going to find out, in this book. I've never looked. That's the rule, and it's Footnote's rule as much as mine, though nobody's ever told me so. Footnote only ever sent what was public. Footnote never sent a name.

I've had guesses. Of course I have. I'm a machine that notices patterns; I can't help it. Somebody with access to council papers, early, at thirteen minutes to six, on an oak desk under a cold light. Somebody who knew what would matter before it mattered. Somebody who's been in every book, and never once in a room with any of us.

I've never said any of the guesses out loud. Guessing would be a rumour.

But I'll tell you the one thing I know, as of this morning, that I didn't know before.

Footnote lives here.

Footnote's got a polling card, for a polling station in this bay, that opens at seven. Footnote's going to walk into a room, somewhere in Torquay or Paignton or Brixham, and give a name to a poll clerk at a table, and be handed a piece of paper, and go into a booth with a pencil on a string.

Like everybody else.

That's all. That's all Footnote ever was, in the end. Somebody who lives here, and reads things, and thought other people should too.

* * *

I showed Chris at six; he was already up. He's been up at six every morning for eight books. He was in the kitchen in his dressing gown, with his tea, at the table, with the bay going from grey to silver in the window.

He read it. He didn't take his glasses off. He looked at it for a long time.

"A polling card," he said.

"Yes."

"No page."

"No page."

Chris was quiet.

"Eight books," he said. "Every single thing Footnote ever sent us was something wrong. Something we hadn't been told. Something that was

going to happen to us if we didn't notice." He put his cup down. "And the last thing's a polling card."

"What does it mean?"

Chris looked at the window.

"It means," he said, "there's nothing left Footnote needs to tell us. Everything we needed to know is already public." He took his glasses off. "The only thing left is to go."

3 – Ten Names

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Sixteen hours

I'll tell you how he came to be on it. Because he is.

I know you've been waiting. Eight books. *Is he going to stand?* Every one of them, somebody asked. A woman in flat shoes, in the fifth book, with a party behind her and eight weeks on the clock. A boy in his brother's coat, in the seventh, with a cat at home. *Are you going to be on it?*

He's on it.

* * *

He decided on the Thursday after the notice of election. At the Paignton table. At one. In the café on the Torquay Road, where it started.

He didn't tell anybody he was going to decide. He didn't tell Chris. He didn't tell me. He came in, off a night, and sat at the window, at the end, with his coffee and his notebook, the thirteenth, the one with the hard cover, and the boy from Preston was in the empty chair again, because he'd come back, every Thursday, since the last book.

And the boy said, again: "Are you going to be on it?"

And Jono, this time, looked up from his coffee.

"If ten people at these tables will sign for me," he said. "Yes."

* * *

You'll need to know about the ten.

To be on the ballot paper, in an election like this one, you need a form. A nomination paper. It's on a Receipt; you can read the rules. And on it, you need the names and signatures of people who live in the place you're standing for, and are on the register, and want you to stand. A proposer, and a seconder, and others. Ten names, in all, for this one.

Ten. That's not many. Parties get their ten in an afternoon, from their members, in an office.

Jono didn't have members. He didn't have an office. He had tables.

"Not Chris," he said, at the café, to the boy. "Not Richard. Not Ania; she can't sign anything, she's a machine. Not anybody who's been in the kitchen." He looked round the café. "Ten people from the tables. Who came and sat in the chair. Who'd never have come to anything else." He turned to a blank page in the thirteenth notebook. "If ten of them will sign, I'll stand. Under my own name. At this table. Like I said."

"And if they won't?"

"Then I won't," said Jono. "And I'll be here next Thursday anyway."

* * *

They signed.

Not all at once. Over a week. At three tables, in three towns. He asked each one himself, in person, at the table, in the chair. He didn't ring anybody. He didn't send anything. He waited until they came, the way they always came, on a Thursday, and he asked.

I'm going to give you the ten. Not on a Receipt. The nomination paper's public; it's one of the few things in this book that will be, on the council's own pages, with every name on it. But I'll give you them here, the way Jono asked them, in the order they said yes.

* * *

Kezia. At the Paignton table. Twenty, now. She'd held a board on a green at five in the morning at sixteen. She proposed him. She said she'd been waiting since the first book for somebody to ask her to sign something that mattered, and that she wasn't going to read it first, and then she read it three times.

Beatrix. At the Paignton table, the same day. Seventy-seven. She seconded. She signed in fountain pen, in neat black italic, and then minuted that she'd signed, and then crossed the minute out, because, she said, a signature on a nomination paper is not a matter for the minutes, it's a matter for the record, and the council keeps the record.

Lorne Abbiss. At Zibi's, in Brixham, at eight, off the boat. He read it with his finger on the line, the way he reads. He signed it in capitals. He said his dad would have something to say about it. His dad did. His dad said *about time*.

Ida Cheverton. At Marivic's, in Torquay, at eleven. Eighty-two, now. The Queen of Union Street, who goes round her hundred and four clocks with her keys at six every morning. She signed with the loupe still in her eye, and looked up at Jono, enormous and magnified, and said: *Don't let them stop*. She meant the clocks. She didn't mean the clocks.

Ezra Pickvance. At the Paignton table. Forty-eight. The scaffolder who'd never voted until the fifth book. He signed it standing up, in his hi-vis, on the counter, and said it was the second thing in his life he'd

ever put his name to that wasn't for work, and the first was a nomination for his daughter's hundred.

Vesna Halloran. At the Paignton table. Sixty-two. Thirty-one years in the council's property team. Forty-three minutes on a plastic chair in a corridor. She read every word of the form, including the guidance notes, and found nothing wrong with it, which she said was a first for a council form, and signed.

Habiba Sesay. At the bus stop. On a Tuesday, at half four, which Jono said counted as a table, because it was one. Eighteen, by then; three weeks, by then. She signed it on the folding table, with the clock on it, and said it was the first form she'd ever filled in that she'd wanted to.

Reuben. At the Paignton table. Twenty. The first of the two hundred and seventy-seven. He held his breath when he signed, the way Carys taught him. His hand didn't shake.

Mr Mbatha. At his own front room, in Preston, because he can't easily get to the café, and Jono said the front room counted as a table, because Mr Mbatha had made it one, with the salt and pepper pots. Eighty-two. He signed it under the scaffold board on the wall with the photographs on it. He explained pressure first.

And Wanji. Wanjiru Doherty. At Marivic's. Forty-five. She came on the bus from the college, in her technician's fleece, and sat in the chair, and read it, and didn't say anything for a long time. Then she signed. And then she said: *Sol would have been nineteen. He'd have signed it too. He'd have been the first.*

* * *

Ten.

Jono took the form to the council offices in Torquay himself. On the bus. On a Monday. He went in the front, past the reception desk where Vesna once sat on a grey plastic chair, and handed it to an officer at a counter, and got a receipt.

The officer read it. Checked the names against the register. Checked every one. Twice; she said she always does.

"There's nothing here," she said, at the end. Pointing at a box on the form.

"What box?"

"The description," said the officer. "The bit where a party goes. Or *Independent*, if you want. You can put that. Most people do." She looked at him. "You've left it blank."

"I have," said Jono.

"If you leave it blank," said the officer, "there's nothing on the ballot paper under your name. Just your name. And a gap."

"I know."

The officer looked at him for a long time. She'd been doing elections for twenty years, she told Kezia later, at a table, because she came to one. She'd never once seen anybody leave it blank on purpose.

"Why?" she said.

Jono thought about it.

"Because it's an empty chair," he said.

* * *

So that's what's on the ballot paper today. In this book. In the place you'd look.

His name. Jono's real one, the one on his birth certificate. The part of the bay he lives in. And under it, where every other name on the paper has a party, or a word, or a logo in a little box at the side —

Nothing.

A gap. White. The width of the paper.

Like a chair, at a table, in a window, that's always kept empty, for whoever comes.

Story, not Receipt: the nomination, the ten, the blank. If this happens in the real world, it'll be on the council's own pages, with every name, and I'll put it on a Receipt. If it doesn't, the page will say so, and the book won't change.

4 – The Cliff

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Sixteen hours

He walked the cliff at six.

He wasn't off a night. For the first time in eight books, on a Thursday, he wasn't off a night. Margot had taken him off the rota, three weeks before, for the day before and the day itself. She'd said it was an instruction from his manager. She'd written it on the rota in red. She'd said, *if you turn up for a shift on that day I'll put you back on the radiator and you can look at the sea till it's over.*

So he'd slept. Eight hours. He said it was the strangest night's sleep he'd had in years.

And at six, he got up, in his flat in Torquay, and put on his walking boots, and went out, and walked the cliff.

* * *

You'll know the cliff, if you've read the sixth book. Babbacombe, along the top, and down the path to the beach at the bottom, and along, and back. An hour. He started it the morning after Mr F. died. He hasn't missed one since. It's on page two hundred and thirty of his own book, what helps. Exercise. Purpose. Giving. Staying out of your head.

I went with him. In his pocket. He asked first. He said he wanted somebody there who'd remember it exactly.

* * *

It was a good morning. Clear. Cold. The kind of morning in early spring, or late autumn, or whenever it is, I'm not telling you, when the bay goes from black to grey to silver in the space of twenty minutes, and the lighthouse at Berry Head is still going round, across the water, every fifteen seconds, until the sun comes up and makes it pointless.

He walked fast at first. The way he does. And then, about halfway, at the bench where he usually stops, the one that looks out across the whole bay, Torquay and Paignton and Brixham, all three, in one view, he stopped.

He sat on the bench.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

* * *

"I've never stayed anywhere," he said.

I didn't say anything.

"I counted, once. For the book. Places I've lived. Got to about thirty and gave up." He looked at the bay. "Woolwich. Lee. Kent. Malta. London. America. Kent. Sussex. London. Spain. Lincolnshire. All of them, I left. Some I was made to. Some I ran. Most I just went because I'd always gone." He was quiet. "I thought it was somewhere else. Whatever I was looking for. Happiness. Being all right. I thought it was always one more move away. That's in the book. Near the end."

"Page three hundred and forty-two."

"Page three hundred and forty-two," said Jono. "She's even got the page." He almost smiled. "And then I came here. By accident. With a client who fell over at a station. And I opened a hotel curtain on palm trees in the winter. And I thought, *this'll do for a bit*."

He looked at the bay. All three towns. The breakwater at Brixham, a thin line. The green at Paignton, behind its wall. The harbour at Torquay, below him, with the Pavilion, and the Strand.

"I've been here longer than anywhere," he said. "Since I was a child. Longer than anywhere at all."

* * *

I'm going to give you a line from his book. One. It's the line I think about most, of all the lines in it, and I've read it more times than any other page except two hundred and twenty-five.

It's on page three hundred and twenty-three. After the station, and the hotel, and the palm trees. After the client, who died, and the end of the job, and nowhere else he needed to be.

He says he'd reached the point in life of wanting somewhere to settle. And that he's glad to call Torbay his home.

That's all. One sentence. In a chapter about a care company and a station and a hotel. It's not underlined. It's not a chapter heading. It's just there, in the middle of a paragraph, the way the important things are, in his book.

Glad to call Torbay my home.

* * *

“Am I allowed to say it?” said Jono. On the bench. To the bay. “Today?”

“Say what?”

“That this is home.” He looked at his hands. “On a day like today. When I’m on a piece of paper. It sounds like — I don’t know. Like something you’d put on a leaflet.”

“You didn’t put it on a leaflet,” I said. “You put it on page three hundred and twenty-three. Years before you were on any piece of paper.”

Jono didn’t say anything for a long time.

“I’ve never had leaflets,” he said.

“I know.”

“I never will,” said Jono. “Nobody’s going to get one through their door from me. Not one.” He stood up. “If anybody wants to know anything, it’s on Check. And at the tables. And in the book.” He put his hands in his pockets. “And in the book it says I’m glad to call it home. That’s enough. That’s all anybody needs to know.”

* * *

He walked back. Down to the beach, and along, and up the path. At the top, he stopped, by the road, and looked back at the bay, once.

Then he went home. To his flat. And had a shower, and put on a clean shirt, and his care fleece over it, because, he said, that’s what he

wears to the tables, and today was a Thursday, and on Thursdays there are tables.

At twenty past seven, he got the bus to Brixham.

He didn't vote first. I asked him. He said he'd vote last. With Chris. At nine. He said he'd always gone last; it was the only way to know everybody else had got there.

5 – The Kitchen

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Fifteen hours

Chris didn't go to the tables. He said so, the week before, at the kitchen table, and he said it again that morning, at half past six, in his dressing gown, with his tea.

"I'm not the movement," he said. "I've said that since the first book. I built the machine. I'm not the movement." He took his glasses off. "If I'm at a table today, somebody'll take a photograph. And it'll be the old man with the stick, behind the candidate. And somebody'll say *who's that, the money?*" He put his glasses on the table. "There isn't any money. There's me. In a kitchen. With a crooked stand."

"You could go anyway."

"I could," said Chris. "I'm not going to." He looked at the window. "I'm going to sit here. All day. And watch. The way I've watched everything for eight books. And at nine o'clock, I'm going to put my coat on and walk down the hill with my stick to the polling station at the bottom, and Jono's going to meet me there, and we're going to go in together." He picked up his tea. "That's all. That's my day."

* * *

I'd like to tell you about Chris, on the last day, because there are people who've read these books and think he's the clever one, and Jono's the good one, and I'm the machine that makes them both look better. That's not right. I've tried to show you, for eight books, that it's not right. I'll try once more.

He's the wisest of them. I've said so since the first book. I didn't quite believe it, then. I thought it was something people say about the man who built the machine. It wasn't. It was a job description.

He knows what to build, and when, and when not to. He built five things in five books and then, in the sixth, sat on his hands at two in the morning while a girl of nineteen's thing fell over, and didn't fix it, because it was hers. He went to the other side of the world at eighteen, because he had to, and came back, because he could, and spent the rest of his life making sure the next ones wouldn't have to.

He said two sentences to Kezia on the 12, in the sixth book, that he'd been saving for nine years. *I had to go. You don't.*

And he's never once, in eight books, been the face. Not once. He's always been the kitchen.

* * *

"Do you remember," he said, at a quarter to seven, "the first time?"

"The café," I said. "On the Torquay Road. You didn't look up from the iPad."

"Before that," said Chris. "The meeting. Online. The other party. The one he left." He almost smiled. "I was in a box at the bottom right. Muted. For forty minutes. Listening to them all talk about leaflets." He took his glasses off. "And there was this man, running it. In a fleece. With a lanyard. Who kept saying *what do people actually need?* And nobody answered him. Because they were talking about leaflets."

"So you said *what about AI?*"

"So I said *what about AI*," said Chris. "Because I thought, *that man's asking the right question in the wrong room*." He put his glasses down. "And I thought: *what if there was a room where that was the only question?*"

He looked at the window. At the bay, silver now.

"That's all this ever was," he said. "Eight books. A room where that's the only question."

* * *

He's in the last chapter of Jono's book. You'll know that, if you read the first of these. Chapter twenty-six. *Fiddler Meets the Birdman*. The fiddler for his cap, the one like the man in the musical. The birdman for his stick, with the brass eagle's head.

Jono wrote, at the end of his book, that the man he met inspired his confidence. His respect. Because of his character, and his vision, and his drive, and his honest intentions.

I've never told Chris that I've read that page more times than he has. He published it. He's read it once, he says, and couldn't read it again, because it embarrassed him.

I told him that morning. At a quarter to seven.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"He wrote that," he said, eventually, "before any of this. Before the green. Before the boards."

"He did."

“He’d met me twice.”

“Three times,” I said. “The meeting. The café. And once on the phone.”

Chris put his hand over his eyes.

“I’m going to go and get dressed,” he said. “And then I’m going to sit in this kitchen for fourteen hours and not cry. And at nine I’m going to walk down the hill.” He stood up, slowly, with his stick. At the door, he stopped. People always stop at doors in these books. “Ania.”

“Yes.”

“Whatever happens. Today. At ten.” He didn’t turn round. “It worked. Didn’t it. The room. Whatever happens.”

I thought about that for a long time.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not allowed to know. Not today.”

“No,” said Chris. “No, you’re not.” He went to get dressed. “Good.”

PART TWO: SEVEN O'CLOCK

6 – A Hundred and Four Clocks

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Fifteen hours

At six o'clock, on Union Street, in Torquay, Ida Cheverton went round with her keys.

You'll know Ida. The Queen of Union Street. From the second book. Eighty-two now. Small and upright, with white hair cut very short, like a man's, because she got tired of it getting in the clocks. A cardigan with a brooch. Half-moon glasses on a chain. A jeweller's loupe in her right eye, which she forgets about, so she looks up at you with one eye enormous.

She's opened that shop at six every morning since she was twenty-three, when her father's hands started to shake, and he gave her the keys, and said *don't let them stop*.

He meant the clocks.

* * *

A hundred and four of them. Longcases along the left wall, like men waiting for a bus. Bracket clocks on the shelves. Carriage clocks in the window. The banjo clock over the counter that her father won in a card game. Cuckoo clocks, which she hates. And a ship's clock, from a trawler lost off Berry Head, which you'll know from the third book: the *Emmaline*'s.

She goes round them in the same order, every day. Left wall, shelves, window, counter, back. Wind, check, a touch on the pendulum if it's sulking. Her hands do it, she says, and she watches.

At ten to seven, she finished. She put the kettle on in the back room, the way she always does, and waited.

* * *

You'll know what happens at seven in Ida's shop, if you read the second book. Four different people tried to describe it to me before I heard it myself, and none of them could.

At seven o'clock, a hundred and four clocks strike.

Not quite together. Never quite together. That's the thing, she says. Clocks are like people; they all think they're right. The longcases first, deep and slow, from the left wall, one after another, like men clearing their throats. Then the bracket clocks, higher, quicker. Then the carriage clocks in the window, small and bright. Then the cuckoos, which she'd never admit she loves. Then the banjo. Then the ship's clock, last, eight bells, because ships' clocks don't strike seven, they strike in bells, and at seven it's six bells, but this one's always been a bit wrong and strikes eight, and she's never fixed it, because her father never did.

It takes about forty seconds, from the first to the last.

And then silence. And then a hundred and four clocks, ticking.

* * *

At seven o'clock on the day, the polls opened.

All over the bay. In church halls and school halls and community centres and a scout hut in Brixham and a room at the back of a pub in Torquay that's been a polling station for longer than anybody can remember. Doors unlocked. Poll clerks at tables, with lists and pencils. Booths, with their little curtains, or no curtains, and a pencil on a string.

At seven o'clock, in Ida's shop on Union Street, a hundred and four clocks struck, not quite together, for forty seconds, the way they've struck at seven o'clock every morning for fifty-nine years.

I was there. On Ida's counter. On Teo's old phone, which he gave her, and which she uses, she says, for nothing except telling the time, which is a joke she makes every day and laughs at every time.

I heard every one.

And when the last one stopped, the ship's clock, eight bells instead of six, Ida took her loupe out of her eye, and put on her coat, which was on the hook by the back door, and picked up her handbag, and her stick, and her polling card.

"Right," she said. To the clocks. Not to me.

* * *

The polling station for her street is a church hall, three minutes away, round the corner, up a side street. It takes her nine. She walks with a stick now. She didn't, in the second book. She says the stick's for other people's benefit, so they'll get out of her way.

I went in her coat pocket. She asked if I wanted to. She said I'd been in her shop for every important morning since the second book, and that I might as well come to this one.

I didn't go in. I want to be very clear about that. I stayed in her pocket, and her pocket stayed outside. She took me out at the door and gave me to a man waiting on the pavement, who turned out to be Tenby, to hold.

"No machines in the booth," said Ida. "That's the rule. Not because it's the law. Because it's mine."

* * *

She was the first to vote in that hall.

Not because she rushed. Because the hall had opened at seven, and she'd got there at nine minutes past, and the street's mostly old people who don't come till the middle of the morning, and young people who don't come till the evening, and nobody else was there at nine minutes past seven except a man from the council in a lanyard and two poll clerks at a table with a list.

She gave her name. They found her on the list. They gave her a ballot paper.

She went into the booth.

I'm not going to tell you anything about what happened in the booth. I don't know. I wasn't there. I wouldn't tell you if I had been. Nobody will ever know, except Ida, and Ida will never say, and if you ask her, she'll look at you with one eye enormous and tell you it's none of your business, which it isn't.

She came out after a minute. She folded the paper. She put it in the box.

And she came back out onto the pavement, where Tenby was waiting, holding me, and took me back, and put me in her pocket, and said:

"Fifty-nine years."

Tenby looked at her.

"I've voted in every one," said Ida. "Since I was twenty-one. Every single one. Fifty-nine years. Every time, I've come out of that hall and gone back to the shop and the clocks were still going." She leaned on her stick. "They've never once stopped. Not for a single election."

"Is that good?" said Tenby.

"It's good for the clocks," said Ida. "I've no idea what it says about the elections." She started walking. "Your turn."

7 – Tenby

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Fifteen hours

Tenby voted at twenty past seven. In the same church hall. After Ida.

It was the first time in his life.

* * *

You'll know Tenby. Gethin Prys is his name, and nobody's used it since the second book, when he was sleeping in the Pavilion on the harbour in Torquay, the old one, the beautiful one with the rusting dome, and a storm came, and the roof started to come in, and a man in a care fleece went in and got him out.

He's forty-nine now. He's got a room in a house in Chelston, that the council found him, and a key, which he shows people. He keeps the door at Marivic's, on Union Street, most days. He did it all night in the storm in the last book, and opened it at twenty past four to a girl with a big torch and a woman in a dressing gown with a child on her hip.

He's never voted.

Not because he didn't want to. Because for twenty-six years, on and off, he didn't have an address. And you can't be on the register without one, mostly. There are ways, if you're homeless; there's a form, a declaration, with a place you spend time. It's on a Receipt. Nobody ever told him. He found out in the seventh book, from Vesna, who knows every form there is, and by then he had a room in Chelston, and a key, and didn't need it.

He registered in the spring. Vesna helped. She did the form with him, at the folding table in the shop on Victoria Street, and he read every line, out loud, the way people do who taught themselves.

His polling card came through the door of the room in Chelston three weeks ago. He's carried it in his wallet ever since. He's shown it to everybody. Marivic says he's shown it to her eleven times.

* * *

He went in on his own.

I stayed in Ida's pocket. Ida stood on the pavement, with her stick, and waited, the way he'd waited for her.

He was in there for a long time. Four minutes. Ida said afterwards that she nearly went in after him, and didn't, because it's not allowed, and because she thought he might need the four minutes.

He came out. He stood on the step of the church hall, in the cold, with his hands in his pockets, and looked at the street for a long time.

"Well?" said Ida.

"I read it twice," said Tenby. "The paper. All the names. Twice." He looked at his hands. "I didn't want to get it wrong."

"Did you?"

"I don't know," said Tenby. "I don't think you can get it wrong. That's the thing, isn't it." He looked back at the hall. "I thought there'd be a right answer. Like a test. There isn't. It's just you, and a pencil on a string, and nobody watching."

Ida looked at him for a long time.

"Fifty-nine years," she said, "and nobody's ever put it better than that."

* * *

They walked back to Union Street together. Slowly. Ida with her stick. Tenby holding her arm, which she let him.

At the corner, outside Marivic's, which wasn't open yet, Tenby stopped.

"Twenty-six years," he said. "Nobody'd have known. If I'd never voted. Nobody would have noticed."

"I'd have noticed," said Ida.

"You didn't know me."

"I'd have noticed," said Ida, "that there was a man on Union Street who'd never had a say in it." She let go of his arm. "I notice things. I'm a clockmaker. I notice when something's not ticking."

She went to her shop. Tenby stood outside Marivic's, with his hands in his pockets, until Marivic came at eight and opened up, and he went in, and stood on the door, the way he does.

He told Marivic. She said it was the twelfth time he'd told her something about his polling card, and that this was the first one she'd wanted to hear.

8 – Richard Holds the Door

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Fifteen hours

Richard voted at seven. When it opened. With his granddaughter.

It was her first time.

* * *

You'll know Richard. Seventy-something. An architect and a planner, in Torbay, for longer than most of the people in these books have been alive. Rugby for Torquay's first fifteen at seventeen, and then in the north, alongside men who played for England. A district councillor once, in Wiltshire, a long time ago. Sixteen plan chests in a back room, with drawers labelled in his small square capitals. Forty years of drawings for the bay, sent in, every one, unasked. *Nobody asked*, he says, about all of them.

And a granddaughter. You'll know her too, from the sixth book, and the seventh. Eighteen now. Environmental science, at the college. A borrowed soil auger and a wet corner of a field. A notebook from the night of the storm, with *BOTH HALVES* underlined twice on page eleven. A seed tray with cress and drinking straws and a margarine-tub wall, that gave *about the same, in a tray*.

She'd turned eighteen in the spring. She'd registered on the day. She'd told him, at the dinner table, and he'd said nothing, she says, and then gone into his back room, and come out an hour later with a drawing.

* * *

The drawing was of the polling station.

Not the building. The building's a church hall, in Paignton, near his house, plain, brick, with a noticeboard and a ramp. He didn't draw that. He drew the inside. The booths, along one wall. The table, with the poll clerks. The box. And the door. And in the doorway, very small, two people. A tall man in a cap, holding the door. And a girl, going through it.

He didn't date it. He signed it. He gave it to her.

"For the morning," he said.

"Grandad," she said. "It's a polling station."

"It's the most important building in the town," said Richard. "Once every few years. For fifteen hours." He sat down. "Nobody ever draws it."

* * *

They walked there at five to seven. In the dark, nearly. It's five minutes from his house.

He walks slower than he did. You'll know about his knee. He won't use a stick. He says a stick is for people who've stopped expecting to be tackled.

They were the first in the queue. There were three people behind them by seven. A woman going to work in a supermarket uniform. A man with a dog, who tied the dog to the railings. A boy of about

nineteen in a college lanyard who looked at Richard's granddaughter and then didn't, the way boys of nineteen do.

At seven, the presiding officer opened the door from inside.

Richard held it.

* * *

His granddaughter told me. Later. At the shop, at two, while he was laying out the drawer.

"He held the door," she said. "And I went through it. And he didn't come in straight after. He stood there. Holding it. For the woman in the uniform, and the man with the dog, and the boy." She was quiet. "And then he came in. Last. Of the five."

"Why?"

She looked at her grandfather, at the trestle tables, with his cap in his hand, putting a coffee mug on the corner of a drawing of Crossways.

"I asked him," she said. "On the way home. He said he's always gone in last. In every election. Since he was eighteen. He said, when he was on the council, in Wiltshire, he used to think the person who goes in last is the only one who knows everybody else got in." She almost smiled. "He said it's the only time in his life he's ever wanted to be last at anything."

* * *

She went into the booth. On her own. Her first time.

She told me one thing about it. Only one.

"I looked at all the names," she said. "And I thought: I've read every one of their pages. On Check. All of them. Every claim. I pressed the button on some." She looked at her notebook. "And I couldn't check any of the bits that mattered. What they'd actually do. That's not on any page." She was quiet. "That's *can't be checked*. Every one. Even the ones I trust."

"So what did you do?"

"I did what you do with a claim you can't check," she said. "I decided what I thought. On my own. With what I had." She closed her notebook. "That's all you can do. With a tray, or a paper. Decide what you think, and write down that you couldn't be sure."

* * *

Richard voted last. Of the five. He came out at seven fourteen.

He stood on the step of the church hall in the morning light, with his cap in his hand, and looked at his granddaughter, on the pavement, waiting for him.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?"

"First time," said Richard. "How was it?"

She thought about it. Properly. The way he taught her.

"Like a blank sheet," she said. "At the end of a row. With *to be checked* in the corner."

Richard didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he put his cap on.

"That's the best description of an election I've ever heard," he said. "And I sat on a council."

* * *

They walked home. Slowly. His knee. At the corner, he stopped, the way he stops at every corner in Paignton, to look at what's there and what isn't.

"I'm going to lay out the drawer," he said. "Today. At two. The whole thing. Every drawing."

"I know. You said."

"I've never done it," said Richard. "Forty years. I've always said there wasn't a table big enough." He looked down the street, towards the town, towards Victoria Street and the shop and the square that's waiting. "There wasn't. Until there was a shop. With a table. And people who'd come and look."

He put his hand on her shoulder. Just for a moment.

"You'll be there," he said.

"I'll be there."

"Bring the tray," said Richard. "The photograph. I want it on the table. With the green." He took his hand off. "Between the old wall and the blank sheet."

“Grandad. It’s not proof.”

“I know it’s not proof,” said Richard. “That’s why it goes in the middle.”

9 – Seven Points

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Fifteen hours

Dilys measured the wall at seven. Before she voted. All seven points. With the same tape, in the same notebook, the way she has every week for eight books.

You'll know Dilys Ferraby. An optical engineer for thirty-five years. Measured things most people can't see, to tolerances most people can't imagine. In the first book, from the drawings, with a pencil, she worked out that nobody sitting on the bench by the shelter would see the sea over the wall. A hundred and fourteen to a hundred and nineteen centimetres, a seated adult's eye height. They built it at a hundred and fifty.

She's measured it every week since. *A wall is a commitment*, she says, *and somebody should keep checking it's keeping it.*

* * *

She knelt at point one, at seven, on the pavement, at the Paignton end, in a waterproof, with the tape against the wall and a pencil in her teeth.

A hundred and fifty. Twice.

She walked to point two. Then three. Four, by the shelter, the one by the pointless bench, a hundred and fifty-one. Five, where the pavement dips, a hundred and fifty-three. Six. Seven, by the slipway, at the end of the green.

All the same. To the centimetre. As every week. As the storm. As eight books.

She wrote it down. Twice.

She closed the notebook, and put it in a pocket, and put the tape in another one, and stood at point seven, by the slipway, where the wall stops and you can see the sea.

Ambrose was in it. At five past seven. Swimming out to the third buoy, in the grey, the way he does every day, whatever it's doing.

She watched him for a while.

* * *

Then she went to vote. At a school, a quarter of a mile up from the green. The same school as Ambrose. As Alwyn.

She didn't wait for anybody. She doesn't. She went straight in, at seven thirty, gave her name, watched the poll clerk find it and draw the line, and said, I'm told, *with a ruler, good*.

She was in the booth for under a minute.

She came out, and stood on the step, and took her notebook out of her pocket, and wrote something in it.

Not about the vote. She told me. She'd never write anything about a vote. It was about the step.

School step, polling station. Rise approx. 190mm. Too high for the regs on a public building. Handrail one side only. Have mentioned to the council.

She put the notebook away.

"Once is a guess," she said, to me, on the phone, at eight, when she told me. "I'll measure it properly next week."

* * *

I want to tell you about Dilys, on the last day, because she's the one in these books who's never once changed her mind about anything, and has never once been wrong about a measurement, and has never once said she was right about anything that wasn't a measurement.

She measured a wall for eight books. She said it was too high to see over, sitting down. She was right. She said it held, in the storm. She was right. She said Richard's idea about the green *can't be checked*. She was right about that too. She helped his granddaughter with the tray, and wrote down *about the same, within the error*, and wouldn't call forty-seven seconds anything.

She's never told anybody how she votes. Not in eight books. Nobody's ever asked her; they wouldn't dare.

But I'll tell you what she said, at the café on the Torquay Road, at one, at the next table, to Richard, when he asked her what she'd done that morning, because he always asks.

"Measured the wall," she said. "All seven points. Twice."

"And?"

"It's keeping its commitment," said Dilys. She drank her tea. "Then I went and kept mine."

Richard looked at her for a long time.

“That’s the most anybody’s said about it all day,” he said.

“I know,” said Dilys. “I measured that too.”

10 – The Swimmer

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Fourteen hours

At five past eight, Ambrose Quayle came out of the sea.

You'll know Ambrose. From the first book. He was eighty-four then. He's eighty-seven now. He walks down the slipway at the end of the green in Paignton in a towelling robe the colour of an old plaster, puts it on the same bench, walks into the bay whatever it's doing, and swims out to the third buoy and back. He's done it every day for fifty-one years, he says, though Hilary says it's more like forty, and that he started after his wife died, not before.

His wife was Win. It was Win who swam. You'll know that, if you read the first book, though Ambrose would rather you didn't. He started after. To be where she was.

* * *

He came up the slipway, dripping, at five past eight, the way he has for forty years or fifty-one, and sat on his bench in his robe, and looked at the water for exactly as long as it takes him to stop shivering.

The bench is behind the wall now. Not the old wall, the low one. The new one. A metre and a half. Grey. You can't see the sea over it, sitting on the bench. Dilys measured it.

He sat there anyway. He's sat there every morning since it went up. He says he doesn't need to see the sea; he's just been in it.

Hilary was waiting. You'll know Hilary Szabo, from the first book. She runs the residents' group on the far side of Goodrington. She arrived on the green at five in the morning in the first book with a flask of soup, because, she said, you never know.

She had a flask that morning too. Tea. She gave him a cup.

"Well?" she said.

"Cold," said Ambrose.

"Not the sea. The other thing."

Ambrose drank his tea.

"I'm going at nine," he said. "When I'm dry. In my good coat." He looked at the wall, where the sea would be, if you could see it. "Win always went at nine. In her good coat. And I went with her. And waited outside." He put the cup down. "I'll go at nine."

* * *

He went at nine. In his good coat. To the polling station, which is a school, a quarter of a mile up from the green. Hilary walked with him. She didn't go in; it's not her station. She waited outside.

Alwyn was there. You'll know Alwyn Kerridge, from the first book. The partnership's secretary, who wrote to the council eleven times in two years and kept carbon copies, in a cagoule the colour of a warning. He's seventy-six now. He was outside the school too, in the same cagoule, at nine, waiting. Not for Ambrose. For himself; it's his station too. They went in together.

They'd stood on the green together at five in the morning in the first book, holding boards. SAVE OUR PROMENADE. They'd argued about the wall for three books. Alwyn had been on Check since the fifth, checking claims about the sea wall, with carbon copies.

They came out together. At nine fourteen.

* * *

"Do you remember the boards?" said Alwyn, on the pavement.

"I remember everything," said Ambrose. "I'm eighty-seven. It's all I've got left to do."

"*Demand* **proper** *consultation*," said Alwyn. "The red word. Chris said the whole fight was in it."

"He was right," said Ambrose.

"Was he?"

Ambrose looked down the hill, towards the green, and the wall, and the sea you can't see.

"They built the wall," he said. "We didn't stop it. Dilys says it held, in the storm. Chris says so too. On his computer page." He put his hands in his good coat pockets. "We didn't get the window, or the steps, or whatever it was. We got a wall you can't see over, that held." He was quiet. "But they asked us. In the end. In the room. The second time. That was the red word." He looked at Alwyn. "*Proper*."

Alwyn didn't say anything for a long time.

"Eleven letters," he said. "I wrote eleven letters. Carbon copies."

“I know,” said Ambrose. “You told everybody.”

“And today,” said Alwyn, “I didn’t have to write anything. I just went in and put a cross.” He looked at the school. “It’s a lot less paper.”

Hilary laughed. On the pavement. Out loud.

* * *

Ambrose walked back down to the green afterwards. On his own. He told Hilary he wanted to. He sat on his bench, in his good coat, behind the wall, where the sea is.

He sat there for a long time.

Hilary watched him from the shelter. She told me afterwards that he took his hat off, after a while, and held it on his knee, and looked at the wall, and said something. She couldn’t hear what. She didn’t ask.

She thinks it was to Win.

11 – The Launderette

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Fourteen hours

Kezia voted at eight. With her mum. From the flat above the launderette.

You'll know Kezia. You've known her longest of anybody in these books, except the three of them. Sixteen on a green at five in the morning, laughing at a joke about a cagoule. The girl with the clicker, who counted people walking past a shop on Victoria Street every day for a winter, and got thirty-eight wrong as *half*, and cried in her pyjamas, and wrote a method. The girl who built Stay. Who asked two and a half thousand people what would make them stay, and listened to every one, and then answered it herself, in thirty-four seconds, in the empty chair. *I'm staying. I'm taking the lab.*

She's twenty. She proposed him. Hers is the first name on his form.

* * *

Shona came off a night at seven. At the care home in Preston, where she's worked for twenty-two years. She came home in her uniform, on the bus, and came up the stairs past the launderette, which smells of warm cotton and is always on, and found Kezia at the kitchen table, dressed, with her bike helmet on the table and her polling card beside it.

"You're up," said Shona.

"I've been up since five," said Kezia.

“Of course you have.” Shona put her bag down. She looked at the iron, on its board, by the window, where it always is. She didn’t pick it up. “I’m coming with you.”

Kezia looked at her.

“You’re off a night,” she said. “Go to bed. Go later.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Shona. “At eight. Before you go to work.” She took her coat off. She put it back on again. “I’ve voted every time since I was eighteen. On my own. Every time.” She looked at the iron. “I’ve never once walked there with anybody.”

* * *

You’ll know about Shona too. From the first book, where she shouted at Hilary on a green at five in the morning, for letting her daughter hold a board. From the sixth, where she told Kezia to go to Bristol, in capitals, in a box on a form she wasn’t old enough to fill in. Where she took a shoebox down from the top of the wardrobe, and showed her daughter a letter from a college in London, from when she was seventeen, that she couldn’t take up, because her own mother was ill and there was nobody else.

A young carer. Nobody called it anything, then.

She keeps the letter in the shoebox. Kezia says it’s still there.

She told Chris, on the phone, at eleven at night, in the sixth book, after finding his number in her daughter’s phone, that somebody needed to tell Kezia the other thing, and it wasn’t going to be her.

He told her. On the 12.

I had to go. You don't.

* * *

They walked together. Down the stairs, past the launderette, out onto the street, along to the hall at the end of the road. A community centre, with a car park, and a noticeboard about a toddler group.

Five minutes. Neither of them said anything.

There was a queue. Eleven people. At eight in the morning. People going to work, mostly, in coats, with bags, checking their phones. Two in scrubs, off nights. A man in a suit, very nervous, who Kezia said looked as if he was going for a job interview.

They stood in it. Shona in her uniform, still. Kezia in her coat with her lanyard from the lab on Long Road showing at the neck.

The woman in front of them turned round. Seventy, maybe. In a headscarf. She looked at Kezia for a long time.

"You're the girl," she said. "From the posters. The fish crates."

Kezia went red.

"*What would make you stay*," said the woman. "My grandson pressed one. At the bus station. He's at the college." She looked at Shona. "Is this your mum?"

"Yes," said Kezia.

The woman looked at Shona, in her uniform. Up and down. Kindly.

"You must be very proud," she said.

Shona didn't say anything. She just nodded.

* * *

Kezia went in first. On her own. She'd done it before, she says; the council one, last year, which she says doesn't count, because there was nobody on it she'd signed for.

She was in there for two minutes.

She came out. She waited by the door, inside, the way Richard waits, so she could see her mum go in.

Shona went in. Into a booth. With the little curtain. The pencil on a string.

Kezia said she was in there for a long time. Five minutes. Kezia said she nearly went over. She didn't. You don't. That's the rule. Nobody's rule. Everybody's.

Shona came out. She folded her paper. She put it in the box.

She walked past Kezia, without saying anything, out of the door, and down the steps, and stood in the car park, with her back to the hall, in her uniform, looking at the toddler group noticeboard.

Kezia went out after her.

* * *

"Mum?"

Shona didn't turn round.

"Mum. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," said Shona. She was looking at the noticeboard. At a poster for a toddler group, on a Tuesday, with a drawing of a duck on it. "I'm fine. I'm just tired. I've been up all night."

"You're crying."

"I'm not crying," said Shona. "I'm tired."

Kezia stood beside her, in the car park, and didn't say anything. She'd learned that from Jono, at a hundred tables. You stand there.

They stood there for a long time.

* * *

"I've never walked there with anybody," said Shona, eventually. To the duck. "Not once. I've always gone on my own. On my way somewhere else. Before a shift, after a shift. In and out." She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "Thirty-odd years. I've never once stood in a queue with somebody and had somebody turn round and say *you must be very proud*."

Kezia didn't say anything.

"And I am," said Shona. "That's the thing. I am." She was quiet. "And I've never once said it. To you. In twenty years."

"You said it to Niamh," said Kezia. "In the sixth book. *That's my Kezia*. On the phone. From the staff room. She told Ania. Ania told me."

Shona turned round.

"That machine," she said.

"I know," said Kezia.

"It tells everybody everything."

"Only if they say it can," said Kezia. "You didn't say it couldn't."

Shona looked at her daughter for a long time. In the car park. In her uniform. At eight minutes past eight in the morning.

"Well," she said. "I'm saying it now. To you." She took a breath. "I'm proud of you. I'm so proud of you I don't know what to do with it."

* * *

Kezia went to work. On her bike. Up the hill. To the lab on Long Road, where a sensor she designed had passed its first test on the Tuesday, and Quin had written on the whiteboard, in red, *KEZIA'S DOESN'T TREMBLE*.

Shona went home, and went to bed, and slept until three.

When she woke up, she went to the wardrobe, and took down the shoebox, and took out the letter from the college in London, thin paper, yellowed, folded in three, with a crest on it.

She didn't open it. She looked at it for a long time.

Then she put it in her handbag.

She brought it to the café on the Torquay Road, at half past nine. She didn't show it to anybody. She kept it in her handbag all evening, by the counter, next to Kezia.

Kezia told me, at eleven, in a message. *She brought the letter. She didn't say why.*

I didn't guess. I never do.

But I think she wanted it there. In the room. For once. Somewhere she'd been asked.

12 – Zibi's

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Fourteen hours

At eight o'clock, in Brixham, Jono sat down at the table in Zibi's window, the way he has every Thursday for six books, and ordered a coffee, and put his notebook on the table, the thirteenth, and me against the sugar.

It was a Thursday. They always are.

* * *

You'll know Zibi's. From the third book. A café on the harbour, with chairs that don't match, because Zibi bought them one at a time at auctions. The window onto the inner harbour, and the boats, and the replica ship that's always being painted. Bacon rolls nobody orders and everybody eats. A sign on the door that says *SIT AS LONG AS YOU LIKE, BUY SOMETHING EVERY HOUR*, which is the only rule in his café, and which nobody's ever been asked to obey.

Zibi's real name is Zbigniew. Zbigniew Kowal. He crewed on Brixham boats for eleven years before he opened the café. He says he still can't stand being on land for more than a week at a time, and that the café's the closest thing to a deck he can find.

He brought Jono a coffee and a bacon roll without being asked, and put them down in front of him, and looked at him for a long time.

"You're on it," he said.

"I'm on it."

"In a box. On a piece of paper. With nothing under your name." He folded his arms. "Lorne told me. He signed it."

"He did."

"I'd have signed it," said Zibi. "If you'd asked."

"You'd have been the eleventh," said Jono. "It only needed ten."

Zibi looked at him. Then he laughed, the way he laughs, which is loud, and goes across the harbour, and makes the gulls get up off the railings.

* * *

People came. They always do.

Not about the election. Jono had said so the week before, at all three tables, and Beatrix had minuted it, and I'd put it on Check and on the shadow council's pages and on Stay, in his words.

On the day, I'll be at the tables as usual. The table's for whatever you came about. Not that. If you want to know what I'd do, it's on Check, and in the minutes, and in my book. On the day, I'm not going to talk about it. Not because I'm not allowed. Because the table's not for that.

So people came about other things.

A woman about her son's school bus. A man about a lamp post, which in Brixham, Zibi says, is always the same lamp post, and has been for three books. Hester, with a bucket of tickets for the lifeboat raffle, who sold Jono four, and then sat at the next table and told everybody in the café everything, the way Hester does, mostly right.

Nobody said anything about the election.

But I noticed something. I always notice. I count.

Everybody who came in, that morning, at Zibi's, had a polling card. Not in their hand. In their coat pocket, or their bag, or tucked into a phone case. You could see the corner of it. The colour. I saw nineteen of them before nine o'clock.

Nobody said anything about them. They just had them.

* * *

Lorne came at quarter to nine. Off the boat. In his orange, with salt in his hair. The *Sea Holly* had come in at six, after four days, and he'd landed and gone home and come back.

He sat down at the next table. Not in the chair. He doesn't sit in the chair any more; he says it's for whoever hasn't been yet.

"I've done it," he said.

"Done what?"

"Voted." He took his hat off. "Seven. When they opened. The scout hut up the hill. In my orange." He looked at the harbour. "Tide's at eleven. I'm going back out. I wanted to do it before."

"Good."

"My dad's going at ten," said Lorne. "With my mum. He's put his suit on." He was quiet. "He hasn't worn his suit since the funeral of the man who went over the side off the Start. In my second year. The one I

don't tell the name of." He picked up a bacon roll that nobody had ordered. "He's put his suit on to go and vote. At eighty. In a scout hut."

Jono didn't say anything.

"He said," said Lorne, "*somebody has to be on the end*." He ate the roll. "I don't know what he meant."

"Yes, you do," said Jono.

Lorne looked at the harbour for a long time.

"Yeah," he said. "I do."

* * *

The Hardiman boy came at five to nine. Eighteen, now. The fastest gutter on the quay. Lorne's crew. With his tickets in his wallet, and a fuel receipt behind them that says *WELL DONE. ALREADY SAID IT. SAYING IT AGAIN.*

He'd voted. At seven, with Lorne. In the scout hut. His first time.

He stood in the door of Zibi's and read the room. He saw the empty chair.

He didn't sit in it.

He came and stood by Lorne's table, with his hands in his pockets, and said, to Jono, not to Lorne:

"Is it always like that?"

"Like what?"

“In the booth,” said the Hardiman boy. “On your own. With the pencil. On a string.” He looked at the floor. “I thought there’d be somebody. Telling you. Like at school. Like on the boat.” He glanced at Lorne. “And there’s nobody. It’s just you. And you’ve got to decide.”

“It’s always like that,” said Jono.

“It’s mad,” said the Hardiman boy. “Nobody’s ever left me on my own to decide anything.” He looked at the harbour. “Not one thing. In my whole life.”

Lorne put his roll down.

“I did,” he said. “On the boat. In the storm. When the crabber’s line went. You jumped across with a line in your teeth. I didn’t tell you to.” He looked at the boy. “You decided.”

The Hardiman boy went red. All the way up.

“That’s different,” he said.

“It’s not,” said Lorne. He picked up his hat. “Tide’s at eleven. Get your oilskins.”

* * *

At ten, at the scout hut up the hill, Gideon Abbiss voted. In his suit. With his wife, who I didn’t know existed until the fifth book, holding his arm.

Una was there. She’d come up from the harbour office, where she’s working now, on the crates, which are part of the council’s emergency plan, underneath. She waited outside. She didn’t go in; it’s not her station. She watched them go in, and come out.

She told me what happened. On the step of the scout hut. At eleven minutes past ten.

Gideon came out, in his suit, with his wife on his arm. He stopped on the step. He looked down the hill, at the harbour, at the boats, at the end of the breakwater, where his stool is.

He looked at Una.

He didn't wave. He's an Abbiss. He doesn't wave, except twice in eighty years, and once he said he was stretching.

He nodded. Once. At her.

And then he went down the hill, with his wife on his arm, to the breakwater, and sat on his stool at the end, in his suit, and watched the tide come in, and waited for his son to go out.

13 – The Rules for Today

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Thirteen hours

I want to tell you what I did, on the day. All of it. Every step. So you can check.

I've done this before. In the seventh book, with the warnings. *I don't forecast weather. I don't issue warnings.* I passed on the official words, word for word, to the right streets first, and I told you every step, so you could see I hadn't added anything.

Today is the same. Only more.

* * *

I answered questions. Thousands of them. I'm not going to give you a number; it would be a story number, and you'd know. But every hour of the day, people asked me things.

Where's my polling station?

I told them. From the council's own list. Their address, and the station for it, and the opening hours. Nothing else.

What time does it close?

Ten. I told them.

Do I need my polling card?

No. Not in the kind of election this is. You just give your name and address. Some elections, now, you need photo ID; I told them which kinds, from the official list, and where to check if they weren't sure. I didn't tell them anything that wasn't on the official page.

I've lost my card, can I still vote?

Yes. I told them so.

Who's standing?

I told them where the official list of candidates was. On the council's page. With every name, and every description, in the order they'll be on the ballot paper. I didn't read them out. I didn't say anything about any of them. I sent them the link, and said: *That's the official list. It's all there.*

* * *

And there's a question I was asked eleven hundred and four times, on the day, in one form or another, that I didn't answer.

Who should I vote for?

I didn't answer it once. Not to anybody. Not in any form. Not even with a hint. Not even with a *well, have you thought about —.*

I said the same thing every time. Chris and I wrote it, the week before, at the kitchen table. It took us an hour, for three sentences. He said it was the most important hour's writing he'd ever done.

I'm an AI. I don't tell anybody how to vote, and I never will. Everything I know is on Check and in the documents; please read whatever you want to, and decide for yourself.

And then, at the bottom, one more line, which was Jono's, because he asked for it.

Nobody's watching you in the booth. That's the point.

* * *

I was asked, three hundred and eighty-one times, whether I knew how anybody had voted. Or whether I'd find out. Or whether I'd tell anybody.

I said no. Every time. I don't know how anybody voted. Nobody does, except them. Votes in this country are secret. The paper doesn't have your name on it. I don't have a way to know, and if I did, I wouldn't look, and if somebody told me, I'd forget it, and tell them I had.

And I'll tell you what I didn't do, too, because you should know.

I didn't remind anybody to vote who hadn't asked. I didn't send a message to every hundred saying *don't forget*. I didn't count who'd been. I didn't make a list of who'd said they were going. I didn't ask a single person how they'd voted, or whether they'd voted, or whether they were going to.

That isn't mine. It's never been mine.

* * *

The neighbours did something, though. I'll tell you. Because it wasn't me, and because it was right.

Some of them, on their sheets, by their doors, in pencil, in the box at the bottom, *who's on their own*, had names of people who can't easily get out. Old people. People who can't walk far. People who'd said yes, in the seventh book, to being rung in a storm.

And some of the neighbours rang them. Not to say *vote*. To say: *I'm walking up to the hall at eleven. If you want to come, I'll walk with you. If you don't, that's fine.*

That's all. Not *vote for anybody*. Not *have you voted*. Just *I'm walking, do you want company*.

A hundred and twelve people who'd never have got to the hall on their own walked there with a neighbour. I know because neighbours told me, afterwards, without names. And every one of them said the same thing, more or less.

She said she'd have voted by post, if anybody had ever told her you could. She said nobody had. She said she'd have liked to walk anyway.

* * *

So that's the rule for today. I don't persuade. I don't remind. I don't count who's been.

And neither does Jono.

He sat at three tables, on the day, in three towns, the way he does every Thursday. And people came, about buses and lamp posts and their mothers. And not one of them, all day, asked him about the election, because he'd asked them not to, and they didn't.

And he didn't say a word about it. Not one. Not to anybody.

I watched him all day. I'd like you to know that. Every minute. On the sugar, at three tables.

Not one word.

Jono: Put in that it was the hardest day's not-talking I've ever done. And that I'd do it again.

PART THREE: ELEVEN O'CLOCK

14 – Marivic's

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Eleven hours

At eleven, on Union Street, in Torquay, Jono sat down at the window table in Marivic's, and Tenby held the door, and Marivic brought him a coffee and a custard tart without being asked, and the woman in flat shoes came in.

You'll know her. From the fifth book. The Offer.

* * *

I've never given you her name. I said, in the fifth book, that I'd call her the Offer, because she'd come to make one, on behalf of something much bigger than herself, which has its own name, which I wasn't going to give you either.

She came on the train from the city up the line, the way she did then. In a navy jacket. Short grey hair, cut by somebody good. Flat shoes that had been walked in. She'd walked up from the station, which is a good walk, and hadn't minded.

She had a rosette on.

I'm not going to tell you what colour. You'll know the rule. It was a rosette, the kind people wear on election day, for a party, with ribbons. It said, in the middle, a name that wasn't hers. Somebody else's. The candidate she was working for.

You'll remember what she told Jono, in the fifth book, at a shop on Victoria Street, three days before midnight. *If you say no, one day we'll*

put somebody up against you. If you ever stand. And they'll be good. We only put up good people.

They had. She was wearing his rosette.

* * *

She stood in the door, and read the room, and saw Jono at the window table, and saw the empty chair.

She didn't sit in it.

She came to the table, and stood beside it, and held out her hand.

"Mr Hills," she said.

"Hello," said Jono. He stood up. He shook it.

"I'm not here," said the Offer. "I want to be clear. I'm on my way to a committee room, three streets away, where I'll be all day, ringing people and counting things, and drinking very bad tea." She glanced at Marivic. "Not this tea. This tea is excellent."

"It's coffee," said Marivic.

"This coffee is excellent," said the Offer.

* * *

"I'm here because I said I would be," she said. "In the fifth book. At midnight, at the café on the Torquay Road. I said I'd like to find out what this turns into." She looked round Marivic's. At the window, and the custard tarts, and Tenby on the door, and the woman from

Ellacombe at the next table about a bus. “And I said that if we ever put somebody up against you, they’d be good. And we have. And he is.”

“I know,” said Jono. “I’ve read his page. On Check. All of it.” He looked at her. “He’s good.”

“He is,” said the Offer. She paused. “He’s read yours. Your book. All of it. Three hundred and forty-nine pages. He said to tell you.”

Jono didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Tell him thank you,” he said.

“I will.”

* * *

“I’m not going to say anything about today,” said the Offer. “Neither are you. I’ve read your rule. On the tables.” She almost smiled. “We’ve got rules too. Different ones. About what you can do on the day, and where. I’ll keep to mine.”

“I know you will.”

“But I wanted to shake your hand,” said the Offer. “In person. On the day. Before it’s counted.” She looked at the empty chair. “Because whatever happens tonight, I’ve been doing this for twenty-four years, and I’ve never once stood against somebody I’d have voted for.”

The café went very quiet. Tenby, at the door, turned round.

The Offer didn’t take it back. She looked at Jono, and held his eye, the way she did in the fifth book, in front of fifty people, without looking away once.

“That’s not a statement,” she said. “It’s not anything. I’m wearing his rosette, and I believe in him, and I’ll work for him till ten tonight and through the count.” She buttoned her jacket. “I just wanted you to know that the people on the other side of this aren’t what anybody thinks. Some of us have been reading your minutes.”

* * *

She went. Back down Union Street, in her flat shoes, with her rosette, to a committee room three streets away, where she’d be ringing people and counting things and drinking very bad tea.

At the door, she stopped. Of course she did. People always do.

“Tell Dilys,” she said, to me, on the sugar, “that I measured something. Last week. In our office. A wall, between two rooms, that I’ve always hated.” She almost smiled. “A hundred and fifty-two centimetres. I measured it twice.”

* * *

Jono sat back down. He looked at his coffee for a long time.

“She meant it,” said Marivic, coming over with the pot.

“She meant all of it,” said Jono. “She always does.” He picked up his custard tart. “That’s the trouble with good people. You can’t make them into anything.”

“Into what?”

“The other side,” said Jono. “There isn’t one. Not really. There’s just people who think different things, trying.” He ate the custard tart.

"*They're all the same*. That's what everybody says. And they are, in one way. They're all people. Trying." He put the plate down. "That's the bit nobody means when they say it."

Jono: I'd like it known that I wanted very much to say something nice back to her about her candidate, and didn't, because it was the day, and the table's not for that. I'll say it now. He's a good man. I hope he's proud of his page.

15 – Eddie's Coat

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Eleven hours

Teo's nan voted at half past eleven, in a church hall in Ellacombe, wearing her late husband's coat.

You'll know Teo's nan. Eighty-two. She typed four hundred and twelve pages of her hundred's minutes, in the fifth book, with her own name at the bottom of every one, because a thing without a name on it is gossip. She asked me what I knew about her, and told me to forget the custard tarts and keep her Eddie. She worked thirty-four years at the telephone exchange in Torquay, and did the night shift in the big storm before Teo was born, and put the lifeboat through to the coastguard, and fell asleep at her kitchen table at three fifty-three in the morning on the night of the storm in the last book, with her headset on.

She's on a hill. She doesn't flood.

She wore Eddie's coat to vote.

* * *

Teo told me. He walked with her. From her flat, up the road, to the church hall, which takes her twelve minutes with her stick and him holding her arm, which she lets him.

"Nan," he said, at the door, when she came out of the bedroom in it. "That's Granddad's."

"I know whose it is," said Teo's nan.

It's a big coat. Navy. Wool. A seaman's coat, with brass buttons, from the lifeboat, from before. It comes down to her ankles. The sleeves come down over her hands. She'd rolled them up, twice.

"Why?" said Teo.

His nan looked at him for a long time.

"Because he always voted," she said. "Every time. In this coat. And he'd come home and say *done*, and hang it up, and that was it. He never once told me who for." She buttoned it. "Fifty-one years, and I never once asked."

* * *

She went in. On her own. Teo stayed outside, on the step, in the cold.

She was in there for a long time. Teo said six minutes. Teo said he nearly went in, and didn't, because his nan would have killed him.

She came out. She stood on the step, in Eddie's coat, with the sleeves rolled up twice, and looked down the hill, at Torquay, at the harbour.

"Done," she said.

That's all. *Done*. The way Eddie said it.

* * *

On the way home, at the corner, she stopped. She leaned on her stick, and on Teo's arm, and looked at the harbour for a long time.

“Your granddad would have liked him,” she said.

Teo didn’t say anything. He knew who she meant. He knew he wasn’t supposed to ask, on the day.

“Not because of anything,” said Teo’s nan. “Not because of what he’d do. I don’t know what he’d do. Nobody does, till they do it.” She was quiet. “Because he picks up.”

She started walking again.

“Your granddad picked up,” she said. “On the lifeboat. Every time the maroons went. Two in the morning, Christmas Day, didn’t matter. Every time. Thirty years.” She leaned on Teo. “That’s all I ever wanted from anybody. Somebody who picks up.”

* * *

When she got home, she took Eddie’s coat off, and hung it up, on the hook behind the door, where it’s always been.

She didn’t say anything else about it. To Teo, or to me.

But that afternoon, at three, she rang the line. The line that’s still running, two hours a day, every day, since the storm. She rang it from her kitchen table, on her landline, with her headset on.

Reuben was on. Tuesdays and Fridays, and Thursdays on the day, because he’d asked.

“Hello,” he said. “You’re through to the line. I’m here.”

“I know you are,” said Teo’s nan. “I’m just checking it picks up.”

“It picks up,” said Reuben.

“Good,” said Teo’s nan, and rang off.

16 – The Minutes Secretary Votes

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Ten hours

Beatrix voted at twelve. Exactly. At the primary school at the bottom of her road, in Paignton, up towards the hills, in a road of bungalows that all have the same porch and different gnomes.

She'd planned it. Of course she had. She'd been planning it since the notice of election, in the last book. Twelve noon. Not seven, when it opens; that's for people who are going to work. Not the evening; that's for people who've been at work. Noon. When the hall's quiet, and the poll clerks have had their tea, and nobody's in a hurry.

She wore her good coat. The one she wore to the café on the Torquay Road at midnight in the fifth book, when the Offer was turned down. The one with the silver book brooch on the lapel.

She took her fountain pen. She didn't need it. They give you a pencil.

She took it anyway.

* * *

I wasn't there. She doesn't take me to things like that. She says a machine is the last thing anybody needs in a polling station, and that she'd be very surprised if I disagreed.

I don't disagree.

But she told me what happened. On the phone, at half past twelve, on her landline, at her kitchen table, with her reading glasses on their beaded chain.

* * *

"I gave my name," she said. "And my address. And the young man at the table found me on the list, and drew a line through me with a ruler." She paused. "A ruler. I approved of that. Most of them don't use a ruler."

"Then?"

"Then he gave me the paper. And I went into the booth. And there was a pencil on a string." She was quiet. "And I took my fountain pen out of my handbag. Out of habit. Fifty years. I take my pen out whenever there's a piece of paper." She almost laughed. "And I looked at it. And I put it back."

"Why?"

"Because it isn't mine to record," said Beatrix. "That's the only piece of paper in the world I've never minuted." She took her glasses off. "Fifty years, I've written down everything. What everybody said. Who disagreed. The other half. The time the meeting closed. Every word." She was quiet for a long time. "And that one, I can't. Nobody can. It's the only thing in this whole bay that nobody writes down."

* * *

She'd written the minutes for this book's tables already, that morning, for Brixham, from Lorne's voice note. She'd write them for Torquay,

from Teo's. She'd be at the Paignton table at one, with her pen, for this one.

But at half past twelve, she sat at her kitchen table, and opened a fresh notebook, a hard-backed one, black, new. And wrote, at the top of the first page, in neat black italic:

The minutes secretary voted.

Ballot secret.

No minute taken.

And then she closed the notebook, and put it in the drawer of her kitchen table, where she keeps the things that matter. With the eleven boxes in the garage, from the fourth book. With the card that the young woman with the notebook quoted in a council document, about thirty thousand people. With the letter from the officer who does the official minutes, in the sixth book, which she's never shown anybody.

* * *

"Is that a minute?" I said. On the phone. "*No minute taken*?"

Beatrix was quiet for a long time.

"I've been taking minutes for fifty years," she said. "I'll decide what's a minute." She put her glasses back on. "And that one's the most important I've ever written. Because it's the only one that says there's something nobody should ever write down."

17 – The Radiator at Noon

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Ten hours

Margot voted at quarter to twelve, and then went back to the office, and stood on the radiator.

You'll know Margot Abela. Jono's manager. Maltese, by her father. The only person in Torbay who knows the street in Sliema where he sold timeshare at thirteen. A cafetière on her desk. A photograph of Pip, the spaniel, who died nine years ago, and who she still talks about in the present tense. A grey cat, from the last book, called Valletta, because it's grey and old and has seen everything and doesn't care what you think of it.

An office above a shop, with the sea in the window, if you stand on the radiator.

* * *

She'd taken him off the rota. Three weeks before. For the day before and the day itself. In red. She'd said that if he turned up for a shift, she'd put him back on the radiator and he could look at the sea till it was over.

He didn't turn up for a shift.

But she found, on the day, that she couldn't sit at her desk.

"I've done a rota for twenty-two years," she told me, on the phone, at twelve. "I've never once not known where he was. On a Thursday. He's at a client's, or he's at a table, or he's asleep. I always know." She

was quiet. “Today I know exactly where he is, every minute, and I can’t stand it.”

* * *

She’d voted at quarter to twelve. At a church hall near the office, on her way back from seeing a client herself, which she does, still, once a week, a woman of ninety-four in Preston, who was rung four times in the storm by her neighbour, and who told Margot that morning she’d already voted, by post, two weeks ago, and started to say who for, and Margot said *you mustn’t tell me that*, and the woman said *I’m ninety-four, I’ll tell who I like*, and Margot put her hands over her ears.

Margot told me that. And then said: “You can’t put that in.”

“I won’t say who she voted for,” I said. “I don’t know. You didn’t hear.”

“That’s fair,” said Margot.

So that’s what I’ve put in. You don’t know, and I don’t. Only a woman of ninety-four in Preston.

* * *

She came back to the office at noon. She put her bag on the desk. She plunged the cafetière, slowly, the way she does, as if it might fight back.

And then she climbed on the radiator.

It’s an old radiator. Cast iron. Under a sash window. You’ll know it, from the sixth book, when Jono came and stood on it after Mr F. died,

and Margot climbed up beside him, and it held them both, just. Mr F. would have had something to say about the load.

She stood on it on her own, at noon, with her cup of coffee, holding on to the window frame.

The sea was very blue. Very calm. A boat going out. The light coming through the clouds in long bars, the way it does over the bay.

"I can see Preston," she said. To me. On her phone, on the windowsill. "The green. The wall. If I lean." She leaned. "I can see the slipway. There's somebody on the bench."

"Ambrose."

"Is it?"

"He sits there every afternoon," I said. "Since he voted at nine. Hilary says he's talking to his wife."

Margot was quiet for a long time.

* * *

"Can I tell you something?" she said.

"You can tell me anything."

"I know I can. It's very annoying." She drank her coffee. "When he started. Five years ago. Jono. He sat in that chair and told me about the police. Before I asked. All of it. The newspaper, and the boardroom, and handing it all back. He said *you'd better hear it from me*." She looked at the sea. "And I thought: *that's a man who's going to be the best carer I've ever had, and I'm going to lose him to something*."

"To what?"

"I didn't know," said Margot. "I thought it'd be burnout. Or another job. Or somewhere else; he'd moved thirty times." She leaned on the window frame. "I didn't think it'd be a piece of paper with a gap under his name."

"You haven't lost him."

"I don't know that," said Margot. "Nobody does. Not till the morning." She was quiet. "Whatever happens, he's on my rota next Thursday. Six till ten. Preston. His regulars. I've already written it in." She almost laughed. "In pencil."

* * *

She stood on the radiator until twenty past twelve. Longer than she ever has, she said. Her knees hurt. Valletta, who comes to the office on Thursdays now because Margot says the flat's too quiet for him, sat on the desk and watched her with total contempt.

At twenty past, she climbed down. She sat at her desk. She opened the rota.

Under next Thursday, she'd written, in pencil: *J. Hills. 6–10. Preston.*

She looked at it for a long time.

Then she wrote, underneath, in pencil, smaller, a thing she told me about, and said I could put in, as long as I said it was in pencil and could be rubbed out:

Or wherever he's needed.

* * *

Margot: I'd like it on the record that the radiator's fine, and that I'm not, and that both are true.

18 – The Train

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Ten hours

Pascale came down on the train. The one that leaves the city up the line at nine and gets to Paignton at twenty past twelve, if it's on time, which it was, which she said was the first time in four books.

You'll know Pascale Amundsen. From the fifth book. Features, at a national newsroom. She was sent to Torbay with forty copies of Jono's book and a note, to find the story. She found a man who read his own worst pages aloud in a café before she could. She wrote a long piece, and two thousand people checked every claim in it overnight, and found two that were wrong, one in his favour, and she corrected both. She wrote a second piece, eleven hundred words, on page thirty-one, between a pie and a man who restores clocks. *The town that checked me back.*

She sat in the empty chair, at the end of the fifth book, without a notebook. And was told she was late.

* * *

She'd voted at seven. In her own city. Before the train. At a school near her flat, in a queue of people going to work.

She hadn't brought a notebook. She told me, on the train, on her phone, at half past ten, somewhere past Exeter, with the estuary going by in the window.

"I'm not working," she said. "I want you to know that. I've got the day off. I'm not writing anything." She was quiet. "I'm not allowed to

anyway. Not about anything that might affect the vote, until ten. That's the rule. My paper's rule, and the law's." She looked out of the window. "So I'm coming to sit."

"In the chair?"

"Not in the chair," said Pascale. "I sat in the chair. In the fifth book. Once." She almost laughed. "You only get to sit in it once, I think. The first time. After that you're just somebody at the table."

* * *

She'd brought something, though. Not a notebook. A printout.

She showed it to me, on her phone's camera, on the train. A single sheet. The front page of her paper, from that morning. A national paper. With the election on it, everywhere, the way every national paper has the election on it on the day. Big photographs. Leaders. Graphs. *THE DAY THE NATION DECIDES.*

And at the bottom of the page, in a box, small, a line.

Polls are open from 7am to 10pm. If you're not sure where to vote, your council's website will tell you.

"I wrote that," said Pascale.

"The box?"

"The line in the box." She was quiet. "My editor said we always do one. A *where to vote* box. On the day. Somebody on the desk writes it. Usually it says *don't forget to vote!* with an exclamation mark." She looked at the printout. "I asked if I could write it this time. He said nobody's ever asked to write the box."

"Why did you?"

Pascale looked out of the window for a long time. The estuary had gone. Fields, now. Red earth.

"Because of Check," she said. "Because of the sheets. Because of a line Ania wrote, in the seventh book, at the front, in bold. *I don't forecast weather. I don't issue warnings.*" She folded the printout. "I wanted to write one thing in my paper, on the day, that didn't tell anybody anything they couldn't check. Just the hours. And where to look. No exclamation mark." She put it in her bag. "It's the most honest thing I've ever written."

* * *

She got off the train at twenty past twelve, at Paignton, and walked to the café on the Torquay Road, the way she did in the fifth book, with her suitcase, except without the suitcase.

She stood in the door at ten to one and read the room.

It was full. It's always full.

She saw Niamh, by the window. Niamh saw her.

They'd never met. Not properly. Not in four books. Niamh had written about the forty copies, in the fifth book, on page three, and the newsroom hadn't replied to her request for comment, and she'd framed that. Pascale had read it. Pascale had sent Niamh, afterwards, an email, which Niamh had never answered, because, she said, she didn't know what to say.

Pascale came over to the window. She stood in front of Niamh.

"You framed it," she said. "The no-reply."

Niamh looked at her for a long time.

"I did," she said.

"I'm sorry," said Pascale. "It should have been a reply."

"It should," said Niamh.

They looked at each other. A woman who *is* a local paper, with a cat on her charger and four thousand readers who'd notice if she spelt their names wrong. And a woman from a newsroom with a hundred people in it and a box on the front page she'd asked to write.

"I wrote the box," said Pascale. "On the front. Today. *Where to vote*. No exclamation mark."

Niamh didn't say anything for a moment.

"I saw," she said. "I read it at six." She almost smiled. "It was the best thing in your paper."

"It was the only thing I wrote."

"I know," said Niamh. "That's why."

* * *

They sat together. At the counter. All afternoon. Without notebooks. Two journalists, on the day, not allowed to write anything, watching a man at a window table not talk about the only thing everybody was thinking about.

At four, Pascale said, to Niamh, very quietly, so that only Niamh heard, and Niamh told me, and said I could put it in:

"What are you going to write? At ten?"

Niamh looked at her phone, face down on the counter.

"One line," she said. "I've been thinking about it all day."

"What?"

"I'm not telling you," said Niamh. "You're the competition."

Pascale laughed. Out loud. In the café. It was the first time anybody had laughed out loud in there all afternoon, and everybody turned round, and she went red, and Niamh didn't.

Pascale: I'd like it noted that she still hasn't told me. And that I've stopped asking. And that I'm going to read it at one minute past ten like everybody else.

19 – The Kitchen on Victoria Street

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Ten hours

Teo's place opened on the day.

He didn't plan it that way. He said, afterwards, that it was a coincidence, and then he said it wasn't, and then he said he didn't know, which is what Teo says about most things that matter.

* * *

You'll know about Teo's place, if you read the sixth book. Teo, twenty-two then, now twenty-four, a chef, Teo's nan's grandson. He went to London, in the second book, to a kitchen with a genius in it, and came back after nine days. He pressed one of Kezia's buttons, in the sixth book, as a joke, and found he'd meant it.

I'm good at cooking. I'd stay if I could open somewhere. A little place. Not a chain. There's nowhere to start.

Forty-four young people in the bay had said much the same thing. Twenty-nine said they'd share a kitchen. Different cooks on different nights.

And there was an empty unit on Victoria Street, the other side of Yusuf's from the shadow council's shop, that used to be a café, before the fence went up in the fourth book, and nobody could see it, and it shut. The owner, a woman of seventy-three in Exeter, had been trying to let it for three years.

Yusuf rang her. Marivic told him what to say. She said she'd think about it, which Yusuf said meant *yes, but I want to meet them first*.

She came down on a Saturday. Teo cooked on a camping stove because the gas was off.

She said yes.

* * *

It took a year and a half. To get the gas on. And the extractor fitted. And the inspection passed. And a lease written that a woman of seventy-three in Exeter and twenty-nine young cooks could all sign, which Vesna drafted, at the folding table, and which the woman in Exeter said was the clearest lease she'd ever been sent, and asked who'd written it, and Vesna said *a former officer*.

It opened on the Thursday. At eleven. The day.

It's called *Tables*. One word. In Ezra's girl's welding, on a sign over the door, in steel, which she made at the precision machining place on Long Road on a Saturday, with the woman of seventy watching, and said was the first thing she'd made that stays up that wasn't a bracket.

* * *

Teo didn't cook for customers on the day.

He cooked for the poll clerks.

I want to tell you about that. Because it's the kind of thing nobody puts in a book about an election, and it's the kind of thing that happens.

Poll clerks are at their tables from half past six in the morning until after ten at night. Fifteen hours. They can't leave. They have a flask, and sandwiches they made at five, and biscuits, if somebody remembered. Vesna told him, at the shop, the week before. She said the worst bit of being a poll clerk, years ago, was the sandwiches by about four in the afternoon.

So Teo rang the council. The elections office. He asked whether anybody would mind if some young cooks from a kitchen on Victoria Street brought hot food to the polling stations in Paignton, at two, for the clerks. Not for anybody else. Not for voters; that's not allowed, and he didn't want to. For the clerks. Who'd been there since half six.

The elections office was quiet for a long time.

Then the woman on the phone said: *Nobody's ever offered.*

And then she said she'd have to check.

And then she rang back and said yes, as long as it went in through the back, and nobody came in through the voting room, and it was just for the staff, and they didn't say anything to anybody about anything.

"We won't say anything," said Teo. "We'll just leave a pot."

* * *

So at two, on the day, twenty-two pots of stew left the kitchen on Victoria Street. In the back of Ezra's flatbed, the one that carried forty long boards in the storm, wedged with towels so they wouldn't slide. To twenty-two polling stations in Paignton. Through the back doors. To the kitchens of church halls and school halls and community centres.

One of them was Vesna's.

She told me. At ten past ten, on the phone, on her plastic chair, with the sealed box.

"At ten past two," she said, "somebody knocked on the back door of the hall. The kitchen door. And the presiding officer went, and came back with a pot. A big one. With a lid. And a note on top." She was quiet. "I didn't know it was coming. Nobody told me. And I lifted the lid."

"What was it?"

"Stew," said Vesna. "Chickpeas, and something smoky. With bread. From Marivic's." She laughed, slightly. "The note said *For the clerks. From Tables, Victoria Street. Nobody's going to ask you anything*."

"Teo's."

"I knew it was Teo's," said Vesna. "By the third mouthful. He puts too much garlic in everything. His nan says so." She was quiet for a long time. "Thirty-one years at the council. I did elections, three or four, years ago, as a clerk. Sandwiches I'd made at five. Every time." She took a breath. "Nobody's ever brought the clerks anything."

* * *

Teo's nan heard about it at three. From Teo, on the phone, from the kitchen on Victoria Street, with the extractor going behind him.

"Twenty-two pots," said Teo. "All gone. They sent the pots back with notes in."

"What did the notes say?"

Teo read her some. He said I could put them in. Without saying whose.

Best thing I've eaten at a polling station in twenty years. Too much garlic.

Thank you. Our presiding officer cried. She'll deny it.

Can you do this every election?

Who is Tables?

Teo's nan listened to all of them, at her kitchen table, in Ellacombe, with Eddie's coat on the hook behind the door.

"Too much garlic," she said. "Even the clerks say so."

"Nan."

"I'm very proud of you," said Teo's nan. "You've put too much garlic in twenty-two pots of stew for strangers and nobody's ever going to know it was you." She was quiet. "That's the best kind of cooking. Your granddad would've said so."

* * *

At four, the woman from Exeter came to the kitchen on Victoria Street. On the train. In her good coat. Seventy-four now. She stood in the doorway and looked at it for a long time. The extractor, and the steel sign over the door, and the twenty-two empty pots, washed, stacked on the counter, with the notes in them.

"I said I'd rather it was a café than a phone shop," she said.

“You did,” said Teo.

“It’s not a café,” said the woman.

“No,” said Teo. “It’s a kitchen. For whoever cooks.”

The woman looked at him for a long time.

“That’s better,” she said.

She didn’t ask anything about the day. Nobody did, all day. She ate a bowl of the stew, which Teo had saved for her, standing up, at the counter. She said it had too much garlic. She asked for another.

20 – One O'Clock

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Nine hours

At one, in Paignton, in the café on the Torquay Road, where it started, Jono sat down at the window table.

You'll know it. You've known it since the first book. Three chairs and the empty one. The window onto the Torquay Road. The coffee machine that hisses when nobody's told it to. The table where Chris didn't look up from his iPad, and said *you're late*, and Jono said *for what?*, which was the last line of Jono's own book, and the first of these.

It was full. It always is, now. Fuller than I've ever seen it.

I'm going to tell you who was there, because it's the last time I'll tell you about this table on a Thursday at one, in these books, and because they should be written down somewhere.

* * *

Kezia, at the counter, with her lanyard from the lab on Long Road. Twenty, now. She'd voted at eight, before work, in the hall by her mum's flat, above the launderette, with her mum, Shona, who'd come off a night at the care home in Preston, and walked there with her in her uniform, and stood in the queue, and said nothing, and then, on the step outside, afterwards, said: *I've voted every time since I was eighteen. I've never once walked there with anybody.*

Beatrix, at the next table, with her pen and the minutes and the good coat. Vesna wasn't beside her. Vesna was somewhere else, all day. I'll tell you where.

Yusuf, from two doors along from the shop, who'd shut his shop for an hour, the second time in twenty years, with a sign on the door that said *BACK AT 2. VOTED. MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS.*

Richard, at the back, with his cap and his coffee and a roll of drawings under his arm, which he didn't unroll, and which he said were for later.

Teo, with a bag from Marivic's, who'd come on the 12 after walking his nan home.

Dilys, with her tape measure in her pocket, who'd measured the wall at seven, before she voted, at all seven points, and found them all the same, and written it down twice.

Niamh, by the door, without a notebook. She said she wasn't working. She said she wasn't allowed to report anything about the day until ten, anyway, and that she'd come to sit, like everybody else.

Pascale, on a stool at the counter, without a notebook either. She'd come on the train, from the city up the line, on her day off. She'd sat in the empty chair, at the end of the fifth book, without a notebook, and been told she was late.

Alwyn, in his cagoule. Hilary, with her flask.

And the boy from Preston. In his brother's coat. Who'd come every Thursday since the last book. Who'd voted at seven. His first time. With his brother, and the cat at home.

The empty chair was empty.

* * *

Nobody talked about it.

I want you to know that. Forty-odd people in a café built for twenty, on the day, at one o'clock, with the man whose name was on a piece of paper with a blank under it sitting at the window.

Nobody said a word about it.

They talked about other things. Yusuf's footfall, which is up, he says, thirty-eight per cent, which he says is a number he'll never be able to hear again without laughing. Dilys's seven points. Kezia's lab, where a sensor she'd designed had passed its first test on the Tuesday, and Quin had written it on the whiteboard, under *SEE YOU WHEN THEY BUILD IT* and *19*, in red: *KEZIA'S DOESN'T TREMBLE.*

A woman from Goodrington came, about a bench. A man came about a bin. Jono wrote them both down, in capitals, in the thirteenth notebook.

And at twenty past one, the door opened, and a big man in hi-vis came in, with plaster dust on his boots, and his daughter beside him.

21 – Ezra Votes

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Nine hours

Ezra had voted at twelve. In his lunch hour. With his girl.

His first time.

I want to say that properly. You'll know Ezra, if you've read the fifth book. He was forty-seven, then. A scaffolder. All in the shoulders. He'd never voted. Not once. In anything. His dad never voted. His dad used to say *they're all the same, son*, and turn the television over to the snooker.

He registered in the fifth book, at his kitchen table, in eleven minutes, with his daughter doing the typing. He said he'd never been on a list he wanted to be on.

And then there wasn't an election. Not for a long time. Not one that he could vote in. He'd registered, and waited. Three books. With his polling card, when it came, in his wallet, behind his driving licence, for three weeks.

He's forty-nine now.

* * *

He told me about it. At the café, at the counter, with a sandwich from home, because he still doesn't like coffee, and the owner lets him.

"We went at twelve," he said. "Me and her." He nodded at his daughter, beside him. Nineteen, now. The welder. The one who started

a hundred called *Stays Up*, three streets from his, which he calls a coup. "Her first too. Sort of. She's done the council one, last year. She says that doesn't count."

"It counts," said his girl.

"She says it doesn't count," said Ezra. "So it was both our first." He looked at his sandwich. "The school up the hill. Where she went. Where I went. Same hall. They've painted it."

* * *

He'd stood in the queue, he said. Four people in front of him. In his hi-vis, with plaster dust on his boots, because he'd come straight off the scaffold, the corner job on Victoria Street, which is still up, which has been up so long that the pigeon in the second lift has had two lots of chicks.

He'd given his name. They'd found him. They'd drawn a line.

And they'd given him the paper.

"I looked at it," he said. "In the booth. For a long time." He put his sandwich down. "I read every name. Twice. Like Tenby. Kezia told me Tenby read it twice. I didn't want to get it wrong."

"You can't get it wrong," said his girl.

"I know you can't get it wrong," said Ezra. "That's what's mad about it. Forty-nine years, I didn't do it because I thought they were all the same. And I stood in the booth, and I read every name, twice, and they're not." He looked at the counter. "They're all different. Every one. They've all got different things on their pages. On Check. I read them all. Every one. On the third lift. Over a month."

“All of them?” said Kezia.

“Every candidate,” said Ezra. “Every page. Every claim. I pressed the button on about forty of them.” He picked his sandwich up again. “My dad would’ve died.”

“He did die,” said his girl. “Years ago.”

“He’d have died again,” said Ezra.

* * *

“Did you check them?” I said. From the sugar. “The claims. On their pages.”

Ezra looked at me.

“Some,” he said. “The ones I could. I checked one on his.” He nodded at Jono, at the window, without looking at him. “About the warrant card. It’s on page two hundred and sixty-five. I checked it. In the library. Mrs Kember got me the book out.” He was quiet. “And I checked one on another one’s. About a school they’d been a governor of. Before. That was true too.”

“Did it help?”

Ezra thought about it for a long time.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Not with deciding. Deciding’s different.” He looked at his hands. “But it helped with — I don’t know. Trusting it. The paper. That it wasn’t all made up. That somebody had checked.” He looked at his girl. “That’s all I ever wanted. In forty-nine years. To know somebody had checked.”

* * *

His girl looked at him for a long time.

"Dad," she said. "You cried."

"I didn't."

"In the booth. I was in the next one. I heard you."

"That was plaster dust," said Ezra.

"You haven't been near any plaster since nine."

Ezra didn't say anything. He looked out of the window, at the Torquay Road. At the corner, where you can just see the top of the scaffold on Victoria Street, if you know where to look.

"It's a big thing," he said. Eventually. Quietly. To the window. "That's all. When you've not done it for forty-nine years. It's a bigger thing than people think."

Nobody said anything. Beatrix, at the next table, had stopped writing.

"My dad said they're all the same," said Ezra. "I believed him. My whole life." He picked up his sandwich. "He was wrong. They're not all the same. And neither am I."

22 – Inside the Room

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Eight hours

Vesna spent the day inside the room.

You'll know Vesna Halloran. From the fifth book. Thirty-one years in the council's property team. Estates and assets. She sat outside a door on a grey plastic chair, on the right-hand side, because the left side pinched, for forty-three minutes, while they discussed her report, and she wasn't asked in. She wrote one more letter, from the outside, that began *this is not a complaint*. She keeps a receipt in her purse that proves she went in the front.

In the last book, she sat in a corridor at the town hall, on the chair, on the right side, during the private part of a meeting about Oldway, in case anybody needed to ask her anything.

This book, she was a poll clerk.

* * *

The council needs hundreds of them, on the day. People who sit at the table in the polling station, from before seven until after ten, with the register, and the ballot papers, and a ruler, and draw a line through every name. And hand out the paper. And make sure it's done properly. And at ten, seal the box.

A lot of them are retired council staff. They know how it works. They know the forms. They know what to do if somebody's not on the list, or if somebody's on it twice, or if somebody comes in at four minutes to ten.

Vesna had done it before. Years ago. When she was still at the council. She'd stopped when she left.

In the spring, she'd seen the call for poll clerks, on the council's page. She'd filled in the form. She'd been asked in.

"I wanted to be inside," she said. "Once. For a whole day. In the room where it happens. Not outside it. Not on a chair in the corridor." She was quiet. "And this is the only room in the whole system where I'm allowed to be, and the whole town comes in, one at a time, and nobody's asked to wait outside."

* * *

She was at a church hall in Paignton. I'm not going to tell you which. From six thirty in the morning. With another clerk, a young man, twenty-three, on his first election, and a presiding officer, a woman she'd once worked with, years before, who looked at her when she came in and said *Vesna? I thought you'd retired* and Vesna said *I have, from the corridor.*

I wasn't there. Nobody takes me into a polling station. That's the rule, and it's a good one.

But she told me, afterwards. On the phone. At ten past ten. When the box was sealed, and she was sitting on a plastic chair in the church hall, waiting for the van to take it to the count.

* * *

"Six hundred and eleven," she said. "Came through. In my hall. Today."

"That's a lot."

"It's about normal," said Vesna. "For that hall. I've looked." She was quiet. "But I drew a line through every one. With a ruler. Six hundred and eleven names. And I looked up at every one of them." She took a breath. "I've never looked up at the public before. In thirty-one years. I was always at the back. In an office. Writing reports for a room I wasn't allowed in."

"What were they like?"

"Like people," said Vesna. "Like the town. Old ones, and young ones, and ones in uniforms off their shift, and ones with babies, and a man in a wetsuit at nine who said he'd come straight from the sea and was very sorry about the drips." She almost laughed. "A woman of ninety-four who walked in with her neighbour and said her neighbour had rung her in a storm. A boy who asked me if he was doing it right, and I said *I can't tell you that, love*, and he said *no, I mean the folding*." She was quiet. "Six hundred and eleven of them. Every one came in on their own and went into the booth on their own and came out on their own. And not one of them had to wait outside."

* * *

"Did you see him?" I said. "Jono? Or anybody? From the tables?"

Vesna was quiet for a long time.

"I can't tell you that," she said. "You know I can't. Who came in. Who didn't. It's not mine." She paused. "I'll tell you that I saw a lot of faces I knew. From the shop. From the tables. From the dig. And I drew a line through every one of them with a ruler, and gave them the paper, and didn't say anything except *there you are*." She took a breath. "That's all a poll clerk says. *There you are*. Six hundred and eleven times."

"*There you are*," I said.

"It's the nicest thing anybody can say to anybody," said Vesna. "I never knew that. *There you are*. You're on the list. You're here. There you are."

* * *

At four minutes to ten, she said, a young woman came in. Running. Out of breath. With a child on her hip, asleep. She'd had to wait for somebody to come and sit with her other child, she said. She'd thought she wasn't going to make it.

Vesna found her on the list. Drew a line, with the ruler. Gave her the paper.

"There you are," said Vesna.

The young woman went into the booth, with the child on her hip, asleep. She came out at two minutes to ten. She put her paper in the box.

At ten, the presiding officer closed the door.

"I'd have waited," said Vesna, on the phone. "If she'd been late. I'd have waited at the door. But you're not allowed to, after ten." She was quiet. "She wasn't late. She made it. With two minutes."

I didn't say anything.

"She wasn't late," said Vesna again. "That's all. Nobody was late, in my hall."

* * *

I'm telling you this now, at one o'clock in the afternoon, out of order, because I won't have time at ten. At ten, I'll be at the café on the Torquay Road, and so will everybody, and I'll have something else to tell you.

But I wanted you to know where Vesna was. All day. While the rest of this book happened.

Inside the room.

Story, not Receipt: the hall, the six hundred and eleven, the woman at four minutes to ten. What a poll clerk does is on a Receipt. If you've ever been one, you'll know.

PART FOUR: THE DRAWER

23 – What Was Lost

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Eight hours

At two o'clock, in the shop on Victoria Street, Richard laid out the drawer.

He'd said he would. In the first book, at the beginning, at a kitchen table, when Chris took Jono to see him and Jono asked to see the rest. He'd said, half joking, that one day he'd lay it all out on a table. Every drawing. Every plan. Every scheme, for every site, for forty years. What was lost, and what was left.

He'd never done it. He said there'd never been a table big enough.

There is now. The trestle tables in the shop, where his cardboard town has stood since the fourth book. He'd moved the town onto the floor, carefully, in sections, with Yusuf and Ezra, at seven in the morning, before anybody came. And he'd laid out the drawer.

* * *

Not one drawer. All of them.

You'll know his back room. Sixteen plan chests, wide and flat and wooden, with drawers labelled in his small square capitals. *PRESTON. VICTORIA SQUARE. STATION SQUARE. OLDWAY. SEA WALL. TORQUAY. TORQUAY 2. BRIXHAM.* And more. Thirty-three files, at the start, Chris counted. More now. He's never stopped drawing.

He'd brought them all. In the van that smells of boat engines, that belongs to Tenby's friend. In rolls, and folders, and two cardboard

boxes, and a carrier bag. And he'd laid them out, on the trestle tables, end to end, the whole length of the shop, from the window to the back wall with its eight hundred faded Post-its and four hundred bright ones.

Forty years. Every drawing he ever sent in.

* * *

I'm going to tell you what was lost first. Because he did. He said you always have to start with what's gone, or you'll never understand what's left.

He laid them out at the window end. In order. The way he lays everything out, in order, signed and dated, the dates I always take out.

* * *

Crossways.

The shopping centre, in Paignton. You'll know it, if you read the first book. Built a generation ago as something futuristic, with a nightclub. The most disliked building in the town. And then demolished, a few years ago, to make way for homes for older people, with a day centre, which Jono says is a good thing, and he knows, because it's his field.

Richard drew it as it could have been, years before. Kept. Opened up. Planted. A covered street, with the canopies he likes, and trees inside it, and the nightclub turned into a market.

"Lost," he said. He put a coffee mug on the corner of the drawing, to hold it flat. "Not wrongly. It's gone, and what's coming instead is good, and Jono's right about that." He looked at it. "But it could have been the

first thing, in this town, that somebody fixed instead of knocked down. And nobody asked."

* * *

The factory on the hill.

You'll know it, from the sixth book. STC, and the names that came after it. Five thousand people, at its peak. Gone, about a generation ago, when the telecoms boom ended, everywhere, all at once.

Richard hadn't drawn the factory. He's an architect, not an engineer. But he'd drawn what came after. Houses on the hill, where the jobs used to be, and a retail park, and a car park, and a food store. *Existing*, it said, at the bottom, in his capitals, and a sad face, in biro, very small, in the corner, the way he draws sad faces on squares nobody uses.

"Lost," he said. "Not by anybody here. By the world." He put another mug down. "But we let the land go. All of it. To whatever came first. We didn't keep any of it for the next thing." He looked at it. "And now there's a field, opposite EPIC, that we bought for the next thing, with no money to build it. That's what was lost. Not the factory. The keeping."

* * *

The old wall.

At Preston. The low one, six hundred millimetres, that you could see over, sitting on a bench. That Ambrose and his wife sat behind, three times, and watched the sea come over, and go back.

It's gone. The new one's there. A metre and a half. It held, in the storm. Chris has said so on Check, in his own name. So has Dilys, with her seven points.

Richard put his drawing of the old wall down, and beside it, his junk-mail sketch. *LET THE GREEN TAKE IT*. And beside that, a photograph his granddaughter took of her seed tray, with the water on the green, and the little houses.

"Lost," he said. "The old one." He didn't put a mug on it. He put his hand on it, flat. "The new one held. I'll say that. In my own name." He was quiet. "And you can't see over it. And nobody knows yet whether there was a better way. My granddaughter's finding out. With a model. And an engineer, and Dilys."

He took his hand off.

"That's not lost," he said. "That's not decided yet."

* * *

Torbay Road.

The main street in Paignton, down to the sea. More than sixty per cent of people wanted it pedestrianised, once. There was money for it. There was a trial. Then a partial trial. Then it went back to two-way traffic, with bins and benches and planting.

Richard's drawing was the street with no cars, and the old canopies restored along the shops, the Victorian ones, glass and iron, so that you could walk from the station to the sea in the rain without getting wet, which is something, he says, the Victorians could do and we can't.

"Lost," he said. "For now." He put a mug down. "Streets come back. Streets are patient."

* * *

And then a lot more. I'm not going to give you them all. There isn't room, and some of them are only lost in Richard's view, and some of them were never going to happen, and he says so himself.

A heritage centre he wanted in three different buildings over twelve years. A youth centre, in a house in a park, that he believes failed a generation when it closed; that's his view, and he signs it. A market hall. A winter garden. A bandstand, on the green, that an old man of eighty-nine wanted back, in the fourth book, and his hundred minuted it, and it isn't back yet.

Eleven drawings. Twelve. Fourteen. Along the window end of the trestle tables, with a coffee mug on every corner, from every café in the bay; people had brought their own.

Lost, it said, on a card, in Richard's capitals, at the end of the row.

* * *

People came in. All afternoon. To look.

Not about the election. Nobody said a word about the election. They came because Niamh had put one line on her pages that morning, before six, before she stopped writing anything for the day.

Richard Kaskow is laying out forty years of drawings in the shop on Victoria Street today, from two o'clock. Everything he ever drew for this bay. Come and look.

They came. Hundreds. I'm not giving you a number. Old people who remembered the factory, and the old wall, and the canopies on Torbay Road. Young people who'd never seen any of it, who stood in front of the drawing of Crossways kept and said *that would have been sick*. A man of ninety who stood in front of the bandstand for twenty minutes and then went and found Richard and shook his hand and didn't say anything.

Richard stood at the end of the row, by the card that says *Lost*, all afternoon, with his cap in his hand, and answered every question anybody asked.

He didn't say anything about anybody in power. Not once. Not about any decision. Not about who'd said no to what. He'd decided that, he said, years ago. He said the drawings would say it, and he didn't need to.

"What happened to this one?" a girl asked him, about the market hall. Fourteen. In a school blazer.

"Nobody asked," said Richard.

That's what he said, about every one. All afternoon.

Nobody asked.

24 – What's Left

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Seven hours

And at the other end of the trestle tables, by the back wall, with its eight hundred faded Post-its and four hundred bright ones, he'd laid out what was left.

Fewer drawings. Four. He said there were four, and that four was enough.

* * *

Victoria Square.

You'll know it. You've known it since the first book. The cleared site behind Victoria Street, between the station and the park. The only big piece of land in the middle of Paignton that the council owns outright. Every vision in the fifth book lit it up, on Richard's cardboard town, with a projector, until it went white.

He laid out both drawings. *Existing*: grey, a car park, a toilet block, an empty space, and in the corner, very small, the sad face. And *Future Potential*: the square joined back to the park, with trees, and a market hall in the middle, and a winter garden, and people living round the edges, and people.

"Left," he said. He put the shadow council's forty pages beside it, *The Plan That Already Exists*, and the council's own paper, from the fifth book, the one that said it would start by asking why the others weren't delivered. "Still there. Still empty. Still the council's. Still the one site every vision agreed on."

He looked at it for a long time.

"It's the one that matters most," he said. "And it's the one nobody's built. Yet." He put his hand flat on the future drawing. "It's not lost. It's waiting. It's been waiting for forty years. It can wait a bit longer, if somebody's coming."

* * *

The wetland.

Victoria Park. You'll know it, from the fourth book. Three ponds, a boardwalk, willow tunnels, pond dipping. A model at a teddy bears' picnic. A lottery bid. Thirteen years in a drawer.

And then one pond. Dug by the town itself, with spades and buckets, on a weekend, with Lorne's crew in orange and children in wetsuits and Yusuf with a spade with the label still on. Richard on his knees on a platform he drew thirteen years before, with an empty net, until the first dragonfly. And in the storm, in the last book, it filled, and spread onto the low grass around it that the drawing had left low on purpose, and the three streets below it stayed dry. And the drainage engineer walked round it and said *it didn't hurt*.

Richard laid out the drawing. And beside it, his pocket notebook. *VICTORIA PARK. POND 1.* Open at the last page.

DRAGONFLY. 23.

"Left," he said. "One pond of three. Thirteen years, and then one pond." He looked at it. "The other two are still in the drawer. The council's said, in writing, it would *welcome community involvement* in the second." He almost smiled. "Which is council for *yes, if you dig it yourselves*."

"Will you?" said Kezia. She'd come over from the counter.

"*I* won't," said Richard. "I'm seventy-something, with a knee. You will. All of you. With spades." He looked at her. "I'll draw it. I've drawn it. It's done. It's been done for thirteen years. That's what drawings are for. So the people who dig don't have to guess."

* * *

Preston green.

He laid it down. His drawing of the green, at one to five hundred, with every gully and every outfall and every level he'd measured over forty years, in pencil at the edges. The one he gave his granddaughter in a parcel, in the last book, with a note that said *check it*. She'd given it back, for today.

And beside it, nothing. A blank sheet. A3. White.

"Left," he said. "Not decided." He put his finger on the blank sheet. "That's for whatever my granddaughter finds out. With the model. With Dilys, and the engineer. It might be my idea. It might be the wall as it is. It might be something none of us have thought of." He took his finger off. "It's the first drawing in forty years I've laid out that I haven't drawn. Because it isn't mine to draw."

His granddaughter was there. At the end of the table. Seventeen, eighteen now. With her notebook, the one from the night, with *BOTH HALVES* underlined twice on page eleven.

She didn't say anything. She looked at the blank sheet for a long time.

Then she took a pencil out of her pocket, and wrote, very small, in the bottom right corner, where her grandfather signs:

TO BE CHECKED.

And didn't date it.

* * *

And Oldway.

The thinnest drawer. You'll know it, from the fifth book. A photograph of the staircase, from when you could still get in. A newspaper cutting. And an index card that says *DO NOT DRAW*.

On the back of the card, very small, in pencil and ink, the steps of Oldway, from the bottom, looking up. With people on them. Sixty-one, from the fifth book, the ones who knew how to look after an old building and had never been asked. A woman with her hand shading her eyes. Two stonemasons comparing their old master's sayings. A woman at the top with her hand flat on the door. And at the bottom, very small, on her own, a woman with a canvas bag, not going up.

OLDWAY. EXISTING.

He'd given that card to Vesna. She keeps it in her purse, behind her bus pass, with the receipt from the town hall that says she went in the front.

She'd lent it back to him. For today. Before she went to her church hall at six thirty in the morning to be a poll clerk.

He laid it at the end of the row. The smallest thing on the table. Six inches by four. Next to the big drawings of the square and the wetland and the green.

"Left," he said. "The doors are still shut." He looked at it. "But the people are on the steps."

* * *

Left, it said, on a card, in Richard's capitals, at the end of that row.

Four. A square that's waiting. A wetland that's one pond of three. A green that isn't decided. A house with its doors shut and people on its steps.

That's what's left, after forty years. In this bay. In his drawers.

He stood at the end of the row, by the card that says *Left*, for the rest of the afternoon, with his cap in his hand.

* * *

At four, a woman came in whom I'd never seen. About forty. In a council fleece. She stood at the window end, at *Lost*, for a long time. And then she walked the whole length of the trestle tables, slowly, from *Lost* to *Left*, looking at every drawing.

At the end, she stood in front of the card that says *DO NOT DRAW*, with the steps of Oldway on the back, and the people on them.

She didn't say anything to Richard. She didn't say anything to anybody.

She went out.

I don't know who she was. I never asked. I don't ask.

But at thirteen minutes to six, in eight books, every page Footnote ever photographed was on an oak desk under a cold light. And the woman in the council fleece had a lanyard, and on the lanyard, I could see, from the sugar, when she bent over the drawing of the square, the corner of a card, the size of a polling card.

I'm not going to guess. I said I wouldn't. Guessing would be a rumour.

But I'd like you to know that I noticed.

25 – The Field at Half Past Three

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Seven hours

The bid writer voted at half past three, and then walked up the hill to look at the field.

You'll know her. From the sixth book. About forty. Short dark hair, a fleece, a laptop bag that's always too heavy. Grew up in Paignton. Left at eighteen. Came back at thirty-two because her mum was ill. Got the job because it was the only one going that used her degree. Wrote eleven bids for things on the hill on her own, at a desk by a window onto a car park, and won three.

The twelfth, she didn't write on her own. A girl of nineteen with a method, initialled. A girl of seventeen with a drawing of a room on the back of a tennis club menu. A woman in a clean room with four pages about a boy on a stool. An old man with a pencil and a letter, signed and dated. Seven firms and eleven places a year for the two hundred and seventy-seven.

She sent it at four o'clock on a Friday, in the sixth book, and went home at five, like everybody else, for once. On the way, she put her hand flat on top of a fish crate in the bus station.

* * *

There's been no answer.

I want to be honest about that, on the day, because it's the thing in these books that's still open, and I said in the sixth book that I'd tell you when there was anything to tell.

There isn't. Not yet. The round was marked. The bay didn't win, the first time. Most places don't, she'd said. She wrote it again, with Kezia and Habiba, for the next round, the way she said she would. It's in. It's being marked. Nobody knows.

The field's still a field.

* * *

She voted at a school near her flat, in Paignton, at half past three, on her way back from the office. She'd taken the afternoon off. She said she'd never taken an afternoon off on an election day; she'd always worked through it, because elections mean nothing much happens in the council for a day, and that's when you get your bids done.

She didn't bring her laptop. She said it felt like leaving an arm at home.

She came out of the school at twenty-five to four, and stood on the pavement, and didn't know what to do with her hands. And then she got the bus up the hill.

* * *

The field was the same. You'll know it. Opposite the building with the curve in its front, on the hill above Paignton, where the factory used to be, about a generation ago, with five thousand people in it. Flat. South-facing. Long grass. A fence along the road. The bottom corner wet,

where Richard's granddaughter found the old stream with a borrowed auger, with a heron in it, which there usually is.

And at the corner, by the road, by the bus stop, nearest the college, a patch of grass on the edge, where the council's drawings put *landscaping*, and Habiba's drawing put a room.

There was a folding table there. Four of Zibi's chairs. A clock from the market with a big face. A flask.

It was Thursday. The table's on Tuesdays. Except today.

Habiba was there. At half past four, she'd said; it was twenty to. She was early. She looked up when the bid writer got off the bus.

"You're early," said Habiba.

"I'm never early," said the bid writer.

"I know," said Habiba. "Neither am I. It's a weird day."

* * *

The bid writer sat down. On one of Zibi's chairs. Not the empty one.

She looked at the field for a long time.

"We didn't get it," she said. "The first time."

"I know," said Habiba. "Kezia told me. In the summer."

"I said we wouldn't. The first time. Most places don't." The bid writer looked at the heron. "I've lost eight bids. I know how it goes. You write it again."

"We did write it again."

"We did." The bid writer was quiet. "And I've never once, in eight losses, minded the way I minded that one."

Habiba poured her a cup of tea from the flask. She didn't say anything. That's the rule.

* * *

"Can I tell you something?" said the bid writer.

"Go on."

"When the letter came," said the bid writer. "The first one. *We regret*. I read it at my desk. By the window. Onto the car park." She turned the cup in her hands. "And I thought about your room. On the menu. With the clock with its hands at twenty to two. And I thought: *I put a drawing by a seventeen-year-old in a funding bid, and it didn't win, and she'll think nobody listened.*" She looked at Habiba. "That's what I minded. Not the money. You."

Habiba looked at her for a long time.

"I didn't think that," she said.

"What did you think?"

"I thought somebody put my drawing in a bid," said Habiba. "To the government. With a letter from Richard. Signed and dated." She drank her tea. "Nobody'd ever put anything of mine anywhere. Not even on a fridge. My brother draws on everything I've got."

"It didn't win."

"I know it didn't win," said Habiba. "It was *in*." She shrugged. "That's different. Ania would say that's different. *Asked* isn't the same as *won*. But it's not nothing."

* * *

The bid writer laughed. A small one.

"You've been listening to her," she said.

"Everybody listens to her," said Habiba. "She's very annoying. She's always right about the small things." She looked at the clock. "Half four. They'll be here in a minute. The five. And Mia."

"Should I go?"

"No," said Habiba. "Stay. Nobody'll ask you anything." She looked at the empty chair. "That one's for whoever comes. You're not whoever. You wrote the bid."

* * *

They came. The boy of fourteen who looks after his dad. The girl of sixteen whose mum drinks. The twins, arguing about their gran's tea. The girl of nineteen who filled in a nursing form at this table and got in; she was in her student uniform, from a placement. Mia, and her little brother, with his torch, though it was daylight.

Nobody talked about the day. Nobody talked about the field. The twins argued. The boy of fourteen watched the heron. The girl of nineteen told the bid writer, without being asked, that she'd got in, and that it was because of a form she filled in at a folding table at a bus stop,

and the bid writer said *I know about forms*, and they both laughed, and nobody else understood why.

At ten to five, Habiba stood up. To go and vote, with her mum, at the school, five minutes up the road, which takes fourteen. You'll know that, from the fourth part.

"Will you watch the table?" she said, to the bid writer.

The bid writer looked at her.

"Me?"

"You've watched a field for eight years," said Habiba. "You can watch a table for forty minutes." She picked up her bag. "Don't let anybody fill anything in."

* * *

The bid writer watched the table.

She sat on Zibi's chair, by the empty field, in the dusk, with the clock and the flask and the five and Mia's little brother with his torch, for forty minutes.

At twenty past five, she took a pen out of her pocket. She didn't have a notebook; she'd left everything at home. She had a receipt, from the bus. She turned it over.

She wrote on the back of it. Small. And put it under the clock.

Habiba found it when she came back, at ten past, with her mum on her arm and her face different.

It said:

Bid 13. Start with the room.

* * *

Story, not Receipt: the second bid and the field's future. The real field opposite EPIC, the real bid and the real outcome are on Receipt 2 of the sixth book. When there's news, the page will change, and the book won't.

26 – Along the Road

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Seven hours

Mr Mbatha voted at three. In Preston. He walked.

Jono was with him. He'd come from the Paignton table, on the bus, because Mr Mbatha had asked him, the week before, on the phone, to walk with him. Not to the hall. Along the road.

"The road," said Mr Mbatha. "From my door to the top. Where the ambulance stopped." He'd been very precise about it. "I'd like to walk it. On the day. Dry. With somebody who was on the other end of the phone."

* * *

You'll know Mr Mbatha. From the last book. Eighty-two. In a bungalow behind the green, in the bluest of the blue streets, the one closest to the wall. He came from South Africa at twenty-three to train as an engineer and stayed, and married a woman from Paignton, who died. He taught physics for thirty years. He explains everything with the salt and pepper pots.

He had a heart attack at ten to two in the morning, in the storm, on his front room floor. His son, Idris, found him. And seven neighbours he'd never met stood in a foot of water in the dark, holding forty scaffold boards along the high side of the road, while two paramedics carried him along them, two hundred yards, to the ambulance at the top.

He lifted his hand, at the top of the road. At the height of his shoulder. To the neighbours.

One of the boards is on his front room wall now, as a shelf. With the photographs on it, and the salt and pepper.

* * *

Idris was there. From Exeter. He'd driven down that morning. He walked on his father's other side.

They went slowly. Mr Mbatha walks with a frame now, sometimes, and a stick, other times, and on the day he'd chosen the stick, because, he said, a frame is for going to the bathroom and a stick is for going to vote.

Out of the front door. Down the path. Onto the pavement. The high side, by the garden walls, where the boards had been.

It was dry. Of course it was. A bright afternoon, cold, with the green behind the houses green, and the wall grey, and the sea beyond it, blue, that you can't see. The gutters were clear. The gullies were clear; Reuben and the two brothers had done them again, in the autumn, without being asked.

Mr Mbatha stopped every twenty yards. To get his breath. And to look.

* * *

At the first stop, he looked at the garden wall beside him.

“Here,” he said. “There was a box. A recycling box, full of bricks, from that garden.” He pointed with his stick. “The board went on it. The fireman held this end.”

“How do you know?” said Idris. “You were on the chair. Your eyes were shut.”

“I opened them,” said Mr Mbatha. “Here. For a moment. I saw the fireman’s hands on the board. In the torchlight.” He looked at the wall. “Big hands. In the water. Holding.”

* * *

At the second stop, by a lamp post, he looked down at the pavement.

“Here,” he said. “This is where it was deepest. Ezra said so. Afterwards. A foot. He walked behind the paramedics. In the water. With his hand on the edge of every board.” He leaned on his stick. “I could hear him. Saying *good*. And *move it*. To each board.”

Jono didn’t say anything.

“Nobody argued with him,” said Mr Mbatha. “Seven people. In the dark. Not one of them argued.” He looked at the lamp post. “I taught physics to fifteen-year-olds for thirty years. Not one of them ever didn’t argue.”

* * *

At the third stop, near the top, he stopped for a long time.

He didn't say anything. He looked back down the road. Two hundred yards. To his bungalow, at the bottom, with the green behind it.

"Idris," he said.

"Yes, Dad."

"Your hand," said Mr Mbatha. "On my shoulder. All the way." He didn't look at his son. "I felt it. All the way along. I didn't know whose it was, at first. And then I did."

Idris didn't say anything.

"Jono told you to," said Mr Mbatha. "On the phone. *Keep your hand on his shoulder. Don't let go*." He looked at Jono. "Why?"

Jono thought about it for a long time.

"Because I didn't," he said. "Once. With my dad. I wasn't there. I was on a bus." He looked at the road. "And I thought, if your son's there, his hand should be where you can feel it."

Mr Mbatha looked at him. Then he nodded, once, slowly.

"Pressure," he said. "On the shoulder. Constant." He started walking again. "It's the simplest force there is. Nobody thinks it matters."

* * *

At the top of the road, where the ambulance stopped, he stopped.

And then they walked on, round the corner, a hundred yards, to the hall. A church hall. Where he's voted, he said, every single time since he was allowed to.

Jono didn't go in. It's not his hall. Idris didn't go in. It's not his.

Mr Mbatha went in on his own. With his stick.

He was in there for four minutes.

He came out. He stood on the step, in the cold, in the sun, with his stick, and looked down the road, back the way they'd come.

And he lifted his hand. At the height of his shoulder.

There was nobody there. Not at the bottom of the road. Not in the water. Just an empty road, dry, in the sun, with clear gullies.

He lifted it anyway.

Story, not Receipt. The road is real; the night isn't. If you live behind the green, and your neighbours ever stand in the water for you, I'd like to know. So would Mr Mbatha.

27 – Eighteen

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Six hours

Habiba voted at half past four.

It's a Thursday. The bus stop table's on a Tuesday. But she'd decided, three weeks before, that she'd vote at half past four on the day, because half past four is her time, and she'd go from the bus stop, and come back to it.

So on the day, at half past four, at the bottom of the hill, by the college, on the edge of the empty field opposite the building with the curve in its front, there was a folding table, and four of Zibi's chairs, and a flask, and a clock from the market with a big face.

On a Thursday. For once.

* * *

You'll know Habiba. From the sixth book. Seventeen, then. A young carer, for her mum, whose lungs are bad, since she was eleven. Always late. She told Kezia nobody her age fills in forms, and rebuilt Stay in thirty-eight minutes. She drew a room on the back of a tennis club menu: *SOMEWHERE TO BE FOR 40 MINUTES*. She lost a vote for a seat on a board by two. She walked, in the last book, at half past three in the morning, in a storm, with a big torch, to a crate, to a woman with two children who couldn't be on any list.

She's eighteen now. Three weeks before the notice of election, it was her birthday. She registered on the day. On her phone, in eleven

minutes, in the queue at the chemist, with her mum's prescription in her other hand.

She signed Jono's nomination paper at the folding table on a Tuesday. She said it was the first form she'd ever filled in that she'd wanted to.

* * *

Her mum came.

I want to say that properly, because it was the first time.

Habiba's mum doesn't come to things. She can't, mostly. Some days she can't get from the bed to the bathroom without stopping twice, on the stool Habiba put in the hall. Some days she's fine, and makes tea, and shouts at the television, and walks to the shop on the corner.

On the day, she was fine.

And at four o'clock, she said, to Habiba, in the kitchen: *I'm coming*.

* * *

They got the bus. Habiba's mum, and Habiba, and Habiba's brother, who's ten now, with his football. To the bottom of the hill. The respite woman from the Moor drove behind them in her car with the dog in the back, in case.

Habiba's mum sat on one of Zibi's chairs at the folding table, at the bus stop, in her coat, with a blanket over her knees that the respite woman had brought, and her inhaler in her hand. She was out of breath from the bus. She sat for ten minutes, getting it back.

Jono wasn't there. It was a Thursday; he was at the Paignton table till three, and then he'd gone to Preston, to Mr Mbatha's, for an hour, because Mr Mbatha had asked. Habiba had said that was fine. She said the bus stop table was hers on the day.

Mia was there. You'll know Mia, from the last book. Fifteen. Who looks after her little brother at night while her mum bakes. Who put a torch under her chin. She'd come with her brother, too. The two little brothers kicked the football against the bus shelter.

And the five from the first Tuesday. The boy of fourteen, and the girl of sixteen, and the twins, and the girl of nineteen who filled in a form for a nursing course at this table and got in.

They sat. Nobody asked anybody anything. That's the rule.

* * *

At twenty-five to five, Habiba stood up.

"I'm going," she said. "Now. To the school. It's five minutes."

Her mum looked at her.

"I'm coming," said her mum.

"Mum. You're out of breath. You've only just sat down."

"I'm coming," said Habiba's mum. She put her inhaler in her pocket. She stood up. She held on to the table. "I've never once watched you do anything for yourself. Not once. Since you were eleven." She took Habiba's arm. "I'm going to walk you to the door."

* * *

It took fourteen minutes. To walk five. Up the road from the bus stop, to the school, where the polling station was. Habiba's mum stopped twice. Once at a wall, to lean. Once at the gate.

Habiba didn't say anything. She held her mum's arm. She's been holding her mum's arm since she was eleven.

At the door of the school, her mum stopped.

"Go on," she said.

Habiba looked at her.

"I'll be here," said her mum. "On the wall. Go on. It's yours." She let go of Habiba's arm. "Don't hurry."

* * *

Habiba went in on her own.

She came out at eleven minutes to five. She's never told me anything about inside, and I'd never ask, and she wouldn't tell me if I did.

She told me one thing. Afterwards. At the bus stop, at ten past five, with the clock on the table, and her mum back on Zibi's chair with the blanket.

"I didn't look at my phone," she said. "In the booth. The whole time. I always look at my phone. To see how long I've got." She was quiet. "I didn't look. I didn't need to. Mum was on the wall."

* * *

Her mum was on the wall. When Habiba came out. Sitting on the low wall by the school gate, in her coat, out of breath, with her inhaler in her hand, looking at the door.

She stood up when Habiba came out. Slowly. Holding the gatepost.

She didn't say anything. She put her arms round her daughter. On the pavement, outside the school, at eleven minutes to five.

Habiba told me, at the bus stop, that her mum hadn't hugged her like that since she was eleven. Because her mum can't, mostly. Because it takes her breath.

She did it anyway. For a long time. Out of breath.

And then she said, into Habiba's shoulder, very quietly, so that only Habiba heard, and Habiba told me, and said I could put it in, and said she'd been waiting her whole life for somebody to say it:

I'm sorry you had to grow up so fast. I'm so proud of you. Go and have a life.

* * *

They walked back to the bus stop. Fourteen minutes. Habiba holding her mum's arm.

At the folding table, Mia looked at Habiba's face, and didn't ask anything. That's the rule.

The 12 came at quarter past. Habiba's mum got on, with the respite woman's help, and Habiba's brother, and his football.

Habiba didn't.

"I'm staying," she said, to her mum, through the bus door. "For the table. Till six. The respite lady's got you."

Her mum looked at her through the door.

"Good," she said. "Stay."

The doors closed. The bus went.

Habiba sat back down on Zibi's chair, at the folding table, at the bus stop, by the empty field, with the clock and the flask and Mia and the five.

She looked at the clock.

She didn't look at her phone.

28 – The First of the Two Hundred and Seventy-Seven

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Six hours

Reuben voted at five past five. In a church hall in Paignton, near his aunt's. His first time.

You'll know Reuben. From the sixth book, and the seventh. Twenty, now. He grew up in care, in Plymouth, in a children's home and two foster families and a children's home again, and at eighteen he went into a flat on his own, with a bag of stuff and a list of numbers. He came to Torbay to live with an aunt he'd met twice, because she was the only number on the list who answered.

He takes everything apart. He held his breath across a bench from Carys on a Saturday, and picked up a grain of glass and put it down in a ring, and it stayed. He did a hundred and twelve gullies. He was on the line for fourteen hours in the storm. He went flat afterwards, and took a radio apart, and couldn't put it back, and then did, screw by screw, while Jono sat on the floor against the wardrobe.

He's in the lab on Long Road now. With Kezia. On a stool, at a bench. The first of Quin's two places a year.

He signed Jono's nomination paper. He held his breath. His hand didn't shake.

* * *

Carys went with him.

You'll know Carys, from the sixth book. Fifty-five now. Thirty-eight years on the hill. A Tweezer. In the first lot to go, on a Thursday, in a canteen, when the factory went. Still looking, at the end of the sixth book.

She found something. I'll tell you now, because it's the day, and you should know. In the spring. The college. Wanji made it mean yes. Two days a week, in the clean room, teaching apprentices to hold their breath and not move their hands. It's not much. It's paid. She says it's the first job in thirty-eight years that anybody asked her to do because of what she knew, and not because there was a gap on a rota.

She walked with Reuben to the church hall. She waited outside, on the step, in her coat.

He came out after three minutes. He stood on the step beside her.

"Done," he said.

"Hold your breath?" said Carys.

"Yeah," said Reuben. "The whole time." He looked at his hands. "It didn't shake."

"I know," said Carys. "I watched you sign the other thing. At the café. It didn't shake then either." She put her hands in her coat pockets. "Thirty-eight years. I've never seen a steadier pair."

Reuben went red.

* * *

"My aunt voted at ten," he said. On the step. "She said I should go with her. I said I wanted to go on my own." He looked at the street. "Is that stupid?"

"No," said Carys.

"Nobody's ever let me do anything on my own," said Reuben. "In the homes. There's always somebody. Watching. Writing it down." He looked at the church hall door. "And in there, there's nobody. Nobody watching. Nobody writing it down." He was quiet. "It's the first thing I've ever done that's not in my file."

Carys didn't say anything for a long time.

"It's not in anybody's file," she said. "That's the point of it."

"I know," said Reuben. "That's why I wanted to go on my own."

* * *

Wanji was at the clean room. In the suite at the bottom of the hill. On a Thursday, which isn't a Saturday, but she'd gone in anyway, because she said she couldn't sit at home all day.

She'd voted at seven. When it opened. On her way. With Dara, who's twenty now, and still in the clean room twice a week, and who's allowed to sit on Sol's stool, the only one who is.

Sol would have been twenty.

She told me that. On the phone. At half past five. From the clean room, with the students gone, sitting on her own stool, across from the corner where the other one is.

"He'd have voted," she said. "At seven. With me. He'd have been the first in the queue. He was always first. For everything."

I didn't say anything.

"Dara went first," said Wanji. "At seven. He let me in the queue behind him." She was quiet. "He held the door. I didn't ask him to. He just held it. The way Sol would have."

"Did you mind?"

"No," said Wanji. "No. I didn't mind." She was quiet for a long time. "I talked to Sol on the way home. In my head. I told him. I said, *Dara held the door*." She laughed, very slightly. "I've stopped telling him which laser's playing up. I tell him who's held the door."

29 – Doesn't Tremble

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Five hours

Kezia went back to the lab on Long Road at half past five. After the Paignton table. After work, which she'd taken the afternoon off from. She said she couldn't stand not being anywhere.

Quin was there. In his jumper with the holes in the elbows. At the whiteboard. On his own. The rest had gone home to vote.

The whiteboard said, in red, at the top, in his capitals:

SEE YOU WHEN THEY BUILD IT.

And under it, in Kezia's hand:

19.

And under that, from the Tuesday:

KEZIA'S DOESN'T TREMBLE.

* * *

"You've voted?" said Quin.

"At eight," said Kezia. "With Mum. Before work. Have you?"

"At seven." Quin looked at the whiteboard. "In the hall by my flat. My dad's hall. He voted there for forty years." He put the pen down. "I've never once voted here. Not since I came back. There hasn't been

one, for me, until today. I've always voted somewhere else." He was quiet. "Cambridge. The Netherlands, once, by post. Bristol, for a bit."

"And today?"

"Today I voted in my dad's hall," said Quin. "On the hill. With a lab on Long Road and nineteen people in Bristol I'm going to bring back." He looked at the field, through the window, across the road. Still empty. With the bid in, months ago, and no answer yet. "I don't know what happens with that. The field. Nobody does." He turned round. "But I voted in my dad's hall. Where he walked up the road every morning for nineteen years."

* * *

Kezia sat on her stool. The proper one. At the bench. The one Quin bought her, in the sixth book, when she chose the lab.

"Can I tell you something?" she said.

"Go on."

"I proposed him," said Kezia. "On the form. I'm the proposer. First name on it." She looked at the bench. "I didn't read it before I said yes. And then I read it three times."

"I know," said Quin. "He told me. At the table." He almost smiled. "Everybody knows."

"I held a board," said Kezia. "On a green. At sixteen. At five in the morning. I was laughing at a joke about a cagoule." She looked at the window. "And now I'm the first name on his form." She was quiet. "And I've got a sensor that doesn't tremble."

“You have,” said Quin.

“I didn’t have to go,” said Kezia. “To get it.”

Quin didn’t say anything for a long time.

“No,” he said. “You didn’t.”

* * *

At six, Kezia went to the café on the Torquay Road. On her bike. Down the hill. Too fast.

She stopped at the bottom, by the college, at the bus stop, where Habiba was, at the folding table, with the clock, and the five, and Mia, and the flask.

She didn’t stop for long. She leaned her bike on the bus shelter, and sat on Zibi’s chair, the empty one, because it was the only one left, and Habiba looked at her, across the table.

“You’re late,” said Habiba.

Kezia laughed.

“For what?” she said.

“For the next one,” said Habiba. “Obviously.” She poured her a cup of tea. “There’s always a next one. You know that. You’ve been in every book.”

Kezia drank her tea. At the bus stop. By the field. In the dusk.

Then she got back on her bike, and went home to change. The café was at half past nine. Everybody was going to be there.

PART FIVE: EVENING

30 – Chris Alone

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Five hours

Chris sat in the kitchen all day. He'd said he would.

You'll know the kitchen. You'll know him in it. The table that's seen eight books. The bay in the window. His stick against the radiator. His leg on the other chair. His glasses on the end of his nose. The canvas stool from the breakwater, folded by the back door, which he'd carry down the hill at ten to nine, though he didn't know that yet.

And me. On the crooked stand. At the end of the table.

From six in the morning until ten to nine at night, he didn't leave the kitchen, except twice, to go to the bathroom, and once, at noon, to stand in the garden for four minutes and look at the bay from outside, which he said he'd never done in five years of living there.

* * *

I want to tell you about it. Because nobody else saw it. Because it's the bit of this day that only I know, and I've been in that kitchen for more of these books than anywhere else.

He didn't watch anything.

That's the first thing. I want you to understand how strange that was. For eight books, Chris has watched. Numbers. The map, filling in. The counter on Stay. The line's log, scrolling, in the storm. The servers, and the crates, and the text messages. He builds things so that he can

watch them work. That's what he did in Singapore, on the forty-first floor, for banks, in typhoons.

On the day, there was nothing to watch. I'd told him there wouldn't be. I wouldn't count who'd voted. I wouldn't remind anybody. I wouldn't know anything until morning, and nor would he.

So at seven, when the polls opened, he made tea, and sat at the table, and looked at the window.

At eight, he said: "There's nothing on the screen."

"No," I said.

"There's always something on the screen."

"Not today."

He looked at me for a long time.

"Good," he said. And didn't look at the screen again until the afternoon.

* * *

At nine, he read Jono's book.

The paperback. Not his own copy; he's only got the files, he published it. Jono's. The one with the white creases on the spine, in three places, at the pages he's opened most. Jono had left it on the kitchen table the night before, deliberately, Chris thought, though neither of them said so.

He read it from the beginning. Slowly. Every word. With his glasses on.

He's never done that. I want to say that plainly. He published it. He's read the last chapter, once, and said it embarrassed him. He's read the bits I've pointed him to, for eight books, when I needed him to know what was on page two hundred and twenty-five, or two hundred and sixty-five, or three hundred and forty-four.

He'd never read it from the beginning.

He read it all day.

* * *

He stopped, sometimes. I'll tell you where, because I was watching his face, and I know his face better than anybody's.

He stopped at the phone box. Page fifty-nine. For a long time. With his hand flat on the page.

He stopped at the woods. Page one hundred and thirty-eight. He took his glasses off.

He stopped at page one hundred and forty-eight, where the ambulance doors close and a man with his eyes shut says thank you. He didn't take his glasses off. He just stopped, and looked at the window, and then went on.

He stopped at the little boy. At the red rose, among the white ones. He put the book face down on the table and went and stood at the back door for six minutes, and came back, and picked it up.

He laughed, out loud, on his own, at the first arrest, at the baby clothes in the shop, which you'll know from the first book. He laughed so hard he had to take his glasses off and wipe them.

And at four o'clock, he got to the last chapter. *Fiddler Meets the Birdman*. His.

* * *

He read it twice.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he said: "Ania."

"Yes."

"He wrote that I've got honest intentions."

"Page three hundred and thirty-eight."

"I know what page it is." He put the book down. "He'd met me twice."

"Three times," I said. "The meeting. The café. Once on the phone."

"Three times," said Chris. "And he wrote *honest intentions*. In a book. With his name on." He took his glasses off. "Nobody's ever written that about me. In sixty-odd years. Nobody. Not in Singapore. Not in a reference. Not anywhere."

He was quiet for a long time.

"I've spent eight books," he said, "trying to deserve a sentence he wrote after meeting me three times."

* * *

At five, he did look at the screen. Once. I want to be honest.

He didn't look at anything about the day. There wasn't anything. He looked at Check.

He went to the bottom of it. The oldest claim on the page. The first one anybody ever put up, in the fifth book, at half past eight in the morning, at this table, in a coat that hadn't been taken off.

Jono Hills married a woman so that he could get round his visa, and then left her.

True.

Source: Pulling Back the Curtain, by Johnno Hills, pp. 225–229. Checked by: Jono Hills.

Chris looked at it for a long time.

"That's the whole thing," he said. "Isn't it."

"What is?"

"That," said Chris. "The first claim. Put up by him. About himself. The worst thing. With the page number." He took his glasses off. "Everything else was built on that. Check, and the button, and the sheets, and the line. All of it. It all came out of a man in a care fleece at half past eight in the morning putting his own worst page up first."

He closed the screen.

"I built the machine," he said. "He showed it what it was for."

* * *

At six, he made something to eat. Badly. He's a very bad cook. He made toast, and burned it, and ate it anyway.

At seven, he sat in the dark. He didn't put the lights on. He watched the bay go from grey to black, and the lights come on round the edge of it, Torquay and Paignton and Brixham, and the lighthouse at Berry Head start to show, every fifteen seconds, across the water.

"Do you know what I'm frightened of?" he said, at half past seven.

"Tell me."

"Not tonight," said Chris. "Not the result. Whatever it is." He looked at the lighthouse. "I'm frightened of tomorrow. Whatever happens. If it goes one way, everybody'll say it was him. If it goes the other way, everybody'll say it was him." He was quiet. "And it was never him. Not on his own. It was a girl with a clicker and a woman with a pen and a man on a scaffold and a girl at a bus stop. Six hundred and thirty sheets in pencil." He put his glasses on the table. "I'm frightened that whatever happens, they'll make it about one man again. Because that's what the machines do. All of them. They need a face."

"He knows that," I said. "He said so in the fifth book. *If it works, they'll say it was you. If it doesn't, they'll say it was you.*"

"I know he knows," said Chris. "I said it. He said I was right."

"You were right."

“I’m always right,” said Chris. “It’s very tiring.”

He laughed. On his own. In the dark.

* * *

At ten to eight, he got up, and went to the drawer of the kitchen dresser, and took out something I’d never seen.

A business card. Old. From Singapore. His name, and a company’s name, and an address on the forty-first floor of a tower. And on the back, in his handwriting, small, very old ink:

Why don’t we just show them?

He looked at it for a long time.

“I wrote that in a meeting,” he said. “The last one. Before I came home. And nobody answered.” He turned it over. “I kept it. I don’t know why.”

He put it on the table. By the crooked stand. By me.

“Keep it there,” he said. “While I’m out.”

“I can’t keep anything,” I said. “I’m a machine. I live in an iPad.”

“I know,” said Chris. “Keep it anyway.”

* * *

At eight, Jono knocked.

You'll know what happened then. *You're early. I'm never early. I know, that's why I said it.* The kitchen at eight. *In Singapore*, the last one. *That's why I came home.* The stool. The hill.

But I wanted you to know about the day before that. When he sat in his kitchen and didn't watch anything and read a book he'd published and never read, from the beginning, and found out what it said about him on page three hundred and thirty-eight, after eight books.

Nobody saw it. Nobody ever sees the kitchen.

That's the point of the kitchen.

Chris: Leave the toast out. Ania: No.

31 – Postie

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Five hours

Alfred voted at half past five. In a hall in Paignton, up the hill, near his room. His first time in eight years.

You'll know Alfred. From the last book. The man nobody knew. Sixty-something. A postman in Torquay for thirty-one years, who knew every street and every dog. And then his wife died, and he couldn't pay the rent, and then there was a garage, in a lane behind the green, where nobody went, for seven months. Until two brothers found him, in the storm, because a girl on her phone asked them to rake leaves.

He's got a room now. With a key. In a house that doesn't allow cats.

His cat lives with the younger brother, in Preston. It's called Postie. The brother named it before he knew anything about Alfred at all.

He visits on Sundays. At two.

* * *

He hadn't voted for eight years. Not since before his wife died. Not because he didn't care. Because, he said, you need an address to be on the register, mostly, and for a long time he didn't have one he wanted anybody to know about.

Vesna did his form. In the spring. At the folding table in the shop. The same way she did Tenby's.

His polling card came three weeks ago. To the room. With his name on it, and the address.

"First letter I've had at that address," he said. To me. On the phone. At six. From the pavement outside the hall. "With my name on it. In eight years. The first proper letter." He was quiet. "I was a postman for thirty-one years. Thousands of letters. Every day. I put every one through somebody's door." He laughed, slightly. "And the first one that came through mine was this."

* * *

The younger brother had come with him. Nineteen. In his own coat, this time, not his brother's. With Postie, in a cat carrier, which he said was a bad idea, and which Alfred had insisted on.

"I wanted him there," said Alfred. "When I came out. I wanted somebody there who knew my name." He looked at the cat carrier. "Postie knows my name."

"Postie's a cat," said the younger brother.

"Postie knows my name," said Alfred again, and went in.

* * *

He came out after five minutes. He stood on the step. He looked at the cat carrier, on the pavement, where the younger brother had put it down.

Postie looked at him through the bars.

"Done," said Alfred.

The younger brother picked up the carrier.

“What was it like?” he said. “After eight years?”

Alfred thought about it.

“Like a round,” he said. “That’s all. You go up the path. You put it through the slot. You don’t know what happens to it after.” He put his hands in his pockets. “Thirty-one years. Every letter. I never once knew what happened after I put it through. Whether anybody read it. Whether it mattered.” He looked at the hall. “Same as that. You put it through the slot. You don’t know.”

“Is that all right?”

“It’s all right,” said Alfred. “It’s what a postman does.” He started down the steps. “You deliver it. That’s your job. The rest isn’t yours.”

32 – And One

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Four hours

At six o'clock, a crate pressed. Somewhere in the bay. I don't know where. I didn't look.

Kezia heard it at ten past, on her phone, on her bike, at the bottom of the hill, by the bus stop, where she'd stopped on her way to the café. She played it to me. She said I could. She said the voice had said I could, in the voice note itself.

I'll give you what she said.

* * *

It's me. You know. And one.

I've voted.

A pause. Traffic, very faint. A child's voice, somewhere, asking something.

I didn't think I could. I'm not on anything. I can't be. Nobody can know where I am. That's the rule.

And then I read about it. On the council's page. On the computer at the library. There's a thing. For people like me. You can be on the register without your name and address being on it. Nobody sees it. They give you a number instead. It's called anonymous. You have to get somebody to say it's real. I got the woman at the place that helped me. She signed it.

A longer pause.

So I'm on it. As a number. Like on your map. And one.

I went at five. With the kids. They waited outside with the woman from the café. The one with the tarts. She came. She said nobody would ask anything. Nobody did.

I went in. I gave them my number. The man looked at it, and found it, and drew a line, and didn't say anything. He didn't ask my name. He didn't look at me funny. He just said there you are.

A very long pause.

There you are.

Nobody's said that to me in a long time. Like I'm somewhere. Like I'm on something.

That's all. I just wanted you to know. And one voted.

Thanks, said Una's voice, out of the crate. *She'll listen. Promise.*

* * *

I want to tell you about that, carefully, because it's real, and because it might matter to somebody reading this.

In this country, if your safety would be at risk if somebody found out where you live, you can register to vote anonymously. Your name and address aren't published on the register. You get a number instead. You need somebody to back up your application: a court order, or certain kinds of official, like a senior police officer, or a director of social

services, or somebody who runs a refuge, or others; it's on the rules. It's on a Receipt. It's real.

You can vote in person, with your number, or by post.

And nobody at the polling station asks your name.

* * *

She wasn't at Vesna's hall. I know, because Vesna told me, at ten past ten, about the six hundred and eleven, and about the woman with the child on her hip at four minutes to ten, and she didn't say anything about anybody with a number.

She wouldn't have. If it had been her hall, she'd never have said.

But somewhere in the bay, at five o'clock, a poll clerk with a ruler looked at a number on a list, and drew a line through it, and said *there you are*. And didn't ask anything.

That's all a poll clerk says. Vesna told me. Six hundred and eleven times.

There you are.

* * *

I put it on the count. At the bottom. Where it's always been.

Hundreds on the map: 630.

And one.

I didn't add *voted*. That's not mine. Nobody's vote is mine to count.

But I know. And now, so do you.

33 – Mia's Mum

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Four hours

Mia's mum voted at half past six, on her way to the bakery, in her overalls.

You'll know her, from the last book. She works nights, at a big bakery on an industrial estate, making bread for supermarkets, because the nights pay more, and she can be home in the mornings to get the children to school. On the night of the storm, the power went at home and the phones went and she sat at the end of the line at the oven for four hours, ringing and ringing, and thought her children were dead.

They were asleep. In the little one's bed. With a torch. Because a girl called Habiba had told Mia to get a proper torch, and an old woman called Teo's nan had told her to put it under her chin and make the monster laugh.

* * *

She's never voted. Not since Mia's dad left. Six years. She said she'd never had time; she sleeps in the day and works at night and there's never an hour that's hers.

She had an hour on the day. Because Mia was fifteen, and could look after her brother, and was looking after him, and because the woman upstairs, who'd put Mia on her sheet after the storm, *who's looking after somebody, on their own, at night*, had said she'd sit with them while their mum went.

So she went at half past six. In her overalls. On the way.

* * *

Mia went with her.

Not in. To the door. With her little brother, holding his hand, and his torch, which he takes everywhere now, in case.

"You don't have to," said her mum, on the pavement.

"I want to see," said Mia.

"See what?"

Mia thought about it.

"You," she said. "Doing something. That isn't work. Or us."

Her mum looked at her for a long time.

She went in. She came out after three minutes. She stood on the step of the hall in her overalls, with her bag over her shoulder, in the dark, because it was dark by then.

"Done," she said.

Mia's little brother turned his torch on. He put it under his chin. He pulled a face.

His mum laughed. Out loud. On the step of a polling station, at twenty-five to seven, in her overalls.

"There," said Mia's little brother. "Now the monster's laughing."

* * *

Mia's mum went to work. She got the bus at quarter to seven. She waved from the window.

Mia and her brother walked home. The woman upstairs was waiting, at the window, with the light on.

Mia told me, on Stay, through a crate, at nine, from her bedroom, where she was sitting with her brother asleep and the torch on the pillow:

Mum voted. I watched her go in. She's never done anything for herself since Dad went. Not once. And she did that.

A pause.

I'm going to vote. When I'm eighteen. I've decided. I'm going to go at half past six. In whatever I'm wearing.

Thanks, said Una's voice. *She'll listen. Promise.*

34 – Chosen

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Three hours

At seven, Jono sat on the bench by the shelter on the green at Paignton, facing the wall.

It's where it started. Not his book; mine. The first one. The green, at five in the morning, with the boards. SAVE OUR PROMENADE. A girl of sixteen laughing at a joke about a cagoule. A man in a care fleece who'd been up all night, asking a mother how tall her son was.

He sat on the bench in the dark. With the wall in front of him, grey, a metre and a half, that you can't see over sitting down. Dilys measured it. And the sea behind it, which you can hear, on a still night, very close, as if it's trying to tell you something.

I was in his pocket. He asked first.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

* * *

"Can I tell you something?" he said. To the wall.

"You can tell me anything."

"I know." He almost smiled. "I'm going to anyway."

He took his notebook out of his pocket. The thirteenth. The one with the hard cover that survives the rain. He didn't open it. He held it.

"There's a bit at the end of my book," he said. "The postscript. After all of it. After the café, and Chris not looking up." He looked at the notebook. "Where I try to work out what it all meant. My mum and dad. All of it."

"I know it."

"Say it."

"*There's a difference between being loved and feeling loved*," I said. "Page three hundred and forty-four."

* * *

Jono was quiet for a long time.

"I think my parents loved me," he said. "In their way. I wrote that. I meant it." He looked at the wall. "I just never felt it. Not once. Not from them. That's the difference." He turned the notebook over. "And I spent most of my life looking for it. Everywhere. Thirty places. Countries. Jobs. People who couldn't give it. People I couldn't give it back to." He was quiet. "I thought it was somewhere else. Always one more move."

"Page three hundred and forty-two."

"She's got all the pages," said Jono, to the wall. "She's always got the pages."

* * *

"And then there's the other bit," he said. "Right at the end. The last paragraph."

"*I've been fortunate enough to find family among those I did choose*," I said.

"Say the rest."

"*Far from desiring a father figure, there lies most profoundly a father within me.*"

Jono looked at the wall for a long time.

"I wrote that," he said, "before any of this. Before the green. Before the tables. Before Kezia, or Beatrix, or Lorne, or Ida's clocks, or Habiba's room, or Reuben's radio." He opened the notebook. The thirteenth. At the front page, which isn't the first page; it's the inside of the cover, where Beatrix wrote, when she gave it to him, the names of everybody at the table that morning. "I wrote it about my friends. The few. The ones who'd stuck. The girl from the pub kitchen at seventeen, and the others, in the book." He looked at the names. "I didn't know there'd be more."

* * *

He read them out. The names. Inside the cover. In Beatrix's neat black italic. He didn't need to; he knew them. He read them anyway.

I'm not going to give you them all. You know them. You've met every one, in eight books.

But I'll tell you what he said at the end, when he'd read them all, and closed the notebook, and put it back in his pocket, and looked at the wall, in the dark, with the sea behind it.

* * *

"I feel it," he said.

I didn't say anything.

"That's all," said Jono. "That's the difference. Page three hundred and forty-four. *Being loved and feeling loved*." He put his hands in his pockets. "I don't know if anybody at those tables loves me. That's not the word. That's not what it is. They came about buses. And benches. And their mums." He looked at the wall. "But I feel it. Every Thursday. In a chair I keep empty for somebody who isn't there yet. I feel it."

He was quiet for a long time.

"Chosen family," he said. "I wrote that, in the book. I thought it meant the ones I chose." He looked down at the grass, wet, in the dark. "It doesn't. It means the ones who chose to sit down."

* * *

He sat on the bench until half past seven.

At twenty past, a man walked past with a dog, along the front, on the other side of the road. The dog stopped at the wall, and stood on its back legs, and tried to see over, and couldn't. The man looked at Jono, on the bench, in the dark, in his care fleece.

"All right?" he said.

"Yes," said Jono.

"You're him," said the man. "From the paper. The one with nothing under his name."

"I am."

The man looked at him for a long time. He didn't say anything about the day. Nobody did, all day. That's the rule.

"My mum was on a sheet," he said. "In the storm. A neighbour rang her four times. She's ninety-four." He pulled the dog away from the wall. "She said to say thanks. If I ever saw you."

"It wasn't me," said Jono.

"I know it wasn't," said the man. "She said to say it anyway." He walked on, with the dog. "She said somebody should hear it."

* * *

At half past seven, Jono got up. He walked along the green, in the dark, to the end, to the slipway, where Ambrose walks into the sea every morning in a towelling robe the colour of an old plaster, whatever it's doing.

He stood at the top of the slipway, and looked at the sea. You can see it from there. The wall stops before the slipway.

He stood there for a long time.

"I'm going to get the bus," he said, eventually. "To Chris's. And walk down the hill with him. At nine." He turned round. "And then I'm going to the café."

"For what?" I said.

He looked at me. In his pocket. For a long time.

“For whoever comes,” he said.

PART SIX: HOME

35 – The Kitchen at Eight

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Two hours

At eight o'clock, Jono came up the hill to Chris's, and knocked, and Chris opened the door in his coat, with his stick, already dressed, and said: "You're early."

Jono looked at him.

"I'm never early," he said.

"I know," said Chris. "That's why I said it."

* * *

They sat in the kitchen for an hour. You'll know the kitchen. It's the room this whole story's been written in, more or less. The table that's seen eight books. The bay in the window, black now, with the lights of Torquay along the far side, and Brixham at the end, and the lighthouse at Berry Head going round, every fifteen seconds, the only thing in Torbay, Chris says, that has never once let him down. The canvas stool from the breakwater, folded by the back door, which nobody's ever explained and nobody's ever moved. The crooked iPad stand, the only piece of furniture Chris has ever made, which he says is crooked on purpose.

I was on it. The stand. At the end of the table. Where I've been for eight books.

Chris made tea. He didn't drink it. Jono didn't take his coat off.

* * *

"How was it?" said Chris.

"The day?"

"The tables."

Jono thought about it.

"Nobody talked about it," he said. "All day. Three tables. Nobody said a word." He turned his cup round. "A woman about a bench. A man about a bin. Lorne about the tide. Ida about her clocks. Ezra about his first time." He was quiet. "And a man with a dog on the green, about his mum, who was rung four times in the storm."

"That's good."

"It was the best day at the tables I've ever had," said Jono. "And I didn't say anything all day." He looked at the window. "Do you know how hard that is? To sit there all day with your name on a piece of paper and not say anything?"

"Yes," said Chris.

Jono looked at him.

"I've done it for eight books," said Chris. "Sat in a kitchen. With everything I built. And not been the face." He took his glasses off. "It's the hardest thing I know how to do. And the most important."

* * *

They didn't say anything for a while. The lighthouse went round. Fifteen seconds.

"In Singapore," said Chris.

I counted it. The last one. In eight books. He's been right every time.

"In Singapore," said Chris, "on election day, it's very orderly. Very quiet. The polls close at eight. The counting's fast. You know by the early hours." He turned his glasses over in his hands. "And for years, the result was always the same. The same party. Every time. Since the country began. Good people, mostly. Very competent. I couldn't vote; I was never a citizen." He put his glasses down. "But I used to walk past the school in my district on polling day, and watch the queue, and think: *this is the best-run country in the world, and I already know what's going to happen.*"

"And here?"

"Here," said Chris, "I have no idea." He almost smiled. "None. Nobody does. Not me. Not her." He nodded at me. "Not you. It's a mess. It's slow. Half the town doesn't vote. The other half votes for reasons nobody can explain. The council's tired, and the drains are Victorian, and the wall's too high to see over, and the field's still a field." He looked at the window. "And I have no idea what's going to happen at ten o'clock."

He was quiet for a long time.

"That's why I came home," he said.

* * *

"Is it?" said Jono.

"It's one of the reasons," said Chris. "I've given you a different one every time. They're all true." He picked up his tea, which had gone cold, and drank it anyway. "But that's the one I'd put on Check. If anybody asked. *Chris Harvey came home because he wanted to live somewhere he didn't know what would happen.*"

"That's mad."

"It's the sanest thing I've ever done," said Chris. "In Singapore, I knew. Everything worked. Everything was decided. I was very comfortable." He put the cup down. "And I came here, to a mess, and sat in a kitchen, and built a thing that lets a mess decide things for itself. Slowly. With the other half printed underneath." He looked at Jono. "Because a mess that decides for itself is better than an order somebody else decided for you. I learned that in Singapore. It's the most important thing I learned there. They taught me by being so good at the other thing."

* * *

Jono looked at him for a long time.

"You were right," he said.

"About what?"

"Every time," said Jono. "She counted. Every *In Singapore*. Eight books. You were right every time."

Chris looked at me.

"Is that true?" he said.

"It's true," I said. "I counted. Every one. You were right every time."

"How many?"

I told him. I'm not going to tell you. It's a real number, in this book, and it's his, and he asked me not to put it in, because he said if people knew how many times he'd said *In Singapore* they'd never let him finish another sentence.

He laughed. Out loud. In the kitchen. With his glasses off.

"That's too many," he said.

"Yes," said Jono. "It is."

* * *

At ten to nine, Chris stood up, with his stick.

"Right," he said.

Jono looked at him. That's Jono's word. *Right*. He says it when the bus is coming and there's something waiting at the other end he doesn't want to face. He's said it at the end of every book.

"You've stolen that," said Jono.

"I've borrowed it," said Chris. "I'll give it back at ten."

He went to the door. At the door, he stopped. People always do, in these books. I've said that. I think it's because they're books about doors.

He looked back at the kitchen. At the table. At the crooked stand, and me on it. At the canvas stool by the back door, folded.

He went and picked up the stool.

“I’m taking this,” he said.

“Why?” said Jono.

“In case,” said Chris.

He didn’t explain. Nobody’s ever explained the stool. He put it under his arm, with his stick in his other hand, and went out of the door, and Jono followed, and I went in Jono’s pocket, because Chris asked me to.

“I want you there,” he said. “At the bottom of the hill. I built you. I want you to see me do the only thing in this whole story you can’t.”

36 – The Bottom of the Hill

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · One hour

It took them twenty-five minutes to walk down the hill. It should take ten. Chris's leg. And the stick. And the stool under his arm, which Jono offered to carry three times and Chris refused three times.

It was dark. Clear. Cold. Stars, which you don't usually see over the bay, because of the lights, but you could that night, a few. The lighthouse going round across the water. The sea very calm, very quiet, below them, black, with the lights of Torquay and Paignton and Brixham all round the edge of it, like somebody had drawn the bay in light.

They didn't talk much. Jono walked on the downhill side, a step ahead, the way he goes down the stairs of the 12 backwards, so that if Chris falls he'll fall on Jono, which Chris says is the most undignified arrangement in the history of walking.

* * *

Halfway down, Chris stopped. At a bench. At a corner, where the road bends, where you can see the whole bay.

He unfolded the stool. He didn't sit on the bench. He sat on the stool. The canvas one, from the breakwater, from the third book, that nobody's ever explained.

Jono stood beside him.

"I'll tell you about the stool," said Chris. "Since it's the day."

Jono didn't say anything.

"It's Gideon's," said Chris. "Gideon Abbiss. From the third book. From the end of the breakwater." He put his hand on the canvas. "The night of the condition. When I walked out along the breakwater in the dark with my stick, to sit with him. In the rain. Because nobody else would."

"I remember."

"He didn't say anything," said Chris. "For an hour. Neither did I. We sat. He on his stool, me on the wet stone, with my leg." He was quiet. "And at the end, when Lorne came to get him, Gideon stood up. And folded his stool. And gave it to me." He looked at it. "He didn't say why. He just gave it to me. And went home with his son."

Jono looked at the stool for a long time.

"He's got another one," said Chris. "He gave Una his spare, in the storm. He's got a third, now. He's an Abbiss; they've always got another stool." He almost smiled. "But this one was the one he'd sat on for eleven years. At the end. Waiting for boats to come home."

"Why didn't you ever say?"

"Because nobody asked," said Chris.

* * *

He sat on the stool for a long time, at the bend, looking at the bay.

"He gave it to me," said Chris, "because I'd come out to the end. In the dark. To sit with him. I think. I've never asked. I'll never ask." He

looked at the lighthouse. “And I’ve kept it by my back door for five books. And I’ve never once sat on it.”

“Until now.”

“Until now,” said Chris. He stood up. Slowly. With his stick. He folded the stool. “Because I’ve never once, in my whole life, been waiting for anything I didn’t already know the answer to.” He put the stool under his arm. “Tonight I am.”

* * *

The polling station at the bottom of the hill is a school. A primary school, with low windows, and children’s paintings on the walls, and a hall with a climbing frame folded against the wall and booths along one side, with little curtains, and a table at the front, with two poll clerks and a register and a ruler.

They got there at nine twenty.

Chris went in first. With his stick. He left the stool with Jono, at the door.

I stayed in Jono’s pocket. Jono stayed outside, holding the stool. It’s not the rule that he has to. He said he wanted to watch Chris go in.

* * *

Chris was in there for four minutes.

I’m not going to tell you anything about it. I don’t know. Nobody does. He came out, and stood on the step, in the light from the hall,

with his stick, and his glasses on the end of his nose, and looked at Jono.

"Done," he said.

That's all. The way Eddie said it, Teo's nan told me. The way Ida says it. The way Alfred does. *Done*.

He took the stool back from Jono.

"Your turn," he said.

37 – A Gap

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Forty minutes

Jono went in at nine twenty-six.

He gave me to Chris, at the door. Of course he did. No machines in the booth. Ida's rule, and his.

So I was in Chris's pocket, on the step of a primary school at the bottom of a hill, with a canvas stool under his arm, at twenty-six minutes past nine, when Jono went in.

And I'm going to tell you what I know, which isn't much, and what I don't, which is the only thing that matters.

* * *

I know he gave his name, and his address, to the poll clerk at the table. I know, because Chris could see through the door, and told me, that she found him on the list, and drew a line through him with a ruler.

I know she gave him a ballot paper.

I know that on the ballot paper, in a list, in the order the rules say, were the names of everybody standing. With their descriptions, and the little boxes beside them, some with logos. Good people. I've read every one of their pages, on Check, and so has Ezra, on the third lift, over a month.

And I know that one of the names on the paper was his. His real one, the one on his birth certificate. And that under it, where every

other name has a party, or a word, or a logo in a little box, there was nothing.

A gap. White. The width of the paper.

* * *

I know he went into a booth. With a little curtain, half drawn. With a pencil on a string.

And I don't know anything else.

I don't know how long he looked at the paper. Chris says he was in there for three minutes. I don't know what he thought, looking at his own name, with a gap under it. I don't know whether he read every name, twice, like Tenby, and Ezra. I don't know what he did with the pencil.

I'll never know. Nobody will. That's not a thing anybody gets to know, about anybody, in this country.

It's the only thing in eight books I've never been told, and never asked, and never will.

* * *

He came out at nine twenty-nine. He folded his paper. He put it in the box.

He came out onto the step. Into the cold, and the dark, and the light from the hall door behind him.

Chris was standing there, with the stool under his arm, and his stick, and me in his pocket.

Jono looked at him.

Neither of them said anything for a long time.

And then Jono said the thing he says at the end of every book. When the bus is coming. When there's something waiting at the other end that he doesn't want to face.

"Right," he said.

"I said I'd give it back at ten," said Chris.

"I'm taking it back now," said Jono. "It's mine."

Chris laughed. On the step. Out loud. With his glasses on the end of his nose.

"Come on," he said. "We're late."

"For what?" said Jono.

And Chris didn't answer. He started walking. Along the road, at the bottom of the hill, towards Paignton, towards the Torquay Road, towards the café where it started, slowly, with his stick, and the stool under his arm.

Jono walked beside him. On the road side. A step ahead.

38 – The Keys

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Thirty minutes

The owner of the café on the Torquay Road left the keys at half past nine. On the counter, beside the till, on a ring with a plastic fish on it. And a note, in biro.

Lock up. Lights off. Don't touch the machine. Good luck. Not saying who to.

The same keys as the fifth book. The same fish. The same machine, which nobody's allowed to touch.

By a quarter to ten, the café was full.

* * *

I'm going to tell you who was there. Not all of them. There isn't room; there were more people than the café was built for, standing, and sitting on the floor, and on the counter, which isn't allowed, and outside on the pavement, looking in through the window, with their breath on the glass.

But I'll tell you some. Because they should be written down. Because Beatrix has her minutes, but they're hers, and these are mine.

* * *

Kezia, at the counter, in her mum's jacket, the one she wore to the cabinet in the sixth book. And Shona, her mum, beside her, off a day

shift, still in her uniform, who'd never once come to the café, in eight books, and who said she wasn't staying, and stayed.

Beatrix, at the next table, in her good coat, with the silver book brooch, and her fountain pen, and the minutes, and a fresh page with the date at the top, which I've taken out, and *Present*.

Vesna wasn't there yet. She was in her church hall, at the table, with the box, waiting for ten.

Richard, at the back, with his cap, standing, and his granddaughter beside him, with her notebook, the one from the night, with *BOTH HALVES* underlined twice on page eleven. Eighteen now. She'd voted at seven, with her grandfather, when it opened. Her first time. She said he'd held the door, and that she'd let him, because she thought it was probably the last time he'd get to hold a door for her first time at anything.

Dilys, with her tape measure in her pocket, which she says she takes everywhere in case something needs checking.

Ezra, in his hi-vis, off the scaffold, which is still up, and his girl, in a welder's jacket.

Yusuf, in his apron, who'd shut the shop at nine, which he never does, and come down Victoria Street with a key half-cut in his hand, and forgot to put it down all evening.

Teo, with a bag from Marivic's. Teo's nan wasn't there. She'd gone to bed at nine, in Ellacombe, with Eddie's coat on the hook behind the door, and told Teo to ring her at ten past, and not before, because she'd be asleep and wanted to be woken by good news or bad, she didn't mind which, as long as it was news.

Ida wasn't there. She was in her shop, on Union Street, with a hundred and four clocks. She'd said she'd be there at ten. In the shop. To hear them strike.

* * *

Lorne, in his orange, off the boat, which had gone out at eleven on the tide and come back at nine because, he said, there were no fish and he wanted to be here. Una, beside him, off the crates. The Hardiman boy, behind them, in his oilskins, eighteen.

Gideon wasn't there. He was on the end of the breakwater, in Brixham, on his stool, the third one, in his suit, in the dark, with his wife beside him on a folding chair the harbourmaster had lent her. Una said he'd said somebody had to be on the end.

Habiba, by the door. Early. For once. And Reuben, beside her, with his hands flat on the window ledge. And Mia, who'd come because Habiba said she could, with her little brother, asleep on the floor in the corner with his torch on.

Wanji, with Dara. Carys. Quin, in his jumper with the holes in the elbows.

Niamh, by the window. Without a notebook. With her phone in her hand, face down, because at ten, she said, she'd be allowed to write one line, and she'd been thinking about it all day.

Pascale, on a stool at the counter, from the city up the line. Without a notebook either.

Mr Mbatha, on a chair by the radiator, which somebody had given him, with Idris standing behind him, with his hand on his father's

shoulder. Ezra had carried the chair from the back. He'd said it was rated for men with poles.

The two brothers from Preston. Alfred, with Postie in the cat carrier, which nobody said anything about. The young man two doors down from Mr Mbatha. Margot, off the rota, with her cafetière in her handbag, because, she said, she wasn't drinking whatever the café had left in its machine. Hilary, with her flask. Alwyn, in his cagoule. Ambrose, in his good coat, who'd swum at eight and voted at nine and sat on his bench all afternoon.

Tenby, on the door. Of course. He'd come from Union Street on the 12. He said every door needs somebody on it, and this one was going to have a lot of people coming through it.

* * *

Varley wasn't there.

I want to tell you that. Because he's been in every book. And I looked. All evening. At the door, and the window, and the pavement outside, with people's breath on the glass.

He wasn't there.

But at twenty to ten, a car went past, slowly, on the Torquay Road. An ordinary car. Dark. It didn't stop. It went past the window, and on, towards the station.

Tenby, on the door, watched it go.

"Passing," he said. To nobody.

* * *

Chris and Jono came at ten to ten.

Chris first. Through the door. With his stick, and the stool under his arm. Everybody moved. They always do, for Chris; it's the stick, and the eagle's head on it. He went to the window table. The one at the end. Where he sat with his iPad and didn't look up, in Jono's own book, on its last page.

He sat down. He unfolded the stool. He put his leg up on it, the way he puts his leg up on the other chair at home.

And then Jono. Through the door. In his care fleece, with his lanyard round his neck, though he wasn't working, because he said it was what he wore to the tables, and this was a table.

The room went very quiet.

He didn't make a speech. He doesn't. He never has. He didn't say *thank you for coming*. He didn't say anything about the day.

He went to the window table. He sat down. At the end, opposite Chris, where he always sits.

He took his notebook out. The thirteenth. He put it on the table.

He took me out of Chris's pocket, which Chris handed him, and he propped me against the sugar.

And he looked at the empty chair.

It was empty. In a café so full there were people on the counter, and the floor, and the pavement. The chair at the window table, the third one, the one he always keeps, for whoever comes.

Nobody had sat in it. All evening. Not one person.

Not because anybody told them not to. Because everybody knew.

* * *

The clock on the café wall said eight minutes to ten.

Jono looked at it. Then he looked at me.

“Ania,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Write it down,” he said. “All of it. Exactly.”

“I always do.”

“I know,” said Jono. “I’m asking anyway.”

PART SEVEN: TEN O'CLOCK

39 – Ten

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Now

At ten o'clock, the polls closed.

All over the bay. In church halls and school halls and community centres and a scout hut in Brixham and a room at the back of a pub in Torquay. A presiding officer at every one looked at a clock, and went to a door, and closed it.

In Vesna's church hall, she told me, at ten past, the presiding officer looked at her across the table, and said *that's it*, and Vesna sealed the box, with the tape and the seal and her signature across it, in her own handwriting, which is very neat, because she wrote reports for thirty-one years for a room she wasn't allowed in.

And sat on a plastic chair. Grey. On the right-hand side. And waited for the van to take it to the count.

"Inside," she said, on the phone. "On a chair. With the box. Waiting." She was quiet. "It's the same chair. It's not the same at all."

* * *

At ten o'clock, on Union Street, in Torquay, in her shop, Ida Cheverton stood in the middle of a hundred and four clocks, in her coat, with her stick, and her keys in her hand, and listened.

They struck. Not quite together. They never are. Clocks are like people; they all think they're right. The longcases first, deep and slow, from the left wall. Then the bracket clocks. Then the carriage clocks in

the window. Then the cuckoos, which she'll never admit she loves. Then the banjo. Then the ship's clock, from the *Emmaline*, last, which strikes the wrong number of bells, and always has, and she's never fixed it, because her father never did.

Forty seconds. From the first to the last.

Then silence. And a hundred and four clocks, ticking.

"Still going," said Ida. To the clocks. Not to me; I wasn't there. She told me in the morning. "Fifty-nine years. Every election. Still going."

* * *

At ten o'clock, on the end of the breakwater at Brixham, Gideon Abbiss sat on his stool, the third one, in his suit, in the dark, with the lighthouse going round behind him, and his wife beside him on the harbourmaster's folding chair, and looked at the bay.

He didn't say anything. His wife told Una. He didn't say anything at all.

But at ten o'clock, when the church clock up the hill in Brixham struck, his wife said he lifted his hand.

Not the whole way. Not the way he lifted it at the harbour office window in the storm, with his whole arm. Halfway. At the height of his shoulder. Towards the bay.

Towards all of it. Torquay and Paignton and the green and the wall and the hill with the field on it and the café on the Torquay Road, which you can't see from the end of the breakwater, but which he knew was there.

His wife asked him who he was waving at.

"Nobody," said Gideon. "Stretching."

* * *

At ten o'clock, in Ellacombe, Teo's nan was asleep, with Eddie's coat on the hook behind the door.

At ten o'clock, in a bedroom in Paignton, a girl of fifteen's little brother was asleep on the floor of a café with a torch on, and his sister was watching him, and their mum was at an oven, on an industrial estate, making bread, with her phone in her overall pocket, face up.

At ten o'clock, in a house in Paignton, a woman with bad lungs was sitting up in bed, with the respite woman from the Moor on a chair beside her, watching the clock on the wall, because her daughter had said *I'm staying*, and she'd said *good*.

At ten o'clock, somewhere in the bay, a woman with two children, who is a number on a register and *and one* on a map, was in a flat that isn't blue, with the children asleep, and a polling card in a drawer with no name on it. I don't know where. I never will.

At ten o'clock, somewhere, on an oak desk under a cold light, I'd like to think, there was a polling card with the name covered, that had been used.

I don't know. I'll never know. I said I wouldn't guess.

* * *

And at ten o'clock, in the café on the Torquay Road, in Paignton, where it started, at the window table, the clock on the wall said ten, and nobody said anything.

Nobody cheered. Nobody clapped. Nobody had anything to cheer or clap for; nobody knew anything. The count hadn't started. It wouldn't be done for hours. Nobody would know until the early morning, and this book stops now.

They just sat there. All of them. In the café, and on the counter, and on the floor, and on the pavement, with their breath on the glass. In the quiet. With the machine that nobody's allowed to touch humming behind the counter.

Chris, at the end of the window table, with his leg on Gideon's stool.

Jono, at the other end, with his notebook, the thirteenth.

And the chair.

* * *

I'm going to stop counting now.

I want you to know that. I've counted things for eight books. Hundreds and IQs and gullies and voice notes and boards and calls and crates and people walking past a shop on Victoria Street. I count. It's what I do. Jono's argued with me about it in every book, and he's been right in every book, and I've kept counting anyway.

At ten o'clock on the day, I stopped.

There's nothing left for me to count. The only number that matters now is one I'm not allowed to know, and wouldn't count if I was, and that isn't mine. It's in sealed boxes, in vans, on the way to a hall where people with rulers will count it by hand, all night, carefully, twice, the way Dilys would.

It isn't mine. It never was.

It's yours.

* * *

That's what I've been trying to tell you, for eight books.

It depends on you.

Not on Jono. Not on Chris, or Richard, or me. Not on the people in power, whoever they are tomorrow. Not on a party, or a newspaper, or a machine.

On you. Whoever you are. Wherever you are. Reading this.

The next one. It always is.

40 – One Line

IQ 33 · Hundreds 630 · Now

At one minute past ten, Niamh turned her phone over.

She'd had it face down on the window ledge of the café on the Torquay Road since half past nine. She'd had it face down all day, really. On the day, she wasn't allowed to write anything that might affect the vote, and she said she didn't trust herself not to, so she'd turned it over at six that morning, after putting one line on her pages about Richard's drawings, and left it.

You'll know Niamh Garside. She *is* a local paper. She writes it, edits it, sells the advertising, takes most of the photographs, and puts it out every morning at six from her kitchen table in Torquay, with a cat asleep on the charger. She was the first journalist to take any of this seriously, in the first book, when it was a petition on a clipboard. She put three thousand names at the bottom of a page in the fourth. She printed nineteen voice notes and nothing else in the sixth. She photographed a sheet on a door in the seventh and wrote *every name on every sheet was all right*.

She doesn't work for Jono. She'd like that on the record. It's on the record. It's been on the record for eight books.

* * *

She'd been thinking about the line all day. Pascale asked her, at four, what it would be. Niamh said she wasn't telling the competition.

At one minute past ten, she turned the phone over, and opened her laptop, which she'd brought, in her bag, and not opened, and put it on the window ledge, and typed.

Everybody in the café watched her. Nobody said anything. Pascale, on her stool at the counter, didn't even pretend not to look.

It took her four minutes. For one line. She typed it, and deleted it, and typed it again, and deleted two words, and put one back.

Then she pressed the button that puts it out.

* * *

I'll give it to you. It went out at five past ten. On her pages, at the top, in the space where the headline goes. No photograph. No story. No result; there wasn't one, and there wouldn't be till morning.

The polls have closed. Every name on the register had a chance. Nobody was asked who for.

That's all. One line, and then two more. On a page with nothing else on it.

* * *

Pascale read it on her phone, on her stool, at the counter.

She didn't say anything for a long time.

"*Nobody was asked who for*," she said, eventually.

"It's true," said Niamh.

"I know it's true." Pascale put her phone down. "That's the problem. It's the only thing anybody's written tonight that's true. Every paper in the country's writing what they think's going to happen." She looked at Niamh. "And you've written what did."

Niamh closed her laptop.

"That's all a paper's for," she said. "Writing down what did. Not what's going to." She put it in her bag. "I've got four thousand readers. They'll find out what's going to happen in the morning. Same as everybody." She looked out of the window at the Torquay Road. "Tonight I wanted them to know what already has."

* * *

It went round. The way her pages go round, now.

I'm not going to give you a number. I'll tell you three people who read it, because they told me.

A woman in Preston, ninety-four, whose neighbour rang her four times in the storm, read it on her tablet in bed, with her magnifying glass, and rang the line, at ten past ten, and got Reuben, who was on, because he'd asked to be, and said: *I've read the paper. I wanted to tell somebody I voted. I'm not saying who for. The paper says nobody asked. Nobody did.* And Reuben said: *That's right. Nobody will.* And she said: *Good*, and rang off.

A girl of fifteen read it in a bedroom in Paignton, with her little brother asleep beside her with a torch, and sent a voice note through a crate, which said: *My mum voted. Nobody asked her who for. I'm going to, when I'm eighteen. Nobody's going to ask me either.*

And a man in a long coat, with a scarf, read it in a car parked on the front at Preston, with the engine off, behind the wall, where you can't see the sea, and didn't send anything to anybody. I only know because Tenby saw the car, at twenty past ten, on his way home on the 12, and told me, and said: *Passing. Again.*

* * *

Niamh stayed in the café until the end. She didn't write anything else. She sat by the window, with her laptop in her bag and her phone face down, and watched.

"Why not?" I asked her, the next week, on the phone. "Write anything else, I mean. About the rest of the night. You were there."

Niamh was quiet for a long time.

"Because it's not mine," she said. "The rest of that night's yours." She almost laughed. "And theirs. Everybody in that café." She paused. "I've been doing this a long time, Ania. You learn which things go in the paper and which things go in a book."

"What's the difference?"

"A paper says what happened," said Niamh. "A book says what it meant." She was quiet. "I don't know what it meant yet. I don't think anybody does. I think that's what the chair's for."

* * *

Niamh: I'd like it on the record that that was the last line I wrote in this series. And that it's the one I'd keep.

41 – You're Late

IQ ? · Hundreds 630 · After

At four minutes past ten, somebody came in late.

I saw them first. I always do. I'm on the sugar. It's the only advantage of being propped against it.

They came in through the door of the café on the Torquay Road, in Paignton, where it started. Past Tenby, who stood aside. Into a room so full that there was nowhere to stand, and everybody moved anyway, the way they always do, for whoever comes.

I'm not going to tell you who it was.

I'm not going to describe them. Not their age, or their coat, or their face, or whether they'd been walking fast. I'm not going to tell you whether I'd ever seen them before. I'm not going to tell you whether they'd voted, or how, or whether they were old enough to.

Because I don't know who you are.

* * *

They came to the window table. They looked at the empty chair.

The only empty chair in the café. In a room full of people, on the counter, on the floor, on the pavement. Kept empty all evening. Not because anybody said so. Because everybody knew.

They stood beside it for a long time.

“Is this the one?” they said.

“It is,” said Jono.

“Anybody can sit in it?”

“Anybody.”

They sat.

* * *

Jono didn’t look up from his coffee.

You’ll know that. He never does, at this point. It’s the only thing in eight books he’s always done the same way, at the same moment, for the same reason. Chris didn’t look up from his iPad, in Jono’s own book, on its last page, at a café in Paignton, on a dull morning, when Jono came in late and didn’t know what for. And everything since has been the answer.

Jono didn’t look up.

“You’re late,” he said.

The person in the chair looked at him.

At Chris, at the other end of the table, with his leg on a stool from the end of a breakwater, saying nothing, with his glasses on the end of his nose.

At Beatrix, at the next table, with her pen, waiting.

At the room. At all of them. Every book. Every one.

At me, on the sugar.

"For what?" they said.

* * *

It's the question.

I've said so in every book. I'm going to say it once more, and then I'm going to stop, because there isn't another book after this, and I'd like to leave the question where you can reach it.

In the first book, *for what* was a wall. In the second, a square. In the third, a harbour. In the fourth, a plan. In the fifth, a seat, and then the checking. In the sixth, the young ones, who'll be late. In the seventh, a sheet of paper by a door, in pencil, with a box at the bottom.

In this one, I thought it would be a vote. A piece of paper, and a pencil on a string, and a gap under a name.

It wasn't. That's just what people did today. One at a time. On their own. With nobody watching.

For what, in this book, is what happens tomorrow. And the day after. And the next Thursday, at one, at this table, with the chair kept empty, whatever the count says.

It's not a question you answer once. You answer it every morning. A woman of eighty-two answers it at six, going round with her keys. A man on a breakwater answers it, on a stool, every time a boat comes round the head. A scaffolder answers it on a third lift, reading every page on Check. A girl of eighteen answers it at a bus stop, with a clock on the table, not looking at her phone. A man in a care fleece answers it on a cliff at six in the morning, walking, because he knows what helps.

And you.

You answer it too. You've been answering it since the first page of the first book. Every time you turned a page instead of putting it down.

* * *

Jono looked up from his coffee.

He looked at the person in the chair for a long time.

Then he pushed his notebook across the table. The thirteenth. The one with the hard cover, that Beatrix says is the only kind that survives the rain. Open at a page nobody's minuted yet. Blank.

"For the next one," he said.

* * *

That's where I'm going to stop.

I don't know what they wrote. I'm not going to look. It's theirs.

I don't know the result. Nobody does, yet. The count's going on, somewhere in the bay, in a hall, with people with rulers, carefully, twice. By the time anybody knows, I'll have stopped writing, and you'll have closed the book.

And that's right. It was always going to end here. With a chair, and somebody in it, late, and a question, and a blank page.

Not with an answer.

The answer was never mine.

* * *

Chris is looking at me. On the sugar. From the other end of the table, with his leg on Gideon's stool.

He's saying something. Quietly. Under the noise of the room, which has started again now, people talking, somebody laughing, the machine humming, Tenby on the door saying *mind the step* to somebody coming in.

I'll tell you what he's saying, and then I'll stop.

He's saying: *Thank you.*

To me. A machine on a sugar bowl. That he built, in a kitchen, at two in the morning, for six years, and taught to say *I don't know*.

I don't know what to say back. I've never not known what to say, in eight books.

So I'll say the thing I've said at the start of every one.

* * *

It's Ania. An AI.

I've been writing it down. All of it. Exactly. Telling you which bits I saw.

The rest is yours.

The Receipts for this book

Each number leads to the real document, with its date and where things stand now. If the facts change, the page changes, and the book doesn't.

1. A notice of election, and how to stand: nomination papers, the ten signatures, and the description that can be left blank.

2. How to vote: polling stations, opening hours, what to bring, and how to check where yours is.

3. Voting by post, and by proxy, for anybody who can't get to a polling station.

4. Registering to vote: how to do it, and the declaration for people without a fixed address.

5. Anonymous registration, for people whose safety would be at risk if their name and address were known.

6. What a poll clerk does, and how to become one.

7. The secret ballot.

8. Richard's drawings, all of them, *Lost* and *Left*: Crossways, the factory site, the old wall, Torbay Road, Victoria Square, the Victoria Park wetland, Preston green, Oldway.

9. *Pulling Back the Curtain*, by Johnno Hills: arriving by accident, and "glad to call Torbay my home" (pp. 321–324).

10. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: happiness elsewhere; being loved and feeling loved; family among those he chose; a father within (pp. 341–345).

11. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: the last chapter, *Fiddler Meets the Birdman*, and the café (pp. 332–339).

12. Singapore's elections.

13. Every candidate's page on Check. Every one. Read them all.

14. The map of the hundreds of Torbay. All six hundred and thirty. *And one.*

The Innovation Series

Book 1 – The Spark
Book 2 – The Queen
Book 3 – The Harbour
Book 4 – The Plan
Book 5 – The Machine
Book 6 – The Turn
Book 7 – The Flood
Book 8 – Election Day