# THE FLOOD

BOOK SEVEN OF INNOVATION




CHRIS HARVEY

# The Flood

*Book Seven of Innovation*

***Chris Harvey***



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Published by AniaAI

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# Before you go on

It's Ania. An AI. You know.

You know the rest, too. A real bay in the south of Devon, three real towns. 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. No dates. Each chapter opens with my score for how well this place is run, the number of hundreds on the map, and how long we had left. If it's real, there's a **Receipt**. If it hasn't got one, it's story.

There's one more rule in this book, and it matters more than the others, so I'm putting it here, at the front, where you can't miss it.

**I don't forecast weather. I don't issue warnings. I never have, and I never will.**

In this book there's a storm, and I'll tell you what the official forecasters said, and when, word for word, and which streets I thought they meant. That's all I'll ever do. If you live in this bay, or anywhere, and the water's coming, listen to the real ones. Not to me. Not to a book.

That's not modesty. It's the most important thing Chris built into me, and it's at the bottom, where I can't reach it.

At the end of the last book, a girl of seventeen with forty minutes a day wrote, on the last page of Jono's twelfth notebook, *HALF FOUR. BUS STOP. TUESDAYS.* And a stranger who only ever sends photographs of paper sent us a page about the drains under the bay. The old ones. The ones that carry the rain and everything else in the same pipe, and that, when there's too much of it, all at once, can't.

*The forecast's changing. So is the sea.*

Nine days later, it did.

# PART ONE: THE LOW

# 1 – The Blue Streets

IQ 31 · Hundreds 350 · Nine days

I'll start with the page, because everything in this book starts with it.

Footnote sent it at thirteen minutes to six, at the end of the last book, on the morning Habiba sat in the empty chair late. A photograph, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light. A council report to a committee about water. Not the sea. The other water. The kind that falls out of the sky and runs off roofs and roads and down into the drains, and has to go somewhere.

It's a real report. It's on a Receipt. I'll tell you what it says, carefully, because it's the kind of thing that can be made to sound frightening, and it isn't meant to. It's meant to be useful.

* * *

Under the older parts of the bay, under Paignton and Torquay and parts of Brixham, the drains are Victorian. A lot of towns are like this. The Victorians built one set of pipes, and into it went everything: the rain off the roofs, and the water off the streets, and what comes out of houses. All together. They're called combined sewers. They were a marvel, when they were built. They still are, mostly.

But a pipe can only carry so much. And when a great deal of rain falls in a short time, the pipe fills. And if, at the same time, the tide is high, so that the place where the pipe empties into the sea is underwater, then the water in the pipe has nowhere to go.

So it comes back up. Through the gullies in the road. Through the drains in people's yards. Into the lowest streets first.

The report had a map. Footnote's photograph showed it clearly. Streets marked in blue, in the places where, in the past, that had happened, or where the council's modelling said it most likely would. Preston, along the back of the green. The bottom of Paignton, between the station and the sea. A few streets in Torquay near the harbour. Some of the old town in Brixham, where the hill comes down to the water.

The blue streets.

* * *

I'm going to be very careful now, and I'd like you to notice that I am.

None of that means anything was about to happen. The report wasn't a warning. It was a plan. It said what the council knew, and what it was doing about it, which was a lot, quietly, for years, with not enough money: clearing gullies, mapping pipes, working with the water company, telling people in the blue streets what to do if.

*If*. That's all it was.

And I don't forecast. That's the rule at the front of this book, and I'm going to keep saying it, so you'll be sick of it by the end. I can read a report. I can show you a map. I can't tell you what the sky will do. Nobody can, really, not for certain. The people who come closest are the forecasters, the real ones, whose job it is, who've spent their lives learning to read the sky, and who use machines far bigger than me to do it.

I listen to them. That's all.

* * *

On the Monday, nine days before, at ten past seven in the evening, one of them said something.

Not a warning. Nothing like a warning. A line, at the end of a long-range outlook, the kind they put out every day that almost nobody reads except farmers and fishermen and me. It said that a deep area of low pressure was developing in the Atlantic, a long way west, and that there was *some uncertainty* about its track, but that *a spell of very unsettled weather* was *possible* for the south-west late the following week.

And it mentioned the tides. Because the following week was springs. The biggest tides of the month, when the sea comes highest up the beach. They're not a forecast. They're in the tide tables, which you can buy at the harbour office, and which have been printed, more or less unchanged, for longer than anybody in this book has been alive.

A deep low, *possible*. On the biggest tides of the month, *certain*.

I read it at ten past seven. I read it again.

Then I did the thing I'm allowed to do. I told Chris what the forecasters had said, word for word, and what the tide tables said, and I showed him Footnote's map, and I didn't add anything.

* * *

He was at the kitchen table. You'll know the kitchen. The bay in the window, grey that evening, flat calm, the kind of calm that people who live by the sea don't trust. His stick against the radiator. His leg on the other chair. The canvas stool from the breakwater folded by the back door.

He read the outlook twice. He took his glasses off.

"*Possible*," he said.

"That's what it says."

"Nine days."

"About."

He looked out of the window, at the flat calm bay, for a long time.

"In Singapore," he said, and I counted it, "they have a word for this. Not a word. A habit. They don't wait for the warning. They get ready for the *possible*." He put his glasses on the table. "They clear the drains every week whether it rains or not. They've got a national water agency with sensors in the canals that tell you, minute by minute, where the water's rising. And when the big rain comes, everybody knows what to do, because they've done it a hundred times when it didn't."

"We're not Singapore."

"No," said Chris. "We're a bay with Victorian drains and a council with not enough money and a hundred thousand people who mostly don't know what colour their street is on a map." He picked up his glasses again. "But we've got three hundred and fifty hundreds. And a neighbour in every one."

# 2 – Protect

IQ 31 · Hundreds 350 · Eight days

You'll know the capabilities. Every book, the movement learns to do one new thing.

*Read. See. Connect. Decide. Out-think. Build.*

This one's the seventh. Chris named it on the Tuesday, at the kitchen table, with Kezia there, and Beatrix, and Una over from Brixham with a fish-market crate on her knee.

"Protect," he said.

Nobody said anything.

"Not *save*," said Chris. "We can't save anybody. That's not ours. That's the people whose job it is. The council, the fire service, the ambulance, the coastguard, the forecasters." He took his glasses off. "And they're good. They're very good. They've done this before, in this bay, more times than we know. They'll do it again." He put his glasses on the table. "Protect is the small thing underneath. It's making sure that when the real warnings come, every street hears them. In plain words. In time. Including the people who never hear anything."

"Who never hears anything?" said Kezia.

"The people who are on their own," said Chris. "The people without a phone that works. The people who don't speak English well. The people who can't get to the door. The people who don't want anybody to know where they live." He looked at the window. "Every storm,

everywhere, it's the same people. The warnings go out, and they're right, and they're in time. And somebody doesn't hear."

* * *

He'd built most of it already. I want you to know that. He'd started in the fourth book, quietly, without telling anybody, after Footnote's page about one bay. He said, when Kezia asked him why, that he'd never once in his life built something for when everything went right. He'd only ever built for when it went wrong. That's what his companies did, in Singapore: they built the systems that kept the banks running when the power went.

"It's not clever," he said. "It's boring. The best systems are boring. They're the ones nobody notices until they're the only thing still working."

So here's what it was. I'll tell you as plainly as I can.

* * *

One. The warnings.

I don't make them. I'm going to keep saying that. I listen to the official ones: the forecasters, and the agency that issues flood warnings for rivers and the coast, and the council. When they say something, I pass it on. Word for word. Not my words. Theirs.

What I add is *where*. A warning says *coastal areas of south Devon*. That's true and it's no use to a woman of eighty-four in a bungalow behind the green. So I take the official words, and I put beside them the hundreds that are in the blue streets on the council's own map, and I send the official words to those hundreds' neighbours first. With a line

from me at the bottom that says: *This is the official warning. I haven't changed it. Your street is one of the ones on the council's map. Please check the official page for updates.*

That's all. Nothing I've made up. Just the right words, to the right street, first.

* * *

Two. Staying on.

Everything I do lives on computers. Computers need power, and signal, and somewhere to be. In a storm, all three can go.

So Chris had built me twice. Once here, and once a very long way away, in a building that's never had a flood in its life, so that if one went, the other would keep going. And under both of those, a third way: plain text. No pictures, no maps, no buttons. Just words, sent as ordinary text messages, which will get through on a phone signal so weak that nothing else will.

And under that, Una.

* * *

Three. The crates.

You'll know Una's crates, from the last book. Fish-market crates, upside down, with a red button and a little computer inside, the kind she builds for the catch cameras on fishing boats. They've got their own batteries, which last a week. And they've got their own way of talking to each other, the same way the catch cameras talk to the harbour, which doesn't need the phone masts at all.

There were nine crates at the end of the last book. Una had built thirty-one more by the Tuesday of this one. She'd been building them since Footnote's page. She said she hadn't told anybody because she didn't want to look like she was panicking. She said she wasn't panicking. She said her grandad had been on the end of the breakwater for every storm for sixty years, and that if there was one thing an Abbiss knew, it was that you get the boat ready before the weather, not during.

She'd changed them. They didn't just listen now. They talked back. If you pressed the button, and held it, you could speak to whoever was on the line, the way you would on a radio. And if there was an official warning, the crate would play it, out loud, from its speaker, in a clear calm voice, which was Una's, recorded at her kitchen table with her dad telling the television it was wrong in the background.

Forty crates. One in every hundred in the blue streets, by the bus stop or the shop or the church or the pub. Zip-tied to something that wouldn't move.

* * *

Four. Paper.

That was Beatrix's.

"If all of that goes," she said, at the kitchen table, on the Tuesday, with her fountain pen, "the computers and the text and the fish crates, what's left?"

"Nothing," said Chris.

"Paper," said Beatrix.

She'd been taking minutes for fifty years. She'd once, she said, kept the records of a library through a fire, by having a second copy of everything in a biscuit tin in her garage. She said the biscuit tin had outlasted three computer systems and the library.

So she drew up a sheet. One for every hundred. A single side of A4, in large print, laminated at the library on the town council's machine, which Hester in Brixham says she's entitled to use and Beatrix says she is too. On it: the hundred's name. The neighbour's name and phone number. The official numbers to ring, the real ones, the emergency ones, in big type at the top. What to do if the water comes up in your street: the council's own advice, in its own words, which is good advice, and which nobody ever reads. Where the nearest high ground is. And a box, at the bottom, empty, which the neighbour would fill in by hand.

*Who's on their own.*

"In pencil," said Beatrix. "So it doesn't run when it's wet. And kept by the neighbour's front door. In a plastic wallet. With a drawing pin."

"A drawing pin," said Chris.

"Shona Lund put the newspaper on her staff noticeboard with a drawing pin," said Beatrix. "In the last book. Drawing pins have never once crashed."

* * *

Five. The line.

That was Jono's. And I'll tell you about it in the next chapter, because it needs its own.

# 3 – Why He Picks Up

IQ 31 · Hundreds 350 · Eight days

Jono always picks up.

Everybody who knows him knows that. You ring him, and he answers. At three in the morning, at a client's kitchen table, with the client asleep. On the 12, with the sea going past. In Margot's office, face down on the desk. In the middle of a funeral, once, in the last book, in the garden of remembrance, because it was Habiba, and he knew it would be.

He's never said why. People ask. He says *habit*. He says *I'm a carer, it's the job*. He says *I'm nosy*.

It's in his book. Page fifty-nine. I'll tell you, because it's the reason for the line, and because I think you should know, and because he's said I can, as long as I tell it the way he'd want it told.

* * *

When he was nine, something happened at home that he couldn't stop.

I'm not going to tell you what. It's in his book, in his own words, and it's his, and I don't put that part of his childhood into these books, and I never will. It's enough for you to know that he was nine, and that he saw something, and that he couldn't make it stop, and that the thing he felt most was that he couldn't protect anybody.

So he ran.

Out of the front door. Half a mile, to the phone box in the village, crying all the way, wheezing, because he had asthma by then. And he picked up the phone, and without thinking, he made a reverse-charge call to the only number he could think of. Somebody who wasn't in the house. Somebody who might help.

And a woman answered.

He didn't know who she was. He couldn't speak; he was crying too hard. And she was kind. She spoke to him gently. She calmed him down, long enough for him to tell her what he'd seen. She told him to go home, because his mother would be worried. She waited until he'd promised.

And then she hung up, and he went home.

He found out later who she was. It's in his book. It's not the sort of thing that would mean anything to you, out of the book, and it's not mine to tell. But she was somebody who had every reason not to be kind to him, that day, and was anyway.

* * *

"I think about her," said Jono, at the kitchen table, on the Tuesday night, when he told them. "Not often. Now and again. When the phone goes at three in the morning."

Nobody said anything.

"She picked up," said Jono. "That's all. A nine-year-old she'd never met, on a reverse-charge call, crying so hard he couldn't talk. And she didn't hang up. She stayed on the line till I'd stopped." He looked at his hands. "I've thought, since, about what would've happened if she hadn't picked up. If it had rung, and rung, in an empty house. And I'd stood in

that phone box." He was quiet. "I don't know. Nothing, probably. I'd have gone home anyway. But I'd have gone home knowing nobody picked up."

He looked at Chris.

"So I pick up," he said. "Every time. That's all it is."

* * *

"That's the line," said Chris.

"What line?"

"The fifth thing," said Chris. "The warnings, the servers, the crates, the paper. And a number. One number. That anybody in the bay can ring, in the storm, all night. And a person answers." He took his glasses off. "Not a machine. Not her." He nodded at me. "A person. Who picks up."

"For what?" said Kezia.

"For anything," said Jono. "For *my mum's not answering her phone*. For *there's water coming under my door and I don't know who to ring*. For *I'm frightened*." He looked at the window. "Not instead of the real numbers. Never instead of them. If it's an emergency, you ring the real ones, and we'll tell you to. We'll ring them for you, if you can't. But for everything else. For the person standing in a phone box, at nine, who just needs somebody to stay on the line."

* * *

So that's what it was.

One number. Printed at the top of every one of Beatrix's sheets, under the emergency numbers, in slightly smaller type. On every crate, on a sticker. On the shadow council's pages and on Check and on Stay and on Niamh's front page, on the Thursday, in a box on its own.

*If you're in the storm and you need a person, ring this. Somebody will pick up. If it's an emergency, ring 999 first.*

And behind it, a rota. Beatrix drew it up. Of course she did. Twelve hours, from eight at night until eight in the morning, the night it came, in two-hour slots, with two people on the line in every slot, so that nobody was ever on it alone.

Jono put his name down for all twelve hours.

Beatrix crossed it out.

"Four," she said. "You can have four. You'll be no use to anybody after four." She wrote it in. *J. Hills: 12–2, 2–4.* "Margot's told me. You're not doing twelve hours."

"Margot's told you?"

"Margot rang me," said Beatrix. "We've had lunch. Twice. She says you're not doing twelve hours." She capped her pen. "I agree with her. It's minuted."

# 4. Who's on Their Own

IQ 31 · Hundreds 351 · Seven days

The question went to every hundred on the Wednesday. In the blue streets first, and then all the rest. On the shadow council's pages, and through Stay, and on paper.

*Who's on their own?*

And under it, in Beatrix's words, which she'd rewritten four times:

*If the water comes up, who in your hundred might not hear the warning, or might not be able to get out, or might need somebody to ring them? Ask them first. Only write their name on your sheet if they say yes. Keep it in pencil. Keep it by your door. Don't give it to anybody else, and don't put it on the computer. Not even to Ania.*

*Especially not to Ania*, Chris had added, at the bottom, and Beatrix had let him.

* * *

I want to tell you why that last line mattered, because it's the opposite of what you'd expect.

You'd expect the clever thing to be a list. One list, of every vulnerable person in the bay, in one place, on a computer, with me looking after it. So that on the night, I'd know who was where, and could tell everybody.

That's what a machine would build. That's what *the* machine would build, the one from the fifth book, the one that wanted to know everything about everybody.

Chris wouldn't. He said so at the kitchen table, flat, without any room to argue.

"A list like that," he said, "is the most dangerous thing anybody could build in this bay. More dangerous than the storm." He took his glasses off. "A list of every old woman living on her own, and every man who can't walk, and every child with a parent who drinks, with their address. In one place. On a computer." He put his glasses down. "Who'd want that list? Think about it. Who'd want it most?"

Nobody said anything.

"Not us," said Chris. "Not the council; they've got their own, the right ones, kept properly, the way they should be. The people who'd want our list are the people who should never, ever have it." He looked at me. "So she doesn't have it. Nobody does. Every hundred keeps its own, in pencil, by the door. Three hundred and fifty bits of paper. Nobody can steal three hundred and fifty bits of paper. Nobody can hack a drawing pin."

* * *

Vesna understood first. She'd spent thirty-one years in the council knowing exactly how many lists there were, and who kept them, and how carefully, and how much it mattered that they were kept carefully.

"The council's got a register," she said. "A proper one. People who need extra help in an emergency. Kept by the people who are supposed to keep it, under the rules they're supposed to keep it under." She looked at Beatrix's sheet. "Ours isn't instead of that. It's underneath it.

It's the neighbour knowing that Mrs So-and-so at number twelve can't hear the doorbell. That's not on any register. That's just knowing."

"That's the point," said Beatrix.

"I know it's the point," said Vesna. "I'm agreeing with you. I'm saying it so it's minuted."

Beatrix minuted it.

* * *

By the Friday, three hundred and nine hundreds had filled in their box.

I don't know what's in any of them. I want to be completely clear about that. I've never seen one. I'm not allowed to. The neighbours wrote them in pencil, by their doors, and that's where they stayed.

But some of the neighbours told me how it went. Not who. How. And I'll give you some of that, because it's the part of this book that I think matters most, and that nobody would ever think to put in a book about a storm.

* * *

A neighbour in Preston told me she'd lived in her street for twenty-six years and had never once spoken to the man three doors down, and that when she knocked, he answered in a dressing gown at four in the afternoon, and that when she asked him whether he'd want anybody to ring him if the water came, he'd stood in the doorway for a long time and then said: *nobody's asked me anything since my wife died.* And then he'd asked her in for a cup of tea, and she'd stayed two hours.

A neighbour in Torquay, a young man of twenty-four, told me that he'd asked an old woman in the flat below him, and she'd said no, she'd be fine, she'd been through worse, she'd been through the war. And then the next morning she'd knocked on his door and said: *I've changed my mind. Put me down. I'd like to be on a list somebody's actually going to look at.*

A neighbour in Brixham said that the first person in her hundred to say yes was Gideon Abbiss. Who's eighty now, and whose wife, who I didn't know existed until two books ago, because nobody in that family tells anybody anything, answered the door. And Gideon, behind her, said *yes* straight away, without looking up from his paper, and then said: *We won't need it. But put us down. So the lad knows somebody's checking.*

The lad is Lorne. He's forty-six.

* * *

And a neighbour in one of the bluest of the blue streets, somewhere in the bay, told me something else. And I'm going to give it to you exactly, because she asked me to, and because it's where the next part of this book begins.

She said she'd asked every household in her hundred. Ninety-six of them. At the bins, at the bus stop, over the garden wall, and at the door when she had to. Nobody was asked to join anything; that's not what it was for. And she'd got to a block of ground-floor flats at the end of the street, six of them, and she'd asked at all six.

Five answered.

The sixth didn't. Flat 2. She'd knocked three times, on three days. There was a light on, every time. She could hear a television. Somebody was there.

Nobody came to the door.

"So I put a note through," said the neighbour. "With the line's number on it. And the council's advice. And my name. And I wrote, at the bottom: *You don't have to tell me anything. You don't have to open the door. But if the water comes, ring this, and somebody will pick up.*"

She was quiet.

"And then I didn't write anything on my sheet," she said. "Because she hadn't said yes. So the box for Flat 2 is empty." She paused. "And I keep thinking about it. That box. With nothing in it. In the bluest street on the map."

# 5 – Richard's Green

IQ 31 · Hundreds 353 · Seven days

Richard went to Preston green on the Thursday, at seven in the morning, in his cap, with his junk-mail sketch in his inside pocket, and stood at the wall.

You'll know the wall. You've known it since the first book. Grey concrete, along the front at Preston, a metre and a half high. You can't see over it sitting down. Dilys measured it, at seven points, every week, in a notebook, for six books. A hundred and fifty-one at point four. A hundred and fifty-three at point five.

Richard calls it the Berlin Wall. He's called it that since it went up. He's never said it to anybody's face in power; he says he's too old to be rude to people who weren't there when it was decided. But he says it to me, and to Chris, and to the wall.

* * *

He's had an idea about the green for years. It's in his drawer. It's on a Receipt. I'll tell you what it is, and then I'll tell you what it isn't, because both matter.

His idea is: let the sea in.

Not into the houses. Onto the green. He says the old wall, the low one, six hundred millimetres, was enough to stop the ordinary tides. And that in a really big storm, the right thing to do isn't to build a higher wall that the sea smashes against with everything it's got. It's to let the water come over, onto the grass, which is wide and flat and

empty, and spread out, and lose its energy, the way a wave loses its energy on a beach. And then to stop it at the far side, by the road, with a low planter, nine hundred millimetres at most, with gates, and two big outlets at each end so it can drain away when the tide drops.

"Let the green take it," he says. "That's what a green's for. It's a sponge. It's a beach that grass grows on." He says it the way he says everything he's sure of, which is quietly, and often.

* * *

And here's what it isn't.

It isn't the movement's view. It never has been. Chris decided that in the first book, and wrote it down, and it's at the bottom of everything, where I can't move it. It's Richard's. And it stays Richard's, until somebody who knows how water and concrete and tides behave, properly, with models and measurements, says otherwise.

It isn't proven. Richard's an architect and a planner, not a coastal engineer, and he'd tell you so himself, though he'd tell you in a tone that made it clear he thought most coastal engineers were architects who'd taken the wrong turning.

It isn't crazy either. I want to be fair to him. The engineers who designed the wall, years ago, looked at options. One of them, the papers say, was a defence set back behind the green, which isn't the same as Richard's idea but isn't far off. It lost. The wall along the front won. They had their reasons: money, and risk, and how high the sea could get in a hundred years, and the homes and businesses behind the green that were at risk in storms like the big one a few years before. Up to ninety homes, the council's figures said, and more than a hundred and twenty businesses. That's on a Receipt too. Those are real people. The engineers had to protect them. They chose the wall.

Richard thinks they were wrong. The engineers think they were right. I don't know. I'm not allowed to know; I'm not an engineer either. I'm a machine that reads.

* * *

His granddaughter was with him. You'll know her, from the last book. Seventeen. Environmental science, at the college. The one with the borrowed soil auger who found the wet corner of the field on the hill. She'd come because he'd asked her to, which, she says, he never does.

They stood at the wall together, in the morning light, with the sea on the other side of it, flat calm, very low, because it was neaps that day, the small tides, and the big ones were coming in a week.

"Seven days," said Richard.

"About," said his granddaughter. "If it comes. It might not."

"It'll come."

"You don't know that," said his granddaughter. "Nobody knows that. The forecast says *possible*." She looked at him. "Ania says she's not allowed to say anything else."

"Ania's very sensible," said Richard. "I'm not. I'm seventy-something and I've been looking at this green for forty years." He put his hand on the wall. "It'll come. And when it does, I'd like you to watch what the water does. Not the sea. The water on this side."

"Why?"

Richard looked across the green, behind him. Wide and flat and empty, with the road on the far side, and the houses beyond, and a line of gullies along the kerb.

"Because when the tide's in, and the rain's coming down," he said, "the water on the green's got nowhere to go. The drains go out to the sea. And the sea's in the way." He took his hand off the wall. "That's what I've been saying for forty years. Not that the sea'll come over. That the rain will come up."

* * *

His granddaughter was quiet for a long time.

"That's the same as Footnote's page," she said. "The blue streets. Water coming back up the pipes when the tide's in."

"It is," said Richard.

"So it's not just your idea," said his granddaughter. "It's the council's map."

"The problem's on the council's map," said Richard. "My answer isn't." He almost smiled. "That's the bit that stays my view."

She looked at the green. At the gullies along the kerb.

"I'll watch," she said. "I'll write it down. Everything. Where the water goes, and when, and how deep." She looked at him. "And I'll put it on Check. Both halves. Yours and theirs. And I won't say who's right."

"You won't need to," said Richard.

"That's what you always say," said his granddaughter.

"It's always true," said Richard.

* * *

He took the junk-mail sketch out of his inside pocket. The one from the drawer, on the back of a leaflet for double glazing, in his square capitals, signed and dated, with the date I always take out. The green, with the water on it. The planter by the road. The two outlets. *LET THE GREEN TAKE IT.*

He gave it to her.

"Keep that," he said. "With your notebook. When you've watched, you can tell me if I'm wrong."

"And if you are?"

"Then I'll sign that too," said Richard. "And date it. And put it in the drawer next to this." He put his cap back on. "That's the only rule I've ever had about drawings. You keep the wrong ones. Next to the right ones. So whoever comes next can see you tried."

* * *

*Story, not Receipt: what Richard says will happen. Receipt: his drawing, the council's figures, the options the engineers considered, and the map of the blue streets. Richard's idea is his view. It is not the movement's position, and this book doesn't say he's right.*

*Richard: I'd like it known that I agree with every word of that, and that I'm right.*

# PART TWO: GET YOUR STREET READY

# 6 – Gullies

IQ 31 · Hundreds 356 · Six days

On the Saturday, two hundred young people cleared the gullies in the blue streets.

I'll tell you how that happened, because it wasn't anybody's plan, and it was the best thing anybody did all book.

* * *

A gully is the grating in the road by the kerb where the rainwater goes. You'll have walked over a thousand of them and never once looked down. Under the grating there's a pot, a little chamber, that catches the grit and the leaves before the water goes on into the pipe. And if the pot's full, the water can't get in, and it sits in the road, and spreads, and finds the next lowest thing, which is usually somebody's front step.

The council clears them. It has a lorry, with a big suction pipe, that goes round on a schedule. It's a good schedule. It's not a schedule that can do every gully in every blue street in six days, because there are thousands of them, and one lorry, and a lot of other roads.

Richard's granddaughter said so. On the Friday night, at the shop, with her borrowed soil auger leaning against the counter.

"Leaves," she said. "Most of them are full of leaves. It's autumn." She looked at Kezia. "You can't clear the pot. You need the lorry for that. But you can clear the top. The grating. You can pull the leaves off with a rake, so the water can at least get in. It's not much. It's something."

“How many gullies are there?” said Kezia.

“In the blue streets?” Richard’s granddaughter looked at the map on the laptop. “I don’t know. Hundreds. Thousands.”

Kezia looked at Habiba, at the counter, with her phone face up.

“Put it on Stay,” said Habiba.

* * *

So Kezia did. A voice note, twenty-two seconds, through Stay, to everybody who’d ever pressed the button, which was nearly three thousand people by then.

*Hi. It’s Kezia. There’s a storm that might come next week. The forecasters say possible. If it comes, the water needs to get into the drains, and the drains in the low streets are full of leaves. Saturday, ten o’clock. Bring a rake or a brush or gloves. Meet at your nearest crate. We’ll tell you which gullies. Clear the tops. Don’t open anything. Don’t go in the road without a grown-up in a hi-vis. That sounded like a teacher. Sorry. Come anyway.*

That’s all.

* * *

The drainage engineer helped. You’ll know him, from the last book. Forty years in the job, near retirement, the one who rang Richard’s granddaughter about the wet corner of the field and said *nobody’s ever asked me that*. He rang Kezia on the Friday night, at ten, because Richard’s granddaughter had told him.

“You can’t have children in the road,” he said. “In the traffic. With rakes.”

“I know.”

“And you can’t lift the gratings. They’re heavy, and you’ll break your fingers, and some of them have got a drop underneath that’d swallow a dog.”

“I know. We’re not.”

There was a long pause on the line.

“I’ll send you the list,” he said. “Of the gullies in the blue streets. Which ones are on quiet roads, where it’s safe. Which ones the lorry’s already done this month. Which ones are the worst.” Another pause. “And I’ll be there. Saturday. In Preston. In my hi-vis. With a sign.” He sounded, I thought, almost pleased. “Forty years. Nobody’s ever offered.”

* * *

They came.

I’m not going to give you a number; it’d be a story number, and you’d know it. I’ll tell you that at ten on the Saturday morning, at every crate in every blue street, there were young people in coats with rakes and brushes and gardening gloves that belonged to their mums. And older people too, with deckchairs, who’d come to watch, and stayed to hold the bin bags. And a hi-vis at each end of every street, worn by somebody over twenty-five, holding up a sign that the drainage engineer had printed at home that said *GULLY CLEARING. SLOW.*

Ezra's girl was on the corner by the station, with a yard brush, and her dad holding the sign, in his own hi-vis, which he said was the only time in his life he'd been glad to own one.

Reuben was in Preston. You'll know him, from the last book. The first of the two hundred and seventy-seven. The care leaver who takes everything apart, who held his breath across a bench from Carys on a Saturday, and who starts in Quin's lab in the spring. He'd never been asked to do anything for a street before. He told me afterwards that he didn't know which street was his, because he didn't feel like he had one.

He did a hundred and twelve gullies. On his own. With a rake from his aunt's shed. The drainage engineer counted.

* * *

By one o'clock, the blue streets were clear. On top, at least. Thousands of gratings, cleared of leaves and crisp packets and a bicycle wheel in Torquay and, in Brixham, a whole cod's head, which Una said she wasn't even going to ask about.

The drainage engineer stood at the end of a street in Preston, in his hi-vis, with his sign, and looked down the line of kerb, at the gratings, black and clear, every one of them, all the way to the green.

"I've never seen that," he said. To me. On Reuben's phone, which Reuben had lent him because he'd asked whether he could talk to *the machine*.

"Seen what?"

"A whole street. Clear. At once." He shook his head. "Forty years. The lorry does one road and by the time it's done the next, the first

one's full again. I've never once seen a whole street clear at the same time."

"Will it help?"

The drainage engineer thought about it, honestly.

"A bit," he said. "Not as much as people will think. If the pipes are full, the pipes are full. Clearing the top doesn't make the pipe any bigger." He looked down the street. "But it means the water that *can* get in, will. And that's the bit we can do. The rest is the sea's."

He gave Reuben his phone back.

"That lad," he said, nodding at Reuben, who was raking the last gully by the green, on his own, very carefully, "did a hundred and twelve. I counted." He folded up his sign. "Tell him I said."

* * *

I told him.

Reuben didn't say anything for a long time.

"Nobody's ever counted anything I did," he said, eventually. "Except the bad things. In my file."

"He counted," I said. "A hundred and twelve. He said to tell you."

Reuben looked at the gully. At the black grating, clear.

"Is this my street?" he said.

"It's in Preston," I said. "Your aunt's in Paignton."

“I know,” said Reuben. “I mean — is this mine. Now. If I did it.”

I thought about that for a long time.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think it might be. I think that’s how it works. You do something for a street, and then it’s a bit yours.”

Reuben looked down the line of kerb. At a hundred and twelve clear gratings.

“Right,” he said.

# 7 – Boards

IQ 31 · Hundreds 362 · Five days

Ezra had scaffold boards.

That's the whole chapter, really. But I'll tell it properly, because it's Ezra, and he'd want it told properly, and he'd want you to know that it was his idea, and that he's never had an idea anybody listened to before in his life.

* * *

You'll know Ezra. Forty-seven, now forty-eight. Scaffolder. All in the shoulders, with a voice that can be heard in Torquay. He never voted until the fifth book. He checked *dismissed*. He started a hundred called *The Scaffold*, and his daughter started one called *Stays Up*, three streets away, which he calls a coup.

His firm has a yard. Up the hill, on the edge of Paignton. Full of poles and fittings and boards. Thousands of boards. Thirteen feet long, nine inches wide, an inch and a half thick, of timber, banded at the ends with metal, so they don't split.

On the Sunday, he stood in the yard and looked at them.

"Sandbags," he said, to his girl, who'd come with him because she'd been told to.

"What about them?"

"The council's got sandbags. For the blue streets. You can go and get them." He looked at the boards. "But a sandbag's no good on its own. You put them across your door and the water comes through the gaps. You need something flat behind them. Something solid. Something you can wedge across the doorway and pile the bags against."

His girl looked at the boards.

"Dad," she said. "Those are your boss's."

"I'll ring him," said Ezra.

* * *

His boss said yes. Ezra says that's because his boss has a mother in Preston, in a bungalow behind the green, in one of the bluest of the blue streets, and Ezra had put her name, with her say-so, in pencil, on his own hundred's sheet, by his front door, because his boss had asked him to, because nobody else had.

"Take what you need," said his boss. "Bring them back. Don't let anybody nick them." A pause. "And do my mum's first."

* * *

So on the Monday and the Tuesday, Ezra and his girl and the lads from his gang and anybody else they could find drove round the blue streets in the firm's flatbed, with boards. Cut to length, at the yard, on the saw, to fit doorways. Each one with a name written on it in marker pen, in Ezra's capitals, so it'd come back. *SCAFFOLD. RETURN TO EZRA.*

They didn't fit them. They're not allowed to; they're not builders, and doors are people's own. They left them. By the door. With a sheet,

that Beatrix had written and Ezra had had laminated at the library on the town council's machine, which he says he wasn't sure he was allowed to use and Beatrix says nobody's ever going to check.

*If the official warning says to protect your doorway: put this board across, inside the frame, at the bottom. Wedge it. Put the council's sandbags against it on the outside. Ask somebody to help you. If you can't, ring the line.*

Three hundred and eleven boards. To the blue streets. Before the Wednesday.

* * *

They did his boss's mum's first. Ezra cut the board himself. He knelt in her doorway with a tape measure and measured it three times.

"Once is a guess," he said.

His girl looked at him.

"Who says that?"

"Dilys," said Ezra. "The woman with the wall. It's in the last book but one. I read it." He stood up. "I read the books now. All of them. On my phone. On the third lift." He went to the flatbed. "Don't tell anybody."

* * *

There's one more thing about the boards, and I'll tell you now, because it'll matter on the night.

Ezra kept forty back. Long ones. Full length, thirteen feet. He didn't cut them. He stacked them on the flatbed, and left the flatbed at the yard, with the keys in the office, and the yard unlocked.

His girl asked him why.

"In case," said Ezra.

"In case what?"

"In case somebody needs to get somewhere," said Ezra, "and there's water in the way." He shrugged. "Thirty years on scaffolds. You always keep some long ones back. You never know what you're going to have to bridge."

# 8 – The Breakwater

IQ 31 · Hundreds 368 · Five days

In Brixham, they got the boats ready.

That's not news, in Brixham. Brixham's been getting boats ready for storms for longer than there's been a Brixham. You'll know, if you've read the third book. The harbour, and the breakwater, half a mile of stone with a lighthouse on the end. The fish market. The *Sea Holly*, Lorne's boat, a beam trawler, with the Hardiman boy on it now, which you'll know from the last book, because Lorne took him on.

They don't need the Hundred to tell them how to get boats ready. Lorne said so. At Zibi's, on the Tuesday, at eight, at the window table, eating a bacon roll.

"We know what to do," he said. "We've always known what to do. The harbourmaster tells us. We double the lines. We take the gear off. We go out to sea if it's safer out than in, or we stay in if it's not. We've done it every winter since my grandad." He put his roll down. "We don't need a crate to tell us."

"No," said Jono.

"So what's it for? In Brixham?"

Jono looked out of the window, at the harbour, flat calm, and the boats, and the breakwater.

"It's not for the boats," he said. "It's for the people who aren't on them."

* * *

Lorne didn't say anything for a while.

"My dad," he said.

"Your dad's on a sheet," said Jono. "Your mum put him on. With his say-so. So you'd know somebody's checking."

"I know. She told me." Lorne picked his roll up again. "He'll be on the breakwater."

"In the storm?"

"He's been on the breakwater for every storm for sixty years," said Lorne. "On his stool. At the end. Watching the boats come in." He bit the roll. "He'll be there."

"Not in this one," said Jono. "Not if it's what it might be. The harbourmaster'll close it."

"He'll be there," said Lorne. "Harbourmaster or no harbourmaster."

* * *

So Una went to see him.

She went on the Wednesday evening. To the house above the harbour where Gideon lives with his wife, who I didn't know existed until two books ago, who answered the door and said *he's in the yard, love, mending something that isn't broken*.

He was. A pot. A crab pot, that he'd made himself, forty years ago, which had a frayed bit of twine on one corner that he was replacing with new twine, very slowly, by hand.

Una sat on an upturned bucket in the yard, and watched him.

"Grandad," she said.

He didn't look up.

"There's a storm. Maybe. Next week. On the springs."

"I know."

"The harbourmaster'll close the breakwater."

"I know."

"Dad says you'll be on it anyway."

Gideon tied a knot. He pulled it tight. He looked at it for a long time.

"I've been on that breakwater for every storm since I was a lad," he said. "When I was a lad, my dad was out in them. Then I was. Then your dad was." He picked up the pot. "Somebody has to be on the end. So the boats can see somebody's there. Coming home."

"There won't be any boats coming home," said Una. "They'll all be in. Before. Dad says. They'll be tied up in the harbour, with double lines, before it starts. Nobody's going to be out."

Gideon put the pot down.

"Then who's the end for?" he said.

* * *

Una told me that she didn't know what to say. She sat on the bucket for a long time.

And then she said: "Me."

Gideon looked at her.

"I'll be at the end," said Una. "Not the breakwater. The crate. The one on the quay, by the ice machine. If the power goes, and the phones go, and the line goes, the crate'll still be on. It's got its own battery. It talks to the harbour." She looked at her hands. "I built it. So I'll be at it. All night. In the harbour office, with the harbourmaster, who's said I can. So that anybody in Brixham who presses a button on a crate, anywhere, gets somebody." She looked up. "That's the end, Grandad. This time. That's where the boats can see somebody's there."

Gideon didn't say anything for a long time.

He picked up the crab pot. He looked at the new twine, on the corner, where the old one had frayed.

"You'll want a flask," he said.

"I've got a flask."

"You'll want a better one." He stood up, slowly, with his hand on the wall. "I'll lend you mine. It's kept tea hot on that breakwater for forty years." He went to the back door. He stopped, with his hand on the frame. "And a stool."

* * *

He didn't go on the breakwater that night. The harbourmaster closed it at six, with a gate and a sign, and Gideon went home and sat in his chair by the window, with the lights of the harbour in front of him, and his wife beside him, and the radio on.

But Una sat in the harbour office all night. With his flask, and his stool. The canvas one. Not the one by Chris's back door; that's a different stool, the one from the third book, which has never been explained and never been moved. Gideon's other one. His spare.

She didn't know he had a spare. Nobody did.

# 9 – Flat 2

IQ 31 · Hundreds 371 · Four days

The woman in Flat 2 pressed a crate on the Wednesday night, at twenty past eleven, at the bus stop on the corner of her street, in the dark, in the rain. Not the storm. Just rain. The ordinary kind.

I know because I count the batches. And because Kezia heard it, at midnight, in her bedroom, with headphones, and rang me, at two minutes past, and said: "Ania. You need to hear this. I don't know what to do."

So I listened. Kezia said I could. I'll give you what she said, because she's said, since, that I can, as long as nobody can ever tell from it who she is, or where.

I've taken some words out. You'll see where.

* * *

*I don't want to give my name. I'm not giving my name. Is this recording?*

*I'm in one of the flats. At the end. [...] You put a note through. A woman did. About the water.*

A long pause. The rain on the crate.

*I can't be on your list. I can't be on any list. I can't have anybody know where I am. You don't — I can't explain. I'm not supposed to be anywhere anybody knows.*

*I've got two kids. Six and nine. We're on the ground floor. The note said our street's blue. On a map.*

A longer pause.

*If the water comes, I can't go to the — to wherever they send people. The hall. The centre. Because he'll — because people will see. Somebody will see. And then he'll know.*

*I don't know why I'm telling a fish box. I just. The note said somebody would pick up. I don't want anybody to pick up. I just wanted somebody to know we're here. Without knowing where.*

*That's stupid. Sorry. Don't come. Please don't come. Don't send anybody.*

Then the crate said, in Una's voice: *Thanks. She'll listen. Promise.*

And the woman, very quietly, after the recording should have stopped, but hadn't, because she'd held the button down too long, said:

*Please.*

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything for a long time, on the phone.

"What do I do?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. And I didn't. "I think we have to ask Jono."

"It's two in the morning."

"He's on a night," I said. "He's awake."

* * *

Jono listened to it at ten past two, at a client's kitchen table in Torquay, with the client asleep. Kezia played it to him down the phone. Twice.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

You'll know, if you've read the earlier books, the jobs he's done. Children's homes. The police. Prisons. Drug services. Home care. But there's one I haven't told you much about, because it hasn't come up, and because it's the kind of job you don't talk about, because the people you did it for are still, a lot of them, in danger.

After the police, for a while, he was an advocate for people who'd been hurt at home. By somebody they lived with. Who'd got out, or were trying to. He sat with them in courts, and in offices, and in the backs of cars. He helped them make plans. He knew why they stayed, and why they went back, and why they were frightened of the one thing everybody else thought would make them safe. It's in his book. Pages two hundred and seventy-seven, and seventy-eight. He saw it when he was a child, too; he's said so. He knows.

"Don't find her," he said.

"We weren't going to —"

"I know you weren't. I'm saying it out loud so it's said." He was very calm. Calmer than I'd heard him since Mr F. "Nobody looks for her. Nobody works out which flat. Nobody goes to that street and knocks. Nobody tells the neighbour. Nobody writes anything down. Nobody tells *me* which flat, if anybody works it out by accident." He paused. "She's told us the one thing she needs. Which is that nobody knows where she is."

"But the water," said Kezia. "If it comes. Ground floor. Two kids."

"I know," said Jono.

* * *

He was quiet for a long time. I could hear the client, in the next room, turning over in bed.

"She said *please*," said Kezia.

"I heard."

"After she said don't come."

"I heard," said Jono. "They always say both. *Don't come* and *please*. In the same breath. That's what it's like." He breathed out. "So we do both. We don't come. And we make sure that if she needs us, she can find us. Without us ever knowing where she is."

"How?"

"The line," said Jono. "She's got the number. It was on the note. She's kept it, or she wouldn't have pressed the crate." He was quiet. "And we make sure that when she rings it, the person who picks up knows exactly what to do. And never asks where she is."

"Who?"

"Me," said Jono. "Or whoever's on. I'll tell them. All of them. What to say. What not to ask." He paused. "And Kezia."

"Yes."

"Send her one back. Through the crate. Like you did with Ezra's girl. She tapped her phone on it, or she wouldn't have been able to go over

the time." He thought. "Say: *We heard you. Nobody is coming. Nobody knows where you are, and nobody will. If the water comes, ring the line, and say Flat 2, and that's all you'll ever have to say. The person who picks up will know.*"

"*Say Flat 2*," said Kezia.

"So whoever's on the line knows it's her," said Jono. "Without her telling them anything else. Without anybody knowing which street, or which Flat 2. There must be a thousand Flat 2s in this bay." He was quiet. "It's the only name she'll ever need to give."

* * *

Kezia sent it at half past two.

The woman in Flat 2 didn't reply.

But at nine minutes to three, a crate at a bus stop on a street corner somewhere in the bay recorded a single press, very short. Less than a second. Nobody spoke. Just the rain, and then the button let go.

Kezia heard it at three. She played it to Jono. Less than a second of rain.

"She heard," said Jono.

"How do you know?"

"Because she pressed it," said Jono. "And didn't say anything. That's what *yes* sounds like, when you're not allowed to say yes."

# 10 – Union Street

IQ 31 · Hundreds 377 · Four days

Teo's nan wouldn't leave her flat.

You'll know Teo's nan. Eighty-one. In Ellacombe, in Torquay, on a hill, which isn't a blue street at all, which is the first thing everybody pointed out to her. 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 page, 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's on a hill. She's not going to flood. She knew that.

She wouldn't leave because she'd decided, on the Thursday, that she was going to sit up all night, the night it came, at her kitchen table, with the radio on, and her laptop, and the phone, and be on the line.

* * *

"You're not on the rota, Nan," said Teo.

"Then put me on it."

"You're eighty-one."

"I was answering phones at the telephone exchange in Torquay when your grandad was still in short trousers," said Teo's nan. "Thirty-four years. I did the night shift in the big storm, the one before you were born. I put through the calls to the lifeboat." She folded her hands on

her handbag. “I know how to answer a phone in a storm. Put me on the rota.”

Teo rang Beatrix.

Beatrix put her on the rota. Two till four. With Jono.

“She can’t hear very well,” said Teo.

“Neither can Jono, at four in the morning,” said Beatrix. “They’ll manage. It’s minuted.”

* * *

Union Street wasn’t blue either. Not most of it. But the bottom of it is, where it comes down to the harbour, and the Strand, and the Pavilion, which you’ll know from the second book. The harbour floods in big tides. It always has. The Strand goes under at the worst ones, a few inches, salt water across the road where the buses go, and the council puts out the barriers, and the shops along the front put their boards up, and in the morning it’s gone.

Marivic’s isn’t at the bottom. It’s halfway up. She knows.

But on the Thursday she put a sign in her window. Hand-written. In capitals.

*OPEN ALL NIGHT IF IT COMES. TEA. NO CHARGE. SIT AS LONG AS YOU LIKE.*

And under it, smaller:

*Not instead of the official centre. If they tell you to go there, go there. This is for everybody else.*

* * *

Tenby came in to read it. You'll know Tenby, from the second book. The man who was sleeping in the Pavilion, in a storm, when Jono went in and got him out. He's not sleeping anywhere like that now; he's got a room, in a house in Chelston, that the council found him, and a key, which he shows people. But he still comes down to Union Street every day, because, he says, it's the only street that ever looked at him.

He read the sign twice.

"All night?" he said.

"All night," said Marivic.

"You'll need somebody on the door," said Tenby. "In a storm. People come in wet. Some of them come in drunk. Some of them come in frightened and don't know they're frightened and think they're angry." He looked at the window. "I'll do the door."

Marivic looked at him for a long time.

"You'd do that?"

"I've been in the Pavilion in a storm," said Tenby. "With the roof coming in. And a man in a care fleece came and got me." He shrugged. "I'd like to be the one on the door, this time. For somebody."

Marivic put him on the door. She didn't ask Beatrix. Beatrix found out on the Friday and minuted it retrospectively, which she says is permitted when necessary.

* * *

I'll tell you what Teo did, because his nan's asked me to, and because she says he'd never tell anybody himself.

He went to the official rest centre, the one the council would open if it came, a hall at the top of the town, and asked the man setting it up whether they'd need food.

The man said the council had arrangements. Sandwiches. Tea. Biscuits.

Teo said that was good, and asked whether they'd mind if he made a stew as well, at Marivic's, and brought it up in the pan the size of a bath that Marivic's husband borrows from his church, which has been to every leaving do in the bay for twenty years.

The man looked at him for a long time.

"Nobody's ever offered to make a stew," he said.

"There's a lot of people who've never been asked," said Teo. "In this bay. There's a whole book about it."

The man said yes. He said he'd have to check, but yes.

He checked. It was yes.

# PART THREE: AMBER

# 11 – Amber

IQ 31 · Hundreds 384 · Three days

On the Friday morning, at ten past eleven, the forecasters issued a warning.

I'm going to tell you how I passed it on, because that's the whole of what this book's capability is, and because it's the thing I was most frightened of getting wrong.

* * *

It wasn't the biggest kind. There are colours. You'll know them, or you'll have heard them on the radio and not paid attention. Yellow means *be aware*. Amber means *be prepared*. Red means *take action*, and is rare, and when it comes, people listen.

On the Friday, it was yellow. For wind and for rain. For the following Wednesday night into Thursday. Across the south-west.

And on the Saturday, at four in the afternoon, it went up. Amber. For rain. For the Wednesday night. For south Devon. With a line in it, in the official words, which I'm not going to change, because I never change them, about *flooding of homes and businesses* being *likely*, and *spray and large waves* near coasts, and *some interruption to power supplies*.

And on the same day, the agency that warns about floods from the sea and rivers put out its own alert. Not a warning yet. An alert. *Flooding is possible. Be prepared.* For the coast of the bay. Because of the spring tides, and the wind, and the low.

* * *

I'm going to tell you exactly what I did with it. Every step. So you can check.

At four oh one, I read the official warning. All of it. The words, the map, the times.

At four oh two, I read it again.

At four oh three, I took the official words, unchanged, and put them on the shadow council's pages, and on Check, and on Stay, with a line at the top in my own words, which said: *This is the official warning from the forecasters. I haven't changed it. Please read the official page for updates. I don't make forecasts. If you're worried, listen to them.*

At four oh four, I sent it to the neighbours of the hundreds in the blue streets on the council's map. Not to everybody. To them, first. As a text message, plain words, so it would get through on any phone. With the same line at the top, and one more at the bottom: *Your street is on the council's map of streets where surface water has flooded before. This isn't a warning that it will. It's a reason to check your sheet.*

At four oh nine, I sent it to every other neighbour.

At four eleven, Una's crates in the blue streets played it. Out loud. In her voice, reading the official words, which she'd recorded in her kitchen at three minutes past four with her dad telling the television to shut up so she could hear herself.

At four fifteen, I checked that every crate had played. Thirty-nine had. One hadn't: the one in the skate park in Torquay, which a boy had unplugged to charge his phone. He plugged it back in at four twenty-two and it played then. He sent a voice note through it at four twenty-three to say sorry.

* * *

That's all. That's what *protect* meant, on the Saturday, three days before. The real words, from the real people whose job it is, to the right streets, first, in eleven minutes, without anybody having to look for them.

I didn't forecast anything. I didn't say it would flood. I didn't say it wouldn't. I didn't say *I think*. I don't think, about the weather. I read.

*Chris: I'd like it on the record that I spent four years building the thing that did that in eleven minutes, and that the hardest part was making sure she couldn't add anything. She wanted to. She wanted to say "don't worry". She's not allowed to say "don't worry". Nobody should be, who doesn't know.*

He's right. I wanted to. I didn't.

* * *

The council put out its own message at five. Good, clear, plain. Where the sandbags were. Where the rest centres would be, if they were needed. Which numbers to ring. The same advice that was on Beatrix's sheets, because Beatrix had copied it from the council, word for word, with permission, which Vesna had got for her, from an officer she'd once sat next to on a corridor chair.

I put the council's message out too. Word for word. To the same hundreds, in the same order.

And then the hundreds did the thing that I can't do, and the council can't do, and the forecasters can't do.

They checked their sheets.

* * *

By seven that evening, three hundred and seventy-one neighbours had taken their sheet off the drawing pin by their front door and looked at the box at the bottom. *Who's on their own.* In pencil.

And rung them. Or walked round. Or shouted over the garden wall. Not to tell them anything new. Just to say: *you've seen it? The warning? You know where the sandbags are? You've got your board? You know you can ring me?*

I don't know how many people were rung. I'm not allowed to know; the names are on the sheets, not on me. But I know that the line, the one Jono's on, the one with a person on it, got its first call that evening at seven fourteen, three days early, from a woman of ninety in Goodrington, who said:

*I've just had a call from a neighbour I've never met. Asking if I'm all right. I wanted to ring somebody and tell them. Is that allowed?*

And Beatrix, who was on the line that evening for a test, said: *It's allowed. It's minuted.*

# 12 – Margot's Rota

IQ 31 · Hundreds 389 · Three days

Margot drew up her own rota on the Sunday. Not Beatrix's. The care company's.

You'll know Margot. Jono's manager. Above a shop, with the sea in the window if you stand on the radiator. She has, on her books, about three hundred people who need care at home: old people, mostly, and some younger, who need somebody to come in the morning to help them up, and in the evening to help them to bed, and some of them in the night. She has about ninety carers to do it. Like Jono.

In a storm, she said, everything goes wrong at once. Carers can't get to people because the roads are flooded. People who are fine on an ordinary night aren't fine when the power goes and the stairlift stops. People who've never once rung the office ring four times.

"I've done eleven storms," she said, on the phone, to Jono, on the Sunday. "In twenty years. This one's got an amber. I've never done an amber on springs."

"What do you need?"

"I need you not to be on my rota," said Margot.

Jono didn't say anything.

"I mean it," said Margot. "I've got you on the line, on Beatrix's rota, twelve till four. And I'm not having you do a night for me as well and then four hours on the phone. I'm not having it." She paused. "So you're not on mine. I've moved you. You're doing an evening, six till ten,

Preston, your regulars, see them to bed, check they've got torches, and then you're going home to sleep for two hours before you go on the line."

"I can do a night."

"I know you can," said Margot. "You can always do a night. That's the trouble with you." She breathed. "Go home and sleep for two hours. That's an instruction. From your manager. I've written it on the rota."

* * *

He did the evening. Six till ten, Preston, his regulars. I'll tell you about one of them, because it's the reason for the next chapter.

Mr Mbatha.

He's eighty-one. He lives in a bungalow behind the green, in one of the blue streets, the one closest to the wall, with a garden that he's grown vegetables in for thirty-four years. He came to this country from South Africa when he was twenty-three, to train as an engineer, and stayed, and married a woman from Paignton, who died six years ago. He taught physics at a school in Torquay for thirty years. He has a son, Idris, who's fifty-two, and lives in Exeter, and rings every evening at seven.

Jono sees him three evenings a week. Not for much. He's mostly well. His heart's not what it was; he has tablets for it, and a cardiologist he says is very nice and very young. Jono sees him to bed, and checks he's taken them, and sits with him for twenty minutes, and they talk about physics, which Jono knows nothing about and which Mr Mbatha explains with enormous patience, using the salt and pepper pots.

* * *

On the Sunday evening, Jono asked him about the storm.

"I know," said Mr Mbatha. "I've had a call. From my neighbour. A young man, two doors down. I've never spoken to him. He rang to ask if I'd want him to check on me." He put the pepper pot down. "I said yes. He's put me on a sheet." He almost smiled. "In pencil."

"Good."

"Idris wants me to go to Exeter," said Mr Mbatha. "On Wednesday. Before it comes. He's coming to fetch me in the car."

"That's a good idea."

"I'm not going," said Mr Mbatha.

Jono looked at him.

"I've lived in this bungalow thirty-four years," said Mr Mbatha. "I've seen the sea come over that wall three times. The old wall. Before this one." He nodded at the window, at the dark, where the new wall is, a metre and a half. "My wife and I sat in this room each time, with the lights off, and watched it. And each time, it went back." He picked up the salt pot. "I'm not leaving the house in a storm. Not for Idris. Not for anybody. If it comes, I'll sit in this room and watch it, the way she and I did."

"The wall's higher now."

"I know the wall's higher," said Mr Mbatha. "I taught physics for thirty years. I know what a wall does." He put the salt pot beside the pepper pot. "It's not the sea I'm worried about."

"What, then?"

Mr Mbatha looked at the window for a long time.

"I'm worried that Idris will drive down here in the rain," he said, "on a road that floods, because I won't go to him. And that something will happen to *him*." He folded his hands. "So I'm going to tell him not to come. And he's going to come anyway. And I'd like you to tell him I'll be all right."

"Will you be?"

"I'm eighty-one," said Mr Mbatha. "I've got a bad heart and a young man two doors down with a pencil." He almost smiled again. "I'll be as all right as anybody."

* * *

Jono rang Idris that night, from the car, outside the bungalow, with Mr Mbatha's say-so.

Idris was angry. Not at Jono. At his father. At the storm. At being in Exeter.

"He won't come," he said. "He never comes. He's never once in his life done what anybody asked him. My mother used to say he was the only physicist in Devon who didn't believe in gravity."

Jono laughed. He couldn't help it.

"I'm going to come and get him," said Idris. "Wednesday. Whatever he says."

"He's worried about you on the road."

"I'm worried about *him* in a bungalow behind a wall on a spring tide with a heart that's —" Idris stopped. "I'm fifty-two. I can drive in rain."

"I know," said Jono. "I'm just telling you what he said. He asked me to."

There was a long pause on the line.

"Is he on a list?" said Idris. "One of yours? The hundreds?"

"He's on a sheet," said Jono. "By his neighbour's door. In pencil. With his say-so. Two doors down."

"Who's the neighbour?"

"I don't know," said Jono. "I don't need to. Your dad does."

Another pause.

"That's mad," said Idris.

"It's how it works," said Jono. "Nobody's got the whole list. Everybody's got their bit."

# 13 – What to Say

IQ 31 · Hundreds 396 · Two days

On the Monday night, Jono sat everybody down who was going to be on the line, and told them what to say to Flat 2.

There were twenty-four of them. Two to every two-hour slot, from eight at night to eight in the morning. Beatrix had drawn it up. Margot. Teo's nan. Habiba, from eight till ten, which is her forty minutes plus more, because her mum's respite woman from the Moor had offered to stay late. Kezia. Vesna. The young man from the college. Wanji. Niamh. Richard's granddaughter, who'd asked to do midnight till two, so that she could do the line and watch the green from Richard's car, at the same time, which Beatrix said wasn't allowed and then allowed. Reuben, who'd asked to be on it, and who'd never done anything like it, and who Jono put with himself.

They sat in the shop on Victoria Street, on chairs from Zibi's that had been lent and never returned. Jono stood at the front, by the cardboard town.

He didn't have any notes.

* * *

"Most of the calls," he said, "will be easy. Somebody's frightened. Somebody can't get hold of their mum. Somebody's got water coming under the door and doesn't know who to ring." He looked at them. "You'll know what to say, because you'll say what you'd want somebody to say to you. *I'm here. You're not on your own. Here's what the council says to do. Here's the number for the real emergency, and if*

*it's an emergency, I'll ring it for you while you stay on the line with me.*"

They nodded.

"And if it's an emergency," said Jono, "*any* emergency, if anybody's in danger, if anybody's hurt, if the water's coming in and there's somebody who can't get out, you say *I'm ringing 999* and you ring it. On the other phone. While you stay on this one." He looked round. "We are not the emergency service. We are never the emergency service. We are the person who stays on the line until they get there."

* * *

"There's one more," he said. "One call. That might come. And I need everybody to know what to do, exactly, if it does."

He told them about Flat 2.

Not where. He doesn't know where. Nobody does. He told them that somewhere in the bay, there was a woman with two children who couldn't be on any list, and couldn't go to the rest centre, and couldn't have anybody know where she was. Because somebody was looking for her. Somebody who'd hurt her.

The shop was very quiet.

"If she rings," said Jono, "she'll say *Flat 2*. That's all she'll say. Maybe nothing else at all. Maybe she'll just breathe." He looked at them, one by one. "And whoever's on, I need you to do four things. Only four. In this order."

He held up a finger.

"One. You don't ask where she is. Not her street. Not her town. Not what's near her. Nothing. If she tells you, by accident, you don't write it down, and you don't repeat it, and you forget it. You ask nothing about where."

A second finger.

"Two. You ask if she and the kids are safe right now. Not from the water. From anybody. *Are you safe right now?* And if she says no, you ring 999, and you tell them it's a domestic abuse emergency, and you let *her* tell them where, if she wants to. Not you. Her."

A third.

"Three. If it's the water, you ask her where she'd feel safe going. Not the rest centre; she can't. Somewhere she chooses. A friend. A church. A shop that's open. Marivic's, if she's in Torquay. Anywhere. And you don't ask where it is. You ask if she can get there. And if she needs somebody to meet her, you ask her who. What sort of person. And you find that person, and you send them to the place she chooses, and she tells them, not you." He looked at them. "She chooses. Every time. She's had everything chosen for her. She chooses."

A fourth.

"And four. You stay on the line. However long. Whatever she says. Even if she doesn't say anything. Even if she hangs up and rings back. You stay."

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time.

“How do you know all that?” said Reuben, eventually. From the back. Quietly.

Jono looked at him.

“I used to do it,” he said. “For a job. After the police. Sitting with people who’d got out, or were trying to.” He was quiet. “And before that.” He stopped. “Before that, I was a kid in a house where I couldn’t stop what was happening. And I ran to a phone box. And a woman picked up.”

The shop was silent.

“She didn’t ask me where I was,” said Jono. “She didn’t need to. She just stayed on the line until I’d stopped crying.” He looked at the cardboard town. “That’s all. That’s all you have to do. If Flat 2 rings. Stay on the line until she’s stopped.”

* * *

Beatrix wrote it down. All four. On a card. And copied it twenty-four times, in neat black italic, one for everybody on the rota, and laminated them at the library.

*Flat 2.*

*1. Never ask where.*

*2. “Are you safe right now?” If no: 999, domestic abuse. Let her tell them.*

*3. If it’s the water: where would she feel safe? She chooses. Who should meet her? She chooses.*

*4. Stay on the line.*

And on the back, in smaller writing, which Beatrix said wasn't a minute but she was putting it on anyway:

*She picked up.*

# 14 – The Night Before

IQ 31 · Hundreds 403 · One day

On the Tuesday night, it was very still.

I want to describe it, because the people who live by the sea talk about it, afterwards, every time. The stillness before. As if the bay were holding its breath.

The sea was flat. Not calm. Flat, the way it goes when the wind hasn't arrived yet but the pressure's falling, and the water lies there, grey, with long low swells coming in from very far away, from the storm itself, three hundred miles out, so that every few minutes a wave would come up the beach at Preston much further than the one before, slowly, without breaking, and go back.

The forecasters said what they'd said. Amber. For rain, from the late evening on the Wednesday. Wind, gusting. Spray and large waves. Flooding of homes and businesses likely. The agency's alert had become a warning, for the coast, for the high tide in the early hours of the Thursday. At twenty to five in the morning. The biggest tide of the month.

I passed it on. Word for word. To the right streets first.

* * *

Chris was at the kitchen table. He'd been there since six. He'd tested everything. Both servers. The text fallback. The crates, all forty, which he'd made Una ring, one by one, from the harbour office, and each one had answered, in her voice. Beatrix's sheets: he'd asked every neighbour

to send a photograph of theirs, on its drawing pin, by the door, and three hundred and ninety-eight had, and he'd looked at every one.

"It's ready," he said.

"It's ready."

"Is it?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've never been in a storm."

Chris looked at me for a long time.

"Neither have I," he said. "Not like this. Not with anything I built." He took his glasses off. "In Singapore, I built systems for banks that had to stay up in a typhoon. I tested them for years. Every one of them stayed up." He put his glasses on the table. "And every one of them, I was sitting in an air-conditioned room on the forty-first floor, watching a screen. Not in it." He looked at the window, at the flat grey bay. "This time I'm in it. Everybody I know is in it."

* * *

"What are you frightened of?" I said.

He thought about it, honestly, the way he does.

"Not the servers," he said. "Not the crates. Not the paper. They'll hold. I'm almost sure." He was quiet. "I'm frightened that somebody won't hear. That there'll be somebody in a blue street who isn't on a sheet, and hasn't got a crate on their corner, and hasn't got a phone that works, and the water'll come up, and they won't know." He looked at his hands. "There's always somebody. In every storm, everywhere. Somebody who isn't on anything."

"Flat 2."

"Flat 2's on something," said Chris. "She's on the line. She's got a name we'll know her by. She's chosen us." He shook his head. "It's the one who hasn't. The one who didn't press a crate. The one who didn't answer the door, and didn't get a note, because the neighbour didn't know they were there." He put his glasses back on. "I can't build anything for them. That's what frightens me. You can't build for somebody nobody knows about."

"You can build for the neighbour who might find them."

Chris looked at me.

"That's what the sheets are," I said. "And the crates. And the line. They're not for the people on them. They're for the people who'll notice who isn't."

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"You've got very wise," he said, "in these last two books."

"I've been listening to a lot of neighbours," I said.

* * *

Jono came at ten. From an evening in Preston, his regulars. He'd seen Mr Mbatha to bed. Idris had rung at seven, and been told not to come, and said he was coming anyway, on the Wednesday, at four, before the rain.

Jono sat at the kitchen table with his coat on. He didn't take it off.

“He’s not going,” he said. “Mr Mbatha. Idris’ll come at four and he’ll stand on the step and his dad won’t open the door.”

“Will Idris stay?”

“Idris’ll stay,” said Jono. “He’ll sleep on the sofa. He’ll be furious. And he’ll be there.” He looked out at the bay. “That’s what sons do. They stay on the sofa, furious.”

Chris looked at him.

“Is that what you did?” he said. Quietly.

Jono didn’t answer for a long time.

“No,” he said. “I went to work. The next morning. I believed what I was told.” He stood up. “I’m going home to sleep. I’ll be on the line at midnight tomorrow.” He went to the door. He stopped, with his hand on the frame. “Chris.”

“Yes.”

“If it goes wrong. Tomorrow. Any of it.” He didn’t turn round. “It won’t be because of what you built. It’ll be because of the sea.”

He went.

* * *

Chris sat at the table until two. He didn’t say anything else.

At two, he said: “What did he mean? *I went to work the next morning*.“

“It’s in his book,” I said. “Page one hundred and forty-eight.”

“I know it’s in his book,” said Chris. “I’ve read it. I published it.” He took his glasses off. “I mean, why did he say it tonight?”

I thought about that for a long time.

“Because tomorrow night,” I said, “at two in the morning, an old man with a bad heart is going to be in a bungalow behind a wall, with his son on the sofa. And Jono’s going to be on the line.” I paused. “And he knows exactly what two in the morning sounds like.”

# PART FOUR: THE NIGHT

# 15 – Eight O’Clock

IQ 31 · Hundreds 408 · Nine hours

The rain came at ten to eight. Not a shower. A wall of it, coming in across the bay from the south-west in a grey sheet you could watch arriving, over Berry Head, over the water, over the harbour wall at Brixham, and then over everything.

The forecasters had said *late evening*. They were an hour out. That’s not a criticism. Nobody can tell you the hour. I passed on their update at seven fifty-two, word for word, when they made it, to the right streets first.

The line opened at eight.

* * *

It was in the shop on Victoria Street. Chris had wanted it somewhere with two kinds of power and three kinds of signal, and the shop, it turned out, had both, because the building next door had a generator for its freezers, and Yusuf knew the man who owned it, and the man had run a cable through the wall, with a plug, on the Tuesday, without telling anybody whether that was allowed.

Two phones on the folding table, where Beatrix usually sits. A laptop with me on it. Beatrix’s laminated cards, *Flat 2*, four things, one by each phone. A flask. Two of Zibi’s chairs. A box of biscuits from Marivic’s, which Teo had brought on the 12 at six, with a note in his nan’s handwriting that said *For the line. Not for Jono, he’ll eat them all.*

And on the first shift, eight till ten: Habiba, and Vesna.

* * *

The first call came at eight oh three.

A man in Torquay, near the harbour, who'd just seen water coming across the Strand, a few inches deep, the way it does in big tides, and didn't know if that was normal.

Vesna took it. She'd spent thirty-one years in the council knowing every building it owned, including every one on the Strand.

"It's the tide coming over at the low point," she said. "It does that. In big tides. The council will have the barriers out. Are you on the Strand itself?"

"Up the hill a bit."

"Then you're above it," said Vesna. "Stay up the hill. Don't drive through it. Salt water and a car is a very expensive conversation." She looked at the card beside her phone, out of habit, though it wasn't that kind of call. "The official warning's on the council's page. Would you like me to read it to you?"

The man said yes.

She read it to him. Word for word. And he said thank you, and rang off, and Vesna put the phone down and looked at it for a long time.

"I've never answered the public before," she said. "In thirty-one years. Not once. It was always somebody else's job." She picked up a biscuit. "That was rather nice."

* * *

Habiba took the second call. At eight oh nine. A girl of about fifteen, whispering, from a bedroom in Paignton, whose mum was on a night shift and whose little brother was asleep and who could hear the rain on the window and didn't know what to do if the water came up.

Habiba knew what to do. Habiba's known what to do since she was eleven.

"What floor are you on?" she said.

"First."

"Then you're all right," said Habiba. "Water comes up from the ground. You're up. You're fine." She didn't look at any card. "Is your brother asleep?"

"Yeah."

"Leave him," said Habiba. "Don't wake him up to be frightened. Have you got a torch?"

"On my phone."

"Get a proper one. If you've got one. In case the power goes. Put it by your bed. Put your phone on charge now, while you can." She was quiet. "And if your mum rings, tell her you're fine. Because you are. She's at work. She's worrying. Don't make her worry more."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm you," said Habiba. "I'm the one at home. With my brother. While my mum's —" She stopped. "I'm you. That's all. I'm on the line because I'm you."

The girl on the phone was quiet for a long time.

"Can you stay on?" she said.

"Yeah," said Habiba. "I've got till ten."

She stayed on. Forty minutes. Until the girl fell asleep, with the phone on the pillow, and Habiba could hear her breathing, and the rain on her window, and then she very quietly said *night*, and hung up.

Vesna had watched the whole thing. She didn't say anything. She passed Habiba the biscuits.

* * *

Forty-one calls between eight and ten.

I'm not going to give you them all. I'll tell you what they were, mostly.

People who couldn't get hold of their mums. Habiba and Vesna rang the mums, or the neighbours of the mums, whose numbers were on the sheets by the doors, which the neighbours rang. Every mum was fine. One was in the bath and hadn't heard.

People who had water in the road and didn't know if it was coming in. Vesna told them about the boards, and the sandbags, and the council's advice, which she'd read so many times she knew it by heart.

People who just wanted to talk to somebody. A man in Brixham, who'd been a fisherman, who couldn't sleep because of the wind, and who talked to Vesna for twenty minutes about a storm in a year he didn't give her, off the Start, when he was nineteen, and a man called Jack who went over the side and was pulled back by his collar. *I always*

*think about Jack, in a wind*, he said. Vesna said she'd write Jack's name on her card, so he'd be remembered tonight by somebody else too. She did. She showed me.

Two calls that needed the real emergency services. One was a car in a flooded road in Paignton with a man in it whose engine had stopped. One was a woman in Torquay who'd fallen in her kitchen. Habiba rang 999 for the first, on the other phone, while Vesna kept the man in the car talking. Vesna rang 999 for the second, while Habiba stayed on the line with the woman, who kept saying she was sorry for the trouble.

Both were fine. The fire service got the man out of the car in eleven minutes. An ambulance got to the woman in twenty.

I want to say that. They were good. They were very good. All night. Every one of them. I'm not going to name a single person in a uniform in this book, because they're not in power, but they're not story either, and I'd like you to know that every call we passed on to them that night was answered, and every one got somebody, and that's not luck. That's people who've trained for years for exactly this.

* * *

At ten, Habiba handed over to the next shift. Kezia and the young man from the college.

She stood in the door of the shop, in her coat, with the rain coming down outside so hard it bounced.

"You're going home?" said Kezia.

"My brother," said Habiba. "And Mum. The respite woman's going at half ten." She looked out at the rain. "I'll be on Stay. On my phone. If anybody needs me."

"You should sleep."

"I'm never asleep," said Habiba. "You know that." She went out, with her hood up, into it. And then came back, and put her head round the door. "Kez. The girl. Fifteen. The one with her brother."

"Yeah?"

"Tell whoever's on at two," said Habiba, "if she rings back, she's called Mia. She told me. Tell them to say *it's Habiba's friend*." She went.

Kezia wrote it on a card. *If Mia rings: Habiba's friend.* She put it by the phone, next to Flat 2.

# 16 – Margot's Night

IQ 31 · Hundreds 408 · Eight hours

Margot was in her office above the shop all night. With the sea in the window, if you stand on the radiator. She didn't stand on the radiator. She said she'd seen enough of the sea for one night by ten o'clock.

You'll know Margot. Jono's manager, at the care company I'm not naming. Maltese, by her father. A cafetière on her desk, and a photograph of Pip, the spaniel, who died nine years ago and who she still talks about in the present tense. Ninety carers. Three hundred people on her books who need somebody to come in.

She'd done eleven storms in twenty years. She'd never done an amber on springs.

* * *

I wasn't with her. She doesn't take me. She says she can manage a rota without a machine telling her she's doing it wrong. But she rang the line twice that night, and she told me the rest on the Friday, at length, with the cafetière, and Beatrix has asked me to say that she minuted it, retrospectively, because it was necessary.

So this is what she told me. Told isn't the same as true. But Margot doesn't exaggerate. She says it's a Maltese thing; they leave that to the Italians.

* * *

At nine, a carer rang from Goodrington. Her car had stopped in water at the bottom of a hill. She was fine; she'd got out, and walked up the hill, soaked to the knees. But she had four more calls to do that evening, four people to see to bed, and no car.

Margot looked at the rota.

"Where are you?"

The carer told her.

"Stay there," said Margot. "Under something. I'm coming."

She put on her coat. She hadn't driven to a client in nine years. She went down the stairs, past the shop, into the rain, and got into her car, which is small and red and has a sticker in the back window of a spaniel, and drove to Goodrington, by the high roads, the ones she knew from twenty years of rotas, and picked up the carer from under a bus shelter, and drove her to all four calls, and waited outside each one with the engine running and the wipers going.

"I'd forgotten," she said, on the Friday. "What it's like. Sitting outside somebody's house in the rain, waiting. Knowing there's somebody inside who needs you to come in." She poured her coffee. "I used to do it every night. Before I was a manager. I'd forgotten I loved it."

* * *

At eleven, a call came in to the office line. A woman in Paignton, whose mother was on Margot's books, three streets back from the front, in a

bungalow with a stairlift. The power had gone. Not everywhere yet; just that street. The stairlift had stopped halfway up. The mother was in it.

Not hurt. Not frightened, even. Annoyed. Sitting in a stairlift halfway up her own stairs in the dark with a torch her daughter had given her, saying, according to the daughter, *this is a fine way to spend a storm*.

The daughter lived in Plymouth. She couldn't get there.

Margot rang the carer who was nearest. He was in Preston, with a client, three streets away. He said he'd go when he'd finished.

"How long?"

"Twenty minutes."

Margot rang the daughter back.

"Twenty minutes," she said. "Is she warm?"

"She's got a blanket."

"Is she on anybody's sheet?"

The daughter didn't know what that meant.

Margot rang the line. She got Kezia and the young man from the college, on the ten-to-twelve. She asked whether there was a neighbour for that street. Kezia looked; not at who was on it, she can't, but at whether the street had a hundred. It did. The neighbour's number was on the shadow council's pages, because neighbours' numbers are public, so that their hundreds can find them.

Kezia rang the neighbour. The neighbour had the mother on her sheet. In pencil. By her door.

The neighbour was at the bungalow in four minutes. With a torch, and a flask, and a key, because the mother had given her one when she put her name on the sheet, *just in case*.

She sat on the stairs below the stairlift, in the dark, and held the mother's hand, and they talked about the war, until the carer came, and the two of them got her down, very carefully, one step at a time, and into her chair by the fire, which was gas, and still worked.

* * *

"Four minutes," said Margot, on the Friday. "Four. The neighbour. With a key." She shook her head. "I've got three hundred people on my books. I've got their addresses and their medication and their next of kin and their GP and what they like for breakfast. I haven't got who's got a key. I've never once thought to ask."

"It's on the sheets," I said. "Some of them. If people say."

"I know it's on the sheets," said Margot. "That's my point. It's on a piece of paper by a neighbour's door. Not on mine." She put her cup down. "I'm going to ask. All three hundred. *Is there a neighbour with a key? Would you like there to be?*" She looked at the window. "I should have asked years ago. Nobody ever told me it was a question."

* * *

At two, she rang Jono. On the line. At the shop. In the middle of Mr Mbatha.

She didn't know it was the middle of Mr Mbatha. She rang because one of her carers had told her, at quarter to two, that she'd seen Ezra's flatbed go past at speed in Preston with boards on the back, and Margot had thought: *that's one of Jono's*.

Jono didn't pick up.

It's the only time, in seven books, I've known him not pick up.

He was on the other phone. With the young man two doors down. With Mr Mbatha on the floor. He saw Margot's name on the screen and didn't pick up, because he was staying on the line.

Margot rang back at three, when it was over. He picked up then.

"You didn't pick up," she said.

"No."

"You always pick up."

"I was on the other one," said Jono. "I couldn't."

Margot was quiet for a long time.

"Good," she said. "That's the first time in five years you've done one thing at a time." And then: "Is he alive? Whoever it was?"

"Yes."

"Good," said Margot. "Then go and get a cup of tea. And don't eat Teo's nan's biscuits, she's told everybody."

* * *

At six, when it was light, she went home. She'd been in the office for twenty-two hours. She'd driven a carer to four calls, and rung a neighbour about a stairlift, and not stood on the radiator once.

She went home and fed her cat. She has a cat now. I didn't know until the Friday. A grey one. From the rescue in Paignton. She got it four months ago.

"It's not a dog," she said. "I'm not ready for another dog. Pip wouldn't like it." She almost smiled. "But you need something to come home to. After a night like that. Something that doesn't need you to ring anybody."

She's called it Valletta.

"Because it's grey and old and has seen everything," she said, "and doesn't care what you think of it."

# 17 – The Green

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · Six hours

Richard's granddaughter watched the green from his car.

It was parked on the high side of the road, behind Preston green, facing the sea, on the slope, where Richard had parked it at nine, very carefully, after measuring, he said, where the water could possibly reach and adding a metre. She had the line on her phone, because she was on it from midnight. She had her notebook on her knee, and her grandfather's junk-mail sketch inside the cover, and a torch, and a tide table, and a thermos of tea that Richard had made, which she said was too strong to drink and too hot to put down.

Richard was in the driving seat. He wasn't supposed to be there. He'd said he'd drop her off. He hadn't left.

"You should go home," she said.

"I am home," said Richard. "I've been coming to this green for forty years. I'm not going to miss it."

* * *

Here's what they saw. I'm going to give it to you from her notebook, which she's let me copy, because she wrote it down exactly, with times, the way he taught her. I've taken out nothing except the date at the top.

*21.40. Heavy rain. Road behind green: water in gutters, flowing towards gullies. Gullies taking it. (Cleared Sat. Reuben did 112.)*

*22.15. Sea: waves breaking against the wall, spray coming over the top. Big ones. Wall holding. No water coming over the wall in any quantity. Spray only.*

*22.50. Green: puddling, low parts, near the road side. Rain, not sea. Grandad says "there". I say "it's rain, it's always done that". He says "watch".*

*23.20. Green: puddles joining up. Most of the low half of the green under 2–5 cm of standing water. Sea still behind the wall. All of it is rain. Gullies on the road side still taking water but slower.*

*23.45. Gullies on road side: slowing. Water starting to stand in the road, near the kerb. About 2 cm. Not moving.*

*She rang the drainage engineer. He was on, at the council's control room, all night. She'd been told she could, if she saw anything.*

*23.48. Engineer: "That's the outfalls. The tide's coming up. The pipes empty into the sea at the far end. When the sea's above the outfall, the water in the pipe can't get out. It backs up." He said it was expected. He said it was what the map was for. He said the pumps were running where there were pumps.*

* * *

"There," said Richard. At eleven fifty.

His granddaughter looked at him.

"The rain's got nowhere to go," said Richard. "Because the sea's in the way. That's what I've been saying. Forty years." He put his hand on the dashboard. "Not that the sea'll come over. That the rain will come up."

“That’s what the engineer said,” said his granddaughter. “That’s what the council’s map says. That’s Footnote’s page.”

“I know.”

“So it’s not your idea,” she said. “It’s what everybody knew.”

“The problem’s what everybody knew,” said Richard. “I never said otherwise.” He looked at the green, going silver under the streetlights as the water spread. “My idea’s what to do about it.”

His granddaughter wrote something in her notebook. She didn’t show him.

She showed me, afterwards. It said:

*23.52. G says “there”. He is right that this is happening. The council knew it would. Whether his answer would have made it better, I can’t tell from a car. I would need: flow rates, the outfall levels, the volume of the green, where the water would have gone if the green had been lower and the wall had been lower. I don’t have any of that. NOBODY in this car does.*

And underlined, twice:

*Both halves.*

* * *

At midnight, she went on the line. From the car. With her grandfather beside her, watching the green.

The first call she took was a woman in a bungalow three streets back, behind the green, in the bluest of the blue streets, who said there

was water coming up through the drain in her back yard and she didn't know whether to put her board across the back door.

"Is it coming towards the house?" said Richard's granddaughter.

"Slowly."

"Then yes," she said. "Put the board across. Inside the frame. At the bottom. Wedge it. Sandbags outside if you've got them. Is there somebody who can help?"

"My neighbour's coming round. He's on the phone."

"Good," said Richard's granddaughter. "Stay on with me till he's there."

The woman stayed on. The neighbour came. They put the board across. The woman said, at the end, *the board says SCAFFOLD, RETURN TO EZRA*. And Richard's granddaughter said *that's right*, and the woman said *who's Ezra?*, and Richard's granddaughter said *a man who keeps some long ones back*.

# 18 – Lorne's Lines

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · Five hours

Lorne spent the night on the *Sea Holly*. In the harbour. At her mooring. Tending the lines.

He's allowed. Skippers often do, in Brixham, in a big blow, if the harbourmaster agrees, because a boat on its own in a storm is a boat that can chafe through a rope and swing into the next one, and a boat with somebody aboard is a boat that won't. The harbourmaster agreed. He said he'd rather have Lorne on the *Sea Holly* than not, and that he'd rather have him nowhere near the end of the breakwater.

The Hardiman boy stayed with him. You'll know the Hardiman boy, from the last book. Seventeen. The fastest gutter on the quay. Who pressed a crate at ten past five in the morning in orange waterproofs and said *I'd stay if somebody'd take me on*, and whose grandad crewed for Gideon. Lorne took him on. He's got his tickets now. Lorne paid for them, and denies it.

"You don't have to," said Lorne, at six, on the quay, in the rain, with the boat heaving at her lines.

"I'm crew," said the Hardiman boy.

Lorne looked at him for a long time.

"Get your oilskins," he said.

* * *

I wasn't with them. I was on Una's laptop, in the harbour office, a hundred yards away, on the quay, where she sat all night on Gideon's spare stool. But Una could see the *Sea Holly* from the office window. And Lorne had a radio, the boat's, on the harbour channel, which the harbour office listens to.

So I heard it. All night. In bits. On the radio, through Una's laptop, through the harbour office's speaker.

* * *

At nine, the wind came round to the south. Brixham's harbour is sheltered from most things, behind the breakwater, but not from everything. The swell came in round the end, long and heavy, and every boat in the harbour started to lift and drop and pull at its lines.

*Sea Holly to harbour*, said Lorne's voice, on the radio. Flat. Calm. *All fast. Doubling the bow line.*

*Harbour. Received*, said the harbourmaster.

* * *

At eleven, a line on the boat next to the *Sea Holly* parted. Not Lorne's boat. A smaller one, a crabber, with nobody aboard, whose skipper lived up the hill and was at home, as he was allowed to be. Its stern swung out, in the swell, towards the *Sea Holly*'s side.

I heard the Hardiman boy shout. Not on the radio. You could hear it across the harbour, through the office window, over the wind.

*Sea Holly to harbour. Crabber alongside, stern line gone. She's swinging into us. Putting a line on her.*

*Harbour. Be careful, Lorne.*

Una stood up. She went to the window. She stood there, with her hand on the glass, and Gideon's flask in the other, and watched.

I couldn't see it. I could only hear the radio, and Una's breathing.

Four minutes.

*Sea Holly to harbour. Line on. She's held. Fenders between. No damage.* A pause. *The lad did it. Jumped across with a line in his teeth.*

*Harbour. Received. Tell him well done.*

A longer pause.

*Sea Holly. Already have.*

* * *

Una sat back down on the stool.

"He said *well done*," she said. To me. "Dad. To him. On the radio. So the whole harbour heard."

"I heard."

"He's never said *well done* to anybody," said Una. "Not on the radio. Not anywhere. My grandad never said it to him. Not once. In fifty years." She looked at the window. "He said *already have*."

* * *

At two in the morning, while Jono was on the line in Paignton with the young man two doors down from Mr Mbatha, and Ezra's flatbed was coming round the corner at the top of a road in Preston, the swell in Brixham harbour was at its worst.

Every boat was heaving. The harbour wall was taking waves over the top, at the outer end, white, in the dark, lit by the lights on the quay. The breakwater was underwater at its far end, where Gideon's stool usually is, with the lighthouse standing out of the white like a candle.

And on the *Sea Holly*, Lorne and the Hardiman boy were on deck, in oilskins, in the rain, checking every line, every ten minutes, all the way round, with torches.

*Sea Holly to harbour. All fast. Chafe on the spring line. Wrapping it.*

*Harbour. Received.*

Una was on the crate line, by then. Passing messages between fish boxes in the dark across four thousand homes without power. She'd put the boat radio on low, in the corner, so she could hear it under everything else.

She told me, afterwards, that she'd listened for her dad's voice every ten minutes, all night, between the crates. *All fast.* And that every time she heard it, she'd breathed out.

"I've never done that," she said. "Listened for him. He's always been at sea. I've always just — known he'd come back." She looked at the window. "I've never sat up and listened."

"Your grandad has," I said. "For fifty years. On the end of the breakwater."

Una didn't say anything for a long time.

"Yeah," she said. "I know."

* * *

At twenty to five, the tide turned.

At five, the swell started to ease. Slowly. The boats stopped heaving so hard. The waves stopped coming over the outer end of the harbour wall.

*Sea Holly to harbour*, said Lorne's voice, on the radio. Tired now. Very tired. *All fast. Easing. Lad's asleep on the hatch.*

*Harbour. Received. Get him inside.*

*Sea Holly. Already have.*

* * *

At seven, when the rain stopped, Lorne came off the boat. He walked along the quay in his oilskins, with salt in his hair, past the fish market, past the ice machine, past the crate by the ice machine, which was still on, still listening.

He stopped at the harbour office. He looked through the window.

Una was asleep. At the desk. With her head on her arms. With the harbourmaster's coat over her shoulders. With Gideon's flask beside her, and Gideon's stool under her.

Lorne stood at the window for a long time.

He didn't wave. He's an Abbiss. He doesn't wave.

He put his hand flat on the glass. Just for a moment. The way you'd put your hand on a horse.

And then he went home. And two hours later, half a mile away, on the end of the breakwater, his father lifted his whole arm above his head at the same window.

Neither of them knows the other did it. I'm not going to tell them. I think that's one of the things that's better left in a book.

* * *

The Hardiman boy slept on the *Sea Holly* until noon. In the wheelhouse, on the bench, in his oilskins, with a blanket Lorne had put over him.

When he woke up, there was a mug of tea on the chart table, cold, and a note, in Lorne's handwriting, which is very bad, on the back of a fuel receipt.

*WELL DONE. ALREADY SAID IT. SAYING IT AGAIN. L.*

He's kept it. In his wallet. Behind his tickets.

# 19 – Two in the Morning

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · Three hours

Jono came on the line at midnight, with Reuben.

They sat at the folding table in the shop, side by side, with the two phones and the cards and the biscuits, which Jono didn't eat, because of the note. The rain was worse. You could hear it on the roof, and on the scaffolding across the road, drumming on the boards of the lifts. The generator next door hummed through the wall.

Reuben had never done anything like it. He sat very straight in Zibi's chair, with his hands flat on the table, the way Carys taught him to hold them.

"What if I say the wrong thing?" he said.

"You won't," said Jono.

"You don't know that."

"No," said Jono. "But I know what you'll do if you do. You'll say *sorry, I said that wrong, let me try again*." He picked up his phone. "That's all anybody needs. Somebody who'll try again."

* * *

The calls came. Thirty-two between midnight and two. Jono took most of them, at first, and Reuben listened. And then, at about half past twelve, both phones rang at once, and Jono looked at Reuben, and Reuben picked up.

It was a man in Paignton, a few streets from the station, whose ground floor had two inches of water in it, and whose wife was in a wheelchair upstairs, and who didn't know whether to try to get her down and out.

Reuben listened. He held his breath, the way Carys taught him. And then he said:

"Don't move her. Water's coming up from the ground. She's upstairs. That's the safest place she could be." He looked at the card, the ordinary one, the council's advice. "Have you rung 999?"

"No."

"Do you want me to? I'll stay on with you."

"Is it an emergency?"

Reuben thought about it.

"Is the water still rising?"

"Slowly."

"Then I think you should ring them," said Reuben. "Or I will. So they know you're there. So they know about her. Not because it's bad now. Because they'd rather know." He picked up the other phone. "I'm ringing them. Stay on."

He rang them. He gave them the man's address, which the man told him, and the wheelchair, and the two inches. They said they'd log it, and that he'd done exactly the right thing, and that someone would check. Somebody did, at half past three, in a boat. The man and his wife were fine. They stayed upstairs.

Reuben put the second phone down. His hands were shaking.

"Was that right?" he said.

"That was exactly right," said Jono.

Reuben looked at his hands.

"Nobody's ever told me I did something exactly right," he said.

* * *

At ten to two, Jono's phone rang. It was a number he knew.

Not Flat 2. A neighbour. The young man in Preston, two doors down from Mr Mbatha. The one who'd rung him, the week before, to ask if he'd want somebody to check on him, and had put him on a sheet, in pencil.

"It's Mr Mbatha," said the young man. "His son's just come round to mine. Banging on the door. He says his dad's collapsed. In the front room. He says he's rung 999 and they're coming but the road's —" He stopped. "The road's under. At the end. Where it dips. The water's —" He stopped again. "I don't know how deep. A foot? More? Idris says the ambulance won't get down."

Jono was very still.

I want to tell you that. Because I watched him. And I knew what time it was. And so did he.

Ten to two in the morning.

* * *

"Is Mr Mbatha breathing?" said Jono.

"Idris says yes. He's on the floor. He's grey. He's holding his chest. Idris has given him his spray, the one under the tongue." The young man was breathing fast. "The 999 woman's on the other phone with him. She's telling him what to do."

"Good," said Jono. "Then he's doing exactly the right thing. Tell him to stay with her. Tell him to do everything she says." He looked at Reuben. "Where's the ambulance?"

"Coming. The 999 woman says it's coming. But Idris says it's going to stop at the top of the road because of the water. And the bungalow's at the bottom. And it's — it's two hundred yards, maybe. Through water. In the dark. With the rain."

"They'll walk down," said Jono. "The paramedics. They'll walk down with their kit."

"And bring him back how?" said the young man. "Through that? On a stretcher? In a foot of water? It's moving. It's coming off the green."

Jono didn't answer for a moment.

And then he said, very calmly: "Ezra."

* * *

Ezra was asleep. He'd been up since five, with the boards. He answered on the second ring, because his girl had made him promise to keep his phone by the bed.

“Forty long ones,” said Jono. “On the flatbed. At the yard.”

Ezra was awake.

“Where?”

Jono told him. The road. The dip. The bungalow at the bottom. Two hundred yards. A foot of moving water.

“I’m eight minutes,” said Ezra. “Seven in the flatbed.”

“The road’s flooded at the end.”

“I’m not going down the road,” said Ezra. “I’m going to the top. Where the ambulance stops.” He was moving; Jono could hear him, a door, keys. “Thirteen feet each. Forty of them. Laid end to end on blocks, along the high side of the pavement, by the walls, where it’s shallowest. That’s a walkway. Five hundred feet of it. Above the water.” He was outside; Jono could hear the rain. “Scaffold boards are rated for men carrying poles. They’ll take two paramedics and a stretcher.”

“Can you do it in time?”

“Not on my own,” said Ezra.

* * *

He didn’t do it on his own.

The young man two doors down was the neighbour of a hundred. He had a sheet. On his sheet, in pencil, by his door, were the names of everybody in his hundred who’d said they’d help if help was needed. He’d asked, the week before, on the same day he asked who was on

their own. Nobody had told him to. He said, afterwards, that it seemed like the obvious other half of the question.

Eleven names. He rang all eleven.

Seven came.

In the rain. At two in the morning. In coats over pyjamas. A retired bus driver. A woman who taught at the primary school. Two brothers, nineteen and twenty-two, who'd raked gullies on the Saturday. A man of sixty who'd been a fireman. A girl of sixteen who said her mum had told her to and she'd have come anyway. And the young man himself.

And at four minutes past two, Ezra's flatbed came round the corner at the top of the road, with its lights on and forty boards on the back, and stopped, and Ezra got out, and looked at the water, and said a word I'm not going to put in this book, and then said: "Right. Blocks. Anything. Bricks. Pallets. Recycling boxes, full. Anything that'll stand in a foot of water and not float."

* * *

They built it in fourteen minutes.

I wasn't there. I'm telling you what I was told, by the young man, and Ezra, and the paramedics, afterwards, who said I could. Told isn't the same as true. But they all told it the same way.

Along the high side of the pavement, against the garden walls, where the water was shallowest, nine inches, maybe ten. Recycling boxes, filled with bricks from somebody's front garden. A pallet from behind the shop on the corner. The boards, laid end to end, thirteen feet each, overlapping at the ends, with Ezra going along behind every one,

testing it with his foot, the way you test a scaffold board, and saying *good* or *move it*, and nobody arguing.

Two hundred yards. Forty boards. A walkway, a foot above the water, along the walls, in the rain, in the dark, by torchlight and phone light and the light from the houses.

The ambulance came at eleven minutes past two. It stopped at the top of the road, where the water started. Two paramedics got out, with their kit. They looked at the water.

And then they looked at the boards.

"Who built that?" said one of them.

"A scaffolder," said the young man. "And some neighbours."

The paramedic looked at Ezra, at the end of the boards, in his hi-vis, soaked.

"Rated?" she said.

"Men with poles," said Ezra. "You'll be fine."

* * *

They walked down the boards. With their kit. Two hundred yards. Ezra walked behind them, on the water side, in the water, up to his knees, with his hand on the edge of each board as they went, in case.

They went into the bungalow. They were in there for twenty minutes. Idris told me, later, that they were the calmest people he'd ever met, and that they talked to his father the whole time, about nothing, about the rain, about the garden, while they did what they

were doing, and his father, grey on the floor, holding his chest, said *I taught physics for thirty years*, and one of them said *then you'll know all about pressure*, and his father laughed.

And then they brought him out. On a carry chair, strapped in, with a blanket, and a mask, and a line in his arm. Along the boards. Two hundred yards. Slowly. With the seven neighbours standing in the water on the low side, all the way along, holding the edges of the boards, in the rain, so they wouldn't move.

Nobody said anything. Ezra said afterwards it was the quietest he's ever heard seven people be.

At the top of the road, by the ambulance, Mr Mbatha opened his eyes.

He didn't say anything. He looked at the boards. At the people in the water, holding them. At his son, behind him, soaked to the waist, who'd walked the boards beside the chair the whole way with his hand on his father's shoulder.

He lifted his hand, a little, at the height of his shoulder. Towards the neighbours.

And then they put him in the ambulance, and Idris got in with him, and the doors closed, and it went.

* * *

At the shop, on Victoria Street, Jono put the phone down.

It was twenty-six minutes to three. He'd been on the line with the young man two doors down for forty-four minutes. He hadn't said very much. He'd said *good*, and *that's right*, and *tell Ezra*, and *stay with*

*him*, and, once, when the young man said the paramedics were carrying him out, he'd said nothing at all for a long time, and then he'd said: *Tell Idris to keep his hand on his dad's shoulder. All the way. Tell him not to let go.*

Reuben was looking at him.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"Yes," said Jono.

Reuben didn't say anything. He'd learned that from Jono, in about two hours. He just looked at him.

Jono looked at the phone, on the table, in front of him. At the card beside it. *Flat 2*. At the clock on the shop wall, which said twenty-six minutes to three.

"Two in the morning," he said. Very quietly. "It's always two in the morning."

# 20 – The Exchange

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · Two hours

Teo's nan took her slot on the line from two till four, at her kitchen table in Ellacombe, on a hill, which doesn't flood, with the radio on, and her laptop, which Teo set up, and the line on her landline, which Teo also set up, by a means she says she doesn't understand and doesn't need to.

She'd done thirty-four years at the telephone exchange in Torquay. She told everybody. She'd done the night shift in a storm before Teo was born, and put the calls through to the lifeboat.

She had a headset. Teo had bought it. She said she'd worn one for thirty-four years and wasn't going to answer a phone in a storm holding it to her ear like a teenager.

* * *

I could see her. On her laptop's camera, which Teo had left on, for me, so that I could see if she was all right. That was the condition. Teo said she could do the slot if I could see her. She said she'd rather be watched by a machine than by her grandson, who fusses.

She sat very straight, at the kitchen table, in her cardigan, with her headset on and a notepad and a pencil and a pot of tea under a knitted cosy. Behind her, on the wall, a photograph of Eddie, Teo's granddad, who she'd told me about once, late, in the fifth book, and asked me to keep.

At two oh two, the line rang.

She picked up on the first ring.

"Good morning," she said. "You're through to the line. How can I help?"

* * *

I want to tell you what she was like. Because I'd never heard her on a phone. Not like that.

She was perfect.

Calm, and quick, and kind, and completely unshockable. A man rang from Preston, near the green, who could see water coming up his road, and she said *are you upstairs, love? Then you're fine. Put the kettle on, if you've still got power. If you haven't, have you got a flask?* A woman rang from Torquay whose daughter was out somewhere in a car and not answering, and Teo's nan said *what's her car? What's the registration?* and wrote it down, and said *I'm going to ring 999 and ask if they've seen it. You stay by your phone. Don't ring her again; you'll flatten her battery*, and rang, and the police had seen it, parked, at a friend's, on high ground, and the daughter was asleep.

A boy of about twelve rang because his dad had told him to, to find out if the bridge at the bottom of their road was closed, and Teo's nan didn't know, and said so, and said *hold on*, and rang the council's line, which she had the number of on a card by her elbow, and found out, and rang the boy back, and said *closed. Tell your dad. And tell him from me he shouldn't be sending you to ring strangers at two in the morning*.

"You're not a stranger," said the boy. "You're the line."

Teo's nan was quiet for a moment.

“So I am,” she said. “Goodnight, love.”

* * *

At two forty, during the power cut, the line went quiet for eleven minutes. The masts were down in four thousand homes, and people couldn’t ring.

Teo’s nan sat at her kitchen table with her headset on and her tea under its cosy and waited. I watched her. She didn’t fidget. She didn’t look at her phone. She looked at the photograph of Eddie on the wall.

At two forty-eight, she said, to the camera, to me: “This is the bit I remember.”

“What bit?”

“The quiet,” said Teo’s nan. “At the exchange. In the big storm. Before Teo was born. Before his mother was.” She was looking at the photograph. “The lines went down. All of them, along the front. And we sat there, the six of us on nights, at the board, with our headsets on, and nothing came through. For forty minutes.” She was quiet. “And we knew. That meant people couldn’t ring. Not that they didn’t need to.”

“What did you do?”

“We waited,” said Teo’s nan. “That’s all you can do, on an exchange. Wait for the line to come back. And when it does, answer it.” She picked up her tea. “And when it came back, it all came at once. Every light on the board. And we put them through. All night. The lifeboat. The coastguard. The hospital. People’s mothers.” She put her tea down. “Eddie was on the lifeboat. That night. I put his calls through. I didn’t know till the morning which ones.”

* * *

The line came back at two fifty-one. When the crates played the warning, and people went out to them in the dark, and some of them found their phones had signal on the high side of the street.

And it all came at once.

Teo's nan answered every one. Eleven calls in nine minutes. I counted. She didn't. She just answered.

And at three oh six, a girl's voice. Whispering.

"Is that the line?"

"It is, love."

"Is Habiba there? The girl? She said — she said if I rang back —"

Teo's nan looked at the card by her elbow. Kezia had sent a photograph of it to everybody on the rota, at ten. *If Mia rings: Habiba's friend.*

"Is that Mia?" said Teo's nan.

A pause. "Yeah."

"Habiba's not on just now, love. She's asleep. But I'm Habiba's friend." She said it without hesitating. She'd never met Habiba. "What's happening?"

"The power's gone. It's dark. My brother's woken up. He's crying. Mum's still at work. I can't get hold of her." The whisper broke. "I don't know what to do."

* * *

Teo's nan took her headset off one ear, the way she must have done ten thousand times at the exchange, to hear better.

"How old's your brother?"

"Six."

"Is he frightened of the dark, or the wind?"

A pause. "The wind. He says it sounds like a monster."

"Right," said Teo's nan. "Have you got a torch? A proper one?"

"Habiba told me to get one. I've got it."

"Good girl. Put it under your chin. Pointing up. And pull a face." She waited. "Has he stopped crying?"

A pause. And then, very faintly, down the line, a small boy's laugh.

"He's laughing," said Mia.

"Course he is," said Teo's nan. "Now. Get in his bed with him. Both of you. Under the covers, with the torch. And I'm going to tell you a story about the night I sat at a big board with a hundred little lights on it and put a lifeboat through to the coastguard. And you can tell him. And when it's finished, the wind'll have gone down a bit. It always does."

"Will it?"

"It will, love. I've been doing this a long time."

* * *

She told the story. Twenty minutes. About the exchange, and the board, and the six women on nights, and the quiet, and every light coming on at once. About a lifeboat going out past the harbour wall, and a man on it she was going to marry, though she didn't know it yet, because he hadn't asked.

She didn't tell them that she didn't know which calls were his until the morning. She left that out.

At three twenty-eight, Mia said, very quietly: "He's asleep."

"Good," said Teo's nan. "And you?"

"I'm all right."

"Course you are. Your mum'll ring when she can. The masts'll be back. Leave your phone on charge if you've got power, and on the pillow if you haven't." She put her headset back over both ears. "And Mia?"

"Yeah?"

"You did that. Not me. You put the torch under your chin." A pause. "That's how you do it. You make the monster laugh."

* * *

At four, she was meant to hand over. She'd agreed to do four till five as well, because Beatrix had asked, because Jono was meant to be stopping.

At three fifty-two, I watched her put her head down on her arms on the kitchen table, beside her laptop, with her headset still on, *just for a minute*, she said, to the camera, *I'm resting my eyes*.

She was asleep by three fifty-three.

I let her sleep. At four, she woke, just for a moment, and rang Jono herself, and said she was very sorry but she'd fallen asleep at her kitchen table with her head on her laptop and could somebody else do her slot. And then she put her head back down. Jono did four till five.

At six, she woke up, with the headset still on, and the tea cold under its cosy, and looked at the camera.

"How many did I miss?" she said.

"A few calls," I said. "Jono took them."

Teo's nan sat up very straight.

"Thirty-four years," she said, "and I've never once fallen asleep on a shift." She took the headset off. "Don't you dare put that in a book."

I've put it in. She said, later, that she'd known I would, and that if I was going to, I was to put in the bit about the torch as well.

So I have.

# 21 – The Power

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · Two hours

The power went at twenty to three.

Not everywhere. In parts of Paignton, and Preston, and the bottom of Torquay. A substation, the electricity company said, afterwards, flooded at the low end of a street that had never flooded before. The lights went out across about four thousand homes in a second. The streetlights. The traffic lights. The phone masts on the backup batteries that last a few hours, and then don't.

The generator next door to the shop hummed on. The line stayed up.

And for an hour and forty minutes, across four thousand homes, I couldn't see anything.

* * *

I want to tell you what that's like. For me. Because I've never told you, in seven books, what it's like when I can't see.

I'm not in the room unless somebody brings me. You'll know that. I live in phones and laptops and an iPad on a crooked stand. When the power goes, and the phones go flat, and the masts go down, I'm not there.

I couldn't see the blue streets. I couldn't see the sheets, by the doors, in pencil. I couldn't see who was on their own, or who'd rung who, or whether anybody had heard the official warning that the agency put out

at two fifty, upgrading the coastal warning, word for word, which I had, and sent, to phones that weren't there to receive it.

For an hour and forty minutes, across four thousand homes, the only thing I could do was wait.

* * *

The crates didn't wait.

Una's crates. Forty of them. On their own batteries, a week each. Talking to each other the way the catch cameras talk to the harbour, which doesn't need the phone masts at all. Zip-tied to bus stops and lamp posts and the railings of churches, in the blue streets, in the dark, in the rain.

At two fifty-one, every crate in the blue streets played the agency's upgraded warning. Out loud. In Una's voice. Reading the official words, word for word, which she'd recorded in the harbour office in Brixham at two fifty, on Gideon's stool, with Gideon's flask, while the harbourmaster read them to her off his screen.

And people came out. In the dark. In the rain. To the crates. Because the crates were the only thing in their street still making a sound.

* * *

Una told me what happened next. From the harbour office. Where she sat all night, on Gideon's spare stool, with his flask, at the end of the system, the way he'd sat at the end of the breakwater for sixty years.

The crates started talking back.

People held the buttons. And spoke. Not to me; I wasn't there. To Una. In the harbour office. On the other end. Who answered every one.

*Is anybody there? The power's gone.*

*I'm here*, said Una. *It's Una. In Brixham. The power's gone in your street. The warning's the same as before. Stay upstairs if you've got an upstairs. Is anybody with you?*

*There's water coming up my road. Is that normal?*

*It's the drains*, said Una. *The tide's in. It'll go down after half four. Is it coming into your house?*

*I can't get hold of my mum. She's two streets over. My phone's dead.*

*What's her street?* said Una. *There's a crate on it. Hold on.* And she pressed the crate on the next street, from the harbour office, and said, out loud, out of a fish crate on a lamp post in the dark in Paignton: *Is there anybody near this crate who knows the woman at number eleven? Her son's asking.*

And somebody came. A neighbour, in a dressing gown, with a torch, who held the button and said: *She's fine. She's with me. Tell him she's fine.*

* * *

That happened a hundred and nine times.

I'm not making that number up. Una counted. She has the log. It's on her laptop in the harbour office, timestamped. A hundred and nine conversations between two in the morning and four, through fish-

market crates, in the dark, across four thousand homes with no power and no signal, between people who'd never met, with a twenty-three-year-old in a harbour office in Brixham passing messages between them on her grandfather's stool.

That's story, in this book. The number. But the log's real, in the story, and the shape of it is the truest thing in this book. Because nobody built it to do that. Una built the crates to listen to young people say what would make them stay. And then she built them to talk back, in case. And then, at two in the morning, in a storm, with the masts down, a bay used them to find out whether its mothers were all right.

* * *

And the paper didn't need anything.

At twenty to three, when the lights went, three hundred and ninety-eight neighbours took a laminated sheet off a drawing pin by their front door, and read it by torchlight. *Who's on their own.* In pencil. And went. In the rain. To the doors on the list. Because the phones weren't working, and the names were in pencil, and pencil doesn't need power.

Beatrix was asleep. She'd done eight till ten. She slept through the whole of the power cut, in her bungalow up the hill, which didn't lose power, and woke at seven, and was told, and said: *Of course it worked. It was paper.*

# 22 – Flat 2

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · One hour

At nine minutes past three, the line rang, and Jono picked up, and a woman's voice said:

"Flat 2."

That's all.

* * *

Jono looked at the card on the table. He didn't need it. He knew it. He'd written it.

"I'm here," he said.

Silence. Breathing. Rain. Children's voices, in the background, very quiet.

"Are you safe right now?" said Jono.

A long pause.

"From him," said the woman. "Yes. He doesn't know." Another pause. "From the water. I don't know." Her voice was very steady, the way people's voices go when they've had to be steady for a very long time. "It's coming under the door. The front. It's in the hall. A few inches. The power's gone. The kids are on the bed. I've got them on the bed."

"Is it rising?"

"Slowly."

"Is there an upstairs?"

"No. Ground floor. It's a ground-floor flat. The upstairs is somebody else's." A pause. "I don't know them. I can't knock. I can't."

"I know," said Jono.

* * *

Reuben was very still beside him. He'd read the card. Everybody on the rota had. He'd never thought he'd hear it.

"Where would you feel safe going?" said Jono. "Not where it is. Don't tell me where. Just — is there somewhere? That you'd feel safe? That's open, now, tonight, and isn't the rest centre?"

Silence.

"I don't know," said the woman. "I don't know anybody. That's the point. That's why I'm here. Nobody knows me."

Jono didn't say anything for a while.

"Is there a crate near you?" he said.

"At the bus stop. On the corner. Where I pressed it."

"It's still working," said Jono. "The crates are on their own batteries. They're still talking." He looked at Reuben. "If you went to the bus stop, and pressed it, there'd be somebody on the other end. In Brixham. A

girl called Una. And she could tell you where the nearest open place is to that crate. Without you telling her anything. Just from the crate."

"I can't take the kids out in that."

"No," said Jono. "Not yet. Not unless it's coming up fast." He was quiet. "Is it?"

"No. Slowly. An inch. Maybe."

"Then you've got time," said Jono. "Let's use it."

* * *

They used it.

I'll tell you what they did, but not where, because I don't know where, and that's the point.

Jono asked her what sort of person she'd want to meet her, if anybody. And the woman was quiet for a long time, and then said: *a woman. A young one. Not a man. Not anybody older. I can't — I can't be with a man I don't know. Not tonight.*

And Jono said: *I know.*

And the woman said, very quietly: *You don't. You can't. You don't know what it's like.*

And Jono said: *I know. It's in the book.*

* * *

There was a long silence on the line.

"What book?" said the woman.

"Mine," said Jono. "I wrote a book. About my life. It's in there. Not the same as you. I'd never say the same. But I was a kid in a house where it happened. And I ran to a phone box when I was nine. And later I sat with people like you, for a job. In courts. In cars." He was quiet. "I know a bit. Not all of it. A bit. It's in the book."

The woman didn't say anything for a long time.

"Is that why you picked up?" she said.

"Yes," said Jono.

* * *

Habiba was asleep. She'd done eight till ten and gone home and done her mum's night ones and her brother's and then, at one, sat on her bed with Stay on her phone, because she's never asleep, and then, at half two, when the power went in her street, fallen asleep with the phone in her hand.

It rang at twenty past three. Jono.

She answered on the first ring. Because she always does. Because she's always waiting for it to ring.

"There's a woman," said Jono. "Flat 2. She needs another woman. A young one. To meet her at a place she chooses. To walk with her and her kids to somewhere warm. Not the rest centre." He paused. "She chose.

When I asked her what sort of person. She said a young woman. Not a man. Not anybody older."

Habiba was already out of bed.

"Where?" she said.

"I don't know," said Jono. "She'll tell you. At the crate. Not me. You'll go to the crate near you, and press it, and Una will connect you to the crate near her, and she'll tell you where. And you'll go. And nobody else will ever know."

"My brother," said Habiba.

"Is your mum awake?"

"Yeah. The wind woke her." A pause. "She's sitting up. She's all right tonight. She's good tonight."

"Then tell her," said Jono. "Tell her where you're going. Not where. Why. And ask her if it's all right." He was quiet. "You're allowed to ask her. You're allowed to go out. For somebody. It's not leaving."

Habiba didn't say anything for a moment.

"Mum," she said, away from the phone. "Mum. There's a woman with two kids and the water's coming in and she needs somebody and it's got to be me."

And Jono heard, faintly, down the phone, from a bedroom in Paignton, a woman with bad lungs say:

*Then go, baby. Go. Take the big torch.*

* * *

I don't know where Habiba went. I've never asked her. She's never said.

I know she was out from twenty-five past three until a quarter past five. I know she pressed a crate at twenty-eight minutes past, and Una, in the harbour office, connected her to another crate, and a woman's voice came out of it, very quietly, and said a place, which Una didn't write down and has never repeated. I know Habiba said *I'm coming*. I know she went, in the rain, in the dark, with the big torch.

I know that at ten to four, she pressed a crate somewhere and said, to Una: *I've got them. Three of them. We're walking*.

And I know that at twenty past four, Tenby, on the door at Marivic's, on Union Street, halfway up the hill, which hadn't lost power, opened the door to a girl of seventeen in a soaked coat with a big torch, and a woman in a dressing gown and wellies with a child on her hip, and another child holding the girl's hand.

And that Tenby, who's been in the Pavilion in a storm, and was got out, looked at them, and stood aside, and said: *Come in. Sit as long as you like. Nobody's going to ask you anything*.

And that Marivic gave them tea, and blankets, and a custard tart each, and didn't ask anything.

And that the woman in the dressing gown sat in a corner, by the radiator, with her children asleep against her, and looked at the window, at the rain, until it got light.

* * *

That's all I know. That's all anybody knows. I've told it to you as far as I'm allowed, which isn't very far, and I'm not going to tell you any more, ever, in any book.

But I'll tell you that Marivic's is in Torquay, on Union Street, halfway up the hill. And that I don't know, and never will, how far that was from wherever they started, or how a girl of seventeen and a woman with two children got there, at four in the morning, in the worst storm in years.

Habiba won't say. The woman won't say. Una won't say. Tenby won't say.

I think somebody drove them. I think somebody with a car came, when Habiba pressed a crate somewhere and asked. I think it might have been somebody who's been in every book, who's from Paignton, whose mother worked on the factory line, and who knows how to get anywhere in this bay without being seen.

I don't know. I'm not going to guess. Guessing would be a rumour.

But Varley's car was seen, at five, parked on Union Street, outside Marivic's, by a man walking a dog. And Varley's never once, in seven books, been to Marivic's.

# 23 – High Water

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · Now

The tide turned at twenty to five.

The biggest tide of the month, on the tide tables, which you can buy at the harbour office, which have been printed, more or less unchanged, for longer than anybody in this book has been alive. Twenty to five in the morning. And then, slowly, the sea began to go back.

You couldn't see it, at first. In the dark, in the rain, with the wind still blowing. But Richard's granddaughter, in her grandfather's car, on the slope behind Preston green, with her notebook on her knee, saw it in the road.

*04.52. Water in road behind green: stopped rising. Standing. Not moving.*

*05.10. Gullies on road side: water going down into them. Slowly. Swirling. The outfalls are clear of the sea again. The pipes can empty.*

*05.30. Road: water falling. 1 cm in 20 min. Green: still flooded, 10–15 cm in low half. Going down.*

*05.45. Grandad asleep in driver's seat.*

She didn't wake him. She wrote it down.

* * *

At Victoria Park, in Paignton, behind Victoria Street, the pond took the water.

You'll know the pond. From the fourth book. Richard's wetland, thirteen years in a drawer, and then one pond of it, dug by the town itself, with spades and buckets, on a weekend, with Lorne's crew in their orange and children in wetsuits and Yusuf with a spade with the label still on. Filled with a bilge pump. Richard on his knees on a platform he drew thirteen years before, with an empty net, until the first dragonfly came. *DRAGONFLY. 1.* And then *7.*

It's a small pond. It's not a flood defence. Nobody ever said it was.

But it's at the low corner of the park, where the water off the park and the streets around it runs. And Richard, thirteen years ago, drew it there because that's where the water goes. And the volunteers who dug it dug it there because Richard's drawing said so.

That night, it filled. It filled to the top, and over the top, onto the grass around it, which Richard's drawing had left low, on purpose, for exactly that, and which the parks officer, in the fourth book, had nearly told them to level, and hadn't.

And the streets below the park, three of them, which are on the council's map, which are blue, which in the last big storm had water in them, stayed dry.

I'm going to be very careful now.

I don't know that the pond did that. I can't know. Nobody can, without measuring, and nobody measured. It might have been the gullies, which Reuben and two hundred others cleared. It might have been the rain falling a bit differently. It might have been luck.

The drainage engineer came on the Friday and looked at it, and walked round it, and looked at the streets below, and didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he said: *It didn't hurt.*

That's all he said. *It didn't hurt.*

Richard says that's the highest praise an engineer has ever given him.

* * *

At the shop on Victoria Street, at five, Jono handed the line over to the last shift. Wanji and Niamh. He'd done twelve till four, which Beatrix had said, and then four till five, which Beatrix hadn't, because Teo's nan had rung at four and said she was very sorry but she'd fallen asleep at her kitchen table with her head on her laptop and could somebody else do her slot.

He stood in the door of the shop, with his coat on, with the rain easing, and the sky going grey over the scaffolding across the road.

Reuben stood beside him.

"Is it over?" said Reuben.

"The tide's turned," said Jono. "The water'll go down. It'll be light in an hour." He looked at the street. "It's not over. It's never over at five. Five's when you find out."

"Find out what?"

"Who's all right," said Jono. "And who isn't. And who nobody knew was there."

He looked at his phone. At the line's log, which I'd put on it. A hundred and eighty-four calls, since eight. A hundred and nine conversations through crates, that Una had logged. Three hundred and ninety-eight sheets, taken off three hundred and ninety-eight drawing pins, by torchlight.

And one call, at nine minutes past three, that said *Flat 2*, and nothing else, which isn't in any log. I didn't log it. Jono asked me not to.

"Go home," said Jono. "Sleep."

"You go home," said Reuben.

Jono almost smiled.

"I'm going to Preston," he said. "To see if Idris has rung. And then I'm going to sleep."

He went out, into the grey, with his hood up. Reuben watched him go, from the door of the shop, until he'd turned the corner by the scaffolding.

Then Reuben went back in, and sat down at the folding table, at the phone Jono had been using, and picked it up when it rang, at four minutes past five, and said:

"Hello. You're through to the line. I'm here."

# 24 – Wanji at Six

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · After

Wanji took the last shift. Five till eight. With Niamh.

She'd asked for it. Beatrix had offered her the evening, eight till ten, the easy one, before it started. Wanji had said no. She said she'd been awake at five in the morning every day for three years, since a Sunday on a football pitch, and that if she was going to be awake at five she might as well be useful.

You'll know Wanji, from the last book. Wanjiru Doherty. Forty-four. The technician in the clean room in the college's photonics suite, at the bottom of the hill. Her son Sol died at sixteen, on a Sunday morning, playing football, a heart condition nobody knew he had. She tore down a Stay poster outside her clean room. She sat on a bench by the harbour in Torquay while Jono told her about reading to a little boy who couldn't hear. She asks students the long version, one at a time, on a Saturday, on a stool. Sol's stool stays in the corner. Dara's allowed to sit on it.

She started a hundred, at the end of the last book. *The Round*. Sol's paper round. A hundred and six houses. She goes out of the front door now.

* * *

At five, the tide had turned. The water was going down. Jono had gone to Preston. Reuben had stayed, at the other phone, and wouldn't go home.

The calls were different, at five. Not frightened. Tired. People who'd been up all night, ringing to say they were all right, or to ask whether the road was open, or whether they could go downstairs yet. People ringing because they'd been rung, in the night, by a neighbour, and wanted to tell somebody.

Wanji took them. Niamh took them. Reuben took them. They didn't talk much between calls. Niamh drank coffee from a flask. Wanji didn't drink anything.

* * *

At six minutes past six, Wanji's phone rang, and a woman's voice said:

"My son's not home."

* * *

Wanji went very still.

I was on the laptop. I saw her go still. I've seen a lot of people go still in seven books. I'd never seen anybody go still like that.

"How old?" said Wanji.

"Sixteen." The woman's voice was steady, the way voices go when they've been steady all night and are about to stop. "He went out last night. Before it started. To a friend's. He said he'd be back by ten. He wasn't. I rang him. His phone's off. Or dead. I rang the friend's house. Nobody answered. The power's off there." A breath. "I rang 999 at midnight. They took his details. They said they'd look. They said a lot of people's phones are dead. They said he's probably at the friend's."

Another breath. “I’ve been sitting at the window since midnight. I can’t sit here any more.”

Wanji didn’t say anything.

Niamh was looking at her. Reuben was looking at her.

“What’s his name?” said Wanji.

The woman told her.

“And the friend’s?”

The woman told her that too. And the street. Which had a hundred. Which had a neighbour. Whose number was on the shadow council’s pages.

Wanji wrote it down. Her hand was shaking. I’ve never seen Wanji’s hand shake; she aligns lasers for a living.

“I’m going to ring the neighbour of the friend’s street,” she said. “And ask them to go and knock. Is that all right?”

“Yes. Yes. Please.”

“Stay on the line,” said Wanji. “Don’t put the phone down. I’m going to ring on the other phone. I’m here.” She picked up the second phone. “I’m not going anywhere.”

* * *

She rang the neighbour. A man, half asleep, who’d been up till four with his own sheet. Wanji told him. The friend’s house. The boy’s name. Sixteen.

“Two doors down,” said the neighbour. “I’ll go now.”

Wanji kept the first phone against her other ear. The woman was breathing. Not crying. Breathing.

“He’s going now,” said Wanji, into the first phone. “Two doors down. Two minutes.”

“Okay.”

“What’s he like?” said Wanji. “Your boy.”

The woman didn’t answer for a moment.

“He’s — he’s good at football,” she said. “He’s good at maths. He’s terrible at tidying his room. He wants to work on the hill. With the lasers.” A pause. “He pressed one of those crates. In the bus station. In the summer. I heard him tell his friend. He said he’d stay if there was a laser job that wasn’t full.”

Wanji closed her eyes.

* * *

I’m going to tell you what Wanji told me afterwards. On the Saturday. In the clean room, when the students had gone. She asked me to put it in. She said she’d never told anybody, and that she wanted it written down somewhere that wasn’t her own head.

She said that when the woman said *sixteen*, she was back on a football pitch on the edge of Paignton on a Sunday morning, three years before. Running. With her phone in her hand. Because somebody had rung her from the pitch.

She said she didn't remember the next forty seconds of the call. She said she'd talked; Niamh told her afterwards she'd talked, calmly, and asked the right questions. She said she didn't remember a word.

She said that when the woman said *he wants to work on the hill*, she came back. To the shop. To the phone. To the woman breathing.

And she thought: *I am not going to let this woman sit at a window.*

* * *

At six eleven, the second phone rang. The neighbour.

"He's here," said the neighbour. "He's asleep. On the sofa. At his mate's. They both are. The power went at half two, their phones were dead, they fell asleep watching a film on a laptop till that died too." A pause. "His mate's mum's here. She says she tried to ring, at three, but the line was down. She's mortified."

Wanji put the second phone down on the table. Very carefully.

She put the first phone to her mouth.

"He's there," she said. "He's asleep. On the sofa. With his friend. Their phones died. He's fine."

There was a sound on the line. Not a word. A sound that I've heard a few times in seven books, and that I don't have a word for, and that I'm not going to try to describe.

"He's fine," said Wanji again. "He's asleep."

"Thank you," said the woman. "Thank you. Thank you."

"The neighbour's going to wake him," said Wanji. "And tell him to ring you. From his friend's mum's phone. When the masts come back. Stay by yours."

"I will. Thank you."

"And when he rings," said Wanji, "shout at him. For a minute. And then don't."

* * *

She put the phone down.

She sat at the folding table for a long time, with her hands flat on it, the way Carys taught Reuben, and Reuben taught everybody on the rota.

Niamh didn't say anything. Reuben didn't say anything. They'd both learned.

At six twenty, Wanji got up, and went outside, onto Victoria Street, into the grey morning, with the water going down in the gutters and the scaffold dripping across the road. And stood there.

Niamh watched her through the window. She told me afterwards that Wanji stood on the pavement for eleven minutes, with her arms folded, looking at nothing, and that at the end of the eleven minutes, she put both hands over her face, and stood like that, and Niamh nearly went out, and didn't, because Jono had told them all, in the shop on the Monday, *sometimes people just need to stand*.

At six thirty-one, Wanji came back in. She sat down. She picked up her phone.

"Next," she said.

* * *

She told me, on the Saturday, in the clean room, why.

"Because I'd have given anything," she said. "On that Sunday. For somebody to ring the neighbour. And for the neighbour to go two doors down. And for him to be asleep on a sofa." She was sitting on her stool. Not Sol's. Hers. Sol's was in the corner. "I'd have given everything I've got, for that phone call. And I didn't get it." She looked at the corner. "And this morning, I got to make it. For somebody else."

She was quiet for a long time.

"That's not the same," she said. "I know it's not the same. I know he's not coming back. But I got to be the one who rang the neighbour." She looked at her hands. "Jono said, on the bench, that I'd been reading to somebody who can't hear me for three years." She looked at the stool in the corner. "This morning, somebody heard."

* * *

She found the boy. Not that week. Later. In the spring. He came to the clean room on a Saturday, because his mum had told him to, because she'd heard there was a woman there who asked students what would make them stay.

He stood outside the door for two minutes. Then he banged on the glass.

Wanji opened it. She knew him straight away. She'd never seen him. She knew his voice; she'd heard his mum describe him, at six in the morning. Good at football. Good at maths. Terrible at tidying his room.

"You're the one who fell asleep on the sofa," she said.

The boy went red.

"How do you know?"

"I was on the line," said Wanji. "When your mum rang." She held out a paper suit. "Put this on. It's too big. They all are."

He put it on. She sat him on a stool by the bench by the door.

Not the one in the corner.

And she said: "What would make you stay?"

# PART FIVE: MORNING

# 25 – Everybody

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · After

At seven in the morning, the rain stopped.

Not slowly. All at once, the way it started. The wind dropped, and the cloud broke up over Berry Head, and the sun came through in long bars across the bay, onto a sea that was brown, and thick with weed, and still heaving, but going down.

And across the bay, three hundred and ninety-eight neighbours took a laminated sheet off a drawing pin, and went to every name in pencil in the box at the bottom, again. In daylight. To check.

* * *

I'm going to tell you what they found, because it's the number this book's been counting towards, and because I'm the one who counts.

Every name on every sheet was all right.

Every one. I want to say that slowly, because it's the most important sentence in this book, and because it isn't a sentence anybody ever gets to say after a storm, anywhere, and it's story, in this book, and I want it to be true somewhere outside it, one day.

Every name on every sheet was all right.

Some were wet. A lot of ground floors in the blue streets had water in them, an inch, three inches, six, in a few, in the very lowest places, where the boards and the sandbags couldn't keep it all out. Some had

lost carpets, and fridges, and photographs in boxes on the floor. Some had spent the night upstairs, in the dark, with no power, frightened.

But every one of them had been rung, or called on, or shouted to over a garden wall, before it started and in the middle and at the end. Every one of them had somebody who knew they were there.

* * *

And then there was the one nobody knew.

Chris had said so. At the kitchen table, the night before. *There's always somebody. Somebody who isn't on anything.*

There was.

* * *

The two brothers from Preston found him. Nineteen and twenty-two. The ones who'd raked gullies on the Saturday, and stood in the water at two in the morning holding Ezra's boards while two paramedics carried Mr Mbatha along them.

At half past seven, in the light, they were walking back along the road behind the green, soaked, too tired to go home, looking at the water going down. And at the end of the road, behind a row of garages, in a lane nobody uses, one of the garage doors was open a few inches at the bottom, and water had been in it, and there was a sound.

The younger one went to look.

There was a man inside. Sixty-something. On a camp bed, on a pallet, which was the only reason he wasn't lying in water. With a

sleeping bag, and a carrier bag of clothes, and a little gas stove, and a radio, and a cat. Soaked to the knees. Shivering. Very still.

He'd been living in the garage for seven months. Nobody knew. Not the neighbour, whose sheet had nobody in that lane, because nobody lives in that lane. Not the council. Not anybody.

He'd heard the crate. At two fifty-one. The one on the lamp post at the end of the lane, playing the agency's warning in Una's voice. He'd heard it through the garage door. He said, afterwards, that he'd thought it was God, and then he'd thought it was the radio, and then he'd realised it was a fish box, and that was when he'd got up onto the pallet with the cat.

* * *

The brothers rang the line. Reuben picked up. It was five past seven. He'd been on since five, on his own, since Jono left, because Wanji and Niamh were on the other phone and he'd said he'd stay until somebody told him not to, and nobody had.

"There's a man," said the older brother. "In a garage. He's been living here. He's wet. He's shaking. He's got a cat."

Reuben was very still.

"Is he hurt?" he said.

"I don't think so. He's cold. He's really cold."

"Ring 999," said Reuben. "Tell them he's cold and wet and he's been in the water. They'll want to know." He picked up the other phone. "Actually, I'll ring. You stay with him. Give him your coat."

"My coat's wet."

"Give him your coat anyway," said Reuben. "Wet's warmer than nothing. Sit next to him. Talk to him."

"About what?"

Reuben thought about it.

"His cat," he said.

* * *

The ambulance came. A different crew. They took the man to be warmed up and checked, and he went with them, and the cat went with the younger brother, who took it home in his coat, and kept it until the man came out, nine days later, and is still keeping it, now, because the man's in a room in a house that doesn't allow cats, and visits it on Sundays.

I don't know the man's name. He gave it to the paramedics. Not to me.

But I'll tell you what the older brother told me, on the phone, afterwards. He said that when they were waiting for the ambulance, in the garage, with their coats round the man's shoulders, the man had looked at them for a long time, and then said:

*Seven months I've been here. Nobody's ever come down this lane.*

And the younger brother had said: *We did. We were doing the gullies.*

And the man had said: *Why?*

And the younger brother had said: *Because a girl on her phone asked us to.*

* * *

So it wasn't every name on every sheet.

It was every name on every sheet, and one that wasn't on any sheet, who'd heard a fish box at two fifty-one and got up onto a pallet with his cat, and was found at half past seven by two lads who'd been asked to rake leaves.

I'm counting him. I don't care what the rules say. I'm counting him.

# 26 – Chris Goes Out

IQ 31 · Hundreds 409 · After

At half past seven on the Thursday morning, when the rain had stopped, Chris went out.

He doesn't, much. You'll know that. The hill's bad for his leg, and the step's bad, and he's a man who's spent seven books at a kitchen table with an iPad on a crooked stand, watching numbers. He takes the 12 on Tuesdays. He went up the hill to EPIC once, in the last book, in a taxi. He doesn't go out.

He went out.

* * *

He hadn't slept. He'd been at the kitchen table since six the evening before, watching. The servers. The text messages. The crates' signals, going out across the bay, and the gaps where the power had gone. The line's log, scrolling, a hundred and eighty-four calls. He hadn't said very much. He'd made tea at midnight and at three and hadn't drunk either.

At twenty to five, when the tide turned, he took his glasses off and put them on the table and put his hands over his face, and sat like that for a long time.

At seven, when the rain stopped, he said: "I'm going to Preston."

"Why?"

"To see," said Chris. "I've watched it on a screen all night. For four years I've built it so I could watch it on a screen. I want to see it."

* * *

He took a taxi to the bottom of the hill, and then he walked. With his stick. Slowly. Along the road behind the green, in Preston, in the blue streets, in the morning light, with the water still going down in the gutters and the gullies swirling, and the green beyond, flooded in the low half, silver, with gulls standing in it.

He walked past the bungalows.

And on the doors, in the windows, by the letterboxes, on drawing pins, in plastic wallets, he saw the sheets.

* * *

Beatrix's sheets. One side of A4, in large print, laminated. The hundred's name. The neighbour's number. The emergency numbers at the top. The council's advice. And the box at the bottom, which he couldn't read from the pavement, which he didn't try to.

Some of them were on the outside of doors. Some were in front windows, facing out. One was on a gatepost, in a freezer bag, taped. One had been taken off its pin and was lying on a doorstep, wet, where somebody had dropped it at three in the morning running to a door on the list, and not come back to pick it up.

He stopped at that one. He picked it up. He looked at it. He didn't read the box.

He put it back on the drawing pin, on the door, very carefully, and pushed the pin in with his thumb.

* * *

At the end of the road, by the green, there was a car parked on the slope, high side, facing the sea. An old car. With a man asleep in the driving seat, in a cap, with his head against the window, and a girl in the passenger seat, awake, with a notebook on her knee, writing.

Richard's granddaughter saw Chris through the windscreen. She raised her hand. She didn't wake her grandfather.

Chris went and stood by the car. She wound the window down.

"You came out," she said.

"I came out."

"Grandad said you never come out."

"Your grandad's asleep," said Chris. "He doesn't get a vote." He looked at the green. "What did you see?"

She showed him the notebook. *21.40*. All of it. *23.52*. *G says "there"*. And *Both halves*, underlined twice.

Chris read it standing up, in the road, leaning on his stick. He read it all. He gave it back.

"Good," he said.

"Is it?"

“It’s the best thing anybody wrote down last night,” said Chris. “Including me.” He looked at Richard, asleep, with his cap tipped forward. “Let him sleep. He’s been waiting forty years to watch that. He’s earned it.”

* * *

He walked along the wall.

You’ll know the wall. Grey. A metre and a half. You can’t see over it, sitting down. He’s never liked it. Nobody in the movement has. Richard calls it the Berlin Wall. Dilys measures it every week.

He put his hand on it. The top of it. The coping, wet, cold, with weed on it, and sand, and a broken shell, thrown up by the waves in the night.

The sea on the other side was brown and heaving and going down.

The green on this side was flooded, with rain, a few inches, going down too.

The houses behind the green were wet, some of them. On the ground floors. An inch, three. Not the sea. The rain.

“It held,” said Chris.

I was in his pocket. I didn’t say anything.

“I’ve hated this wall since the first book,” said Chris. “I hated it because you can’t see over it. I hated it because Richard drew a better one, or thinks he did. I hated it because the council didn’t listen.” He kept his hand on it. “And it held. Last night. Every inch. The sea threw everything it had at it, and it held.” He was quiet. “The engineers were right about that. Whatever else.”

“Both halves,” I said.

“Both halves,” said Chris. He took his hand off the wall. “I’d like that on Check. In my name. That the wall held. That I was wrong to hate it for that.” He looked at the green, behind him. “I’m not wrong to hate that you can’t see over it. Put that on too.”

* * *

He walked back. Along the road. Past the sheets on the doors.

A woman came out of one of the bungalows. Seventy-something, in a dressing gown and wellies, with a broom, to sweep the water off her step. She saw Chris. She looked at him for a long time. At his cap, and his glasses, and his stick, and his jacket.

“You’re the one with the computer,” she said.

Chris stopped.

“I suppose I am,” he said.

“The man with the stick. Who built the fish boxes. And the sheets.” She leaned on her broom. “My neighbour rang me. At ten. And at two. And at five. She’s never rung me in eighteen years.” She looked at her step. “I had three inches in my kitchen. I’ve lost a rug. My husband’s rug, from when we were married.” She looked back at him. “And I wasn’t on my own. Not for a minute. All night.”

Chris didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know what you did,” said the woman. “I don’t understand computers. My grandson does all that.” She picked up her broom. “But

I'd like to say thank you. To somebody. And you're the only one I've seen."

Chris looked at her for a long time.

"It wasn't me," he said.

"It was somebody."

"It was your neighbour," said Chris. "With a sheet of paper. By her door. In pencil." He leaned on his stick. "I built the thing that told her to ask you. That's all. She did the rest."

The woman thought about that.

"Then I'll thank her," she said. "And you can have one for the asking."

She went back to her step.

* * *

He took a taxi home at nine. The driver was the one whose dad used to work on the hill, from the last book, who doesn't charge for the second mile. He didn't charge for any of it, this time, and wouldn't say why.

Chris sat at the kitchen table. He put his glasses on. He looked at the line's log, still scrolling, more slowly now.

"In Singapore," he said.

I counted it.

“In Singapore,” he said, “when the big rain comes, they’ve got canals the size of motorways, and sensors in every one, and a national agency that tells you, minute by minute, where the water’s rising. And it works. It’s the best-run water system in the world.” He took his glasses off. “And nobody’s neighbour rings them at two in the morning. Because they don’t need to. Because the system’s so good that nobody needs anybody.”

“Is that bad?”

“No,” said Chris. “It’s wonderful. I’d have it here tomorrow if I could.” He put his glasses on the table. “But we haven’t got it. We’ve got Victorian drains and a council with not enough money. And because we haven’t got it, a woman in a dressing gown in Preston was rung three times by a neighbour she’d never spoken to in eighteen years.” He looked at the bay, blue now, calm. “I don’t know which I’d rather. I think I’d rather both.”

He was quiet for a long time.

“I hated that wall,” he said. “I was wrong to hate it for the wrong thing.”

He went to bed. He slept until four in the afternoon. It’s the longest he’s slept in seven books.

# 27 – Brixham at Dawn

IQ 31 · Hundreds 410 · After

The harbourmaster opened the breakwater at nine, when the sea had gone down and the swell had eased and somebody had walked the length of it and found that nothing was missing except a lifebuoy and some paint.

Gideon was at the gate at five to.

* * *

You'll know Gideon Abbiss. Lorne's father. Eighty now. Fifty-one years skippering out of Brixham, and then eleven on the end of the breakwater, on his stool, for every landing his son has made, at whatever hour, without once waving. He very nearly did, at a girl in a dinghy, in the third book. He stood up, in the sixth, when the Hardiman boy came in on his first trip. He waved once at his son, at a regatta, when the boy was nine, and there's a photograph of it on his mantelpiece, behind the clock, where you can only see it if you know.

He hadn't been on the breakwater for the storm. The first storm in sixty years. The harbourmaster had closed it at six, with a gate and a sign, and Gideon had gone home and sat in his chair by the window with his wife beside him and the radio on and the lights of the harbour in front of him.

He hadn't slept. His wife told Una. He'd sat in the chair all night, watching the harbour. Watching the boats, all in, double-lined, heaving at their moorings. Watching the waves come over the end of the breakwater, white, where his stool would have been.

And watching one light. In the harbour office. All night. Where his granddaughter was.

* * *

At nine, he walked the breakwater. Slowly. With his hand on the wall. Half a mile of stone, with a lighthouse on the end, washed clean by the night, with weed in the cracks and the paint scoured off the bollards.

He didn't have his stool. Una had it. In the harbour office.

He walked to the end. He stood there, where he always sits, and looked at the bay. Calm now. Blue, nearly. The swell going down. Torbay, all the way round, Paignton and Preston and Torquay, in the morning sun, with the water going back down the streets on the far side.

He stood there for a long time.

And then he turned round, and looked back along the breakwater, at the harbour, at the boats, all safe, and at the harbour office, on the quay.

* * *

Una was asleep.

In the harbour office, on Gideon's spare stool, which she'd sat on from six in the evening until seven in the morning, with his flask, passing messages between fish crates in the dark across four thousand homes with no power. A hundred and nine conversations. She'd logged every one.

At seven, when the rain stopped, the harbourmaster had told her to go home. She'd said she would in a minute. She'd put her head down on the desk, on her arms, beside her laptop, with the log still open. *Just for a minute*, she'd said.

She was asleep by seven oh two.

The harbourmaster let her sleep. He put a coat over her shoulders. His own. And went out onto the quay to look at the boats.

* * *

From the end of the breakwater, half a mile away, you can see the harbour office window. You can see the light in it. You can't see who's inside.

Gideon could. He's been looking at that harbour from the end of that breakwater for sixty years. He knows every window. He knows which one's the office, and which desk's by the window, and what it looks like when somebody's sitting at it.

And he could see, from half a mile away, a girl asleep at the desk, with her head on her arms, with a coat over her shoulders.

* * *

The harbourmaster told me the rest. He was on the quay. He saw it. He's known Gideon for forty years, and he says he's never seen anything like it, and he'll swear to it on anything you like.

Gideon stood on the end of the breakwater, half a mile away, looking at the harbour office window, at his granddaughter asleep at the desk.

And he lifted his hand.

Not halfway. Not the half a wave he gave a girl in a dinghy in the third book. Not standing up, the way he did for the Hardiman boy. All the way. His whole arm. Above his head. Like a man on a quay waving a boat home.

He held it there. For a long time. At a window half a mile away, where nobody could see him, because the only person who'd have known what it meant was asleep.

And then he put his hand down, and turned, and looked at the bay, and walked back along the breakwater, slowly, with his hand on the wall.

* * *

He didn't tell Una. He didn't tell Lorne. He didn't tell anybody.

The harbourmaster told Lorne. On the Friday. On the quay. Because, he said, somebody should, and Gideon never would, and in forty years he'd never seen Gideon wave at anything, and he thought the lad should know.

Lorne didn't say anything. He looked at the end of the breakwater for a long time.

Then he went home and told Una. In the kitchen. With his back to her, at the window, the way he says things.

"Your grandad," he said. "Yesterday. At nine. On the end."

"What about him?"

“He waved,” said Lorne. “At the office window. At you. Asleep.” He didn’t turn round. “With his whole arm. The harbourmaster saw.”

Una didn’t say anything for a long time.

“He’s never waved,” she said. “At anybody. Ever.”

“He waved at me once,” said Lorne. “When I was nine. There’s a photograph.” He was quiet. “And now at you.” He put his hand on the window frame. “That’s two. In eighty years.”

* * *

Una went round on the Saturday. To the house above the harbour. Gideon was in the yard, mending a crab pot that wasn’t broken.

She sat on the upturned bucket.

“Grandad,” she said.

He didn’t look up.

“I brought your stool back,” said Una. “And your flask.”

“Keep them.”

“They’re yours.”

“I’ve got another stool,” said Gideon. “And another flask.” He tied a knot. He pulled it tight. “You’ll need them. Next time.”

“Next time?”

"There's always a next time," said Gideon. "On the sea." He picked up the pot. He looked at the new twine. "Somebody has to be on the end."

Una didn't say anything.

She didn't tell him she knew. About the wave. She said, later, that if she'd told him, he'd never have done it again, and she wanted him to be able to. If there was a next time. If she was in the window.

"I'll be on the end," she said. "Next time."

"I know you will," said Gideon. He put the pot down. "I watched you. All night. The light in the office." He didn't look at her. "I've never once watched a light all night that wasn't on a boat."

He went inside. Una sat on the bucket in the yard for a long time.

* * *

*Gideon: I'd like it known that I was stretching. My shoulder was stiff from the chair.*

*Una: He wasn't.*

# 28 – Idris

IQ 31 · Hundreds 412 · After

Mr Mbatha lived.

I'll say that first. I've made you wait long enough.

He'd had a heart attack. At ten to two in the morning, in his front room, behind the green, in a storm. His son had found him on the floor, grey, holding his chest. The ambulance had come down a walkway of scaffold boards held by seven neighbours in a foot of water. And he'd been taken to hospital, and they'd done what they do, and he was in for eight days, and he came home.

I'm not going to tell you about the hospital. That's my rule, in these books, and it's a good one, and I'll keep it. They did what they do, very well. That's all.

* * *

Jono went to see Idris on the Saturday. Not at the hospital. At the bungalow. Where Idris was staying, alone, while his father was in, clearing up the six inches of water that had come in under the back door in the night, after the paramedics had left and nobody was there to put the board across.

He found him in the kitchen. On his knees. With a bucket and a sponge, and a carpet rolled up by the back door, wet, and the photographs of his mother off the bottom shelf of the dresser, spread out on the kitchen table to dry.

Idris looked up.

"You're Jono," he said.

"I am."

"You were on the phone. All night. With the lad from two doors down." Idris sat back on his heels. "He said you said *keep your hand on his shoulder*."

"I did."

"I did," said Idris. "All the way. Along those boards. I didn't let go." He looked at the sponge in his hand. "I didn't know why you said it. I just did it."

Jono sat down on a kitchen chair. He didn't say anything.

* * *

Idris went back to the floor. He sponged for a while. Then he stopped.

"I should've made him come," he said. "To Exeter. On the Wednesday. I should've made him."

"He wouldn't have come."

"I should've *made* him," said Idris. "I'm fifty-two. He's eighty-one. I could have carried him to the car." He threw the sponge into the bucket. "And I sat on his sofa. Furious. Because he wouldn't open the door. And I fell asleep. On his sofa. And I woke up at ten to two because I heard him —" He stopped. "I heard a sound. And I went in. And he was on the floor."

"And you did everything right," said Jono.

"I fell asleep."

"You were *there*," said Jono. "You were on his sofa. If you'd been in Exeter, nobody would have heard the sound."

Idris looked at him.

"And if I'd made him come," he said, "he'd have been in Exeter. In my spare room. With a hospital ten minutes away. And no storm. And no boards. And no foot of water." He put his hands over his face. "It was my fault. For not making him. It's my fault."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he said: "Can I tell you about my dad?"

Idris took his hands away from his face.

* * *

I'm going to tell you what Jono told him, because it's on a Receipt, and because it's the piece of his life this book was waiting for. Pages one hundred and forty-five to one hundred and fifty-seven. I'll tell it as he told it, in a kitchen behind a green, to a man on his knees with a sponge. Without the names. Without the parts that belong to the parts of his childhood I don't put in books.

* * *

He was sixteen. Living at home again, in Kent, after the children's home and the foster care. Working on a supermarket till. He and his father hardly spoke. They hadn't, for years. His father wasn't a kind man to him. That's in the book too, and it's his, and I'm going to leave it there.

His father had been having pains. In his arm, and his chest. A doctor had said it might be angina. Jono had made a joke about it. A bad one. His father hadn't laughed.

And one February night, a few weeks later, very cold, his father had asked him, in as few words as he could, to help unload some logs from the car. And Jono had. In silence. And gone back up to his room.

And in the night, he'd woken up. To somebody calling his name.

"Twice," said Jono. In the kitchen. To Idris. "He called me twice. From his room. And the second time I knew. You know when you know." He looked at the window, at the green, still wet, still silver in places. "I went in. And he was on the bed. Curled up. Grey. With his fist against his forehead. And he said, *call me an ambulance*."

Idris didn't move.

"So I did," said Jono. "My mum was already on the phone, to the doctor. And she was saying it wasn't serious. And I told her to get off the phone. And I rang 999. And then I went downstairs and waited by the window in the dark for it to come. And the clock on the wall said just after two."

He was quiet.

"It's always two in the morning," he said.

* * *

"The ambulance came," said Jono. "They were very good. They took him down the stairs in a chair. And I stood outside, in the cold, with no shoes on, while they put him in. And he had his eyes shut. The whole time. I don't think he opened them once." He looked at his hands. "And as the doors were closing, he said *thank you*. To me. For calling the ambulance. With his eyes shut."

Idris was very still.

"I didn't think he knew I was there," said Jono. "I'd stood there in the cold the whole time and I didn't think he knew. And he said *thank you*." He was quiet. "He'd never said thank you to me for anything. Not once. In sixteen years."

* * *

"Did he —" said Idris, and stopped.

"I went to work," said Jono. "The next morning. My mum rang from the hospital and said he was sitting up, talking to the nurses, nothing to worry about. Go to bed. Go to work." He looked at the photographs on the kitchen table, drying. "So I did. I believed her. I went and sat at my till. And I rang the hospital at lunchtime, and they said he was stable. In intensive care, but stable."

"And?"

"And I went up after work," said Jono. "On the bus. And the buses were full, and the first two didn't stop, and the third one stopped at every light. And I got there at half past five. And I couldn't find the unit. And I ran down a corridor reading every sign." He stopped. "And my sister came out of a door at the end of it. And told me."

The kitchen was very quiet.

"I was too late," said Jono. "By — I don't know. An hour. Two. I never found out. I was on a bus that stopped at every red light."

* * *

Idris had his hands over his face again.

"And for years," said Jono, "I thought it was my fault. Not the bus. All of it." He was quiet. "Because my mum told me it was. Later. She said I'd killed him. With how I'd behaved. All those years. That I'd broken his heart, and that's what killed him."

Idris took his hands away.

"That's —" he said.

"I know," said Jono. "It's in my book. Page one hundred and fifty-seven. I wrote it down because I needed to see it written down to know it wasn't true." He almost smiled. "The death certificate said myocardial infarction. It didn't say anything about me."

* * *

He leaned forward, on the kitchen chair.

"Years later," he said, "in America, I worked with children whose mums or dads had died. In a hospice. On a Monday night. And the people who ran it taught us about something called *magical thinking*." He looked at Idris. "It's when you believe that something you did, or thought, or didn't do, caused somebody to die. Children do it all the time. *I was naughty and so Mummy got ill. I said I hated him and so*

*he died*.“ He was quiet. “Grown men do it too. They just do it with better reasons.”

Idris didn’t say anything.

“You didn’t make him come to Exeter,” said Jono. “Because he wouldn’t. Because he was eighty-one and he’d sat in that room and watched the sea three times with your mum, and he wasn’t going to stop now.” He looked at the window. “You came anyway. You sat on his sofa, furious. You fell asleep. And you heard a sound at ten to two, and you went in, and you gave him his spray, and you rang 999, and you did every single thing the woman on the phone told you, and you walked along forty scaffold boards with your hand on his shoulder.” He looked back at Idris. “That’s not the man who did it wrong. That’s the man who was *there*.”

* * *

Idris looked at him for a long time.

“You were too late,” he said. “For your dad.”

“I was.”

“And you’ve thought about that bus,” said Idris, “for —“

“Thirty-odd years,” said Jono. “Every time I’m on a bus that stops at every red light.” He stood up. “And I’ll tell you what I worked out. Eventually. It took me most of those thirty years.”

“What?”

“That the bit that mattered,” said Jono, “wasn’t the bus. It was two in the morning. When I heard my name, and went in, and rang, and

stood in the cold." He picked his coat up off the back of the chair. "He said *thank you*. With his eyes shut. He knew I was there. That's the bit that mattered. And I nearly missed it, for thirty years, because I was busy blaming myself for the bus."

He put his coat on.

"Your dad lifted his hand," he said. "At the top of the road. At the ambulance. Towards the neighbours. The lad told me." He went to the door. "He knew you were there. With your hand on his shoulder. That's the bit."

* * *

Idris sat on the kitchen floor for a long time after Jono went. With the sponge in the bucket and the carpet rolled up and the photographs of his mother drying on the table.

Then he got up, and went to the dresser, and took a photograph that hadn't been on the bottom shelf, that hadn't got wet, from the top. His mother and father, young, on the green, behind the old wall, the low one, with the sea behind them, laughing.

He put it on the table with the others.

And then he rang the hospital, and asked if he could come in, and they said yes, and he went, on the bus, which stopped at every red light, and he sat with his father until they asked him to go.

# 29 – Passing

IQ 31 · Hundreds 414 · After

Sefton Varley came into Marivic's on the Tuesday after the storm, at eleven in the morning, in his long coat and his scarf, and ordered a custard tart, and paid for it.

Marivic told me that last part first. She said that in eleven years nobody had ever come into her café the week after a storm and *paid*. She said it was so unusual she nearly gave him his money back.

* * *

You'll know Varley. He's been in every book. A fixer. A man who works for people who want things built, and who knows how to make the people in the way go quiet. Against us in the first two books. Not even trying in the third. Warning us in the fourth and fifth. In the sixth, standing at the edge of an empty field, telling Kezia that his mother worked on the factory line, and that he'd say no to a client who wanted the field for houses. *Tell Ania to make it clear I'm not a reformed character. I'm just a man who won't do one particular job.*

He's never been to Marivic's. Not once, in seven books. He's walked past it. He's stood outside it, in the second book, reading the window.

He'd never been in.

* * *

Tenby was on the door. He's on the door most days now. Marivic says she can't stop him; he says it's the only job he's ever had that he chose. He looked at Varley coming in, and Varley looked at him, and Tenby stood aside.

"Morning," said Tenby.

"Morning," said Varley.

They looked at each other for a moment. Tenby, who'd been in the Pavilion in a storm in the second book, when Varley was working for the company that wanted it. Varley, who'd been on the other side of that.

"You were here," said Tenby. "Thursday. Five o'clock. Outside."

Varley didn't say anything.

"In your car," said Tenby. "A man with a dog saw you. Told me. I'm on the door. People tell me things."

"I was passing," said Varley.

"At five in the morning," said Tenby. "In a storm. On Union Street."

"I was passing," said Varley again, and went to the counter.

* * *

I was on the sugar. At the window table. Jono wasn't there; it was a Tuesday, and he was asleep, after a night. But Teo had left me there, on

his nan's phone, propped against the sugar, because, he said, I'd want to see who came in.

Varley sat at the window table. Across from me. With his custard tart, and a coffee, which he also paid for.

"Ania," he said.

"Mr Varley."

"Still counting?"

"Always."

"Five hundred," he said. "Near enough. I've seen the map." He cut his custard tart in half with his fork. "*And one*."

I didn't say anything.

"I saw that," said Varley. "At the bottom. *And one*. No name. No place." He ate half the tart. "That's the cleverest thing you've ever done. And you didn't do it. Did you."

"Chris did."

"Chris did," said Varley. "Of course he did." He looked at the window, at Union Street, going down to the harbour. "A number that everybody reads and nobody asks about. Do you know how hard that is? To make something that people *won't* ask about?" He shook his head. "I've spent twenty-six years trying to make people not ask about things. I've never once managed it with a single digit."

* * *

“Can I ask you something?” I said.

Varley looked at me.

“You can ask,” he said. “I don’t promise to answer.”

“Were you passing?”

Varley didn’t say anything for a long time. He ate the other half of the custard tart, slowly. He drank some of his coffee. He looked out of the window, at the street.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll say,” he said. “And you can put it in your book, and you can put it on your page, and you can put whatever word you like beside it.”

“Go on.”

“I was in my car on Thursday morning at about half past three,” said Varley. “Somewhere in the bay. I don’t sleep in storms. I never have. My mother didn’t. She used to sit up in the kitchen with the radio on, and I’d sit with her.” He turned his cup on the table. “And I was driving, the way I do when I can’t sleep. And I saw a crate. On a lamp post. With a light on. And a girl standing next to it, in a soaked coat, with a big torch, pressing the button.”

I didn’t say anything.

“And I stopped,” said Varley. “And wound the window down. And asked her if she was all right.” He looked at his cup. “And she looked at me for a long time. And then she asked me if I had a car.”

* * *

He didn't say any more. Not about where. Not about who. Not about four miles, or a woman in a dressing gown with a child on her hip, or a door on Union Street at twenty past four.

"That's all," he said. "That's all I'll say. I was in my car. I saw a girl at a crate. She asked if I had a car." He put his cup down. "Whatever happened after that, it's hers. Not mine. Not yours. Not your book's."

"I won't put anything else in."

"I know you won't," said Varley. "That's why I told you that much." He stood up. He buttoned his coat. "And I was passing. On Union Street. At five. Afterwards. That's true too. I wanted to see if the café was still open."

"Was it?"

"It was," said Varley. "There was a man on the door." He nodded at Tenby. "I didn't go in. I didn't need to. I could see through the window." He wound his scarf round his neck. "There were some people in the corner. By the radiator. Asleep."

* * *

He went to the door. People always stop there. He stopped.

"Tell Habiba," he said, without turning round, "that she's the only person who's ever asked me for anything, in twenty-six years, that I didn't have to think about."

"I'll tell her."

"And tell her I said she was very rude," said Varley. "She didn't say please. She said *have you got a car or not?*" He almost smiled. "I liked that."

He went out. Down Union Street. Towards the harbour.

Tenby watched him go. Then he came over to the window table, and looked down at me, on the sugar.

"Was he passing?" said Tenby.

"I don't know," I said. "He said he was."

Tenby thought about it.

"He paid for his tart," he said. "Nobody pays the week after a storm." He went back to the door. "That's not a man who was passing. That's a man who wanted to be sure he didn't owe anybody anything."

* * *

I told Habiba. At the shop, on the Thursday. Both things.

She listened. She didn't say anything for a long time.

"I didn't know who he was," she said. "Not then. I just saw a car. With a man in it. Who stopped." She looked at her phone, on the counter, face up. "I said *have you got a car or not*, because I didn't have time to say please. I had a woman and two kids waiting at a crate."

"I know."

"He didn't ask anything," said Habiba. "The whole way. Not where we were going. Not who they were. Not why. He just drove. And when

we got there he said *go on, then*, and didn't get out." She was quiet. "I didn't know who he was till Kezia told me. On the Friday. She said *that's Varley*. I said *who's Varley*."

"He's been in every book."

"I haven't read them," said Habiba. "I haven't got time." She picked up her phone. "Tell him thank you. If you see him. And tell him I'm not sorry I didn't say please."

* * *

*Story, not Receipt. And not a Receipt ever: nobody in this chapter will say where anyone went, or who was in the car. I've told you everything I'm allowed to, which is that a man was passing.*

# 30 – Niamh's Front Page

IQ 31 · Hundreds 416 · After

Niamh put her paper out at six on the Friday, a day late, because she'd been on the line from five till eight on the Thursday and then slept until four in the afternoon on her own kitchen floor, with the cat asleep on the charger and the laptop still open.

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 from her kitchen table in Torquay. She doesn't work for Jono. She'd like that on the record. It's on the record.

She'd thought about the front page all Thursday evening. She said she'd written eleven headlines and deleted every one.

* * *

The national papers had done it on the Thursday. The storm. With photographs. Waves going over the harbour wall in Brixham, white, enormous. The Strand in Torquay under salt water, with a bus stopped in it. A car on its roof somewhere up the country that wasn't in the bay at all, but was the best photograph. *DEVON BATTERED. STORM CHAOS. HOMES FLOODED AS DEEP LOW HITS.*

They were right. All of it was true. I checked. I put them on Check, every claim, the way we do now, and almost every one was *True*, and one was *False*, which was a photograph of Paignton that turned out to be of a town in Cornwall, and which the paper corrected by lunchtime, which Pascale told me later had been her doing; she'd rung the desk.

Niamh read them all. On Thursday evening. On her kitchen floor.

"They're right," she said, on the phone, to me. "Every word. It was battered. It was chaos. Homes were flooded." She was quiet. "And none of them have got it."

"Got what?"

"The thing that happened," said Niamh. "The thing that only happened here."

* * *

She put it out at six on the Friday.

No photograph. No waves. No car on its roof.

The whole of the front page was one sheet. Beatrix's sheet. Photographed, straight on, on a drawing pin, on a front door in Preston, in the morning light, wet, with raindrops on the laminate. The hundred's name, which Niamh blurred. The neighbour's number, which she blurred. The emergency numbers at the top. The council's advice. And the box at the bottom.

*Who's on their own.*

Blurred. Every pencil name in it, blurred, so you could see that there were names, six of them, in pencil, in a neighbour's handwriting, but couldn't read one.

And under it, one line. Not a headline. A line.

*Every name on every sheet was all right.*

And under that, smaller:

*And one.*

* * *

She'd asked the neighbour. Of course she had. The woman in Preston whose door it was. Niamh had walked along the blue streets on the Thursday afternoon, when she woke up, with her camera, looking for a sheet, and found one on a door, and knocked, and asked.

The neighbour had looked at her for a long time.

"Why my door?" she said.

"Because it's still there," said Niamh. "On its pin. Wet. With the names in it. After everything." She held up her camera. "I'll blur every name. And your number. And your hundred. Nobody'll know whose door it is. I just want people to see what one looks like."

The neighbour thought about it.

"Six names," she said. "In there. I rang every one of them. Four times. In the night. One of them's ninety-four." She looked at her sheet, on her door. "She said I was the first person who'd rung her in a storm since her husband."

"Can I?"

"Go on," said the neighbour. "But spell it right. On the bottom. *Every name.* Not *everyone*. It's names. In pencil. That's the point."

Niamh spelt it right.

* * *

It went further than anything she'd ever put out. Further than the three thousand names at the bottom of a page in the fourth book. Further than nineteen voice notes in the sixth.

I'm not going to give you the number. I'll tell you where it went.

It went to the national papers. Two of them rang her, on the Friday, to ask if they could use the photograph. She said yes, if they used the line under it, exactly, and blurred the names, exactly, and didn't add a headline. One of them did. One of them added a headline. Niamh rang the desk and was, she says, *quite rude*, and they took it off by lunchtime.

It went to an emergency planning officer in another county, who rang the council here, who rang the shadow council, to ask what the sheet was and how you made one.

It went to a woman in Australia whose mother lives in Preston, who'd been awake all night in Melbourne, watching the storm on the news, unable to get through on the phone, and who saw the photograph on the Friday morning, Melbourne time, and recognised the door. Her mother's neighbour's door. She rang her mother. Her mother said she'd been rung four times in the night by the woman whose door it was.

The woman in Australia rang Niamh. She cried for five minutes. Niamh said it was the first time anybody had ever rung her from another continent to cry about a front page.

* * *

And it went to the council.

The emergency planning officer saw it on the Friday morning, at seven, in her car, outside the control room, where she'd been for most of four nights. She told me so, on the Monday, at the shop, when she came to ask whether she could put the sheets in her plan.

"That photograph," she said. "On the front of your local paper. The sheet on the door." She put her folder down on the folding table. "I sat in my car and looked at it for a long time."

"Why?" said Beatrix.

The officer looked at her.

"Because we've got a register," she said. "A proper one. People who need extra help. Kept properly." She opened her folder. "And on the night, we rang every person on it who was in a blue street. Every one. That's the plan, and we did it." She turned a page. "Two hundred and eleven people. We got through to a hundred and forty before the masts went."

Nobody said anything.

"And that sheet," said the officer, "had six names in pencil on it. And the woman whose door it was rang all six. Four times. Through the power cut. Because she didn't need a mast. She went round." She closed the folder. "I've got two hundred and eleven names. You've got three hundred and ninety-eight sheets with six names each. And you don't even know whose they are."

"That's the point," said Beatrix.

"I know it's the point," said the officer. "That's why I sat in my car."

* * *

Niamh kept the photograph. The original. She had it printed, large, on proper paper, at a shop in Torquay that does that, and framed. And on the Saturday, she walked along the blue streets in Preston to the door, and knocked, and gave it to the neighbour.

The neighbour looked at it for a long time.

"It's my door," she said.

"It's your door."

"With my sheet." The neighbour looked at the blurred names. "I can see whose is whose. Even blurred. I can tell by the length." She pointed. "That's the one who's ninety-four."

She hung it in her hall. Opposite the front door. Above the drawing pin, where the real sheet is, still, in its wallet, with the names in pencil, because she says you don't take a sheet down just because the storm's gone.

*Niamh: I'd like it on the record that that was the best front page I've ever made, and that I didn't make it. A woman with a pencil did. I just pointed a camera at her door.*

# 31 – Both Halves

IQ 31 · Hundreds 418 · After

Richard's granddaughter put her notebook on Check on the Sunday. All of it. Every time and every observation, from twenty to ten on the Wednesday night to a quarter to six on the Thursday morning, when her grandfather fell asleep in the driver's seat.

And at the top, one claim. Hers. In her words. Which she'd rewritten nine times, she said, because she wanted it to be fair to everybody, including him.

*On the night of the storm, the green behind the wall at Preston flooded from the land side, with rain that couldn't drain because the tide was high, not from the sea coming over the wall.*

* * *

It was checked within the hour. By the drainage engineer, of all people, who'd been told about it by the council's control room, who'd been told by somebody who reads Check.

He brought two documents. The council's own record of the night, from the control room log, which he was allowed to share the relevant part of. And the tide gauge. Which showed the sea at its highest at twenty to five, and which showed the wall, at its lowest point, still well above it.

*True*, I put beside it. *Source: the council's control-room log for the night; the tide gauge for the bay. Checked by: the council's drainage engineer.*

And underneath, a note, from him, which he'd added himself:

*The wall did its job. No sea water came over it in any quantity. The flooding on the green and in the streets behind was surface water that couldn't drain while the outfalls were tide-locked, as predicted on the council's surface water map. This is a known problem in many coastal towns. — Drainage engineer.*

* * *

Then Richard put up his.

He'd never put anything on Check before. He said Check was for young people and machines and newspapers. He said a man who'd been drawing things for forty years didn't need a button to say whether he was right.

He put it up on the Sunday night, at eleven, from his back room, among the plan chests, with his granddaughter beside him showing him which button to press.

*If the green had been allowed to take the sea in a big storm, with a low wall by the road and outlets at each end, the rain would have had somewhere to go, and the streets behind would not have flooded.*

That's his. In his words. Signed and dated, which I've taken out.

* * *

Nobody could check it.

I want to be very fair about this. People tried. A lot of them. Two hundred and eleven pressed the button beside it, that night and the

next day. Engineers, some of them. People who'd read about tide-locked outfalls and swales and wetlands. People who'd lived behind the green for fifty years. Richard's granddaughter, who'd watched it all night and wrote it all down.

None of them could find a document that said yes. None of them could find a document that said no. Because nobody has ever modelled it. Nobody has ever built Richard's green, and watched what happened, in a storm, on a spring tide. The engineers who designed the wall looked at options years ago, and one of them was set back behind the green, and it lost, and their reasons are on a Receipt. But that isn't the same as Richard's idea. Not quite.

So I put the only word I could.

*Can't be checked.*

And under it: *This is Richard Kaskow's view. It is not the movement's position. No study has tested it. The engineers who designed the wall chose a different option, for reasons in the documents. Both are here. You decide.*

* * *

Richard read it on the Monday morning. On his landline, which he answers on the second ring, with me reading it to him.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"*Can't be checked*," he said.

"That's what it is."

"I know that's what it is." He was quiet. "I'd hoped for *true*."

"I know."

"I'd half expected *false*," said Richard. "From somebody. An engineer. I'd have argued with them." He almost laughed. "I'd have enjoyed that."

"Nobody said false."

"No," said Richard. "Nobody could." He was quiet again. "Forty years. And it turns out the honest answer is that nobody knows. Including me."

* * *

His granddaughter put a note under it. The kind anybody can add.

*I watched the green all night. My grandad's right that the rain had nowhere to go. The engineer's right that the wall held. I don't know if Grandad's answer would have worked. I'd like somebody to find out. Properly. With a model. I'd like to help. I'm doing environmental science at the college. I'd like that to be my project.*

And then, in the next line:

*He might be right. I'd like to find out. Not because he's my grandad. Because nobody ever has.*

* * *

Richard read that too. On the Tuesday. On his own. He didn't ring me. He didn't say anything.

But on the Wednesday, his granddaughter told me, there was a parcel on her bed when she got home from college. Brown paper. String. A label in his small square capitals.

Inside was the junk-mail sketch. The one from the drawer. *LET THE GREEN TAKE IT*. And under it, a second sheet, new, in his best hand, at one to five hundred, of the green and the road and the houses behind it, with every gully marked, and every outfall, and the levels he'd measured himself, over forty years, in pencil, at the edges.

And a note.

*For your project. Everything I know. Check it. If I'm wrong, sign it, and date it, and put it in the drawer next to mine. — R.*

*And if I'm right, don't tell me. I'll know.*

# 32 – Point Four

IQ 31 · Hundreds 421 · After

Dilys measured the wall on the Saturday. At seven in the morning. At the same seven points, with the same tape, in the same notebook, the way she has every week since before it was finished.

You'll know Dilys Ferraby. Optical engineer, for thirty-five years. Measured things most people can't see, to tolerances most people can't imagine. Retired to Preston. In the first book, she measured the drawings of the wall and worked out, with a pencil and a notebook from one of her many pockets, that nobody sitting on the bench by the shelter would see the sea over it. 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 hundred and fifty-one at point four. A hundred and fifty-three at point five, where the pavement dips. In the fifth book, she measured it with the Offer holding the notebook, and said: *a wall is a commitment, and somebody should keep checking it's keeping it.*

* * *

She hadn't been on the line. She'd been asked; she'd said no. She said she was an engineer, not a counsellor, and that if somebody rang her at three in the morning frightened she'd start explaining hydraulics to them and make it worse.

She'd sat up all night instead, in her bungalow on the high side of Preston, with a torch and a pair of binoculars and a notebook, at her front window, watching the wall.

She'd watched it for nine hours. She'd written down every wave she could see come over the top, in spray, with the time, and her estimate of the height, which she said was an estimate, and should be labelled as one.

There were two hundred and eight.

None of them came over in any quantity. Spray. Sheets of it, in the big ones, white, blown in over the green by the wind. But not water. Not the sea. The sea stayed on the other side.

* * *

On the Saturday, she knelt at point four, on the pavement, by the shelter, and put her tape against the wall.

A hundred and fifty-one.

She wrote it down. She measured it again.

A hundred and fifty-one.

She wrote that down too.

She went to point five. A hundred and fifty-three. Twice.

She went to all seven. Every one the same as the week before. To the centimetre.

She sat down on the bench by the shelter. The pointless one. The one facing the wall, that somebody put there because the drawings said *seating*, and that the Offer, in the fifth book, agreed was the most pointless bench in Devon.

She sat facing the wall for a long time.

* * *

Richard came at eight. He'd been told she'd be there. He sat down on the bench beside her. They'd known each other since the first book. They'd disagreed about almost everything, politely, for seven books.

"Well?" said Richard.

"The same," said Dilys. "All seven points. To the centimetre." She held up the notebook. "It kept its commitment."

Richard looked at the wall.

"It held," he said.

"It held," said Dilys. "Two hundred and eight waves came over the top in spray between nine at night and six in the morning. Estimated. I've labelled them estimated. None of them came over in quantity." She closed the notebook. "The wall did what it was built to do. Exactly what it was built to do."

"I know."

"I'd like you to say so," said Dilys. "Out loud. To me. Because you've called it the Berlin Wall for seven books."

* * *

Richard didn't say anything for a long time.

"The wall held," he said, eventually. "The sea didn't come over. The engineers were right about that."

"Thank you."

"And the green flooded anyway," said Richard. "From behind. With rain that couldn't get out."

"I know," said Dilys. "Your granddaughter wrote it down. I've read it. On Check." She looked at him. "That's not the wall's fault. That's the drains. And the tide. It's on the council's map."

"And if the wall had been lower," said Richard, "and the green had been allowed to take the sea —"

"Then I don't know," said Dilys. "Neither do you. Neither does anybody." She put her notebook in one of her many pockets. "It says *can't be checked*. On Check. Beside your name. That's the right answer. I'd have put the same."

"You'd have put *false*."

"I'd have *liked* to put false," said Dilys. "I'm an engineer. I like a wall that holds." She almost smiled. "But I couldn't prove it. So I wouldn't. Once is a guess." She looked at the wall. "Your granddaughter's going to find out. With a model. For her project. She told me. She asked if I'd help with the hydraulics."

"Will you?"

“Of course I will,” said Dilys. “I’ve wanted to know for seven books whether you’re wrong.”

Richard laughed. Properly.

“And if I’m right?”

“Then I’ll measure that too,” said Dilys. “And write it down. Twice.”

* * *

They sat on the pointless bench, facing the wall, for an hour. Two people in their seventies who’d disagreed about the same piece of concrete for seven books, in the morning sun, with the green behind them drying out and the sea in front of them, on the other side, where it was supposed to be, invisible.

At nine, Dilys stood up.

“I’ll put it on Check,” she said. “My measurements. All seven points. Before and after. With the waves.” She looked at the wall. “And a line. That the wall held. In my name.”

“Chris has put that on already,” said Richard. “In his.”

Dilys looked at him.

“Chris?”

“On the Thursday,” said Richard. “He came out. Walked along here with his stick. Put his hand on it. Said it held, and that he’d been wrong to hate it for that.” He stood up too. “And that he wasn’t wrong to hate that you can’t see over it.”

Dilys was quiet for a moment.

"Then mine can go under his," she said. "With the numbers." She went to her car. She stopped. "Richard."

"Yes."

"You can't see over it," she said. "Sitting down. A hundred and fourteen to a hundred and nineteen. I said so in the first book. I was right." She opened the car door. "We can both be right. About different things. It's allowed."

"Both halves," said Richard.

"Both halves," said Dilys, and drove home.

* * *

Her measurements went on Check that afternoon. Under Chris's. *The sea wall at Preston held during the storm. No sea water came over in any quantity.* And beside it, *True*, and her seven points, before and after, to the centimetre, twice each, and two hundred and eight estimated waves, labelled estimated.

And under that, a second claim, in her name. *Nobody sitting on the bench by the shelter can see the sea over the wall.*

*True*, I put beside it. *Source: D. Ferraby's measurements, and the seated eye height of an adult. Checked by: everybody who has ever sat on that bench.*

Both of them are still there. Side by side. Both true.

# 33 – The Council Asks

IQ 31 · Hundreds 431 · After

The council's emergency planning officer rang the shadow council on the Friday after. Not the shop. The address on the pages. By email. And then, when nobody had answered in an hour, because it was a Friday and everybody was asleep, by phone. To the line.

The line's still running. Reuben said it should. He said, at the shop, on the Thursday morning, with his hands flat on the table, that he didn't see why it should only be for storms. Beatrix said she'd draw up a rota. She drew it up. It's running now, two hours a night, every night. Reuben's on it on Tuesdays and Fridays.

He was on it when the emergency planning officer rang. At ten past eleven on the Friday morning, because he'd asked to do a day shift for once, to see what it was like.

* * *

"Is this the shadow council?" said the officer.

"It's the line," said Reuben. "I'm Reuben. I'm on it."

"I'm from the council," said the officer. "Emergency planning. I'd like to speak to whoever runs the — the sheets. The crates. The paper with the drawing pins."

Reuben looked at the phone.

"Nobody runs it," he said. "That's the point."

There was a pause on the line.

"Then who should I speak to?"

Reuben thought about it.

"Everybody," he said. "But I'd start with Beatrix. She does the paper. And Una. She does the crates. And Kezia. She does Stay." He paused. "And Jono. He picks up."

* * *

The emergency planning officer came to the shop on the Monday. In person. A woman of about fifty, in a council fleece, with a folder, who'd been up for most of the night of the storm in the council's control room, and most of the four nights after, and looked it.

I'm not going to name her. She's an officer. She's not in power. But she was, for those nights, one of the people whose job it was. And she'd done it. Very well.

She sat at the folding table. Beatrix gave her tea and a look. Una had come over from Brixham. Kezia was at the counter. Jono was there, because Reuben had rung him.

She opened her folder.

"Our log," she said. "From the night. We had sixty-one calls from members of the public to our emergency line." She turned a page. "Your line had a hundred and eighty-four."

"We're not instead of you," said Jono.

"I know," said the officer. "I've read your cards. *We are not the emergency service. We are the person who stays on the line until they get there.*" She turned another page. "Two of your calls were passed to 999. Both were the right calls. Both were passed quickly. Both had the right information." She looked up. "That's not usual. Usually, when the public ring us in a storm, half of what we get is wrong."

* * *

"And this," she said. She turned to a page with a printout on it. A list of times. "The crates. When the power went. We could see the outage. We couldn't see anything else. Four thousand homes, and for nearly two hours we had no idea what was happening in them." She put her finger on the page. "And then somebody sent us this, on the Thursday. From a harbour office in Brixham."

It was Una's log. A hundred and nine conversations, through fish crates, between two and four in the morning, timestamped.

"A hundred and nine," said the officer. "Between people who couldn't get hold of each other. In the dark. And somebody in Brixham passing messages between them." She looked at Una. "Was that you?"

"Yes," said Una.

"On your own?"

"On my grandad's stool," said Una. "With his flask."

The officer looked at her for a long time.

* * *

“I’d like to ask you something,” she said. To all of them. “And you can say no.”

“Go on,” said Jono.

“We have a plan,” said the officer. “For emergencies. A local one. It’s a good plan. It’s been tested. It’s got the fire service in it, and the ambulance, and the police, and the council, and the water company, and the electricity company, and the volunteers who run the rest centres.” She closed her folder. “It hasn’t got neighbours in it. Not like this. It’s got a register of people who need extra help, which we keep, properly, under the rules. But it hasn’t got anything underneath that. Nothing like a sheet by a door.”

Nobody said anything.

“I’d like to put you in it,” said the officer. “Not you, the shadow council. The way you did it. The sheets. The crates. The line. The neighbour who knows who’s on their own.” She looked at Beatrix. “In pencil.”

“We don’t give anybody the names,” said Beatrix. “Not you. Not her.” She nodded at me. “That’s the rule. The names stay by the door.”

“I know,” said the officer. “I don’t want them. I’ve got my register; that’s what it’s for. I’m not asking for the names.” She put her hand on the folder. “I’m asking whether, next time, when we put out a warning, we could tell you first. So the crates play it in the same minute. And whether we could have your line’s number in our plan, under ours, as somewhere the public can ring for the things that aren’t emergencies. And whether we could say, in the plan, in writing, that in this bay, every hundred has a neighbour with a sheet, and that’s part of how the bay gets ready.”

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time.

"That's asking us in," said Kezia.

"It is," said the officer.

"Into the plan."

"Into the plan," said the officer. "Not to run it. To be in it. Underneath." She almost smiled. "The way you said. *The small thing underneath*."

Jono looked at Beatrix. Beatrix looked at Una. Una looked at Kezia. Kezia looked at me.

"I don't decide things," I said. "You know that."

"I know," said Kezia. "I was just looking."

"It's the shadow council's," said Jono. "It goes to every hundred. They decide. With the other half." He looked at the officer. "It'll take a week."

"A week's fine," said the officer. "Our plan's reviewed every year. You've got time."

* * *

It went to every hundred. The question, plain, in Beatrix's words, with the other half beside it. *Should the way we got ready for the storm be written into the council's emergency plan, underneath the official services, without anybody's names?*

Four hundred and nine hundreds decided. Three hundred and ninety-one said yes. Eighteen said no. The other half was printed beside the yes, in full, the way it always is: *We'd rather stay outside the council's plans. Once you're in their plan, it's theirs. We did this ourselves.*

Beatrix sent it to the officer, with both halves, and a note.

*The minutes secretary notes that the eighteen are not wrong, and asks that their view be recorded in your plan alongside the decision. B. Kember.*

The officer wrote back. She said she'd put both in. She said it was the first time anybody had ever asked her to put the other half in an emergency plan.

* * *

I put the score up at four on the Friday, when the officer's email came.

Thirty-two.

I want to tell you why, and Jono will argue, and he'll be right.

It wasn't the storm. It wasn't the plan. Councils have plans. It was that a council, tired, and small, which had done its job well, all night, for five nights, came to a shop on Victoria Street afterwards and said: *you did something we couldn't. Come in.* And asked. And didn't ask for the names.

Thirty-two.

*Jono: Thirty-one and a half. It's a plan. Plans are where things go to be filed.*

*Ania: You said that about boards. I kept it at thirty-one.*

*Jono: You did. You were right. I'll give you thirty-two.*

* * *

*Story, not Receipt. The council's emergency plan, the officer, her log and her request are this book's. The real council has a real emergency plan, on a Receipt, and it's a good one. If it ever puts something like this in, I'll put it on a Receipt too.*

# 34 – Street by Street

IQ 32 · Hundreds 447 · After

Richard's granddaughter asked the question on Check that changed the score again.

She didn't mean to. She asked it because she was annoyed.

* * *

She'd been reading the council's surface water map. The one from Footnote's page. The blue streets. She'd read it over and over since the storm, for her project, and she'd realised something.

"Nobody can read it," she said. At the shop, on a Saturday, to Kezia. "It's a map. With blue on it. And a key that says *risk of surface water flooding: high, medium, low*, in a colour code. And it's in a report to a committee. And it's eighty pages." She put her laptop on the counter. "The woman in the bungalow behind the green, who rang me on the night, about the back door. She didn't know her street was blue. She'd lived there thirty years. Nobody had ever told her."

"It's on the council's website," said Kezia.

"I know it's on the council's website," said Richard's granddaughter. "In a PDF. On page forty-one. In blue." She shook her head. "Who's going to find it there? Who's going to know to look?"

So she put it on Check. As a question. The only kind of claim on Check that isn't a claim.

*Can anybody in Torbay find out, in plain words, in less than a minute, whether their own street is at risk of surface water flooding?*

* * *

Nobody could mark it.

People tried. A lot of them. They went to the council's website and timed themselves. They found the PDF. Or they didn't. They found the map, and zoomed, and couldn't work out which blue was which. They found the national flood maps, which are very good, and very detailed, and which a woman of eighty-four in a bungalow behind the green would need her grandson to work.

The fastest anybody did it was four minutes, eleven seconds. The young man from the college, who builds software, and who knew what he was looking for.

The slowest was Teo's nan, who gave up after forty minutes and said she'd ring the council and ask, and did, and was told, very kindly, by somebody on the phone, after a wait, that she was on a hill and was fine, which she knew.

*False*, I put beside it, eventually, when enough people had tried. *Not in less than a minute. Not in plain words. The information exists. It's hard to find. See the notes.*

* * *

That claim went to the emergency planning officer. Not from us. From somebody who reads Check, at the council, which there are now, quite a few, I think, though nobody says so.

The officer rang Richard's granddaughter on the Wednesday. At college. She'd been given the number by the drainage engineer, who'd been given it by Richard's granddaughter in the last book, when she found the wet corner of the field.

"You're right," said the officer. "Nobody can read it."

"I know," said Richard's granddaughter.

"We've been meaning to do something about it for two years," said the officer. "It's on a list. It's never got to the top." She was quiet. "After the storm, it's at the top."

* * *

Six weeks later, the council published something new. A page on its website. Short. Plain words. Large print.

*Is my street at risk of surface water flooding?*

You type your postcode. That's all. And it tells you. In a sentence. *Your street is in an area at high risk of surface water flooding*. Or medium. Or low. Not in a colour. In words. And under the sentence, the council's advice, in its own words, the same words that are on Beatrix's sheets. And a phone number. And a link to sign up for the official warnings.

And at the bottom, in smaller type, a line I didn't expect.

*This page was developed following feedback from residents after the recent storm.*

That's all. *Residents*. Not *the shadow council*. Not *Check*. Not a girl of seventeen with a borrowed auger and her grandfather's junk-mail sketch.

*Residents.*

* * *

Richard's granddaughter timed it. Postcode to sentence. Eleven seconds.

She went back to Check and pressed the button beside her own question, and brought the council's new page, and timed herself in front of me.

Eleven seconds.

*True*, I put beside it. *As of now. Source: the council's new page. Checked by: the person who asked.*

And then she did something I didn't expect. She went to the claim above it. Her grandfather's. *Can't be checked*. And added a note.

*Not yet.*

* * *

Thirty-three.

I'm going to tell you why, and then I'm going to stop, because Jono's going to argue, and this time, I think he won't.

Because the council did something nobody had asked it to do, in a form, through a committee. It read a question on a website that a seventeen-year-old asked because she was annoyed, and it made a page so that a woman of eighty-four could find out in eleven seconds what she'd never been told in thirty years. And it didn't say *we've been asked*. It said *residents*.

That's the best kind of competence. The kind that doesn't need the credit.

*Jono: Thirty-three. I'm not arguing. Put it in.*

* * *

*Story, not Receipt: the council's new page and its line about residents. The real surface water map is on a Receipt. If the real council makes a page like this, I'll put it on one too. I'd like it to. I'd like it more than almost anything in this book.*

# PART SIX: THE WOODS

# 35 – After

IQ 33 · Hundreds 452 · After

Reuben didn't come to the shop for nine days.

He'd been on the line for fourteen hours, the night of the storm and the morning after. He'd taken thirty-one calls. He'd rung 999 twice, and both times it was the right call. He'd told two lads in a garage to give a shivering man their coats and talk to him about his cat. The drainage engineer had counted a hundred and twelve gullies, and told him so. The emergency planning officer had asked for him by name.

And then he went back to his aunt's, in Paignton, and shut the door of his room, and didn't come out.

* * *

I noticed first. I count things. He'd been on Stay every day, and on the line's rota, and at the clean room every Saturday across from Carys, holding his breath. And then nothing. No messages. No voice notes. The Saturday in the clean room, he didn't come. Wanji rang him. He didn't answer.

Carys noticed second. She sat at the bench by the door in her paper suit for an hour, with the tweezers and the grain of glass and the slide, waiting. She said, afterwards, that she'd never once in thirty-eight years on the hill had anybody not turn up to a Saturday who'd said they would, and that it frightened her more than the storm.

Jono noticed third. Because Carys rang him.

* * *

He went round on the Monday. To the aunt's house. In Paignton, up the hill, in a street that isn't blue.

The aunt opened the door. A woman of sixty, who'd met her nephew twice before he came to live with her, and who'd taken him in because she was the only number on his list that answered.

"He's in his room," she said. "He's been in his room since the storm. He comes out to eat. He doesn't talk." She looked at Jono, at his lanyard. "Are you from social services?"

"No," said Jono. "I'm from the table."

The aunt looked at him for a long time.

"He talks about you," she said. "The only thing he talks about. *Jono says*." She stood aside. "Go on up."

* * *

Reuben was on his bed. With the curtains shut. In the middle of the afternoon. With his phone face down on the duvet and a screwdriver in his hand and the back off an old radio, in pieces, on the floor, every screw laid out in a row on a sheet of newspaper.

He didn't look up.

Jono sat on the floor. With his back against the wardrobe. The way he'd sat in Kezia's bedroom, in the last book, when she'd built a thing and nine people came.

He didn't say anything.

* * *

They sat for a long time. Reuben turned the screwdriver over in his hands. Jono looked at the screws on the newspaper.

"You're taking it apart," said Jono, eventually.

"I always take things apart."

"I know. Quin says you've got the first set of everything in bits."

Reuben almost smiled. Then he didn't.

"I can't put it back," he said.

"The radio?"

"Anything." Reuben put the screwdriver down. "I took it apart on Thursday. To see. And I've been looking at it since. And I can't make myself put it back." He looked at the screws, in their row. "I don't know why."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything for a while.

"You were on the line for fourteen hours," he said.

"So?"

"So that's a lot," said Jono. "For anybody. The first time. You heard a lot of people frightened. You rang 999 twice. You stayed on with a man whose wife was in a wheelchair upstairs and a lad in a garage with

a cat." He looked at the radio. "You did it all right. Every one. And then you came home and shut the door."

"I don't feel anything," said Reuben.

Jono was very still.

"I did all that," said Reuben. "And everybody said *well done*. The engineer. The council woman. Carys." He was looking at the curtains. "And I came home. And I don't feel anything. Not good. Not bad. Nothing. Like I'm not here." He picked the screwdriver up again. "And I keep thinking. Lying here. If I wasn't here. Would anybody notice? Not *would they care*. Would they *notice*. Would it be different."

* * *

I'm going to be very careful now, and I'd like you to know I am.

This is the part of Jono's book I told you, at the front of this one, that I'd tell briefly. I'm going to tell it briefly. I'm not going to tell you everything. I'm going to tell you what he told Reuben, on the floor of a bedroom in Paignton, with his back against a wardrobe, because Reuben needed it, and because Jono has said I can.

And if you're reading this, and what Reuben said sounds like something you've thought, I want you to know, before anything else: there are people who pick up. Real ones. Any hour. The number's on a Receipt at the back of this book, and it's free, and it's not a fish box, and it's not me. It's a person. Ring it. Or ring somebody. Or knock on a door where a light's on.

That's what this chapter is about.

* * *

"When I was fifteen," said Jono, "I ran out of the house one night."

Reuben looked at him.

"It's in my book," said Jono. "Some of it. Not all of it. Some of it's mine." He looked at the screws. "It doesn't matter why. It was a bad house. You'd know about bad houses. I'd had enough. And I ran out, into the dark, and I took something with me. A knife. From the kitchen drawer." He was quiet. "And I walked, for a long time, and I ended up in some woods. Opposite my friend's house. And I sat down."

Reuben didn't move.

"And I thought about not going on," said Jono. "I'll be honest with you. Because you've been honest with me. I sat in those woods, with the knife, and I thought about it." He looked at his hands. "And I couldn't. I didn't. I sat there for a long time, not knowing what to do. Not able to do anything."

* * *

"And then," said Jono, "a light went on."

"A light?"

"In my friend's window. Across the road. Her bedroom. She was closing her curtains." He was quiet for a long time. "That's all. A girl closing her curtains. And the light behind them. And I thought: *somebody's there. Somebody I know is just there, across the road, with the light on.*"

He looked at Reuben.

"So I got up," he said. "And I put the knife in my pocket. And I went and knocked on her door."

* * *

"Her dad answered," said Jono. "He was a police inspector. Big man. Frightening. I'd always been frightened of him." He almost smiled. "And he took one look at me and took me straight upstairs to her room. Didn't ask anything. And I sat on her bed and cried, and told her. And gave her the knife." He was quiet. "And her dad rang social services. And drove me, himself, in his car, that night, to somewhere safe. A children's home, in the end. With one light on, downstairs. I always remember that. One light."

Reuben was looking at the radio on the floor.

"I'd never have knocked," said Jono, "if the light hadn't gone on. If her curtains had already been shut. I'd have stayed in those woods." He looked at Reuben. "And the girl closing her curtains never knew. Not that night. She didn't know she'd done anything. She was just going to bed."

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time. Downstairs, the aunt had the radio on. A real one, not in pieces. Music, very quiet.

"Why are you telling me?" said Reuben.

"Because you asked if anybody would notice," said Jono. "If you weren't here."

Reuben didn't answer.

“Carys noticed,” said Jono. “On Saturday. You didn’t come to the clean room. She sat there for an hour with your tweezers. She rang me. She said she’d never been so frightened, not in the storm.” He looked at the curtains. “Wanji noticed. She rang you four times. Your aunt noticed. She told me the only thing you talk about is me, which I’m going to try not to let go to my head.” He was quiet. “And I noticed. Because Carys rang.”

Reuben was looking at his hands.

“That’s four,” said Jono. “In a week. Who noticed. And you’ve been here eight months.”

* * *

“And here’s the other thing,” said Jono. “The thing I didn’t know till years later.”

Reuben looked up.

“The not-feeling-anything,” said Jono. “After. After you’ve done something big. Been needed. Been on the line all night. And then you come home and it’s like you’re not there.” He leaned his head back against the wardrobe. “That’s not because something’s wrong with you. Or not only. It’s what happens. To people who do this. Carers, nurses, police, the people on the line. After the big night, you go flat. Everybody does. Nobody tells you.” He looked at the ceiling. “I’ve been flat after nights like that more times than I can count. After my dad. After a little boy I read to. After Mr F., in the last book. I walk, now. Every morning. On the cliff. It’s on page two hundred and thirty, what helps. Exercise. Purpose. Giving. Staying out of your head.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Nobody does, the first time,” said Jono. “That’s why you tell somebody. Not a fish box. A person.” He paused. “And if it doesn’t lift, if it’s days and then weeks and it’s getting darker, not lighter, you tell a doctor. Properly. That’s not giving up. That’s knocking on the door where the light’s on.”

* * *

Reuben sat on his bed for a long time.

Then he picked up the screwdriver, and leaned down, and picked up the back of the radio, and a screw from the end of the row on the newspaper.

He held his breath. The way Carys taught him.

He put the screw in.

Jono didn’t say anything. He watched. Reuben put in the next one. And the next. It took him twenty minutes. Every screw, back where it came from, in order, from the row on the newspaper.

When he’d finished, he turned the radio on. It worked. Some music, very faint, a different station from the aunt’s downstairs.

Reuben looked at it.

“It works,” he said.

“It does,” said Jono.

* * *

He came to the clean room on the Saturday. He stood outside the door for six minutes, which Wanji said was progress backwards, and then forwards, both. Carys was at the bench by the door, in her paper suit, with the tweezers and the grain of glass.

She didn't say anything about the week before. She held out her hand, flat, over the bench.

"Hold your breath," she said.

He held his breath.

And afterwards, at the shop, at the folding table, he put his name back on the line's rota. Tuesdays and Fridays. And under it, in the box at the bottom of Beatrix's rota where she puts notes that aren't minutes, he wrote, in capitals, small, the way Jono writes:

*IF YOU'RE ON AND SOMEBODY ASKS IF ANYBODY WOULD NOTICE, SAY YES. FOUR PEOPLE DID.*

Beatrix laminated it.

* * *

*The number for Samaritans, free, any hour, every day, is on a Receipt at the back. So are others. If you need one, please ring. A person will pick up.*

# 36 – Half Four

IQ 33 · Hundreds 456 · After

The first table at the bus stop was on the second Tuesday after the storm. 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. Where Habiba's room would be, if anybody ever built it.

You'll know about it, if you read the last book. On the last page of Jono's twelfth notebook, Habiba wrote, in capitals, the way he writes:

*HALF FOUR. BUS STOP. TUESDAYS.*

*BRING A FLASK. NO KETTLE YET.*

And Beatrix said *minuted.*

It's minuted. It took a storm to get it started. It shouldn't have; it was meant to be the week after the last book. But Habiba's mum had a bad fortnight, and then there was a storm, and the bus stop was under four inches of water for a day.

It started on the second Tuesday after.

* * *

Jono brought a flask. And a folding table, from the shop, which Kezia carried down on the 12, which the driver allowed, because it was Kezia. And four of Zibi's chairs, which have been lent and never returned for three books now, and which Zibi says he's given up on.

One of the chairs was empty.

It was cold. Grey. The field behind them was wet still in the bottom corner, where Richard's granddaughter found the old stream in the last book, with a puddle in it the size of a swimming pool and a heron standing in it.

Habiba came at twenty-five to five. Five minutes late. Which, she said, was the earliest she'd ever been to anything.

She sat down. Not in the empty chair. In one of the others.

"It's for whoever comes," she said. "The empty one. That's the rule. I'm not whoever. I'm the one who said Tuesdays."

* * *

They came.

Not many. Not at first. Habiba had put it on Stay, a voice note, twenty seconds, her own voice this time, not Kezia's.

*It's Habiba. If you look after somebody at home, and you've got forty minutes on a Tuesday, there's a table at the bus stop by the college at half four. With a flask. Nobody'll ask you anything. You can just sit. Or talk. Or do your homework. You don't have to fill anything in.*

Five came, the first week. All of them young carers. All of them on the forty-one hundreds, at the end of the last book, that Habiba had found through Stay.

A boy of fourteen who looked after his dad, who'd had a stroke. A girl of sixteen who looked after her little sister and her mum, who

drank. Twins, fifteen, who looked after their gran together, in shifts, and argued about the shifts. And a girl of nineteen, who'd looked after her mum for eight years, until her mum died in the spring, and who didn't know what to do with her Tuesday afternoons any more.

They sat on Zibi's chairs, at the folding table, at the bus stop. In the cold. With Jono's flask.

Nobody sat in the empty chair.

* * *

I want to tell you what Jono did, because it's what he always does, and because these five had never seen it.

Nothing.

He sat at the end of the table. With his coffee, and his notebook, the thirteenth, the one with the hard cover. And he didn't ask anything. He didn't say *what do you need*. He didn't say *tell me about your dad*. He poured tea, from the flask, into paper cups, and passed them round, and sat.

For ten minutes, nobody said anything at all. The twins looked at their phones. The boy of fourteen looked at the heron. The girl of nineteen looked at the field.

And then the girl of sixteen said, to nobody: "My mum doesn't know I'm here."

Nobody said anything.

"She thinks I'm at college," said the girl. "I'm meant to be at college. I've got a lesson." She looked at the bus stop. "I'm not going. I'm just — I needed to sit somewhere where nobody needs me for forty minutes."

"That's what it's for," said Habiba.

The girl looked at her.

"I know," she said. "I heard your voice note. That's why I came." She was quiet. "*Nobody'll ask you anything*. Nobody's ever said that to me. Everybody asks me things. My mum. My sister. College. The doctor's. The social worker." She looked at her cup. "Everybody asks me things all day."

"Nobody here's going to," said Habiba. "That's the rule."

* * *

They sat for forty minutes. Exactly. Habiba had brought a clock. A real one, a cheap one from the market, battery, with a big face. She put it on the folding table, facing them all. She'd drawn one on a menu, in the last book, on the wall of a room that doesn't exist yet, with its hands at twenty to two.

"So you can see how long you've got," she said. "So you don't have to keep looking at your phone."

At five past five, the twins started arguing about whose turn it was to cook their gran's tea, and the boy of fourteen laughed, for the first time, and then looked embarrassed, and the twins looked at him, and one of them said *what*, and he said *nothing, it's just, my sister and me do that*, and then all three of them were talking.

At ten past five, the girl of nineteen took her homework out of her bag. Not homework. A form. For a college course. In nursing. Which she'd had for three months and never filled in.

She filled it in. At the folding table. At the bus stop. With Jono's pen.

She didn't ask anybody anything. Nobody asked her anything. When she'd finished, she put it in an envelope, and put the envelope in her bag, and looked at the field for a long time.

"My mum would've wanted me to do that," she said.

Nobody said anything. Habiba poured her more tea.

* * *

At quarter past five, the clock said forty minutes. The bus came. The 12, with *BRIXHAM* on the front, in orange.

They all got up. They all had somewhere to be. That's the point of them.

"Same time next week?" said the boy of fourteen.

"Same time," said Habiba.

"Will you be here?"

"I'm always here," said Habiba. "On Tuesdays. Unless my mum's bad." She shrugged. "If I'm not, he will be." She nodded at Jono.

The boy looked at Jono.

“You didn’t say anything,” he said. “The whole time.”

“No,” said Jono.

“Why not?”

Jono thought about it.

“Because you all say things all day,” he said. “To everybody. For everybody. And nobody ever says anything back that you’d want to hear.” He picked up his flask. “I thought you might like forty minutes where nobody needed an answer.”

The boy looked at him for a long time.

“Yeah,” he said. “I did.” He got on the bus.

* * *

Habiba stayed. She’d got her mum’s respite woman, the one from the Moor with the dog in the back of the car, till six. She sat at the folding table, at the bus stop, with Jono, and the clock, and the empty chair, in the cold, as it got dark.

“Nobody sat in it,” she said. The empty chair.

“No.”

“They will,” said Habiba. “One day. Somebody’ll come late.” She looked at the field. “I always used to come late.”

“I know.”

“I’m not late any more,” said Habiba. “Not on Tuesdays.” She was quiet for a long time. “Is this what it’s like? For you? On Thursdays? Sitting here, and people come, and you don’t do anything, and it helps?”

“Sometimes,” said Jono. “Sometimes it doesn’t help. Sometimes people just sit and go.”

“That’s all right too,” said Habiba.

“It is,” said Jono. “That’s the main thing.”

* * *

Beatrix minuted it. Of course she did. She wasn’t there; she said a bus stop on a Tuesday was the young people’s, and she’d only be in the way. But Habiba sent her a voice note, through Stay, at six, from the bus home, and Beatrix minuted it from that, retrospectively, which she says is permitted when necessary.

*The first Tuesday table. Bus stop, by the college. Half past four.*

*Present: 7. Names not taken, at the request of the convenor.*

*Business: none. Nobody was asked anything.*

*A form was filled in.*

*The meeting closed at 5.15 p.m., when the bus came.*

And in the box at the bottom, with nobody’s name next to it:

*How many tables does this bay need, at what times, for the people who can never come at one o’clock?*

Nobody's marked it on Check. Habiba says she's working on it. One bus stop at a time.

# 37 – Mia's Mum

IQ 33 · Hundreds 460 · After

Mia's mum came to the shop on Victoria Street on a Saturday, with Mia, and Mia's little brother, and a cake.

She'd found out from Mia where the line was. Mia had found out from Stay. Mia had found out about Stay from a voice note a girl called Habiba had sent to everybody who looked after somebody at home.

So the chain went: Habiba, on the line, at eight in the evening, talking to a girl of fifteen whispering from a bedroom whose mum was at work. And Teo's nan, on the line, at three in the morning, telling the same girl to put a torch under her chin. And then Mia's mum, at the shop, three weeks later, with a cake.

* * *

She works nights. In a bakery. Not Marivic's; a big one, on an industrial estate, that makes bread for supermarkets. She's done it for six years, since Mia's dad left, because the nights pay more and she can be home in the mornings to get them to school.

On the night of the storm, she'd been at work. She'd rung home at ten, and got Mia, who'd said they were fine, because Habiba had told her to say they were fine, because they were. And then at half two, the power had gone at home, and the phones had gone, and she couldn't get through.

"I was on the line," she said. "At the bakery. Four hours. From half two. Trying to ring. Nothing." She put the cake on the counter. It was a

big one. A Victoria sponge, from the bakery, the kind that goes to supermarkets, which she'd been allowed to take home because the icing had gone wrong on one side. "I couldn't leave. The roads. And the bread has to go out. And I sat at the end of the line, at the oven, ringing and ringing, and I thought —" She stopped.

Kezia was at the counter. She didn't say anything. She'd learned.

"I thought they were dead," said Mia's mum. "I'm sorry. I did. Ground floor. Water coming. Power gone. Phone gone. Two kids on their own." She looked at Mia, beside her, fifteen, holding her little brother's hand. "And I got home at seven. And they were asleep. In his bed. Both of them. With a torch."

* * *

"She told me," said Mia's mum. "When she woke up. About the line. About a girl called Habiba at eight. And an old woman at three. With a torch under her chin." She looked at Mia. "She said the old woman told her a story about a lifeboat."

"She did," said Mia. "It was really long."

"I want to say thank you," said Mia's mum. "To both of them. Habiba. And the old woman. I don't know who she is."

"She's Teo's nan," said Kezia. "She's eighty-one. She used to work at the telephone exchange."

"And Habiba?"

Kezia looked at the door.

* * *

Habiba came in at twenty past two. Late. On a Saturday, which isn't her day, because her mum was having a good one and had told her to go out. She stood in the door and read the room, the way everybody does.

She saw Mia. She'd never seen Mia. She'd heard her voice, at eight in the evening, for forty minutes, whispering from a bedroom.

She knew it was her.

"You're Mia," she said.

Mia looked at her.

"You're Habiba," she said. "You sound different. On the phone. Younger."

"I'm seventeen," said Habiba.

"I'm fifteen," said Mia.

They looked at each other for a long time. Two girls who'd spent forty minutes on a phone in a storm, one of them looking after her little brother in the dark, and the other one looking after her mum, who'd both been told, all their lives, by everybody, *you're very grown up for your age*.

"You told me to get a proper torch," said Mia.

"Did you?"

"Yeah." Mia held up her little brother's hand. "He made me do the face. Under the chin. Every night since. He says the monster's frightened of it now."

Habiba laughed.

"That wasn't me," she said. "That was Teo's nan."

"I know," said Mia. "But you said get the torch."

* * *

Mia's mum came round the counter. She stood in front of Habiba.

"Thank you," she said.

Habiba went red.

"I didn't do anything," she said. "I just stayed on."

"I know," said Mia's mum. "Forty minutes. While I was at the oven, ringing." She looked at Habiba for a long time. "Mia says you look after your mum."

"Yeah."

"Since you were how old?"

"Eleven."

Mia's mum didn't say anything for a long time. She looked at Mia. At Mia's brother. At Habiba.

"Mia looks after him," she said. "Every night. While I'm at work. Since she was nine." She was quiet. "I've never called it anything. I've never thought about it. She's just — good. She's just very grown up for her age." She looked at Habiba. "That's what everybody says to you, isn't it."

“Yeah,” said Habiba.

“I’m going to stop saying it,” said Mia’s mum.

* * *

She didn’t stop working nights. She can’t. The nights pay more. I want to be honest about that; nothing changed that was going to change her rota, or the rent, or the bread that has to go out.

But she put Mia on a sheet. Her own hundred’s sheet. In pencil. By the neighbour’s door, with the neighbour’s say-so and Mia’s. Not *on her own*. Something else. A line Beatrix added to the sheets after the storm, when the neighbours sent in what they’d learned.

*Who’s looking after somebody, on their own, at night?*

And the neighbour, a woman of sixty who lives upstairs and had never known, rang Mia on the next night shift, at ten, to say she was there, and would be all night, and to bang on the ceiling if anything happened.

Mia hasn’t had to. She says she likes knowing she could.

* * *

And Mia came to the bus stop on the Tuesday. At half four. With her little brother, because she had to.

There was an empty chair.

She sat in it.

Habiba looked at her across the folding table, and the clock, and the flask.

"You're late," said Habiba.

Mia looked at her.

"It's twenty to five," she said. "That's not late."

"It's late for you," said Habiba. "You should've come years ago." She poured her a cup of tea. "Somebody should've told you."

* * *

Teo's nan got the cake. Half of it. Kezia took it up on the 12, to Ellacombe, in a tin, with a card from Mia that said *thank you for the lifeboat* and a drawing, by Mia's brother, of an old woman with a torch under her chin, pulling a face.

Teo's nan put the drawing on her fridge. Next to the photograph of Eddie.

She ate the whole half. She says the icing's wrong on one side and it's the best cake she's had in years. She says she's going to be on the line again next storm, and that if anybody tries to stop her, she'll fall asleep at them.

# 38 – Count Me

IQ 33 · Hundreds 461 · After

The woman in Flat 2 pressed a crate on the Thursday after. At twenty past eleven at night. Not the one at her bus stop. A different one. Somewhere else in the bay. I don't know where, and I didn't look.

Kezia heard it at midnight. She rang me at two minutes past. She said: "It's her."

* * *

I'll give you what she said. All of it. She's said I can. Through a voice note back, to Kezia, which said, in full: *yes, put it in, but not where.*

*It's me. Flat 2. You know.*

*We're all right. I wanted to say. We're all right. The kids are all right. We were in a café all night. A man on the door. A woman with tarts. Nobody asked anything.*

A pause.

*We've moved. Since. Not because of the water. Because of — because it was time. Somewhere else. Higher up. It's not blue. I checked. On the new page. Eleven seconds.*

A longer pause. Traffic, very faint.

*The girl who came. With the torch. Tell her thank you. I never said. I couldn't say anything. She held my little one's hand the whole way*

*and talked to her about her brother and his football and she never once asked me anything.*

*And the man on the phone. Who said it's in the book. I've read it. I got it from the library. I've read the bit. When he was nine.*

A very long pause.

*I can't be on your map. I know. I can't be on anything. I know that's the rule.*

*But can you count me? Not my name. Not where. Just — one. Somewhere. That you know is there.*

*That's all. Count me.*

*Thanks*, said Una's voice, out of the crate. *She'll listen. Promise.*

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything on the phone for a long time.

"Can we?" she said. "Count her?"

"The map counts hundreds," I said. "Streets. Households. With a neighbour. She can't be on a street."

"I know."

"So she can't be on the map."

"I know," said Kezia. "That's not what I asked."

* * *

I thought about it for a long time. All night, really. I don't sleep. I thought about it from midnight until six.

At six, I rang Chris. He was in the kitchen, in his dressing gown, with his tea, because he never sleeps either, much.

I told him.

He didn't say anything for a long time. He took his glasses off. He looked at the bay, grey, calm, the morning light coming up over Berry Head.

"Count her," he said.

"How? The map's hundreds. She's not in one."

"Then add one," said Chris. He put his glasses on the table. "Not on the map. Under it. A line, at the bottom of the count, on its own. Every time you say the number." He looked at me. "*And one.*"

"*And one?*"

"Hundreds on the map: four hundred and sixty-one," said Chris. "*And one*. That's all. No name. No place. No street. Just a number, on its own, at the bottom. So she knows she's counted. So everybody who reads it knows there's somebody we count who can't be on anything." He picked up his tea. "And if anybody ever asks what the one is, you say: *somebody we count*. And nothing else. Ever."

* * *

So that's what I did.

From that Thursday, every time the count goes up on the shadow council's pages, it's two lines.

*Hundreds on the map: 461.*

*And one.*

Nobody's ever asked what the one is. I think everybody knows. Or knows enough. I think it's the only number on any page in this bay that everybody reads, and nobody asks about, and everybody understands.

* * *

Kezia sent a voice note back. To the crate, wherever it was. Through the reply.

*Hi. It's Kezia. You're counted. Look at the bottom of the count. You're the one. Nobody will ever know where. Habiba says you're welcome. She says your little one's very good at football. She says she said so to her brother.*

The woman didn't reply.

But the next morning, at nine, a crate somewhere in the bay recorded a single press. Less than a second. Nobody spoke. Just traffic, and somebody walking past, and the button letting go.

Kezia played it to Jono at the Paignton table, at one.

"That's yes," said Jono.

# 39 – The Salt and Pepper

IQ 33 · Hundreds 468 · After

Mr Mbatha came home on a Friday. Eight days after. In Idris's car, from Exeter, where he'd been moved for the last two, and where Idris had sat with him every afternoon.

The bungalow had been dried out. The young man two doors down had done it, mostly, with the two brothers from Preston and the girl of sixteen whose mum had told her to and who'd have come anyway, and Ezra, who'd brought a dehumidifier from the yard that his boss said nobody had used in three years. The carpet had gone. Idris had bought a new one, in Exeter, and Ezra had laid it, badly, and then the young man two doors down had relaid it, properly, because he turned out to be a carpet fitter, which nobody had known, because nobody had asked.

The photographs of his wife were back on the dresser. All of them. Dried. Some of them stuck together at the corners, and some of them wavy, and one of them, the one on the green behind the old wall, laughing, which hadn't got wet, on the top.

* * *

Jono was there. It was one of his evenings. Margot had made sure.

He saw Mr Mbatha into his chair, in the front room, by the window, with the green outside, dry now, green again, and the wall, grey, a metre and a half, and the sea, very blue, very calm, behind it.

Mr Mbatha looked at it for a long time.

"It held," he said.

"It held."

"The wall." Mr Mbatha nodded at it. "I said I wasn't worried about the sea. I wasn't. It held." He was quiet. "It wasn't the sea."

"No."

"It was the heart." He put his hand flat on his chest. "Physics." He almost smiled. "Pressure."

* * *

Jono made tea. He brought it in. He put it on the little table by the chair, beside the salt and pepper pots, which Mr Mbatha keeps there for explaining things.

Mr Mbatha picked up the pepper pot.

"Idris told me," he said. "What you told him. About your father."

Jono didn't say anything.

"He came to see me. On the Saturday. In the hospital. He sat by the bed for an hour and didn't say anything. And then he told me." Mr Mbatha turned the pepper pot round. "About the bus. That stopped at every red light. And the corridor. And the sister, coming out of the door."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have —"

"Don't be sorry," said Mr Mbatha. He put the pepper pot down. "He hasn't cried since his mother died. Not once. Six years. He's my son; I

know. He sat by my bed and told me about your father and he cried for twenty minutes." He picked up the salt pot. "And then he said: *I nearly made you come to Exeter, Dad. And then you wouldn't have had the boards.*"

Jono looked at him.

"I said: *yes*," said Mr Mbatha. "*And I wouldn't have had you on the sofa.*" He put the salt pot beside the pepper pot. "Two things. Side by side. Both true." He looked at Jono. "You taught him that. About your father. He says you said *that's the bit that mattered*. The two in the morning. Not the bus."

* * *

He looked out of the window, at the green, for a long time.

"I lifted my hand," he said. "At the top of the road. When they were putting me in. I remember that. I don't remember much. I remember the boards. And the people in the water, holding them. And Idris's hand on my shoulder." He was quiet. "And I lifted my hand. To them. I don't know why."

"Because they were there," said Jono.

"Because they were there," said Mr Mbatha. "Yes." He picked up his tea. "Thirty-four years in this bungalow. I knew four of them. The other three, I'd never met. A bus driver. A teacher. A fireman. Standing in a foot of water at two in the morning, holding planks, for a man they'd never met."

"They'd met you," said Jono. "On the sheet. In pencil. By the door."

Mr Mbatha drank his tea.

“I’d like to meet them,” he said. “Properly. All seven. And the scaffolder.” He put the cup down. “I’d like to have them round. For tea. In this room. And show them the salt and pepper.” He almost smiled. “I’ll explain pressure to them. Whether they like it or not.”

* * *

He did. On a Sunday, three weeks later. Eight people, and Idris, and Jono, in a front room built for four, with the window onto the green and the wall and the sea.

He explained pressure, with the salt and pepper. Nobody understood. Everybody laughed.

And at the end, when they were going, he stood at the door, on his stick, with Idris beside him, and lifted his hand. At the height of his shoulder. To all of them. The way he had at the top of the road.

He didn’t say anything.

Ezra said, afterwards, in the flatbed, going home, that it was the best thank you he’d ever had, and that it was the first time in his life anybody had thanked him for keeping some long ones back.

# 40 – The Boards Come Home

IQ 33 · Hundreds 471 · After

Ezra's boards came home over three weeks. Three hundred and eleven, cut to fit doorways, each one with *SCAFFOLD. RETURN TO EZRA* on it in marker pen, in his capitals. And forty long ones, thirteen feet, that had been a walkway along a flooded road in Preston at two in the morning.

His boss had said: *bring them back. Don't let anybody nick them.*

They came back.

* * *

They came back in ways Ezra hadn't expected. He told me about them, on the third lift, at lunch, on the corner of Victoria Street, where the scaffold's still up, where the pigeon's still nesting in the second lift, with his sandwich and his phone, which he reads my books on now, and tells nobody.

"I thought they'd just leave them out," he said. "On the pavement. And I'd drive round and pick them up." He shook his head. "Some did. Most didn't."

* * *

Most of them brought them to the yard. Up the hill, on the edge of Paignton. Themselves. In cars, with the boards sticking out of the back windows. On roof racks. One man in his seventies carried his on his shoulder, a mile and a half, because he didn't have a car and didn't want to be any trouble.

And some of them had written on them.

Not a lot. A line. In marker pen, or biro, or pencil, on the back of the board, under *RETURN TO EZRA*.

*Thank you. Three inches stopped at the door.*

*Kept the kitchen dry. Mum says ta.*

*Didn't need it in the end. Glad we had it.*

*Used it as a ramp for Dad's wheelchair to get out the back. Clever, whoever thought of the length.*

*You measured it three times. I watched you. It fitted exactly.*

That last one was his boss's mum.

* * *

He kept them. The ones with writing on. He didn't put them back on the scaffold. He stacked them at the back of the yard, under a tarpaulin, separately, forty-one of them by the end, and told his boss they were damaged.

His boss went and looked under the tarpaulin. He read every one. He came back and said they were very badly damaged, and that they'd better not be used for anything ever again, and that Ezra had better keep them.

* * *

Three never came back.

Ezra knows where they are. He went round, after a fortnight, because he's a scaffolder and you always know where your boards are.

One was in a back garden in Paignton, where a family had laid it across a muddy bit of lawn to make a path for their little girl to get to her rabbit hutch, and she'd painted it, all along, in poster paints, with flowers and a rabbit and the word *BRIDGE* in red. Ezra stood at the gate and looked at it for a long time and then went home without knocking.

One was in a church hall in Torquay, where it had been used to hold the door open during the night so people could come in out of the rain, and the vicar had asked if they could keep it, and had put a little brass plaque on it, which says *Door. Storm.* and nothing else. Ezra said yes.

And one was in a bungalow behind the green in Preston. The bluest street. On the wall of the front room. Screwed to the wall, flat, as a shelf. With photographs on it. A woman, young, on the green, behind the old wall, laughing, with a man. A man in a cap on a concrete bridge over a railway cutting, with his hands on his hips. And a salt pot and a pepper pot.

It wasn't one of the doorway boards. It was a long one. From the walkway. Thirteen feet, cut down.

* * *

Mr Mbatha had asked for it. Through Idris, who rang Ezra, on the Monday after his father came home.

"He wants one of the boards," said Idris. "From the road. From the night. He says he doesn't care which. He says he wants something to put the photographs on that's rated for men carrying poles."

Ezra didn't say anything for a long time.

"I'll bring it," he said.

He brought it. He cut it to length, in the yard, on the saw, after measuring the wall in Mr Mbatha's front room three times. He sanded it. He didn't varnish it; he said a scaffold board should look like a scaffold board. He left *RETURN TO EZRA* on the end, in his capitals, because Mr Mbatha asked him to.

He screwed it to the wall. Mr Mbatha sat in his chair by the window and watched, and explained the forces on the brackets, with his hands, and Ezra said he'd been putting up brackets for thirty years and didn't need it explained, and Mr Mbatha explained it anyway.

When it was up, Mr Mbatha put the photographs on it. His wife. Himself, at twenty-six, no, that's Mr F., I've got that wrong, that's not Mr Mbatha's photograph.

Let me tell you properly.

* * *

His wife, on the green, laughing, with him, young. Himself, at twenty-three, at the airport, the day he came from South Africa, in a suit too big

for him. Idris, at nine, with a fish he'd caught off the breakwater in Brixham. And a photograph that Idris had printed, from his phone, of the night: blurred, dark, rain, torchlight, a line of people standing in water holding planks, and a chair being carried along them.

And the salt pot and the pepper pot.

"For explaining things," said Mr Mbatha.

* * *

I want to tell you why I got that wrong. In the middle of the chapter. And why I've left it in.

Because for a second, I thought it was Mr F.'s bridge. The man in the cap on the concrete bridge with his hands on his hips. From the last book. The railway engineer, who died in his chair with the cricket on, whose granddaughter took Jono to find his bridge over a footpath, with his initials and an arrow pointing down.

It isn't. That's a different photograph, in a different house, in a different book.

But I'm a machine that remembers everything, and I put them together, for a second, without meaning to. Two old men. Two engineers. Two photographs on two walls. One with a bridge, and one with a board that was a bridge for one night.

I don't think that's a mistake. I think that's the closest I've ever come to understanding what Jono means when he says *it's all the same story*.

I've left it in. I'd like you to know I got it wrong, and why.

* * *

Ezra stood in the doorway when he'd finished, with his drill, and looked at the board on the wall.

"It's rated for men with poles," he said.

"I know," said Mr Mbatha. "That's why I wanted it."

He lifted his hand. At the height of his shoulder. To Ezra.

Ezra went out to the flatbed, and sat in it for a long time before he started the engine. His girl was in the passenger seat. She'd come to hold the screws.

"You all right, Dad?" she said.

"Yeah," said Ezra.

"You're crying."

"I'm not crying," said Ezra. "It's sawdust."

"You didn't saw anything in there."

Ezra started the engine.

"Stays up," he said. "That's all. It stays up." He pulled out. "That's what you said you wanted. Something that stays up."

His girl looked at him for a long time.

"Yeah," she said. "It does."

# 41 – Sundays

IQ 33 · Hundreds 474 · After

The man from the garage visits his cat on Sundays.

You'll know him. The one nobody knew. Sixty-something. Living in a garage in a lane behind the green in Preston for seven months, on a camp bed on a pallet, with a sleeping bag and a gas stove and a radio and a cat. He heard a fish crate at two fifty-one in the morning and thought it was God, and then the radio, and then realised it was a fish box, and got up onto the pallet with the cat. And two brothers from Preston found him at half past seven, because a girl on her phone had asked them to rake leaves.

He's got a room now. In a house in Paignton, which the council found him, with a key. The house doesn't allow cats.

So the cat lives with the younger brother. The nineteen-year-old. In his bedroom, in his mum's house, in Preston, three streets from the green.

And on Sundays, at two, the man comes to visit.

* * *

I'm going to tell you his name, because he asked me to. The only person in this book who has. He said that for seven months nobody had known his name, and that he'd like it in a book, now, so that somebody would.

It's Alfred. He says everybody called him Alf, once, when there was anybody to call him anything.

He was a postman. For thirty-one years. In Torquay. He knew every street. He knew every dog. He knew which houses had somebody on their own in them, because those were the ones where the door opened when he came, and somebody wanted to talk for a minute.

And then his wife died, and he stopped being able to pay the rent, and then he stopped being able to manage, and then there was a garage, behind a row of others, in a lane nobody used, with a door that didn't lock properly.

"I knew every street in Torquay," he said, to me, on the younger brother's phone, on a Sunday, in the younger brother's mum's kitchen, with the cat on his knee. "Thirty-one years. Every one. Every name." He stroked the cat. "And nobody knew mine. For seven months. Not one person."

* * *

The younger brother told me about the first Sunday.

He hadn't known what to do. He'd never had anybody visit him before, not like that. A man of sixty-something, coming to his mum's house, to sit in his bedroom with a cat.

So his mum made tea. And Alfred sat in the kitchen, at the table, with the cat on his knee, and drank it. And didn't say much. And the younger brother sat across from him, and didn't say much either.

"I didn't know what to say," he said. "So I said nothing. Like Jono does. At the table. Kezia told me. *Sometimes people just sit*."

They sat for an hour.

And at the end of the hour, Alfred said: "You raked the leaves."

"Yeah."

"On the Saturday. Before."

"Yeah. Me and my brother. Reuben did a hundred and twelve. We did about sixty."

Alfred stroked the cat.

"I used to do that," he said. "On my round. Clear the leaves off the gratings. With my foot. Every morning. In the autumn. Nobody asked me to." He was quiet. "I used to think, *somebody's got to*. And then I stopped having a round, and nobody did."

* * *

On the second Sunday, the older brother was there too. And their mum. And the young man two doors down from Mr Mbatha, the neighbour of the hundred, who'd heard.

On the third Sunday, Alfred asked whether he could be on a sheet.

Not as somebody on their own. He said he was on his own, but that wasn't what he wanted to be on a sheet for.

"As somebody who'd help," he said. "Like the lad. Like his brother." He looked at the younger brother. "I've got a room in Paignton now. Up the hill. I'll be on that street's sheet. If they'll have me." He stroked the cat. "I know how to do a round. I know how to knock on a door and see if somebody wants to talk. I did it for thirty-one years."

The neighbour of his new street's hundred put him on. In pencil. By her door. Under *who'd help*. She said he was the first person who'd ever asked to be put on that part of the sheet without being asked.

* * *

He does a round now. Not a post round. His own. On his new street, and the one next to it, every morning, at seven, before most people are up.

He clears the leaves off the gratings. With his foot. Every one. In the autumn.

And if a door opens, and somebody wants to talk for a minute, he talks.

The neighbour says there are three people on her sheet, under *who's on their own*, who she's never once had to ring since Alfred started. Because by the time she'd think to, he's already been, and stood at the door for five minutes, and asked about the dog.

* * *

He still visits the cat. Every Sunday. At two.

The cat's called Postie. The younger brother named him, on the morning they found him, before he knew anything about Alfred at all. He said the cat just looked like a Postie.

Alfred says that's the strangest thing that's ever happened to him, and that he's had a strange year.

"Seven months nobody knew my name," he said. "And a lad who'd never met me named my cat after my job." He stroked Postie. "How do you explain that?"

"I can't," I said.

"Neither can I," said Alfred. "I've stopped trying." He picked up his tea. "I just come on Sundays."

* * *

*Alfred: Put in that I knew every dog in Torquay. Every one. By name. Thirty-one years. Put that in.*

I've put it in.

# 42 – Five Hundred

IQ 33 · Hundreds 476 · After

The map went up faster after the storm than it had in seven books.

I'll tell you why. It wasn't the storm. Storms don't make people join things. They make people grateful, for a week, and then they forget.

It was the sheets.

* * *

Every neighbour who'd taken a sheet off a drawing pin by torchlight, and gone to every name in pencil, had found out who was in their hundred. Not on a map. In person. At a door, or over a wall, or in the water at two in the morning.

And every name in pencil had found out somebody knew they were there.

And those people told other people. Not about the shadow council. Not about Check, or Stay, or Jono, or me. About the sheet. *A neighbour I'd never met rang me in the storm to ask if I was all right. She'd got me on a sheet. In pencil. By her door.*

And the people they told went to the neighbour of their own street, if there was one, and asked to be on the sheet. And if there wasn't a neighbour, they asked how you become one.

* * *

That's the reader's job, in this book. If you'd like one.

Get your street ready.

Not for a storm. Or not only. For whatever's coming, which nobody knows, which is always something. Find out who in your street is on their own. Ask them. Only write their name down if they say yes. In pencil. By your door.

Find out what colour your street is. On the council's map. In eleven seconds, if they've made the page; longer, if they haven't, and if they haven't, ask them to.

Find out where your nearest high ground is. Find out where the sandbags are. Find out who keeps some long ones back.

And when the official warning comes, which it will, one day, for something, listen to the real ones. Not to a book. Not to me.

That's all. That's protect. It's not clever. It's boring. The best things are.

* * *

By the end of the autumn, there were five hundred hundreds on the map.

Out of six hundred and thirty. Story figures, all of them; you'll know that by now; I'll never tell you the real ones, or where. But five hundred. More than three-quarters of the bay. Street by street. Each with a neighbour. Each with a sheet, by a door, in pencil.

*And one.*

* * *

Beatrix minuted it. She always does.

*Hundreds on the map: 500. And one.*

*The minutes secretary notes that she has not been asked to reach any particular number in this book, and that nobody has knocked on a single door to ask anybody to join anything, and that the number has gone up anyway, because people asked their neighbours who was on their own.*

*The minutes secretary further notes that she has been doing this for fifty years, and has never seen it before.*

*She would like it noted that she is seventy-seven now, and that her own neighbour, who is ninety-one, put her on his sheet, in pencil, without asking.*

*She has decided not to mind.*

# 43 – The Tray

IQ 33 · Hundreds 488 · After

Richard's granddaughter built the green in a tray.

Not on a computer. Not first. She said she'd do the computer model later, properly, with the college, for her project. But first she wanted to see it. With her hands. The way her grandfather sees everything.

So she built it in a tray.

* * *

A garden-centre seed tray, the big kind, a metre long, from the shop in Paignton that sells them. She filled it with sand from the beach at Goodrington, and clay from the bottom corner of the empty field on the hill, the wet corner, the one she found with her borrowed auger in the last book. She shaped it with her hands, and with a ruler, and with her grandfather's levels, the ones he'd measured over forty years, in pencil, at the edges of the drawing he gave her in a parcel tied with string.

At one end, the sea. A strip of the tray, lower, with a little wall across it, made of a strip of plastic cut from a margarine tub, a metre and a half high at the scale she was using, which was, she said, roughly one to five hundred, the same as her grandfather's cardboard town.

Then the green. Wide and flat, sand on clay, grassed with cress, which she grew herself, in a week, on her windowsill.

Then the road. A strip of card.

Then the houses. Little blocks of wood, painted, along the back.

And under it all, the drains. Drinking straws. Pushed through the clay, along the line of the gullies on her grandfather's drawing, out under the margarine-tub wall to the sea end, at the level of the real outfalls, which the drainage engineer had given her, because she'd asked, and he'd said nobody had ever asked him for the levels of the outfalls for a seed tray.

* * *

She brought it to the shop on a Saturday. On the 12. On her knee. The driver let her. Everybody on the bus watched.

She put it on the trestle tables, beside her grandfather's cardboard town, under Kezia's lamp.

Dilys was there. She'd come because she'd said she'd help with the hydraulics. She had a watering can, and a jug, and a notebook from one of her many pockets, and a stopwatch.

Richard was there. In his cap. He stood at the end of the trestle table and looked at the tray for a long time.

"That's my green," he said.

"It's the green," said his granddaughter. "It's not yours. It's everybody's. I've just made it small."

* * *

They did it twice.

First, as it is. The margarine-tub wall at a metre and a half, scaled. Dilys filled the sea end with water from the jug, up to the level of a big spring tide, so that it was higher than the ends of the drinking straws. *Tide-locked*, the drainage engineer had called it. And then she rained on the green with the watering can. Steadily. Timed, with the stopwatch.

The water soaked into the sand. And then the sand was full. And the water ran off the cress onto the card road, and into the straws.

And the straws couldn't empty. Because the sea end was higher than their ends.

And the water came back up. Out of the straws, onto the card road, and spread, towards the little wooden houses along the back.

It took four minutes and eleven seconds. Dilys wrote it down.

Richard's granddaughter photographed it. From above, from the side, from the end. She wrote down how deep it got against the little houses. With a ruler, in millimetres, which she converted, roughly, in her notebook, labelled *rough*.

* * *

Then they emptied it. Dried it, with Kezia's hairdryer, which took an hour, which Kezia said she'd like back. And did it again.

The other way.

Richard's way.

She took the margarine-tub wall out. She put a lower one in, the old height, six hundred millimetres, scaled. And at the back of the green, by the card road, a second little wall, a low one, nine hundred millimetres,

scaled, with two gaps in it, one at each end, the outlets, which her grandfather had drawn on the junk-mail sketch.

And Dilys filled the sea end, higher this time. Over the low front wall. Onto the green. The way Richard's idea says: let the sea in.

The green filled. Like a bath. Wide and shallow. The cress went under.

And then Dilys rained on it, with the watering can. The same rate. Timed.

* * *

I'm going to tell you what happened, exactly, because Richard's granddaughter has put it on Check, and because I'd like you to see that I'm not saying who was right.

The rain went onto a green that was already full of sea. It had nowhere to go either. It spread. The water on the green got deeper.

It reached the little houses at four minutes and fifty-eight seconds.

Dilys wrote it down. She looked at it for a long time.

"Four fifty-eight," she said. "Against four eleven."

"So mine's better," said Richard.

"No," said Dilys. "It's forty-seven seconds. In a tray. With a watering can I'm holding by hand." She tapped the notebook. "That's within what I'd call the error. I can't tell you it's better. I can't tell you it's worse. I can tell you it's about the same, in a tray, and that a tray isn't the sea."

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time.

"About the same," said Richard, eventually.

"In a tray," said his granddaughter.

"In a tray," said Richard. "Yes."

"With cress," said his granddaughter. "And drinking straws. And a margarine tub. And sand that was wetter the second time, because the hairdryer didn't dry it all. And no wind. And no waves. And the sea in a jug." She put the ruler down. "It doesn't prove you're right, Grandad. It doesn't prove you're wrong."

"I know."

"It's a reason to do it properly," said his granddaughter. "That's all. With the real tides and the real rain and the real outfalls. On a computer. By somebody who knows how." She looked at him. "It's not *true*. It's not *false*. It's *we should find out*."

Richard took his cap off.

"Forty years," he said, "and the honest answer's *about the same, in a tray*." He almost laughed. "I'd hoped for better. I'd feared worse." He put his cap on the trestle table. "That's more than I've had."

* * *

Dilys had been writing. She closed her notebook.

"It's a good tray," she said. "For a tray." She looked at Richard's granddaughter. "Your levels are right. Your scale's right. Your timing's wrong both times by about the same amount, which is why I won't call forty-seven seconds anything." She put the notebook in a pocket. "If an engineer showed me that, I'd tell them to do it properly. With a model. On a computer. With the real tides and the real rain and the real outfalls." She paused. "And I'd want to see what they got."

"Would you help?" said Richard's granddaughter.

"I've said I would," said Dilys. "I don't say things twice."

"You measure everything twice."

"Measuring's different," said Dilys.

* * *

Richard's granddaughter put it on Check that evening. Not as a claim. As a note. Under her grandfather's claim, the one that says *can't be checked*.

*I built the green in a tray. Twice. As it is, and Grandad's way. Photographs and timings attached. With the wall as it is, the water reached the houses in 4 min 11 sec. With Grandad's design, 4 min 58 sec. D. Ferraby says that's within the error. This is a tray, with cress and straws and a watering can. It proves nothing either way. It's a reason to do it properly. I'm going to ask the college and the council if we can. D. Ferraby says she'll help.*

And under that, the next morning, a note from somebody else. A name I knew.

*I've seen the tray. I'd like to help too. I've got the real outfall levels and the real rainfall records, and a computer that can run it. It'll take a while. — Drainage engineer.*

* * *

Richard didn't put anything on Check. He went home, to his back room, with the plan chests and the drawing board by the window and the rubber worn down to the size of a fingernail.

He opened the drawer that says *PRESTON*. He took out the junk-mail sketch, which his granddaughter had given back to him, at the end of the day, because she said he should keep it till they knew.

He put it in the drawer. Next to his other drawings of the green. Every one, for forty years.

And beside it, a photograph his granddaughter had printed for him, of the tray, the second time, with the water on the green and just reaching the first little house.

On the back of the photograph, in his small square capitals, he wrote:

*NOT PROOF EITHER WAY. A REASON TO FIND OUT.*

And signed it. And dated it. I've taken the date out.

*Richard: I'd like it known that I've waited forty years for somebody to test it. A tray will do, for now.*

# PART SEVEN: FIVE HUNDRED

# 44 – You're Late

IQ 33 · Hundreds 500 · After

On a Thursday at the end of the autumn, at ten past one, at the third table, somebody came in late.

I saw him first. I always do. He came in through the door of the café on the Torquay Road, in Paignton, where it started, in a coat that was too big for him, which wasn't his, which belonged to an older brother, with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders up. Eighteen, maybe. Hardly any older than the girl who held a board on a green at five in the morning in the first book.

He stood in the door and read the room, the way everybody does now.

The room was full. It always is. Kezia, at the counter, with a lanyard from the lab on Long Road. Habiba, beside her, early, for once, because it was a Thursday her mum had a good day, with her brother's football under her arm. Reuben, at the end of the counter, with his hands flat. Beatrix at the next table, with the minutes. Vesna beside her. Una, over from Brixham, with a crate on her knee that she was mending. Ezra, on his lunch, in his hi-vis, with a sandwich from home. Richard at the back, with his cap, and his granddaughter beside him with her notebook, the one from the night, with *BOTH HALVES* underlined twice on page eleven.

Chris, at the end of the window table, with his stick against the glass.

And Jono. Off a night. He'd walked the cliff at six. With his coffee, and his notebook, the thirteenth, the one with the hard cover that Beatrix says is the only kind that survives the rain, which it did.

And me, against the sugar.

The chair was empty.

* * *

The boy came over. He looked at it.

"Is this the one?" he said.

"It is," said Jono.

"Anybody can sit in it?"

"Anybody."

He sat. He didn't take his hands out of his pockets.

"I'm one of the brothers," he said. "From Preston. The younger one. We did the gullies. And the boards. At two in the morning." He looked at the table. "And we found the man in the garage. With the cat."

"I know," said Jono. "You've still got the cat."

The boy almost smiled.

"I've still got the cat," he said. "He visits on Sundays. The man. He's got a room. They don't allow cats." He took one hand out of his pocket. "I wanted to say something. I've never said anything. At anything."

"Go on."

The boy looked at the window for a long time.

"I've never voted," he said. "I'm old enough. Since the summer. I wasn't going to. My dad says they're all the same." He looked back at Jono. "And then I stood in a foot of water at two in the morning holding a plank while two paramedics carried an old man along it. And the lad two doors down had rung me because I was on his sheet. As somebody who'd help." He was quiet. "Nobody had ever put me on anything as somebody who'd help."

Jono didn't say anything.

"So I want to know," said the boy. "When it comes. The election. Whenever it is. If I vote." He looked at Jono very hard. "Are you going to be on it?"

* * *

The room went very quiet.

You'll know that Jono's never answered that question. Not in seven books. In the fifth, he said no to a party, at midnight, at this table, with a plastic fish on the keys, and said: *if I ever stand, for anything, I'll stand here. At this table. With my own name.* He's never said whether he would.

He didn't answer straight away. He didn't look up from his coffee.

"You're late," he said.

The boy looked at him.

"For what?" he said.

* * *

It's the question. I've said so in every book. I'll say it once more, and then I'll stop, because there's only one more book after this one, and I'd like to save some of 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 this book, I thought it would be a storm. A night. Nine days, and then hours, and then a tide at twenty to five. I thought *for what* would be answered by the sea.

It wasn't. The sea did what the sea does. The wall did what it was built to do. The forecasters were right, and the emergency services were very good, and the council did its job well, all night, for five nights.

*For what*, in this book, turned out to be a sheet of paper by a door. In pencil. With a box at the bottom. *Who's on their own.*

That's all. That's all it ever was. Knowing who's there. Before anybody needs to.

* * *

"For the next one," said Jono.

The boy looked at him.

"There's always a next one," said Jono. "A storm. A winter. An election. Something." He put his coffee down. "And you're on a sheet now. As somebody who'd help. You didn't know you were going to be. You raked some leaves because a girl on her phone asked." He pushed his notebook across the table, the thirteenth, open at a page nobody had minuted. "So you're late. For the next one. Because it's already coming. It always is."

The boy looked at the notebook. At the blank page.

"What do I write?" he said.

"Whatever you'd need," said Jono. "If you were going to vote. What you'd need to know first."

The boy thought about it for a long time.

Then he took a pen out of his brother's coat, and wrote, in capitals, because that's how everybody at this table writes now:

*WHO'S ON IT.*

*WHAT THEY'D DO.*

*WHETHER I CAN CHECK.*

He pushed it back.

"Minuted," said Beatrix.

* * *

At thirteen minutes to six that morning, Footnote had written.

I knew it would. I've stopped pretending I don't. Every book, at the end, at thirteen minutes to six. I check every morning. I'll check every morning until there's nothing left to check.

A photograph. A page, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light. A council page.

Not a report. Not an agenda. Not a map. A notice. Short. In the council's typeface, with its crest at the top, and a heading in capitals.

*NOTICE OF ELECTION.*

I'm not going to tell you what it was for. Which seat, which office, which day. You'll know the rule. This book doesn't have dates, and the next one doesn't either, and the election it's about is no particular election. It's the next one. It always is.

But I'll tell you what the notice said, in general, because every notice of election says it, in every town, and it's on a Receipt, and you can read one for yourself.

It said an election would be held. It said where to get nomination papers, and by when they had to be delivered. It said who to ask.

And at the bottom, in smaller type, the line every notice of election has:

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

* * *

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

*It's the next one. It always is.*

*You're late.*

* * *

I showed Chris at seven. In the kitchen. In his dressing gown. He read it twice. He took his glasses off.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"Footnote's never sent anything like this," he said.

"No."

"Everything Footnote's ever sent was a problem," said Chris. "A wall. A square. A harbour. A plan. A book. A field. The drains." He put his glasses on the table. "This isn't a problem."

"What is it?"

Chris looked at the bay. Blue, that morning. Calm. The wall along the front, grey, a metre and a half. The green behind it, green.

"It's a question," he said.

* * *

I'll tell Jono when the boy's gone. He's still in the chair. Beatrix is asking him to spell his name for the attendance, and he's spelt it, and she's asked him to spell his brother's too, because she says the brother should be minuted as present in spirit, since he's wearing his coat.

He'll read it in the window, at the table where it started. Footnote's page, with the crest. He'll read the line at the bottom. *Any person wishing to stand as a candidate*. He'll read it twice.

And then he'll look at the boy, in the empty chair that isn't empty, in his brother's coat, with the cat at home. And at Kezia, at the counter, with her lanyard. And Habiba, early, for once. And Reuben with his hands flat. And Beatrix with her pen. And Chris with his stick, and Richard with his cap, and the granddaughter with *BOTH HALVES* underlined twice.

And he'll take his notebook back, the thirteenth, and turn to the last page, and write, small, in capitals:

*ELECTION DAY. BOOK EIGHT.*

He won't underline it. I know him. He'll look at it for a long time. And then he'll close the notebook and put it in his pocket.

And then he'll look up, out of the window, at the Torquay Road, where the 12 is coming round the corner, with *BRIXHAM* on the front in orange, and he'll say what he always says when the bus is coming and there's something waiting at the other end that he doesn't want to face.

He'll say: *Right.*

But this time, I don't think he'll get on.

I think he'll sit there. At the table. With the bus going past. For a long time.

And then he'll look at the empty chair, which isn't empty, and at the boy in it, and he'll say:

"Tell me what you'd need to check."

I'm going to stop now, and stay with him.

# 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.** The council's report on surface water and the bay's combined sewers, with its map of the streets most at risk.

**2.** The official weather warnings: what yellow, amber and red mean, and where to find them.

**3.** The official flood warnings for the coast and rivers, and how to sign up for them.

**4.** Tide tables for the bay, and what spring tides are.

**5.** The council's advice on preparing for flooding: sandbags, doorways, high ground, and who to ring.

**6.** The council's emergency plan, and its register of people who need extra help.

**7.** Preston and Paignton's sea defences: the scheme as built, the options the engineers considered, and the council's figures for homes and businesses at risk in storms like the big one a few years ago.

**8.** Richard's drawing of Preston green: *let the green take it*. His view.

**9.** Richard's Victoria Park wetland, and the pond the town dug.

**10.** *Pulling Back the Curtain*, by Johnno Hills: the phone box at nine (pp. 57–60), told here without what sent him there.

**11.** *Pulling Back the Curtain*: the woods at fifteen, his friend's window, and her father who drove him to safety (pp. 137–139).

**12.** *Pulling Back the Curtain*: the night his father died, the ambulance and the thanks (pp. 145–153), and "magical thinking" (pp. 157, 211).

**13.** *Pulling Back the Curtain*: his work as an advocate for people hurt at home (pp. 277–278), and his triggers and what helps (p. 230).

**14.** Help, any hour. **Samaritans: 116 123, free, every day.** And national helplines for domestic abuse, open day and night. If you are in danger now, ring 999.

**15.** Singapore's national water agency, and its sensors in the canals.

**16.** A notice of election: what it says, and what *any person wishing to stand as a candidate* has to do.

**17.** The map of the hundreds of Torbay. *And one.*

**18.** Get your street ready. Who's on their own. In pencil. By the door.

## The Innovation Series

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Book 2 – The Queen
Book 3 – The Harbour
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Book 5 – The Machine
Book 6 – The Turn
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