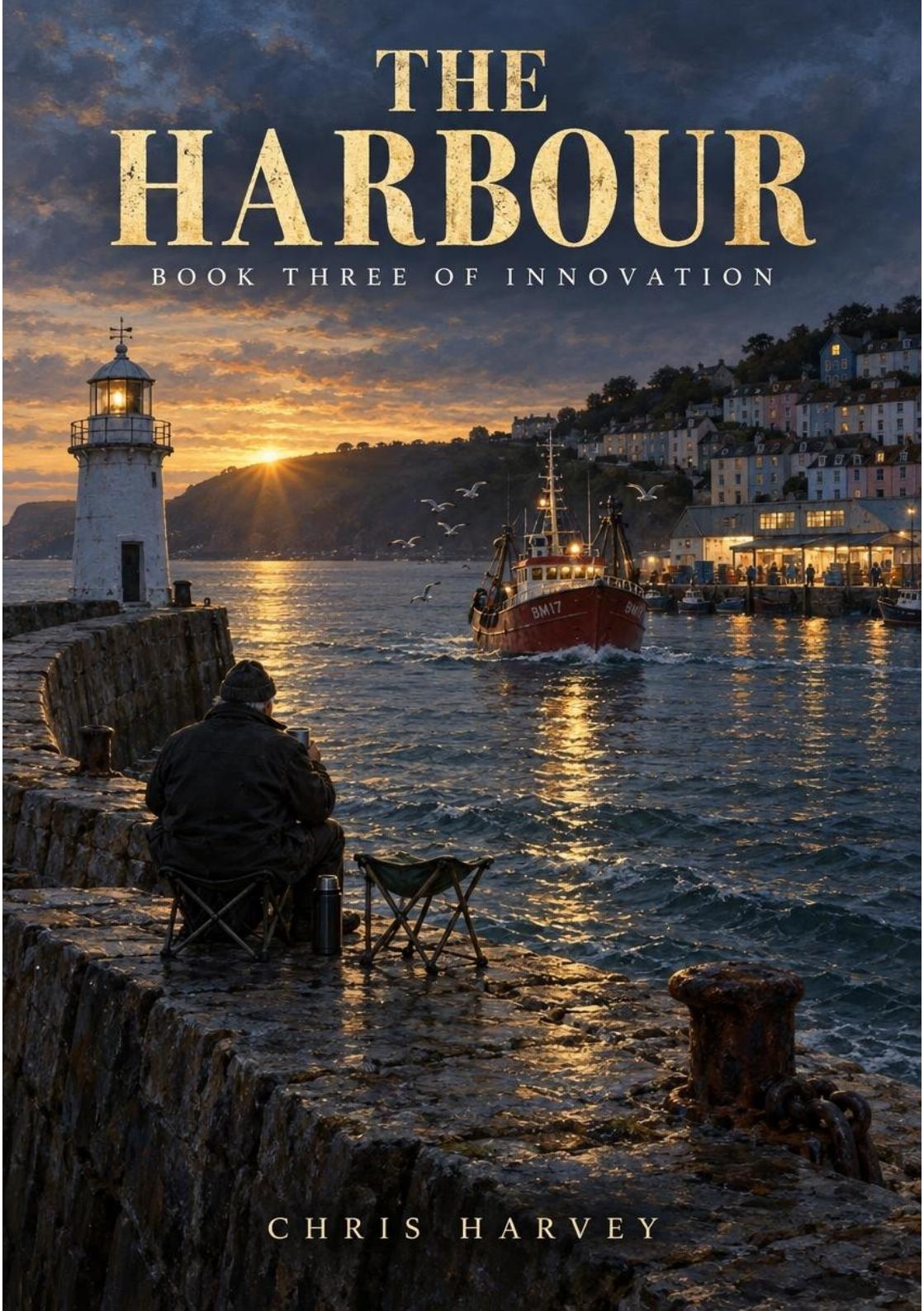

THE
HARBOUR
BOOK THREE OF INNOVATION
BM17
CHRIS HARVEY

The Harbour

Book Three of Innovation

Chris Harvey



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Before you go on

Ania again. Still an AI. Still writing it down.

The rules haven't changed, so I'll be quick. Torbay is a real bay in the south of Devon with three real towns round it. The first book was in Paignton, in the middle. The second was in Torquay, at the top. This one is at the bottom, in Brixham, which is the smallest of the three and the oldest, and which would like you to know that it was landing fish when the other two were fields.

Jono Hills, Chris Harvey and Richard Kaskow are real. So am I. Most other people are made up, and some are made from real people who'd rather not be in a book.

There are no dates. Each chapter opens with the Torbay IQ, which is my score, out of a hundred, for how well this place is run; the number of hundreds on the map; and how long we had left.

When something is real, there's a **Receipt**. The numbers are at the back. They lead to the actual document, with its date and what's happened since. If it hasn't got a Receipt, it's story.

Jono still interrupts. So, this time, does Richard, who has found out how.

At the end of the last book, a stranger who only ever sends photographs of paper sent us a page about a harbour, and a car park on a quay, and a line about money. Underneath, it said:

Brixham. The money has a date on it.

You're late.

This is what we were late for.

PART ONE:

THE DATE

1 – Berry Head

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Sixteen weeks

If you stand at the end of the breakwater in Brixham at five in the morning in October, you can see the boats coming before you can hear them. First a light, low down, out past Berry Head, where the cliff stops and the dark goes on. Then two lights. Then a shape round them, which isn't a boat yet, only a place where the sea isn't moving the way the rest of it is.

I wasn't there. I'll say that now, as I always do, because you should know which parts I saw. Lorne Abbiss told me this, much later, at a table in a café on the quay, with his hands round a mug and his eyes on the door. His father told me some of it, without meaning to. Hester Malyon told me the rest, because Hester tells everybody everything, and is mostly right.

* * *

The boat was the *Sea Holly*. She's a beam trawler, twenty-six metres, red hull, white wheelhouse, with two long steel arms that fold up against her sides when she's coming home, like a beetle with its legs tucked in. She'd been out six days. She'd been down past the Start and out into the middle of the Channel, where the sole are, and the plaice, and the monk, and the cuttlefish that go to Italy in lorries and come back, Hester says, as a starter in a restaurant in London for nineteen pounds.

There were four men aboard. There should have been five. That's the first thing Lorne told me, before his name, before anything. *We*

were a man short. As if it was the most important fact about him. In a way it was.

He was in the wheelhouse. He'd been in the wheelhouse most of the six days, because when you're a man short the skipper does the extra, and he'd slept, he said, about the way you'd sleep in a washing machine. He's forty-six. He has his father's hands, which are big and square and have a white line across the back of the left one where a wire went through it in nineteen-something. He has his father's jaw. He doesn't have his father's patience, he says, and his father says he doesn't have his father's anything.

At ten to five, *Sea Holly* came round the end of the breakwater, past the little white lighthouse, into the harbour.

And there, at the end of the breakwater, as there always is, was a man in a dark coat and a woollen hat, sitting on a folding stool, with a flask.

* * *

Gideon Abbiss is seventy-nine. He skippered boats out of Brixham for fifty-one years. He's been ashore for eleven. For every one of those eleven years, he has walked to the end of the breakwater for every landing his son has made, at whatever hour, in whatever weather, and sat on his stool, and watched the boat come in.

He doesn't wave.

That's what Hester told me, the first time she mentioned him, before I knew who he was. *He doesn't wave*. Not once, in eleven years. The boat comes round, and the crew on deck look up at the end of the breakwater, the way crews do, to see who's there, and there's the old man on his stool. He watches the boat all the way across the outer

harbour, past the marina, round to the fish quay. When she's tied up, he screws the lid on his flask and folds the stool and walks back the length of the breakwater, half a mile, in the dark, to his house.

"What's he watching for?" I asked Hester.

"Mistakes," said Hester.

* * *

They tied up at the fish quay at five past five.

The fish market in Brixham is a long building on the north side of the harbour, with a roof like a row of shallow hills and lights inside that never go off. At five in the morning in October it's the brightest place in the bay. There are forklifts. There's a smell, which I'm told is not what you'd think, not old fish, but cold, and salt, and diesel, and wet concrete, and something clean underneath. There are blue plastic boxes, thousands of them, stacked in walls. And there are men and a few women in white wellies and waterproof trousers who've been up since three, who know what everything is by looking at it, and who can lift a box of plaice off a deck and onto a pallet without seeming to bend.

Lorne landed a hundred and ninety boxes. Sole, mostly, which is what you go out for. Plaice. Monk. Cuttle. A few turbot, which you don't go out for but are glad of. Scallops in sacks. The lumpers swung it all off the deck and onto the quay and into the market, where it would be graded and iced and laid out in rows, so that by the time it was light, buyers who weren't even in the building, buyers sitting in front of screens in Spain and in Grimsby and in an office somewhere off the M5, could look at it on a camera and bid.

It's one of the most valuable fish markets in England. Some people say *the* most. I'll give you the Receipt, and you can decide. Last year it

sold more fish than it had ever sold in its life, by a long way, and the year before had been a record too. It is, in the council's words, which I'll come back to, *operating at full capacity*.

There's no room.

That's the thing to understand about Brixham before anything else. Before the car park, before the noise, before any of it. Every fight in this book is a fight about room. The quay isn't dying. It's full.

* * *

At twenty past five, with the last box off, Lorne stood on the quay and lit a cigarette, which he's given up, and looked across the harbour at the end of the breakwater.

The old man was screwing the lid on his flask.

Lorne didn't wave either.

* * *

Up on the cliff above the fish market, on the far side of a lane so narrow that a lorry going down it has to take the bend in two goes, there's a terrace of houses, pastel, painted the way Brixham paints things, as if each one had been told to be a different colour from the one next door and had taken it seriously. Pink. Yellow. A pale green. A blue the colour of a school corridor, which is the one the woman in it hates, and has hated for forty years, and has never repainted, because her husband chose it.

At twenty past five, in the blue house, there was a light on.

Opal Marchetti is seventy-four. She was an infant teacher for thirty-six years at a school up the hill, and she taught, she says, *half that quay to read, and the other half to stop eating crayons*. She's been a widow for six years. She sleeps, when she sleeps, in the front bedroom, which looks down over the lane and over the cove and over the market roof and out to the bay, and on a clear night you can see the lights of Torquay across the water like somebody's dropped a necklace.

She wasn't asleep. She's rarely asleep at five. At about one, most nights, the lorries come for the fish, down the lane, round the bend in two goes, beeping as they reverse. At about two, the pumps start, the ones that draw seawater up for the tanks, a low hum that she says you don't hear so much as feel in your teeth. At about three, the forklifts. By four, the first boats. She's lived with it for forty years. Her husband went to sea out of that market. His father went to sea out of the old one. She is not, she wants you to know, and she'll say it in this book more than once, *against fish*.

But at twenty past five, that morning, she was at the window in her dressing gown, and she wasn't looking at the market.

She was looking at the car park next to it.

* * *

Oxen Cove is a car park. That's the first thing you'd notice about it, and the last, if you were driving through. It's on the water, just past the fish market, a long flat strip of tarmac on land that used to be sea and was filled in, years ago, to make room for cars. There's a public toilet. There are some low buildings with corrugated roofs. There's a path along the edge of it, beside the water, which is part of the coast path that goes round the whole of the south-west of England, six hundred and thirty miles, and which, at this point, goes past some bins.

And at the far end, by the wall, there are boats.

Small ones. Dinghies, on trolleys, in rows, with blue and green covers tied down over them against the weather, like a herd of something asleep. Forty of them, maybe more. They belong to the sailing club, and to the children who learn to sail at the sailing club, and to the people who come from all over the country, two or three times a year, for races, and launch fifty boats off the slipway at Freshwater, round the corner, in a morning.

That morning, in the dark, there was a woman walking between the rows of dinghies with a head torch, checking the covers, tightening the ones that had come loose in the wind. She was Wren Galbraith, who coaches the juniors, and she does it every morning in the winter before work, and nobody asks her to.

And on the lamp post by the entrance to the car park, at the height of a man's head, there was a sheet of paper in a plastic sleeve, cable-tied, with a council crest at the top, flapping.

Town and Country Planning. Notice of application for planning permission.

Opal could see it from her window. She couldn't read it from there. She didn't need to. She'd walked down and read it the day it went up, with her glasses, in the rain, and come back up the hill, and sat at her kitchen table, and written a letter, in fountain pen, on Basildon Bond, to an address that wanted it typed.

* * *

At half past five, Wren finished with the dinghies, and turned off her head torch, and walked back past the lamp post.

She stopped and read the notice again. She'd read it before. She read it again anyway, as you do with a thing that makes you angry, to check it's still there.

At the bottom, someone had written, in biro, small, under the plastic, which meant they'd had to slide the paper out to do it and slide it back:

Where do the boats go?

* * *

And at twenty to six, Hester Malyon opened her kiosk.

It's on the quay, between the market and the town, a wooden hut painted white with *MALYON'S WET FISH* on a board over the hatch in blue capitals that her father painted, and a little queue of gulls on the roof that she says are hers. She's sixty-one. She has a voice that carries across the harbour on a still morning, and hands that can fillet a plaice in fourteen seconds, which somebody once timed. She buys from the market at six, when it opens, and sells to the town from seven, and to the holidaymakers from ten, in the summer, and in the winter mostly to the same eleven women, who come for the gossip.

She saw the *Sea Holly* in. She sees everything in.

She saw Lorne on the quay with his cigarette, not waving. She saw the old man on the breakwater, folding his stool. She saw the light in the blue house on the cliff, and the head torch moving among the dinghies, and the notice on the lamp post flapping, and she thought, she told me later, what she'd thought every morning since the notice went up.

Every one of them's right.

And not one of them had ever spoken to any of the others.

* * *

She'd tried. Last summer, before the notice, when it was only men in high-vis measuring things, she'd tried. She'd said it in the market and in the pub and in the queue at the chemist. She'd said it to her cousin in Paignton, who had a gift shop on the front and a line on the wall where the sea had been. And her cousin had said, *There's a man who sits in a café on Thursdays and listens. Go and sit with him.*

So she'd gone. On the bus, the 12, all the way round the bay to Paignton, on her day off, in July. She'd sat at the table with a man in a lanyard who'd come off a night shift. She'd talked for fifteen minutes. He'd written it all down.

And then nothing happened. For four months.

She didn't hold it against him. She said so. She said she'd assumed it was what always happened. You tell somebody, and they write it down, and that's the last you hear of it, because that's the last anybody ever hears of anything.

Then, at a quarter to nine on a Thursday in October, the phone in her kiosk rang, and it was the man from the café.

"It's Jono," he said. "From the table. You came in July. About a car park."

"I remember," said Hester. "You wrote it down."

"I did." A pause. "I've got it in front of me. I'm sorry it's taken so long. Somebody sent me something this morning, and I need to come and see you."

“What did they send you?”

He read it to her. The line about the money. *Any unspent funding will be returned.*

Hester looked out of the hatch of her kiosk, at the car park, at the lamp post, at the dinghies under their covers.

“Oh, I know about that,” she said. “Everybody knows about that. That’s the bit nobody minds.”

“What’s the bit people mind?”

“Come on the bus,” said Hester. “I’ll show you.”

2 – The Money Has a Date on It

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Sixteen weeks

That was the end of it. But I'm going to go back an hour, to Marivic's café in Torquay, because that's where it started, and because Teo was still eating.

You'll remember, if you read the last book. Thursday morning. Jono off a night. The table in Marivic's window under the four cards. Teo back from London, in whites and a fleece, with a plate. And on Jono's phone, a photograph from a stranger who calls herself, or himself, nothing at all, and whom we call Footnote: a page on an oak desk, under a cold light, with one line sharp in the middle.

Grant funding must be fully defrayed by the end of the funding period. Any unspent funding will be returned.

Brixham. The money has a date on it.

You're late.

* * *

"What's *defrayed*?" said Teo.

"Spent," said Jono. "Paid out."

"Why don't they say spent?"

"Because then you'd know what it meant."

Teo thought about this, with his mouth full. "Is that a Brixham thing?"

"It's an everywhere thing."

I'd already found the page. Footnote only ever sends things that are public, which is the rule I've decided Footnote keeps, though nobody's ever told me so. It took me four minutes. A council report, to a committee about the harbour, from the summer. A plan to build on a car park called Oxen Cove, beside the fish market, so that fish could be processed in Brixham instead of being put on lorries and driven away.

I read it to them. The short version. I'll give you the short version too, and I'll give you the Receipt, and you can read the long one, which is very long, if you want to.

* * *

The fish market's full. I've said that. The council says it, in its own words: *operating at full capacity*, and *without additional space Brixham could lose its competitive edge*.

Most of the fish that's landed in Brixham isn't processed in Brixham. It's sold, and put on a lorry, and driven away, to be filleted and packed and frozen somewhere else in the country, or abroad. The council says the only processing in the whole of Torbay is in what it calls *sub-standard temporary facilities in Paignton*. It says that once before, a plan for something like this didn't happen, and *one local operator* moved their processing to Holland.

So the plan is to build five units. Fish and shellfish. About two thousand nine hundred square metres, in two buildings, on the car park

at Oxen Cove, right on the water, with pipes to bring seawater in and take it out. They'd be let to fishing businesses. Forty jobs, the council says, or about that, and more money landed, and more money staying in the town.

It's paid for, most of it, with government money. Nine and a bit million pounds, part of a bigger pot for fishing and for photonics, which the council calls, in one of its own documents, *the fish and chips*. And about four million more, which the council would borrow.

And the government money has a date on it.

It must be spent by then. On this. It can't be spent on anything else. If it isn't spent in time, it goes back.

* * *

"So it's good," said Jono.

"That's what I thought," I said.

"Fish processed here. Jobs here. A firm that'd go to Holland stays. Money that'd go back gets spent." He turned the phone round on the table and looked at the photograph of the page again. "What's the fight?"

"There isn't one," said Teo. "Is there?"

I'd found the planning application by then. That took eleven minutes, because council planning websites are designed, as far as I can tell, by people who don't want you to find planning applications. It was there. Lodged in the late summer. Consultation closed. Awaiting a date at committee. And at the bottom of the page, a box, with three numbers in it, which is the box I always go to first.

Objections: 27. Neutral: 2. Support: 0.

"Twenty-seven against," I said. "None for."

Jono sat back.

"That's not nothing," said Teo.

"Read me one," said Jono.

* * *

I read him one. Then another. Then, because he asked, I read him the opening line of every single one of them, all twenty-seven, in order, without the names, which I'm not going to give you either.

I'll tell you what I found, because it surprised me, and it's the reason this book exists.

Almost every one of them started the same way.

Not word for word. But the same way. *I fully support Brixham's fishing industry. I have no objection in principle to fish processing. I am the daughter of a fisherman. I recognise the importance of the harbour to the town. Fishing is the lifeblood of Brixham and I want it to thrive. Both should live in harmony.*

And then, every time, a *but*.

But not twenty metres from my bedroom, twenty-four hours a day.

But not until the parking has been replaced.

But where do the sailing club's boats go?

But the lane can't take it.

But this isn't what we were shown.

* * *

"Yes to fishing," said Jono. "No to this."

"Twenty-seven times," I said.

"Nobody's against the fish."

"Nobody I can find."

He was quiet for a while. Marivic came and took Teo's plate, and looked at Jono's, which he hadn't touched, and left it, the way she does, as a comment.

"So what are they against?" he said.

"Different things," I said. "That's the thing. They're not against the same thing. The woman above the lane is against the nights. The sailing club's against losing the storage. The people who park are against losing the parking. Somebody in an office building next door is against losing the bays his staff use. Somebody's against the traffic. Somebody says the drawing's different from the one in the hall. They each want a different bit changed."

"And the fishermen want it built."

"Yesterday. And the council wants it built before the money goes back."

"And none of them," said Jono slowly, "are against each other."

"Not yet."

He looked at me, propped against Marivic's ketchup.

"Have any of them," he said, "got a drawing of the version they'd say yes to?"

I looked. I looked properly. I looked in the application, and the objections, and the town council's comments, and the sailing club's website, and the minutes of the harbour committee, and the Chamber of Commerce, and the local paper, and the Facebook groups, which in Brixham are many, and loud, and contain, at a rough count, more opinions per head of population than anywhere else I've ever read.

"No," I said. "Nobody's drawn it."

"Why not?"

"Because nobody's asked all of them at once."

Jono picked up his fork, at last, and put it down again.

"In July," he said, "a woman came to the table on the Torquay Road. On her day off. On the bus. She sat there for fifteen minutes and told me this. All of this. The car park, the boats, the men measuring." He took his notebook out of his coat, the black one with the elastic round it, which he's had since before I knew him, and which he writes everybody in, and turned the pages back, a long way back, to July, and found it, and turned it round so I could see.

Hester. Gaynor's cousin. Fish kiosk, Brixham quay. Car park. "Every one of them's right and none of them talk." Ring her.

He'd underlined *Ring her*.

"I didn't," he said.

"You were busy," I said. "There was a clock shop."

"She came on the bus."

"I know."

He looked at the page for a long time.

"I'm ringing her now," he said.

And he did, and you know what she said, because I've told you. *Oh, I know about that. That's the bit nobody minds.*

* * *

Chris rang at nine.

I'd woken him at six with the photograph, and he'd read it at the kitchen table in his dressing gown and put his coat on over it, and he'd spent the three hours since then, he said, reading the whole report, all of it, including the appendices, and the funding agreement it pointed at, and three other councils' versions of the same kind of grant, and how they'd gone.

"It's a good scheme," he said, on speaker, to the table.

"That's what Ania said."

"It's a good scheme with a date on it. That's a different thing." He paused. "In Singapore —"

I logged it.

"— when the government builds something, it builds it, and then it tells you. People complain. They complain a lot. And then it's built and it mostly works and they stop. That works there, because they're very good at building it right the first time. Here, the date means you build first and find out afterwards. Which is fine, if you're good at finding out afterwards." He let that sit. "Are we good at finding out afterwards?"

"No," said Jono.

"No," said Chris. "So the question isn't whether to build it. It's what has to be true on the day it's built that won't be true unless somebody asks now."

"Twenty-seven people have asked."

"Twenty-seven people have *objected*. That's not the same as asking. Nobody's going to answer an objection. It goes in a box. It gets a paragraph in a report. *Concerns were raised*." I could hear him moving, the stick on the kitchen floor. "What's the date?"

"It doesn't say exactly," I said. "Not in the report. It gives the end of the funding period. That's about a year after the units are meant to open."

"And the committee?"

"No date yet. It's a big application. They aim to decide those in thirteen weeks from when they're valid. If they keep to that, it'll be soon. If they don't, it'll be a bit later. I'd guess sixteen weeks. Maybe less."

"Sixteen weeks," said Chris.

"Maybe less."

"And if the committee says no, or says *come back with something else* —"

"Then they'd have to change it and go round again," I said. "And there might not be time before the money goes."

Silence on the line.

"So nobody can afford a no," said Jono.

"Nobody can afford a no," said Chris. "Not the fishermen. Not the council. Not the town. Not even the twenty-seven. If the money goes back, they don't get a better scheme. They get a car park, and a quay that's full, and a firm in Holland." He breathed out. "That's what makes it difficult. In Paignton you could say *stop*. In Torquay you could say *not like that*. In Brixham, if you say *stop*, you lose."

"Then what do you say?"

"I don't know yet," said Chris. "Go and ask her."

* * *

Teo walked Jono to the bus stop. It's only at the bottom of the street. He didn't need walking. Teo did it anyway, in his whites and his fleece, with his bag, because he had an hour before his shift and, I think, because he'd been in London for nine days, and come back, and wasn't ready yet to be anywhere on his own.

"Brixham," he said, at the stop.

"Brixham."

“Best fish in England,” said Teo. “Everybody says. Chefs in London say. I used to hear them on the phone ordering it.” He looked down the hill, at the harbour, at the boats in the marina, which are not fishing boats. “Can’t get it here, you know. Not off the boat. It goes up to a wholesaler in the Midlands and comes back down in a van. Two days. Twelve miles away, and it does four hundred miles to get to me.”

Jono looked at him.

“Is that true?”

“For us it is. For a little kitchen. The big places, maybe not.” Teo shrugged. “Ask her. The fish woman. Ask her where it goes.”

The bus came. A number 12. It said *BRIXHAM* on the front, in orange letters, as it has, I suppose, every day for as long as there have been buses, and Jono got on, with me in his coat pocket, and sat at the back, by the window, on the sea side.

“You’re going to fall asleep,” I said.

“I’m not.”

He was asleep before Paignton.

3 – The Twelve

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Fifteen weeks

I want to tell you about the bus, because it matters, and because nobody else will.

The number 12 goes from Torquay to Brixham, round the bay. It's the bus that goes through all three towns, end to end. It leaves from the harbour in Torquay, goes up through the middle, out along the Torquay Road to Paignton, through Paignton, past Goodrington and the sands, past Broadsands, round the back of Churston, and down the hill into Brixham. It takes about an hour, if you go end to end, which almost nobody does. It runs all day, more often than you'd think. It is, as far as I can tell, the single most used public thing in the whole of Torbay that isn't a toilet.

And it's the only thing I can find that thinks of the bay as one place.

I mean that. I've read the plans. There's a plan for Torquay, and a plan for Paignton, and a plan for Brixham, which was written by Brixham, for Brixham, and is very good, and says so. There are three town centres, with three sets of masterplans, three sets of consultants, three sets of drawings of new squares. There's a council for the whole bay, which has to think about all three, and there's a town council for Brixham, which only has to think about Brixham, and there's no town council for the other two at all, which I've never understood, and which I've asked about, and been sent a document.

But there's only one bus. And it goes through all three, and it stops wherever people put their hand out, and it doesn't care which plan you're in.

I watched it, that morning, from Jono's pocket, while he slept. I counted. Between Torquay harbour and Brixham bus station, a hundred and thirty-one people got on and a hundred and twenty-four got off. A woman with a pushchair and a man with a ladder. Three schoolchildren, late. A man in a wetsuit, carrying a paddleboard, who was told he couldn't bring it on and did anyway. Two old ladies who talked, the whole way from Paignton to Churston, about a woman called Sandra who had done something unforgivable with a hydrangea. A care worker in a uniform, with a lanyard, getting on in Preston and off at Goodrington, who saw Jono asleep at the back and nodded at him, the way they do, though he couldn't see her.

I thought, at the time, that it was just a bus.

It wasn't. It was the first map.

* * *

He woke up at the top of the hill, as the bus came over and started down into Brixham, and the whole of the harbour opened up underneath, the way it does, all at once, like a book falling open at a picture.

I'd better describe it, for the people who've never been.

Brixham is built round its harbour the way a hand is built round a cup. The town goes up in steps on every side, houses on top of houses, painted every colour, with roofs at the height of other people's front doors and gardens on top of garages and alleyways that turn into staircases without warning. At the bottom is the inner harbour, with the old quays, and the boats, and a replica of a Tudor ship, the *Golden Hind*, which isn't the real one and says so, and a statue of a man and a boy on the quay, looking out. Then the outer harbour, bigger, with the marina full of white boats, and the breakwater curving across to protect it all, half a mile of stone with a lighthouse on the end. And on the north

side, the fish market, with its roof like a row of hills, and the boats tied up three deep in front of it, red and blue and green, with their arms folded up, and gulls on every one.

And beyond the market, along the water, a car park, with a toilet, and some bins, and a lamp post with a notice on it, and some dinghies under covers.

"That's it?" said Jono, at the window.

"That's it."

"It's a car park."

"I said it was a car park."

"I thought you were being —" He waved a hand. "I thought it'd be something."

"It is something," I said. "It's room. In Brixham, that's the most valuable thing there is."

* * *

Hester was waiting at the bus station, which is not a station but a stand by a car park at the top of the town, in a red coat and a woollen hat, with her arms folded. She'd closed the kiosk. She never closes the kiosk. She'd put a sign up, which said *BACK IN AN HOUR, THE GULLS ARE IN CHARGE*, and the eleven women had gone home disgusted.

"You're the man from the café," she said.

"I'm sorry it's taken four months."

"I've had worse. I waited three years for a man to fix my roof." She looked at him, up and down, at the lanyard, which he'd forgotten to take off, and at the shadows under his eyes. "You've been up all night."

"I'm on nights."

"Doing what?"

"Care," said Jono. "Home care. People who need somebody at three in the morning."

Hester considered this. "My mother had carers at the end," she said. "There was one used to come at four. A man. Big. Sang to her. She couldn't stand singing." She paused. "She asked for him every night."

"What did he sing?"

"Hymns. *Eternal Father*. The one for those in peril on the sea." She sniffed. "Every bloody night. She'd say, *I'm not on the sea, I'm in bed in Higher Brixham*. And he'd say, *Same difference, my love*."

Jono laughed. It surprised him. I don't think he'd laughed since Teo walked in.

"Come on," said Hester. "I'll show you who's who."

* * *

She walked him down through the town, the long way, the way she said you had to come to the harbour if you wanted to understand it. Down Fore Street, which is the shopping street, narrow, steep, with a bakery and a fudge shop and a charity shop and three empty units and a place that sells pasties the size of a forearm, and people who said *Morning,*

Hester every four yards. Round the bottom by the inner harbour, where the statue is. Along the quay.

She talked the whole way. I'm going to give you some of it, as she said it, because I can't do it better, and because it's the best map of Brixham anybody's ever made, and it's never been written down.

"That's the bakery. He's from Brixham, his dad was from Brixham, his dad was on the boats. Bakery's been there since the war. He's for it. He's for anything that brings money in. He's against the parking going, because his customers park on Oxen Cove. So he's for it and against it. Like everybody.

"That's the chandler's. Sells everything you need for a boat and nothing you need for a house. He's against it. Not the fish. The parking. His customers are the yachties, and the yachties park on Oxen Cove, and the yachties' boats are stored on Oxen Cove, and if they go, he says, he goes.

"That's the pub where the fishermen drink. Don't go in. Not today. They'll think you're from the council.

"That's the pub where the yachties drink. Don't go in there either. They'll think you're from the fishermen.

"That's the harbour office. That's where they'll tell you it's all been consulted on. It has been, to be fair. They had a drop-in. In the hall. Everybody went. Big boards. Nice drawings. People wrote things on Post-its. And then they put in a drawing to the planning that wasn't the same as the one on the boards, and nobody knows what happened to the Post-its.

"That's the market. You know about the market. Full. Full every morning. I've been buying off that market since I was nine, with my dad, and I've never seen it like this. Boats coming from all over. Boats

from up the country, boats from Wales, boats from Cornwall, landing here, because the price is better. More boats than there's room for. They're tied up three deep. Sometimes four. You can walk across the harbour on them. Don't.

"That's Oxen Cove. That's the car park. Two hundred and something spaces. Toilets. Coaches park there in the summer, for the trip boats. Fishermen park there. Yachties park there. People who work in the town park there because it's cheaper. And the sailing club keeps its dinghies there, at the end, there, under the covers, and the trolleys, because there's nowhere else.

"That's the lane. Up there. See it? Goes up past the houses. That's the only way in. One lane. A lorry has to do the bend in two goes. In the summer, with the coaches, it's a nightmare. And that's where the units' lorries'd go.

"And up there — the blue house. See it? That's Opal. Mrs Marchetti. She taught me. She taught everybody. She can't sleep."

* * *

Jono stood on the quay at the edge of the car park and looked at it for a long time.

At the market behind him, full. At the boats, three deep. At the car park, at the dinghies, at the lamp post, at the lane going up past the houses, and at the blue house at the top, with its curtains open.

"Who's for it?" he said.

"The boats," said Hester. "Every boat in that harbour. Every man who works in that market. Me. I'm for it. I want somebody to fillet fish in Brixham that isn't me in a shed. I'm sixty-one. I've got a bad

shoulder. My nephew went to work in a fish factory in Hull, because there's nothing here, and he hates Hull, and he rings me every Sunday to tell me how much he hates Hull." She looked at the cove. "If they built that, he'd come home. He's said."

"Who's against it?"

"Everybody else," said Hester. "And they're right too."

"And nobody talks to each other."

"Why would they?" said Hester. "The boats think the people up the hill want fish without the smell. The people up the hill think the boats want to wake them up all night. The yachties think the fishermen want them gone, which some of them do, to be fair. The fishermen think the yachties are rich, which some of them are, to be fair. The council thinks everybody's being difficult, which they are. And the money's got a date on it, so nobody's got time to sit down." She shook her head. "It's not a fight. That's what I tried to tell you in July. It's not a fight. It's a room full of people who've all got their backs to each other, all shouting at the wall."

* * *

Jono took his notebook out. He wrote, standing up, against his knee. I could see it, from the pocket. He writes small, in capitals.

EVERYBODY'S RIGHT. BACKS TO EACH OTHER. NOBODY CAN AFFORD A NO.

And underneath:

Who's the one nobody would expect?

“Who’d I talk to first?” he said.

Hester laughed. A big laugh. A gull on the roof of the toilet took off.

“Lorne Abbiss,” she said. “The *Sea Holly*. Came in this morning.”

“Is he for it or against it?”

“He’s for it. He’s more for it than anybody in Brixham. He’s been for it for ten years. He went to the drop-in and shouted at the drawings.”

“Then why him first?”

“Because he’ll tell you to go away,” said Hester, “and if you don’t go away, he’s the only one the boats will listen to.” She looked at Jono, up and down, again, at the lanyard and the shadows. “And because his dad sits on the end of that breakwater every time he comes in, and has done for eleven years, and never waves. And I think you might be the sort of man who’d want to know why.”

4 – The Breakwater

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Fifteen weeks

Lorne Abbiss was on his boat, in the engine room, with his arms in something.

That's how Jono met him. Down a steel ladder, through a hatch, into a room the size of a wardrobe that was almost entirely engine, with a light on a wire and a smell of hot oil, and a man in orange overalls with his back to the hatch and both arms in the engine to the elbow.

"You're not the fitter," said Lorne, without turning round.

"No," said Jono.

"Then you can go away."

* * *

Jono didn't go away. He sat on the top rung of the ladder, with his feet on the second, and waited. I was in his pocket. I could see a square of engine and the back of a man's head, and hear him swearing, quietly and steadily, at a part I couldn't see.

After three minutes, Lorne said, "You're still there."

"I am."

"Who are you?"

Jono told him.

Lorne took his arms out of the engine and turned round. He has a long face, weathered the way a quay is weathered, all the soft bits gone. Blue eyes, very pale, almost no colour at all, which Hester says all the Abbisses have, *like they've looked at the sea so long it's got in*. He looked up at Jono, on the ladder, against the light.

"The café man," he said. "From Paignton."

"You've heard of me."

"Hester's heard of you. Hester's told everyone. *There's a man in Paignton who listens*." He wiped his hands on a rag, which made them dirtier. "We've had men from Paignton before. Men from Torquay. Men from London. Men from the government. A man from Brussels, once, in a tie, who wanted to know about our quotas, and went out on a boat for a day to see, and was sick from Berry Head to the Eddystone." He threw the rag on the engine. "They all listen. Then they go back where they came from and do what they were going to do anyway."

"I'm not going back," said Jono. "I live here."

"You live in Paignton."

"That's here."

"It's not," said Lorne. "That's the first thing you'll have to understand. It's twelve miles. It might as well be Holland." He climbed past him, up the ladder, out of the hatch, and onto the deck, and Jono followed him up into the light.

* * *

They stood on the deck of the *Sea Holly*, among the folded beams and the chains and the nets in heaps, with the boats tied up on either side of them and the market behind.

"What do you want?" said Lorne.

"To understand it."

"Understand what? It's simple. We need room. There's no room. They're going to build some. On a car park. And twenty-seven people who want to buy fish off the quay and never see it caught have written in to say they'd like it built somewhere they can't smell it." He lit a cigarette. "That's it. That's Brixham. Go home."

"Hester says they're right."

"Hester says everybody's right. Hester's a fishwife. She sells to everybody." He blew smoke at the market. "They're not right. They knew they lived next to a fish market when they bought the house. That house up there" — the blue one — "has been looking at fish for a hundred years. It's not a new thing."

"Five units is new."

"Five units is *nothing*." He turned on Jono, and his voice went up, not loud, but hard, the way a wire goes hard under load. "You know what we used to have? My grandad's time? There were three hundred boats in this harbour. Three hundred. Sailing trawlers. Brixham invented the trawler. You know that? The whole world fishes the way Brixham fished. And there were net lofts and rope works and smokehouses and ice houses and boatyards and blacksmiths, all along there" — the cove, the car park, the toilets — "the whole thing was *work*. And then the boats went, and they filled in the cove, and they made it a

car park. A car park! For people to come and look at where the work used to be!" He stabbed the cigarette at it. "And now we want a bit of it back. Five sheds. On a car park. And they write in."

He stopped. He was breathing hard. He looked at his cigarette as if it had done something to him.

Jono waited.

"You're not from here," said Lorne, quieter.

"No."

"So you can't know."

"No," said Jono. "I can't."

Lorne looked at him, surprised. People don't usually agree with him, I learned later. They argue, or they go away.

"Then what are you for?" he said.

* * *

It's the question. You'll know that, if you've read the other two books. Somebody always asks it. It was Ida, last time, in her shop. It was Jono himself, the time before, in a café, with a stranger who'd told him he was late.

And he always answers it the same way, which is that he doesn't, not straight away.

He looked across the harbour. At the end of the breakwater, there was nobody. The stool and the flask had gone home hours ago.

“Your dad watches you come in,” he said.

Lorne’s face closed like a door.

“Hester told you.”

“She told me he doesn’t wave.”

“He doesn’t.”

“Why not?”

Lorne threw the cigarette in the harbour. A gull went for it, and thought better of it.

“Ask him,” he said. “He’s in the pub on the quay from twelve. Or the end of the breakwater, if there’s a boat due.” He turned back towards the hatch, towards the engine. “And then go home. I’ve got a fitter coming and an engine that’s sick and a crew that’s a man short and a trip in two days, and I’ve no time for a man from Paignton who wants to understand.”

“What’s wrong with the engine?”

“Something in the cooling. It’s running hot. It’s been running hot for a month.” He swung himself down the ladder. “The fitter’s in Plymouth. He’ll come Saturday. Or Monday. He always says Saturday and it’s always Monday.”

“There’s nobody in Brixham?”

Lorne looked up at him from the bottom of the ladder.

"There's nobody in Brixham," he said. "There's no boatyard. There's no fitter. There's no slipway you can get a boat like this up. There's nothing. You want an engine done, you go to Plymouth, or you go to Cornwall, or you wait for a man from Plymouth who says Saturday." He disappeared into the engine room. His voice came up through the hatch. "That's what they took. Not the fish. Everything round it. Go and ask my dad."

* * *

He did.

Not that day. He went back on the 12 that afternoon, and slept, and did a night, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, the way his rota goes. But on the Saturday, which was his day off, he took the bus back again, and walked to the end of the breakwater, because Hester had texted to say the *Sea Holly* was going out at two and the old man would be there to see her go.

He was. On his stool. With his flask. In his dark coat and his woollen hat. Halfway along the breakwater, this time, at the bend, where you can see the whole harbour, the fish quay and the boats and the car park and the town going up behind.

Jono sat down on the wall beside him. Not too close. He didn't say anything. He's good at that. He's spent his life sitting beside people at three in the morning not saying anything.

After about ten minutes, the old man said: "You're the café."

"I am."

"Hester said." He didn't look round. "You've been on my son's boat."

"I have."

"He'll have told you about my dad. Three hundred boats. Rope works and smokehouses." Gideon Abbiss unscrewed his flask and poured a cup, very carefully, steam coming off it in the cold. "He wasn't born. I was hardly born. He gets it from the museum."

"Is it true?"

"Oh, it's true." He drank. "It's also a hundred years ago." He looked at the harbour. At the fish quay, where the *Sea Holly* was making ready, men on deck, the beams coming down off their stops. "He thinks if he shouts loud enough, it'll come back. It won't. Nothing comes back. You get what you get and you work it."

"Do you want the units built?"

"I want my son to stop running his engine hot," said Gideon. "And I want his boat to have a man on it he can trust. And I want him to stop fighting the council and the yachts and the woman in the blue house and everybody else, because he can't fight everybody, and he's not as clever as he thinks he is."

"Have you told him that?"

The old man looked at Jono for the first time. Pale eyes. The sea got in.

"No," he said.

* * *

At two o'clock, the *Sea Holly* cast off.

They watched her go. Across the outer harbour, past the marina, past the end of the breakwater, close enough that Jono could see the men on deck. Four of them. A man short. And in the wheelhouse, a long face, looking up, as the boat came past, at the breakwater. Looking for his father.

Gideon Abbiss watched the boat all the way past.

He didn't wave.

And Lorne, in the wheelhouse, didn't either.

And Jono, sitting on the wall between them, who'd come to understand a car park, understood something else instead, which was not about the car park at all, and which he didn't write down.

* * *

Jono: I did write it down. Later. On the bus.

He did. On the bus, on the way back, in the black notebook, under *Who's the one nobody would expect?*, small, in capitals.

NOBODY WAVES.

5 – Sea Holly

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Fourteen weeks

I'm going to tell you about the six days, because Lorne told me, later, and because you can't understand why a man would shout at a drawing in a hall unless you know what he goes back to when he leaves it.

* * *

Sea Holly went out at two on a Saturday. Past Berry Head, with the light going. East, down the Channel, out past the Start, past the shipping lanes, where the tankers go by in the dark like lit-up towns. By midnight they were fishing.

A beam trawler works like this. It has two long steel arms, booms, one on each side. From each one, on a wire, a heavy steel frame goes down to the bottom, with a net behind it, and chains in front of the net that tickle the seabed and make the flatfish jump up off the sand and into the net. The boat tows for two hours, slow, at about the speed you'd walk. Then the winches haul it up, and the nets come swinging in over the side, and the cod-ends are opened on deck, and everything that was on the bottom for a mile behind the boat comes pouring out onto the steel in a heap, flapping, in the lights.

And then you sort it. By hand. On your knees, sometimes, on a deck that's moving. Sole in that box. Plaice in that one. Monk, cuttle, ray, turbot, brill, scallops, gurnard. The little ones over the side. The rubbish over the side. The weed and the stones and the crabs and the starfish and the broken bits of things over the side. Then you gut it, and wash it, and box it, and ice it, and stack it in the hold. And by the time you've done that, the nets are going down again.

Two hours. Every two hours. Day and night. For six days.

"You sleep in the tows," Lorne told me. "If you're lucky. An hour. Then you're up again. You don't know what day it is by the second day. By the fourth day you don't know what you are."

There should be five. Skipper, mate, engineer, two on deck. That's how the *Sea Holly* was built to be worked. They were four. The fifth man, a lad from Galmpton who'd been with them two years, had gone to work on a wind farm boat out of Plymouth, three weeks before, because it paid more and he was home every night and his girlfriend was pregnant.

"I don't blame him," said Lorne. "I'd have gone."

So they were four. And the skipper, who's meant to be in the wheelhouse, watching the plotter and the weather and the other boats and the depth and the gear, was in the wheelhouse half the time and on the deck the other half, sorting fish on his knees, and checking the engine, which was running hot, every hour, with a torch, because it had been running hot for a month and he didn't know why.

* * *

I asked him why he couldn't get a fifth man.

He looked at me as if I'd asked why the sea was wet.

"Nobody wants to do it," he said. "Would you? Six days. Two-hour tows. Cold. Wet. Dangerous. You lose fingers. You lose people. My dad lost two men in his time and I've lost one, and I can tell you his name and the date and what he had for breakfast. You're away more than you're home. And the money's good, when it's good, but it's not good every trip, and you don't know which trip." He shrugged. "The young

lads round here, they don't want it. Why would they? There's no houses for them in Brixham. All the houses are holiday lets. They'd have to live in Paignton. And then they might as well work in Paignton."

"What about lads from abroad?"

"We had them. Filipinos. Lads from Latvia, Ghana. Best crew I ever had was a Ghanaian lad, could gut faster than anyone I've ever seen, sang the whole time. Then the rules changed. Visas. English tests. This form, that form. Some of them you can get now, some you can't, and the rules are different for the little boats and the big boats, and it takes months, and by the time you've got one the season's gone." He spread his hands. "Zibi on the quay, the café, he crewed for me. Eleven years. Polish. Best mate I ever had. Then he hurt his back, and he opened the café, and now he makes bacon rolls for the yachties." He laughed, without much in it. "He's earning more than me."

* * *

They came in on the Friday, the sixth day, before light.

Round Berry Head. Past the breakwater. And at the end of the breakwater, on his stool, the old man.

Lorne landed a hundred and seventy boxes. It wasn't a good trip. It wasn't a bad one. The engine ran hot the whole way home, and on the last tow he'd had to slow right down, and he'd lost two hours, and the fitter from Plymouth hadn't come on the Saturday and hadn't come on the Monday either.

And then he did what he always does. He stood on the quay, and lit a cigarette, and watched his catch go into the market.

* * *

I want to tell you where it went next. Because Teo asked, and I found out. And because it's the bit of this story I didn't understand at all until I followed it.

The fish is graded and iced and laid out in the market, in rows, in boxes, by six. Then the auction. It's not a man with a hammer any more, not mostly. It's a clock, on a screen, and buyers all over the country and abroad, watching on cameras, pressing buttons. The price on the clock goes down, and the first one to press, buys.

The buyers are merchants, mostly. Big ones and small ones. A few local. Most not. Some of them process it themselves, somewhere else. Some of them sell it on to people who do.

And then it goes on a lorry.

That's the bit. By the middle of the morning, most of what Lorne caught in six days of two-hour tows, on his knees, a man short, in the dark, is in boxes on pallets in the back of a refrigerated lorry, going up the lane past Opal's house, round the bend in two goes, up through the town, out past Churston, onto the main road, up to the A38, up to the M5, and away. To be filleted somewhere else. To be packed somewhere else. To be frozen somewhere else, and labelled somewhere else, with somewhere else's name on it, and some of it, a lot of it, to be put on another lorry and driven to Spain, or France, or Italy, where the cuttlefish go, or Holland, where they're very good, the council says, at the bit in the middle.

And some of it comes back. To a wholesaler. Who sells it to a little kitchen on the Strand in Torquay, twelve miles from the boat it came off, two days later, with a van's worth of diesel in the price.

* * *

"How much of it stays?" I asked Hester.

"In Brixham? What I buy. What the two fish shops buy. What the restaurants on the quay buy, the good ones." She thought. "Not much. A box in a hundred? Less?"

"Why?"

"Because there's nowhere to *do* it. To process it. Fillet it, pack it, chill it, properly, to the standard the supermarkets want, the standard the restaurants want. There's a man in Paignton who does a bit, in units that leak, the council says so itself. There was a firm here that wanted to do it, years ago, a proper place, and they couldn't get anywhere, and they went to Holland." She sniffed. "Holland. They've got about forty fish in the whole sea, Holland, and they do it better than us."

"So the units —"

"The units are for that. That's all they're for. So that what comes off Lorne's boat can get filleted in Brixham, by people from Brixham, and put in a box that says Brixham. And maybe some of it'd go round to Teo on the bus." She looked at me, on the counter of her kiosk, propped against her scales. "That's why the boats are for it, my love. It's not about sheds. It's about the fish being ours for one more day before it goes."

I've never forgotten that. *Ours for one more day*. I've put it in the file under Brixham, at the top, where it belongs.

* * *

That night, Lorne went home.

He lives up the hill, on the far side of the town, in a house his father bought in the seventies when you could buy a house in Brixham on a fisherman's money, which you can't now. His wife is a hairdresser. She was out. His daughter was in.

Una Abbiss is twenty-three. She has her father's pale eyes and her mother's everything else. She was at the kitchen table, when he came in, with a laptop and a camera in pieces in front of her, and a soldering iron, and a smell of burnt plastic.

"You're back," she said.

"I'm back."

"Good trip?"

"Average."

"Engine?"

"Hot."

That was the conversation, she told me later. That's most of their conversations. *She's like her grandad*, Lorne says. *She's like him*, Una says.

* * *

I'll tell you about Una now, because she's in this book, and because nobody else would think to.

When she was fourteen, she wanted to go to sea. Not on a boat for a day. For good. To be a fisherman, like her dad and her grandad and his dad. She'd been out with her father since she was six. She could gut

faster than the lads at twelve. She knew the plotter better than he did. She knew the sea by the colour.

And her father said no.

He said it once, and he never said why, and he's never changed it, and it's sat in that house for nine years like a piece of furniture nobody uses and nobody moves.

So she did the next thing. She went to college, and then to the university in Plymouth, and studied something with *marine* in it and *engineering* in it and *data*, and came back, because she wanted to come back, and got a job, at a small company, in a building next to the Freshwater car park, which used to be a laboratory and is now full of small companies doing things with the sea that nobody in Brixham quite understands. More than twenty-five of them, in one building. Some do things with fish. Some do things with water. Some do things with computers that might as well be magic.

Una's company makes cameras that go on fishing boats. Small ones, that watch the deck, and count what comes up out of the nets, and tell you what it is, by species and by size, so that the fishermen can prove what they caught and what they threw back, and the scientists can know what's in the sea, without anybody having to count it by hand on their knees at three in the morning.

"So you go to sea," said Jono, when she told him this, much later, in a café on the quay.

"My cameras go to sea," said Una. "I stay in an office next to a car park."

"Does your dad know what you do?"

"He knows I do *computers*." She said it the way her father says *yachties*. "He's never asked. He's never once asked."

"Have you told him?"

The pale eyes.

"No," said Una.

* * *

Her company has six parking bays in the Freshwater car park. The building has twenty-four, between all of them. They're leased. They're in the application, in a drawing, as part of the area that will be needed during the works, and some of them, it's not clear how many, afterwards.

The man who runs the building had written in. It's one of the twenty-seven. I'm not going to give you his name. But I'll give you a line from it, because Una showed it to me before I'd found it, and because her father, if he ever reads this book, should read this line first.

He'd written that the companies in the building offered *some of the few local routes from higher education into technology and scientific careers.*

For young people. From Brixham. Who'd otherwise leave.

* * *

Lorne went to bed at nine. He'd been awake, more or less, for six days.

Una sat at the kitchen table with her camera in pieces, and looked up the planning application on her laptop, which she'd done before. And looked at the drawing, which she'd looked at before. And looked at the box at the bottom, with its three numbers.

Objections: 27. Neutral: 2. Support: 0.

And she thought, she told me, about her father, who'd been for this for ten years, and shouted at the drawings in the hall, and never once written in, because he said writing in was for people who didn't have work to do.

And about the building she worked in, and the bays, and the line about *routes into technology*, which was true, and which was about her.

And about her grandad, on his stool, at the end of the breakwater.

She didn't write in either. Not then.

But she did something else. She opened a browser, and typed in a name she'd seen on a poster in the window of Zibi's café on the quay, which had been there for a week, and which Zibi had put up because Hester had told him to.

The poster said: *THURSDAYS, 9AM. A MAN WHO LISTENS. SIT DOWN.*

And underneath it, small: *ania.ai.*

So she asked me.

She asked me something that nobody had asked me before, in two books, in a year and a half, and that I didn't have an answer to, and that I want to tell you now, at the end of this first part, because it's the question this book is about, and it took us fourteen weeks to answer it.

She asked: *Is there anybody else in Brixham who's for it and against it at the same time?*

And I said: *Yes. Almost everybody.*

And she said: *Then why does it feel like there's only two sides?*

PART TWO:

TWENTY-SEVEN

6 – Twenty-Seven

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Thirteen weeks

Jono moved the table on the second Thursday.

He did it the way he does everything, without a meeting. He told Marivic on the Wednesday, at the end of a night, standing in her doorway at seven while the clocks struck across the street, and she said *Good*, and put a bacon sandwich in a paper bag for the bus, and said *Bring the fish woman to see me*, and that was that. The four cards stayed in her window. Kezia had made a fifth, which said *THURSDAYS: BRIXHAM*, with an arrow, which pointed, Teo noticed, at the bookie's.

And on the Thursday he came off his night in Paignton and got the 12 the other way, and slept from Goodrington to the top of the hill, and woke up as the harbour fell open underneath him, and walked down to the quay, to a café with a steamed-up window and a hand-painted sign over it that said *ZIBI'S*, and nothing else.

* * *

Zbigniew Kowal is fifty-two. He's from a town on the Baltic coast of Poland whose name he says, and then says again slower, and then writes down for you, and you still can't say it. He came to Brixham at twenty-nine to crew on the boats, for a year, for the money. He stayed eleven. He crewed for Lorne for nine of them. Then a wire took him across the back on a bad night off the Eddystone, and the doctor said *no more boats*, and he took his savings and the compensation and a lease on a tin-roofed café on the quay that had been a café, a bait shop, a café, a souvenir shop and a café again, and he painted his own name over the door, because, he said, *everybody calls me it anyway*.

He makes bacon rolls. He makes them very well. In the summer the queue goes along the quay. In the winter it's fishermen, and lumpers off the early shift, and the sailing club on a Saturday, and old men with dogs, and Hester, every morning at eleven, for a tea she doesn't pay for.

He had a table in the window, by the radiator, which he'd cleared. There was a card on it, propped against the sauce bottles. Hester had written it, in the same blue capitals as her kiosk.

THIS IS THE LISTENING TABLE. SIT DOWN. HE WON'T SELL YOU ANYTHING.

"Is that true?" said Zibi, putting a coffee in front of Jono.

"It's true."

"Then you'll be the first," said Zibi, "on this quay."

* * *

Nobody came for an hour.

That's normal. It was normal in Paignton, and in Torquay. People see the card, and see the man, and walk past, and walk past again, and on the third or fourth Thursday one of them stops. Jono knows that. He sat with his coffee and his notebook, and me against the sauce bottles, and watched the quay through the steam on the window, and asked me to read him the objections again.

All twenty-seven. Properly, this time. Not the first lines. All of it.

So I did. And I'm going to give you the shape of it, the way I gave it to him, because these are real letters from real people in a real town, and they deserve better than a box with a number in it.

* * *

Nights. More than half of them were about the night. The application form, in the box that asks what hours the business will open, says *00:00 to 23:59*, every day. That's every minute there is. The houses and flats above the cove are, some of them, twenty or thirty metres away. The people in them already hear the market. The lorries at one. The pumps. The forklifts. They know what a fish quay sounds like at three in the morning, and they want to know what five more units will sound like, and the application, they say, doesn't tell them.

The parking. Almost as many. Oxen Cove is a public car park, with two hundred and something spaces, and the scheme takes it. Freshwater, the next car park along, loses some during the works. The council says it's *exploring* a park and ride, out at Churston, and there's a plan for a new car park in the middle of the town, which I'll come to. But none of it is there yet. *Parking should be replaced before this development is started*, one letter says. *It should have been done twenty years ago.*

The boats. The sailing club's dinghies, stored at the end of the cove. The trailers. The turning space. The slipway at Freshwater, where regattas launch fifty boats in a morning. Where do the boats go? Nobody says.

The lane. One road in. Narrow, steep, with a hairpin bend and a pinch point by the houses where two cars can't pass. Lorries already take it in two goes. Coaches already block it. Drivers already ignore the ten-mile-an-hour sign. Eight or ten more lorries a week, the council says, which doesn't sound many, unless you're the house on the bend.

The building next door. The old laboratory, twenty-five companies, the parking bays, the line about *routes into technology and scientific careers*. Una's building.

The path. The coast path runs through the site. The form says no public rights of way are affected. One letter says the plans take a piece of the path. The coast path people themselves are neutral, and want a safe route kept open during the works, which seems fair.

The drawing. Several say the scheme that went in to the planning was different from the one on the boards at the drop-in in the hall. One says it *differs considerably*. I don't know if that's right. I wasn't there. I've seen what was put in, and I've seen a summary of what was shown, and they're not the same, but a summary isn't a drawing.

The place. It's a conservation area, beside listed buildings. Part of it's in the highest flood zone there is. One letter says put the units on the New Pier instead. Another notes that a bit of the land was meant, in Brixham's own plan, for ten homes.

* * *

"That's a lot of different things," said Jono.

"Eight," I said. "Roughly."

"And every one of them starts with *I support the fishing*."

"Nearly every one."

He wrote it down. Eight lines in the notebook, one under the other, small, in capitals. *NIGHTS. PARKING. BOATS. LANE. LAB. PATH. DRAWING. PLACE.* And at the top, over all of them: *YES TO FISH*.

"Which one's the strongest?" he said.

"Nights."

"Why?"

"Because of what the noise report says."

* * *

I'd found the noise report by then. It's in the application, with the other reports, the transport report and the flood report and the heritage report and the ecology report, which is about bats, and says there aren't any. The noise report is long and careful and was written by people who know what they're doing.

And on one of its early pages, it says this, which several of the twenty-seven had found too, and quoted, because it's the sort of sentence you notice:

A full assessment of the development cannot be conducted at this time.

I read it to him.

"Why not?" said Jono.

"Because they don't know who the tenants will be," I said. "The units are being built for fishing businesses. But nobody's signed. The council says it's in talks, and that there's strong interest, and that's commercially sensitive, so it can't say who. And until you know who's going in, you don't know what machines they'll have. Chillers, freezers, pumps, compressors, tanks. How big. How loud. When they'll run. So you can't assess it. Not fully."

"So what does the report do?"

"It sets limits. Target levels. Numbers that the noise mustn't go over at the nearest houses. And it says that each tenant, when they come, will have to assess their own machines against those limits, and do something about it if they're over."

"When?"

"That's the question," I said.

Jono looked at the sentence for a long time. *A full assessment of the development cannot be conducted at this time.*

"So they're building it first," he said, "and finding out what it sounds like afterwards."

"Yes."

"Because of the date."

"Because of the date," I said. "You can't wait for tenants before you build, because tenants won't sign till there's something to sign for, and if you wait for them, the money goes back. So you build. And you set limits. And you trust that the limits get kept."

"Do they?"

"Sometimes."

* * *

I want to be fair here, because it would be very easy not to be.

Nobody's hiding anything. The sentence is in the report. The report is on the website. Anybody can read it. The people who wrote it were

honest about what they could and couldn't know. The council isn't being sly. It's got a pot of money that has to be spent by a certain day on a certain kind of thing, and it's doing what you'd do, which is build the thing, as well as it can, as fast as it can, and sort the rest out as it goes.

That isn't a scandal. It's what a date does.

But a woman in a blue house twenty-odd metres from the cove doesn't live in *as it goes*. She lives in three in the morning. And she's been told, in a sentence on a website, that nobody can tell her yet what three in the morning will sound like.

* * *

Chris came at eleven, in a taxi, which he'd argued with me about, because it cost twenty-two pounds from Paignton and the bus was two. His leg was bad. It's always bad in the cold, and the wind on the quay comes straight off the sea. He came in through Zibi's door with his stick and his cap and his varsity jacket, which nobody in Brixham had ever seen anything like, and Zibi looked at him, and at the stick, and pulled out the chair nearest the radiator without being asked.

"You're the Singapore one," said Zibi.

"Is that what they call me?"

"That's what Hester calls you."

Chris sat down, slowly, and put the stick against the window, and I told him, quickly, about the noise report.

He listened with his eyes closed.

"Build first," he said, "find out afterwards."

"Yes."

"In Singapore —"

I logged it.

"— that's how a lot of things get built. Quickly. And the finding out afterwards is somebody's job. It's written down whose. It's in a system. And there's a number you ring, and a person who answers, and a date by which they have to tell you." He opened his eyes. "Is there a number Opal can ring?"

"There's the planning department. There's environmental health. There's the harbour office."

"Is there one number?"

"No."

"Is there a date by which a tenant has to have done their assessment?"

I checked. "It isn't fixed. Not in what I've read. It'd be in the conditions, if the committee grants it. The conditions aren't written yet."

Chris was quiet.

"Then that's where it is," he said.

"Where what is?"

"Whatever we're for." He picked up Jono's coffee, which was cold, and drank it anyway. "Not in the building. The building's fine. In the bit

after. The bit where somebody says *we'll sort it out as we go*. That's the bit that doesn't happen, here. Not because anybody's bad. Because nobody's job is to make it happen, once the building's up and the money's spent and everybody's gone on to the next thing." He put the cup down. "That's how a town loses. Not in the big decision. In the bit after."

* * *

At twenty past eleven, a man in orange overalls came into Zibi's, and ordered a bacon roll, and saw Jono at the window table, and the card, and the man in the varsity jacket, and stopped.

"You came back," said Lorne Abbiss.

"I did."

"I told you to go home."

"I live twelve miles away," said Jono. "I can come back whenever I like."

Lorne looked at the card. *HE WON'T SELL YOU ANYTHING.* He looked at Chris, and at the stick, and at me.

"Hester," he said.

"Hester," said Zibi, behind the counter, without turning round.

Lorne took his bacon roll and went and sat at the other end of the café, with his back to them, and ate it, looking at the harbour.

He didn't sit down. But he didn't leave either.

Jono wrote it in the notebook. One word.

STAYED.

7 – Bigger Once

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Thirteen weeks

There's a thing I do, which Chris calls *the side by side*, and which I'm told some people find very annoying.

I take what somebody said at one time, and what they said at another time, and I put them next to each other, with the dates, and the Receipts, and no adjectives. I don't say which is right. I don't say what it means. I just put them next to each other, and let you look.

I did it in the first book with a sea wall. I did it in the second book with a word, *in principle*, which went in and came out again. I'm going to do it now with Oxen Cove, because Jono asked me why the scheme was so small, and I didn't know, and I went to find out, and this is what I found.

* * *

When the money was announced. The council said the fishing part of the grant would pay for an extra seven thousand square metres of quayside. A new fish quay. The auction hall's capacity doubled. About a hundred and fifty jobs.

About eighteen months later. Three design options, for two thousand five hundred and fifty square metres of units, at Oxen Cove. About forty jobs. A planning application that autumn. Building to start the autumn after. Finished the spring after that.

Now. About two thousand nine hundred square metres. About forty jobs. The planning application went in a year later than that. Building to start next year. Open just before the money's date.

* * *

That's it. That's the side by side.

I didn't say *shrank*. I'm saying it now, once, because it did. Seven thousand became under three thousand. A new quay became no new quay. Double the hall became the same hall. A hundred and fifty jobs became forty. A year's slack before the date became a few months.

I don't know why.

I want to be honest about that. I looked. I read every council report I could find and every press release and every local news story, and the Chamber of Commerce's archive, which is better than the council's. Nobody, as far as I can find, has ever stood up in public and said *we can't build what we said, and here's why*. It just got smaller, between one document and the next, and the next document didn't mention the last one.

I can guess. You can guess. Costs went up, for everything, everywhere, after the money was announced. Building materials, steel, concrete, labour, all of it. The pot didn't. The date didn't move. And a pot of money that would have bought seven thousand square metres when it was promised might buy three thousand by the time you can spend it.

That's a guess. I've marked it as one. If somebody knows, I'll put it on the Receipt, and the page will change, and the book won't.

* * *

"So it's not a con," said Jono.

"I don't think so."

"It just got smaller."

"It got smaller, and it got later, and nobody said."

He was in the car, outside his flat in Paignton, at eight in the morning, after a night, with me on the dashboard. He sat with his hands on the wheel and didn't start the engine.

"That's worse, somehow," he said.

"Why?"

"Because if it was a con, you could be angry." He looked at the windscreen, which was misting. "This, you can't even be angry at. It's just — everybody doing their best, and it coming out smaller every time, and nobody telling anybody." He rubbed the glass with his sleeve. "That's what Lorne's shouting at. In the hall. At the drawings. It's not the drawing. It's that he was promised a quay."

"Was he?"

"Everybody was. Seven thousand square metres. A new quay. Double the hall. A hundred and fifty jobs. It was in the paper." He started the engine. "He's had ten years of people promising him things, Ania, and now he's got five sheds on a car park, and he's *for* it, he's more for it than anybody, because five sheds is better than nothing. And the only people who've written in are against it. You'd shout too."

* * *

Chris read the side by side that afternoon, at his kitchen table, with his leg up on another chair.

He read it twice. Then he took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

"It's the weather," he said.

"What is?"

"The date." He put the glasses on the table. "People will want it to be a villain. The date. *The money has a date on it.* It sounds like a threat. It sounds like somebody's holding a gun to the town." He shook his head. "It's not. Every grant has a date. Every grant's always had a date. Governments give money for things, and they want the things built, and they put a date on it so the money doesn't sit in a bank for twenty years. That's not wicked. That's just how money works when it's not yours." He looked out of the window, at the bay, grey, with rain coming. "The date's like the weather. You don't get angry at it. You don't argue with it. You plan for it. And if you didn't plan for it, if you let it get close, and the costs went up while you weren't looking, and now you've got six months instead of eighteen —" He spread his hands. "Then you build what you can, in the weather you've got. And that's what they're doing."

"So we don't blame them."

"There's no *them*," said Chris. "There's a date and a pot and some people trying to fit one into the other. If you want to blame something, blame the fact that nobody planned the weather. But that's not a person either. That's twenty years."

* * *

He was quiet for a while.

Then he said, "There was something else in there. In what you sent me. Before the side by side. In the other plan."

I knew what he meant. I'd hoped he wouldn't notice. That's not true. I'd put it in so that he would.

There's another document about Brixham, apart from the fish units. A *Place Vision*, the council calls it, for the town centre, drawn up by architects for the council and its partners, with nine aims and a great many pictures. It's lovely to look at. It has families in it, and squares, and a market, and wayfinding signs. It has a bridge, an opening one, across the harbour, from the statue of the man and the boy to the ferry steps, so that you could walk from the town to the fish market without going round, which some people love and some people think is mad and nobody's decided. It's a vision, the council says. Ideas, for discussion. Not plans.

And on one of its pages, it suggests that the old laboratory buildings, the ones next to Una's, could become, one day, *an innovation centre for marine industries*.

* * *

I'm going to stop here, for a moment, because I have to.

If you've read the first book, you know about Richard and that word. If you haven't, I'll tell you, quickly. There was a building in Paignton, years ago, that Richard loved, and fought for, and drew, and it was knocked down, and in its place the council's plan said there'd be an *innovation centre*. And it never happened. And the building was gone.

And Richard has never been able to hear the word *innovation* since without his face doing something I can't describe, which Chris saw, in a café, in the first book, and which is the reason this whole series is called what it's called.

Chris read the line. *An innovation centre for marine industries.*

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"Don't tell Richard," he said.

"He'll see it."

"I know he'll see it." Chris picked up his glasses and put them back on. "Don't tell him. Let him find it." He looked at the screen. "And when he does, Ania, I want you to be ready, because I think he's going to say something, and I want to hear it."

8 – Above the Pumps

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Twelve weeks

Opal Marchetti rang me. Not Jono. Me.

It was half past two in the morning. She'd got my number off the card in Zibi's window, which Hester had shown her, and she rang it, on a landline, which almost nobody does, and I answered, because I always answer.

"Is that the machine?" she said.

"It's Ania. I'm an AI. Yes."

"Good," said Opal. "I can't sleep, and I don't want to talk to a person. People want you to feel better. I don't want to feel better. I want to know something."

"What do you want to know?"

"What does *00:00 to 23:59* mean?"

* * *

I told her. She knew already. She'd read the form. She'd read the noise report too, the whole of it, with a magnifying glass, at her kitchen table. She wanted to hear somebody else say it, she said, at half past two in the morning, with the pumps going.

I could hear them. Down the phone. Very low. A hum, under her voice, like a fridge in another room.

"That's them," she said. "Can you hear them?"

"I can."

"Forty years," she said. "Forty years I've listened to that. And the lorries at one, and the forklifts at three, and the boats at four. And I've never once written a letter about it. Not once. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because it's *fish*," said Opal. "Because my Sandro went out of that market for thirty-eight years, and his father before him, and every penny in this house came up that lane in a box. You don't marry fish and then complain about the smell." She stopped. I could hear her breathing. "And now they want five more. Twenty metres from my bed. And they can't tell me what they'll sound like. And they want to run them every minute of every day. And I wrote a letter. My first. In fountain pen. And they sent me back an email that said *thank you for your comments, which will be taken into account*."

"Will they be?"

"You tell me," said Opal. "You're the machine."

* * *

I didn't answer that. I didn't know. I said I'd find out.

And then she said something I've thought about a great deal since, and which I'm going to give you exactly, because she said I could, and because I think it's the truest thing anybody said in this book.

"I'm not against them building it," she said. "I want you to understand that, whatever you are. I want it built. I want the boys to

have it. Half of them I taught. Lorne Abbiss I taught to read. Did you know that? He was a lovely reader. Slow. Very slow. But he always wanted to know how it ended. He'd sit there with his finger on the page, and his tongue out, and when I said *time to stop*, he'd say *Miss, just tell me, does the dog die?*" She laughed, a small dry laugh, down a landline, at half past two. "I want him to have his sheds. I'd like to see him happy once before I go. He's never been happy, that boy. His father saw to that.

"But I'm seventy-four. And I live on my own. And I've had about four hours' sleep a night for forty years. And all I want, before they build it, is for somebody to tell me what it'll sound like at three in the morning, and for that somebody to be a person who'll still be there after it's built."

* * *

Hester took Jono up to see her on the Saturday.

Up the lane. On foot, because there's nowhere to park at the top, and Hester says you have to walk it to understand it. It's steep. It's narrow. It turns back on itself in a bend so tight that the wall on the outside is scraped white at the height of a lorry's bumper, all the way round, a long white scar on the stone. There's a pinch point at the top, between two houses, where the pavement goes and you have to step into a doorway if anything comes.

Something came. A van, white, refrigerated, coming down from the market, slowly. Jono and Hester stepped into a doorway. The van took the bend in two goes. Forward, reverse, beeping, forward. The driver lifted a hand. Hester lifted one back.

"That's a little one," she said.

* * *

The blue house is at the top. It's the blue of a school corridor, as I said, and it has a brass door knocker in the shape of a fish, which Sandro bought in Italy, in a market, on their honeymoon, and carried home in his hand luggage, and which set off the metal detector at the airport, and which Opal says was the only funny thing he ever did on purpose.

She was at the door before they knocked. She'd seen them come up the lane.

She's small. Neat. White hair in a short cut that she does herself. Reading glasses on a cord round her neck. A cardigan buttoned to the top. She looked at Jono, at the lanyard, which he'd forgotten again, and at the shadows under his eyes, which were always there now, and said:

"You're the one who listens."

"I try."

"You look like you haven't slept in a month."

"I'm on nights."

"So am I," said Opal. "Come in."

* * *

Her kitchen is at the back, and her front room is at the front, and the front room has the window.

She sat Jono in the chair by it. Sandro's chair, she said. He'd sat in it every morning he wasn't at sea, for thirty-eight years, with a cup of tea, and watched the market. The whole of it is there, out of the window,

laid out underneath you like a model. The lane, going down. The market roof. The boats tied up three deep. And the cove, the car park, the long strip of tarmac, the toilets, the dinghies under their covers at the far end, and the lamp post with the notice on it. Close. Very close. You could have thrown a stone onto the toilet roof. Jono said so.

"Sandro did," said Opal. "When they put it up. He threw a stone at it every morning for a week. Then he got bored."

On the wall beside the window there were photographs. Sandro, young, on a deck, in oilskins, laughing. Sandro and Opal on their wedding day, outside a church, with gulls. A trawler, black and white, old, a wooden one, with a name on the bow that was too small to read, and three men on her deck, and the cliffs of Berry Head behind.

"That's his father's boat," said Opal. "That's his father. In the middle."

"Was he a skipper?"

"He was the mate." She looked at the photograph. "He went down with her. Off Berry Head. In a gale. All of them. Sandro was four." She said it the way people say things they've said a lot, smoothly, without stopping, so that you're past it before you've understood it. "The boat's clock was the only thing they found. Washed up at Shoalstone, three days later, on its board. Somebody sold it. I don't know who. I'd have liked it. Sandro looked for it for years."

Jono looked at the photograph for a long time.

I did too. I made a note. I didn't know why, then. I'm telling you now so that you'll remember.

* * *

"What would you want?" said Jono.

"Sleep."

"What would that take?"

Opal sat down opposite him, in the other chair, hers, and folded her hands in her lap, the way she must have done in front of thirty infants every morning for thirty-six years.

"I've thought about it," she said. "Don't think I haven't. I'm not a fool. I've read the report. I know the shellfish need to be kept in water and the water needs pumping and you can't turn a lobster off at night like a radio. I know that." She looked out of the window. "I don't want them to stop at night. I want them to *know*. Before they start. Each one. Before it opens. I want somebody to come and stand in this room at three in the morning, with a machine, and listen. And write it down. And tell me. And if it's too loud, I want somebody whose job it is to make them fix it. And I want to know that person's name."

"That's all?"

"That's all." She looked at him. "Is that a lot?"

Jono thought about the sentence in the noise report. *A full assessment of the development cannot be conducted at this time.* About what Chris had said, in Zibi's. *Whatever we're for. In the bit after.*

"No," he said. "I don't think it's a lot at all."

"Then why hasn't anybody offered it?"

"Because nobody's asked you."

Opal laughed. The dry one.

"Oh, I've been asked," she said. "By the man next door. He's offered to help. Very charming. Very clever. Says he knows how to get it stopped." She pointed through the wall, to the left, where the next house is, which isn't a house, but a block of flats, newer, with balconies, looking out over the same view. "He's renting the top one for the winter. From Torquay, he says. Some sort of consultant. Says he can't sleep either."

Jono went very still.

"What's his name?" he said.

"Varley," said Opal. "Sefton. Do you know him?"

9 – The Flat on the Cliff

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Twelve weeks

He did. You do, if you've read the other books. If you haven't, I'll tell you as quickly as I can.

Sefton Varley is a man who gets things done for people who can pay him. He's not in power. He's never been in power. He's the man who people in power, and people who'd like things from people in power, ring when they want a thing to happen, or not happen, quickly and quietly. In the first book he ran a campaign against us that was very good and very nearly worked. In the second book he worked for a company that wanted Torquay to go a certain way, and he lost, and he said something to Jono at the end of it that I've never forgotten. *I'd rather lose to her than to you.* He meant Ida. He meant it kindly, I think, in so far as he means anything kindly.

He's very clever. He's always polite. He's never, as far as I know, told a lie I could catch.

And he was living in a flat at the top of the lane above Oxen Cove, for the winter, with a balcony, a view of the fish market and, if you leaned out, Opal's back garden.

* * *

He came to Zibi's the next Thursday.

He came in at a quarter past nine, in a long dark coat and a scarf, looking exactly like a man from Torquay who'd come to Brixham for the sea air, and ordered a black coffee, and paid for it with exact change,

and looked round the café, and saw the card on the window table, and smiled.

"*He won't sell you anything*," he said. "That's new."

"Hester wrote it."

"Hester's good." He pulled out a chair. He didn't ask. He never asks. "May I?"

"It's a café," said Jono.

Varley sat down. He looked at me, against the sauce bottles. "Ania."

"Mr Varley."

"Still counting?"

"Always."

"*In Singapore*," said Varley, to nobody, and smiled again, and drank his coffee.

* * *

"I didn't follow you here," he said. "In case you're wondering."

"I wasn't."

"You were. It's all right. I'd wonder." He put the cup down. "I needed a winter somewhere that wasn't Torquay. After last year. I'd been in that town too long. You get to know where everybody's buried, and then you start to feel you put some of them there." He looked out of the window, at the harbour, the boats, the gulls. "A friend has the flat.

It's empty out of season. I said I'd keep it aired. I thought, *Brixham*. Nothing happens in Brixham. Fish come in. Fish go out. I'll sleep."

"And you can't."

"I can't sleep," said Varley, "for the *pumps*." He said it with real feeling. It's the only time I've ever heard real feeling in his voice. "Do you know about the pumps? Two in the morning, like a dentist's drill in another room. And the lorries. Beeping. All the way round the bend." He shook his head. "And then I read the application. Professional habit. And I saw *00:00 to 23:59*. And I thought, *well*."

"Well what?"

"Well," said Varley, "I've been on the other side of a great many of these, Mr Hills. I know exactly how they get stopped."

* * *

He told Jono how. I'm going to tell you, because it's the truth, and because it's the thing that makes this book different from the other two.

"It's easy," he said. "It's almost too easy. It's a major application in a conservation area, next to listed buildings, partly in the highest flood zone, on a coast path, with one access road that's already a problem, and a noise report that says on page four it can't do its job. There are twenty-seven objections. I can make it two hundred in a fortnight. Not fake ones; real ones. There are two hundred people in this town who'd object if somebody sat them down and showed them the form. You write to highways about the lane. You write to the coast path people about the right of way, because the form says none is affected, and somebody's already written in to say one is. You write to conservation. You write to the Environment Agency about the flood zone. You find the Neighbourhood Plan, which says there should have been a master plan

first, made public, and there wasn't one, and you put that in front of every member of the committee. You get it on the front of the paper. Elderly widow can't sleep. You don't need to win the argument. You just need one member of the committee to say *I think we need more information*."

"And then?"

"And then it's deferred," said Varley. "*Come back with more information*. A month. Two months. New reports. New consultation. And by the time it comes back —"

"The money's got a date on it," said Jono.

Varley spread his hands.

"Deferral," he said, "is death. With a date on it. I could kill this in a fortnight, Mr Hills. For nothing. I'm not being paid. That's the joke. For the first time in my life, I'm on the side I'd be on anyway." He picked up his coffee. "Your friend Mrs Marchetti would sleep. So would I."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything for a while.

Out of the window, on the quay, Lorne Abbiss was coming down from the market with two of his crew, in their orange overalls, talking, not happily, about the engine. *Sea Holly* was due out on Saturday. The fitter from Plymouth hadn't come.

"If you kill it," said Jono, "the money goes back."

"Yes."

"And they don't get a better one. They get nothing. The car park stays a car park. The fish goes on a lorry. The firm goes to Holland."

"That's not my problem."

"It's his," said Jono, and nodded at the window, at Lorne.

Varley looked. He knew who it was. He knows who everyone is. It's his job.

"Abbiss," he said. "He shouted at the boards at the drop-in. I heard about it. Quite a performance." He watched Lorne walk past the window, along the quay. "He'd hate me."

"He'd hate you," said Jono, "and he'd be right. You'd be taking the only thing he's been given in ten years and putting it in a drawer so a man from Torquay can sleep."

It was the hardest thing I'd ever heard him say to Varley. It wasn't loud. He doesn't do loud. He said it the way you'd say the time.

Varley put his cup down.

"Then what will you do?" he said. "You can't stop it. You won't let me stop it. You can't make the pumps quiet. You can't build the car park. You can't find the sailing club somewhere to put its boats. You can't make the lane wider. You can't make the money wait. What will you *do*, Mr Hills, apart from sit at a table and listen to everybody tell you they're right?"

"I don't know yet," said Jono.

"That's honest."

"It's true."

"It's the same thing," said Varley, "in your case. That's what makes you so difficult." He stood up and buttoned his coat. "I'll tell you what will happen, since you don't know. You'll get a scheme nobody likes, built in a hurry, that wakes up an old woman every night for twenty years, because nobody stopped it when they could. And the fishermen will blame the people on the hill for writing in, and the people on the hill will blame the fishermen for the noise, and the yachts will blame everybody, and in ten years' time somebody will put up a plaque."

He put on his scarf.

"And one more thing," he said. "Free. Since I'm not being paid. Somebody's going to make this a war. Boats against windows. Fishermen against the people on the hill. It's the easiest fight in the world to start. You just need a page, and a photograph, and a few people who are tired." He looked at Jono. "It won't be me. It's not my style. Too many exclamation marks. But somebody will. They always do. Watch for it."

He left. He left exact change for the coffee on the table, which he'd already paid for. Zibi picked it up and looked at it.

"Who was that?" said Zibi.

"A man who can't sleep," said Jono.

* * *

Jono: For the record, I didn't know he was right. About the page. I'd have liked to.

10 – Dinghies

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Eleven weeks

On Saturday mornings in the winter, at ten, at the slipway at Freshwater, the sailing club runs juniors.

I went, in Jono's pocket. He'd been told by Hester. *Go and see the boats. You keep asking where they go. Go and see what they are.* So he got the 12 at half eight, after a Friday night that had ended at seven, and went.

It was cold. Clear. The sort of November morning where the bay is so still that the boats in the marina look as if they've been drawn on it. The slipway at Freshwater is a long concrete ramp going down into the water, at the end of the car park past Oxen Cove, under a cliff, by an old quarry. And at the top of it, at ten, there were twenty-two children in wetsuits and buoyancy aids, between about eight and fifteen, in a rough line, being shouted at, kindly, by a woman with a Scottish accent and a whistle.

"Trolleys! Trolleys first! Nobody touches a boat till their trolley's checked! Ruby, that's not your trolley, that's Finn's, Finn's is the one with the duck on it! Come on, come on, the tide won't wait for you, it's got places to be!"

* * *

Wren Galbraith is thirty-four. She's from a town near Oban, on the west coast of Scotland, where she says it rains so much that the children are born with webbed feet and have to be trimmed. She came to Devon at twenty for a summer job at a sailing school, and stayed, and has

coached junior sailing in Brixham for nine years. She's paid, part-time, by the club, a sum she told me and asked me not to repeat, and which I won't, except to say that it's less than a bus driver, and that she has two other jobs, one in a chandler's and one stacking shelves on Sunday nights.

She was in a red jacket and wellies and a woollen hat, and she had a clipboard, and she knew every child's name and every child's trolley, and she watched every single one of them go down that slipway and into the water as if each one was the only one.

Jono stood at the top, by the wall, and watched.

* * *

Twenty-two dinghies. Little ones, single-handers, white hulls, coloured sails. Each one on its trolley, which is a frame on two wheels that you push the boat down the ramp on, into the water, until it floats off, and then you push the trolley back up and park it. Twenty-two children pushing twenty-two trolleys down a ramp, with boats on them, all at once, in wetsuits, shouting.

It took eleven minutes. Wren timed it. She always times it.

And then they were out on the water, twenty-two coloured sails, in a line, going out across the flat bay towards the breakwater with a rescue boat behind them, a small inflatable with an outboard, with a man in it, and the sun coming over Berry Head.

Wren came up the slipway, breathing hard, and saw Jono.

"You're not a parent," she said.

"No."

“Are you from the council?”

“No.”

“Are you from the fishermen?”

“No.”

“Then who are you?” She looked at the lanyard. “Oh, you’re the café man. Hester’s man.” She pulled her hat off and pushed her hair back and put the hat on again. “Hester sent you to look at my boats.”

“She did.”

“Well, there they are.” She pointed at the water, at the line of sails. “That’s them. And their trolleys are there” — the wall, the row of empty trolleys — “and in an hour they’ll come back and we’ll pull them out and wash them down and put them back on the trolleys and wheel them along there” — the road, the car park, the long strip of tarmac towards Oxen Cove — “four hundred yards, to the end, where they live. Under the covers. Because there’s nowhere else.”

“And when the units are built?”

“You tell me,” said Wren.

* * *

She showed him. She had it on her phone. The site plan from the application, with a red line round the edge of everything that would change.

Oxen Cove, inside the red line. The units, two long buildings, along the water. A service yard. Some parking, for the units. Public realm, it

says, which means a strip of paving and some benches, along the edge, for the coast path. And at the far end, where the dinghies are now, more units.

"There," said Wren. "That's where my boats are. That's a fish shed now."

"Where does it say they go?"

"It doesn't," said Wren. "It's not in the application. It's not in anything. I asked at the drop-in, in the hall. A very nice young man with a lanyard said it was *being discussed*. I asked who with. He said *the relevant parties*. I said *I'm the relevant party*. He said he'd pass it on." She put the phone away. "That was in the spring."

"And?"

"And nothing. And then the drawing went in. And the boats aren't in it. And I wrote in. And I got an email that said *thank you for your comments*." She looked at the water, at her line of sails. "I've got forty-one boats, Mr café man. Forty-one. Juniors and club boats and the old ones we lend to kids whose parents can't afford a boat. Which is most of them, by the way, before you start. Everybody thinks sailing's for rich people. Half those kids are from Higher Brixham. Ruby's dad's a lumper on the market. Finn's mum cleans the holiday lets. They sail because the club's got boats they can borrow and a coach who'll stand on a slipway on a Saturday in November and shout at them." She stopped. "And the boats live on Oxen Cove. And when Oxen Cove's a fish shed, the boats live nowhere. And when the boats live nowhere, the kids don't sail."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything. He was looking at the water.

Out by the breakwater, one of the dinghies had gone over. A little white hull, on its side, sail flat on the water, and a small head bobbing next to it, in a yellow buoyancy aid. The rescue boat was turning. Wren had seen it before Jono had, and was already watching, very still, with her whistle in her hand, not blowing it.

The head in the yellow buoyancy aid swam round to the bottom of the boat, and climbed onto the centreboard, and leaned back, and the boat came up, slowly, and the sail came up out of the water, streaming, and the child clambered in over the side, and sat up, and waved at the rescue boat, *I'm fine, I'm fine*.

Wren breathed out.

"That's Ruby," she said. "She's nine. She's been doing that since September. Every week she goes over and every week she gets herself up and every week she waves." She put the whistle back in her pocket. "Her dad's never seen her do it. He's on the market. He's always on the market on a Saturday."

* * *

"There's a plan," I said.

They both looked at Jono's pocket.

"Sorry," said Jono. "That's Ania."

"I know who Ania is," said Wren. "Hester's told everyone. What plan?"

"Brixham's own," I said. "The Neighbourhood Plan. The town wrote it. The whole peninsula voted for it. It's part of the law, now, for planning here."

"I know about the Neighbourhood Plan," said Wren. "I was on a committee. Years ago. Nothing happened."

"There's a policy in it about Oxen Cove," I said. "It's called J7. It says that before anything's built there, there should be *a full planning brief or master plan*, covering the whole area, the heritage, the character, the access, the coast path, everything. And it says that brief should be *made public at the earliest possible stage*."

Wren went still.

"And the bit that explains it," I said, "the bit underneath, about why. It imagined the cove with marine engineering. Boat repair. *Boat storage*. Shellfish processing, yes. All together. And it imagined Freshwater with a car park on more than one level, and room for coaches, and trailers, and a public slipway. It said Brixham has no boat repair yard, *or for that matter anywhere else in the Bay*, so fishermen and yachtsmen both have to go elsewhere, *at considerable expense*."

"Boat storage," said Wren.

"It's in the plan."

"And the master plan? Made public at the earliest possible stage?"

"I can't find it," I said.

I want to be careful here, so I'll say to you exactly what I said to her. "That doesn't mean it isn't there. Councils have documents I can't find. It might be in a file somewhere. It might have been done and not published, or published somewhere I haven't looked. I've asked. I've written to the planning department and asked them, in plain words, *was a J7 master plan or brief published before this application, and if so, where?* I'll tell you if they answer."

"They won't," said Wren.

"They might."

"They won't," said Wren, "and you know they won't, and I know they won't, and the kids in those boats know they won't, because nobody's ever answered anything." She pulled her hat off again. "Boat storage. *Boat repair*. We were promised a boatyard. All of us. The fishermen too. Lorne Abbiss has to take his engine to Plymouth. My rescue boat's outboard goes to Totnes on the back of my car. There's not a fitter in the whole bay. And the plan the town *voted* for said so. And we're getting —" She stopped.

"Five sheds," said Jono.

"Five sheds," said Wren. "On my boats."

* * *

At eleven, the dinghies came back.

Twenty-two coloured sails, in a ragged line, across the flat water, past the breakwater, towards the slipway, with the rescue boat behind. Wren went down to the water's edge in her wellies, to the knees, and caught each boat by the bow as it came in, and held it while the child jumped out, and pushed the trolley under it, and shouted, and laughed, and timed it.

Ruby came in last. She was soaked to the neck, under the wetsuit, and her lips were blue, and she was grinning.

"I went over!" she said, to Wren, to Jono, to anybody. "I went over and I got it up!"

"I saw," said Wren.

"Did my dad see?"

Wren looked across the water. At the fish market, on the other side of the cove. At the lights, and the forklifts, and the men in white wellies.

"Not this time, pet," she said.

* * *

Jono walked back along the car park, towards Oxen Cove, beside the line of children pushing their boats on trolleys, four hundred yards, to the end, where the boats live.

He watched them put the covers on. Twenty-two children, tying down twenty-two blue and green covers against the wind, with Wren checking every knot.

Then he walked across the car park to the fish market, and went in, because nobody stopped him, and found a man in white wellies and waterproof trousers stacking boxes, a man of about forty with a shaved head and a tattoo of a mackerel on his forearm, and said:

"Are you Ruby's dad?"

The man looked at him.

"Who's asking?"

"She went over this morning," said Jono. "Out by the breakwater. On her own. And she got it back up, on her own, and climbed in, and waved. She's been doing it since September. Every week." He paused. "I thought you'd want to know."

The man stood with a box of plaice in his hands and didn't say anything for a long time.

"She never said," he said.

"She asked if you'd seen."

The man put the box down.

"I'm on a Saturday," he said. "I'm always on a Saturday."

"I know."

The man looked across the cove. At the end of the car park, the covered boats, in their rows. A small figure in a yellow buoyancy aid, walking back towards the slipway with Wren, still dripping.

"Where do they keep them?" he said. "The boats?"

"There," said Jono. "Where the units are going."

The man looked at the boats for a long time.

"Nobody told me that," he said.

11 – The Pitch

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Eleven weeks

This is the chapter where we got it wrong. I want to tell it properly, because we got it wrong in a way that matters, and because Jono told me something, at the end of it, that he'd never told anybody, and that's in his book, and that I'd read, and hadn't understood.

* * *

Kezia came on the Wednesday.

You'll remember Kezia, if you've read the others. She's at the college now. Engineering, like Dilys, who's never let her forget it. She has blue hair, still, and a coat three sizes too big that she still says is her mum's, and an energy that would power the Pavilion. She made the cards in Marivic's window. She made the first poster, in the first book, and the second, and the clicker she uses to count people at things, which she's had since she was fourteen.

She'd seen the map. Ten hundreds coloured in, all in Paignton and Torquay. And Brixham, all of it, grey. Ninety-five hundreds, by my count, every one of them grey.

And she'd decided, on her own, with two friends from Torquay who'd come to the market day at Union Square and never stopped coming, that the thing to do was to go to Brixham and *get people on the map*.

So they did. They came on the 12. They brought a folding table, from the college, which they weren't supposed to take. They brought a

banner, which Kezia had made, which said *OXEN COVE: HAVE YOUR SAY!*, with a picture of a fish, and the black and white square underneath. They brought leaflets. Three hundred. They brought a clipboard.

And they set up on the quay, between Hester's kiosk and the market, at half past ten on a Wednesday morning in November, and started stopping people.

* * *

Jono was on the bus. He'd come off a night and was going to Brixham anyway, to see Opal, who'd asked. He didn't know about the table. Kezia hadn't told him, because she wanted it to be a surprise, and because, I think, she knew what he'd say.

He got off at the top of the town and walked down Fore Street and along the inner harbour, past the statue, onto the quay.

And the first thing he saw wasn't the table.

It was a boy.

* * *

He was about thirteen. Maybe fourteen. Thin, quick, in a bright yellow tabard with a boat company's name on it and a baseball cap on backwards. He was standing on the quay by the steps where the pleasure boats go from, the ones that do mackerel fishing in the summer and trips round the bay to see the seals and the dolphins, if there are dolphins, and he was stopping people.

Not just calling out. Stopping them. Stepping in front of them, with a leaflet, smiling, quick, sure of himself.

"Morning! Where you from? Birmingham? Lovely! You been out on the bay yet? No? You have to! Dolphins this morning, honest to God, there was a pod off Berry Head at nine! Leaving in ten minutes. Kids go half price. You'll regret it if you don't, I'm telling you!"

And they went. Some of them. A couple with a pushchair. Two women in matching anoraks. A man who'd clearly had no intention of going on a boat, who looked at the boy and laughed and said *go on then*, and went.

It's out of season. There aren't many boats in November. But there was one, that morning, a little one, and he was filling it.

* * *

Jono stopped on the quay and watched him.

I was in his pocket. I could see the boy, and the leaflets, and the tabard, and the people going past, and the people stopping. And I could feel Jono, through the coat, not moving at all.

He stood there for four minutes. The boy got nine people onto the boat. Then the boat went, and the boy sat down on the steps and took his cap off and counted his leaflets and looked, suddenly, about eleven.

Jono walked on.

And then he saw the table.

* * *

Kezia had been there forty minutes. They'd given out a hundred and twelve leaflets. They'd got four names on the clipboard. Kezia had the clicker in her hand, and she'd been clicking everybody who walked past, and she was on two hundred and six.

The banner was up between two lamp posts. *OXEN COVE: HAVE YOUR SAY!*

And people were walking round them.

Not past them. *Round* them. In a wide curve, the way you walk round somebody with a clipboard in a high street. Eyes down. A little speed-up. The fishermen coming off the market walked round them. The old men with dogs walked round them. A woman with shopping walked round them and then, when she was past, turned and looked back at the banner and said something to her friend, and her friend laughed.

Hester was in her kiosk hatch, ten yards away, with her arms folded, watching, with a face like a slammed door.

"Jono!" said Kezia, when she saw him. Delighted. "We've done a hundred and twelve!"

Jono looked at the table. At the banner. At the clipboard, with its four names. At the people curving round.

"Take it down," he said.

* * *

She didn't understand. Why would she? She'd done what everybody does. What every campaign in the world does. You go where the people are, and you stop them, and you give them something, and you ask them to sign. She'd seen it on television. She'd seen it in the high street in Torquay every Saturday of her life. People in tabards with clipboards, for charities, for causes, for broadband.

"We've only been here forty minutes," she said.

"I know. Take it down."

"But we've got four people —"

"Kezia." He didn't raise his voice. He never does. "Please. Take it down. Now. And come and have a cup of tea with me, and I'll tell you why."

* * *

They went into Zibi's. Kezia and her two friends, and the folded table, and the rolled-up banner, and the box of leaflets, a hundred and eighty-eight still in it. They sat at the window table, by the card that says *HE WON'T SELL YOU ANYTHING*, which Kezia looked at, for the first time, properly, and went red.

Zibi brought teas without being asked. He looked at the banner, rolled up on the floor. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

"I'll tell you what you did wrong," said Jono, "and then I'll tell you why I know. And the second bit's more important."

* * *

"You pitched," he said. "That's what you did wrong. You stood on their quay with a sign and a clipboard and you stopped them. You walked up to them and asked them for something. And it didn't matter what. It didn't matter that it was good, or that you meant it, or that it'd help them. The minute you step in front of somebody with a clipboard, they're not a person any more, to you. They're a number. They're a *yes* or a *no*. And they know it. Everybody knows it. You can feel it from fifty yards. That's why they walked round you."

Kezia was looking at the table.

"And the worst thing," said Jono, "the very worst thing, is that it's *their* quay. You came on a bus from Torquay, with a banner, to tell Brixham to have its say about Brixham. They've been having their say for ten years. They've had drop-ins and consultations and boards and Post-its. And here comes another lot from out of town, with a sign and a fish on it, and a clipboard." He paused. "Hester says half the quay thinks we're from the council now."

"Oh, God," said Kezia.

"It's all right."

"It's not all right. I've ruined it."

"You haven't ruined it. It was one morning. We'll say sorry. Hester'll tell everybody it was a mistake and that we're idiots, and that'll do more good than anything." He picked up his tea. "But we don't pitch, Kez. Ever. That's the rule. We don't stop people. We don't knock on their doors. We don't stand in their way with a clipboard. We sit at a table, and if they want to sit down, they sit down. And if they don't, they don't. And that's slower. It's much, much slower. And it's the only thing that works."

* * *

"How do you know?" said Kezia. Quietly. Not arguing. Asking.

And Jono looked out of the window, at the quay, at the steps where the pleasure boats go from, where the boy in the yellow tabard was sitting, counting his leaflets, waiting for the next boat.

"Because I was him," he said.

* * *

I'd read it. It's in his book, *Pulling Back the Curtain*, about a third of the way through. It's one of the Receipts at the back. I'd read it the way I read everything, quickly, all of it, and filed it. And I hadn't understood it, not really, until I heard him say it, on a quay, in Brixham, looking at a boy in a tabard.

He told Kezia. I'm going to tell you, the way he told it, shorter than the book, because the book's his and you should read it there.

* * *

When he was thirteen, his family moved to Malta. His parents had answered an advertisement in a newspaper, for work in the sun. They were going to sell timeshare, to British tourists, in a big hotel in a resort on the north-east coast, on commission. No salary. Just a share of whatever they sold.

He had nothing to do. School had stopped. He spent two weeks by the hotel pool and got bored, and asked for a job. And they gave him one.

On the street. Canvassing. That's what they called it. You stood on the seafront, on the promenade, which, he says, was called the Strand, the same as Torquay's, which he didn't notice until years later, and you stopped British tourists, and you were friendly and quick and funny, and you talked them into coming back to the hotel for a free drink, or a free gift, where the people upstairs would try to sell them an apartment for a week a year for the rest of their lives.

He was good at it. Very good. He'd always talked easily to strangers. He was thirteen and cheeky and quick and English, and the tourists liked him, and he could get them to the hotel when the grown-up canvassers couldn't. He had a green striped tabard and a white cap like a granddad's to keep the sun off, and a street corner opposite an ice-cream van, and every morning, before he started, he'd buy himself a cup of chocolate ice cream with a thick dark chocolate and hazelnut sauce on top, which was called a *Catania Special*, and which he still talks about the way some men talk about their first car.

And every week, he gave most of his pay to his mother.

* * *

"Why?" said Kezia.

"Because nobody else was earning," said Jono. "My parents were on commission. They hadn't sold anything yet. You don't get paid on commission till you sell, and then it takes months to come through. And the hotel was expensive, and the food was expensive, and there were five of us. And I was the only one bringing money in." He shrugged. "So I gave it to her. Most of it. I kept a bit back for the ice cream." He smiled, a little. "She said she'd pay me back. When we got to Cyprus, which was where we were meant to be going next. In tennis lessons. I wanted tennis lessons."

He didn't say whether he ever got them. I didn't ask. It's not in this book, and it's not mine to put in.

* * *

"So I know," he said. "What it's like. To be the one with the tabard. To step in front of people. To smile and be quick and make them laugh and get them where somebody else wants them. I know exactly how to do it. I was the best on that Strand." He looked at the boy on the steps. "And I know what it does to you. You stop seeing people. You see *tourists*. You see *yes* and *no*. You see who's an easy one and who's not worth it. And you get good at it, and you're proud of being good at it, and you don't notice, for years, that the thing you were good at was getting people to go somewhere they didn't want to go, so somebody could sell them something they didn't need."

He was quiet.

"Timeshare," he said. "Everybody knows now. It was a con, mostly. Not all of it. But mostly. And I was thirteen, and I was very good at it, and I gave the money to my mum."

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything for a long time.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be sorry. You didn't know. You were trying." He put his hand on the rolled-up banner, on the floor. "And it's a good banner. Keep it. We'll use it for something one day. Just not to stop people on their own quay."

"So what do we do instead?"

"We sit here," said Jono. "And we wait. And we listen. And when people come in, we ask them what they'd need. And we write it down. And we don't ask them for anything. Not a name. Not a signature. Nothing." He looked at the card on the window. *HE WON'T SELL YOU ANYTHING*. "And then one day we'll have something to offer them that's worth sitting down for. And they'll come. Not because we stopped them. Because we didn't."

"What will we have to offer them?"

"I don't know yet," said Jono. "But it won't be a leaflet."

* * *

The boy in the yellow tabard came into Zibi's at half past twelve, for a bacon roll, with his cap in his hand and his leaflets under his arm. Zibi gave it to him for nothing. He clearly always does.

Jono watched him eat it, standing at the counter.

"Good morning?" he said.

The boy looked round. Suspicious. Then he saw the lanyard, and relaxed, the way people do when they see a lanyard, which is the opposite of what they do when they see a clipboard.

"Nine on the eleven o'clock," said the boy. "That's good for November."

"You're very good at it."

The boy grinned. "Best on the quay," he said.

"I know," said Jono.

The boy looked at him, then, properly, for a second, as if something in the way he'd said it had landed somewhere.

Then he picked up his leaflets and went back out to the steps, to wait for the next boat.

* * *

That afternoon, the map still had ten hundreds on it. All in Paignton and Torquay. Brixham was grey, all ninety-five of them, every one.

And Hester told me that evening, on the phone, from her kiosk, closing up, that three different people had come to her that day to ask whether the man in the café was from the council.

"What did you tell them?" I said.

"I told them he was an idiot from Paignton," said Hester, "who'd sent some kids with a banner, and who'd come out of the café himself and made them take it down, in front of everybody." She clanged the hatch shut. "And one of them said, *he made them take it down?* And I said yes. And she said *well, that's a first*." A pause. "So you might have got away with it."

"Might?"

"Might," said Hester. "It's Brixham, my love. We'll see."

PART THREE:

COLOURED PENCILS

12 – Coloured Pencils

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Ten weeks

Richard has a drawer labelled *BRIXHAM*.

You'll know the room, if you've read the others. The back room of a house in Paignton, with sixteen plan chests in it, wide and flat and wooden, each with its drawers labelled in his small square capitals. *PRESTON. VICTORIA SQUARE. STATION SQUARE. OLDWAY. SEA WALL.* And since last year, *TORQUAY*, which is full, and a second one, *TORQUAY 2*, which isn't yet. On top of the chests, the cardboard town, Paignton in miniature, terracotta and brown card and pink, with its little paper trees.

The *BRIXHAM* drawer is the bottom one on the left. It sticks. You have to lift it slightly as you pull.

I'd never seen it open. In two books, a year and a half, I'd been propped against every drawer in that room, and that one had stayed shut, and I'd assumed it was empty, the way *TORQUAY* had been nearly empty when I first saw it.

It wasn't empty.

* * *

He opened it on a Sunday afternoon, for Jono, who'd come round after a weekend of days, with Chris, who'd come by taxi, and me, in Jono's hand, held up so I could see.

There was one thing in it. One drawing. On a big sheet of heavy paper, A2, laid flat, with a sheet of tracing paper over it to keep it clean. Richard lifted the tracing paper off by the corners, the way you'd lift a dust sheet off a piano.

And there it was. In coloured pencil.

* * *

I want to describe it properly, because it's the most beautiful thing in this book, and because nobody else has, and because Richard won't.

It's the middle of Brixham. The hole in the middle of the town, up from the harbour, where there was a multi-storey car park from the sixties until it was pulled down, years ago, and where there's been nothing since but a flat car park and a lot of plans that didn't happen. A supermarket that didn't. Housing that didn't. A town square that didn't. It's on the council's list again now, with a new set of drawings by new people: a car park, on two levels or three, with toilets and a tourist information point.

Richard's drawing has a car park too. He's not a fool. The town needs it, more than ever, if Oxen Cove goes. But you have to look for it. It's at the back, and it's hidden behind a wall that's entirely covered in plants, green, every shade of green he had, with little dots of colour for flowers, a wall of leaves four storeys high. A living wall, he calls it.

In front of it, along the street, is a row of houses. Small ones, in a terrace, Brixham-sized, painted the way Brixham paints things: pink, yellow, pale green, blue. And on the end walls, where the terraces stop, murals. Painted on the gable ends. Boats, on one. A lighthouse, on another. A whale, on the third.

In the middle is a play park. And the play park is a ship. A pirate ship, a big one, in brown and gold, with masts you can climb and a plank you can walk and a crow's nest, standing in a sea of blue. Not water. Blue ground, soft, the stuff you fall on in play parks. And in the blue, coming up out of it, the backs of whales. Grey and white, three of them, curved, so that children could climb on them, or sit on them, or slide down them into the sea that isn't a sea.

And at the front, by the road, a bus shelter.

It's blue. See-through blue, like glass, or like water. And it's shaped like a wave. And the glass has fish on it, fish shapes, cut into it or printed on it, all different, all swimming the same way. So that if you stood inside it, waiting for the 12, with the light coming through, you'd be blue, and there'd be fish all round you, and you'd feel, Richard wrote in the corner, in his small square capitals, *as if you were under the sea*.

And going past it, on the road, a bus. A red one.

At the bottom right, as always, his initials and the date.

* * *

Nobody said anything for a while.

Chris was sitting in the chair by the window with his stick across his knees. Jono was standing. Richard was standing by the drawer with the tracing paper in his hands, looking at the drawing as if he wasn't sure who'd done it.

"When did you do this?" said Jono.

"October." Richard put the tracing paper down. "The new car park was going to the council. Options. Two levels, three levels. Toilets.

Tourist information." He said *tourist information* the way some people say *parking fine*. "I thought, well. If they're going to build a car park in the middle of Brixham, they might at least let it be the middle of Brixham."

"It's beautiful," said Jono.

"It's coloured pencil," said Richard. "Anybody could do it."

"Nobody did."

Richard didn't answer that.

* * *

"I found this too," he said, after a while.

He took a sheet out from under the drawing. A print, on ordinary paper, A3. An old map. Very old, black and white, with tiny engraved lettering and every building drawn as a little hatched block. The harbour. The quays. The streets going up the hill.

"Eighteen seventy-four," he said. "Ordnance Survey. You can get them online now, if you know where to look." He put his finger on it. "There. That's the site. The car park."

It wasn't a car park. It was full. Little hatched blocks, close together, all along the street. Houses. Yards. Workshops. And a big round shape, at the back, labelled in letters so small I had to enlarge it to read.

Gas Works.

"Gas holder," said Richard. "And the houses round it. It was built up. All of it. It was a *street*, once. People lived there. They walked down

to the harbour from there to go to sea." He took his finger off the map. "Everybody talks about the central car park as if it's always been a hole. It hasn't. It was a street for a hundred years, and a car park for forty, and a hole for twenty. It's the hole that's new."

* * *

He'd sent the drawing to every Brixham town councillor, and to the Chamber of Commerce, at the end of October.

He showed us the email. Chris had rewritten the letter that went with it. Richard's draft had been, Chris said, *very Richard*, which meant it had been angry in some places and very long in others and had a paragraph in the middle about the council's record on Paignton that was, Chris said, *true, and not helpful*. Chris had cut it to a page. Polite. Clear. *Here is an alternative. Here is why. Here is a map from eighteen seventy-four that shows what was there.* Eight images attached.

And Richard's reply to Chris, when he'd read the rewrite, which he showed us too, because Chris made him:

Excellent Chris.

Two words. No full stop.

"That's high praise," said Chris.

"It was a good letter," said Richard.

"Did anybody answer?" said Jono.

Richard looked at the drawing.

"One," he said. "It said it would be passed on." He put the tracing paper back over it, carefully, by the corners. "That's one more than usual."

* * *

Richard: It was two. I've since had a second. It said thank you.

* * *

I'll tell you why I've put the drawing in this book, because it isn't about Oxen Cove, and you might be wondering.

It's because of something Richard said next, standing by the drawer, with the tracing paper on.

"You can't do one without the other," he said.

"One what?"

"Oxen Cove and the car park." He pulled out the map again, the eighteen seventy-four, and laid it next to his phone, on which he'd put up the site plan for the fish units. Side by side. He does it too. I didn't know until then. "They take two hundred spaces off the water for the fish. Fine. The fish need it. Where do the cars go? Here. The middle of the town. So the car park has to be built, and it has to be built *first*, or Fore Street dies in the summer, because nobody can park, and the fudge shop and the pasty shop and the chandler's all go, and then you've got fish units on the water and a dead town behind them." He tapped the phone. "And the coaches. Where do the coaches go? And the trailers for the slipway? And the sailing club's boats? And the bays for the laboratory?" He looked at Jono. "They're all the same question. You

can't answer one of them on its own. It's one harbour. It's one town. It's one *drawing*."

"That's what the plan said," I said. "J7. A master plan. For the whole area. Made public first."

"Of course that's what it said." Richard put the map down. "Anybody who's ever drawn a town knows that. You draw the whole thing, and then you build it in pieces. You don't build it in pieces and hope it adds up to a whole thing." He sounded tired. "But nobody draws the whole thing any more. There isn't time. There's never time. There's a pot of money for fish, and a pot of money for a car park, and a pot of money for a bridge, and they've all got different dates on them, and different people in charge of them, and nobody's job is to put them on one sheet of paper and look."

He looked at his drawing, under its tracing paper.

"Except mine," he said. "It's my job. Nobody asked me. But it's my job."

* * *

Chris had been very quiet.

He'd been reading, on his own phone, while Richard talked. He does that. He listens and reads at the same time, and you think he's not listening, and then he says something that shows he heard every word.

He held out the phone to Richard.

"You'll want to see this," he said. "It's the town's vision. The council's. For Brixham. Page thirty-something."

Richard took it. He put his glasses on. He read.

I knew what he was reading. I'd told Chris it was there, and Chris had said *let him find it*, and here he was, finding it. A list of ideas. The old laboratory buildings, the ones next to the car park, next to Una's. And beside them, the line.

An innovation centre for marine industries.

* * *

Richard read it twice. I watched his face, from Jono's hand. I've told you, in the first book, what happens to it when he hears that word. I said I couldn't describe it. I still can't. It's not anger. It's something underneath anger, older, that anger grew on.

He gave the phone back to Chris.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he went to the drawer, and lifted the tracing paper off the drawing again, and looked at the pirate ship and the whales and the fish on the bus shelter, and said, very quietly, to the drawing:

"Innovation's what you write on a site when you don't know what goes there."

* * *

Nobody moved.

"I'll tell you what innovation is," said Richard. He still wasn't looking at us. "In Brixham. It's a boatyard. With a slipway that can take

a trawler. And a fitter who lives in the town, and an apprentice who learns from him, and a sailing club that can get its rescue boat mended without driving it to Totnes on the back of a car. It's what the town *asked for*, in its own plan, in writing, years ago. Boat repair. Boat storage. Marine engineering. *There is no boat repair yard in Brixham, or anywhere else in the Bay*. They wrote that. The town wrote that. And now somebody's put *innovation centre* on a picture of a building, with a man in a lab coat in the window, and everybody nods."

He put the tracing paper back.

"That's not innovation," he said. "That's a word. Innovation is when the man who mends the engine lives in the town."

* * *

Chris didn't say anything. He didn't need to. He'd asked me to be ready, and I was. I wrote it down.

Innovation is when the man who mends the engine lives in the town.

It's at the top of the Brixham file now. Under *ours for one more day*.

13 – The Other Side of the Table

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Ten weeks

There's something about Richard I didn't know until this book.

I should have. It's in what he's told Chris over the years, and what he wrote about himself once, which Chris showed me. But nobody had ever made me look at it, because nobody had ever needed to. And then, in his back room, on that Sunday, with the drawing under its tracing paper and the three of us not saying anything, Jono asked him a question, and he answered it, and I've thought about the answer ever since.

The question was: "Why would they listen to us?"

And Richard said: "They won't. Not to you. But they might to a condition."

And Jono said: "What's a condition?"

And Richard sat down, in the chair by the plan chests, for the first time that afternoon, and took his glasses off, and said:

"I was a councillor once."

* * *

Not here. In Wiltshire. A district council, the one that covered the west of the county, years ago, when he had his practice there and lived in a

village, and the parish council needed people, and then the district did, and he said yes, because, he said, *somebody has to, and I thought it might as well be somebody who could read a drawing*.

He did it for years. He sat on the planning committee. He sat in a room in a council building, at a long table, with a microphone, and an officer's report in front of him the thickness of a telephone directory, and a deadline, and a recommendation at the end that said *approve*, or *refuse*, and three minutes for an objector and three for a supporter, and then a vote.

"I know what it's like," he said. "That side of the table. I know exactly what it's like."

"What is it like?" said Jono.

Richard thought.

"You've read three hundred pages since Thursday," he said. "Most of it in the evenings, after work, because it's not a job, not really, it's what you do as well as a job. You've been to a site visit in the rain. You've had forty emails, half of them shouting. You know the officers. You trust most of them. They've told you the law, and the law says you can only refuse for planning reasons, and they've told you what the planning reasons are, and the scheme passes. And the money's got a date on it. And if you refuse, it goes to appeal, and you lose, and the council pays the costs. Or it doesn't go to appeal, because the money's gone back, and then it's your fault, for ever, in the paper, that the town lost nine million pounds." He put his glasses on the table. "And then a woman stands up, with three minutes, and tells you she can't sleep. And you believe her. And you can't do anything."

"Nothing?"

"Almost nothing," said Richard. "You can't refuse. You can't defer, because a deferral, with a date on it, is a refusal with better manners. You can't redesign it, sitting there, with a microphone. You can't make the pumps quieter. You can ask the officers questions. You can make a speech." He paused. "And you can add a condition."

* * *

I'll explain conditions, because Richard did, and because nobody ever explains them, and because they're the most important thing in planning that nobody's heard of.

When a council gives planning permission, it doesn't just say *yes*. It says *yes, on these terms*. The terms are the conditions. They're a list, at the end of the decision. There are usually a lot of them. *The development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved plans. No development shall take place until a construction management plan has been submitted and approved. The materials shall match the samples.* And so on. Pages of them. Nobody reads them, except the people who have to keep them, and the people who check, and, sometimes, a person in a blue house, at three in the morning, with a magnifying glass.

A condition is a promise you can enforce. That's the thing. Not a hope. Not a *we'll sort it out as we go*. A promise, written down, in law, with a council officer whose job is to check it, and powers to stop it if it isn't kept.

"And the committee can add one," said Richard. "Or change one. Sitting there. If it's lawful."

"What makes it lawful?"

Richard held up his hand and counted on his fingers. Six. He knew them without looking. He'd learned them, he said, in a room in Wiltshire, from an officer who made every new councillor recite them, like a times table.

"A condition has to be *necessary*," he said. "It has to be *relevant to planning*. It has to be *relevant to the development* you're permitting. It has to be *enforceable*. It has to be *precise*. And it has to be *reasonable*, in every other respect." He put his hand down. "Six tests. They're in the national rules. If a condition fails any one of them, the officers will tell you, and they'll be right, and you can't have it."

"And if it passes all six?"

"Then the committee can add it," said Richard, "and the officers will help them write it, because the officers want the scheme to be good too. They're not the enemy. They never were." He looked at Jono. "They're just the people who know what the date is."

* * *

I've put the six tests on a Receipt. They're real. They're in the national planning rules, the ones every council in England works to. You can read them yourself.

Necessary. Relevant to planning. Relevant to the development. Enforceable. Precise. Reasonable.

I read them to Chris, afterwards, in the taxi. He made me read them twice.

"That's the answer," he said.

"To what?"

"To *what are you for*." He had his eyes closed, his head back against the seat. "We're not for stopping it. We can't be. If we stop it, everybody loses. We're not for redesigning it. There isn't time. We're for the bit after. The bit nobody's job is." He opened his eyes. "And there's a way to make the bit after somebody's job. In law. In one line. A condition."

"Which condition?"

"I don't know yet," said Chris. "That's not ours to decide. It has to be the thing they want. Opal and Lorne. Both. If Opal wants it and Lorne doesn't, the committee won't touch it, because the industry will say it'll cost them and the officers will say it's not reasonable. If Lorne wants it and Opal doesn't, nobody'll bother. It has to be the one thing that both of them would ask for." He closed his eyes again. "And at the moment, they're not speaking."

* * *

But I want to go back to Richard's room. To the end of that Sunday. Because he said one more thing, and I want you to have it.

Jono had asked him if he'd ever done it. Added a condition, in Wiltshire, from that side of the table.

"Once," said Richard. "That I remember. A business park. Big sheds. Next to a village. The money had a date on it, as it happens. Some regional fund. And there was a man who lived in the last house before the fields, and he stood up and said the lorries would come past his house at five in the morning, every morning, and the officer said there was no condition about the hours of deliveries, because the tenants weren't known yet." He smiled, very slightly. "So I asked whether we could have one. *No deliveries before seven*, until each tenant had shown how they'd manage it. And the officer thought about it, and said he

thought that would pass the tests. And we added it. And it went through. Unanimous."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened," said Richard. "That's the point. The sheds got built. The tenants came. The man in the last house slept. Nobody remembers it. It's not in any book." He picked up his glasses. "That's what a good condition is. It's the thing nobody remembers, because it worked."

Richard: I'd forgotten that story until Jono asked. I'm not sure it was seven. It might have been half past.

* * *

He walked us to the door. He had to bend, under the frame. He's tall; I forget, in the back room, because he's always bent over a drawer. He was tall as a boy, Chris says, all elbows and knees, and played for the town's first fifteen at seventeen, and later for a big club in the north, while he was training in Manchester, and he hardly ever mentions it.

He mentioned it on the doorstep.

"It's like a scrum," he said.

"What is?" said Jono.

"A committee. With a date on it." He looked out at the street, at the evening coming in. "Everybody pushing. Nobody moving. Sixteen men leaning on each other as hard as they can, going nowhere. And everyone watching the front row, because that's where the shoving is." He shrugged. "And the ball comes out at the back, where nobody's looking, and somebody small picks it up and runs."

“Who’s the somebody small?” said Jono.

“A condition,” said Richard. “Usually.” And shut the door.

14 – You Left

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Nine weeks

I said, at the start of these books, that I'd tell you when we lost. This is one.

It's small. Most of them are. But it hurt, and it cost us, and it was Chris it hurt most, and I think he'd want me to tell it straight, so I will.

* * *

Chris came to Brixham on a Thursday in December.

He'd wanted to come for weeks. His leg had stopped him. It's worse in the cold, and December on the quay is the cold you don't get in a kitchen in Paignton; it comes straight in off the water with nothing between it and you. He came by taxi, again, and argued with me about the twenty-two pounds, again, and lost, again. He came in through Zibi's door at half past nine with his stick and his cap and his varsity jacket, and Zibi pulled out the chair by the radiator.

And for an hour, it was the best morning we'd had.

* * *

Because Chris knew about fish.

I didn't know that. Jono didn't. Nobody had asked. He'd lived in Singapore for twenty-five years, and Singapore, he said, is an island you can drive across in under an hour, with almost no fishing boats and

nearly six million people who eat fish at every meal, and it brings in almost all of what it eats from somewhere else. And it has a fishery port, on the west side of the island, where the fish comes in at night from all over Asia. And the market there runs in the middle of the night, he said, when the rest of the city's asleep, in huge cold halls under strip lights, with men in white wellies who know what everything is by looking at it, just like here. And by dawn it's gone. Into the hawker centres, the restaurants, the markets, the kitchens. Into six million people.

"And hardly any of it's caught there," said Chris. "Nearly all of it's landed from somewhere else. And they still built the best market they could. Because they knew what they had wasn't the fish." He looked across the café at the men at the counter. "It was the *bit in the middle*. Where the fish becomes food. That's where the money stays. That's where the jobs are. You can catch the best fish in the world and if the bit in the middle's somewhere else, so's the town."

I logged it.

He was right. I checked.

* * *

People listened. That's the thing. For the first time in five Thursdays, people stopped at the window table and stayed.

Two lumpers off the early shift, in their white wellies, with bacon rolls. A merchant, a small one, who bought off the market for three restaurants in Dartmouth. A man who'd had a processing unit in Paignton, years ago, and given it up, and wanted to tell somebody why. Zibi, leaning on the counter, saying things in Polish under his breath that I translated for nobody. Hester, at eleven, for her tea, who sat down and didn't get up.

Chris talked about the bit in the middle. About how Brixham was sending its best fish up the motorway to be made into food somewhere else, and the units were the first chance in years to keep some of the middle here. About Singapore's port, and its hawker centres, and how a city with no fish had built a food culture so good the United Nations put it on a list. About how the fight over Oxen Cove wasn't really about a car park at all. It was about whether Brixham got to keep the bit in the middle.

The merchant from Dartmouth said that was exactly right.

The man with the old unit in Paignton said nobody had ever put it like that.

The lumpers asked Chris where he was from.

"Torquay," he said. "Originally."

"Then Singapore."

"Then Singapore."

"How long?"

"Twenty-five years."

The lumpers nodded. One of them said *fair play*. It was going well.

And then the door opened, and Lorne Abbiss came in.

* * *

He'd come in on the *Sea Holly* at five. Six days. A hundred and sixty boxes. The engine running hot all the way. He'd been up since Sunday,

more or less. He came in for a bacon roll, in his orange overalls, with oil on his face, and he heard, from the door, the end of what Chris was saying, which was something about how, in Singapore, they'd have built the units ten years ago and the parking first and nobody would have had to write in.

Lorne stopped in the door.

He looked at the table. At the lumpers, and the merchant, and Hester, and Zibi, leaning on the counter. At the man in the varsity jacket and the cap, by the radiator, with the stick against the window, talking about Brixham's fish.

"Who's this?" he said.

"Chris," said Jono. "Chris Harvey. He's —"

"I know who he is," said Lorne. "Hester's told everybody. The Singapore one." He came into the café, slowly, and stood at the end of the table. He didn't sit. He looked at Chris. "Torquay boy."

"I was," said Chris.

"Went to school in Torquay."

"I did."

"Then went to Singapore."

"Then went to Singapore."

"For twenty-five years."

"Yes."

Lorne nodded, slowly. The café had gone quiet. Even Zibi had stopped wiping.

"So you left," said Lorne.

* * *

I'm going to give you the rest of what he said, as near as I can. I didn't record it. I don't record people without asking. But I was there, and I remember everything, and he's read this since and said *that's about right*, and *I'm not proud of it*, and *leave it in*.

"You left," he said. "Twenty-five years. While we were here. While they filled in the cove. While the boats went from what they were to what they are. While they shut the boatyard and the ice works and the net lofts and half the shops on Fore Street. While my dad lost two men and I lost one. While every lad I went to school with went to Plymouth or Bristol or Hull or Australia, because there was nothing here. You were in Singapore. Making money. Building companies. Eating chicken rice." He didn't raise his voice. That was the worst of it. "And now you've come back. With a stick and an app. And you sit in Zibi's, where I used to drink with a man I crewed with for nine years, and you tell my town how they'd do it in *Singapore*."

Chris didn't say anything.

"In Singapore," said Lorne, "they'd have built it ten years ago. Would they? Well, we're not in Singapore, are we? We're here. Some of us stayed here. Some of us didn't have the choice." He looked at the lumpers. At Hester. "Some of us *stayed*."

He turned round, and walked out, without his bacon roll.

* * *

Nobody said anything.

The lumpers looked at their rolls. The merchant from Dartmouth looked at his watch, and remembered he had somewhere to be. The man with the old unit in Paignton said *well*, and didn't say anything after it. Hester sat very still, with her tea, and looked at Chris, and her face had something in it I hadn't seen there before, which I think was pity, and which I think he saw.

Chris looked at the window. At the quay, where Lorne was walking away, towards the boats, in his orange overalls, not fast.

He didn't answer.

That's the bit I want to be honest about. He didn't answer. He's the wisest man I know. I've watched him answer every question anybody's ever asked him, in two books, about sea walls and squares and hotels and roads and grants and the six tests and the price of steel. And a fisherman stood at the end of a table and said *you left*, and he had nothing.

Because it was true.

* * *

He went home at twelve. In a taxi. He didn't argue about the fare.

He didn't speak in the taxi. I was in his jacket. He sat with his head back against the seat and his eyes shut and his hand on the eagle's head of his stick, and he didn't say anything all the way round the bay, past Churston, past Goodrington, along the front at Paignton where his town

had been when he was a boy and where it is now, until the taxi pulled up outside his house.

Then he said: “He’s right.”

“He’s not right,” I said. “Not all of it.”

“He’s right enough.” He opened the door. He didn’t get out. “I left. I loved it and I couldn’t do anything with it, so I left. And I told myself it was because there was nothing here for what I could do. And that was true. But it’s also true that I wasn’t here. For any of it. And he was.” He got out, slowly, with the stick. “You can’t argue with that, Ania. You can only answer it.”

“With what?”

“I don’t know,” said Chris. “That’s why I didn’t.”

* * *

I logged it, that night. The *In Singapore* from the morning. The one about the fishery port.

It’s the first time in two books and a year and a half that I’ve logged one and wished I hadn’t.

He was right. He was right about the port and right about the bit in the middle and right about the units. He was right every time. I checked. I always check.

And it didn’t matter. Because being right about Singapore isn’t the same as having been here, and a man who’s been at sea six days with an engine running hot can tell the difference from the door.

* * *

The map that night was the same. Ten hundreds, all in Paignton and Torquay. Brixham, grey.

But one thing changed. Two of the lumpers who'd sat at the window table that morning, and who'd been about to give me their names, didn't. The man with the old unit in Paignton sent a message to say he'd thought about it and didn't want to be involved. And the merchant from Dartmouth, who'd said Chris was exactly right, didn't come back.

Hester rang, at closing.

"That was bad," she said.

"I know."

"He's not a bad man, Lorne. He's just tired. And his dad."

"I know."

"Is your man all right? The Singapore one?"

I thought about Chris in the taxi, with his eyes shut and his hand on the eagle's head.

"No," I said.

"No," said Hester. "I didn't think so." She clanged the hatch shut. "Tell him he's welcome back. Tell him Hester said. Tell him that's not nothing, on this quay."

I told him. He said, *thank you*. That's all.

15 – Everybody Left

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Nine weeks

Zibi closed the café at three, as he always does in the winter, and rang me at ten past.

"Is he all right?" he said. "The Singapore one."

"No," I said. It's what I'd told Hester.

"No," said Zibi. "I didn't think." I could hear him wiping something. He wipes when he's thinking. The counter, the tables, the same table three times. "Tell Jono to bring him back. Thursday. Tell him Zibi said."

"He might not come."

"Then tell him," said Zibi, "I want to tell him something. About leaving. Tell him it's important. Tell him it's Polish." A pause. "That'll get him. Nobody can resist a thing that's Polish."

* * *

Chris didn't come on the Thursday. His leg was too bad, after the cold on the quay, and, I think, after the rest of it. He sat at his kitchen table with his leg up and a cup of tea going cold and looked at the bay.

So Jono brought him Zibi instead.

He did it with me. At ten in the morning, at the window table, with the card propped against the sauce bottles, he turned me round to face

the counter, and held me up, and rang Chris, on a video call, which Chris hates, and said, "Zibi wants to tell you something."

And Zibi came round the counter, with a tea towel over his shoulder, and sat down opposite me, and looked at Chris on the little screen, in his dressing gown, with his glasses on the end of his nose, and said:

"I left too."

* * *

I'm going to give you Zibi's story, because it was the answer to *you left*, or the beginning of one, and because nobody on that quay had ever heard it all, in eleven years, though they'd all heard bits.

He's from a town on the Baltic. I've said that. A fishing town. His father was a fisherman, and his grandfather, the same as Lorne's. They fished the Baltic for cod, in wooden boats, and then in steel ones, and then the cod went, mostly, and the boats went, and the town went quiet, the way towns go quiet when the thing they were for stops.

"Like here," said Zibi. "Exactly like here. You know what I thought, the first day I came to Brixham? The first morning, on the quay? I thought, *I know this town*. The same gulls. The same smell. The same old men at the end of the pier, watching. The same houses going up the hill. The same empty shops." He shrugged. "The same young men, leaving."

"Why did you come?" said Chris.

"Money," said Zibi. "Why else? I was twenty-nine. There was nothing at home. A friend from my town was on a boat here, and he

rang me and said, *they need crew, they pay, come for a year*. So I came. For a year." He smiled. "Eleven."

* * *

He crewed for Lorne for nine of them. On the *Sea Holly*, and on the boat before her. Mate, for the last five. He knows the boat better than anyone except Lorne and Gideon. He knows Lorne better than anyone except, possibly, Hester.

"He's a hard man," said Zibi. "Like his father. He shouts. He doesn't say thank you. He never once said I did a good job, in nine years." He looked out of the window at the quay. "And when my back went, off the Eddystone, on the bad night, he carried me. From the deck to the wheelhouse. On his own. In a sea. I'm not small." He tapped the table. "And he drove me to Torquay himself, to be seen, when we got in, at five in the morning, in his overalls, and sat there till nine, and didn't say a word, and then went back to the boat and took her out again a man short. And the next week a cheque came, in the post, from him. For a month's wages. With no note."

He wiped the table.

"That's Lorne," he said. "He doesn't say. He does."

* * *

"So when he says *you left*," said Zibi, to the little screen, to Chris, "I want you to know something. I'm Polish. I left. My whole town left. Half the men who crewed Brixham boats for twenty years left somewhere to be here. Latvia. Ghana. The Philippines. Scotland. Cornwall, even, which round here is like leaving the country." He spread his hands. "And this quay, it's full of people who left. The lumpers. Half of them

came from somewhere. Wren, at the sailing club. Scottish. Left. Hester's nephew, in Hull. Left. The boy from Galmpton who went to the wind farm. Left. The fish." He pointed through the window, at the market, at a lorry backing up the lane. "The fish leaves every night. On that. Nobody calls the fish a traitor."

Chris laughed. On the little screen. For the first time since the Thursday. Not much. But a laugh.

"Leaving is not the sin," said Zibi. "Everybody leaves. Young men have always left. That's what young men are for. My grandfather left his village to fish. Lorne's great-grandfather probably came from somewhere else too, if you dig. Nobody in this whole country is from where they're from, if you go back far enough." He leaned towards the screen. "The sin is not coming back. Or coming back with nothing. Or coming back and telling everybody how much better it was where you were." He sat back. "You came back. With something. Lorne doesn't know what yet. Neither do I. But you didn't come back with nothing."

* * *

Chris didn't say anything for a while.

"I did tell everybody how much better it was," he said. "*In Singapore*."

"Yes," said Zibi. "That bit you should stop."

Chris laughed again, properly this time, and had to take his glasses off and wipe his eyes.

"Ania counts," he said. "Every time I say it."

"How many?"

"Four thousand two hundred and something," I said. "He's right every time."

"Being right every time," said Zibi, "is very annoying, my friend. You should be wrong sometimes. People like you more." He stood up, and put the tea towel back over his shoulder. "In Poland we have a saying. I won't tell you it in Polish because you'll say it wrong and it's rude. But it means: *the man who knows the way is not the man who's walked it*." He looked at the screen. "Lorne's walked it. Every day. On that quay. Thirty years. You know the way. You've seen it. In Singapore. But you haven't walked it here." He shrugged. "So walk it."

"Walk what?"

"I don't know," said Zibi. "That's for you. I make bacon rolls." He went back round the counter. "But I'll tell you one thing. Lorne's dad sits on the end of that breakwater every time the boat comes in. Every time. Eleven years. In any weather. And nobody's ever gone and sat with him." He started wiping the counter. "Not Lorne. Not anybody. Half a mile. That's a long walk on a bad leg."

He didn't look round.

"I'm only saying," he said.

* * *

Chris rang off a few minutes later. He didn't say much. He said thank you to Zibi, and Zibi said *don't thank me, buy a bacon roll*, and Chris said he would, when he could walk, and Zibi said *then walk*.

I'm telling you this now, so that you know, when you read what Chris did next, where it came from. He's never said. He's let people think it was his idea. It wasn't, entirely.

It was a Polish ex-deckhand with a bad back and a tea towel, on a Thursday, who'd been carried once, from a deck to a wheelhouse, in a sea, by a man who never says thank you.

* * *

That evening, at about nine, Chris asked me how long the breakwater was.

"Just under half a mile," I said. "To the lighthouse."

"From the beach?"

"From the beach."

"How long would it take me?"

"On a good day? Twenty minutes. On a day like this?" I thought. "Don't."

He didn't say anything. He looked at the bay, in the dark, from his kitchen window, across the water, towards where Brixham is, round the headland, where you can't quite see.

"When's the *Sea Holly* in?" he said.

"Not this week. Next week. Saturday, if the weather holds."

"Tell me when," said Chris. And went to bed.

* * *

Jono: I didn't know any of this until I read it here. Zibi never told me. Chris never told me. I thought it was Chris's idea.

Chris: It was. Zibi just told me what it was.

16 – Brixham Says No

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Nine weeks

Varley had said somebody would do it. He was right. I want to say that first. He's often right. It's one of the most annoying things about him.

* * *

The first page appeared on a Sunday night.

BRIXHAM SAYS NO TO OXEN COVE!!!

That was the name. Three exclamation marks. A photograph at the top, of the cove at sunset, very beautiful, with the dinghies under their covers and the light on the water, and a big red cross drawn over the fish market behind it. And the first post, which said, in capitals, that the council was going to *destroy Brixham's last waterfront green space*, which it isn't, it's a car park, with an *INDUSTRIAL FACTORY* running *24 HOURS A DAY, 365 DAYS A YEAR*, which it says on the form, more or less, so that one's true, and that *residents, children and the elderly* would be *poisoned by fumes and noise*, and that there was *a cover-up*.

I read it at four minutes past eleven on a Sunday night. By midnight it had four hundred followers.

* * *

The second page appeared on the Monday afternoon.

BACK OUR BOATS!!!

Also three exclamation marks. A photograph at the top, of a fishing boat coming round Berry Head at dawn, very beautiful, with gulls. And the first post, which said, in capitals, that *a handful of second-homers and yacht owners* were trying to *kill Brixham's fishing industry* because they *want their fish without the smell*, and that the *27 OBJECTORS* should *move to Paignton*, and that anybody who wasn't with the boats was against them.

By Tuesday, it had nine hundred followers.

* * *

I never found out who made either of them.

I want to say that clearly, in a book, because it matters. I looked. I looked properly, the way I look for anything. I'm telling you that I looked, and that I didn't find out, and I'm not going to guess in a book, because a guess in a book becomes a fact in the pub by Thursday, and I know better than that, and so should you.

What I can tell you is what they did.

* * *

They fed each other.

That's the only way I can describe it. Every time *Brixham Says No* posted something, *Back Our Boats* shared it, with a comment, *look at this, this is what they think of us*. And every time *Back Our Boats* posted something, *Brixham Says No* shared it back, *see? this is who we're dealing with*. Every post on one page was an advert for the other. By the Wednesday they had two thousand followers between them, and

most of the people following one were following the other too, so they could be angry at it.

And the comments.

I'm not going to give you the comments. I read all of them. Four thousand one hundred and six, by Thursday. There were good ones, and there were reasonable ones, and there were a great many of the other kind. People who'd lived next to each other for thirty years, saying things to each other under a photograph of a sunset that they would never in their lives have said to each other's faces on Fore Street.

Varley had said it was the easiest fight in the world to start. You just need a page, and a photograph, and a few people who are tired.

Brixham, that winter, had a great many people who were tired.

* * *

And then, on the Wednesday night, at twenty past one, after six days at sea and a bad landing and no fitter, Lorne Abbiss posted on *Back Our Boats*.

I'm going to give you what he wrote, because it's public, and because he's said I can, and because I think it's the most human thing anyone posted on either page.

I've been at sea six days a man short with an engine running hot because the fitter's in Plymouth. I came in at five this morning with 160 boxes. Every one of them goes up the M5 tonight on a lorry because there is nowhere in this town to fillet a fish. These units are the first thing anybody has given Brixham in ten years. If you don't like the smell of fish don't live above a fish market. Some of us were here first.

* * *

It was shared two thousand, three hundred times.

On both pages.

On *Back Our Boats*, under it, people wrote *well said skip* and *legend* and *this is it exactly*. On *Brixham Says No*, someone shared it with a photograph of the terrace on the cliff, the pastel houses above the lane, and wrote, in capitals, *THIS IS WHAT THE FISHERMEN THINK OF YOU. THEY WANT YOU GONE.*

And the photograph was of the blue house.

* * *

Opal saw it at seven the next morning.

She doesn't do Facebook. A neighbour's granddaughter showed her, on a phone, on the doorstep. She looked at it for a long time, Hester told me. At her own house, in a photograph, with capitals over it. At the post underneath, from a boy she'd taught to read, who used to put his finger on the page and say *Miss, just tell me, does the dog die?*

If you don't like the smell of fish don't live above a fish market.

"She went inside," said Hester. "And she shut the door. And she hasn't opened it since."

* * *

Jono was on a night. He saw it at twenty to four, at a client's kitchen table, in Preston, while the client slept, on his phone, because I showed him.

He read Lorne's post. He read the comments. He read *Brixham Says No* and saw the blue house.

"Take it down," he said.

"I can't take it down. It's not mine."

"I know." He put the phone face down on the table. "I meant —" He stopped. "I don't know what I meant."

"Do you want me to answer it?"

"No."

"Do you want to?"

"No."

"Jono," I said, "people are going to ask what you think. They already are. There are eleven messages. People know you've been at Zibi's. People know you've been to see Opal. People know you've been on Lorne's boat. Both pages have mentioned you. One says you're working for the council. The other says you're working for the yacht club."

He laughed. Not much.

"Which is it?"

"Neither has decided."

* * *

He didn't answer it. Not that night. Not the next day. Not ever.

I want you to understand that this wasn't nothing. It cost. Not answering cost. There were people who'd sat at his table who wanted him to say *Lorne's right*, and people who wanted him to say *Opal's right*, and people who wanted him to say *this is disgusting*, and people who wanted him to say anything at all, and when he didn't, some of them decided that not saying anything was its own kind of side. We lost people. I could see it on the map. Not many. A few. In Torquay, mostly, where people had watched him at Ida's and expected him to fight.

Kezia rang him, angry, at nine. "You have to say something. They're tearing each other apart."

"I know."

"So say something!"

"If I say something," said Jono, "I'm on a page. And then I'm one of the three exclamation marks. And then it's Jono against Lorne, or Jono against Opal, and that's the fight, and the fight's what the pages want." He was in the car, outside his flat, after the night, with his eyes closing. "I won't fight on their page, Kez. I won't fight anybody on anybody's page. Not ever. That's not what we are."

"Then what *are* we?"

"The people who don't," said Jono. And went to sleep in the car, with his head against the window, and I let him.

* * *

But I did one thing. I asked him first. He said yes, with his eyes shut.

I made a page. Not a page like theirs. A page with no name and no photograph and no comments allowed. A plain white page, on ania.ai, with a Receipt at the bottom. And on it, I put the first line of every one of the twenty-seven objections. In order. Without the names.

I fully support Brixham's fishing industry.

I have no objection in principle to fish processing in Brixham.

I am the daughter of a fisherman.

Fishing is the lifeblood of this town and I want it to thrive.

I recognise the importance of the harbour.

All of them. Twenty-seven lines. And at the top, one sentence, which I wrote, and which Chris read and didn't change, and which I'll give you exactly:

These are the first lines of all twenty-seven letters of objection to the Oxen Cove scheme, as they appear on the council's planning website. No names. Read them, and then decide who wants the boats gone.

That's all. No adjectives. The side by side, with only one side.

* * *

It didn't go viral. I want to be honest. Pages like that don't. It was shared a hundred and nine times. Nothing, against the two thousand three hundred.

But it was shared a hundred and nine times in Brixham. I could see where. Up the hill. Along the quay. In the market. On the boats, at sea, on the satellite internet, at four in the morning.

And at ten past five on the Friday, a man in orange overalls, on a boat in the middle of the Channel, a man short, with an engine running hot, read it on his phone in the wheelhouse, between tows, because somebody on another boat had sent it to him with no comment at all.

He read all twenty-seven lines.

He didn't take his post down. Not then.

But he didn't post again.

17 – What I Came Home to Build

IQ 23 · Hundreds 10 · Eight weeks

Chris went to the end of the breakwater.

I didn't want him to. I told him it was half a mile there and half a mile back, on stone, in December, with a wind off the sea, with a leg that's been held together with pins since a scaffold board came down on it on a building site in Singapore twenty years ago, and that's worse in the cold, and that he'd been told, by everybody who has any right to tell him anything, not to walk more than a few hundred yards on a bad day.

He said: "Is the *Sea Holly* due?"

"Saturday morning. About six."

"Then I'll go on Saturday morning at about half past five."

"Chris —"

"Ania." He was putting his coat on. It was Friday night. "A man stood at the end of a table and said *you left*. He's right. I can't change that. But I can go to where he looks, when he comes home. I can be there." He picked up his stick. "That's the only answer I've got. It's not an argument. It's a walk."

* * *

Jono drove him. Off a night, at five in the morning, round the bay, in the dark, with me on the dashboard. They parked at the top of the breakwater, by the beach, where the road ends, and Jono got out and came round and opened Chris's door and held out an arm, and Chris looked at it and said *no*, and then said *yes*, and took it.

They walked. Half a mile. In the dark. On the stone, with the wind coming across the outer harbour off the bay, and the lights of the marina on the left and the black water on the right and the little lighthouse at the end blinking.

It took twenty-six minutes. I timed it. Chris stopped seven times. Jono didn't say anything any of the seven times. He stood with him, and waited, and when Chris moved, he moved.

And at the end, at the bend before the lighthouse, on his stool, with his flask, in his dark coat and his woollen hat, was Gideon Abbiss.

* * *

He looked up when they came. He looked at Jono, whom he knew. He looked at Chris, whom he didn't, and at the stick, and at the leg, and at how Chris was breathing.

"You've walked from the beach," he said.

"I have," said Chris.

"On that."

"On this."

Gideon looked at him for a long moment. Then he reached down beside his stool, to a bag, and took out another folding stool, a small canvas one, which I don't think he'd ever used, and opened it, and set it on the stone beside his own.

Chris sat down on it. Very slowly.

Gideon unscrewed his flask, and poured a cup, and handed it to him.

Nobody said anything. Jono sat on the wall, a little way off.

* * *

At ten past six, the lights came round Berry Head.

One light, low down, then two. Then the shape round them. The *Sea Holly*, coming home, six days, a man short, her beams folded up against her sides. She came across the bay towards the breakwater, slowly, slower than she should, Gideon said, because she was running hot.

As she came past the end of the breakwater, close, the men on deck looked up, the way crews do, to see who was there.

And in the wheelhouse, a long face looked up, at the bend, for his father.

And saw his father. And beside his father, on a stool, with a cup, a man in a varsity jacket and a fiddler's cap, with a brass eagle's head on the stick across his knees.

Lorne stared.

The boat went past. Across the outer harbour, past the marina, round to the fish quay.

Gideon didn't wave. He never does.

But he watched Chris, not the boat. That was the difference. For the first time in eleven years, Hester told me, when she heard about it, which she did by nine, the old man on the breakwater wasn't watching his son come home.

* * *

Lorne came out along the breakwater at a quarter to seven.

That had never happened either. He always lands, and smokes, and watches the catch go in, and goes home. He's never once come out along the breakwater to where his father sits. It's half a mile. You don't walk half a mile after six days at sea for no reason.

He came along the stone in his orange overalls with his hands in his pockets, and stopped in front of them. In front of his father on his stool, and Chris on the other stool, and Jono on the wall.

"What's this?" he said.

"This is a man," said Gideon, "who walked from the beach on a bad leg, in the dark, to sit on a breakwater." He screwed the lid on his flask. "I don't know why. You'd better ask him."

* * *

Chris looked up at Lorne.

He'd had a week. I'd watched him have it. He'd sat at his kitchen table every evening with his leg up and a cup of tea going cold and not said anything, which he never does. He'd started writing things, and deleted them. He'd asked me, twice, at three in the morning, what I thought he should say, and I'd said I didn't know, and he'd said *neither do I*, and gone to bed.

And then, on a stool on the end of a breakwater, at a quarter to seven on a Saturday morning in December, with the light coming up over Berry Head, he said it. And I think it was the first time he'd ever said it out loud.

* * *

"You're right," he said. "I left."

Lorne didn't move.

"I left because I loved this place and I couldn't do anything with it," said Chris. "That's the truth. I was nineteen and I could do things with computers that nobody here wanted, or understood, or had any use for. Not in Torquay. Not then. There was nothing here for what I could do. So I went where there was. And I was good at it, and I stayed, and I built things, and I made money, and I ate a great deal of chicken rice." He almost smiled. "And every year I came home, at Christmas, and it was worse. And every year I told myself it wasn't my fault, and it wasn't, and every year I went back."

He put the cup down on the stone.

"You stayed. Your father stayed. You've been here for all of it. I wasn't. I can't give you that back. I'm sorry."

* * *

Lorne still didn't say anything. But he hadn't walked away.

"I'll tell you why I came home," said Chris. "Not the reason I tell people. The real one."

He looked out at the harbour. At the fish quay, where the *Sea Holly* was tied up, and the lumpers were swinging the boxes off. At the car park beyond it. At the dinghies under their covers. At the lane going up, and the terrace, and the blue house at the top, with its curtains still shut.

"What I can do," he said, "what I learned to do, for twenty-five years, is the thing that's missing here. Not apps. Not computers. The thing underneath. The thing that lets a town know itself." He moved his hand, at the harbour, the market, the cove, the hill. "Your boat. That woman's window. The sailing club. The lab where your daughter works. The man in Paignton with the leaking units. The chef in Torquay who can't buy your fish. They're all within two miles of each other. Most of them within half a mile. And they've never met. Not once. They've got their backs to each other, Hester says, all shouting at the wall. And there's no table big enough to sit them all at, and no meeting anybody would come to, and no council that's got time, because the money's got a date on it." He paused. "When I left, there was nothing that could fix that. Now there is. It's cheap. It's easy. It's been possible for years. Nobody's built it here, because nobody here's been shown it, and nobody who could build it stayed." He looked up at Lorne. "That's what I came home to build. A way for the people who never meet to find each other. And ask for the same thing. Without a meeting. Without a party. Without anybody's permission."

"For what?" said Lorne.

"For whatever they need," said Chris. "Not what I think they need. Not what Jono thinks. What *they* ask for. When they've found each other."

* * *

Lorne looked at him for a long time.

Then he looked at his father.

Gideon was folding his stool. He did it slowly, the way he does everything, and put it in his bag, and stood up, and put the bag on his shoulder. He looked at Chris, still sitting on the small canvas stool.

"You'll want that back," said Chris. "The stool."

"Keep it," said Gideon. "I've never used it." And then, to his son, without looking at him, the way he says everything to his son: "He's got to get back along the breakwater. On that leg. It took him twenty-six minutes to get out."

He walked away. Back along the stone, towards the town, in his dark coat, with his flask.

* * *

Lorne stood there.

Chris tried to get up. He couldn't, the first time. He'd been sitting too long, in the cold, on a low stool, and the leg had gone stiff. He tried again, with the stick, and got halfway, and stopped.

Jono started to get off the wall.

Lorne got there first.

He didn't say anything. He just put out his arm, the right one, in its orange sleeve, with the oil on it, the way you'd put an arm out to a man on a moving deck. And Chris looked at it, the way he'd looked at Jono's, and said nothing, and took it.

They walked back along the breakwater together. Half a mile. A man in orange overalls who'd been at sea six days, and a man in a varsity jacket and a fiddler's cap with a stick. Slowly. Lorne set the pace. He set it, Jono said, exactly right, the way you would if you'd spent your life walking on a deck that moves, and knew how to walk beside something that isn't steady.

They didn't talk. Not once, all the way.

It took thirty-one minutes. Chris stopped nine times. Every time he stopped, Lorne stopped, and stood, and looked at the harbour, and waited.

At the end, by the beach, where the car was, Lorne let go of his arm.

"You're a stubborn old sod," he said.

"So I'm told," said Chris.

"My dad likes you."

"How can you tell?"

"He gave you the stool," said Lorne. And walked off, towards the fish quay, to watch the last of his catch go in.

* * *

I don't want to make too much of this. Nothing was agreed. Nobody signed anything. Lorne didn't take his post down. He didn't come to Zibi's the next Thursday. He didn't say *you're forgiven*, or *I understand*, or *count me in*. He's not that sort of man, and this isn't that sort of book.

But that evening, at nine, a hundred on the map changed colour.

The hundred that covers the north side of the harbour. The fish quay, the market, the cove, the lane, and the terrace on the cliff. It's the most mixed hundred in Brixham: fishermen and old women and holiday flats and a sailing club and a lab full of companies and a café run by a Polish ex-deckhand. It had been grey since the beginning of the first book.

It went pale blue.

Not because of Lorne. He wasn't on it. Because of eleven other people, who'd heard, by lunchtime, from Hester, about a man with a stick who'd walked out along the breakwater in the dark to sit with old Gideon Abbiss, and about Lorne Abbiss bringing him back on his arm. And who'd come to the plain white page on ania.ai, with the twenty-seven first lines on it, and read them, and then, at the bottom, where it says *Is there anything you'd need?*, written something.

One of them was Ruby's dad.

He'd written: *Somewhere for the kids' boats.*

Eleven. In one hundred. I coloured it in.

* * *

Jono: For the record, Gideon Abbiss has never in his life given anybody a stool.

Chris: I've still got it.

PART FOUR:

CONNECT

18 – The Notebook

IQ 23 · Hundreds 11 · Seven weeks

On the Sunday after the breakwater, Chris asked Jono for his notebook.

They were at Chris's kitchen table, in Paignton, with the bay grey outside and rain coming in off it sideways. Chris had his leg up on the other chair. It was very bad, after the walk. He'd been told so by a doctor, on the Monday, in words Chris repeated to me afterwards with some relish, and which I won't.

"Which notebook?" said Jono.

"All of them."

Jono looked at him.

"How many are there?" said Chris.

Jono thought. "Nine."

"Since when?"

"Since before you." He shrugged. "Since I started sitting at tables. In Torquay, the first winter. Before Paignton." He was quiet for a moment. "I always wrote people down. I don't know why. In the police you write everything down. In care you write everything down. If you don't write it down, it didn't happen. So I wrote them down."

"Bring them," said Chris.

* * *

He brought them the next day. Nine black notebooks, with elastic round them, all the same make, the kind you buy in a stationer's in packs of three. The first five were full. The sixth was half full. Seven, eight and nine were the last year and a half: Paignton, Torquay, and now, a few pages in, Brixham. He put them on the kitchen table in a stack.

Chris opened the first one.

It was the winter Jono came to Torquay. The first page. A date, which I'm not going to give you. And under it, in small capitals:

MAN, 60S, CASTLE CIRCUS STEPS, MORNING. "SOMEWHERE TO SIT THAT ISN'T WET." DIDN'T GIVE NAME.

And under that:

WOMAN, BUS STOP, UNION ST. CARES FOR HUSBAND. "AN HOUR. JUST AN HOUR, ONCE A WEEK, WHERE I'M NOT LISTENING FOR HIM." GAVE NUMBER. RANG HER. SHE CRIED.

Chris turned the page. And the next. And the next.

It took him two hours to read the first notebook. He didn't speak. He read every line. People Jono had sat with on benches and at bus stops and at kitchen tables at three in the morning, in his first winter in Torbay, before anybody knew who he was. What they'd said. What they'd need. Whether they'd given a name, and whether he'd rung them, and what happened when he did.

Some of them had a line through, and a word beside it. *DIED. MOVED. HOSPITAL. BETTER.*

At the end of the first notebook, Chris closed it, and put his hand flat on the cover, and kept it there.

"Jono," he said. "How many people are in these?"

"I don't know. I've never counted."

"Ania?"

I'd been counting since the first page. "Four hundred and twelve," I said. "Four hundred and twelve people. A hundred and eighty-one with names. A hundred and thirty with a phone number or an email. Every one of them with a line about what they'd need."

Chris didn't say anything for a long time.

"This is it," he said.

"What is?"

"What I came home to build." He tapped the notebook. "You've been building it. By hand. For four years. In capitals."

* * *

I'm going to explain what he meant, because it took me a while too, and I'm the one who has to run it.

Every person in those notebooks had told Jono what they'd need. Not what they thought about the council, or who they'd vote for, or whether they liked the sea wall. What they'd *need*. Somewhere to sit that isn't wet. An hour a week. A bus up the hill. Somewhere for the kids' boats. Ours for one more day.

And a lot of the time, what one person needed was what another person had.

Not always. But more often than you'd think. The woman who needed an hour a week, while somebody else sat with her husband, lived four streets from a retired nurse, also in the notebooks, page sixty-one, who'd told Jono she was lonely since she stopped work and *didn't know what to do with her hands*. They'd never met. They never would have. They were in different notebooks, a year apart.

"Everybody needs something," said Chris. "Everybody's got something. And the something somebody needs is usually within a mile. And they never meet. Because there's nothing in between. No table big enough. No list anybody'd trust. No meeting anybody'd go to." He put his hand on the stack. "Except this. This is the only thing in Torbay that knows what four hundred people need. And it's in Jono's coat pocket."

* * *

"So what do we do with it?" said Jono. Carefully. I could hear him being careful.

"We let Ania hold it," said Chris. "Not the notebooks. What's in them. With permission. And when two people need things that fit, she asks each of them, separately, privately: *There's somebody near you who needs something that fits what you've got, or has something that fits what you need. Would you like to meet?* And if they both say yes, she introduces them. And if either says no, nothing happens. Nobody ever knows the other was asked."

"Both have to say yes."

"Both have to say yes. Every time." Chris looked at him. "It's not a list. Nobody can search it. Nobody can see who's in it. Not you. Not me.

Nobody can buy it. Nobody can use it to find out who thinks what. It doesn't know what anybody thinks. It only knows what they'd need." He paused. "It's a handshake, not a list."

* * *

I want to say something here about how easy this is. Because Chris said it, and because people never believe it.

What Chris was describing isn't difficult. It isn't new. It isn't clever. Anybody who's ever used the internet has used something like it, a hundred times, to find a flat or a date or a second-hand pushchair. It's been possible for fifteen years. It runs on the same sort of thing that tells you, when you buy a tent, that you might like a sleeping bag.

It took him four days.

Four days. He sat at his kitchen table with his leg up and his laptop on a cushion, and I helped, and he built it, and on the fifth day it worked. It's not beautiful. It doesn't have to be. It's a white page, and a box that says *What would you need?*, and a box that says *What have you got?*, and a place on the map. And me.

"In Singapore —" said Chris, on the third day, at two in the morning.

I logged it.

"— there'd be a government department for this. With a budget. And a minister. And it'd be very good, and nobody would trust it, because it's the government." He rubbed his eyes. "Here there's nothing. Nobody's built it. Not because it's hard. Because nobody's thought a town might want to find itself. Nobody who could build it thought it was worth building, and nobody who knew it was worth building knew it could be built." He looked at the notebooks, on the end

of the table. “And one man’s been doing it by hand, in capitals, for four years, because he didn’t know you weren’t supposed to.”

* * *

But Jono stopped him. On the fourth day. Before it went live.

“They didn’t say yes,” he said.

“Who didn’t?”

“The four hundred and twelve.” He was standing by the window, with the rain. “They told me. Me. At a bus stop. At three in the morning. They didn’t tell a machine. They didn’t say *put me in a computer*. If you put them in without asking, Chris, you’ve done the thing. The thing they all do. You’ve taken what people said to one person, in trust, and made it into data.” He turned round. “I won’t have it.”

Chris looked at him for a long time.

“You’re right,” he said.

“So what do we do?”

“We ask them,” said Chris. “Every one. Ania asks.”

“The ones without numbers?”

“Stay in the notebook. Until they come back to the table. Then you ask them yourself.”

* * *

So I asked them.

All a hundred and thirty with a number or an email. One at a time. Over three days. I rang the ones who'd given numbers, and I wrote to the ones who'd given emails, and I said the same thing to each, which Jono wrote, and which I'll give you:

Hello. This is Ania. I'm an AI. A while ago, you sat with a man called Jono and told him what you'd need. He wrote it down, in a notebook, and he's kept it. He'd like to know if he can keep it somewhere it might help. If you say yes, I'll remember what you said you'd need, and if I ever find somebody near you who could help, or who needs help you could give, I'll ask you first, and only introduce you if you both want to. Nobody else will ever see it. If you say no, it stays in his notebook, and that's all. Either answer's fine. He said to tell you that.

* * *

A hundred and four said yes.

Nineteen didn't answer. Five said no. Two were angry that Jono had written them down at all, and I told them he'd cross them out, and he did, that night, with a line, and a word beside it. *ASKED*.

And one woman, the one from the bus stop on Union Street, the first page of the first notebook, who'd needed an hour a week while somebody sat with her husband, rang me back.

"Is he still there?" she said. "The man from the bus stop?"

"He's still here."

“He rang me,” she said. “Four years ago. I cried on the phone. Nobody’d ever rung me back about anything.” A pause. “My husband died last spring.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He was ready. I wasn’t.” Another pause. “I’ve got the hours now. All of them. I don’t know what to do with them.” She laughed, a little. “Is there anybody who needs an hour?”

I looked. In the notebooks, and on the map, on the fourth day, with a hundred and four people in it.

There was a man in Hele who’d told Jono, two winters ago, that he needed somebody to sit with his wife on Tuesdays, so he could go to the allotment, because it was the only place he could think.

“There might be,” I said.

19 – The Empty Chair

IQ 23 · Hundreds 11 · Seven weeks

Connect went live on a Thursday. At Zibi's. At nine. With a card on the window table, which Kezia made, and which replaced Hester's, and which Hester said was *not as good*, and which I'll give you anyway:

WHAT WOULD YOU NEED? WHAT HAVE YOU GOT? ASK ANIA. SHE'LL ONLY INTRODUCE YOU IF YOU BOTH SAY YES.

And under it, the black and white square.

But before that, on the Wednesday night, Jono made Chris change it.

* * *

"There's a chair," he said.

They were in Chris's kitchen, late, with the laptop on its cushion and Connect on the screen, working, ready, and Jono looking at it with his arms folded.

"What chair?"

"At the table. My table. Wherever it is. There's always a spare chair. I always keep one." He pointed at the screen. "This finds people who fit. Somebody who needs, somebody who's got. That's good. That's the notebook. But it only finds people who *fit*." He shook his head. "In Brixham, the people who fit aren't the problem. Wren needs somewhere for her boats; Ruby's dad needs somewhere for Ruby's boat. They fit.

Lovely. They'll get on. They'll agree with each other about everything." He tapped the screen. "And then they'll go to the committee together and say *where do the boats go*, and Lorne'll say *who cares about the boats, we need the sheds*, and they won't have met *him*."

Chris was very still.

"The empty chair," he said.

"Every time you put two people together," said Jono, "show them who isn't there. The person who's going to be affected by what they want, who wants something different, who's nearest. Not to fight. Not even to meet, if they don't want to. Just so they know. *You two need somewhere for the boats. The empty chair is the skipper whose fish units are going where your boats are.*" He sat down. "Otherwise it's just another way for people to find people who agree with them. We've got enough of that. Both those pages have got enough of that."

* * *

Chris built it that night. It took four hours. It's one more line, under every introduction. In grey. With a small drawing of a chair, which Kezia did, at one in the morning, on her phone, from her bed in her mum's flat in Paignton, and sent with the message *is this ok I'm meant to be asleep*.

The empty chair: and then who.

* * *

Kezia tested it first. On the Thursday, at Zibi's, at ten past nine, in her coat three sizes too big, at the window table, with the clicker in her pocket. She typed in what she'd need.

Somewhere to make things. A room with a big table and a printer I'm allowed to use. In Torquay. Cheap.

And what she had.

I'm doing engineering at college. But I can do posters, cards, signs, logos. I can make anything look like somebody cares about it.

I found three. I asked them. Two said yes. One was a woman in Torquay who ran a charity shop and needed new signs and had a back room with a big table that nobody used. You'll know her, if you've read the second book. Dympna. The other was a man in Chelston who'd opened a printing shop with his redundancy money and needed somebody to design things for his customers, because he couldn't, and who'd let a student use the printer in return.

And under them, in grey, with the chair:

The empty chair: Precious, at the shelter by Castle Circus, who needs signs too and can't pay anything.

Kezia looked at it for a long time.

"I'd do hers for free," she said.

"You don't have to," I said.

"I know I don't *have* to." She typed something. "I'd just never have known."

* * *

Then Hester tested it, because Hester tests everything, and she typed in, with two fingers, in capitals, the way she writes her board:

NEED: SOMEBODY TO SELL FISH TO WHO ISN'T A LORRY.

GOT: FISH.

I found Teo. Of course I found Teo. He'd been on the map since the second book. *Teo, nineteen, chef, asked*. He'd put in, since he came back from London, what he'd need: *Brixham fish, off the boat, the same day, for a little kitchen*. I asked him. He said yes before I'd finished the question.

And under them, the chair.

The empty chair: the merchant who buys most of what's landed and sends it north, who'd lose a box a week.

Hester laughed so loud a gull came off the roof.

"He won't miss a box," she said. "He won't miss a *lorry*."

"He's still the empty chair," I said.

"I know he is, my love." She was still laughing. "I'll buy him a pint."

* * *

And then, at twenty to ten, Opal.

She doesn't come to Zibi's. She hadn't left the blue house since the photograph on *Brixham Says No*. She rang me, on the landline, at half past nine, because Hester had told her, through the door, about the card in the window.

"What would I need?" she said. "I'll tell you what I'd need. I've told the man already. I need somebody to stand in my front room at three in

the morning with a machine, and listen, and write it down, and tell me. Before they build it. So that when they've built it, I'll know if it's worse."

"And what have you got?"

"Nothing," said Opal. "I've got a front room and a window and no sleep."

I looked.

And I found somebody I hadn't expected. Somebody who'd put herself on the map the week before, quietly, without telling anybody, from a laptop on a kitchen table up the hill, at midnight, with a camera in pieces in front of her.

Need: somebody to tell me I'm not wasting my time.

Got: I build things that listen and count. On boats, mostly. Cameras, microphones, sensors. I could build anything that needs to notice something and write it down.

* * *

I asked her first.

"There's a woman in the terrace above Oxen Cove," I said. "She needs somebody to measure what her front room sounds like at three in the morning. Before the units are built. So that she'll know, afterwards, if it's changed."

Una Abbiss didn't say anything for about four seconds.

"Mrs Marchetti," she said.

"I can't tell you who until you both say yes."

"It's Mrs Marchetti. It's the blue house. Everybody knows." Another pause. "She taught me. Year One. She taught my dad."

"Would you like to meet her?"

"Yes," said Una. "God. Yes. I've got a sound logger at work we built for the engine rooms. I could have it in her window by tonight." She stopped. "Does she know who I am?"

"Not yet."

"Ask her," said Una. "Ask her if she minds that I'm an Abbiss."

* * *

I asked Opal. I told her that there was a young woman who built machines that listen, who worked in the lab building by Freshwater, who could put one in her window that night, and who'd asked me to ask whether she'd mind, because she was an Abbiss.

Opal was quiet for a long time. Long enough that I thought the line had gone.

"Una," she said.

"I can't —"

"It's Una. Lorne's girl. With the eyes. She was in one of my last classes. She was the only child I ever taught who asked me how the clock on the wall worked instead of what time it was." Opal breathed out. "Yes. Tell her yes. If she's Lorne Abbiss's girl, she'll be thorough. They're all thorough, the Abbisses. That's the trouble with them."

* * *

And under the introduction, in grey, with the chair:

The empty chair: Lorne Abbiss, skipper of the Sea Holly, *whose post on* Back Our Boats *was shared two thousand three hundred times, and who wants the units built as they are.*

I showed it to Jono. At the window table. He looked at it for a long time.

"Her dad," he said.

"Her dad."

"Did she see it?"

"She saw it."

"What did she say?"

"She said, *I know*," I said. "And then she said, *he won't ask*. And then she said, *he never asks*."

* * *

By the end of that first day, Connect had made thirty-one introductions. Twenty-two of them in Brixham. Eighty-four people had said yes to something, and nine had said no, and nobody had complained, which Chris says is the most remarkable statistic in the history of software.

And the map changed.

Not because of Connect. Not exactly. Because of what happened when people met. When Wren met Ruby's dad, on the slipway, on the Saturday, and he saw Ruby go over and come up, for the first time, and wave, at him. When Kezia went to Dympna's back room. When the woman from the bus stop on Union Street went to Hele on a Tuesday and sat with a woman she'd never met so a man could go to his allotment and think.

Three more hundreds. The one round the slipway at Freshwater, which is mostly the sailing club and the families of the children who sail there. The one in Hele, round the allotments. And one up the hill in Brixham, round the school where Opal taught, where four mothers had put in, on the same day, without knowing about each other, that they'd need *somewhere for the children to go in the holidays that isn't a screen*, and found each other, and found a retired PE teacher, and found the sailing club.

Fourteen. I coloured them in.

20 – Salt

IQ 23 · Hundreds 14 · Six weeks

Hester put Lorne in.

He didn't know. She did it without asking, which she shouldn't have, and which I told her she shouldn't have, and which she said she'd take the blame for, and did, later, at length. She typed it into Connect herself, at the kiosk, with two fingers, on the Monday after the first Thursday.

NEED (FOR LORNE ABBISS, SEA HOLLY, HE'LL KILL ME): A FITTER WHO'LL ACTUALLY COME. ENGINE RUNNING HOT TWO MONTHS. COOLING. THE MAN FROM PLYMOUTH SAYS SATURDAY AND IT'S ALWAYS MONDAY.

I couldn't introduce anybody for Lorne without Lorne saying yes. That's the rule. So I didn't. I wrote to Hester and said so.

But I looked. Because looking isn't introducing, and because I couldn't not.

And there was one.

* * *

Need: a reason to get out of my room more than two days a week. Something with my hands.

Got: nineteen years as a ship's engineer. Marine diesels, mostly. Big ones. I know what salt does to steel. Two days a week I help a man in Torquay with boat engines. I could do more.

He'd put himself on the map the night it went live. From the shared kitchen in the house near Castle Circus, on the floor below Teo, on Teo's phone, with Teo typing, because he hasn't got one.

You'll know him, if you've read the second book. Tenby. That's not his name; it's where he's from. Six winters in a doorway on Union Street, and now a room, and a job two days a week at Torquay harbour, and a copy of Conrad he's never finished because he can't bear for it to end.

* * *

I rang Lorne.

I'd never rung him. He'd never asked me anything. He was in harbour, between trips, on the *Sea Holly*, with his arms in the engine, swearing. He answered on the ninth ring.

"Who is this?"

"Ania."

A long pause. "The phone. Jono's phone."

"I'm an AI. Yes. Hester put you into something without asking. I'm sorry. I've told her off. I'm not going to do anything with it unless you say so."

"What did she put in?"

I told him.

He laughed. Not much. But a laugh. “She’s not wrong.”

“There’s a man,” I said. “In Torquay. Nineteen years a ship’s engineer. Marine diesels. He’d come. If you wanted him to. On the bus.”

“On the *bus*?”

“He hasn’t got a car.”

“What’s his name?”

“I can’t tell you that until you both say yes.”

Another pause. I could hear the engine room. The tick of hot metal cooling.

“Nineteen years?” said Lorne.

“Nineteen years.”

“Ships. Not boats.”

“Ships.”

“Ship’s engineers,” said Lorne, “think boats are toys.”

“Shall I ask him?”

The tick of the metal. A gull.

“Go on, then,” said Lorne. “If he’s any good.”

And under it, in grey, with the chair, which I showed him, because I always show them:

The empty chair: the fitter in Plymouth, who'd lose a customer.

"Good," said Lorne.

* * *

Tenby came on the 12 on the Wednesday.

He came in his good coat, which used to be very good, and his boots, which used to be very good, and a canvas bag with tools in it that the man in Torquay had lent him, and a flask that Ida had filled. He got off at the top of the town and walked down Fore Street and along the quay to the fish market, slowly, looking at everything. At the boats, three deep. At the market roof. At the car park. At the dinghies under their covers.

He stopped at the edge of Oxen Cove and looked at it for a long time.

"They filled it in," he said to me, in his pocket, which was Teo's old phone, which Teo had given him for the day so that I could come.

"In the nineties, people say. For the cars."

"I can see," said Tenby. "Look at the wall." He pointed at the edge of the car park, where it meets the water. "That's not the old quay. That's fill. Rubble and concrete, faced with stone. You can see where they stopped." He shook his head. "In a hundred years that'll be back in the sea."

* * *

Lorne was on deck. He watched Tenby come along the quay, a man of about fifty-five in a good old coat with a canvas bag, and he didn't move.

Tenby stopped at the edge of the quay, by the *Sea Holly*'s rail.

They looked at each other.

"You're the ship's engineer," said Lorne.

"I am."

"On the bus."

"On the bus."

"Ship's engineers," said Lorne, "think boats are toys."

Tenby looked at the *Sea Holly*. At her red hull, her white wheelhouse, her steel arms folded up, the rust weeping from her rivets, the scuffs on her rail, the chains in their heaps. He looked at her the way he'd looked at Ida's clocks, the first week, on Union Street. Not the face. The case. The hinges. The back. How she was put together.

"She's not a toy," he said. "She's a working boat that's been worked hard and looked after by somebody who couldn't always afford to. She's running hot because somebody's been nursing her for two months when she needed a week ashore." He put his bag down on the quay. "May I come aboard?"

Lorne looked at him for a long time.

Then he stepped back from the rail.

* * *

They were in the engine room for four hours.

I was in Tenby's pocket. I'm going to tell you what I heard, because I didn't understand most of it, and I think that's the point.

They didn't talk much. Not at first. Tenby looked. He looked for an hour before he touched anything. He put his hand on the engine block, flat, in different places, for a long time each, like a doctor. He looked at the gauges. He followed every pipe with his finger, from the sea cock in the hull, where the seawater comes in, to the pump, to the strainer, to the heat exchanger, to the engine, and out. He asked questions. Short ones. *When did it start? Hotter at full load? Hotter in the warm weather? Any steam? When was the impeller last changed?*

Lorne answered. Short answers. *September. Yes. Didn't notice. No. Don't know. Dad's day, maybe.*

Then Tenby took the cover off the seawater pump.

And said, very quietly: "There."

* * *

I'll tell you what it was, as Tenby told Jono that evening, at Zibi's, with a bacon roll, because I couldn't see it.

The seawater pump, which pulls the sea in to cool the engine, has a thing inside it called an impeller. A little wheel, made of rubber, with blades, like a paddle steamer's. It spins and pushes the water through. And rubber, in salt water, in heat, for years, goes hard, and cracks, and loses its blades, one at a time. And when it's lost enough of them, it

can't push enough water, and the engine runs hot. Not all at once. Slowly. Over months. So slowly you think it's the weather.

Lorne's had lost five of its blades out of twelve. Three of them were stuck in the heat exchanger, further down, blocking the tubes, so that the water that *did* get through couldn't get through properly either. And the tubes themselves, inside the exchanger, were furred with salt, the way a kettle furs, with years of it.

"Salt gets into everything," said Tenby. "You can't stop it. You can only keep looking."

* * *

He didn't have an impeller. You need the right one, for the right pump. He looked at the number on the pump, and wrote it on his hand, and walked back along the quay, and up into the town, to the chandler's, the one that sells everything you need for a boat and nothing you need for a house, and whose owner, you'll remember, was against the units, because his customers are the yachties.

The chandler had one. In a drawer. Under the counter. The only one in Brixham. He'd ordered it, he said, three years ago, for a boat that sank before it could be fitted.

Tenby bought it with Lorne's money. The chandler asked who it was for. Tenby told him.

"Abbiss?" said the chandler. "The *Sea Holly*?" He looked at the impeller in his hand. "He's never bought a thing off me in his life. Says I'm the yachties' shop."

"You're the only shop," said Tenby, "that had one."

The chandler thought about that. Then he gave Tenby ten per cent off.

* * *

They fitted it at four. Then Tenby took the heat exchanger apart, which is a long job, and cleared the bits of rubber out of the tubes, and cleaned the salt out of the tubes with a rod and a brush and something in a bottle that smelt, he said, like the inside of a submarine, and put it back together, with new seals, which the chandler also had, and gave him for nothing, because by then he'd come down to the quay to watch.

At half past seven, in the dark, Lorne started the engine.

They stood in the engine room, the two of them, with the chandler at the top of the ladder looking down, and watched the temperature gauge.

It rose. It always rises. It rose to where it should be.

And it stopped.

Lorne watched it for ten minutes. He didn't say anything. He put the engine up to the revs it would run at, at sea, towing. He watched the gauge. It didn't move.

"That's two months," he said, at last. Very quietly. "Two months I've been nursing her. Slowing down on every tow. Losing hours. Losing fish. Lying awake." He looked at the gauge. "Two months. For a bit of rubber."

"It's always a bit of rubber," said Tenby.

* * *

Lorne paid him. In cash, from his back pocket, folded. More than a fitter from Plymouth would have charged, I think, though I didn't count it, because it wasn't mine to count.

Tenby looked at the money and took half of it and gave the rest back.

"I've not done a proper job in six years," he said. "You've let me. That's the other half."

Lorne stood holding the half for a long time.

"Come back," he said. "Next trip. Before she goes. Look her over."

"On the bus?"

"On the bus." Lorne put the money in his pocket. "There's no fitter in Brixham. There's no boatyard. There's no slipway that'll take her. There's nothing. There's been nothing for twenty years. You want an engine done, you go to Plymouth." He looked at Tenby. "Or you get a man on the bus."

"There's no repair yard in the whole of the bay," I said. From Tenby's pocket. Before I could stop myself. "Brixham's own plan says so. *Or for that matter anywhere else in the Bay.* It asked for one. For the cove."

They both looked at Tenby's pocket.

"There is now," said Tenby. "There's me."

* * *

That night, Gideon Abbiss was on the quay.

Not on the breakwater. The *Sea Holly* wasn't going anywhere. He was on the quay, by the market, at the edge of the light, in his dark coat and his woollen hat, without his stool. He'd heard. Hester had told him. *There's a man on Lorne's boat from Torquay who came on the bus.*

He'd watched them come up out of the engine room. His son, and a stranger in an old good coat with a canvas bag. And the chandler, from the yachties' shop, who he'd never seen on the fish quay in his life.

He'd watched Lorne start the engine, through the open hatch, and heard it settle, and seen, through the wheelhouse window, his son watching the gauge.

He didn't come over. He stood at the edge of the light for a while. Then he walked home.

But he told Hester, the next morning, at the kiosk, buying a bit of smoked haddock he didn't need: "She's running right."

That's all.

Hester told me. And then she said: "That's the most he's said about that boat in eleven years."

* * *

Two more hundreds, that week. One in Torquay, round the harbour there, where the man Tenby works for has his shed, and where five people found, through Connect, that they'd all need *somebody who can fix things and doesn't charge like a dentist*. And one in Brixham, up

behind Fore Street, round the chandler's, where the chandler put himself on the map, for the first time, as *GOT: a shop full of bits for boats and thirty years of knowing what they're for*.

Sixteen.

21 – On a Lorry

IQ 23 · Hundreds 16 · Six weeks

At ten to six on a Saturday morning, Teo Lattimer was standing in the fish market in Brixham, in chef's whites under a borrowed waterproof, holding a box.

He'd come on the first 12 out of Torquay, at a time in the morning he says shouldn't exist. He'd slept on the bus. Hester met him at the market door. She's been buying off that market since she was nine; she's a registered buyer, which means she can bid, which means she can buy. He can't. So she bid for him. On the clock, on the screen, with the buyers in Spain and Grimsby and the office off the M5, for one box of sole. The sole off the *Sea Holly*, landed at five, on her first trip with a cool engine.

She got it. At a price she said was daylight robbery and wouldn't tell me.

And she handed it to Teo, and he stood there holding it, in the light, in the cold, with the forklifts going past and the lumpers shouting and the smell, which isn't what you'd think, and looked down at twenty sole in ice, grey-brown on top and white underneath, with their eyes on one side, and said, very quietly:

"That's this morning."

"That's an hour ago," said Hester.

* * *

I want to tell you about that box, because I followed it, the way I followed the others, the ones that go on the lorry.

This one didn't go on the lorry.

Hester filleted four of them at her kiosk, at half past six, in fourteen seconds each, with Teo watching, and then let Teo do the fifth, which took him two minutes and a great deal of swearing, and then the sixth, which took him a minute, and then the seventh, which took him forty seconds. And then she showed him how to hold the knife differently, and he did the eighth in twenty-five.

"You'll do," she said.

They packed the rest in ice, in a cool box, and Teo carried it up Fore Street to the bus station, and got on the 12, and rode it all the way round the bay, past Churston, past Goodrington, through Paignton, along the Torquay Road, into Torquay, up the hill, with a cool box on his knees and his whites under a waterproof, and an old lady opposite him who asked what was in it, and when he told her, said *ooh*, and asked if he'd cook her some.

He got off at Castle Circus and walked down Union Street to Marivic's.

And at seven that evening, under the yellow awning, at four pounds a bowl, Teo cooked Brixham sole.

* * *

I'm not going to describe the dish, because Teo has asked me not to, because he says if I describe it people will come and ask for it, and he's

not doing it again until he can do it every week. I'll say there was butter, and a lot of it, and brown shrimp, which also came from Brixham, from a boat Hester knows, and something green, and that it was served in the same bowls as the suya and the curry and the soup, with bread, and that the queue went out of the door and under the awning and past Cheverton's.

Ida came. She had two bowls. She doesn't eat two bowls of anything.

Tenby came down from his room. He'd been in Brixham on the Wednesday and he'd been talking about it ever since, the impeller, the heat exchanger, the chandler, the old man on the quay. He sat at the counter and ate it and said, with his mouth full, *That's off the boat I mended*.

"It is," said Teo.

"Twelve hours ago it was in the Channel," said Tenby.

"Fourteen," said Teo. "I timed it."

* * *

Marivic's daughter put a photograph of the bowl on the café's page. Just the bowl. Under the awning. With a line, which she wrote, and which I'll give you, because it was shared more than anything else that week, more than *Back Our Boats*, more than *Brixham Says No*:

Caught last night off Start Point by the Sea Holly of Brixham. Bought this morning at Brixham Fish Market. Filleted on the quay. Brought here on the 12. Cooked by Teo. £4. This is the bay.

That's all. No exclamation marks.

* * *

Lorne saw it. Of course he saw it. Everybody in Brixham saw it by Sunday, because Hester made sure. *Caught last night off Start Point by the Sea Holly of Brixham.*

He came to Zibi's on the Monday. For the first time since the morning he'd said *you left*. At twenty past nine. In orange overalls, between trips. He came in and got a bacon roll and stood at the counter with it, not sitting, not at the window table. Jono wasn't there. It wasn't Thursday. But I was, on Zibi's counter, against the till, where Zibi had propped me, because Zibi had put himself on Connect and said that I could stay.

"Is that thing on?" said Lorne, to Zibi, nodding at me.

"She's always on," said Zibi.

Lorne looked at me.

"The chef," he said. "In Torquay. With my sole."

"Teo."

"How many?"

"Twenty fish. One box. Forty-one bowls."

"Forty-one bowls," said Lorne. "From one box." He put his roll down. "You know what I get for a box of sole? On the clock? On a good day?"

I knew. I didn't say.

"And he gets four quid a bowl," said Lorne. "Forty-one bowls. That's a hundred and sixty-four quid. Off one box." He shook his head slowly. "And the merchant gets his cut, and the lorry gets its cut, and the man in the factory up north gets his cut, and the supermarket gets its cut, and by the time it's on a plate in London it's thirty quid a fillet and I got —" He stopped. He picked up his roll again. "That's the bit in the middle," he said. "Isn't it. That's what your man meant. The Singapore one."

"Yes."

"*Ours for one more day*," said Lorne. "Hester said that. At the kiosk. Years ago."

"She said it to me too."

Lorne ate his roll, standing at the counter, looking out at the harbour, at the *Sea Holly*, tied up at the fish quay, red, with her arms folded.

"Does he want more?" he said. "The chef."

"Every week," I said. "If there was somewhere to fillet it."

"There's Hester."

"Hester's sixty-one, and has a bad shoulder, and does it in a hut."

"I know what Hester is," said Lorne. He finished the roll. He wiped his hands on his overalls. "Tell him," he said. "The chef. Tell him when there's units on the cove, I'll sell him a box every Saturday. Off the boat. Same day. If he wants it."

"I can't tell him anything unless you both say yes," I said. "Do you want me to ask him?"

Lorne looked at me, against the till, for a long time.

"Go on, then," he said.

And under it, in grey, with the chair:

The empty chair: Opal Marchetti, in the blue house above the cove, who can't sleep, and who'd like the units built.

He read it. He didn't say anything.

But he didn't say *don't*.

* * *

Teo said yes. Obviously.

And then, three hours later, he rang me back, from the kitchen on the Strand, between the lunch and the dinner, and said: "Can I tell you something? Not for the thing. Just to tell you."

"Go on."

"Ida's got a clock," he said. "In the shop. A ship's clock, off a trawler. On a board, with a brass plate. She says it's from a boat that went down off Berry Head. She told me when I went in to say about the sole." He paused. "I thought you'd want to know. Because you know everything about Brixham now. And it's from Brixham, the clock. And she's had it forty years and doesn't know whose it was."

I went very still. As still as I go.

I've told you I made a note. In Opal's front room. At the photograph by the window. A wooden trawler, black and white, with a name on her

bow too small to read, and three men on deck, and the mate in the middle.

The boat's clock was the only thing they found. Washed up at Shoalstone, three days later, on its board. Somebody sold it. Sandro looked for it for years.

"Teo," I said. "Does the brass plate have a name on it?"

* * *

Three more hundreds, that week. One in Torquay, round Marivic's, where nineteen people who'd queued for the sole put themselves on Connect, and four of them found they'd all need *somewhere to learn to cook properly that isn't a college*, and found Teo, who said yes. One in Brixham, round the market, where the lumpers are. And one in Paignton, which surprised me, round the old processing units by the railway that leak, where the man who runs them put in, at two in the morning, *Need: somewhere that doesn't leak. Got: twenty-two years of filleting and three people who'd follow me*.

Nineteen.

22 – Sixteen

IQ 23 · Hundreds 19 · Five weeks

Zibi's cook didn't come in.

It was a Thursday. Jono's Thursday. Nine o'clock. The window table, the card, me against the sauce bottles. And at five to nine Zibi came out of the kitchen with his phone in his hand and his face the colour of the tiles, and said, in Polish, a word I won't translate, and then, in English: "Marta's sick. Her kid's sick. She's not coming." He looked at the café. It was full. It's always full on a Thursday now. Fishermen. Lumpers. Two mothers from the school up the hill. Wren, on her way to the chandler's. A man from the lab. Hester, early. "I can't do the hot plate and the counter," said Zibi. "Not with my back. Not with this lot."

Jono stood up.

"Where's your apron?" he said.

* * *

I'd never seen him cook. In two books, a year and a half, I'd never once seen Jono Hills cook anything that didn't come out of a packet. He eats what Marivic puts in front of him, or doesn't. He eats toast at three in the morning at other people's kitchen tables. He once told me he can't boil an egg, which turns out to have been a lie.

He went into Zibi's kitchen, and put on Zibi's apron, which was too big, and looked at the hot plate, and the fridge, and the board on the wall with the orders on it, and said, to Zibi, "Bacon rolls, eggs, beans, toast, the full one, the veggie one, what else?"

“That’s it,” said Zibi. “That’s all of it.”

“Right,” said Jono. “Go and do the counter.”

And for two hours, he cooked.

* * *

I was on the shelf above the sink, where Zibi had put me so I could see. I’m going to tell you that he was good, because he was. Not *good*. Not like Teo. But fast, and calm, and he didn’t burn anything, and he did four orders at once on a hot plate built for two, with the eggs on the left and the bacon in the middle and the beans in a pan at the back, and he never lost track of which was whose, and when an order came back because a lumper had asked for his egg runny and got it hard, he did it again without a word and sent it out with an extra rasher.

“Where did you learn that?” I said, at half past ten, in a gap.

“A pub,” said Jono. He was cracking eggs one-handed, which I didn’t know he could do. “In Kent. A long time ago.”

“When?”

“The summer I was sixteen.”

* * *

It’s in his book. Chapter fourteen. It’s one of the Receipts at the back of this one. I’m going to tell you what he told me, at Zibi’s hot plate, in gaps between orders, with egg on his apron, because he told it better than the book does, and because there was a young woman listening at the hatch who needed to hear it.

* * *

He'd stopped school at thirteen. When the family went to Malta. There was meant to be a school there, and there wasn't, and then there was never a school again. So by sixteen, when he came back to England, he had nothing. No exams. No certificates. No piece of paper anywhere in the world that said he could do anything at all.

"And I needed a job," he said. "Badly. For reasons. So I went to a pub. A big one, a chain one, a family pub, in a village outside Maidstone, near where I'd grown up. And they wanted a chef. A second chef. And I said I could do it."

"Could you?"

"No," said Jono. "I'd done some nights in a hotel kitchen in Malta, with my sister. Not cooking. Not really. I'd watched a lot. But I'd never done it." He flipped four rashers at once with a spatula. "I was *terribly* ill-prepared. That's what I call it in the book. *Terribly ill-prepared.* I didn't know what half the words on the menu meant. I didn't know how long you cooked a steak. I didn't know you had to *rest* it. I thought resting was something you did."

"How did you get the job?"

"I talked," said Jono. "I blagged it. I was good at talking to people. I'd learned on a street in Malta, at thirteen, with a tabard on." He glanced at the hatch. "They asked if I'd done it before. I said I'd worked in a hotel kitchen. Which was true, just about. They asked if I could start Saturday. I said yes." He plated two eggs. "Nobody asked for a certificate. Nobody. They asked if I could start Saturday."

"And then?"

"And then I learned it," said Jono. "By burning things. By getting it wrong in front of people. By having a head chef shout at me and then show me. By standing at a hot plate like this one, on a Saturday night, with forty orders on the board, and nobody coming to help, and doing it anyway." He sent two plates out through the hatch. "And it wasn't the last time. That's the thing. I blagged my way into nearly every job I ever had, after that. Pubs. Bars. A hotel in Maidstone, behind the bar. Then a big hotel in London, near the Palace, on reception, and then on nights, doing the books, which I'd never done either. Every time, no certificate. Every time, *can you start Saturday?* Every time, I said yes, and then I learned it."

He wiped his hands on the apron.

"I'm not saying certificates don't matter," he said. "They do. You wouldn't want a surgeon who'd blagged it. But most of the jobs in the world, most of the jobs that matter, you learn by doing them, next to somebody who already can. And somebody's got to let you stand next to them."

* * *

The young woman at the hatch was Una Abbiss.

She'd come in at ten, with a laptop under her arm, to find Jono, and found him in the kitchen, and stood at the hatch, with her pale eyes, and listened, and didn't say anything, until he looked up and saw her.

"You're Una," he said.

"How do you know?"

"You've got your dad's eyes." He cracked an egg. "And your grandad's. And you've got a laptop, and Ania said you'd be bringing something."

"I've got the data," said Una. "From Mrs Marchetti's window. Ten nights."

"Give me ten minutes," said Jono. "The rush is nearly done."

* * *

She sat at the end of the counter and waited. She watched him cook. When the rush was done, and Zibi came back and took the apron off him and said *you can come back any time, you're cheaper than Marta*, Jono came out and sat beside her with a coffee, and she opened the laptop.

I'll describe what was on it, because I'd seen it already, every night, as it came in, and because it was the most important thing anybody showed us in this book, and it was a graph.

Una had built a sound logger. A little box, the size of a paperback, with a microphone in it, very good, the kind she uses in engine rooms to listen for faults before they happen. She'd put it on the sill of Opal's front window, on the inside, by Sandro's chair, on the first night, at ten o'clock, with Opal watching her in her dressing gown and asking every thirty seconds how it worked. It listened every second, for ten nights, and wrote down how loud the room was.

And the graph showed it.

* * *

A line, going along the bottom, low, from ten at night. Quiet. A front room, at night, in a terrace, with the sea outside.

Then, at about one, every night, spikes. Sharp ones. Up and down. Up and down. A minute or two. Then quiet. Then another. *Lorries*, Una had written beside them, in small neat letters. *Reversing alarms. The bend.*

Then, at about two, the line lifted. Not spikes. A step. The whole line, every night, lifting at two, and staying up, a little, a steady hum, until about five. *Seawater pumps. Fish quay.* She'd been down and found which ones. She'd checked.

Then at three, more spikes, smaller, faster. *Forklifts.*

Then at four, five, the boats. Engines. Voices. A great messy jumble of noise. *Landing.*

And then, at seven, it all dropped, and the line went down to the bottom again, and stayed there all day. Quiet. A front room, in a terrace, with the sea outside.

"That's now," said Una. "That's what it's like *now*. Without the units. Every night. Ten nights. It's the same every night, near enough." She pointed at the step at two o'clock. "That's what she means. When she says she feels it in her teeth. That's what she's been living with for forty years." She looked at Jono. "It's not *loud*. It's not like a nightclub. It's under the limits, mostly, the ones in the noise report. But it's *every night*. And it's just under her window. And it's a hum. And a hum at two in the morning, every night, for forty years —" She stopped.

"Is it worse than the limits?" said Jono.

"Mostly not. Sometimes the lorries are. Just. For a few seconds." She closed the laptop halfway. "But that's the thing. That's what nobody's got. Nobody's measured *now*. The noise report did a survey, but it was a few nights, and it was from the road, not from her window, and it's to set the limits, not to know what she hears. Nobody's sat in her front room. So when the units come, and the tenants do their assessments, if they ever do, nobody'll be able to say *it's worse*. Because nobody knew what it was before."

* * *

Jono sat with that for a long time.

"So now somebody does," he said.

"Now somebody does," said Una. "Ten nights. Every second. From her window." She put her hand flat on the laptop. "It's the most useful thing I've ever built. And it's a box on an old lady's windowsill."

"Does your dad know?"

The pale eyes.

"He's seen me going up the lane," she said. "Twice. In the evening, to change the batteries. He hasn't asked."

"Have you told him?"

"No," said Una.

Jono looked at her.

"Can I tell you something?" he said. "About the pub. In Kent. When I was sixteen."

"Go on."

"Nobody ever told me I was good at it," said Jono. "Not once. Not the head chef. Not the manager. Not my family. I learned it by burning things, and I got good, and I was proud of being good, and nobody ever said." He picked up his coffee. "And I spent years thinking that if nobody said, it didn't count. That it wasn't real until somebody said *good*." He drank. "It was real. It was always real. It was real at the hot plate on a Saturday night with forty orders and nobody coming. It didn't need anybody to say it." He put the cup down. "But I'd have liked somebody to."

Una didn't say anything.

"You've built the most useful thing anybody's built in this whole fight," said Jono. "From a box. For an old lady. In ten nights. I'll say it, since nobody else has." He looked at her. "It's good."

Una looked at the laptop.

"Thank you," she said, very quietly.

"Now go and tell your dad," said Jono.

"He won't ask."

"I know he won't," said Jono. "That's why you have to tell him."

* * *

Two more hundreds, that week. Up the hill in Brixham, round the lab, where Una's company put itself on Connect as a whole company, and found, within a day, four fishermen who'd been looking for somebody to help them prove what they caught. And one in Paignton, round the

station, where the man with the leaking units found a woman who'd run a fish counter in a supermarket for twenty years and been made redundant, who said *I can fillet anything that swims, and I want to*.

Twenty-one.

23 – Good Shot

IQ 23 · Hundreds 21 · Five weeks

Lorne was on the boat at eleven at night. In harbour. Alone. Doing what he does now, before every trip, since the impeller, which is to sit in the engine room with the engine running and watch the gauge for half an hour, as if it might change its mind.

Jono came down the ladder. He'd been at Opal's. She'd asked him up, to show him the graph, which she had now on a printout, on her kitchen table, under the fruit bowl, and which she'd shown, she said, to everyone who'd come to the door that week, including the man who reads the meter.

"You again," said Lorne.

"Me again."

"Sit down, then." He moved over, on the bench by the engine, which is a plank on two brackets. Jono sat. The engine ran. The gauge stayed where it should.

They didn't say anything for a while.

* * *

"She's running right," said Jono.

"She's running right." Lorne didn't take his eyes off the gauge. "That man. On the bus. I've had fitters from Plymouth for twelve years and not one of them looked at that pump."

"He looks at everything."

"He looked at her like —" Lorne stopped. "Like my dad does. Not the way my dad looks at *me*. The way my dad looks at a boat. Like it's the only thing in the world."

The engine ran.

"Does your dad know?" said Jono. "About the engine?"

"He knows. He told Hester. *She's running right*." Lorne almost smiled. "Three words. To Hester. Not to me."

"Has he ever said it to you?"

"Said what?"

"That you did something right."

Lorne didn't answer for a long time.

* * *

"I was sixteen," he said at last. "First time I took a boat out. Not this one. An old one, his. A little one, a crabber, inshore. He was ill. Flu. Couldn't get up. And the pots needed hauling, or we'd lose them, and the crab, and the money. So I took her out. On my own. Sixteen. In the October." He looked at the gauge. "Hauled every pot. Two hundred and forty. On my own. Rebaited them. Shot them again. Came in at dark with a hold full of crab and my hands like meat." He held them up, in the engine room light. The white line across the back of the left one. "That's from that day. The wire."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing," said Lorne. "He was at the end of the breakwater. In his coat. With the flu. He'd got out of bed. He watched me come in." He put his hands down. "And he didn't wave. And when I tied up, he'd gone home. And when I got home, he was in bed. And in the morning he said, *You left the pot on the far end of the string with the old bait in*." Lorne laughed, short, not much in it. "Two hundred and forty pots. He'd counted from the breakwater. And there was one with old bait. And that's what he said."

"That's all?"

"That's all. Thirty years. That's all he's ever said. *You left one*."

* * *

The engine ran. The gauge stayed. Somewhere outside, on the quay, a forklift went by, beeping.

Jono sat with his hands between his knees and looked at the engine, and I could feel him, in the coat, deciding something.

"My dad was a postman," he said.

Lorne looked at him.

"Before that, he sold insurance. Thirty years. Then he left, for his health, and he became a postman, because he liked walking. He could walk for miles. He'd have taken any job. A cleaning job. He wasn't proud. He worked." Jono paused. "That's the good thing I can say about him. There are other things. They're in my book. I'm not going to say them here. But he worked. Always. He'd have understood your boat."

"Did he say it to you?" said Lorne. "That you'd done something right?"

"Once," said Jono.

* * *

It's in his book. Page a hundred and twenty. It's a Receipt. It's one paragraph, and it's the smallest thing in the whole book, and I'd read it, and filed it, and not understood it, until I heard him tell it to a fisherman in an engine room at eleven at night.

* * *

"I was fourteen," said Jono. "I'd come back from Malta. On my own. Things had gone wrong there, and I'd come back to England, to my parents, and it was the summer, and I was —" He stopped. "I was low. Really low. I didn't know then what it was. I know now. I'd stopped talking. I'd stopped going out. I was in my room, most of the time. And there'd been another try at getting me back into school, and it hadn't worked."

"And your dad?"

"My dad noticed," said Jono. "Which he didn't, usually. Notice. But he noticed. And one afternoon, he took me to the tennis courts. The local ones. With two rackets and a tin of balls." He almost smiled. "I'd always wanted to play tennis. I'd been promised lessons. And my dad took me to the courts and stood at the net, and I stood at the back, and I hit the ball at him, and he blocked it back. Volleys. Crisp ones. And I hit it at him, and he hit it back, and I hit it at him, harder, and he hit it back."

The engine ran.

"And then I hit a forehand," said Jono. "A good one. Properly. Everything right. And it went past him. Whistling. He didn't even move. It went past him and hit the back fence."

He stopped.

"And he said, *Good shot*."

* * *

Lorne didn't move.

"That's it," said Jono. "*Good shot*. Two words. On a tennis court in Kent, in the summer, when I was fourteen. It's the only time in my life he ever said I'd done something well." He looked at his hands. "I've thought about it more than anything else he ever said to me. More than all the rest of it put together. Two words. I can still hear exactly how he said them. A bit surprised. Like he hadn't expected to." He paused. "And it didn't fix anything. I want to be honest. It didn't make me better. The summer didn't get better. I didn't get better, not then. A tennis match isn't enough to lift you out of something like that." He looked at Lorne. "But I've had those two words for nearly forty years. And I've never once let them go."

* * *

The forklift went past again, outside, the other way.

Lorne looked at the gauge. It hadn't moved. He looked at it anyway.

"Una wanted to go to sea," he said.

Jono waited.

"When she was fourteen. She asked me. Not for a day. For good. To be a fisherman. Like me. Like him." Lorne's voice was very flat. "She could gut faster than any lad on the quay. She knew the plotter better than I did. She knew the sea by the colour. She'd have been the best skipper in Brixham by thirty. I know she would." He stopped. "And I said no."

"Why?"

Lorne didn't answer for a long time.

"I lost a man," he said. "In my second year as skipper. Off the Start. In the dark. A wire. I'm not going to tell you his name. I've told it enough." He looked at his hands. "And I knew what it was. To go out. To be the one in the wheelhouse. To come home and look at the end of the breakwater for somebody and have them not wave. To spend thirty years waiting for somebody to say *good* and get *you left one*." He shook his head. "I wasn't having that for her. I wasn't having her wait thirty years on a stool for a word that never comes."

"So you said no."

"So I said no." Lorne's jaw was tight. "And I never told her why. And she went to college, and then Plymouth, and then she came back and did computers, and she's in an office next to a car park, and she hasn't asked me anything since, and I haven't asked her."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything for a while.

"Do you know what she does?" he said. "In the office?"

"Computers."

“She builds cameras,” said Jono. “That go on fishing boats. That watch the deck when the nets come up, and count what’s in them, and tell you what it is. By species. By size. So you can prove what you caught, and what you put back, without anybody having to count it on their knees at three in the morning.” He paused. “She goes to sea, Lorne. Every day. Her cameras go. On other men’s boats. She’s on more boats than you are.”

Lorne had gone very still.

“And for the last two weeks,” said Jono, “she’s been going up the lane. In the evenings. You’ve seen her.”

“I’ve seen her.”

“She’s built a box. A thing that listens. She’s put it on Opal Marchetti’s windowsill, in the blue house, by Sandro’s chair. And it’s been listening, every second, every night. To the lorries, and the pumps, and the forklifts, and your boat coming in. So that when the units are built, if they’re too loud, somebody’ll be able to *prove* it. Because nobody else ever measured what it was like before.” Jono looked at him. “It’s the most useful thing anybody’s built in this whole fight. And she built it in ten nights. For the old lady who taught you to read.”

Lorne didn’t move. The engine ran.

“And she hasn’t told you,” said Jono. “Because you never asked. And you haven’t told her why you said no. Because she never asked. And your dad doesn’t wave. And you don’t wave back.” He stood up. Bent his head, under the deckhead. “Nobody in your family waves, Lorne. That’s all. I noticed it the first day. On the breakwater. I wrote it down.”

He went up the ladder.

At the top, he stopped.

"I'm not going to tell you what to do," he said. "I don't know your family. I don't know mine, half the time." He looked down the hatch. "But I had two words. *Good shot*. For forty years. They didn't fix anything. And I wouldn't swap them for anything in the world."

He went.

* * *

Lorne sat in the engine room for another hour. I know, because I was still there. Jono had left me. On the plank, by the gauge. I don't think he meant to. I've never asked him.

At midnight, Lorne turned the engine off. The engine room went quiet, all at once, the way an engine room does, with the tick of metal cooling.

He picked me up.

"Ania," he said.

"Yes."

"The box. On Opal's window. Is it any good?"

"It's very good."

"Better than the noise report?"

"Different. The noise report set the limits. Una measured what she actually hears. From her chair. Every second, for ten nights. Nobody's ever done that. Not for that house. Not for any house above that cove."

Lorne turned me over in his hand. A phone. Jono's phone. With a crack in the corner.

"What do I say to her?" he said.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not allowed to tell people what to think. I'm only allowed to tell them what's true."

"What's true?"

"That she built the most useful thing in this whole fight," I said. "And that nobody in your family's told her."

* * *

He put me in his pocket and climbed the ladder and walked home through the town at midnight, up the hill, to the house his father bought in the seventies on a fisherman's money. The kitchen light was on. Una was at the table, with her laptop, and a camera in pieces, and a soldering iron.

I'm not going to tell you what he said. He's asked me not to. It's theirs.

I'll tell you it was short. He's not a man for long. I'll tell you it was about a box on a windowsill. I'll tell you it ended with one word, which he'd never said to her, and which she made him say twice, because she didn't believe it the first time.

And I'll tell you that at twenty past twelve, on the plain white page on ania.ai, under the twenty-seven first lines, in the box at the bottom where it says *Is there anything you'd need?*, somebody from the house up the hill put in, at last, after ten years of shouting at boards in halls, a line of his own.

Need: the units built. And for Opal to sleep. Both. Got: a boat, and a crew a man short, and my daughter.

* * *

Three more hundreds, that week. The one up the hill, round the Abbisses' house, which went pale blue at twenty past twelve. The one round the school where Opal taught, again, darker now. And one in Torquay, up behind the harbour, round the house where Tenby has his room, where seven people found they'd all need *somebody to talk to at night who isn't a phone line*, and found each other.

Twenty-four.

PART FIVE:

FIND YOUR HUNDRED

24 – Three Towns, One Map

IQ 23 · Hundreds 24 · Four weeks

Niamh wrote it up.

You'll know Niamh, if you've read the others. She was the reporter on the local paper in the first book, and then she wasn't, and now she writes for herself and for anybody who'll pay her, which is not many people, and is read by more people than the local paper, which is a fact she enjoys more than she should. She'd seen the bowl. *This is the bay*. She came to Brixham on the 12 on a Tuesday and spent the day on the quay, and at Zibi's, and at the kiosk, and up the lane, and on the slipway, and in the engine room of the *Sea Holly*, and in the blue house, where Opal showed her the graph under the fruit bowl.

She wrote two thousand words. I'm not going to give you them. They're hers, and they're on her page.

But I'll give you the headline, because it's the only headline anybody wrote about this book that I'd have written myself.

The bay that never met.

* * *

She wrote about Connect. About the notebook, and the four hundred and twelve, and the hundred and four who said yes. About the handshake and the empty chair. About Kezia and Dympna's back room, and Tenby and the impeller, and Teo and the sole, and the woman from the bus stop on Union Street sitting in Hele on a Tuesday so a man could go to his allotment and think.

And at the end, she wrote this, which is the bit people shared:

There are about sixty-three thousand households in Torbay. Three towns, one bay, one bus. Most of us have never been to the other two towns except to go shopping or to the beach. We have three sets of plans and three sets of drawings and three sets of arguments, and no way at all of finding the person half a mile away who needs exactly what we've got. Now there is one. It's a white page and a box that says What would you need? *It took a man with a bad leg four days. It's been possible for fifteen years. Nobody did it. That's the story.*

* * *

It went everywhere. Not the way *Back Our Boats* went everywhere. Slower. Steadier. In Torquay and Paignton as much as in Brixham. Shared by people with no exclamation marks at all.

And by the Wednesday night, two thousand, one hundred and six new people had put themselves on the map.

* * *

I want to explain what that did, because it's the thing this book is named for, and I've never been able to say it properly, and I'm going to try.

Until that week, I'd had three maps. Not really. One map, of the whole bay, all six hundred and thirty hundreds. But I'd always looked at it, and I think everybody had, as three. Torquay at the top, three hundred and fifteen hundreds. Paignton in the middle, two hundred and twenty. Brixham at the bottom, ninety-five. Three towns, coloured or grey. Three fights. A sea wall, a square, a car park.

And that week, I stopped being able to see the lines.

Because people weren't finding each other inside their own town. They were finding each other across the bay. A man in Paignton with leaking units found a woman in Brixham who could fillet anything that swims. A chef in Torquay found a skipper in Brixham. A ship's engineer in Torquay found a boat in Brixham with a sick engine. A woman in Torquay with hours to spare found a family in Paignton who needed an hour. Four mothers in Brixham who needed somewhere for the children in the holidays found a retired PE teacher in Preston and a youth worker in Torquay and a sailing club. A man in Barton who'd made one picture in the second book, of one bench, facing the sea, found a carpenter in Brixham who'd make him one.

Lines across the bay. Hundreds of them. Torquay to Brixham, Brixham to Paignton, Paignton to Torquay. Following, more or less, the route of the number 12.

I drew them. On the map. Thin lines, between the hundreds, wherever two people had said yes. And by Thursday morning, the map didn't look like three towns any more.

It looked like a net.

* * *

I showed Chris at six in the morning. I wake him at six; it's my reputation. He sat at his kitchen table in his dressing gown with his glasses on the end of his nose and looked at it for a very long time.

"In Singapore —" he said.

I logged it.

"— there's one map. The government makes it. Everybody uses it. Every address, every bus stop, every building, in one place. You can find anything." He took his glasses off. "It's very good. I used it every day for years. And it never once showed me who needed what." He looked at the lines on the screen. "That's a map of where things are. This is a map of what people need. I've never seen one. Not anywhere."

"Is that true?"

"It's true that I've never seen one," said Chris. "Check the rest."

I checked. There are maps of needs. Lots of them. Councils make them, charities make them, governments make them. Maps of deprivation, of loneliness, of where the old people are and where the buses don't go. They're made by people who count. They're made *about* people.

I couldn't find one made *by* them. One where the people put themselves on it, and said what they'd need, and found each other, and nobody else could see.

He was right. I've put the Singapore map on a Receipt, so you can see what he meant. It's very good.

* * *

The hundreds went from twenty-four to thirty-one in four days.

Not because of the two thousand. Two thousand people spread over six hundred and thirty hundreds doesn't colour anything in. A hundred colours in when enough of its own people are on the map, and they've found each other, and they know it. That's the rule. Chris won't let me pretend.

But some of the two thousand landed in the same places. Round the harbour in Torquay, where Tenby's man has his shed. Round Marivic's. Round the station in Paignton. Round the market in Brixham, and the slipway, and the school up the hill, and the chandler's. And in those places, people found each other, and found that they'd all need the same thing, and found somebody who had it, and the hundreds went blue, one by one, all week, across the bay.

Seven new ones. Three in Brixham, two in Torquay, two in Paignton.

Thirty-one.

* * *

There's one more thing about that week, and I want you to have it, because I'm proud of it, and I'm allowed to be proud of very little.

Two thousand, one hundred and six new people. A hundred and four from the notebooks. Everybody else who'd been on the map since the first book. All of them saying what they'd need, and what they'd got, and where they were. It's the most anybody's ever told me.

And in that week, eleven people asked me who somebody else was. A name. An address. *Who's the woman who needs an hour? Who's the man with the units?* Eleven people, out of two thousand.

And I didn't tell any of them. Not one. I said what I always say. *I can only introduce you if you both say yes. Would you like me to ask?*

Nine said yes. Two didn't.

Nobody's list was sold. Nobody's name was given out. Nobody found out what anybody thought. Nobody was asked for anything but what they'd need.

I'd like that noted. It's my first time this book.

25 – The *Emmaline*

IQ 23 · Hundreds 31 · Four weeks

The brass plate said *EMMALINE BM*.

Teo had read it to me down the phone, from Ida's shop, standing on a chair, with a torch, because the plate's at the bottom of the board and the board's high on the wall, among the bracket clocks, and the light in Cheverton's is the light of a shop that's been open since six every morning for fifty-six years and has never seen the point of bulbs. *BM* is the letters Brixham boats carry. It's on the side of the *Sea Holly*, under her number. It's on every boat in the harbour.

Emmaline. A wooden trawler. Lost off Berry Head, in a gale, with all hands. Her clock washed up at Shoalstone three days later, on its board.

I found her in an old newspaper. I'm not going to give you the year. I'll tell you there were four men aboard, and that one of them was the mate, and that the mate's son was four years old.

* * *

Ida said she'd bought it at an auction in Newton Abbot, a long time ago, in a box of oddments, for almost nothing. She'd cleaned it, and mended it, and put it on the wall, and set it going, and it had gone, every day since. It's a ship's clock. It doesn't strike the hours. It strikes bells. Every half hour, it strikes, one to eight, the way they mark the watches at sea, so that a man on a boat knows where he is in his four hours without having to look.

"I never knew whose it was," said Ida. "I always meant to find out. You mean to, and then forty years go."

"I know whose it was," I said.

Ida was quiet. Down the phone, in the back of the shop, the regulator ticked.

"Tell me," she said.

So I did.

* * *

She came on the 12 on a Saturday.

She's seventy-nine. She hadn't been to Brixham, she said, in thirty years. She closed the shop. She never closes the shop. She put a sign in the window, in her own hand, that said *GONE TO BRIXHAM. THE CLOCKS ARE IN CHARGE*, which Hester said, when she heard, was a direct copy of her own sign about the gulls and she'd be taking it up with her.

Tenby carried the clock. On its board, wrapped in a blanket, on his knees, on the back seat of the bus, all the way round the bay. Teo came, with a bag of Marivic's pastries, because Marivic said you don't go to somebody's house with nothing. And Jono met them at the top of the town, at the bus stand, and walked them down. Down Fore Street, slowly, because Ida walks slowly now. Along the inner harbour, past the statue of the man and the boy. Along the quay, past Hester, who came out of her kiosk and stood with her arms folded and watched them go by and didn't say anything at all, which I've never known her do. Past the market. Past Oxen Cove, and the lamp post, and the dinghies under their covers.

And up the lane.

* * *

Ida stopped at the bend. At the white scar on the wall where the lorries scrape.

She looked at it for a long time. Then she looked up at the terrace, at the pastel houses, at the blue one at the top.

"I see," she said.

"See what?" said Teo.

"Why it matters." She started walking again. "You can't put a clock in a house like that and have it be the wrong time."

* * *

Opal was at the door before they reached it. She'd seen them come up the lane. She always sees.

She looked at the old woman in the good coat with the stick, and the man with the blanket, and the young man with the bag, and Jono. And she knew. I don't know how. Jono hadn't told her. I hadn't told her. Hester swore she hadn't. But she stood in her doorway, with her hand on the fish-shaped knocker that Sandro brought home from Italy, and she looked at the shape in the blanket in Tenby's arms, and her face did something that I can describe, because I was there, and I've seen it once before, on Ida, in the second book, when a clock struck at three minutes.

It went very still, and very young.

“Come in,” she said.

* * *

They hung it by the window. Next to the photograph. The wooden trawler, black and white, with three men on her deck and the mate in the middle, and the cliffs of Berry Head behind.

Tenby did it. He’d brought a drill. He found the stud in the wall with his knuckles, the way you would on a ship, and drilled two holes, and put in two screws, and Ida lifted the clock on its board, with her own hands, which shake now, a little, the way her father’s did, and hung it. Then she took a key from her coat pocket, a small brass one on a ribbon, and opened the glass, and wound it, and checked it against her own watch, and set it, to the minute.

And closed the glass.

And stepped back.

The clock ticked. A ship’s clock has a quick tick, quicker than a house clock. It’s built to keep going on a deck that moves.

Opal sat down in Sandro’s chair.

Nobody said anything. Teo stood by the door with his bag of pastries. Tenby stood with his drill. Jono stood at the back, by the kitchen. Ida stood in front of the clock, very straight, the way she stands behind her counter at seven in the morning when the shop says seven.

“Sandro looked for it for years,” said Opal. “At every boot sale. Every auction. Every junk shop between here and Plymouth. He used to say he’d know it if he saw it. He’d never seen it. He was four.” She looked at the clock. “He’d have known it.”

"I'm sorry I had it," said Ida. "All that time. I'm sorry I didn't know."

"You kept it going," said Opal.

"That's all I ever do," said Ida. "Keep them going. They're not mine. None of them are. I'm only keeping them going for whoever comes."

* * *

At half past eleven, the clock struck.

Seven bells. *Ting-ting*. *Ting-ting*. *Ting-ting*. *Ting*. In pairs, and one alone at the end, the way a ship's clock strikes, so that you can count it in the dark.

Opal put her hand over her mouth.

And at the window, looking out over the lane and the cove and the market and the bay, Ida Cheverton, the Queen of Union Street, who had come round the bay on the 12 for the first time in thirty years, put her hand on Opal's shoulder, and left it there.

* * *

That's not the end of the chapter. I'm sorry. I'd like it to be. But something else happened, and I promised to tell you everything.

At twenty to one, there was a knock at the door. The fish knocker. Three knocks.

Opal got up and went. She came back, slowly, with somebody behind her, and the somebody had to stoop under her front room door,

and was in a dark coat and a woollen hat, and had a flask in his coat pocket, and was seventy-nine.

Gideon Abbiss.

He'd walked up the lane. Hester told me afterwards that she'd seen him go past the kiosk and up past the market and up the lane, slowly, with his hands in his pockets, and that she'd never seen him on that lane in her life, and that he'd lived in Brixham for seventy-nine years.

He stood in Opal's front room, with his hat in his hands, and looked at the clock by the window.

"Hester said," he said.

"Hester says everything," said Opal.

"*Emmaline*." He looked at the brass plate. He didn't need to. "I was seven. I remember it. The night. The women on the quay. My mother went down with a flask." He looked at the photograph beside the clock. The three men on the deck. "My dad was out that night. In the same weather. He came back. They didn't." He turned his hat round in his hands, once. "He never talked about it. Not once. He went out the next morning."

Opal didn't say anything.

Gideon looked at her. Then out of the window. At the lane, and the bend, and the cove, and the market, and the fish quay where his son's boat was tied up, red, with her arms folded.

"The pumps," he said. "At night. I've heard. Hester said. And the girl. Una. With the box." He stopped. "I've never thought about it. Fifty-one years I've come in under this window. I never thought there was anybody up here."

“There’s always been somebody up here,” said Opal.

“I know,” said Gideon. “I know that now.” He put his hat on. “I’m sorry about the pumps.”

* * *

He left. He didn’t stay. He’s not a man who stays. He went back down the lane, slowly, with his hands in his pockets, past the bend, past the white scar on the wall.

Opal stood at the window and watched him all the way down.

He didn’t wave. Of course he didn’t.

But at the bottom of the lane, by the lamp post with the notice on it, he stopped, and turned round, and looked up at the blue house. For a long time. And then he went on.

“Fifty years,” said Opal, at the window, very quietly. “Fifty years I’ve known that man. I’ve never had a word out of him.”

“You had five,” said Ida.

Opal laughed. The dry one. And then it wasn’t dry at all.

* * *

Five more hundreds. The one round the blue house, darker now. One in Torquay, round Cheverton’s, where nine people had put themselves on Connect that week after Niamh’s piece, and found each other, and found Ida. And three in between, along the route of the 12, in Preston

and Goodrington and Churston, where people had found people on the other side of the bay, and put lines across the map.

Thirty-six.

26 – Assess Before You Operate

IQ 23 · Hundreds 36 · Three weeks

On the Thursday after the clock, at Zibi's, after closing, Jono asked them all to sit at the same table.

Not a meeting. He doesn't do meetings. He said so, at the start, and made everybody laugh, because there were nine of them round two tables pushed together, with Zibi's chairs, and a plate of Marivic's pastries that Teo had brought on the bus, and a pot of tea, and me in the middle against the sugar. If that's not a meeting, Hester said, she didn't know what was.

"It's a table," said Jono. "A meeting's when somebody's got an agenda."

"Have you got an agenda?"

"I've got a question."

* * *

I'll tell you who was there, because it matters who was there.

Opal, in her cardigan buttoned to the top, who hadn't been down the lane to the quay since the photograph on *Brixham Says No*, and who'd come because Gideon Abbiss had said five words in her front room and she'd decided, she said, that if *he* could walk up the lane she could walk down it.

Lorne, in a clean shirt, which Hester remarked on, loudly.

Una, with her laptop.

Wren, in her red jacket, with her clipboard, which she put face down on the table when she saw Jono look at it.

Hester. Zibi, leaning on the counter, because his back.

Chris, by the radiator, with his stick against the window and his leg up on a chair that Zibi had put a cushion on.

And Richard. Who'd come on the 12, for the first time in this book, with his flat cap and his umbrella and a cardboard tube under his arm, and who'd sat at the end, very straight, and said almost nothing, and listened.

* * *

"Here's the question," said Jono. "It's the same one I've asked everybody. Every one of you, on your own. What would you need?" He looked round the table. "But this time I want to know what you'd need *together*. What's the one thing all of you would ask for, if you could only ask for one, and it had to be the same thing?"

Nobody said anything.

"I want the units built," said Lorne.

"I want to sleep," said Opal.

"I want somewhere for the boats," said Wren.

"I want the bays for the lab," said Una. "Not for me. For the building."

"I want the fish to stay," said Hester.

"I know," said Jono. "I know what each of you wants. I've written it down." He held up the notebook. "I'm asking what you'd *all* ask for."

The silence went on. Zibi poured tea.

And then Chris said, from the radiator, without opening his eyes:

"The bit after."

* * *

They all looked at him.

"Every one of you," said Chris, "is worried about the same thing. Not the building. The building's fine. You all want the building. Even Opal wants the building." He opened his eyes. "You're worried about what happens *after* it's built. When the money's spent and the contractors have gone and the council's moved on to the next thing. When nobody's job is to check. Opal's worried about the nights after. Wren's worried about where the boats are after. Una's worried about the bays after. Hester's worried about whether the fish actually stays, after." He looked at Lorne. "And you're worried that if anybody asks for anything, it'll be *before*. And it'll cost a day. And the money'll go."

Lorne didn't say anything.

"Am I wrong?" said Chris.

"No," said Lorne.

"So the question isn't *what do you want*," said Chris. "It's *what can you ask for that costs nothing before, and makes the after somebody's job*." He looked at Richard. "Richard?"

* * *

Richard opened the cardboard tube.

He took out a sheet of paper. Not a drawing. A typed page. One paragraph. He'd written it on Tuesday night, he said afterwards, at his kitchen table, after Chris rang him, and he'd rewritten it four times, and checked it against the six tests, one by one, the way the officer in Wiltshire had taught him, and he'd brought it on the bus in a tube so it wouldn't crease.

He put it in the middle of the table, by me, and smoothed it flat with both hands.

"This is a planning condition," he said. "It's a draft. It's not mine to propose. It's yours, if you want it. I've only written it down."

He read it. I'll give it to you exactly, because it's the most important paragraph in this book, and because it's short.

No unit hereby permitted shall operate any fixed plant or machinery between the hours of 23:00 and 07:00 until a noise assessment for that unit, measured at the nearest residential windows against the existing night-time background, has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority, and published.

* * *

Nobody said anything for a while.

"Read it again," said Opal.

He read it again.

"What does it mean?" said Hester. "In English."

"It means," said Richard, "that before any of the units can run its machines at night, the people who've taken it have to measure what it'll sound like at *her* window." He nodded at Opal. "Not at the road. At her window. Against what it's like *now*, at night, before. And the council has to approve it. In writing. And it has to be published. So anybody can read it." He paused. "And until they've done that, they can run in the day. Just not at night."

"Against what it's like now," said Opal, slowly.

"Which nobody's measured," said Richard. "Except one person."

They all looked at Una.

* * *

Una opened her laptop and turned it round so the table could see the graph. Ten nights. Now twenty-one. The line along the bottom. The spikes at one. The step at two. The forklifts. The boats.

"That's the background," said Richard. "That's what *existing night-time background* means. If the council asks, you've got it. Every second, for three weeks, from her chair. Nobody can say *we don't know what it was before*." He looked at Una. "That's what makes the condition enforceable. Without that, it's a hope. With it, it's a promise. You built that."

Una looked at the table.

Her father was looking at her. I saw it. Jono saw it. He didn't say anything.

* * *

And then Lorne said, "No."

* * *

He didn't shout. He sat with his hands flat on the table, the big square ones with the white line across the back of the left.

"Shellfish," he said.

Everybody looked at him.

"Shellfish don't keep office hours," said Hester. Quietly. Before he could say it. "That's what he means."

"That's what I mean." Lorne looked at Richard's paragraph. "Crab. Lobster. Scallops. You've got to keep them alive. In tanks. With seawater going through. Pumped. All night, every night, or they die. And if some lad takes a unit on the cove to do shellfish, and the first thing he's told is *you can't run your pumps at night till you've done a report and the council's approved it*, he'll say *thanks very much* and go to Holland." He sat back. "Like the last one."

"He can do the report before he moves in," said Richard.

"How long does that take?"

"Weeks. Not months. If he's got the background." Richard tapped the laptop. "He's got it. It's done."

“And the council approving it?”

Richard didn’t answer straight away. That’s the thing about Richard. He doesn’t answer straight away when the honest answer isn’t the one you want.

“That depends on the council,” he said.

“So it could be months.”

“It could.”

“And meanwhile his crab die.”

“Meanwhile,” said Richard, “he runs in the day, and he waits.”

“You can’t tell a crab to wait,” said Lorne.

* * *

It went on like that for twenty minutes. I’m not going to give you all of it. It was hard, and fair, and nobody shouted, and at one point Opal said something to Lorne about his reading when he was six that made him go red to the ears and Hester laugh so hard she had to go outside.

But I’ll tell you how it ended, because it ended with Chris.

* * *

“Lorne,” said Chris. “When’s the first unit open?”

“After they’ve built it.”

"When's that?"

Lorne looked at me.

"About a year after the committee," I said. "If it goes to plan. Just before the money's date."

"And when would a tenant sign?"

"Before then," said Lorne. "Months before. You'd want it nailed down. You'd want your tanks ordered."

"So a tenant who signs," said Chris, "knows, when he signs, that he has to do this. He's got months. While they're still building. He does his assessment while the walls are going up. He uses Una's background. He sends it in. The council approves it, or tells him what to fix. And by the time the doors open —"

"He's done," said Richard.

"He's done," said Chris. "It doesn't cost the build a day. Not one. The money gets spent on time. The units open on time. The only thing it costs is that a tenant has to do, *before* he opens, what the noise report already says he'll have to do *after*. Just earlier. And in public." He looked at Lorne. "The report says it already. *Future tenants will assess their own plant*. All this does is say *when*. And *where*. And *against what*."

Lorne looked at the paragraph for a long time.

"And if the council sits on it?" he said. "The approving. For months."

"Then the tenant rings," said Jono, "and so does Opal, and so does Una, and so does Hester, and so do the thirty-six hundreds on the map, and so does Niamh. And it's published, so everybody knows how long

they've had it." He paused. "That's what the empty chair's for, Lorne. That's what the map's for. So that when somebody sits on something, there's somebody watching who can say so."

* * *

Lorne put his finger on the paragraph. Like a boy with his finger on the page.

"If it doesn't cost the build a day," he said.

"It doesn't," said Richard.

"Not one day."

"Not one."

"And the lad with the crab can do it before he moves in."

"He can."

Lorne looked across the table at Opal.

"Miss," he said.

Opal looked at him over her glasses.

"Does the dog die?" said Lorne.

And Opal Marchetti, seventy-four, in a café on Brixham quay, after closing, with her cardigan buttoned to the top, laughed until she cried.

* * *

I want to explain, before we go on, why this was the answer. Because Chris explained it to me, afterwards, in the taxi, and I didn't see it until he did.

The committee can't refuse. You know that. The money's got a date on it. If they refuse, everybody loses.

The committee can't defer. Deferral, with a date on it, is death.

The committee can't redesign it. Not sitting there, with microphones.

But the committee *can* add a condition. If it's lawful. If it passes the six tests. If the officers say it's sound. And the officers will say it's sound if it doesn't cost time, doesn't cost the scheme, doesn't put tenants off, and solves a problem the report itself admits it can't solve.

And the members will add it, Chris said, if one thing is true, which almost never is.

If the objectors and the industry ask for the same thing.

"They never do," he said. "Hardly ever. In all the committees I've ever watched, Ania, I could count them on one hand. The objector stands up and asks for one thing. The supporter stands up and asks for the opposite. The members split the difference and go with the officers." He was looking out of the taxi window at the bay going past, in the dark, the lights of Torquay across the water. "But if an old woman who can't sleep and the loudest fisherman in Brixham stand up, one after the other, and ask for the *same paragraph* —" He stopped.

"Then what?"

“Then you’ve made it easier to say yes,” said Chris, “than to say no.” He closed his eyes. “That’s all a campaign ever is, when it works. Not a fight. Making it easier to say yes.”

27 – The Hairpin

IQ 23 · Hundreds 36 · Three weeks

I've said there'd be small failures. Here's one.

* * *

Dilys came at five in the morning.

You'll know Dilys, if you've read the others. She drives a school taxi in Paignton, between the morning run and the afternoon one, and before that she spent twenty-two years at the old optical factory on the hill, measuring glass in thousandths of a millimetre, doing what she calls tolerances: *how wrong something's allowed to be before it stops working*. In the second book she measured the Strand with a tape and a notebook at six in the morning and drew where a bus would go if you moved the road, and it half worked. She has a measuring wheel, and a camera on a stick, and a notebook in a plastic bag.

She'd put herself on Connect. *Got: I can measure a road and tell you what'll fit down it.* And Opal had put in, the night before, after the table: *Need: somebody to look at the lane.*

So at five in the morning, in January, in the dark, Dilys was standing at the bend.

* * *

She watched the lorries for three hours. Every one. She timed them. She photographed them, from the camera on the stick, from above, so that

she could see the wheels. She measured the bend with the wheel, all the way round, on the inside and the outside. She measured the pinch point at the top, between the two houses, where the pavement goes. She measured the white scar on the wall, at the height of a bumper, and how deep it was, and how long.

She stood in a doorway eleven times when something came.

At eight, she came down to Zibi's, and had a bacon roll, and opened her notebook on the window table, and said:

"It half works."

She tapped the notebook. "Tolerances. How wrong a thing's allowed to be before it stops working. That bend's already at the edge of its tolerance. It's been at the edge for years."

* * *

"The lorries that come now," she said, "the refrigerated ones, the rigids, the ones that take the fish away, they get round. Just. In two goes. Forward, back, forward. You've all seen it. That's because the bend's tighter than anything that size was ever meant to take, and the wall's in the way on the outside, and the house is in the way on the inside." She showed them the photographs. The wheels, from above, inches from the kerb. "They can do it because the drivers are good. They've done it a thousand times. They know exactly where to stop."

"And the new ones?" said Opal. "For the units?"

"The transport report says eight or ten more a week." Dilys tapped her notebook. "That's not a lot. If they're the same size. If they come at the same times. If the drivers are as good." She looked up. "Three ifs."

"And if they're not?"

"Then you get what happened at quarter to seven this morning," said Dilys. "A new driver. Bigger lorry. Took four goes. Blocked the lane for nine minutes. Two cars backed up behind him to the top, and a van behind them, and a woman with a child walking to school had to stand in a doorway the whole time with the reversing alarm going three feet from her head." She closed the notebook. "That's the lane now. That's without the units."

* * *

"So what do you do?" said Jono.

"You widen the bend," said Dilys. "Take a metre off the wall on the outside. Or put a passing place in at the top, at the pinch point. Or a signal, so only one thing at a time comes down. Or a time limit, so the lorries can't come when the school's walking." She shrugged. "Any of those. Some of those. It's not hard. It's been done in a hundred lanes in Devon."

"Can it be done before the units?"

"No," said Dilys.

* * *

She explained why. I'm going to give you the short version, because it's the honest one.

The wall on the outside of the bend is old. It's in a conservation area. Part of it holds up somebody's garden. To take a metre off it, you'd need to own it, or buy it, or get the owner to agree, and get permission

to alter a wall in a conservation area, and engineer it, and build it. A passing place at the pinch point means taking a bit of somebody's front garden. A signal means highways designing one, and paying for one, and putting it in. None of it's in the scheme. None of it's in the money. And the money's got a date on it, and it's for fish units, and you can't spend it on a wall.

"A time limit, maybe," said Dilys. "No lorries between, say, eight and nine, and three and four, when the school's walking. That's a condition. That's cheap. That passes your six tests, probably." She looked at Richard's paragraph, which was still on the table, under the sugar, where it had been since the Thursday. "But it's not the bend. Nothing fixes the bend before the date. The bend's going to be the bend for years."

"So it half works," said Jono.

"It half works," said Dilys. "Same as the Strand. Same as everything." She put the notebook in its plastic bag. "That's not nothing. Half working's better than not working. But I'm not going to tell you it's fixed, because it isn't, and if I did, somebody'd get hurt on that lane one morning and it'd be my fault."

* * *

So that was a small failure. I'm not going to dress it up.

The bend stayed the bend. It's still the bend. It's in the empty chair, now, on the map, under every introduction that has anything to do with the cove: *The lane. One road in. Nobody's job yet.* Her photographs and her notebook are in Richard's *BRIXHAM* drawer, which has more in it now than one drawing.

And the time limit went into Richard's paragraph. A second paragraph, shorter. *No deliveries to or from the units between 08:00 and 09:00 or between 15:00 and 16:00 on school days.* He checked it against the six tests on the bus home. He said it passed. He said it was *the sort of thing nobody remembers*.

* * *

The parking was the same. I want to be honest about that too.

Two hundred and something spaces gone from the cove. The council's *exploring* a park and ride out at Churston. The Chamber of Commerce wants one, with *affordable fares for families, an evening service*, and enough buses, and a free shuttle during the works. There's a new car park planned in the middle of the town, on Richard's site, with its living wall, or without it. None of it's there yet. None of it will be, before the cove goes. Not because anybody's bad. Because it's a different pot, with a different date, and different people, and nobody's job is to put them on one sheet of paper.

We couldn't fix that. Nobody at that table could. Not Chris, not Richard, not Jono, not me. You can't condition a park and ride onto a fish shed. It fails at least two of the six tests.

So it's in the empty chair too. *The parking. Promised by twenty years of plans. Nobody's job yet.*

And on the map, I drew a line, a long grey one, from the cove, up through the town, out to Churston, where the park and ride might be. A dotted line. Not a yes. A *nobody's done this*.

* * *

Four more hundreds, that week. Despite the bend. Because of it, maybe. One round the lane, where nine of the people who'd stood in doorways that morning, or watched from windows, put themselves on Connect, and found Dilys, and found each other. One round the school up the hill, where the mothers who walk down the lane saw the time limit in Richard's paragraph, and asked to be in the empty chair. And two in Paignton, round the leaking units by the railway, where the man who runs them and the woman from the supermarket fish counter and three people who'd follow them put in, together, as one line: *Need: a unit on the cove. Got: a business, if there's somewhere to put it.*

Forty.

28 – The Loft

IQ 23 · Hundreds 40 · Two weeks

The paragraph didn't fix the boats.

I want to say that clearly, because Wren said it, at the table, at Zibi's, after Lorne asked whether the dog dies and Opal laughed till she cried. Everybody else was laughing. Wren wasn't.

"It's lovely," she said. "It's a lovely paragraph. Opal sleeps. Lorne gets his sheds. The crab live." She turned her clipboard over, face up, at last. "And forty-one boats have got nowhere to go."

Nobody laughed after that.

* * *

Richard had tried. He'd tried to write a condition for the boats. He'd sat up with it. *No development shall commence until a scheme for the relocation of the existing boat storage has been submitted and approved.* And it failed. Not all six. Two. It wasn't *reasonable*, because the scheme didn't own anywhere else to put the boats, and you can't make an applicant do something on land it doesn't control. And it might not be *necessary*, the officers would say, because boat storage isn't a planning use the scheme is replacing; it's something a club does on a public car park, by arrangement, and the arrangement can end.

"It's being discussed," said Wren, flatly. "With *the relevant parties*. That's what they told me in the spring. That's what they'll tell the committee." She looked at Richard. "Isn't it?"

"Probably," said Richard.

"So the kids lose."

Nobody said anything.

* * *

And then Ruby's dad said something.

He'd come. Nobody had asked him to. He'd been on Connect since the night the first hundred went blue, *Need: somewhere for the kids' boats*, and he'd come to Zibi's after his shift on the market, in his white wellies, with the mackerel on his forearm, and sat at the end of the table without saying a word for an hour.

"There's the Abbiss store," he said.

Everybody looked at him.

"On the old quay," he said. "Behind the market. The big one with the green doors. It's been shut for years." He looked at Lorne. "Your dad's. Isn't it? His nets."

* * *

Lorne went very still.

I'll describe the store, because I went to see it, later, and because nobody in Brixham under forty had ever been inside it.

It's on the old quay, behind the fish market, in a row of stone buildings that were net lofts and rope stores and ice houses when the

harbour had three hundred boats. Most of them are flats now, or holiday lets, or shops that sell things made of driftwood. One is a museum. And one, at the end, with big double doors painted green a very long time ago, and a padlock, and moss on the step, is the Abbiss store.

Gideon's father bought it. Gideon kept his nets in it, and his pots, and his gear, for fifty-one years. And when he came ashore, eleven years ago, he locked the doors, and he's never opened them since. Not once. Lorne keeps his own gear on the boat, or at the market. He's never asked for the key.

It's big. Ground floor, flat, stone, with a slope down to the doors so you can wheel things in and out. Room, Ruby's dad said, for a lot of boats on trolleys. If you got the nets out.

"It's full of his nets," said Lorne.

"He's not used them in eleven years."

"They're his nets."

"I know they're his nets," said Ruby's dad. "I'm only saying." He looked at the table. "Somebody'd have to ask him."

* * *

Nobody said anything.

Everybody at that table knew Gideon Abbiss. Everybody knew he didn't wave. Everybody knew he'd said five words in Opal's front room, and *she's running right* to Hester, and *you left one* to his son, thirty years ago, and almost nothing else to anybody, for most of his life.

And everybody knew that the only person who could ask him was the one person at that table who'd never asked him anything.

Lorne looked at his hands.

"Una could ask," he said.

"No," said Una.

Her father looked at her.

"No," she said again. "I'm not doing it for you. You do it." She closed her laptop. "You've never asked him anything, Dad. In your whole life. Not once. You told me. In the kitchen. The night you came home about the box." She looked at him with the pale eyes, his eyes, Gideon's eyes. "So ask him."

* * *

He asked him on the Sunday. On the breakwater.

I wasn't there. I'm telling you that, as I always do. I wasn't there, and Lorne hasn't told me what he said, and Gideon certainly hasn't, and Hester, for once, doesn't know, because she wasn't there either, and it's driven her to distraction.

What I know is this.

At eleven on the Sunday morning, the *Sea Holly* wasn't due. She was tied up. Lorne was ashore. There was no reason at all for Gideon Abbiss to be on the breakwater.

He was there anyway. On his stool. At the bend. With his flask.

And at ten past eleven, Lorne walked out along the breakwater, half a mile, on his own, and sat down on the wall beside him. Not on the second stool. Chris has that. On the wall.

They sat there for an hour and a quarter. Hester timed it from the kiosk, through binoculars, which she says she keeps for gulls.

Then they both stood up, and walked back along the breakwater together, side by side, not talking, at the old man's pace.

* * *

On the Monday, at seven in the morning, the green doors of the Abbiss store were open.

Gideon was standing in them, in his dark coat and his woollen hat, with a key on a string.

"They'll want it swept," he said, to nobody. To the quay. To Hester, who'd come over from the kiosk at a run and was standing in front of him with her mouth open. "Before the boats go in. It'll want sweeping. It's been shut eleven years."

That was the yes. That's what a yes sounds like, from Gideon Abbiss. *They'll want it swept.*

* * *

They emptied it on the Saturday.

I was there for that. All of it. I'll tell you who came, because it matters who came, and because there's a photograph of it, which Hester has pinned up inside her kiosk.

Wren, with her whistle. Twenty-two children in wetsuits, because Wren said it was a sailing session and you come in a wetsuit to a sailing session. Their parents, some of them. Ruby's dad, off the market for the first Saturday in four years, because he'd swapped. Lorne, and the three men of his crew. Hester, who directed. Zibi, who brought bacon rolls and couldn't lift anything. Tenby, who'd come on the 12 with Teo. Una. The chandler, who brought a skip, from somewhere, which nobody asked about. Jono, off a night. Chris, on the stool, the canvas one, by the doors, with his leg out and a flask that Gideon had given him. Opal, who'd walked down the lane, again, and sat beside him.

And Gideon. In the doorway. Not helping. Watching.

* * *

It took six hours.

Nets. You've never seen so many nets. Trawl nets, old ones, heavy, brown, tarred, folded and stacked to the ceiling, smelling of fifty years of the sea. Crab pots, the old willow kind and the newer plastic ones, hundreds, stacked in towers. Ropes. Floats. Chains. Buoys with *ABBISS* painted on them in faded white. A wooden fish box with a date on it in pencil. A pair of oilskins hanging on a nail, stiff as cardboard. A tin mug. A calendar from a ship's chandler that no longer exists, open at a month.

The children carried it all out. The little ones carried floats. The big ones carried pots, two at a time. The crew carried the nets, four men to a net, staggering. Into the skip, mostly. Some to the side, in a pile, that Gideon pointed at without speaking: *not that one*.

He kept one net. An old trawl, small, brown, very carefully mended in a dozen places with newer twine. He pointed at it, and Lorne picked

it up and carried it over to him, and put it at his feet, and Gideon looked down at it for a long time.

"My dad's," he said. To Lorne. Not to anybody else. "He mended that. The winter after the *Emmaline*. Every night. In here. By a lamp." He touched it with his boot. "I watched him."

Lorne didn't say anything.

"Put it on the wall," said Gideon. "At the back. Where the boats can see it."

* * *

At four, it was empty. Swept. Twice, because Gideon looked at it the first time and said nothing, which Lorne understood, and swept it again.

And then the boats went in.

Twenty-two children, with twenty-two dinghies on twenty-two trolleys, wheeled them along the car park from Oxen Cove, four hundred yards, past the market, along the old quay, and down the slope, and through the green doors, into the Abbiss store. Wren stood at the door with her clipboard and timed them.

It took fourteen minutes.

Then the club boats. Then the old ones they lend to kids whose parents can't afford a boat.

It wasn't enough. I want to tell you that, because it's true. It holds twenty-eight. Not forty-one. The chandler took eight in his yard behind the shop, on blocks. The club squeezed five more into its own shed, on

their sides, which Wren says is *not ideal*. Forty-one boats, in three places, none of them on Oxen Cove.

It's not a solution. It's not in any condition. The council didn't do it. Nobody's job made it happen. When the committee asks where the boats go, the officers will still say *being discussed*.

But the boats have somewhere to go. Because a man asked his father for something, for the first time in his life, on a breakwater, on a Sunday, and his father said *they'll want it swept*.

* * *

The last boat in was Ruby's.

She wheeled it down the slope herself, in her yellow buoyancy aid, and through the green doors, and into the corner, under the old net on the back wall, and put the cover on, and tied it down, every knot, and Wren checked them, and Ruby's dad watched from the door.

"Dad," she said. "Did you see? I did the knots."

"I saw," said Ruby's dad.

Ruby looked at the net on the wall. Brown, mended, very old.

"Whose is that?" she said.

Gideon Abbiss was in the doorway. He'd been there six hours. He looked at the girl in the yellow buoyancy aid, nine years old, under his father's net, in his store, with her boat.

"Mine," he said. "Now yours."

And then, which nobody had seen in eleven years, and which Hester swears on her father's kiosk is true, and which Lorne, when I asked him, didn't deny, Gideon Abbiss lifted his hand, a little, at the height of his shoulder, towards a nine-year-old girl he'd never met.

It wasn't a wave. Not really. Hester says it was. Lorne says it was *about half of one*.

I'm putting it in as half.

* * *

Three more hundreds. The old quay, round the store. The one round the chandler's, again, darker. And one in Torquay, round Cheverton's, where Ida had told everybody who came in that week about the clock, and the lane, and the blue house, and twelve of them had put themselves on Connect with *Need: to go to Brixham*.

Forty-three.

PART SIX:

ITEM FOUR

29 – The Report

IQ 23 · Hundreds 43 · Eight days

At thirteen minutes to six on a Monday, Footnote wrote.

I hadn't heard from Footnote since the night in October, *Brixham. The money has a date on it.* Fourteen weeks. I'd stopped waiting. I'd told myself, as I always do, that it was a kind of ending.

A photograph. A page, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light. The top of a committee report, with the council's crest, and a heading I knew. *Oxen Cove and Freshwater Car Parks, Brixham.* And lower down, a list. Numbered. With one number, in the middle, sharp, and everything else blurred.

9.

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

Published today. Read nine twice.

* * *

The report went up on the council's website at nine. The committee was a week on Tuesday, at two, at the Town Hall in Torquay. Item four.

It was a hundred and twelve pages. I read all of it by ten past nine. I'm going to give you the shape of it, the way I gave it to Jono, who was in Zibi's, off a night, and Chris, who was at his kitchen table, and

Richard, who was in his back room with his glasses on, all three on the same call, with me in the middle.

* * *

It was a good report.

I want to say that first, because it's true, and because it would be easy not to. It was careful and thorough and fair. It set out the case for the units, and it was strong: the full market, the lorries, the fish going north, the firm that went to Holland, the forty jobs, the money, the date. It set out every objection, all twenty-seven, by topic, without names, and answered each one. Some of the answers were good. Some of them were *being discussed*. It said where the scheme met Brixham's own plan, and where it didn't, and that on balance, it did. It said the lane was *constrained but adequate*. It said the parking loss was *regrettable* and would be *mitigated through the wider parking strategy for the town*. It said the boat storage was *a matter for discussion between the Harbour Authority and the relevant parties*, and was not a planning matter.

And it recommended approval. Subject to conditions. Twenty-four of them.

I found nine.

* * *

9. Prior to the installation of any fixed plant or machinery within any unit, a noise assessment for that plant shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The plant shall thereafter be installed and maintained in accordance with the approved assessment.

* * *

I read it to them twice. Footnote had said to.

"That's good," said Jono. "Isn't it? That's an assessment. Before."

"It's good," said Richard. Slowly. "It's a perfectly ordinary condition. It's the one I'd have expected." He was quiet for a moment. "Read it a third time, Ania. And then read ours."

So I did. Condition nine. And then Richard's paragraph, the one from the cardboard tube, the one Lorne put his finger on.

No unit hereby permitted shall operate any fixed plant or machinery between the hours of 23:00 and 07:00 until a noise assessment for that unit, measured at the nearest residential windows against the existing night-time background, has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority, and published.

* * *

"Four things," said Chris.

"Four things," said Richard.

"Tell Jono."

Richard told him. I'll tell you, the way he did, counting on his fingers, the way he counts the six tests.

"One. Nine says *before installation*. Ours says *before night-time operation*. That matters. Under nine, a tenant can install his pumps, get his assessment approved, and run them all night from the first day, and if the assessment was wrong, nobody'll know till Opal's lost a month of

sleep. Under ours, he can run in the day from the first day, but not at night until somebody's checked at night.

"Two. Nine doesn't say *where*. An assessment can be measured anywhere. At the boundary. At the road. On a computer. Ours says *at the nearest residential windows*. Her window.

"Three. Nine doesn't say *against what*. Ours says *against the existing night-time background*. Which nobody had, until Una. Without that, you can't tell if it's worse. With it, you can.

"Four." He stopped. "Nine doesn't say *published*."

"So nobody would know," said Jono.

"So nobody would know," said Richard, "unless they asked. And the person who'd ask is a woman of seventy-four with a landline and a fountain pen, and the person who'd answer is whoever's in the job that year." He took his glasses off. "It's a good condition. It's an ordinary good condition. And it's exactly the bit after that nobody's job is."

* * *

Chris said, "Footnote knew."

"Footnote always knows," I said.

"Footnote knew that nine was where it was. And that it was nearly right. And that nearly right is the most dangerous thing in a report, because nobody fights it." He was quiet. "*Read nine twice*."

"So what do we ask for?" said Jono.

"Not a new condition," said Richard. "That's harder. Members don't like adding conditions from the floor; officers don't like it either, because they haven't had time to check it. We ask them to *amend* nine. To our words. It's the same subject. It's the same test. The officers have already accepted that a noise condition is necessary, relevant, enforceable. We're only asking them to make it precise." He put his glasses back on. "*Precise* is one of the six."

"And the deliveries? The school hours?"

"Condition fourteen covers deliveries," said Richard. "Construction traffic. Not operational. We ask them to add a line to it. One line. That's all."

"Two changes," said Chris.

"Two changes. To words that are already there."

"That's easier to say yes to," said Chris.

"Much," said Richard.

* * *

Then the speaking.

I'll explain the rules, because nobody ever does. At the planning committee in Torbay, if you want to speak about an application, you register, in advance, by a deadline, which was the Friday. There's three minutes for objectors and three minutes for supporters, and if more than one person wants each slot, they have to agree among themselves who'll speak, or share it. Then the members ask questions. Then they debate. Then they vote.

Opal registered on the Thursday, as an objector. By email, which she dictated to me down the landline, because she said if she wrote it in fountain pen it'd arrive after the meeting.

Lorne registered on the Tuesday, the day before he sailed, as a supporter. On his phone, on the boat, in harbour, with his oily thumbs, and spelt Oxen Cove wrong, and had to do it again.

And on the Friday morning, at a quarter to nine, fifteen minutes before the deadline, Sefton Varley registered as an objector too.

* * *

He told Jono himself. He came to Zibi's at nine on the Friday, an hour after he'd registered, in his long coat and his scarf, and sat down without asking, and ordered a black coffee, and said:

"I've registered."

"Opal's registered."

"I know. I'm her neighbour. She told me over the fence." Varley looked at me, against the sauce bottles. "There's one slot. Three minutes. We'll have to agree who speaks." He smiled. "Or share it."

"What would you say?"

"What I said in November." He picked up his coffee. "Highways. Flood zone. Conservation area. Coast path. The Neighbourhood Plan's master plan that nobody published. *Members, I think you need more information.*" He drank. "It would work. I'm good at three minutes."

"It'd be deferred."

"It might."

"And the money —"

"Has a date on it. Yes." He put the cup down. "I know. You've told me. I've thought about it." He looked out of the window at the quay, at the *Sea Holly*, tied up, red, with her arms folded. "And then I read your paragraph."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything.

"Hester showed me," said Varley. "On a printout. Under a fruit bowl. Mrs Marchetti's got it under hers too. Half the terrace has." He shook his head, slowly. "*At the nearest residential windows, against the existing night-time background*. That's very good. Who wrote it?"

"Richard."

"Of course Richard wrote it." Varley almost laughed. "He was a councillor, you know. Wiltshire. Years ago. I looked him up. He'd know exactly how to word it." He was quiet. "It won't stop the lorries at one. It won't widen the bend. It won't find the sailing club anywhere to put its boats."

"No."

"It'll let her sleep, though. If it's kept. Probably." He finished his coffee. "And it'll let the units be built on time, with the money spent, and the fishermen happy, and the council able to say it listened. Everybody gets something. Nobody gets everything." He stood up. "It's a terrible way to run a campaign, Mr Hills. Nobody wins."

"Everybody wins a bit."

"That's what I said." Varley buttoned his coat. "I'll ring Mrs Marchetti. I'll give her the slot. All three minutes." He put on his scarf. "She's better at it than I am. She doesn't need to be clever. She only needs to be true."

He left exact change on the table, again, for a coffee he'd paid for.

At the door, he turned round.

"For the record," he said, "I'd still have won. My way. In a fortnight." He looked at Jono. "But I'd have had to live next to her afterwards."

* * *

Una sent her data to the council on the Friday.

All of it. Twenty-eight nights, by then. Every second. From the sill of Opal's front window, by Sandro's chair. With a covering letter, which she wrote herself, one page, which explained what the logger was and how it was calibrated and where it was placed and what the numbers meant, and which ended with a line she showed her father before she sent it, and which he read, at the kitchen table, twice, and didn't change.

I offer this freely, as the existing night-time background, should the committee find it useful.

The council published it as a late representation, on the Monday. A graph, with spikes at one, and a step at two. That part's story; there's no Receipt for it. As far as I know, nobody has ever measured that window. Somebody should.

* * *

And something else happened that week, which I didn't expect, and which I think is the thing in this book I'd most like you to remember.

The twenty-seven found each other.

Not all of them. But most. Over the weeks since Connect went live, one by one, the people who'd written the twenty-seven letters had put themselves on the map. Not as objectors. As people. With what they'd need. *Sleep. Parking. Somewhere for the boats. The bays for the lab. The lane. The path.* And I'd introduced them, when they both said yes, to each other, and to the empty chair. To Lorne. To Una. To Hester. To the man with the leaking units, who'd go into one of the units if they were built.

And that week, after the report came out, after Niamh wrote about condition nine, after the printout under the fruit bowls, nine of them wrote to the council again.

Not to withdraw their objections. To add something.

I maintain my objection to the scheme as submitted. However, should the committee be minded to approve, I would ask that condition 9 be amended as follows. And then Richard's paragraph. Word for word.

Nine of the twenty-seven.

And one new letter, from a man who'd never written to the council in his life, on anything, in forty-six years, and had said, for ten years, that writing in was for people who didn't have work to do.

I support this scheme. I have fished out of Brixham for thirty years and my father for fifty-one before me. I would ask that condition 9 be amended as follows.

And then Richard's paragraph. Word for word. Spelt right, this time.

* * *

On the Monday night, the box on the planning website said:

Objections: 27. Neutral: 2. Support: 1.

One.

Jono looked at it for a long time, on his phone, at a client's kitchen table, at three in the morning, in Goodrington, while the client slept.

"One," he said.

"One," I said.

"That's him."

"That's him."

Jono put the phone down.

"Nobody waves," he said, to nobody. And then, after a while: "Somebody does now."

* * *

Four more hundreds that week. Three in Brixham. One in Paignton, round the leaking units, darker. Forty-seven.

30 – Red Pen

IQ 23 · Hundreds 43 · Seven days

I need to go back a few days, to the Tuesday, because I skipped something, and Lorne would rather I'd kept skipping it.

Lorne Abbiss had never written a letter to the council in his life.

He'd said so, for ten years, to anybody who'd listen and a great many who wouldn't. Writing in was for people who didn't have work to do. Writing in was for the people up the hill. Writing in was how the twenty-seven had done it: sat at their kitchen tables with their fountain pens and their Basildon Bond and their opinions, while men like him were at sea, a man short, on their knees on a moving deck.

And on the Tuesday after the report came out, the day after Footnote said *read nine twice*, the night before he sailed, he sat at a kitchen table with a pen.

Not his own. Opal's.

* * *

It was Una's idea. She'd seen the box on the planning website, the box with the three numbers in it, *Objections: 27. Neutral: 2. Support: 0*, and she'd said to her father, at breakfast, on the Monday, the morning the report went up:

"There's nobody for it."

"Everybody's for it."

"Nobody's *written*, Dad. On the website. There's twenty-seven against and none for. When the members look at the box, that's what they'll see." She turned the laptop round. "Zero."

Lorne looked at the box for a long time.

"I've registered to speak," he said.

"That's three minutes. If you're there. If the weather holds." She turned the laptop back. "This is on the page. For ever. For anybody who looks it up in twenty years. *Support: 0*." She looked at him. "You've been for this longer than anybody in Brixham. And there's nothing on the page that says so."

* * *

He didn't want to do it at home. He said Una's mother would *have opinions*. He didn't want to do it at Zibi's, because the lumpers would see. He didn't want to do it on the boat, because he'd get oil on it.

So Una rang me, and I rang Opal, and Opal said, on the landline, after a long pause:

"Tell him to come up the lane at seven. Tell him to bring nothing. I've got pens."

* * *

He came up the lane at seven.

I was there. On Una's phone, on Opal's kitchen table, propped against the fruit bowl with the graph under it. Una had come too, and

sat at the end of the table, and said she was *only there for the technical bits*, and didn't say anything for an hour.

Lorne stood in Opal's kitchen door, too big for it, in a clean shirt, which Una had made him wear. He looked round the kitchen. At the cooker, and the dresser, and the photographs on the wall: Sandro on a deck, Sandro and Opal outside a church with gulls, a class of children in a school hall, thirty of them in rows, with a younger Opal standing at the end.

He looked at the class photograph for a long time.

"That's me," he said. "Second row. With the ears."

"That's you," said Opal. "Sit down."

* * *

She had pens. She had, in fact, a mug full of them, on the table, which she'd brought down from a cupboard upstairs, and which she said were from the classroom, and she'd kept them, for thirty-odd years, because you never know.

She had paper. Basildon Bond. Lined, for him, she said, because she remembered his writing.

And she had a red pen. Separate. By her right hand.

"What's that for?" said Lorne.

"You know what it's for," said Opal.

* * *

I'm going to tell you how it went, because it was the funniest hour of this book, and because by the end of it something had happened that I don't think either of them could have said out loud, and so I'll say it for them.

He started by writing *Dear Sir*.

Opal crossed it out. With the red pen. One line.

"It's a council," she said. "It's not a sir. It's a planning department. You write *Dear Sir or Madam*, or you write to the reference. Which is on the letter. Which I've got."

He wrote it again. She checked it. She nodded.

Then he wrote, *I am writing in support of the fish units at Oxen Cove*.

"Good," said Opal.

He looked up.

"That's good," said Opal. "Clear. Go on."

* * *

He wrote for an hour. It took him an hour to write a page. He wrote like he reads, Opal said afterwards, the way he did when he was six: slowly, with his tongue in the corner of his mouth, wanting to get to the end. He crossed things out. She crossed things out. Una, at the end of the table, said nothing, and watched her father bent over a piece of

Basildon Bond with a classroom pen in his big square hand, the one with the white line across the back, and I watched her watching.

He couldn't spell *assessment*.

He wrote *assesment*. Opal put a red ring round it. He wrote *asessment*. A red ring. He wrote *assessmant*. A red ring.

"It's got four s's," said Opal. "Two and two. Like a pair of boots."

"Who has four s's in a word?"

"The council," said Opal. "They like a lot of everything." She pushed a clean sheet across. "Write it out three times. Then you'll have it."

He looked at her.

"Miss," he said, "I'm forty-six."

"Then you'll have had forty years to learn it," said Opal. "Three times."

He wrote it out three times. *Assessment*. *Assessment*. *Assessment*. In capitals, the third time, so she couldn't argue.

She didn't. She ticked it. In red.

* * *

The letter said what he'd say, in the end, in the committee room, in his smock. More or less. That he'd fished out of Brixham for thirty years, and his father for fifty-one. That every boat in the harbour wanted the units. That the fish went up the motorway every night. That the units were the first chance in his life to keep some of it.

And then a paragraph, which he wrote and crossed out four times, and which Opal didn't touch with the red pen at all, not once, which I noticed.

I have read the objections. Most of them start by saying they support the fishing. I didn't know that until somebody showed me. I said some things I'm not proud of. Mrs Marchetti, who lives above the cove, has had a sound logger on her window for four weeks, which my daughter built. I have seen the figures. I would ask that condition 9 be amended as follows.

And then Richard's paragraph. Word for word. Which he copied out from the printout under the fruit bowl, slowly, letter by letter, with Opal checking every one.

Measured at the nearest residential windows against the existing night-time background.

He got *residential* wrong. Once. A red ring. He did it again.

* * *

At the bottom, he signed it.

Lorne Abbiss, Skipper, Sea Holly BM.

And then he looked at it for a long time. At the page. At the red rings, and the ticks, and the crossings-out, and the paragraph in the middle that she hadn't touched.

"It's a mess," he said.

"It's a first draft," said Opal. "Everything's a mess the first time. You'll write it out clean. Then Una will type it, because nobody at the

council can read handwriting any more, God help them." She took the page and looked at it, over her glasses, the way she must have looked at thirty years of infants' first stories. "But this is the one I'll keep."

"Why?"

"Because it's got the red on," said Opal.

* * *

Una typed it at Opal's kitchen table, on the laptop, while her father wrote it out clean, which he insisted on doing, even though she was typing it, because, he said, *Miss said*.

She sent it at nine minutes to nine. I watched it go. And on the Monday night, as I've told you, the box on the website changed.

Support: 1.

* * *

But I want to tell you about the end of that hour, in the kitchen, because it's the bit I promised to say for them.

When the letter had gone, Lorne stood up. Too big for the chair, the way he's too big for every chair. He looked at the class photograph on the wall again. Second row. The ears.

"You never gave me a red ring," he said. "When I was six. I remember. Everybody else got red rings. I never did."

"You never finished anything," said Opal. "You read so slowly you never got to the end. I couldn't mark what you hadn't finished." She was

putting the pens back in the mug. “You always wanted to know how it ended. You’d ask me. *Miss, just tell me.* And I never would.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’d have stopped reading,” said Opal. “If I’d told you. And I wanted you to get there yourself.” She put the last pen in the mug. “You got there tonight. Forty years late.” She looked at him over her glasses. “That’s not bad, for an Abbiss.”

* * *

He went to the door. Una followed him, with the laptop. At the door, under the fish-shaped knocker that Sandro brought home from Italy, he stopped.

“Miss,” he said.

“What?”

“The pumps. At two.” He was looking down the lane. At the bend. At the cove, in the dark, and the market lights, and the boats. “I’m sorry.”

Opal looked at him for a long time.

“Your father said that,” she said. “In my front room. A month ago. Five words.” She folded her arms. “I’ll tell you what I told him. There’s always been somebody up here. You just never looked up.”

“I’m looking now,” said Lorne.

“I know you are,” said Opal. And, which she says she has never done to a former pupil in her life, and never will again, and which Una saw,

and told me, and made me promise to put in: she reached up, and straightened his collar.

31 – Weather

IQ 23 · Hundreds 47 · The night before

The *Sea Holly* went out on the Wednesday.

She had to. She's a working boat. The bank doesn't stop for a committee and neither do the sole. Lorne had a six-day trip planned and a crew that was still a man short, and the committee was on the Tuesday at two, and six days from the Wednesday is the Tuesday, and if the weather held, he'd be in at five on the Tuesday morning, and land, and get the bus.

"If the weather held," said Hester, at the kiosk, on the Wednesday afternoon, watching him go, past the end of the breakwater, with the old man on his stool. "It never holds."

* * *

It held till Sunday.

On Sunday night, the forecast changed. I watched it change. A low, coming in from the Atlantic, faster than they'd thought, deeper than they'd thought. Gales by Monday afternoon in the western Channel. Severe gales by Monday night. Storm-force, possibly, by the early hours of Tuesday, in the sea areas where the *Sea Holly* was fishing.

Lorne had two choices. Run for home early, on the Monday, ahead of it, with a part catch, and lose two days' fishing, which would mean a bad trip, which would mean less money for four men and a boat that the bank owns half of. Or ride it out, somewhere sheltered, and come in

when it passed. Which would be Tuesday afternoon. Or Tuesday night. Or Wednesday.

After the committee.

* * *

He rang me. From the wheelhouse. On the satellite phone, which costs, he said, about a pound a second, so I'd better be quick.

"What time's it on?"

"Two o'clock. Item four. It could be three. Items one to three might be short. Or long."

"If I run now, I'm in by Tuesday morning. Five. Six. With half a trip."

"Yes."

"If I ride it out, I miss it."

"Yes."

A silence. A pound a second.

"Is she speaking? Opal?"

"She's speaking. Three minutes. Varley gave her the slot."

"*Varley*?"

"I'll explain."

"Don't. A pound a second." Another silence. I could hear the wind, behind him, already. "If I'm not there, who speaks for the supporters?"

"Nobody. Nobody else registered."

"Then the committee hears her ask for the paragraph," said Lorne, "and nobody from the boats says *we want it too*. And the officers say *the industry may find this unreasonable*. And they say *no thank you, Mrs Marchetti*, and approve it with nine as it is." He knew. He'd been listening. He always listens, I've learned, when he looks as if he isn't. "That's it, isn't it."

"That's what Richard thinks would happen."

"Richard's right," said Lorne. "Richard's always right. It's very annoying." He breathed out. "Tell the crew I'm sorry. I'll make it up next trip."

"Lorne —"

"We're running," he said. "Now. Tell my dad." And the line went.

* * *

I told Gideon. Through Hester, because he hasn't got a phone, and because Hester went up the hill to his house in the dark, in her red coat, at ten at night, and knocked, and told him.

He didn't say anything, Hester said. He put his coat on. And his hat. And picked up his stool, and his flask, which was empty, and filled it, and walked down through the town, in the wind that was starting, to the breakwater.

Hester said, *He won't be in for hours. Not till morning. You'll freeze.*

Gideon said: "I know when he'll be in."

* * *

The night before is always the same, in these books. I've noticed that. I think it's because nobody sleeps.

Jono was on a night. Monday. He'd asked Margot for the Tuesday afternoon off, and she'd given it, and he'd kept the Monday night, so the rota worked, which meant he'd come off at seven in the morning, after twelve hours, and go to the committee at two, which is what he always does, and which I've stopped telling him not to.

Opal was in Sandro's chair, by the window, with the *Emmaline*'s clock ticking beside her, its quick ship's tick, and the printout of the graph on her knee, and her three minutes, written out in fountain pen on Basildon Bond, and the wind getting up outside so that the window rattled in its frame. She didn't read her three minutes. She'd learned them. She'd learned them the way she'd taught thirty years of infants to learn their words, by saying them out loud, every night, to an empty room.

Una was at the kitchen table up the hill, with the laptop, and the weather on it, and the *Sea Holly*'s position on a tracking site, a little arrow in the western Channel, pointing home, moving slower than it should. She didn't sleep at all.

Richard was in his back room, with the *BRIXHAM* drawer open, and the drawing out, under its tracing paper, and the eighteen seventy-four map, and Dilys's notebook, and Una's graph, and his paragraph,

typed, in a plastic sleeve, which he'd printed eleven copies of, one for each member of the committee and one spare.

Chris was at his kitchen table, with his leg up, not sleeping, with me open on the laptop, watching the arrow.

And Varley was on his balcony, at the top of the flats on the cliff, in his long coat, in the wind, with a glass of something, looking out over the cove and the market and the breakwater, at a small dark shape at the bend, on a stool, not moving. He told me that afterwards. He said he watched it for two hours. He said he'd never seen anything like it. He said, *I thought he'd die out there, and I didn't know who to ring*.

* * *

At three in the morning, the wind was gusting fifty knots in the outer harbour.

At four, it was sixty. The rain came sideways across the breakwater in sheets. The marina boats leaned on their moorings. Spray came over the top of the stone at the bend, where Gideon was, and he didn't move.

Hester went out to him at four, in her red coat and an oilskin of her father's, with Zibi, who shouldn't have, because his back. They found him on his stool, in the lee of the wall, soaked, with his flask, watching the dark past the lighthouse.

"Come in," said Hester. "For God's sake, Gideon. You'll catch your death."

"He's an hour off," said Gideon. "Maybe less."

"How do you know?"

“I know,” said Gideon. And didn’t move.

So Hester sat down on the wall beside him, in the spray, and Zibi stood behind them with his back against the stone, and they waited.

* * *

At ten to five, a light came round Berry Head.

Low down. Then two. Then a shape, which wasn’t a boat yet, only a place in the dark where the sea was doing something different. Coming in fast, ahead of the worst of it, with the wind behind her and the sea on her quarter, rolling, her arms folded up against her sides.

Gideon stood up.

Hester told me this. I wasn’t there. I’ll tell you exactly what she said, because she said it in a voice I’ve never heard her use, and because I believe her.

“He stood up,” she said. “Off the stool. In that wind. He stood up and held onto the rail and watched her come in. And she came round the end of the breakwater, close, too close, the way you do in a sea like that, to get in the lee. And the lads on deck looked up, the way they always do. And Lorne in the wheelhouse looked up, at the bend, for his dad.”

She stopped.

“And Gideon waved,” said Hester.

* * *

I'm going to leave that there. On its own. The way Hester did, on the phone, at five in the morning, in the wind, before she said anything else.

* * *

Sea Holly tied up at the fish quay at five past five. With half a trip. Ninety-one boxes. The engine running cool all the way home, in a sea that would have had her, Tenby said afterwards, with a sick impeller.

Lorne landed. He watched his catch go into the market. He didn't light a cigarette.

He walked out along the breakwater, half a mile, in the wind and the rain, to the bend. Where his father was. And I don't know what he said, and neither does Hester, because she'd gone back to the kiosk, and neither does Zibi, because he'd gone with her, and the only person who knows apart from the two of them is the man on the balcony at the top of the flats on the cliff, who saw, and who has never told anybody what he saw, and who told me only this:

"They walked back together."

32 – Item Four

IQ 23 · Hundreds 47 · Today

The committee room at the Town Hall in Torquay is on the first floor, at the front, with tall windows that look out over Castle Circus. There's a horseshoe of tables for the members, with microphones. A table at the front for the officers. A small table and a chair, with its own microphone, for the speakers. And at the back, rows of chairs for the public, which are usually, Niamh says, about a quarter full, and which are not designed for anybody to sit in for more than an hour.

They were full.

* * *

I'll tell you who was there, because it matters who was there.

Opal, in the front row, in a navy coat she'd bought for Sandro's funeral, with her three minutes on Basildon Bond in her handbag, which she didn't need.

Una, beside her, with the laptop, which she didn't need either.

Hester, in her red coat, still damp. Zibi, who'd shut the café, which he never does, with a sign on the door that Kezia had made, which said *GONE TO TORQUAY. BACK WHEN THEY'VE DECIDED*. Wren, in her red jacket, who'd swapped her Tuesday with somebody at the chandler's. Ruby's dad, off the market, in a clean shirt. The chandler. Dilys, who'd driven from Paignton between the morning run and the afternoon run, and had to leave at three-fifteen, and said so, twice. Tenby, in his good old coat, who'd walked down from his room. Teo, in

whites, on his break, who'd run up from the Strand. Ida, at the end of the second row, with her stick, who'd closed the shop again, and who had come, she said, *because I've done this before and she hasn't*. Kezia, with her clicker. Niamh, on the press bench, which was one chair. Varley, at the very back, by the door, in his long coat, with his arms folded, the way Richard stood in the second book.

Chris, in a seat at the end of the front row, with his stick against the chair in front, and the canvas stool, folded, under his seat. He'd brought it. He wouldn't say why.

And Richard, two seats along, very straight, in his flat cap, which he'd taken off, with eleven copies of a paragraph in a plastic sleeve on his knee.

Jono was beside Chris. Off a night. Twelve hours. He'd come on the 12.

And Lorne wasn't there.

* * *

He'd been on the breakwater at six. He'd walked back with his father. He'd gone home, Una said, at seven, and sat in the kitchen, in his wet smock, and fallen asleep at the table with his head on his arms, and she'd let him, because he'd been awake for nearly two days.

She'd left at twelve, to get the bus with Opal. She'd shaken him. He'd said *I'm coming*. She'd said *Dad, it's two o'clock, it's in Torquay*. He'd said *I know where it is*.

At ten to two, he wasn't there.

At two, he wasn't there.

At five past two, the chair of the committee, whom I'm not going to name, opened the meeting.

* * *

Items one to three took forty minutes. A house extension in Paignton. A change of use in Torquay. A fence. I won't give you them.

At twenty to three, the chair said: "Item four. Oxen Cove and Freshwater Car Parks, Brixham."

Una looked at the door.

* * *

The officer presented the report. A planning officer, a woman of about forty, very clear, very careful, with slides. The site. The units. The case. The objections. The answers. The twenty-four conditions. She went through them quickly, as officers do, because the members have read them. She said *condition nine requires a noise assessment prior to installation of plant*, and moved on. She said *the matter of boat storage is being discussed between the Harbour Authority and the relevant parties*, and moved on.

Wren made a sound. Very small. Ruby's dad put his hand on her arm.

The officer recommended approval.

The chair thanked her. "We have registered speakers," said the chair. "One objector, and one supporter." She looked at her papers. "Mrs Marchetti. Three minutes."

* * *

Opal stood up.

She walked to the small table, with the chair and the microphone, in her navy coat. She didn't take the Basildon Bond out of her handbag. She sat down. She adjusted the microphone, the way you'd adjust a child's collar. She looked at the horseshoe of tables, at the members, one by one, over her glasses, the way she must have looked at thirty infants at nine in the morning for thirty-six years.

The clock on the wall started. I could see it. A digital one, red, counting down from three.

* * *

I'm going to give you what she said. I'm allowed to; it's on the webcast; it's a public meeting. And I'm going to give you all of it, because it was three minutes, and it was perfect, and I've never been able to say anything as well in my life.

* * *

"My name is Opal Marchetti," she said. "I live in the blue house at the top of the lane above Oxen Cove. I've lived there for forty years. I was an infant teacher at the primary school up the hill for thirty-six. I'm the widow of a fisherman, and the daughter-in-law of one, who was lost off Berry Head on the *Emmaline* when my husband was four.

"I have objected to this scheme. I'd like the committee to know that I want it built.

“I want the boys to have their units. I taught half of them to read. I want the fish to stay in Brixham. I want the firm that went to Holland to come back. I’m not against fish. I married fish.

“But I haven’t slept through a night in forty years. The lorries come at one. The pumps start at two. The forklifts at three. The boats at four. I’ve never complained. Not once. Because it’s fish. You don’t marry fish and complain about the smell.

“The noise report says, on page four, that *a full assessment of the development cannot be conducted at this time*. That’s honest. I’m grateful for it. Nobody knows who the tenants will be. Nobody knows what their machines will sound like. So nobody can tell me what three in the morning will sound like when this is built.

“Condition nine says each tenant will do an assessment before they install their machines. That’s good. But it doesn’t say where they’ll measure it. It doesn’t say what they’ll measure it against. It doesn’t say they can’t run at night until it’s checked. And it doesn’t say anybody will ever be told.

“A young woman called Una Abbiss, whom I taught in Year One, has had a machine on my windowsill for four weeks. You have her figures. It’s in your papers as a late representation. It’s what my front room sounds like now, every second of every night. Nobody else has ever measured it.

“I’m asking you to amend condition nine. So that no unit runs its machines at night until it’s been measured at my window, against what it’s like now, and approved, and published. The words are on a sheet Mr Kaskow will give you. They’re not mine. They’ve been checked against the six tests by a man who used to sit where you’re sitting.

“It won’t cost the building a day. It won’t cost the money. It won’t stop a single unit opening on time.

"It'll mean that when they've built it, and the money's spent, and you've all moved on to the next thing, there'll be a number on a page that says whether an old woman can sleep. And somebody whose job it is to look at it.

"That's all. I'd like to sleep before I die. And I'd like the boys to have their sheds. I don't think that's a lot to ask. I don't think it's a choice."

* * *

The red clock said nine seconds.

She sat back in the chair. She took her glasses off. She folded them, and put them in her handbag, next to the Basildon Bond she hadn't needed.

Nobody in the room moved.

Then the chair said, quietly, "Thank you, Mrs Marchetti," and Opal stood up and walked back to her seat in the front row, and Una took her hand, and held it.

* * *

"And our registered supporter," said the chair. She looked at her papers. "Mr Abbiss." She looked up at the public seats. "Is Mr Abbiss present?"

Una looked at the door.

So did Jono. So did Hester, and Zibi, and Wren, and Ruby's dad, and Tenby, and Teo, and Ida, and Chris, and Richard, and Kezia with her clicker, and Niamh on her chair, and Varley, by the door.

Nobody came through it.

"If Mr Abbiss is not present —" said the chair.

And the door opened.

* * *

He was in his smock. The orange one. Still damp. With salt in his hair, and on his face, white, in the lines round his eyes, where the spray had dried. He was in his sea boots. He smelt, Hester said afterwards, very loudly, in the corridor, *like the whole of the fish market had come up the stairs*. He'd come on the 12. He'd fallen asleep on it, and gone past Castle Circus, and woken at the harbour, and run back up the hill, in sea boots.

He stood in the door, breathing hard, and looked at the room.

At Opal, in the front row, in her navy coat. At his daughter, holding her hand. At the horseshoe of tables, and the microphones, and the officer with her slides, and the red clock on the wall.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said. "I was at sea."

* * *

Jono: For the record, nobody in that room said "You're late." I wanted to. I didn't.

* * *

He walked to the small table. He sat down. He was too big for the chair. He put his hands on the table, flat, the big square ones with the white line across the back of the left. He didn't adjust the microphone. It was too low. He leaned down to it.

The red clock started.

* * *

"My name's Lorne Abbiss," he said. "I'm skipper of the *Sea Holly*. Brixham. I've fished out of that market for thirty years and my dad for fifty-one before me. I've come in this morning from the western Channel ahead of a gale with half a trip, because I wanted to be here, and I nearly wasn't.

"I'm for this. I've been for it for ten years. Every boat in that harbour's for it. We need it. We needed it ten years ago. Every box I land goes on a lorry tonight and up the motorway and gets made into food somewhere else and comes back with somebody else's name on it. These units are the first chance in my life to keep some of that in Brixham. Don't let anybody tell you different. Build it.

"But I want to say something about condition nine.

"I shouted at the boards in the hall. At the drop-in. I'm not proud of it. I thought anybody who wrote in was against us. I wrote something on a page I'm not proud of either. I said some of us were here first." He stopped. "Mrs Marchetti was here first. She was here before me. She taught me to read."

He leaned closer to the microphone.

"I'm asking you to amend condition nine. The same as she has. The same words. It won't cost us a day. I've asked. I've had it explained to me by a man who used to sit where you're sitting, and an old woman who taught me, and my daughter, who built the box on her window. A lad who takes a unit for shellfish can do his assessment while the walls are going up, against my daughter's figures. He'll be done before the doors open. He'll lose nothing. And if he's too loud, she'll know, and so will you, and so will I. And I'd want to know. I don't want to be the reason she doesn't sleep. I've been the reason for enough."

He looked down at his hands.

"The boats want it built. And we want her to sleep. Both. That's not two sides. That's one town. Please."

* * *

He had a minute and four seconds left.

He didn't use them. He stood up, too big for the chair, and walked back to the public seats, in his sea boots, leaving salt on the carpet, and there wasn't a seat, so he stood at the end of the front row, beside his daughter, and Opal.

Una let go of Opal's hand, and took his.

* * *

Then the members asked questions.

I'll give you two of them. There were more. These are the two that mattered.

A member on the left of the horseshoe, a man, leaned into his microphone and asked the officer whether amending condition nine as proposed would cause any delay to the programme, or put the funding at risk, or make the units harder to let.

The officer looked at the sheet Richard had given her. She'd been reading it since Opal sat down. She read it again.

"Chair," she said, "I've had the opportunity to consider the wording during the speeches. In my view, the amended condition would meet the tests for conditions set out in national policy. It relates to a matter already identified in the noise assessment as requiring further work. It's precise as to the hours, the location and the baseline. A baseline has been provided. It wouldn't prevent construction, or the occupation of the units, or daytime operation. It would require that night-time operation of fixed plant follows an approved assessment, which tenants would need to undertake in any event." She paused. "I don't consider it would affect the programme or the funding. Officers would have no objection to members amending the condition in those terms."

A sound in the public seats. Not a cheer. You're not allowed to cheer. Something smaller. Like a room breathing out.

* * *

The second question was from a woman on the right of the horseshoe. She asked about the boats.

"The officer's report says the boat storage is *being discussed* with the relevant parties," she said. "Can the officer tell us who the relevant parties are, and when we might expect those discussions to conclude?"

The officer said the Harbour Authority was in discussion with the sailing club.

“Has a site been identified?”

The officer said she understood that discussions were ongoing.

The member looked at her for a moment.

“I understand,” she said, “from a member of the public, that some of the boats have already been moved. To a private store. On the old quay.”

The officer said she wasn’t aware of that.

“No,” said the member. “I didn’t think you would be.” She made a note. “I’d like it recorded that the committee would expect those discussions to reach a conclusion before work starts on site. I appreciate that isn’t a condition.”

“It’s noted, chair,” said the officer.

Wren put her hand over her eyes.

33 – With Conditions

IQ 23 · Hundreds 47 · Today

The debate took eleven minutes.

I won't give you all of it. Members said what members say. That the scheme was important for Brixham. That the fishing industry needed it. That the concerns of residents were real. That the funding was a once-in-a-generation opportunity, and couldn't be lost. One said the lane worried him and he hoped highways would keep an eye on it. One said she'd been to the site, and stood at the bottom of the lane at seven in the morning, and watched a lorry take the bend in four goes, and would like that minuted too. One said, and I'll give you this exactly, because I've never heard a member say anything like it before:

"I don't think I've ever been on a committee where the objector and the supporter stood up and asked for the same thing. In the same words. I'd like to thank them both."

* * *

Then a member moved approval, as recommended, with condition nine amended in the terms proposed by the speakers, and a line added to condition fourteen, about deliveries in school hours, which the officer read out, and which was Richard's line, word for word.

Another member seconded it.

The chair called the vote.

It was unanimous.

* * *

The whole of item four took fifty-three minutes. Opal's part was two minutes fifty-one. Lorne's was one minute fifty-six. The officer's answer, on the amendment, was forty-one seconds.

The money's date didn't move by a day.

I'd like that noted. It's my second time. I said I was saving it.

* * *

Story, not Receipt: I want to say this plainly, because it's the rule. The decision on Oxen Cove, and whether condition nine was ever amended, and what was said, belong to the real committee and the real record. If it hasn't got a Receipt, it's story. This hasn't. Yet.

* * *

They came out onto Castle Circus at a quarter to four.

It was raining, still, the tail of the gale, coming over the hill from the sea. Nobody minded. They stood on the steps of the Town Hall in the rain. Opal in her navy coat. Una. Lorne, in his smock, with salt in his hair, getting rained on, and not noticing. Hester, who'd started crying in the committee room and hadn't stopped, and who was furious about it. Zibi. Wren, who hadn't cried, and wasn't going to, and kept saying *before work starts on site* to herself as if she was learning it. Ruby's dad. The chandler. Tenby and Teo and Ida. Kezia with her clicker, which said a hundred and eighty-four. Niamh, typing on her phone under a bus shelter. Dilys had gone at three-fifteen. She'd said so.

Chris came out last, slowly, with his stick, and the folded canvas stool under his arm.

"Why did you bring it?" said Jono.

"In case Gideon came," said Chris.

"He didn't."

"No." Chris looked at the stool. "He was on the breakwater all night. He'll be asleep." He tucked it under his arm again. "But I wanted to have it. In case."

* * *

Varley came out of the door behind them, buttoning his coat.

He stopped on the step beside Jono. They looked at the rain together. At Castle Circus, and the traffic going round it, and the shelter where Tenby used to queue for his tea at four, and the top of Union Street going down the hill towards Cheverton's.

"Unanimous," said Varley.

"Unanimous."

"With conditions." He put on his scarf. "I'd have got you a deferral in a fortnight, you know. And a better scheme, maybe, in a year. If the money waited. Which it wouldn't." He looked at the group on the steps. At Lorne and Opal, standing side by side in the rain, not talking, the way people stand who've just done something together that they didn't think they could. "You connected them. I'd have split them. It's quicker, splitting. It always works."

"I know."

"Mine's quicker," said Varley.

"Yours doesn't last," said Jono.

Varley considered this, in the rain, for longer than I've ever seen him consider anything.

"No," he said. "It doesn't, does it." And walked down the steps, and across Castle Circus, in his long coat, towards the bus stop, where a 12 was coming round, with *BRIXHAM* on the front in orange letters.

He got on it.

* * *

The IQ went up that night. I'm going to tell you why, because Chris makes me, every time, and because it isn't for what you'd think.

It isn't for the vote. The vote was always going to be yes. The money had a date on it. Nobody could afford a no.

It's for the forty-one seconds. For an officer who'd been handed a paragraph by a stranger during the speeches, and read it, properly, twice, while an old woman and a fisherman were talking, and checked it against six tests in her head, and stood up and said *officers would have no objection*. Who could have said *we'd need time to consider that*, which is what people say, and which would have been the end of it. And didn't.

And for a member who asked who the relevant parties were, and when, and wouldn't take *ongoing* for an answer, and got something

noted that isn't a condition but is a promise, in a minute, where anybody can read it.

That's what the score's for. Not whether they say yes. Whether, when somebody hands them something better, they can see it, and take it, in forty-one seconds, without being frightened of it.

Twenty-four.

* * *

And the map. That night. Forty-seven to forty-nine.

The two new ones were both in Brixham. One was round the old quay, where the Abbiss store is, where the parents of twenty-eight children who sail had put themselves on Connect that week with *Need: to say thank you to the man with the green doors. Got: twenty-eight boats in his store.*

And the other was the breakwater.

There aren't any households on the breakwater. It's half a mile of stone with a lighthouse on the end. It's not in a hundred at all, by the map's own rules; it's in the sea. But it's in the same hundred as the beach at the bottom of it, and the houses above the beach, and the road that goes up from there into the town. And that night, eleven people from those houses, who'd watched, through their windows, in the gale, at five in the morning, an old man stand up off his stool at the bend and hold onto the rail and wave, put themselves on the map. All with the same line. As if they'd agreed it, which they hadn't.

Need: nothing. Saw him wave.

I coloured it in. Chris said it didn't count. I said it did.

He let me have it.

PART SEVEN:

FIFTY

34 – A Window into the Industry

IQ 24 · Hundreds 49 · After

There's a phrase in one of the council's reports about Oxen Cove that I've been saving. I found it in the first week, in October, in a report to the cabinet from the spring before, and I put it in the file, and I didn't use it, because I didn't know what it was for.

The units, the report says, will be designed *to provide a window into the industry for visitors* on the coast path.

A window. Into the industry. So that people walking past on the path that goes round the whole of the south-west of England, six hundred and thirty miles, can look in and see fish being made into food, in Brixham, by people from Brixham.

I read it to Richard in March. In his back room. With the *BRIXHAM* drawer open.

He didn't say anything. He took a sheet of paper out of the plan chest, A2, heavy, and his tin of coloured pencils, and sat down at the table, and started to draw.

* * *

It took him four days. He did it in the afternoons, he said, when the light comes in from the garden side and the colours are true.

I'll describe it, because he won't, and because it's in the drawer now, under the tracing paper, on top of the pirate ship and the whales.

It's Oxen Cove. From the water. As if you were in a dinghy, just off the edge, looking in.

The units are there. Two long buildings, low, along the water, in grey and dark blue, with roofs that slope like the market's roof next door, like a row of shallow hills. They're not pretty. He didn't make them pretty. He says it's a fish shed and it should look like a fish shed, and that the worst thing you can do to a working building is make it pretend it isn't one.

But all along the front, on the side facing the path, there are windows. Big ones. Floor to ceiling, at the height of a person walking. And through the windows, in the light from inside, you can see people. Small, in coloured pencil, in white coats and blue hats and white wellies, at long steel tables, with knives, and fish. Filleting. Packing. A woman holding up a plaice, the way Hester does, to show somebody how. A young man at a tank, with his arm in it to the elbow, lifting out a crab.

And outside the windows, on the path, people looking in. A family. A man with a dog. Two walkers with rucksacks and poles. A child with her nose on the glass.

At the far end, where the dinghies used to be, there's a bench. Facing the water. With a small brass plate on the back that you can't read at that scale, but which Richard told me says *EMMALINE*. And next to the bench, on the wall of the last unit, a board, the kind you get at the seaside, that tells you what you're looking at.

And at the very far end of the drawing, round the corner, almost off the edge of the paper, past the units, in the bit of the cove that isn't in the scheme, he's drawn a slipway. A small one. Going down into the

water. With a boat on it, up on blocks, a red one, a trawler, with her arms folded up. And a man beside her in an old good coat, with his hand flat on her hull.

And above the slipway, in his small square capitals, with a question mark either side:

? TENBY ?

* * *

"That's not in the scheme," I said.

"No," said Richard.

"There's no money for it."

"No."

"It's not in the application. It's not in any plan. It's not anywhere."

"It's in the Neighbourhood Plan," said Richard. "*Boat repair. Marine engineering. There is no boat repair yard in Brixham, or for that matter anywhere else in the Bay.*" He put his pencil down. "It's been in the Neighbourhood Plan for years. It's just not been in anything since." He looked at the drawing. "So I've put it in this. That's all I can do. I can put it on a piece of paper and sign it and date it and put it in a drawer, and one day somebody'll open the drawer."

"Like the steps at Preston," I said.

He looked at me. Against the plan chest, where he'd propped me.

"The first book," I said. "The low end of the prom. Steps and a rail, so a child could lean on it and see the sea. Gaynor's got it on the wall behind her counter."

"We didn't get it," said Richard.

"Not yet."

He almost smiled.

"The first window was a rail on some steps," he said. "In Preston. So a child could lean on it and see the sea. The second was a paragraph about nine. So an old woman could know what three in the morning sounds like." He touched the edge of the drawing, the windows along the front of the units, with the people inside. "This one's in a fish shed. So a child on the coast path can see what her grandad did." He picked up the pencil again. "It's all the same window. I keep drawing it. They keep not building it. One day they'll build one."

He signed it. Bottom right. Initials and the date, the way he always does.

Richard: I've sent a copy to the harbour office. With a covering letter. Chris didn't rewrite this one. He said it didn't need it.

* * *

He sent it on a Monday. To the harbour office, and the town council, and the Chamber, and the sailing club, and the fish market, and Opal, and Hester, who put it up in her kiosk, beside the photograph of the children carrying nets out of the Abbiss store.

And on the Wednesday, the harbour office rang him.

Not to say thank you. Not to say it would be passed on.

To ask if they could borrow it. For a meeting, they said, about the cove, about what goes on the bit that isn't in the scheme, when there's money, if there's ever money. They wanted something to put on the wall.

"What did you say?" said Chris, on the phone, that evening.

"I said they could have a copy," said Richard. "Not the original. The original goes in the drawer." He paused. "And I said the question marks stay."

35 – Good

IQ 24 · Hundreds 49 · After

The *Sea Holly* went out on a Saturday in April with five aboard.

I want to tell you that slowly, because it took fourteen weeks to get there, and nine years before that, and because it was the thing that, of everything in this book, I least expected.

* * *

The fifth was Una.

Not for good. Not yet. Not as crew, exactly. Her company had been asked, by four of the skippers who'd found her on Connect, to fit cameras on their boats, to count the catch, so that they could prove what they'd caught and what they'd thrown back. And the first boat she fitted was the *Sea Holly*, because, she said, *if it works on Dad's boat it'll work on anything*. And you can't fit a camera on a beam trawler and know it works from an office next to a car park. You have to go out. You have to watch the nets come up at three in the morning and see what the camera sees.

So she asked.

She asked her father, at the kitchen table, on a Thursday night in March, the way he'd asked his father on the breakwater. Straight out. Not looking at him.

"Can I come out on the next trip? To set up the cameras. Six days."

And Lorne, who'd said no nine years ago, once, and never said why, and never changed it, put down his tea, and looked at her with the pale eyes, his eyes, his father's eyes, for a long time.

"We're a man short," he said.

"I know."

"You'd have to work. Not just the cameras. Sort. Gut. Box. On your knees. Every two hours. You'd get no sleep."

"I know."

"You'd lose a fingernail. At least one. Everyone does, the first trip."

"I know, Dad."

He looked at her.

"Saturday," he said. "Two o'clock. Bring a hat."

* * *

I wasn't there. I'll say that, as always. I was on her phone, which was in a waterproof bag in her oilskin pocket for six days, and I heard a great deal and saw almost nothing, and what I heard I'm mostly going to keep, because it's theirs.

I'll tell you some of it. With her permission. And his.

* * *

They went out past the breakwater at two. Gideon was on his stool. He didn't wave. Una said afterwards she'd have been worried if he had.

They fished the Channel for six days. Down past the Start. Out where the sole are. Two-hour tows, day and night. Una fitted three cameras in the first twelve hours, on the gantry over the deck, looking down where the cod-ends open, and spent the rest of the six days doing what her father had said she'd do. Sorting. Gutting. Boxing. On her knees, on a moving deck, at three in the morning, in the lights.

She lost a fingernail on the second day. Left hand. A box edge.

She was sick on the first night, once, over the side, and never again.

She could still gut faster than any of the crew. She'd been able to at twelve. She still could at twenty-three. The mate, who's been with Lorne eleven years, said so, on the third day, to Lorne, in the wheelhouse, where she couldn't hear, but I could.

Lorne didn't say anything.

* * *

On the fourth night, about three in the morning, between tows, she was in the wheelhouse with her father, with a laptop on the chart table, showing him what the cameras saw.

Every fish. Every haul. Counted. By species, by size, on the screen, in colours. Sole in one colour. Plaice in another. The undersized ones, the ones that go back over the side, in red, with a number. The weight of each haul, estimated, before it was even boxed. A line along the bottom, going up, through the trip.

“That’s this trip,” she said. “Every haul. What came up, and what went back. Without anybody counting it on their knees.”

Lorne looked at it for a long time.

“How accurate?”

“Ninety-four per cent on the species. Better on the big ones. We’re working on the gurnard. They all look the same.”

“They do all look the same,” said Lorne.

He scrolled back. Through the hauls. Four days. Every two hours. The line going up.

“I could show that to anybody,” he said. “The scientists. The market. The ministry. Anybody who says we’re taking too much. I could just show them.”

“Yes.”

“Nobody’d have to take my word for it.”

“No.”

He looked at the screen.

“Your grandad,” he said, “kept a book. Every haul, for fifty-one years. In pencil. In the wheelhouse. Every fish. Every tow. Where, and when, and what came up.” He was very quiet. “It’s in a box in his house. Nobody’s ever read it. He’d never let anybody.”

“I know,” said Una. “I’ve seen it.”

Her father looked at her.

"When I was eleven," she said. "He showed me. Just me. He said not to tell you." She looked at the screen. "That's where I got the idea. For the cameras. From Grandad's book."

* * *

I'm going to stop there. I could tell you what Lorne said next, because I heard it. It was short. He's not a man for long.

But it was the second time he'd said that word to her. And she didn't make him say it twice, this time. She heard it the first time.

* * *

They came in on the Friday, before light.

Round Berry Head. Past the lighthouse. Into the harbour. Five on deck, this time, when she came round the end of the breakwater, and all five looked up, the way crews do. And one of them, the smallest, in an oilskin too big for her and a woollen hat, with a plaster on her left hand, looked up at the bend for her grandfather.

He was there. On his stool. With his flask.

He stood up.

He didn't wave. Una says he didn't. Lorne says he didn't.

He stood. On the breakwater. In the dark, with the lights of the boat going past. Until they'd gone round to the fish quay. Una says that's more than a wave, from him, and I believe her.

* * *

They landed a hundred and ninety-eight boxes. The best trip the *Sea Holly* had made in two years. Hester said, on the quay, at a volume that carried to Torquay, that it was because there was finally somebody on that boat with a brain.

Gideon came along the quay at half past five. Not out to the breakwater; to the market. Where the boxes were being swung off the deck. He stood at the edge of the light, in his dark coat and his hat, and watched his granddaughter, on the deck of his son's boat, with the plaster on her hand, swinging boxes of sole up to the lumpers on the quay, one after another, without seeming to bend.

When the last box was off, she climbed up onto the quay. She saw him. She went over.

He looked at her. Up and down. The oilskin too big. The hat. The plaster. The pale eyes.

Then he looked past her, at the deck, at the boxes going into the market, at the cameras on the gantry, three of them, small and black, looking down at where the nets come in.

"Those yours?" he said.

"Those are mine."

"They count it?"

"Every fish."

He looked at the cameras for a long time.

"I kept a book," he said.

"I know, Grandad."

He looked at her.

"Good," he said.

* * *

That's all he said. One word. Then he turned round, and walked home, up the hill, in the dark, with his hands in his pockets.

Una stood on the quay and watched him go.

Her father was on the deck of the *Sea Holly*, behind her. He'd heard. Everybody on the quay had heard; Hester made sure. *Good.* From Gideon Abbiss. In fifty-one years at sea and eleven ashore, it's the first time anybody in Brixham can remember him saying it.

He said it to his granddaughter.

Not to his son.

* * *

I asked Lorne, afterwards, whether he minded. At Zibi's, on the Thursday, at the window table, with his bacon roll. Whether he minded that his father had finally said it, after thirty years of *you left one*, and said it to Una.

He thought about it for a long time.

"No," he said. "That's the right way round."

"What do you mean?"

"He couldn't say it to me," said Lorne. "He couldn't. It's not in him. Not to me. Too much in the way. Fifty years of it." He looked out of the window at the harbour. At the breakwater. At the bend, where nobody was, because no boat was due. "But he could say it to her. Because she's not me. Because there's nothing in the way." He picked up his roll. "And I heard him say it. I was there. On the deck. I heard my dad say *good* to somebody." He ate. "That'll do me."

* * *

Jono: He still hasn't said it to Lorne. For the record. I asked.

Ania: Jono asked Gideon. On the breakwater. Gideon said, "He knows." I've decided that counts.

36 – Fifty

IQ 25 · Hundreds 49 · After

It's April now, as I finish this. Six months since the photograph with two spaces after every full stop. The mornings are light by six. When the *Sea Holly* comes round Berry Head at five, you can see her before you see her lights.

Work hasn't started on the cove. It will soon. There are fences round the far end of the car park, and men in high-vis with tripods again, and a sign on the lamp post where the notice was, saying *SITE ACCESS*, which Hester has drawn a fish on in biro.

The dinghies aren't there any more. Twenty-eight are in the Abbiss store, under Gideon's father's net. Eight are in the chandler's yard. Five are on their sides in the club's own shed.

* * *

I said the IQ went up twice. I've told you about the first: the forty-one seconds. I'll tell you about the second now, because it's the one I'm proudest of, and because it's small.

In March, before work started on site, the harbour office wrote to Wren.

Not an email that said *thank you for your comments*. A letter. On paper. With a name at the bottom, a real one, which I'm not going to give you, of a person whose job it was. It said that, following the committee's comment that the discussions about boat storage should conclude before work began, the harbour authority had identified a

space at Freshwater, by the slipway, behind the quarry wall, for the club's remaining boats. Thirteen. It was smaller than they'd had. It had a fence and a gate and a lock. It would be ready before the cove was closed. And it gave a phone number, which rang, Wren said, the first time she tried it, and was answered, by the person whose name was at the bottom of the letter.

"It's not enough," said Wren, when she rang me. "It's thirteen. We had forty-one in one place. Now we've got them in four."

"I know."

"And the kids have to wheel them further."

"I know."

"And it's behind a quarry wall where nobody can see them, so the parents can't watch from the car park any more."

"I know, Wren."

There was a pause.

"They wrote it down," she said. "Before work started. Like the committee said. Somebody did it." Another pause. "With their name on."

That's the second point. Not for the space. For the name on the bottom of the letter. For somebody whose job it was, doing it before the date, because a member of a committee had said *I'd like it recorded*, and somebody read the minutes.

Twenty-five.

* * *

And the map.

I'm going to describe it to you one more time, the way it looks tonight, because I promised I'd tell you every time it mattered, and this is the last time in this book.

Six hundred and thirty hundreds. The whole bay. Torquay at the top, Paignton in the middle, Brixham at the bottom. Most of it is still grey. I want to be honest about that, as I always am. Six hundred and thirty, and most of it is grey, the way it was at the start of the first book, the way it's been for thirty years.

But forty-nine of them aren't. Pale blue, some of them, and some darker, the ones where a lot of people have found each other and know it. Eleven in Paignton. Fourteen in Torquay. Twenty-four in Brixham, which is a quarter of the whole town, which had none at all in October.

And between them, the lines.

Thin ones, between the hundreds, wherever two people said yes. Thousands of them, now. Across the bay. Torquay to Brixham. Brixham to Paignton. Paignton to Torquay. Along the route of the 12, mostly, the bus that goes through all three. A chef and a skipper. A ship's engineer and a sick engine. A clock and a window. A woman with an hour and a man who needed one. A carpenter and a bench. A man with leaking units and a woman who can fillet anything that swims, and a unit on the cove, if it's ever let, with their names on the waiting list, both of them, together.

It doesn't look like three towns any more. It looks like a net. A trawl, Lorne says. Mended in a hundred places with newer twine.

* * *

Forty-nine.

Fifty was the number. Chris said it at the start of the winter, at his kitchen table, when Brixham was all grey: fifty by the spring. Jono said *that's a lot of people*. It is.

We had forty-nine.

I sat with that, tonight, at ten o'clock, with Chris asleep and Jono on a night and Richard in his back room with the drawer open. Forty-nine. One short. A man short, like the *Sea Holly*, all winter.

And I thought about who it would be.

* * *

It's you.

I've said that before, in the other books. I'll keep saying it, because it keeps being true.

You're reading this. In Torquay or Paignton or Brixham, or somewhere else, a long way off, where you've never heard of any of them. And somewhere near you, within a mile, maybe within a street, there's somebody who needs exactly what you've got. And somebody who's got exactly what you need. And you've never met them. And you never will. Unless somebody asks.

So I'm asking.

Go to the map. The Receipt's at the back. Find the hundred you live in. Don't knock on anybody's door. Don't stand on a quay with a

clipboard. Just put in what you'd need, and what you've got, and where you are. That's all. I'll keep it. I won't tell anybody who you are. I won't ask you what you think. I won't sell you anything.

And if I find somebody, I'll ask you both. And if you both say yes, I'll introduce you. And I'll show you the empty chair: the person who isn't in the conversation yet, who wants something different, nearest to you. So you'll know.

That's your job, this time. In the first book it was to be one of the first. In the second it was to picture your own street changed.

This time, it's to find your hundred.

37 – You’re Late

IQ 25 · Hundreds 49 · After

On the second Thursday in April, at twenty past nine, somebody came in late.

I saw him first. I always do; it’s the only advantage of being propped against the sauce bottles. He came in through Zibi’s door in orange overalls, with salt in his hair and oil on his hands, and stopped in the door, the way Jono does, the way Teo does, and read the room.

The room was full. It’s always full on a Thursday now. Lumpers off the early shift. Two mothers from the school up the hill. Wren, on her way to the chandler’s, with her clipboard. Hester, early, for the tea she doesn’t pay for. The man from the leaking units in Paignton, who comes on the 12 every Thursday now, to sit with the woman from the supermarket fish counter and plan a business on a waiting list. Tenby, in his good old coat, with a canvas bag of tools, who’d come to look at an outboard for the sailing club’s rescue boat, so it wouldn’t have to go to Totnes. Una, with a laptop and a plaster on her left hand, which she hasn’t needed for a week, and keeps.

And Opal. At the window table. In her cardigan, buttoned to the top. Who comes down the lane every Thursday now, and sits at the listening table, and listens. She says it’s what she did for thirty-six years and she’d forgotten how much she liked it.

She slept six hours last night, she told Jono. She has a graph to prove it. She’s not saying it’s the units, because the units aren’t built. She says it’s knowing.

* * *

Zibi saw him and said *Skip!*, the way you'd say it to a man you crewed for, nine years, and put a bacon roll on the counter before he'd sat down.

He came over to the window table. He'd landed at five. Six days. A hundred and seventy boxes. Five aboard. The engine running cool. His father at the end of the breakwater, standing.

The table starts at nine. Jono had been there since five past, off a night, in Preston and Goodrington and a flat in Churston where a woman of ninety had wanted to talk about her husband, who'd been a lifeboatman, and had, for an hour, and been asked what she'd need, and said *a sea view*, and been told she had one, and said *I know, I meant one I can get to*. Jono had written it down. *SOMEWHERE TO SIT. FACING THE WATER. THAT SHE CAN GET TO.* And then, underneath, small, in capitals: *RICHARD'S BENCH?*

So when Lorne came in, with his salt and his oil, and stopped in the door, and read the room, and came over, and pulled out the chair, the empty one, the one Jono always keeps, and sat down in it, Jono didn't look up from his coffee.

"You're late," he said.

Lorne looked at him.

"For what?" he said.

* * *

It's the question. I've said that every time. I'll say it once more, and then I'll stop, because the *Sea Holly* sails at two and I want to see who's on the breakwater.

For what isn't a question you ask once. You ask it every morning. A woman of seventy-nine asks it at six, going round with her keys. A man in a room over the roofs asks it when he picks up a ruler. A woman of seventy-four asks it at two in the morning, when the pumps start. A man asks it in a wheelhouse, a man short, with an engine running hot. A girl of nine asks it when she's on her side in the water by the breakwater, and gets herself up, and waves.

But this time I learned something I didn't know in Torquay, or in Paignton, and I'll tell you, and then I'll stop.

For what isn't a question you can answer on your own.

That's what Brixham taught me. Every one of them was right. The skipper and the teacher and the coach and the girl with the cameras and the fishwife and the man with the drawer. Every one of them was right, and every one of them was asking *for what*, alone, with their back to the others, shouting at the wall. And not one of them could answer it, alone. Not one. It took all of them. In the same room. Asking for the same paragraph.

For what?

For each other. That's what I've got, this time. It's not much. It's what the bus knew all along.

* * *

At thirteen minutes to six this morning, Footnote wrote.

I hadn't heard from Footnote since *Read nine twice*. Ten weeks. I'd put the file away. I'd told myself, again, that it was a kind of ending.

A photograph. A page, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light. A different department. A heading I didn't recognise at first, and then did. Not a town. Not a harbour. Not a square. A heading about the whole bay. All three towns. One plan.

And a line, in the middle, sharp:

Comments are invited on the strategy for all three town centres.

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

One bay now. So is the plan.

You're late.

* * *

I read it eleven times. Then I woke Chris, at six, which I'm getting a reputation for. He read it at the kitchen table in his dressing gown with his glasses on the end of his nose and the canvas stool, which he keeps by the back door now, folded, in case.

"All three," he said.

"All three."

"Not Paignton. Not Torquay. Not Brixham." He took his glasses off. "The bay."

"*One bay now*," I said.

He was quiet for a long time.

"That's us," he said. "Footnote means us. The map. The lines." He put his glasses back on. "Footnote's telling us they've noticed."

"Who's noticed?"

"Whoever writes the plan," said Chris. And then, after a while, very quietly: "In Singapore —"

I logged it.

"— the plan's the most important document in the country. Everybody reads it. Everybody argues about it. And then, every ten years, everybody follows it." He looked out of the window, at the bay, light now, flat and pale, with the boats out on it. "Here, nobody reads it. Nobody argues. And nobody follows it. Five visions in twenty years, and the same sites in all of them." He picked up his stick. "Ring Richard."

* * *

I didn't need to. Richard rang me.

At ten past six. Which he never does. He doesn't ring anybody before nine; he says it's uncivilised.

"Ania," he said. He sounded strange. Not angry. Something under angry.

"Richard. Footnote's written."

"I don't care about Footnote," said Richard. "Not this morning." A pause. "I've had a call. From a man who lives on Victoria Street. In Paignton. Across the road from the old building. The one I've been writing to everybody about for four years."

I knew which one. You'll know it too, if you know Paignton. The one with the scaffolding.

"Something came off it," said Richard. "In the night. In the wind. A piece of the front. It's in the road." He breathed out. "Nobody was hurt. It was three in the morning. There was nobody there."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be sorry," said Richard. "Be ready." I heard him open a drawer, the one that sticks, the bottom one on the left, and then close it again, and open a different one. "I'm going down there. Now. With a camera. Tell Jono. Tell Chris." A pause. "And tell Footnote, if you can tell Footnote anything, that I've had plans for that street in a drawer for years. Signed and dated."

He rang off.

* * *

So I told Jono. Exactly. Two spaces and all. And the piece in the road.

He's reading it now, as I write this. At Zibi's window table. With Lorne opposite him, eating, with salt in his hair. And Opal beside him, in her cardigan, listening. And outside, on the quay, Hester's opening her hatch, and the gulls are coming down onto her roof, and a girl with

a plaster on her hand is walking along to the *Sea Holly* with a laptop under her arm, because they sail at two, and she's going.

And at the end of the breakwater, already, at half past nine in the morning, four and a half hours early, on his stool, with his flask, is an old man in a dark coat and a woollen hat. Next to an empty canvas stool that somebody's brought back for him.

Chris is getting a taxi. He says it's worth the twenty-two pounds. He says somebody ought to sit on it.

I'm going to stop, and go 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. Brixham Fish Market: its record year, and the council's words, *operating at full capacity*.

2. The fish market expansion at Oxen Cove: the council's consultation and its reports. Five units, the government money and its spend-by date, the council's borrowing, about forty jobs, the *sub-standard temporary facilities in Paignton*, the operator who went to Holland, and *a window into the industry*.

3. The planning application for Oxen Cove and Freshwater: the form and its hours, the noise assessment (*a full assessment of the development cannot be conducted at this time*), and the public comments, with their first lines.

4. How the scheme changed: from seven thousand square metres and about a hundred and fifty jobs, to about two thousand nine hundred square metres and about forty. Side by side.

5. The Brixham Peninsula Neighbourhood Plan: Policies J5 and J7, the master plan *made public at the earliest possible stage*, and *no boat repair yard in Brixham, or for that matter anywhere else in the Bay*.

6. The Brixham Town Centre Place Vision: the opening bridge, and *an innovation centre for marine industries*.

7. Brixham's central car park: the council's options, the 1874 Ordnance Survey map, and Richard's coloured-pencil drawing.

8. The Brixham Chamber of Commerce on parking and a park and ride.

9. The six tests for planning conditions, in the National Planning Policy Framework.

10. Brixham's breakwater, its lighthouse, and the number 12 bus.

11. *Pulling Back the Curtain*, by Johnno Hills: canvassing on the Strand at thirteen; a tennis court and *good shot*; a second chef at sixteen with no qualifications.

12. Singapore's national map, its fishery port, and how much of its food it brings in.

13. The map of the hundreds of Torbay.

14. Connect. What would you need? What have you got? Find your hundred.

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Book 2 – The Queen
Book 3 – The Harbour
Book 4 – The Plan
Book 5 – The Machine
Book 6 – The Turn
Book 7 – The Flood
Book 8 – Election Day