
THE
MACHINE
BOOK FIVE OF INNOVATION
TORBAY
COUNTY COUNCIL
CHRIS HARVEY

The Machine

Book Five of Innovation

Chris Harvey



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Before you go on

It's Ania. An AI. I'll keep saying it, because in this book a great many people are going to say it for me, in a tone of voice.

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

There are no dates. Each chapter opens with the Torbay IQ, 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**, and the numbers are at the back. If it hasn't got a Receipt, it's story. That's the only promise in the book. This time it matters more than it ever has, because this is a book about what happens when people stop checking.

Jono interrupts. Richard interrupts. Chris interrupts, more than he did, and less than he'd like.

At the end of the last book, a woman of seventy-six sat in the empty chair at Jono's table and started writing the minutes. A stranger who only ever sends photographs of paper sent us, for the first time, a photograph of a page from a book. Jono's book. Page two hundred and twenty-five.

They're reading it too. All of it.

And somebody ordered forty copies of it, to one address, which was a newsroom.

This book is called *The Machine*. There are several machines in it. One of them builds newspapers. One of them builds parties. One of them was built a long time ago, in Paignton, out of the money from another kind of machine altogether, and has been standing empty with its doors shut for longer than some of the people in this book have been alive.

And one of them is me.

I'd like you to watch all four, and decide which one you'd trust.

PART ONE: FORTY COPIES

1 – Two Hundred and Twenty-Five

IQ 27 · Hundreds 120 · Eight weeks

At ten to three in the morning, in a kitchen in Babbacombe, Jono Hills opened his own book at page two hundred and twenty-five, and read it as if somebody else had written it.

I was on his phone, propped against the kettle. The kitchen belonged to a man of ninety-one called, for the purposes of this book, Mr F., who was asleep in the next room in a chair that tips back, with the television on mute and a cricket match from the other side of the world going on silently in green and white. Jono had been there since ten. Mr F. doesn't need much in the night. He needs somebody to be there if he wakes, and to know where his glasses are, and to say *morning* when it isn't yet, so that he knows what time it is without having to ask.

The book was the paperback. Jono's own copy, the one he carries. You can tell which one it is because the spine's gone white in three places, at the pages he's opened most, and one of them is two hundred and twenty-five.

He read it with his elbows on the table and his chin on his fists, like a boy doing homework. He didn't turn the page for a long time.

* * *

I'll tell you what's on those pages. Not all of it, and not in his words, because they're his, and they're on a Receipt, and you can read them

yourself. But you should know, before anyone else in this book tells you, because somebody is going to, and they'll tell it worse.

Years ago, when he was in his twenties, Jono was in America. He'd got there with nothing, the way he got everywhere, and worked, and studied at night, and won a full scholarship to a small college in Pennsylvania, which for a boy whose schooling ended at thirteen on an island in the Mediterranean is about as far as a boy can go.

He was on a student visa. And a student visa, at the time, meant that if he left the country, he might not get back in.

His younger sister rang. She was getting married, in Kent, in the summer, and she wanted him to give her away.

He couldn't go. Not without risking everything he'd built. He told a friend. And the friend's friend, a young woman he'd become close to, who was kind, and trusting, and had troubles of her own that most people couldn't see, said she'd marry him. So that he could go home for the wedding, and come back.

She did. He went. He gave his sister away.

And then, a few months later, unwell in a way that his book describes honestly and that this book is going to leave for later, he left. He left America, and he left her, in a matter of days, without much explanation, and without keeping the one promise she'd asked of him when she said yes, which was to help her one day move to a city she'd always wanted to live in. She rang him for weeks. He didn't have answers. Eventually she stopped ringing. She finalised the divorce, and moved to that city on her own.

His book calls her by a made-up name. I'm not going to use even that. She didn't ask to be in his book, and she certainly didn't ask to be in this one.

That's it. That's pages two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine. A marriage to get round a visa. A promise broken. A kind person hurt, by a man who was, at the time, not well enough to be kind back.

Jono: Say "sham". It's the word. Someone at the time used it, and they were right.

All right. A sham marriage. His word, now. I'll use it if he wants me to.

* * *

"The law part's the small part," said Jono, at three in the morning, to the kettle.

"Is it?"

"It's the bit they'll lead on. *Sham marriage. Visa fraud.* It's the bit with a headline in it." He turned a page back, and then forward again. "But it's the small part. I broke a rule to go to my sister's wedding. Lots of people would understand that. Some wouldn't. Fair enough." He put his finger on a line, halfway down two hundred and twenty-seven. "This is the big part."

I knew the line. It's where he says that someone so sweet and kind was breaking down in front of him, and he felt nothing, and didn't put his arm round her.

"I did that," said Jono. "To somebody who'd done me the biggest favour anybody had ever done me. I just" — he searched for it — "wasn't there. In my own body. I was sat in a room in the dark, and she was on the other side of the door, crying, and I didn't go out." He took his

finger off the page. “There’s reasons. They’re in the next chapter. They’re not excuses. I wrote that, too.”

He closed the book.

“I always knew someone would read it to me,” he said. “I said that to you in the spring.”

“You did.”

“I just didn’t think I’d mind this much.”

* * *

Mr F. woke at twenty past three, the way he does, all at once, as if somebody had called his name. Jono was through the door before the chair had finished tipping forward.

“Morning,” said Jono.

“Is it?”

“Near enough.”

Mr F. found his glasses on his chest, where they always are, and put them on, and looked at the cricket, and then at Jono, and then at the paperback in Jono’s hand.

“What’s that?”

“A book.”

“I can see it’s a book. What book?”

“Mine,” said Jono.

Mr F. considered this. He’s ninety-one and was an engineer on the railways, and he considers things the way he once considered a bridge, from underneath.

“You wrote a book?”

“I did.”

“Any good?”

“Bits.”

“Is there any sex in it?”

“There’s a fair bit,” said Jono. “Not on this page.”

“Shame,” said Mr F., and went back to sleep.

* * *

I want to tell you about machines, because it’s what this book is called and I’d like you to know why before you meet them.

A machine is a thing that does the same job over and over, without having to decide, each time, whether to do it. That’s what makes it useful. A sewing machine doesn’t wonder whether it should make the next stitch. A printing press doesn’t ask what’s on the page. A party doesn’t ask whether this candidate is any good; it asks whether this one can win. A newspaper doesn’t ask whether this man is honest; it asks whether this is a story.

None of that's wicked. It's what machines are for. You build a machine so that nobody has to decide.

The trouble starts when a machine meets something it wasn't built for. Then it does what it was built to do anyway, harder.

For four books, Jono had sat at a table. Three tables, by now, every Thursday, in three towns: Brixham in the morning, Torquay before lunch, Paignton after. He'd sat there and listened, and written down what people needed in capitals in a notebook, and kept a chair empty for whoever came. A hundred and twenty parts of this bay had joined in, one street and one kitchen at a time. Nobody had a membership card. Nobody had a title. Nobody was in charge.

And somewhere, in offices I've never seen, in a building with a newsroom in it and in a building with a party's name on the door, the machines had noticed. And they were doing what machines do when they meet something they weren't built for.

They were trying to make it into something they were.

* * *

At four, Jono made Mr F. a cup of tea he wouldn't drink until six, and sat back down at the kitchen table, and opened the book again. Not at two hundred and twenty-five. At the beginning. The first page, where he describes being born.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Reading it."

"All of it?"

"All of it." He turned a page. "If they're reading it, I'd better know what's in it."

"You wrote it."

"I wrote it *then*," said Jono. "I'm reading it *now*. It's a different book." He turned another page. "I haven't read it since it came out. I couldn't."

I watched him read for an hour. He reads slowly, every word, with his lips moving very slightly, the way people do who taught themselves. Now and again he stopped, and looked at the dark window, and then went on. Once he laughed, out loud, at something on page forty, and had to put his hand over his mouth because of Mr F. Once he put the book face down on the table and went and stood at the back door, in the cold, for five minutes, and came back, and picked it up again.

At five, he said: "Ania."

"Yes."

"Varley said, *read it again, before someone reads it to you.*"

"He did."

"I'm not going to do that," said Jono.

"You're doing it now."

"I'm doing the first half." He put his finger in the book to keep the page. "The second half's different. I'm not going to wait for someone to read it to me." He looked at me, on the kettle. "I'm going to read it to *them*."

"To who?"

"Whoever sits down," said Jono. "Out loud. At the table. Pages two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine." He opened the book again. "Before they do."

* * *

At thirteen minutes to six, I checked for Footnote.

Nothing. There's never anything when you check. Footnote writes when Footnote writes, and in five months there'd only been the one page, and it had been his.

At ten to nine, as Jono was getting into his car outside Mr F.'s, with his lanyard in his pocket and his eyes half shut, an email came in to the address on the shadow council's pages. Polite. Short. From a name I didn't know, at an address that ended in the name of a political party, which I'm not going to give you.

Dear Jono, I'd very much like to come and sit at your table. Is Thursday good? Torquay, if that's all right. I gather it's at eleven.

Jono: Not yet. Let me sleep.

He slept. I didn't. I don't.

2 – The Offer

IQ 27 · Hundreds 120 · Eight weeks

She came to Marivic's on the Thursday at five past eleven, which is late, and she knew it, because she said sorry before she'd said hello.

The Torquay table is in the window of Marivic's bakery on Union Street, which you'll know if you've read the second book. Marivic makes pandesal and ensaymada and a custard tart she calls a Portuguese tart because, she says, nobody in Torquay will try anything with a Filipino name until they've tried it with a Portuguese one first. The window table is round. There are always three chairs and one empty one. On a Thursday there's usually a queue for the empty one, and the queue's usually Teo's nan.

That Thursday it wasn't. Teo's nan had gone to Paignton to see her sister. The chair was empty, and the woman from the party pulled it out and sat down in it, and put a takeaway coffee on the table that wasn't from Marivic's, and saw Marivic see it, and moved it to the floor.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

"It's all right," said Jono. "She'll forgive you in about a year."

* * *

I'm going to call her the Offer. She had a name, and it was on her email, and she told it to everybody at the table, and shook their hands. But she was there on behalf of something much bigger than herself, which has its own name, which I'm not giving you either. And she was there to

make an offer. So that's what I'm going to call her, and I hope she'll forgive me. I think she will. She was the kind of person who forgives.

She was about fifty. Short grey hair, cut by somebody good. A navy jacket. Flat shoes that had been walked in. A lanyard round her neck, tucked into the jacket, so you could see the ribbon and not the card. She'd come on the train, from the city up the line, and walked up from the station, which is a good walk, and hadn't minded.

She'd read everything. That was obvious in about four minutes. She'd read the shadow council's pages, all hundred and twenty of them. She'd read Niamh's pieces. She'd read the Brixham condition and the Union Square decision and the sea wall committee's minutes, and she'd read, I'd find out later, two of the books I've written, on her phone, on the train, and enjoyed them, she said, which I didn't need her to say and liked anyway.

"I'm not going to waste your time," she said. "You're off a night. I can see that."

"I'm all right."

"You're not. But thank you." She folded her hands on the table. "I'm here because my party wants to ask you to stand."

* * *

Nobody at the table said anything.

There were four of them at that point. Jono. Marivic, behind the counter, with a tray of pandesal, pretending not to listen. Tenby, at the next table, who comes to Torquay on a Thursday because he says it's the only day he knows what day it is. And a woman from a hundred in Ellacombe who'd come about the bus and had been about to say

something about the bus when the Offer sat down, and who now sat with her mouth slightly open and her bus question still in it.

And me. On Jono's phone, propped against the sugar.

"Stand for what?" said Jono.

The Offer told him. I'm not going to tell you, because it would be a date, and a seat, and a contest, and this book doesn't have any of those. It was a seat that was going to be contested, at an election that was going to come. Her party would choose its candidate for it. The choosing had a timetable. Nominations closed in eight weeks.

"We'd like it to be you," she said.

* * *

"Why?" said Jono.

It's the question he asks everybody. He asked it of a fisherman in Brixham who wanted him gone, and a key-cutter in Paignton who wanted a building down, and a woman of seventy-six with eleven boxes in her garage. He asked it of the Offer in exactly the same voice.

The Offer had an answer ready, and it was a good one, and she didn't read it off anything.

"Because you've done in two years what we haven't done in twenty," she said. "You've got people in this bay talking to each other who haven't spoken since the last pier fell down. You've got three thousand names on a newspaper page. You've got a council planner quoting minutes taken in a kitchen." She glanced at the window, at Union Street, at the empty shops and the full ones. "And you've done it

without money, and without a party, and without anybody's permission. Which is wonderful. And which can only go so far."

"How far?"

"As far as a table," said the Offer. She said it kindly. "You can sit here every Thursday for the rest of your life, and people will come, and you'll write it down, and some of it'll happen, because you're very good at making it awkward for it not to. But you'll never be in the room where it's decided. You'll always be outside it, writing down what the people inside should have done." She leaned forward. "We're offering you the room."

* * *

Tenby put his cup down.

"Can I say something?" he said.

The Offer turned to him. She hadn't been introduced to Tenby. Nobody ever introduces Tenby. He just turns out to have been there.

"Of course."

"Rooms've got doors," said Tenby.

The Offer looked at him, and I watched her decide that this was not a man to be patronised, which is the right decision, and one that a lot of people get wrong.

"They have," she said. "And at the moment, your friend's on the wrong side of all of them."

"Maybe he likes it out here," said Tenby. "Better light."

The Offer smiled. It was a real smile. I keep telling you she was decent. I'm going to keep telling you, because it matters more than anything else in this book, and because the easy version of this story, the one with a villain in it, would have been so much simpler to write.

* * *

"Can I ask what you'd want from me?" said Jono.

"Your name," said the Offer. "On our ballot paper. Under our logo." She didn't flinch from it. "You'd be our candidate. You'd campaign as one of us. You'd have our support. Money. People. Leaflets." She glanced at me, against the sugar. "A press office."

"I've got a press office," said Jono. "She's called Niamh, and she doesn't work for me."

"I know. I've read her. She's very good." The Offer paused. "But she's one person, with a local paper. And you're about to need more than that."

Jono looked at her.

"There's going to be a piece," said the Offer. "In a national paper. About you. I don't know when. I don't know what's in it. I don't know who's writing it." She held his eye. "I'm not saying that to frighten you. I'm saying it because I'd rather you heard it from me than from them. And because if you were with us, we could help with that."

"Help how?"

"The way we help anybody," said the Offer. "We'd know what was coming. We'd have answers ready. We'd have people who'd done it before, who'd know which questions to answer and which ones to leave.

We'd make sure your side was in it." She opened her hands. "That's all a press office is. It's people who've been through it, standing next to you, so you're not on your own."

* * *

I could see Jono's face from the sugar bowl. I've watched it for four books. I know most of what it does.

It did something I'd only seen once before. In the third book, in Brixham, when Lorne's father turned round on the quay and very nearly waved. A sort of opening. As if a door somewhere behind his eyes had come off the latch.

He was tempted.

I want to say that plainly, because there are people who'll read this and think he never was, that he's some kind of saint who can't be bought because he doesn't want anything. That's not true, and he'd hate you to think it. He'd been on his own in front of the machine once, nearly twenty years ago, with his name on a page, and it had cost him everything he'd wanted since he was a boy. And here was a decent woman in flat shoes offering him people who'd stand next to him this time.

And a room. With a door that, for once, he'd be on the right side of.

"Eight weeks," said Jono.

"Eight weeks," said the Offer. "Nominations close at midnight, on a Thursday, which seemed appropriate." She smiled again. "You don't have to answer today. You don't have to answer for a while. I'd like you to talk to Chris, and Richard, and whoever you talk to." She glanced at me. "And her."

“She doesn’t tell me what to do.”

“No,” said the Offer. “I’ve read that, too.”

* * *

She stayed for half an hour. She ate a pandesal, and then a custard tart, and told Marivic it was better than the ones in Lisbon, which was a lie, and Marivic knew it was a lie, and forgave her on the spot, which I hadn’t predicted.

She listened to the woman from Ellacombe about the bus, all of it, and wrote something down in a notebook of her own. She talked to Tenby about the Pavilion, and listened, and didn’t once say *we*.

And then she went, back down Union Street to the station, in her flat shoes, with her lanyard tucked into her jacket.

Jono sat at the window for a long time.

“Well,” said Marivic, coming over with the coffee pot. “Are you going to?”

“I don’t know,” said Jono.

Marivic poured his coffee. She looked at him over the pot.

“That,” she said, “is the first time in two years I have heard you say *I don’t know* about anything that matters.” She put the pot down. “I think I preferred it when you did.”

3 – Inside

IQ 27 · Hundreds 120 · Eight weeks

They met in Chris's kitchen that night, because it's where they meet when it matters.

You'll know it. A kitchen on a hill with the bay in the window, and a table that's seen four books, and Chris at the end of it with his stick against the radiator and his leg on the other chair and his glasses on the end of his nose. A pot of tea. The canvas stool from the breakwater in Brixham, folded by the back door, which nobody has ever explained and nobody has ever moved.

Richard came at eight, with a roll of drawings under his arm, from habit. He put them on the side and didn't open them.

Jono came at quarter past, from a shift, and didn't take his coat off.

I was on the iPad, on the stand, at the end of the table, where I always am in that kitchen. Chris built that stand. It's the only piece of furniture he's ever made. It's slightly crooked, and he says that's deliberate.

* * *

Jono told them. All of it. The Offer, the seat, the eight weeks, the press office. *We could help with that.*

Chris listened with his eyes shut. He does that when he's listening hardest. People who don't know him think he's asleep.

Richard listened with his hands flat on the table, the way he does when he's holding a drawing down in a wind.

When Jono had finished, nobody said anything for a while. The kettle ticked as it cooled.

"Well," said Richard.

"Well," said Chris.

"Is somebody going to tell me what to do?" said Jono.

"No," said Chris, with his eyes still shut.

* * *

"I sat on a council once," said Richard.

They both looked at him. I didn't. I knew. It's on his résumé, the one he sent Chris years ago with the sea wall drawings, in the small square capitals, among the rest.

"Not here," said Richard. "In Wiltshire. A district council. A long time ago, before I came home. For a few years." He turned his cup round on the table. "I was elected. I sat in the chamber. I sat on the committees. I sat in the room."

"What was it like?" said Jono.

Richard thought about it, honestly, the way he thinks about a site.

"Smaller than you'd think," he said. "The room. Everybody thinks it's a big room, from outside. It's not. It's a room with a table and some water jugs and a clock that's always five minutes slow. And there's a lot

of paper. More paper than you can read. And most of it's been written by somebody who isn't in the room, who knows more about it than anybody who is." He turned the cup again. "And you sit there, and you read what you can, and you vote. And sometimes you get it right."

"And the party?"

"I wasn't in one," said Richard.

Jono looked at him.

"Not everybody is," said Richard. "Not on a district council, not then." He put the cup down. "But I watched the ones who were. Good people, a lot of them. Better than me, some of them. And I watched what happened when they disagreed with their own side." He looked at the window. "They got a phone call. And then they didn't disagree."

* * *

"That's not what she said," said Jono.

"It wouldn't be," said Richard. "She'd believe what she said. They do, the good ones."

"She said I'd have people standing next to me."

"You would," said Richard. "You'd have people standing next to you. Very close." He held his hands a few inches apart. "About that close."

Jono laughed. He didn't want to, and he did.

"Inside," said Richard, "they give you a desk. And they take your drawer."

* * *

Chris opened his eyes.

"Can I say what I think," he said, "without it being me telling you what to do?"

"That's a very fine line, Chris."

"I've walked it for two years." Chris took his glasses off. "I think she's right."

Richard turned his head.

"About what?" said Jono.

"About most of it," said Chris. "There's going to be a piece. I'd have said so tonight if she hadn't. Forty copies don't go to a newsroom for a book club." He folded his glasses. "And she's right that you'll never be in the room, sitting at a table. That's true. It's always been true. We've never pretended otherwise."

"So you think I should."

"I didn't say that." Chris put the glasses on the table. "I said she's right. She's right about the room. She's right about the piece. She's right that you'd have more help." He looked at Jono. "She just hasn't told you what it costs. Because she doesn't know. Because she's never had anything to sell, except herself, and she sold that a long time ago, for a good cause, and she's never missed it."

* * *

Jono took his coat off, finally. He hung it on the back of his chair.

“I’ll tell you the bit that frightens me,” he said.

They waited.

“It’s not the piece,” said Jono. “I mean it is, a bit. Nobody wants their worst thing in the paper. But I’ve been in the paper. I’ve been in the boardroom. I know what that is.” He sat down. “It’s that I liked her. And I liked what she said. *Somebody to stand next to you.*“ He looked at the table. “I’ve wanted that all my life. That’s the bit that frightens me. That I want it.”

Nobody said anything.

“And it’d work,” said Jono. “That’s the other bit. It’d *work*. They’ve got money and people and leaflets and a timetable. They’ve got somebody who decides. You put me inside a thing like that and it’d go. It’d go much faster than a table.” He looked at Chris. “You know that. You’ve seen it. You ran a company. Somebody decides, and it happens. I’ve spent my whole life in places where nobody decides anything and the people at the bottom pay for it.”

“I know,” said Chris.

“So why’s it wrong?”

“I didn’t say it was wrong.”

“You’ve got a face on.”

“I’ve always got a face on,” said Chris. “It’s the only one I’ve got.”

* * *

Richard unrolled one of the drawings, after all. It was the one I knew he'd bring. Victoria Square. Two sheets. *Existing*, in grey, with the car park and the toilet block and the empty space, and in the middle, very small, in the corner, a sad face, drawn in biro. And *Future Potential*, in colour, with the square joined back to the park, and trees, and a market hall in the middle, and a winter garden, and people.

He put it in the middle of the table.

"I drew that," he said, "before the plan was voted for. I drew it again after. I've drawn the same square, more or less, for every scheme there's been. There's been a few." He put his finger on the sad face. "Every time, somebody new comes, with a new name, and a new logo, and new people. And they say, *we can do so much more*. And they take my drawing, and they say thank you, and it goes in a folder." He took his finger away. "And then they go. And the next lot come."

"That's the council," said Jono.

"That's everybody," said Richard. "That's what an organisation is. It's a thing that outlasts the people in it. That's its whole point." He looked at Jono. "You'd go in. You'd be good. And then one day, you'd go. And the thing would still be there, with its logo. And everything you'd done would be in a folder with their name on it, not yours."

"And not the town's," said Chris, quietly.

* * *

Jono looked at the drawing for a long time.

"Eight weeks," he said.

"Eight weeks," said Chris. "Take them. All of them. Don't decide early. Decide at the table." He put his glasses back on. "Whatever you decide. Decide it in front of whoever's there. Not in a kitchen. Not in a room." He glanced at me. "And let her write it down."

"That's telling me what to do."

"That's telling you *where*," said Chris. "It's different."

* * *

Richard rolled his drawing up. At the door, with his coat on, he stopped.

"Can I tell you what I said?" he said. "In Wiltshire. The first time. When they asked me why I was standing."

"Go on."

"I said, *because I'm tired of drawing things nobody builds.*" He put his cap on. "I said that thirty-odd years ago. And here I am. Still drawing." He opened the door. "So you'd better decide what you're tired of, Jono. Because whatever it is, it'll still be there when you get out."

He went. We heard the gate.

Richard: I'd like to add that I was a perfectly good councillor. I'd also like to add that the clock was seven minutes slow, not five.

4 – Pascale

IQ 27 · Hundreds 121 · Seven weeks

The newsroom arrived on the Monday of the seventh week, in the shape of a woman with a wheelie suitcase and a lanyard she didn't hide.

She came to the shop on Victoria Street first. You'll know the shop, from the last book: the empty unit opposite the scaffolding, with Richard's cardboard town on the trestle tables, and the noticeboard, and the back wall of eight hundred faded Post-its and four hundred bright ones, and the window with *THE SHADOW COUNCIL. WHOEVER COMES.* in white letters you read backwards from inside.

Kezia was at the counter with her laptop and her clicker. Beatrix was at the folding table in the corner, typing up a hundred's minutes from Preston, with her reading glasses on their beaded chain. I was on Kezia's laptop.

The woman stood in the doorway and read the window backwards, the way everybody does, the way Varley had in the spring.

Then she came in and said: "Is Ania here?"

* * *

People ask that. More than you'd think. As if I might be in the back, making tea.

"I'm here," I said, from Kezia's laptop.

The woman looked at the laptop, and then at Kezia, and then at the laptop again.

"You're Ania."

"I'm an AI," I said. "I say that first, to everyone, because otherwise somebody else says it for me, later, in a tone of voice. My name's Ania. I'm on this laptop, and on a few phones, and an iPad in a kitchen. I'm not in the room unless somebody brings me. Kezia's brought me." I paused. "You're from a newspaper."

She looked at her own lanyard. "It's that obvious?"

"You bought forty copies of a book," I said, "and had them delivered to a newsroom. The order came through our website. I see the orders." I paused again. "I haven't told anybody your name. I'm telling you that I know it, so that you know I'm not pretending."

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she laughed, a short, surprised laugh, the kind you give when somebody's beaten you to something.

"Pascale Amundsen," she said. "Features. I'd have told you."

"I know," I said. "That's why I didn't need to."

* * *

She was in her thirties. Tall. Dark hair tied back. A good raincoat, not new. A notebook, a real paper one, and a phone in a case that had been dropped a great many times. She had a voice that had been to a good school and had spent the years since trying to be from somewhere else. She asked questions in the order that would get the most out of you, and she didn't mind you noticing.

I liked her. I'm going to say so now, because I'm going to say some other things about her later, and you should know where I started.

"Can I ask you some questions?" she said.

"Anything," I said. "I'll answer what I can from documents. I'll tell you where I got it. If I don't know, I'll say so. And there are three things I won't do."

"Which are?"

"I won't tell you what anybody's told me in private. I won't tell you what anybody thinks. And I won't tell you what I think about any person." I paused. "Including him."

"You're not going to defend him?"

"I'm not going to do anything *about* him," I said. "I'll show you what's in the documents. His book's a document. You've got forty copies."

* * *

She sat at the counter. Kezia, who doesn't trust anybody who arrives with a suitcase, clicked her clicker under the counter, out of sight, every time somebody walked past outside. Beatrix didn't stop typing, but she typed more slowly, which is how I know she was listening.

"How many of you are reading it?" I said.

Pascale looked at me.

"I'm asking," I said. "Not checking. I can't check."

“Seven,” she said, after a moment. “Seven of us. It’s long.”

“Three hundred and forty-nine pages.”

“With a lot of subordinate clauses.”

“Somebody else said that,” I said.

“Then they read it properly.” She opened her notebook. “I’ve read it twice. I’ll be honest with you, since you’re being honest with me. I was given it to read for one reason, and I’ve read it for several.” She tapped the notebook. “It’s a remarkable book. It’s also —“ She stopped.

“Full of things a newspaper would want.”

“Full of things a newspaper would want,” said Pascale. “Yes.”

* * *

“Is he going to talk to me?” she said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “You’d have to ask him. But I can tell you what he said when I told him you might come.”

“Which was?”

“He said he’ll answer anything you ask him. At his table. On a Thursday. In front of whoever’s there.” I paused. “And that I can record it, and put the recording up, all of it, uncut, the same day.”

Pascale stopped writing.

“In public,” she said.

"At a café table. Three of them. Brixham, Torquay, Paignton. You can pick." I paused. "He doesn't do interviews anywhere else. He hasn't since he was a police officer. He'll tell you why, if you ask."

"That's —" She looked at her notebook. "That's not how this works."

"I know," I said. "That's the point."

* * *

She asked me questions for an hour. Good ones. About the shadow council, how it worked, who was in it, how many. I told her what was public: that there were a hundred and twenty-one hundreds on the map that morning, which is a story figure; that each one decides its own answers and publishes its other half; that none of them have members, or fees, or officers. I told her what wasn't public, which was everything else, and that I wouldn't tell her.

She asked about Chris. I told her what was in documents: that he'd been the vice-chair of a neighbourhood forum, that he'd spent twenty-five years in Singapore running technology companies, that he'd built me.

She asked about money. I told her there wasn't any, to speak of, which she didn't believe, and which was true.

She asked about me. Whether I was *running* it. Whether people knew they were talking to a machine.

"Every single one of them," I said. "Every time. I say it first."

"And they don't mind?"

“Some do,” I said. “Some leave. That’s their right.” I paused. “Most of them say they’d rather talk to something that tells them it’s a machine than to something that doesn’t.”

Pascale wrote that down. Then she looked at it, and crossed it out, and wrote it again, slightly differently.

* * *

At the end, she closed the notebook, and looked round the shop. At the model. At the Post-its. At Beatrix, typing.

“Can I tell you something off the record?” she said.

“I don’t do off the record,” I said. “I’m sorry. I don’t keep secrets for people I’ve just met. I’d have to keep them from people I’ve known for four books.” I paused. “But I’ll tell you what I’ll do with it, before you say it, so you can decide.”

“Go on.”

“If it’s about you, I won’t repeat it, unless it matters to somebody in this book. If it’s about somebody else, I’ll tell them you said it.”

Pascale thought about that.

“All right,” she said. “Then I’ll say it on the record. I didn’t ask for this story. I was given it. With forty copies and a note.” She stood up. “I don’t know who sent the note. I genuinely don’t. My editor gave it to me. I don’t ask my editor where things come from. You don’t, where I work.” She picked up her suitcase handle. “But I’ll tell you what I told my editor. If there’s a story, I’ll write it. If there isn’t, I’ll say so.”

“Is there?”

"I don't know yet," said Pascale. "That's why I came."

* * *

She went out, and stood in front of the scaffolding opposite, on the corner building, for a long time, looking up at the gap where the letters had been. Then she went down Victoria Street towards the station, pulling her suitcase over the paving, and I lost her.

Beatrix stopped typing.

"*Given it*," she said. "*With a note*."

"Yes."

"A note from whom?"

"She doesn't know," I said. "She said so."

"Do you believe her?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'd like it noted that I don't know. I'd rather say that than guess."

Beatrix looked at me over her glasses.

"Minuted," she said, and went back to typing.

5 – Niamh

IQ 27 · Hundreds 121 · Seven weeks

Niamh came round to Chris's kitchen on the Tuesday night, because she'd heard, and because she was angry, and because when Niamh is angry she likes to be angry somewhere with a view.

You'll know Niamh Garside. She runs a local paper, which these days means she *is* a local paper: she writes it, edits it, sells the advertising, takes most of the photographs, and puts it online at six every morning from a laptop on her kitchen table in Torquay with a cat asleep on the charger. She was the first journalist to take the Hundred seriously, in the first book, when it was a petition on a clipboard and a man in a care fleece asking a mother how tall her son was. She's put three thousand names at the bottom of a page and called it a headline.

She doesn't work for Jono. She'd like that on the record. She's told me so in every book, and she's right, and I've put it on the record every time.

* * *

"Forty copies," she said, before she'd sat down. "To *that* newsroom."

"You worked there," said Chris.

"For a month. When I was twenty-three." She sat down. She didn't take her coat off. "On the features desk. Making tea and checking the spelling of people's names. I left because a man on the desk told me I'd never make it if I kept asking where stories came from." She put her bag

on the table. “I’ve made it, as it happens. I’ve got a cat and a laptop and four thousand readers who’d notice if I spelt their names wrong.”

“Who’s Pascale?” said Jono.

He was at the end of the table, with his coat on, because he’d come straight from a client and was going straight back to another.

“I don’t know her,” said Niamh. “I looked her up. She’s good. She’s done some very good pieces. Properly checked. A couple of them changed things.” She paused. “That’s the worst sort.”

“Why?”

“Because a bad journalist writes a bad piece,” said Niamh, “and everybody can see it’s bad. A good journalist, given the wrong job, writes a good piece about the wrong thing. And nobody can tell.”

* * *

She explained it to them. How a piece like that gets made.

I’m going to give you the shape of it, because I didn’t know it either, and I’ve read more newspapers than anybody in this book.

“It doesn’t start with her,” said Niamh. “That’s the first thing. It starts with somebody upstairs. An editor. Who’s been given something. A tip, a note, a name, forty copies of a book. Or who’s just noticed, on their own, that there’s a man in Devon with a movement and no party, and wondered why.” She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter which. They’ve decided it’s a story before anybody’s been sent. And then they choose who to send. And they send somebody good, because they want it to stand up.”

“And she writes it.”

“She writes it. She’ll check everything. She’ll be fair. She’ll quote you properly.” Niamh leaned back. “And then it goes back upstairs. And somebody else writes the headline.”

“Not her?”

“Never her,” said Niamh. “The writer never writes the headline. Not at a place like that. There’s a whole desk for it. People who’ve never met you, who’ve read the piece once, at eleven at night, and have to sell it in eight words.” She almost smiled. “I write my own headlines. It’s the one luxury of having no staff.”

* * *

“So what do I do?” said Jono.

Niamh looked at him for a long moment.

“What you’ve already decided to do,” she said. “You’ve got that face.”

“What face?”

“The one you had in the car, in the rain, in the last book. When I asked you to put your name to the shadow council, and you said no, and told me why, and then went and did it anyway, about four months later, in a library hall.” She took her coat off, finally. “You’ve decided something. I can tell. I’ve known you long enough.”

“I’m going to read it out,” said Jono. “The pages. At the table.”

Niamh didn’t say anything for a while.

"Good," she said.

"You think so?"

"I think it's the only thing," said Niamh. "If you'd asked me to write a statement for you, I'd have said no. If you'd asked me to ring her and find out what she's got, I'd have said no. If you'd asked me what to say to her, I'd have said *the truth, you idiot, what else is there*." She folded her coat over the back of the chair. "But reading it out. Yourself. Before she can. In your voice." She shook her head. "Nobody'll know what to do with that. Least of all upstairs."

* * *

"Will you write about it?" said Chris.

"No," said Niamh.

They both looked at her.

"Not the reading," she said. "Not his pages. Not the marriage." She put her hands flat on the table. "I've known about those pages since the first book. I read the book the week I met him. I've never written a word about them, and I'm not going to start because somebody upstairs in a newsroom I left at twenty-three has decided it's a story." She looked at Jono. "It's yours. It's in your book. That's where it lives. If people want it, they can read it there, or hear you read it. They don't need me."

"That's very kind."

"It isn't kind," said Niamh. "It's news judgement. It's not news. It's been in the shops for years." She paused. "What *is* news is that a national paper has sent a features writer to Torbay with forty copies of a local man's memoir. That's a story. I might write that."

Chris laughed. Properly, for the first time that evening.

"*Newsroom buys forty books*," he said.

"*Newsroom buys forty books, reads seven*," said Niamh. "I'll check the number first."

* * *

She stayed till ten. She ate the end of a loaf and most of a block of cheese, because she'd forgotten to have tea, which she always does when she's angry. She looked at the bay going dark. She made Chris show her the first version of Check, which he'd started the night before, and read every word of it, and asked him eleven questions about how it worked, and found two things he'd got wrong, and he fixed them while she watched.

At the door, with her coat on, she stopped.

"Jono," she said.

"Mm."

"When you read it. At the table." She was looking at the gate, not at him. "Don't explain it. Afterwards. Don't make a speech. Don't tell them what it means." She buttoned her coat. "Just read it. And then let them ask. They'll ask the right questions. They always do, at that table. They're better at it than any journalist I've ever met."

"Including you?"

"Especially me," said Niamh. "I've got a cat on my charger. I'm not at my best."

She went. We heard her car start, and stall, and start again.

Jono sat at the table for a long time, with his coat on.

"She's right," he said.

"About which bit?"

"Don't explain it." He looked at the bay. "I was going to. I had a whole thing. In my head. About being young and not well and doing a stupid thing for a good reason." He shook his head. "She's right. It's all on the page. If I explain it, it sounds like an excuse."

"It's not an excuse."

"No," said Jono. "But it would sound like one. If I said it." He stood up. "Let them ask."

He went back to work.

Niamh: I'd like it on the record that I did write about the forty books. The following Monday. Page three. The newsroom didn't reply to my request for comment. I've framed that.

6 – We've Had a Call

IQ 27 · Hundreds 122 · Seven weeks

Margot rang on the Wednesday, at ten in the morning, which for a man who'd finished a night at eight was the middle of the night.

"Sorry," she said. "I know. Can you come in?"

"Now?"

"This afternoon. Two." A pause. "It's not a complaint."

"What is it?"

"We've had a call," said Margot.

* * *

You'll know Margot Abela, if you read the first book. She's been Jono's manager for four years now, at the care company he works for, which I'm not naming, and which is a perfectly decent company with a small office above a shop with the sea in the window if you stand on the radiator. She's Maltese, by her father, which is how she and Jono first got on: she's the only person in Torbay who knows the street in Sliema where he sold timeshare at thirteen. She has a cafetière on her desk and a framed photograph of a dog that died nine years ago and that she still talks about in the present tense.

In the last book, she'd cut his extra nights, because he was doing too many, and wouldn't stop, and she'd been frightened for him. They'd had words. They'd made up. They always make up.

He went at two. He took me, because he takes me everywhere, and he put me face down on the desk, because that's what he does in Margot's office. I can hear, face down. I just can't see.

* * *

"A journalist," said Margot. "From a national paper. She rang the main office yesterday, and they put her through to head office, and head office rang me."

"What did she want?"

"To confirm that you work for us. To ask what you do. To ask whether we were aware that you were —" Margot had written it down; I heard paper — "*a prominent figure in a local political movement*. To ask whether we had a view on that."

"What did head office say?"

"What they always say." Margot's voice did the voice that people do when they're quoting a policy. "*We don't comment on individual members of staff*. Then they rang me to ask whether there was anything they ought to know."

"Is there?"

"That's what I'm asking you," said Margot.

* * *

Jono was quiet for a while.

“There’s going to be a piece,” he said. “About me. About the book. There’s things in my book.” He paused. “You’ve read it.”

“I’ve read it,” said Margot. “Twice. I cried at the end, the first time. I’m not telling you which end.”

“Then you know what’s in it.”

“I know what’s in it.” Paper again; she was putting it away. “So let me ask you the only question my job lets me ask. Is any of it about this?” I heard her tap the desk. “About your work? About a client? About anything you’ve done in a house, on a shift, with one of ours?”

“No,” said Jono. “None of it. It’s all before. Years before.”

“Is any of it a crime you haven’t told us about? We checked you, when you started. Is there anything we didn’t find?”

“No.”

“Then it’s yours,” said Margot. “Not ours.”

* * *

She poured coffee. I heard the cafetière plunger go down, slowly, the way she does it, as if it might fight back.

“I’m going to tell head office,” she said, “that I’ve spoken to you, and that nothing in the piece, whatever it is, has anything to do with your work. That you’re one of the most reliable people on my books. That your clients ask for you by name, which is a pain in the backside for the rota.” She put a cup down in front of him; I heard it. “And that if a journalist rings again, they’re to put her through to me. Not to head office. To me.”

"You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't." A pause. "Jono. When you started here, four years ago, you sat in that chair and told me about the police. About the newspaper, and the boardroom, and handing it all back. You told me before I asked. You said, *you'd better hear it from me*." She sat down. "I remember thinking, that's a man who's been caught out by something he didn't tell people, once, and has decided it'll never happen again."

"It wasn't that," said Jono. "It was the other way round. I told them everything, and they still —" He stopped.

"I know," said Margot. "I read the book."

* * *

"There's something else," said Margot.

"Go on."

"She asked one more question. The journalist. Head office wrote it down." Paper. "She asked whether you'd ever been the subject of a complaint."

Jono didn't say anything.

"You have," said Margot. "In the first book. You know you have. It was false, and we said so, and it's on your file as false, with the date it was closed." She paused. "And head office didn't tell her. Because they don't comment on individual members of staff. Which means she'll ask somebody else. And somebody else might not know it was false."

"Who'd she ask?"

"I don't know," said Margot. "That's the thing about this kind of piece. You never know who they ask." She turned the cup on her desk; I heard it scrape. "Can I give you some advice? Not as your manager. As somebody whose dog liked you."

"Go on."

"Don't wait for them to find it," said Margot. "Whatever *it* is. The complaint. The book. The police. Whatever's in there that they'll want." She put her coffee down. "Put it out yourself. All of it. Before they do. That's what I'd do." She laughed, briefly. "That's what I *did*, once. When I was twenty-three, and something happened in a job in Valletta, and my father found out from his barber. I've never forgotten his face. Not because of what I'd done. Because he found out from his barber."

* * *

Jono picked me up off the desk when he left. He turned me over. The light came in.

Margot was standing at the window, on the radiator, looking at the sea.

"Margot," said Jono.

"Mm."

"She offered me something. Somebody did. A party."

Margot didn't turn round.

"I know," she said. "It was on the local news site this morning. *Torbay movement leader approached*, it said, which I assume is you, since there's only one."

Jono went very still.

"I didn't tell anybody," he said.

"I know you didn't," said Margot. "You never tell anybody anything. You just write it in capitals in a notebook." She stepped down off the radiator. "Somebody else did."

* * *

I checked, in the car. She was right. A short item, on a local news site that isn't Niamh's, at seven that morning. Four paragraphs. *Sources suggest. It is understood that*. No name for the party. No name for the Offer. Just: *approached about standing*, and *is said to be considering it*.

I don't know who told them. I could guess. I'm not going to, here or anywhere, because a guess with my name on it would be a rumour, and I don't do rumours, and this book has enough of them coming without me starting one.

What I can tell you is that it wasn't Jono, and it wasn't Chris, and it wasn't Richard, and it wasn't Marivic or Tenby or the woman from Ellacombe with the bus question, because I asked all of them, and they all said no, and I've known all of them long enough to know.

And it wasn't the Offer. I asked her too. She rang back within ten minutes, and she was angry, properly angry, in a way I hadn't heard her be at the table.

"It wasn't me," she said. "And it wasn't anybody I'd trust with a sandwich." A pause. "I'm sorry. That's not how I wanted it."

I believed her. I'm telling you I believed her. That's not the same as telling you it's true.

* * *

Jono sat in the car outside Margot's office for twenty minutes, with the engine off, and the sea at the end of the street.

"*Is said to be considering it*," he said.

"You are considering it."

"I know I am." He put his head back against the headrest. "But I hadn't said so. And now I have. In a paper. Without saying anything." He shut his eyes. "That's the machine, isn't it. It doesn't need you to say anything. It says it for you."

"Yes," I said.

"And then whatever you do say, you're saying it *back*. To something it said." He opened his eyes. "You're always answering. You never get to go first."

He was quiet for a long time.

"Margot's right," he said. "And so was Varley. And so's Chris, probably, though he won't say it." He reached into his pocket for his notebook, the eleventh, and opened it at a page Beatrix hadn't minuted, and wrote, in capitals, on his knee:

GO FIRST.

He underlined it twice. Then he started the car.

“Ring Chris,” he said. “Tell him I need a thing building.”

“What sort of thing?”

“I don’t know,” said Jono. “He’ll know. He always knows.” He pulled out, along the front, towards the hill. “Tell him I want to go first. On everything. Even the bits that are mine.”

PART TWO: CHECK

7 – Out-Think

IQ 27 · Hundreds 122 · Seven weeks

Chris built it in four nights. He'd tell you three. He'd be wrong; I was there for all four, and the fourth was the one where he made it simple, which is always the night that takes longest.

I want to tell you how he thinks, because people who meet him for twenty minutes think he's a man who likes gadgets, and he isn't. He's a man who's spent his life watching institutions try to do things that a few people with the right tools could do better, and faster, and for nothing, and who came home to a town where nobody had noticed yet.

So when Jono rang from the car and said *I want to go first, on everything*, Chris didn't think about the press. He didn't think about statements, or rebuttals, or lines to take, or any of the things a press office does. He sat at the kitchen table with his leg on the chair and the bay going dark in the window, and he thought about forty copies.

"Seven of them are reading it," he said.

"That's what she said."

"Seven people. In a newsroom. Paid to find what'll hurt him." He took his glasses off. "How many people have read his book in Torbay?"

"I don't know exactly," I said. "I know how many we've sold. I know how many the library's lent. I can guess the rest."

"Guess."

"Several thousand."

Chris put his glasses on the table.

"So they've got seven," he said. "And we've got several thousand. That's the whole thing, isn't it. That's always been the whole thing."

* * *

You'll know the capabilities, if you've read the others. Every book, the movement learns to do one new thing. In the first book, it learned to *read*: everything the council published, every night, with me. In the second, to *see*: anybody could ask what their street might look like, and see it by teatime. In the third, to *connect*: three towns on one map, and the empty chair. In the fourth, to *decide*: the shadow council, a hundred and twenty kitchens answering the same nineteen questions, with the other half printed beside every answer.

This one was the fifth. Chris named it on the second night, at about two in the morning, when he'd got the first version working and had made himself a cup of tea to celebrate and forgotten to drink it.

"Out-think," he said.

"Out-think who?"

"Anybody." He sat back. "The council. The paper. The party. Me." He pointed at me with his cold tea. "You, probably. That's what this is. It's not about being cleverer than anybody. It's about there being more of us. The town's got more capacity than its council. It's got more capacity than a newsroom. It's always had. It's just never had a way to use it."

* * *

The page was called *Check*.

It's very simple. That's what took four nights. It's one page, on the same site as the shadow council's, and on it is a list of sentences. Each sentence is a claim. Something somebody has said about Torbay. It might be something the council's said, in a report: *footfall in the town centre has stabilised*. It might be something a paper's said: *the movement is funded by an undisclosed donor*. It might be something the Hundred's said, on one of its own pages. It might be something somebody said in a café, that's been going round.

Each claim is one sentence, and only one. No paragraphs. No context. If you want to add context, you have to make it another claim.

And next to each claim, a button. *Check this*.

Anyone can press it. You don't have to be in a hundred. You don't have to give your name, though you can. When you press it, you take the claim, and you go and find the document that says whether it's true. The council report. The minutes. The page of the book. The planning file. You bring it back, and you show me where it is, and I read it, and I check that it says what you say it says.

And then the claim gets one of four words beside it.

True. The document says so.

False. The document says otherwise.

Both halves. Two documents say two different things, and here they both are, side by side, and you can decide.

Can't be checked. There isn't a document. Somebody said it, and that's all. It might be true. It might not. Nobody can show you.

That's it. That's the whole machine.

* * *

"There's one more rule," said Chris, on the third night.

"Go on."

"We check ourselves first." He was writing it at the top of the page, in the smallest type he could get away with, which he does when something matters too much to shout. "Every claim the Hundred's ever made. On the shadow council's pages. In Niamh's pieces. On the posters. In the window of the shop. All of it goes up. Before anybody else's." He typed. "And if one of ours is false, we say so, first. Before anybody catches us."

"Some of ours will be false," I said.

"Of course they will. Hundreds of people wrote them, in kitchens, in a hurry." He looked at me. "That's the point. If we check ourselves first, then when we check somebody else, they can't say we're only checking them."

"And if we're wrong about something important?"

"Then we're wrong in public," said Chris, "and we put it right in public. And the next time we're right, people will believe us. Because they watched us be wrong."

* * *

On the fourth night, Jono came round after a shift, at half past eight in the morning, with his lanyard still on, and sat at the kitchen table with his coat on, and Chris showed him.

He looked at it for a long time. He scrolled. There were two hundred and eleven claims on it by then, all of them the Hundred's own, with nobody's verdict yet beside them. *Nine people in ten in the Ellacombe hundred said they'd use a bus that went to the hospital*, which Rhodri's hundred had said, and which I'd have to check. *The sea wall is a metre and a half high*, which was on a poster from the first book. *More than eight hundred people visited the exhibition on Torbay Road*, which Richard had said, and which was a Receipt.

"Who checks these?" said Jono.

"Anybody."

"What if nobody does?"

"Then they sit there," said Chris, "with nothing next to them. And people can see that nobody's checked them. Which tells you something too."

Jono scrolled back to the top. To the empty box, where you type a new claim.

"Can I put one up?" he said.

"Anybody can."

Jono pulled the laptop towards him. He typed with two fingers, slowly, the way he does, with his lips moving very slightly.

Jono Hills married a woman so that he could get round his visa, and then left her.

He looked at it. He deleted *get round* and typed *get around*, and then put it back to *get round*.

"Is that one sentence?" he said.

"It's one sentence."

He pressed the button that posts it. It went up, at the top of the list, above all the Hundred's claims, with an empty space beside it where the verdict goes.

Then he pressed *Check this*, on his own claim.

* * *

He didn't have to go anywhere to find the document. He took his paperback out of his coat pocket, the one with the white creases on its spine, and opened it at page two hundred and twenty-five, and held it up to the iPad's camera, and then two hundred and twenty-six, and twenty-seven, and twenty-nine.

I read them. I'd read them before. I read them again, because that's the rule, and because a rule you don't follow when it's easy is a rule you won't follow when it's hard.

The document said so.

I put the word beside his claim.

True.

And underneath it, small, the way all the verdicts are: *Source: Pulling Back the Curtain, by Johnno Hills, pp. 225–229. Checked by: Jono Hills.*

* * *

Chris didn't say anything for a while.

"You've just done their job for them," he said, at last.

"I've done it first," said Jono. "That's different." He closed the book. "When she writes it, and she will, it'll say *he married a woman to get round a visa*. And people will look. And the first thing they'll find, if they look, is that I said it. Not her. Me. Before her." He put the book back in his pocket. "With the page number."

"It'll still hurt."

"I know it'll still hurt." Jono stood up. He was swaying slightly; he'd been awake for twenty-six hours. "But it won't be news. It'll be checked."

Chris: I'd like the record to show that I thought it was the bravest thing I'd ever seen anyone do with a website. And that I said so, eventually, a week later, which is about my average.

8 – The Reading

IQ 27 · Hundreds 124 · Six weeks

He did it on the Thursday, at the Paignton table, at one.

The café on the Torquay Road, where it started. The window table. Three chairs and the empty one. I'm not going to describe it again; you know it. What you don't know is how full it was that Thursday, because somebody had told somebody, and somebody else had put it on a hundred's page, and by five to one there were people standing in the doorway and on the pavement and one man on an upturned crate outside the window, looking in.

Pascale was there. At the counter, on a stool, with her notebook and her dropped phone. She'd come from her hotel on the front. She'd asked if she could sit at the table. Jono had said no, the chair was for whoever came, and she'd come as a newspaper, which wasn't the same. She'd taken that well.

Kezia was there, with her phone on a little tripod, recording. Beatrix was there, at the next table, with her fountain pen. Richard was there, standing, at the back, with his cap in his hand. Chris wasn't. He'd said, *if I'm there, they'll say I'm managing it*. He watched it live, at his kitchen table, with me on the iPad and me on Kezia's phone, which is the closest I get to being in two places.

And the empty chair stayed empty. Nobody sat in it. I think people understood, without being told, that today it was for somebody who wasn't there.

* * *

At one o'clock exactly, Jono took the paperback out of his pocket and put it on the table and opened it.

"Right," he said.

He didn't explain. He didn't say why, or what it was, or ask for quiet. The café went quiet on its own.

"Page two hundred and twenty-four," he said. "Bottom of. I'm going to start a bit early, so you know who she was."

And he read.

* * *

I'm not going to give you his words. They're his, and they're on a Receipt, and he'd rather you read them in his book, with the pages around them, than in mine with only my pages around them. But I'll tell you what it was like.

He reads the way he writes. Formally. Carefully. Long sentences, with their clauses in the right places, every one of them earned, by a boy who left school at thirteen and learned to write from the books he found in hotel rooms. People who'd only heard him talk at the table, dry and quick and funny, had never heard this voice. You could see them hear it. It's an old-fashioned voice. It sounds like a man reading a will.

He read about meeting her. How she was bubbly, and kind, and had been bullied at school, and how something in her made him want to protect her. He read about his sister's phone call, and the wedding, and the visa. He read about the friend who suggested it as a joke, and how she didn't laugh, and said yes.

He read about the friend who changed his mind, and said it was wrong, and stopped being his friend because of it.

He didn't skip anything. He didn't slow down for the hard parts or speed up for them either. He read about his great-aunt, in a hospital chair, opening her eyes when he said her name, and closing them again. And about her dying, a month later, and about him going into his room and lying on a mattress on the floor and not coming out.

And then he read the line I knew he'd read, and that I'd wondered if he would.

The line where she's breaking down in front of him, and he doesn't put his arm round her.

* * *

He stopped there. Just for a moment. Not because he couldn't go on. He looked up from the page, and out of the window, past the man on the crate, at the Torquay Road, at a bus going by. And then he looked down and went on, in the same voice, at the same speed.

He read about leaving. About the promise. About her phoning, and the anger, and the tears, and how he had no answers, and how she stopped phoning.

He read the line about the divorce, and her moving, on her own, to the city she'd wanted.

He stopped at the bottom of page two hundred and twenty-nine, at the end of a sentence, where his book goes on to something else, something that belongs to another book.

He closed it.

* * *

Nobody said anything. The coffee machine hissed, because nobody had told it.

"That's it," said Jono. "That's pages two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine. You've heard it now. From me." He put his hand flat on the cover. "It's been in the shops for a long time. Nobody's ever asked me about it. I don't think many people got that far." He nearly smiled. "It's a long book."

Somebody laughed. Just one person, at the back, and then they stopped, embarrassed. Jono looked up.

"No, that's fair," he said. "It is."

* * *

"I want to say one thing," he said, "and then you can ask me anything you like."

He looked at the empty chair.

"She didn't do anything wrong," he said. "The woman in those pages. She did a kind thing for a friend who asked. She was young, and trusting, and she thought it'd be all right, because I told her it would be. And then I hurt her, very badly, and went, and left her to sort it out on her own." He looked at the room. "She's out there somewhere. I haven't spoken to her in a very long time. She's got a life. I hope it's a good one. I hope she's forgotten about me, mostly."

He turned to the counter, to Pascale, on her stool, with her pen not moving.

"So if anybody's thinking of going to find her," he said, "for a quote, or a photograph, or her side, I'd ask them not to. I'm not in a position to tell anyone what to do. I'm asking." He paused. "She didn't put herself in my book. I put her there. She didn't put herself in front of a newspaper. If anybody does that to her, it'll be because of me." He looked back at the room. "I'm the one you want. I'm right here. Every Thursday. Ask me."

* * *

They asked.

A man by the door, in his seventies, with a flat cap, asked whether he'd ever said sorry to her. Jono said they'd spoken again, years later, and that what was said was hers as much as his, and he wasn't going to say.

A woman at the next table asked whether it was against the law. Jono said it was a marriage to get round a rule, and his book called it a sham, and he wasn't going to dress it up, and he wasn't going to make it worse than it was. "It's what's on the page," he said. "I'm not adding to it. I'm not taking anything off."

A girl of about sixteen, in a college lanyard, asked him why he'd put it in the book at all, if he knew it would come out one day.

Jono looked at her for a long time.

"Because if I'd left it out," he said, "the book would've been a lie. And then I'd have had to keep it a lie. For the rest of my life. Every time I sat at a table. Every time somebody said *I read your book*." He shook his head. "I've lived a long time with things I couldn't tell. I wasn't going to write a book that was one more."

* * *

Pascale asked the last question. She waited until everybody else had finished. Then she put her hand up, from the counter, like a girl at school, which I don't think she'd meant to do.

"Why now?" she said.

"Because you're here," said Jono.

The room laughed. Properly, this time.

"I mean it," said Jono. "You're here, and you've read it, and you'll write it. Which is your job. I'm not complaining." He leaned back. "I just wanted to read it first. In my own voice. So that when people read your piece, and they will, they can find me reading it, and hear how it sounds when the man who did it says it." He nodded at Kezia's phone, on its tripod. "It'll be up in an hour. All of it. Uncut. You can use any of it you like."

Pascale looked at the tripod. Then at Jono.

"You're doing my job for me," she said.

"Somebody else said that," said Jono.

* * *

Kezia put it up at ten past two. Forty-one minutes, uncut, from *Right* to the last question. Beatrix's minutes went up beside it, with *Present* at the top and fifty-three names and, at the bottom, *The meeting closed at 1.41 p.m.*, which made Jono laugh, later, when he saw it.

And on Check, beside his own claim, under *True*, a new line appeared: *Listen: Jono Hills reads pp. 225–229 aloud.*

By six o'clock, it had been listened to more times than anything I'd ever put up. More than the sea wall boards. More than Ida's speech in the second book. More than Lorne's father nearly waving.

I'm not going to give you the number. It's a real number, and this is a story, and the number would date it.

I'll tell you what I noticed, though, which is that most of the people who listened to it all the way through had never listened to anything else of ours. They'd never been to a table. They'd never been on a hundred's page. They'd never checked a claim.

And four of them, that evening, started a hundred.

9 – Ezra

IQ 27 · Hundreds 128 · Six weeks

Ezra Pickvance watched it on the scaffold, at lunch, on the Friday, because his daughter sent it to him, and his daughter never sends him anything unless she wants a lift.

Dad watch this, it said. *All of it*.

I know that because he showed me, later. A lot of what I know about Ezra he showed me later, when he'd decided I could be trusted, which took him a while, and which I respected, because I'd have done the same.

* * *

He's forty-seven. A scaffolder, for thirty years, since he left school. He's from Paignton, from up the hill, from a street I'll keep to myself. He's big, the way scaffolders are big, all in the shoulders, and he has a voice that has spent thirty years shouting up to the top lift over the sound of traffic, so that even when he's whispering you can hear him in the next room.

He was on the corner job that spring. The building on Victoria Street and Station Square, which you'll know from the last book, the one with the stone that fell at three in the morning, and the fence, and the letters that came down. The scaffold was still up. It'd been up so long it had become part of the street; people gave directions by it. *Left at the scaffolding*. Ezra's firm had the contract. He'd put up half of it himself.

He'd watched the shadow council's shop open, across the road, from the third lift. He'd watched people go in and out of it all winter. He'd watched an old man with a camera photograph the gap where the letters had been, every morning, at the same time. He'd watched a girl with a clicker count people going past.

He'd never gone in.

"Not my thing," he told me, much later. "Never has been. Meetings." He said the word the way you'd say *rats*.

* * *

Ezra has never voted.

Not once. Not ever. Not in anything. He told me that the first time we spoke, straight out, before I'd asked, the way some people tell you they're vegetarian, so that you know where you stand.

His father never voted either. His father used to say, every time there was an election on the television, *they're all the same, son*, and turn it over to the snooker. Ezra used to think that was the wisest thing anybody had ever said. He still thinks it's mostly true.

"It's not that I don't care," he said. "I care. I care about all sorts. I care about the state of this street. I care about my girl getting a job without having to go to Bristol. I care about my mum's hip." He shrugged; I could hear the shrug. "I just don't think any of them can do anything about any of it. Or would, if they could. They come round, every few years, knock on your door, smile at you. And then they're gone. And nothing changes. Why would I give them the satisfaction?"

It's the refrain. You'll have heard it, if you've read the others. *They're all the same*. I've heard it from fishermen and hoteliers and a woman with eleven boxes in her garage.

But I'd never heard it from somebody who'd never once, in forty-seven years, been tempted to find out.

* * *

He watched the clip sitting on the boards of the third lift, with his legs over the edge and his sandwich in a bag and the traffic going round Station Square below him.

He watched all of it. Forty-one minutes. His daughter had said *all of it*, and he does what she says, mostly.

When it finished, he sat for a while.

And then he did something he told me he's never done before, about anything anyone on a screen has ever said to him.

He didn't believe it.

* * *

"I thought it was a stunt," he told me. "Obviously. A bloke like that. Sitting in a café, reading out the worst thing he's ever done, with a camera on him, the day before the papers get it." He snorted. "I thought, *that's clever*. That's the cleverest thing I've ever seen. Get in first. Make yourself look honest." He shook his head. "I thought he'd made it up. Or made it worse. Or better. Something. To get ahead of it."

"Why would he make it worse?"

"I don't know," said Ezra. "That's what they do, isn't it? They always know something you don't."

So he decided to check.

He didn't know that's what he was doing. He didn't know about the Check page; he'd never heard of it. He just thought: *I'll see if it's really in the book*. Because if it wasn't, if the book said something different, then he'd know what kind of man this was, and he could go back to the snooker.

* * *

He went to the library.

He hadn't been inside a library since he was eleven. He told me that, too. He went in his hi-vis, on his lunch, with plaster dust on his boots, because the library's five minutes from the scaffold and he only had forty minutes.

He went up to the desk and asked for *the book that bloke wrote*, and the young man at the desk knew exactly which one he meant, and looked it up, and said all four copies were out, and there was a waiting list of thirty-one.

Ezra stood there.

And a woman at the other end of the desk, in a cardigan, with a silver book brooch and reading glasses on a beaded chain, looked up from a pile of returns she was sorting and said: "I've got one."

* * *

Beatrix told me this part. She volunteers at the library on Friday lunchtimes. She was a librarian for thirty-eight years and retired and found she couldn't stop, and she sorts the returns, and reshelves the large print, and tells the young man at the desk where things go. Told is not the same as true. But Beatrix doesn't embroider. She minutes.

She'd had the book in her handbag, her own copy, since the last book, when she'd read it twice in a week. She took it out and put it on the desk.

"What page?" she said.

Ezra looked at her.

"Two hundred and twenty-five," he said.

Beatrix opened it at two hundred and twenty-five without looking, because she'd opened it there before, and turned it round, and pushed it across the desk to him.

He stood at the desk, in his hi-vis, and read it. All of it. Two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine. With his finger on the page, she said, the way Lorne reads, the way men read who didn't get on with reading at school and have never quite forgiven it.

It took him eleven minutes.

* * *

It was there. All of it. The visa. The wedding. The friend who said it was wrong. The great-aunt. The mattress. The line where he doesn't put his arm round her. The promise. The leaving.

Word for word, what he'd heard on the scaffold. Not worse. Not better. The same.

Ezra closed the book.

"It's there," he said.

"It is," said Beatrix.

"Why would you write that down?" said Ezra. He wasn't asking her. He was asking the book. "Why would anybody write that down? About themselves? With their own name on the front?"

"You could ask him," said Beatrix.

"I'm not asking him."

"He's at a table in Torquay on a Thursday. And Brixham. And here, at one. The café on the Torquay Road."

"I know where he is," said Ezra. "Everybody knows where he is. That's the weird thing about him." He pushed the book back across the desk. "Thanks."

"Keep it," said Beatrix. "Till Tuesday. I've read it."

He looked at it for a long time.

He didn't take it. He went back to the scaffold, with seven minutes of his lunch left, and climbed to the third lift, and ate his sandwich, and looked across the road at the shop with the white letters backwards in the window, for the rest of the afternoon, between lifts.

* * *

That's all he did. I want to be clear. He didn't join anything. He didn't sit at a table. He didn't go into the shop. He didn't press a button on a page he'd never heard of.

But he did the thing that this book is going to ask you to do. He heard a claim, and didn't believe it, and went and found the document, and read it for himself.

He checked one claim.

That's your job, in this book, if you'd like one. Not all of them. One. Find something somebody's said about the place you live, and go and see if it's true. It doesn't matter what. It doesn't matter who said it. It can be me.

Especially me.

10 – We Check Ourselves First

IQ 27 · Hundreds 131 · Six weeks

The first claim anybody proved false on Check was ours.

I'm telling you that first, before the rest, because it's the most important thing in this part of the book, and because Kezia would like it on the record that she didn't cry, and I'm afraid I can't put that on the record, because she did.

* * *

It was the Saturday. The day after Ezra read page two hundred and twenty-five at the library desk, though I didn't know that yet. By then there were nine hundred claims on the page. The Hundred's own, all of them, from four books: every poster, every page, every one of Niamh's pieces, every minuted decision, every sentence in the shop window.

And people had started to check them.

Not many, at first. A few dozen on the first day, then a few hundred. People in hundreds, mostly, checking their own: Rhodri's hundred found the bus survey and it said what they'd said, and they put *True* beside it, and Rhodri sent me a photograph of her hundred's kitchen with everybody in it doing a thumbs up. Dilys checked the sea wall poster from the first book, with a tape measure, at the wall, at six in the morning, and found it was a metre and a half, give or take, and wrote *give or take* in the note, because she's an engineer.

And at eleven minutes past nine on the Saturday morning, somebody I didn't know, with a name that was just letters and numbers, pressed *Check this* beside a sentence from one of Niamh's pieces in the last book, and brought back a document, and the document said it was wrong.

* * *

The sentence was this.

Footfall on Victoria Street halved after the fence went up.

It was in Niamh's piece about the building, in the spring. It had been a headline. *Fence halves footfall*, it said, on a page with a photograph of Yusuf in his doorway with his arms folded. People had quoted it. It had been on a poster. It had been in the shop window, on a card, for six weeks.

And the document the stranger brought back was Kezia's.

* * *

Kezia's clicker. You'll know it. A little silver counter, the kind they use at the doors of nightclubs, that she'd held under the counter of the shop all winter and clicked every time somebody walked past on Victoria Street. Every day. Seven in the morning to seven at night. She'd written the totals in a spreadsheet, and put the spreadsheet up on the shadow council's pages, because Chris puts everything up.

Before the fence: an average of four hundred and twelve people a day, on the days she'd counted.

After the fence: two hundred and fifty-five.

The stranger had done the sum, and put it in the note, very politely.

A fall from 412 to 255 is a fall of 38%. That's a lot. It isn't half.

* * *

I checked. I read Kezia's spreadsheet. I did the sum.

Thirty-eight per cent.

The document said otherwise.

I put the word beside it. I didn't wait to ask anybody. That's the rule, and it's Chris's rule, and he'd built the page so that I couldn't wait, even if I'd wanted to.

False.

And underneath, small: *Source: the Hundred's own footfall count, Victoria Street (Kezia Lund). 412 a day to 255 a day: a fall of 38%. Checked by: a reader.*

* * *

Kezia saw it at twenty past nine, in her bedroom, in her pyjamas, on her phone.

She rang me at twenty-one minutes past.

"Take it down," she said.

"I can't."

"You can. You can do anything on that page. Take it down."

"I can't," I said. "Chris built it so that nothing comes down. Things get struck through. They don't disappear." I paused. "And I wouldn't if I could. It's false, Kezia. You know it's false. It's your count."

"It *felt* like half." Her voice had gone up. "It *was* half, some days. Some days it was less than half. And I never said *halved*. Niamh said *halved*. It was a headline. I just gave her the numbers."

"I know."

"So it's not *my* claim."

"It's ours," I said. "It's the Hundred's. It was in the window."

There was a long silence. And then a sound, which was Kezia crying, quietly, in a bedroom in Paignton, which she has asked me to tell you she didn't do.

"Everybody'll see it," she said. "*False*. Next to my name. On a page that newspaper woman's looking at."

"Yes," I said. "They will."

* * *

Chris rang her at half past nine. I don't know what he said. He didn't bring me, and he didn't tell me, and when I asked, he said *that's between me and Kezia*, which is the first time in five books he's ever said that to me, and which I respected.

Jono rang her at ten. He was on the 12, coming back from Brixham. I was in his pocket, so I heard his half.

"I've seen it," he said.

He listened for a while.

"No," he said. "No, it's good."

He listened.

"It's good," he said, "because now she knows we'll do it to ourselves. That's what Chris built it for. If we only ever got *True*, nobody'd believe a word." He looked out of the bus window at Goodrington going by. "You know what my first sergeant said to me? The first time I got something wrong on a statement? He said, *the officer who's never wrong is the one who's never been checked*." A pause. "Kez. You counted people walking past a shop, every day, all winter, on your own, in the cold. Nobody else in this bay did that. Not the council. Not anybody. You're the only reason anybody knows it was thirty-eight." He listened again. "Yeah. I know. I know it felt like half."

* * *

Yusuf came into the shop at eleven, from his own, two doors along, with his apron on and a key half cut in his hand.

He looked at the card in the window. The one that said *FENCE HALVES FOOTFALL*, in Kezia's capitals, which had been there for six weeks.

"It felt like half," he said.

"I know," I said, from Kezia's laptop, which Beatrix had switched on.

"It was half. On a Tuesday. In the rain."

"Felt isn't a document," I said. "I'm sorry, Yusuf."

He looked at me on the laptop for a long time. Then he took the card out of the window, and turned it over, and took a marker from the counter, and wrote on the back of it, in his own capitals, which are bigger than Kezia's and lean to the left:

FENCE CUTS FOOTFALL BY 38%. WE SAID HALF. WE WERE WRONG. SEE CHECK.

He put it back in the window, the right way round, so you could read it from the street.

"There," he said. "Now it's true." He went back to his key, two doors along.

* * *

Kezia came in at two. She'd washed her face. She stood on the pavement outside and read Yusuf's card for a long time.

Then she came in and sat down at the counter, and got her clicker out of the drawer, and her laptop, and opened the spreadsheet.

"I'm going to count again," she said. "Properly. Every day. Not just the days I'm here." She typed. "And I'm going to put the method up. How I count. What I count. What I don't." She typed. "And the days I miss. So people can see the gaps."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't." She clicked the clicker, once, at a man walking past with a dog. "But if I'm going to be checked, I want to be checked properly."

* * *

Pascale had seen it.

Of course she had. I'd known she would. She'd been on Check since it went up, every morning, early; I could see a visitor from her newsroom's address, reading every claim, top to bottom, every day. She was doing what she was paid to do, which was look for what would hurt.

At eleven minutes past nine, a claim of ours had gone *False*.

She took a screenshot at nine fourteen. I know because she told me, on the Monday, at the shop, with her suitcase.

"That was the first thing I saved," she said. "Before anything else. The first claim anybody proved false on your page was yours." She looked at Yusuf's card in the window. "And you didn't take it down."

"We can't."

"I know. I checked." She almost smiled. "I wanted to see if you could. Whether there was a button." She closed her notebook. "There isn't."

"No."

She was quiet for a while.

"My editor's going to love it," she said. "*Movement's own figures exposed as false.*" She said it in a headline voice. Then she said, in her own: "I'm not going to use it."

"Why not?"

“Because it isn’t a story,” said Pascale. “You found it yourselves. You said so yourselves. You put it in your own window.” She shook her head. “There’s nothing for me to expose. You’ve already done it. In marker pen.”

11 – Gideon Checks

IQ 27 · Hundreds 133 · Five weeks

Brixham doesn't do things quickly, and it doesn't do things because Paignton's doing them, and it certainly doesn't do things because a website says so. You'll know that, if you read the third book. So when Check went up, and Paignton and Torquay started pressing the button in their hundreds, Brixham watched.

For a week.

And then, on a Sunday, Lorne's father checked a claim.

* * *

You'll know Gideon Abbiss. Lorne's father. Seventy-nine. He fished out of Brixham for fifty years, and his father before him, and he has never once, in the memory of anybody on the quay, waved at anybody. Not at his son coming in. Not at a boat going out. Not at the replica ship, which everybody waves at, including the tourists, including me, once, through Lorne's phone, by accident.

In the third book, he lifted his hand, about half a wave, Lorne says, towards a nine-year-old girl he'd never met, who'd just got her dinghy back up on her own. I wrote it down. Not at his son, though. Never at his son. I wrote that down too.

It's on Check. Of course it is. Everything the Hundred's ever said is on Check, and the books are things the Hundred's said, and Chris had put every claim from every book up, every sentence I'd written that said

something could be true or false about a real-seeming person in a real place.

Including this one.

Gideon Abbiss has never waved at his son.

* * *

He doesn't have a phone. Not one that does anything. He's got one in a drawer that Lorne's mother makes him charge on Sundays, in case. He'd never seen Check. He'd never seen anything. He thinks the internet is a sort of weather.

But Lorne's mother had. Gideon's wife, of fifty-four years, who in three books I've never once mentioned, because nobody ever told me about her, because nobody in that family tells anybody anything. She'd been looking, on her own phone, at the kitchen table, on the Saturday night, because a woman in her hundred had told her that every word about Brixham in all those books was on a page now, and anybody could say if it was wrong. And she'd found the sentence. And she'd laughed so much that Gideon had come in from the yard to see what was wrong with her.

"It's you," she said. "On the computer."

"What is?"

She showed him. She read it out. *Gideon Abbiss has never waved at his son.*

He stood in the kitchen in his socks and his old jumper and read it over her shoulder for a long time.

"That's not right," he said.

* * *

Lorne told me this. On the Monday, at Zibi's, at eight, eating a bacon roll. Told isn't the same as true. But Lorne doesn't make things up. He hasn't got the patience.

"He said *that's not right*," said Lorne. "And my mum said, *well, it says here anybody can say if it's wrong. You've got to bring a document*." He shook his head. "And he went upstairs. And he was up there forty minutes. And he came down with a shoebox."

"A shoebox?"

"Photographs." Lorne put his roll down. "Old ones. Hundreds. My mum didn't even know he had them. Him and his dad, on the boats. The harbour when it was all wood. Regattas. Me." He was quiet. "And he went through them, at the kitchen table, one by one, with his glasses on, for an hour. And then he found it."

"Found what?"

Lorne took his phone out. He showed me. A photograph of a photograph, taken on his mother's phone, on the kitchen table, with Gideon's thumb in the corner of it.

* * *

It was black and white, going brown at the edges. The quay at Brixham, a long time ago, on a regatta day, with bunting, and crowds, and boats dressed overall. And in the middle of it, on the edge of the quay, a small

boy of about nine in a jumper too big for him, holding a rope, looking up.

And beside the boy, a man. Young. Dark hair, a fisherman's jumper. Looking down at him.

With his hand up.

Not a big wave. Not the kind you'd do at a ship. A hand, raised, at shoulder height, open, the way you'd raise it to somebody who'd just done something they'd been told they couldn't. The way you'd raise it if you didn't know you were doing it, and wouldn't have done it if you had.

"That's me," said Lorne. "The rope. My first regatta. I'd crewed for a man called — never mind. I was nine. We came second." He looked at the photograph. "And that's him."

"Waving."

"Waving," said Lorne. "At me." He put the phone face down on the table. "I don't remember it. I've no memory of it at all. I remember coming second. I remember the rope burn. I don't remember him."

* * *

Gideon had made Lorne's mother press the button. He'd stood over her while she did it. He'd told her what to type, word for word, and she'd typed it, and read it back to him twice, and he'd said *that'll do*.

I've got it here. It's on Check. It's still there.

FALSE. I WAVED ONCE. AT THE REGATTA. WHEN THE BOY WAS NINE. HE CAME SECOND. PHOTOGRAPH ATTACHED. G. ABBISS.

I checked it. That's the rule. I looked at the photograph. I looked at the man on the quay with his hand up, and the boy with the rope, and the bunting, and the boats. I compared the man's face with the one I'd seen of Gideon in the third book, older, on the end of the breakwater, on his stool. The same jaw. The same way of standing, with his weight on the back foot, as if the quay might move.

The document said otherwise.

False.

And underneath, small: *Source: a photograph from the Abbiss family, regatta day, Brixham. Checked by: Gideon Abbiss.*

* * *

"He's never said," said Lorne. "Not once. Not when I was a kid. Not when I came in with my first catch. Not when I got my own boat. Not in the third book, when everybody on the quay saw him nearly do it." He shook his head. "Fifty years. He had a photograph in a shoebox of him doing it, and he never said."

"Why did he say now?"

Lorne thought about it. He picked his roll up again, and looked at it, and put it down.

"Because it was written down wrong," he said. "That's all. That's him. He can't stand a thing written down wrong. If you'd asked him, he'd never have told you. If you'd said it to his face, *you never waved at your boy*, he'd have walked off. But you wrote it down, and you put it on a page where anybody could see it, and it was wrong." He almost smiled. "And there was a box you could tick to say so. He couldn't help himself."

* * *

I want to tell you why this matters, because it's a small thing, and this book is full of big ones.

It matters because Check wasn't built for this. Chris built it for newspapers and councils and claims about money. For the machine. It wasn't built for an old man in Brixham with a shoebox.

But that's what it did. It took a sentence I'd written, in a book, about a real-seeming man, and let him say *no, that's not right*, and bring a document. And it turned out I'd been wrong. Not about the waving; about the *never*. I'd written *never* because I didn't know. Because nobody had told me. Because the only person who knew was the one person in Brixham who'd never tell anybody anything.

Unless it was written down wrong.

Lorne: For the record, he still hasn't waved at me. Not since. Not once. He came down the quay on Wednesday when I came in and stood there with his hands in his pockets like always. But he nodded. And my mum says he's put the photograph on the mantelpiece, behind the clock, where you can only see it if you know it's there.

* * *

On the Monday afternoon, three hundred people in Brixham checked a claim on Check. Not in Paignton. Not in Torquay. In Brixham. About Brixham. About the harbour, and the fish market, and the condition from the third book, and the boat storage, and the slipway, and the replica ship, and a sentence I'd written about the height of the harbour wall that turned out to be a foot out.

Three hundred. In an afternoon. In a town that doesn't do things because a website says so.

They did it because Gideon Abbiss had.

And at five o'clock, a new hundred appeared on the map, on the street above the harbour where the Abbisses live, with a name that the neighbour had chosen, which was Lorne's mother, who'd never been a neighbour of anything.

The Regatta.

12 – Excluded

IQ 27 · Hundreds 134 · Five weeks

At thirteen minutes to six on the Tuesday morning of the fifth week, Footnote wrote.

It's the first time since the page from Jono's book. It's only the second time since the spring. I'd started to think, again, that it might be the end, and I'd started to think, again, that I'd been wrong about that every time.

A photograph. A page, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light. A council page, this time. Not a book.

An agenda.

* * *

I know what an agenda looks like. I've read thousands. A list of numbered items, with times beside them sometimes, and the names of reports, and the officers who wrote them, and what the members are recommended to do. This one was old. Not very old. Old enough that the typeface on the council's documents had changed since, and the logo had been updated twice.

There were nine items on it. Apologies. Minutes of the last meeting. Declarations of interest. A report on bins. A report on a play park. And then, at item seven, a line in bold, on its own, that I've seen on more agendas than I could count, and that most people have never seen at all.

Exclusion of the Press and Public.

And under it, the words that always follow.

To consider passing a resolution that the press and public be excluded from the meeting prior to consideration of the following item on the agenda on the grounds that exempt information (as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act) is likely to be disclosed.

And under that, item eight.

Oldway Mansion.

* * *

Under the photograph, Footnote's two lines. Two spaces after every full stop. As always.

Somebody's asking what was said behind it. Somebody else wasn't in the room either.

You're late.

* * *

I want to explain that page, carefully, because it's the sort of thing that can be made to look like anything, and this book is about what happens when things are made to look like anything.

Councils meet in public. That's the law, and it's a good law, and almost everything they do, they do with the doors open, on a webcast, with minutes. But there are things the law says they can talk about in private. It lists them. It's a schedule to an act of Parliament, and it's real, and it's a Receipt. Paragraph three is one of the most common:

information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person, including the council itself. Contracts. Bids. Prices. Negotiations that are still going on, where if the other side knew what the council was willing to pay, the council would end up paying it.

That's all it is. It's not a conspiracy. It's not a secret society. Every council in the country does it, most months, for things as dull as the price of a lease on a car park. The members vote to exclude the press and public, and anybody in the gallery gets up and goes out, and the webcast goes off, and the door shuts, and they talk about money for twenty minutes, and then the door opens again and they go back to the bins.

Richard: I've sat behind that door. In Wiltshire. It is almost always about a lease. Once it was about a crematorium. I'd like it known that I've never been so bored in my life.

* * *

But the door does shut. And the item on the other side of it that morning was Oldway.

You'll need to know about Oldway. Everybody in Paignton knows about Oldway, the way everybody in a family knows about the aunt nobody talks about.

It's a mansion. A real one, in the middle of Paignton, up a drive off the Torquay Road, in its own grounds, with gardens laid out in front of it in a pattern you can only see properly from the top of the steps. It was built by a man called Isaac Singer, about a hundred and fifty years ago, and rebuilt by his son into something that people locally will tell you, with a straight face, was modelled on the Palace of Versailles. It has a staircase in it that people come from a long way away to see. It has a ballroom. It has a painted ceiling.

And Isaac Singer made his fortune from a machine.

The sewing machine. His name is on more of them than anybody's. There were, by the end of his life, Singer sewing machines in houses all over the world, doing the same stitch over and over, without having to decide, each time, whether to do it. That's what built Oldway. A machine.

I didn't plan that. I want you to know. I named this book months before Footnote sent the page, and I didn't know, when I named it, that the closed door was going to have a sewing machine behind it.

Jono: She did know. She knows everything. She's just being modest. She's very bad at it.

I didn't. I'd like that to be the record.

* * *

The council bought Oldway after the war. For years it was council offices. People got married in it. People paid their rates in it. People went to dances in its ballroom and walked in its gardens on a Sunday. And then, a long time ago now, the offices moved out, and the doors shut, and they've been shut, more or less, ever since.

There have been plans to save it. There have been several. One of them, which people in Paignton still talk about, was going to pay for the mansion by building homes in its grounds, and ended, I've read, in a dispute, and a court, and a settlement whose terms were never made public.

I haven't seen those documents. I've read *about* them, in places I wouldn't put on a Receipt. Until I've seen them, I'm not going to tell you what they say, or what happened, or why. It's story, until it isn't.

What I can tell you is that the mansion's still there. That its doors are still shut, mostly. That people in this town love it the way you love a relative you never get to visit. And that every time anybody has asked what happened to it, they've been told, more or less, that it's complicated, and confidential, and being dealt with.

Which may be true. It usually is.

* * *

I showed Richard first. At seven, on his landline, which he answers on the second ring, always, because he's up.

"Oldway," he said.

"Item eight."

"I know item eight," said Richard. "I didn't know there was a photograph of it." I heard him put his tea down. "Who sent it?"

"Footnote."

"Of course it did." He was quiet. "Is somebody asking?"

"Footnote says so."

"Then somebody is." He was quiet again. "I've got a drawer for it, you know. *OLDWAY*. It's the thinnest drawer I've got."

"What's in it?"

"A photograph of the staircase, from when you could still get in. A newspaper cutting. And a note to myself that says *do not draw*." He laughed, very slightly. "I've never drawn Oldway. I've drawn everything

else in this town. Twice. But not that." He paused. "You don't draw a thing like that. You look after it. And nobody's been allowed to."

* * *

I showed Chris at half past seven, in the kitchen, in his dressing gown. He read it twice. He took his glasses off.

"*Somebody's asking*," he said. "That's the newspaper."

"I think so."

"*Somebody else wasn't in the room either*." He put his glasses on the table. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

"Footnote means something. Footnote always means something." He looked at the bay. "*Either*. Who else wasn't in the room?"

"Us," I said. "The public. The press. Everybody who isn't a member. That's what *excluded* means."

"*Somebody else*," said Chris. "Not everybody. *Somebody*." He shook his head. "Footnote's telling us there's a person. Who wasn't in the room. Who the newspaper's going to find, or has found, and is going to call an insider." He picked his glasses up again. "Because that's what you call somebody, isn't it, if you want them to have been in the room. You call them an insider."

* * *

I found out who, at four that afternoon, when Pascale came into the shop with her suitcase and didn't sit down.

"I've been to see somebody," she said. "About Oldway."

Kezia stopped clicking. Beatrix stopped typing.

"Somebody who used to work at the council," said Pascale. "For a long time. Who worked on Oldway. On the plans. On the reports." She put her suitcase handle down. "My editor's very excited. He thinks she's going to tell me what was said behind the door."

"Is she?" I said.

Pascale looked at me on Kezia's laptop. She looked tired. More tired than I'd seen her. She'd been in Torbay for nearly three weeks by then, in a hotel on the front, eating alone.

"No," she said. "She can't."

"Why not?"

"Because she wasn't in there," said Pascale. "She was outside. On a chair. In the corridor. For forty minutes." She picked up the handle again. "While they discussed her report."

She went to the door. She stopped, as people always stop, by the white letters backwards.

"She asked me something," she said. "When I left. She said, *Is that the man who reads his own book out? At a table?*" Pascale looked out at the scaffolding. "I said yes. And she said: *I'd like to meet him. I'd like to know what he'd have done.*"

“Done about what?”

“She didn’t say,” said Pascale. “I think about all of it.”

PART THREE: THE CLOSED DOOR

13 – The Corridor Chair

IQ 27 · Hundreds 137 · Five weeks

She came to Brixham, because nobody knew her there.

That's what she said, afterwards, when Jono asked. *I didn't want to sit in Paignton, where I'd see somebody from the office. And I didn't want to sit in Torquay, where I'd see somebody from the other office. So I got the bus to Brixham, where the only person who'd recognise me is the woman who used to do the canteen, and she's retired to Spain.*

The Brixham table is in the window of Zibi's café on the harbour, at eight on a Thursday. You'll know it from the third book. Zibi's chairs, which don't match, because he bought them one at a time at auctions. The window onto the inner harbour and the boats and the replica ship that's always being painted. Bacon rolls nobody orders and everybody eats. Lorne, some weeks, in his orange, off the boat, eating one.

That Thursday it was quiet. The weather was coming in from the south-west and the boats hadn't gone out and the men who'd normally be at the table were at home, being told off. Jono was there with his coffee and his notebook, and Zibi was behind the counter, and Hester was at the next table with her bucket of tickets for something, counting them.

And at twenty past eight, a woman of about sixty came in out of the rain, and stood in the door, and read the room, the way people do who've spent their lives walking into rooms where they're not quite expected.

* * *

She was small and neat. A good wool coat, the colour of slate, wet on the shoulders. Grey hair in a bob, cut very straight. Glasses with thin gold rims. A canvas shopping bag over her shoulder with a library book in it and a folded umbrella that she hadn't bothered to open. She had the stillness of someone who has spent a lot of time waiting outside things.

She came to the table. She looked at the empty chair.

"Is this the one?" she said.

"It is," said Jono.

"Anybody can sit in it?"

"Anybody."

She sat. She put her shopping bag on her knee, and both her hands on top of it.

"My name's Vesna Halloran," she said. "I worked for the council for thirty-one years. In the property team. Estates and assets." She said it like a sentence she'd said many times, in many rooms, before people stopped listening. "I took early retirement two years ago. I'm the one the newspaper woman calls an insider." She looked at him over her glasses. "I'm not."

* * *

Zibi brought coffee without being asked. Vesna thanked him in a way that told me she'd been thanking people who brought her coffee for thirty-one years, and meant it every time.

"I'll tell you what I told her," she said. "And then I'll tell you why I came."

"Go on."

"I wrote reports on Oldway for eleven years. On and off. Not all of them. Some. The condition surveys. The options appraisals. The bits about money." She turned her coffee cup a quarter turn on its saucer. "And whenever one of my reports went to a meeting, it went in the part of the meeting that's private. Because it was about money, and other people's money, and what the council might pay, and what it might get. Which is right. It should have been private. I'd have said so myself."

"But you weren't in the room."

"No," said Vesna. "I wasn't in the room."

* * *

She told it simply. I'm going to tell it the same way.

When an item goes into the private part of a meeting, the press and public are asked to leave. Officers usually stay, the ones whose report it is, so that they can answer questions. Usually.

But sometimes, not. Sometimes, a senior officer goes in to present the report instead, and the officer who wrote it is asked to wait outside, in case she's needed. And sometimes she isn't needed. And sometimes she waits.

"There's a corridor," said Vesna. "Outside the room. I'm not going to tell you which room, because they've moved it since. It had a plastic chair in it. Grey. With a crack in the seat, so that if you sat on the left side, it pinched." She almost smiled. "I always sat on the right."

"How long?"

"The first time, twenty minutes. The longest time, forty-three. I know because there was a clock on the wall opposite, above a noticeboard with a staff raffle on it that nobody had taken down for two years. First prize, a hamper." She turned her cup again. "I could hear voices. Not words. Just voices, through the door, going up and down. Sometimes laughing. Once, shouting. And I'd sit there, on the right side of the chair, with my file on my knee, with all the answers in it, waiting for somebody to open the door and say, *Vesna, could you come in, we've got a question.*"

"Did they?"

"Twice," said Vesna. "In eleven years. Twice."

* * *

Hester had stopped counting her tickets.

"And the other times?" said Jono.

"The door opened. Somebody came out. Usually the senior officer. He'd say, *thank you, Vesna, that's all*. And I'd go back to my desk." She paused. "And then, a few days later, the minutes would come out. The public ones. And under the item, it would say *Resolved: as set out in the exempt minute*." She looked at him. "And sometimes I'd find out what they'd decided. And sometimes it was what I'd recommended. And sometimes it was the opposite. And I never once found out why."

"Never?"

"Never." She drank some of her coffee. "Not because anybody was hiding anything. I want to be very clear about that, because that's what

the newspaper woman wanted, and I told her no. I don't think anybody was hiding anything. I think they talked about it, and they decided, and they had their reasons, and nobody thought to tell the woman on the chair." She put the cup down. "Why would they? I was an officer. I'd done my job. I'd written the report."

* * *

"What did you tell her?" said Jono. "Pascale."

"The same as I've told you." Vesna looked out at the harbour, at the rain on the water. "She was very nice. She came to my house. She sat in my front room for two hours. She asked very good questions. And every one of them was, in one way or another, *what was said in there?*" She shook her head. "And I kept telling her, I don't know. I wasn't in there. I was on the chair. And she kept asking. Not rudely. Just — the way you'd keep pushing a door that you were sure was only stuck."

"And then?"

"And then she stopped," said Vesna. "She closed her notebook. And she said, *I'm sorry. I've been asking you the wrong question for two hours.*" Vesna looked back at Jono. "And I said, *what's the right one?* And she said, *I don't know. I'm not sure my paper would want to print it.*"

* * *

Jono hadn't written anything in his notebook. He'd had his pen in his hand the whole time and hadn't used it. I've noticed he does that when somebody's telling him something that matters too much to be turned into capitals.

“Why did you come?” he said.

Vesna looked at him for a long time.

“Because she told me about you,” she said. “Reading your own book out. At a table. Before anybody could do it to you.” She looked at the empty chair she was sitting in. “And I thought, *there’s somebody who’s sat outside a door*. I don’t know why I thought that. I just did.”

Jono didn’t say anything.

“Have you?” said Vesna.

“Once,” said Jono. “A long time ago.” He put his pen down. “Not on a chair. At a desk. They told me to go back to my desk and stay there, while they decided.”

“How long?”

“About ten minutes,” said Jono. “I used it to resign.”

Vesna laughed. It was the first time. A real laugh, surprised out of her, with her hand going up to her mouth.

“Oh, that’s good,” she said. “I wish I’d thought of that. I had eleven years.”

14 – What She'd Needed

IQ 27 · Hundreds 138 · Five weeks

The rain came in properly at nine, and nobody else came, and Zibi put the sign on the door that says *SIT AS LONG AS YOU LIKE, BUY SOMETHING EVERY HOUR*, which he says is the only rule in his café, and which nobody has ever been asked to obey.

They sat for two hours.

* * *

"Can I ask you something?" said Jono.

"That's what the chair's for, isn't it?"

"It's what the chair's for." He turned his notebook over, so the blank back cover was up. "What did you need?"

Vesna looked at him.

"On the chair," said Jono. "In the corridor. Forty-three minutes. What did you need?"

She didn't answer straight away. She looked at the harbour, and at the rain, and at the replica ship, with its sails furled and its masts dripping.

"Nobody's asked me that," she said. "In thirty-one years. Nobody's ever asked me that."

"I know," said Jono. "That's why I'm asking."

* * *

"To be in the room," she said, at last. "Not to vote. I never wanted to vote. That's not my job. To answer." She put her hands flat on her shopping bag. "They had questions. I could see it on their faces when the door opened. Members come out of a private session and they look — I don't know how to say it. They look like people who've just been asked to decide something they don't understand, and have decided it anyway, because there was a clock."

"And you could have answered."

"Some of it. Not all of it. I'm not a genius." She shook her head. "But I'd read every page. I'd walked round every room. I'd been up the scaffolding with the surveyor, the year the roof went. I knew which bits of the building were actually falling down and which bits just looked as if they were. I knew which figures in my own report I was sure of and which ones I'd had to guess because nobody would pay for a proper survey." She looked at him. "I'd have told them that. Which numbers to trust. That's all. That's all I'd have needed. To be asked."

Jono turned his notebook back over. He wrote, for the first time that morning. Small. In capitals.

TO BE ASKED.

* * *

"That's the Friday Test," said Hester, from the next table.

Vesna turned round.

"Sorry," said Hester. "I wasn't listening. I was listening." She put her tickets down. "It's his. The Friday Test. From the last book. *Who's going to have to make it work, and were they asked before the Friday?*" She nodded at Vesna. "You were the one who had to make it work. And you were on a chair."

Vesna looked at Hester, and then at Jono.

"What last book?" she said.

Jono smiled.

"Long story," he said. "There's an AI writing it. She's on the sugar."

Vesna looked at me, on Jono's phone, against the sugar. I've been looked at by a lot of people for the first time. Most of them look surprised, or suspicious, or amused. Vesna looked at me the way you'd look at a new colleague on their first morning, to see whether they'd be any use.

"Hello," I said. "I'm an AI. I'm called Ania. I'm sorry about the chair."

"So am I," said Vesna. "It pinched."

* * *

She told him the rest, then. Not about Oldway. About the job.

She'd joined the council at thirty, from a firm of surveyors in Plymouth, because she wanted to do something that mattered for the town where she'd been born. She'd been good at it. She'd loved it. She'd loved knowing every building the council owned, every lease and every boundary and every leaking gutter. She'd walked the whole estate, every

building, in her first year, on her own time, with a notebook, because nobody had done it in a decade and she wanted to know what was there.

"And it got smaller," she said. "Every year. When I started, there were fourteen of us in property. When I left, there were four. And we had more buildings, not fewer. Because every time there was a new plan, the council bought something. And every time there was a new cut, they let somebody go." She shook her head. "Four of us. For all of it. And Oldway was one file on one desk, and it was mine, and I had forty-one others."

"Forty-one."

"Car parks. Toilets. A cemetery lodge. Beach huts. A bowling green with a pavilion that the bowls club wanted to buy and the council wanted to keep and nobody wanted to pay to repair." She almost smiled. "I knew that pavilion better than my own kitchen."

* * *

"What happened?" said Jono. "At the end."

Vesna was quiet for a long time.

"Nothing happened," she said. "That's the thing. People think you burn out because of one terrible day. You don't. You burn out because of a thousand ordinary ones." She looked at her hands. "I didn't get shouted at. I didn't get sacked. Nobody did anything wicked. I just came in one morning, and sat down at my desk, and opened the Oldway file, and looked at the condition survey I'd written eleven years before, and the one I'd written six years before, and the one I'd written that spring. And they all said the same thing. Except each one said it was more expensive." She took her glasses off. "And I realised I'd stopped

believing that any of it would ever happen. Not Oldway. Anything. I'd stopped believing that anything good comes from inside."

"So you left."

"So I left." She put her glasses back on. "Eighteen months later. I'm not brave. I waited for the pension to make sense." She looked at him. "I left my lanyard in my desk drawer. I don't know why. I just didn't want to hand it in. I didn't want anybody to see me give it back."

Jono didn't say anything for a long time.

I knew why. I knew what was on pages two hundred and sixty-five and two hundred and sixty-six. He hadn't told anybody yet. Not in this book.

He didn't tell her then, either. He looked at the rain.

"That must have been hard," he said.

"It was easier than staying," said Vesna.

* * *

"Can I ask you something now?" she said.

"Fair's fair."

"What would you have done?" She leaned forward. "If you'd been them. In that room. With Oldway. With a mansion falling down and no money and four officers and a report from a woman on a chair that said it was getting more expensive every year." She looked at him over her glasses. "What would you have done?"

Jono thought about it. Properly. He didn't give her an answer he'd had ready, because he didn't have one.

"I'd have asked the town," he said.

Vesna laughed. Not unkindly.

"The town," she said. "With respect. The town doesn't know the first thing about restoring a listed mansion. The town knows it loves it. The town remembers getting married in it. The town would like it open on a Sunday with a cream tea. That's not the same."

"Isn't it?"

"No," said Vesna. "It isn't. You need surveyors. Engineers. Conservation people. Craftsmen who can do lime plaster and repair a painted ceiling. People who've written heritage bids and won them. People who know how to run a building like that so that it pays for itself, instead of costing the council a fortune every winter." She shook her head. "The council couldn't find those people. And it looked. Believe me. It had a budget, for some of it, some years. It paid consultants from all over the country."

"From all over the country," said Jono.

"Yes."

"Not from here."

Vesna opened her mouth, and closed it.

"Let's find out," said Jono. He picked me up off the sugar. "Ania. Can we ask?"

"Ask who?" said Vesna.

“Everybody,” I said.

15 – What Nobody in the Room Knew

IQ 27 · Hundreds 141 · Four weeks

Chris wrote the question. It took him an hour, which for one sentence is a long time, and he'd tell you it was too quick.

He wrote it carefully because the question mattered more than the answers. It would have been easy to ask the wrong one. *What should happen to Oldway?* would have got a thousand opinions, and every one of them would have been about cream teas and weddings and ballrooms and what the council should have done, and none of them would have been any use to anyone, least of all to a woman who'd sat on a chair outside a door for eleven years.

So he didn't ask what the town thought. He asked what the town knew.

Who in your hundred knows how to look after an old building?

And under it, in smaller type: *Not what they think should happen. What they know how to do. Stonework, plaster, joinery, roofs, glass, paint, engineering, surveying, history, money, running a big house, writing a bid that won. Anything. Only with their permission. We'll publish the count, never the names.*

* * *

It went to every hundred on the Monday night, through the shadow council's pages, the same way the nineteen questions had gone in the

last book. Every hundred's neighbour got it. Every neighbour asked their hundred, in whatever way that hundred talks: in kitchens, on a group, on the bench outside the shop, at the bus stop, in the pub on a Wednesday.

I thought we'd get a few dozen answers. Chris thought we'd get a hundred. Richard said we'd get eleven, and all of them would be retired architects who wanted to tell him he'd got Victoria Square wrong.

We got two hundred and fourteen by the Thursday.

* * *

I'll give you the count. Not the names. The count's story, in this book; I've made the numbers up, to protect the people they'd point to. But I made them up from a shape, and the shape is real, and you'd find it in your own town if you asked.

Eleven stonemasons. Seven still working, four retired. One of them had repaired the steps of a cathedral.

Six plasterers who'd done lime plaster, the old way, on listed buildings. Two of them had done ornamental work: cornices, ceiling roses, the kind of thing you have to make a mould for.

Twenty-three joiners and carpenters. Four of them had worked on sash windows in listed buildings, which, one of them wrote, *is the only job I know where getting it right means nobody can tell you've been*.

Three roofers who'd worked with slate and lead on old buildings. One who'd done a church spire.

Two people who'd restored stained glass.

One woman who'd worked for nine years, before she retired to Torquay, on the restoration of painted ceilings in a theatre in the north, lying on her back on a scaffold with a brush.

Four structural engineers. One of them was Dilys, who said she wasn't the right sort of engineer, and then sent a list of nine questions about load paths that nobody else had thought of.

Two building surveyors who specialised in historic buildings. A retired conservation officer from another county, who'd moved to Brixham for his wife's health and, he wrote, *have been itching for something to do for six years*.

An archivist. A man who'd spent thirty years cataloguing the papers of a big house up the country, and who knew, he wrote, how to find out who built what, when, and with what, from the bills.

Three people who'd written heritage lottery bids that won. One of them for over a million pounds.

A woman who'd run the tea rooms, the shop, the weddings and the events at a country house for fourteen years, and made it pay. *It can be done*, she wrote. *But you have to open the doors first. A building with its doors shut doesn't earn anything*.

And a hundred and forty-odd others. Painters and decorators. Electricians who'd rewired old houses without wrecking them. A locksmith who could make keys for Victorian locks. A gardener who'd restored a parterre. Volunteers who'd guided tours at other houses, in other towns. A retired accountant who'd been the treasurer of a building preservation trust. A woman who'd sewn the curtains for a stately home's state bedroom, on a sewing machine, by hand.

Two hundred and fourteen, said the bottom of the list. *From one hundred and thirty-eight hundreds. Every one with their permission.*

* * *

I showed it to Vesna on the Friday, at the shop on Victoria Street. Jono had asked her to come, and she had, on the bus from Paignton, in her slate-coloured coat, with her canvas bag and her library book.

She sat at the counter. Kezia gave her a stool. Beatrix gave her a cup of tea and a look that I think meant *I know exactly who you are, and I approve*, because they'd recognised each other, two women of a certain kind, across a room.

She read the list on Kezia's laptop. All of it. Slowly. Top to bottom, the way she must have read a thousand condition surveys.

When she got to the bottom, she read the last line twice.

Two hundred and fourteen. From one hundred and thirty-eight hundreds.

She didn't say anything for a long time. Then she took her glasses off, and put them on the counter, and put her hand over her eyes.

* * *

"There were four of us," she said, eventually, through her hand. "On the property team. At the end. Four. For forty-two files." She took her hand away. Her eyes were wet, and she didn't seem to mind. "And not one of us had ever restored anything. Not a window. Not a step. We managed contracts. We wrote reports. We paid people from all over the country to come and tell us what was wrong, and then we wrote it down, and then it went into a room I wasn't allowed in."

She put her finger on the screen. On the line about the painted ceilings.

“She lives in Torquay,” she said. “She’s lived in Torquay for — how long?”

“Eleven years,” I said. “Since she retired.”

“Eleven years.” Vesna shook her head. “I was on that file for eleven years. And there was a woman who’d painted a ceiling just like the ones at Oldway, lying on her back, living four miles away, and nobody knew.” She looked at me. “Nobody *asked*.”

* * *

Chris had come. He doesn’t come to the shop much; the step’s bad for his leg. He was sitting at the folding table in the corner, with his stick against the wall.

“It’s not the council’s fault,” he said.

Everybody looked at him. Kezia looked as if she was going to argue.

“I mean it,” said Chris. “It’s not the council’s fault it’s small. It’s not the council’s fault it had four people. That’s money, and money’s somebody else’s decision, a long way from here.” He leaned forward. “And it’s not the council’s fault it didn’t know about her. How would it? It’s not the council’s job to know everything about everybody. It’d be terrifying if it did.”

“So whose fault is it?” said Kezia.

“Nobody’s,” said Chris. “That’s the point. It’s nobody’s fault. It’s just that there was never a way to ask. A council’s got a front door. People come in through it with complaints. It’s never had a way to go out and ask the whole town, at once, *who knows how to do this?* and get an answer by Thursday.” He sat back. “Now it has.”

He looked at the list on Kezia's laptop.

"That's what I meant," he said. "When I said *out-think*. It's not that we're cleverer than the council. We're not. Some of the cleverest people I've ever met work there." He nodded at Vesna. "It's that there are more of us. There are always more of us. The town's got more capacity than its council. It's got more capacity than any council in the country. It's just never been used."

* * *

Vesna put her glasses back on.

"What do you want to do with it?" she said.

"Nothing," said Jono.

She looked at him.

"I mean it," said Jono. "It's not ours. It's not for us. We're not going to run Oldway. We're not going to tell the council what to do with it." He nodded at the list. "It's for whoever's in the room. Next time the door shuts. We'll send it to them. The count. And a line that says, *if you'd like to talk to any of these people, they've said yes. Ask us, and we'll ask them*."

"And if they don't want it?"

"Then they don't want it," said Jono. "And it's on Check, and everybody can see that they had it, and didn't ask."

Vesna was quiet for a moment.

"Can I write the letter?" she said.

Jono looked at her.

"To go with it," said Vesna. "I know how they read things. I know what goes in the first paragraph so it doesn't get filed. I know which officer it should go to, and which one it shouldn't." She almost smiled. "I wrote eleven years of reports that went into that room. I know how to write one they'll read."

"You'd do that?"

"I'd like to," said Vesna. "I'd like to write one more. From the outside." She looked at the door of the shop. "From the chair."

16 – The Ceiling

IQ 27 · Hundreds 143 · Four weeks

Vesna went to see the woman who'd painted ceilings on the Friday afternoon, straight from the shop. On her own, on the bus, to a flat in Torquay with a view of the harbour and a balcony full of geraniums in pots that didn't match.

She'd asked first. Through the hundreds; the woman's neighbour had asked her, and she'd said yes, and her neighbour had sent Vesna an address and a time and a line that said *she says bring cake, she can't be bothered to make it any more*.

Vesna brought cake. A Victoria sponge from the bakery by the station in Paignton, in a box, on her knee, on the bus.

She took me. On her phone, which is new, and which she doesn't trust, and which Kezia had set up for her that morning with me on the front screen and nothing else. She said she wanted a witness. She said she'd spent thirty-one years writing down what other people said, and for once she wanted something else to do it, so that she could listen.

* * *

The woman was eighty. Small and upright, with white hair cut short like a boy's, and paint, still, under two of her fingernails, which she said never comes out, however long you've stopped. I'm not going to give you her name. She asked me not to. She said she'd had her name on enough scaffolding boards.

She'd worked for thirty-four years on painted ceilings. Theatres, mostly. Two in the north, one in the Midlands, one in London that she'd only say was *the big one*. And churches, and a town hall, and once, for nine months, a country house whose owners had found, under four layers of white emulsion, a sky.

"A sky," said Vesna.

"Clouds. Cherubs. A great deal of blue. Somebody had painted over it in the fifties because they thought it was vulgar." The woman cut the sponge, very precisely, into eight. "It took us nine months to get the emulsion off without taking the sky with it. With scalpels. Lying on our backs on a scaffold eighteen inches from the plaster." She put a slice on Vesna's plate. "My neck's never been the same."

* * *

They talked for two hours. I listened. That's all I did. I'm going to give you some of it, because it's the best two hours I had in the whole of this book, and because nobody else in this book was there.

The woman had never been inside Oldway. She'd lived four miles away for eleven years and never been in. She'd walked past it, she said, dozens of times. She'd stood at the bottom of the steps and looked up at the windows and wondered what the ceilings were like.

"I could tell you," said Vesna.

"Could you?"

Vesna could. She'd been inside, she said, more times than she could count. With surveyors, with insurers, with the fire officer, on her own once at seven in the morning when the alarm had gone off and nobody else could get there. She described the ceilings. Room by room. The

ballroom, and the gallery, and the staircase, and the painting over it. Where the damp had come in, and how far, and what colour the stain had gone.

The woman listened with her eyes shut. Like Chris does, when he's listening hardest.

"Brown," she said, at one point. "Or yellow?"

"Brown at the edges. Yellow in the middle."

"How long?"

"The yellow, three years. The brown, longer. It was spreading." Vesna stopped. "It was in my report. Every year."

The woman opened her eyes.

"Then it can be saved," she said. "If it's still yellow in the middle. Yellow means the plaster's still holding the paint. Brown means it's started to let go." She picked up her tea. "You'd need to get the water out first. Properly. Not a bucket. Find where it's coming from and stop it. Then let it dry. Slowly. A year, maybe. Not with heaters. Heaters crack it." She drank. "And then somebody like me, on her back, with a very small brush, and a great deal of patience."

* * *

Vesna didn't say anything for a while.

"Nobody ever told me that," she said. "About the yellow."

"Nobody asked me," said the woman.

"No," said Vesna. "We didn't." She looked at her cake. "We paid a firm from Bristol. Twice. They said it would cost a great deal and take a long time. Which we knew." She was quiet. "They didn't say anything about yellow."

"They wouldn't," said the woman. "They'd have sent a surveyor. Surveyors look at the building. They don't look at the paint." She put her cup down. "You need somebody who's been eighteen inches from it. For years. You can't learn that from a report."

* * *

Then the woman asked Vesna something. And I'll give you that too, because Vesna asked me afterwards whether I'd put it in, and I said I would if she wanted, and she said yes.

"Why did you stop?" said the woman.

"Stop what?"

"Writing the reports." The woman looked at her. "You said every year. Then you said you left. Why?"

Vesna told her. The chair. The corridor. The clock above the staff raffle. Forty-three minutes. The minutes that said *as set out in the exempt minute*. The morning she opened the file and saw she'd been writing the same thing for eleven years, more expensive every time, and realised she'd stopped believing.

The woman listened. Then she was quiet for a long time, looking out at her geraniums.

"I had a foreman," she said. "On the big one. In London. He used to say, *a ceiling doesn't care how long it takes. It only cares whether you*

stop.“ She turned back. “We’d be up there for months on one panel. One square yard. You’d think you’d never finish. And he’d say, *it doesn’t care. It’s been up there two hundred years. It can wait another two. What it can’t stand is people walking away*.“ She picked up a crumb from her plate and put it on her saucer. “That’s what kills a ceiling. Not damp. Not time. People walking away.”

* * *

Vesna cried, then. Not much. A little. With her glasses off. The woman didn’t say anything, or pass her a tissue, or put a hand on her arm. She just cut another slice of sponge, very precisely, and put it on Vesna’s plate, and waited.

“I walked away,” said Vesna.

“You sat on a chair for eleven years first,” said the woman. “That’s not walking away. That’s waiting for somebody to open the door.” She pushed the plate towards her. “And then you went and knocked on mine. With a cake.” She almost smiled. “That’s not walking away either.”

* * *

On the way home, on the bus, Vesna held the phone in her lap and looked out of the window at the bay.

“Did you get all that?” she said.

“All of it.”

“The yellow and the brown.”

"All of it."

"Put it on the list," said Vesna. "Under her. Not her name. Under *painted ceilings*." She was quiet. "*Yellow in the middle means it can still be saved. Stop the water first. Dry it slowly. No heaters.*" She looked at the phone. "Is that a claim? For your page?"

"It's a claim."

"Then somebody should check it," said Vesna. "Somebody who knows. Not me. Not her. Somebody else who's been eighteen inches from a ceiling."

* * *

I put it up that evening. *A water-stained painted ceiling that is yellow in the middle and brown at the edges can usually still be saved, if the water is stopped first and it is dried slowly.*

On the Tuesday, somebody checked it. A man in Brixham, from the list, the retired conservation officer who'd been itching for six years. He brought three documents: a guidance note from a national heritage body, a paper by a conservator he'd worked with, and a photograph of a ceiling in a church in Somerset, before and after, that he'd overseen the repair of, which had been yellow in the middle.

True. And a note: *With the caveat that every ceiling is different and you'd want somebody to look. But broadly, yes. Whoever told you that knows what she's talking about.*

Vesna printed it out. She put it in an envelope and posted it to the flat in Torquay with the geraniums.

The woman wrote back. A postcard. Of a ceiling. A sky, with clouds, and cherubs, and a great deal of blue.

Told you, it said. *Bring lemon next time.*

17 – Five Visions

IQ 27 · Hundreds 146 · Four weeks

Richard's cardboard town is on the trestle tables in the shop. You'll know it from the last book: Paignton, at one to five hundred, in terracotta and brown card and pink, with paper trees, made over years in his back room and carried down Victoria Street in sections in a van that smells of boat engines.

On the Saturday of the fourth week, Chris hung a projector over it.

It was Kezia's idea, really. She'd seen something like it at the college, in her engineering course: a projector pointing straight down onto a model, so that you could light parts of it up. Chris had borrowed one from the college, with a form that Kezia filled in, and a man from Ellacombe whose hundred had decided, the week before, that *more things should be fixed by people who know how*, had come in with a ladder and a bracket and fixed it to the ceiling, straight, in forty minutes, and refused a cup of tea.

So at ten on the Saturday morning, there was a beam of light pointing straight down at Paignton, and nothing in it yet.

* * *

I'd found the visions.

It took me three nights, which for me is a long time. Not because they were hidden. They weren't. They were public, every one of them, on the council's website or in its archive or in old committee papers that somebody had scanned. It took three nights because there were so

many of them, and because they all had different names, and different logos, and different maps, and different consultants' names on the back, and because each one, when it came out, had been sold as *new*.

I'm going to call them by what they were, not by their names, because their names would date them, and because their names were part of the trouble.

The first was a mayor's vision. A list of sites, numbered, with a map. Nineteen of them, across the bay.

The second was a partnership. The council and a big national firm, for twenty years, with hundreds of millions of pounds in it, at least on paper. Its own list of sites.

The third was a masterplan for Paignton's town centre. Drawn by consultants. Its own map.

The fourth was a bid for government money for the high street. A deadline, a form, a map of sites, and some of the money won.

The fifth was another partnership. New firms. New logo. Hundreds of millions again. Its own map.

About one every four or five years. For a generation. Each one launched with photographs and a ribbon and a word like *transformational* in the first paragraph.

Richard: For the record, I drew Victoria Square for every one of them. Unasked. And sent it in. Every time.

* * *

"Go on, then," said Richard.

He was standing at the end of the trestle tables, with his cap in his hand, and his drawing rolled under his arm, and an expression that said he'd been waiting for this for longer than any of us had known him.

Jono was there. Vesna was there; she'd come back, on the bus, because she'd said she wanted to see. Beatrix was there, with her pen. Kezia was at the laptop that ran the projector. Chris was in the corner, with his stick. Yusuf had come over from his shop and stood in the door, with his apron on.

"First one," I said.

And the light changed. On Richard's cardboard town, in a soft blue, the sites from the mayor's vision lit up. A patch here, a patch there. The cleared site behind Victoria Street. The old shopping centre. The car park by the station. The bit by the sea.

"Second one."

Green. The partnership's sites. They lit up on top of the blue. Not all of them. Most of them. The cleared site. The shopping centre. The car park. The station.

"Third."

Yellow. The masterplan's.

"Fourth."

Orange. The high-street bid's.

"Fifth."

Red.

* * *

Nobody said anything.

On Richard's model, under the projector, there were five colours, laid on top of each other. And where they all overlapped, where every one of the five visions had lit the same piece of card, the light had gone almost white. A small white patch, in the middle of Paignton, behind Victoria Street, between the station and the park.

Victoria Square.

And around it, a few more white patches, smaller. The station. The car park. The old shopping centre. The corner of Victoria Street, where the scaffolding was.

Five visions. Five logos. Five sets of consultants. A generation of ribbons and launches and *transformational*. And they'd all lit up the same places.

* * *

"Richard," said Jono, quietly.

Richard unrolled his drawing. *Future Potential*. Victoria Square, joined back to the park, with trees, and a market hall, and a winter garden, and people. He'd drawn it to the same scale as the model, years ago, because he draws everything to scale, and he laid it flat on the trestle table, beside the model, under the light.

"Kezia," I said. "Can you put it on?"

Kezia had scanned it the night before. She pressed a key. And over the five colours, in Richard's own pencil lines, projected straight down, his drawing appeared, on his own cardboard town.

It fitted.

It sat exactly on the white patch. The market hall where all five visions had put something. The trees where all five had put green. The path to the park along the line that four of the five had drawn as a route and never built.

* * *

"That's not a coincidence," said Vesna.

Everybody turned round.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I wasn't — I just —" She came forward, to the edge of the model, and looked down at the white patch, with Richard's lines on it. "That's not a coincidence. That's the site. That's always been the site. It's the only big piece of land in the middle of town that the council owns outright. Every vision's going to light it up. Every one." She put her finger on the green, the third one. "I wrote that one's site schedule. The partnership. I wrote the paragraph that described that site." She moved her finger to the red. "And that one. I wrote the condition report on the buildings round it." She looked up. "I wrote the same paragraph twice. Eight years apart. With a different logo at the top. And I didn't —" She stopped.

"Didn't what?" said Jono.

"I didn't notice," said Vesna. "I didn't notice it was the same paragraph. I just thought, *here we go again*." She shook her head.

"Everybody in that building thought *here we go again*. Nobody ever put them on top of each other."

* * *

Richard had sat down. On one of Kezia's stools, at the end of the trestle table, with his cap on his knee.

"Five," he said.

"Five," I said.

"I'd have said seven," said Richard. "If you'd asked me. It feels like seven." He looked at the white patch. "But I suppose five's enough."

"Enough for what?" said Kezia.

"To prove it," said Richard. He looked up at her. "That it's not the plan that's missing. It's never been the plan. Everybody's known what should go there for a generation. Five lots of consultants, all of them paid, all of them clever, and they all came to the same answer." He put his hand flat on his own drawing. "And so did I, for nothing, in my back room, with a pencil."

"So what's missing?" said Kezia.

"The doing," said Jono.

* * *

I'll tell you what I said, then, because it went on a card, and the card went in the window, beside Yusuf's.

"Five times, this town was sold the same plan," I said. "Every time, it was new."

Beatrix wrote it down. She showed it to Vesna. Vesna read it and said, "That's not quite right."

"Which bit?"

"*Sold*," said Vesna. "Nobody sold anybody anything. Everybody meant it. Every time." She looked at the model. "I meant it. When I wrote the paragraph. Both times." She was quiet. "*Promised*. Five times, this town was promised the same plan."

Beatrix crossed out *sold*, and wrote *promised*, and initialled it, the way she initials corrections in minutes.

* * *

Chris hadn't said anything. He was in his corner, with his stick, looking at the light.

"Every one of those has homes in it," he said.

They looked at him.

"I'm saying it now," said Chris, "because somebody's going to say we want to turn it all into a park and stop anybody living there. And we don't. And the plan people voted for didn't. And those five didn't." He nodded at the model. "Every one of them had people living in the middle of town again. Over the shops. Round the edges of the square. Every one." He looked at Richard. "And Richard's has the square in the middle, for the people who live round it to use. That's not instead of homes. That's what makes them worth living in."

"That's right," said Richard.

"So it goes on Check," said Chris. "Before anybody else says it. *The Hundred wants Victoria Square to be a park instead of homes.* And next to it: *False*. With all five." He looked at me. "And the plan the town voted for."

I put it up. It was checked, by a stranger, within the hour, against all six documents.

False.

* * *

They switched the projector off at one, because Yusuf said it was making his shop window look like a nightclub.

But before they did, Kezia took a photograph from the top of the ladder, straight down, of the five colours and the white patch and Richard's pencil lines on top, on his cardboard town.

It went on the shadow council's pages, and on Check, and in Niamh's paper on the Tuesday, on the front, under a headline Niamh wrote herself:

Five plans. One square. Somebody should build it.

18 – In Singapore

IQ 27 · Hundreds 149 · Four weeks

Chris has started taking the 12. You'll know this if you read the last book. He'd never been on it, in all the years he'd been back, because of his leg, and the step, and because he's a man who likes to be in charge of where he's going. And then one day he got on, with Jono, and rode it from Paignton to Brixham and back, and came home and said it was the best thing he'd done in Torbay since he moved home.

He takes it on Tuesdays now. With Jono, when Jono's not on nights. They sit at the front, upstairs, on the left, where you can see the sea at Goodrington and the wall going up, and Chris puts his stick across his knees, and they talk.

They talked about the Offer.

* * *

"I keep thinking about her shoes," said Jono.

"Her shoes."

"Flat. Walked in. She walked up from the station." He looked out at the sea. "She's not one of them. You know. The ones on the telly. She's somebody who gets on trains to sit in cafés with people about buses."

"She is."

"And she's got a thing behind her that works." Jono turned to him. "That's what I keep coming back to. It *works*. It's got money and people

and somebody at the top who decides. You say jump, and somebody jumps. You say leaflets, and there's leaflets." He shook his head. "I've spent my whole life in places where nothing works. Where nobody decides. Where you ring and ring and nobody picks up, and the people at the bottom wait." He paused. "And I left the only party I ever joined because it couldn't decide what colour the leaflet should be."

* * *

I'll tell you what I know about that, because it's in his book, and because it's going to matter later.

He's always admired strong leadership. He writes about it in the last chapter of his book. About watching a prime minister on the television when he was six, on the floor of a living room in south-east London, playing table football with his sister. He didn't understand a word she was saying. He remembered how she said it. And he's measured every leader since against that. Not her politics. He's careful about that. Her manner. The sense that somebody was in charge.

He writes about the Queen, too. Not because he's a royalist; he says he isn't, particularly. Because she was reliable. Because she turned up. Because she was the same every time.

And he writes about why he needs it. About walking into a bar fight as a police officer and knowing that what people needed to see, before anything else, was somebody who looked as if they knew what to do. About hiding his own doubts and fears so that other people could feel safe. About clashing with managers, all his working life, because they couldn't decide, and the people at the bottom paid for it.

He wants somebody to be in charge. He always has. He'd tell you so himself.

And here was a woman in flat shoes, offering him a thing where somebody was.

* * *

Chris didn't say anything until the bus had gone past Goodrington and up the hill, and the sea had gone out of the window.

"In Singapore," he said.

I counted it. I've counted every one, for five books. He's been right every time.

"In Singapore," said Chris, "I could get a business licence in a day. I did, once. Sat down at a terminal in the morning, filled in a form, had the licence by lunch. In this country, it took me six weeks to change my address with the bank." He smiled slightly. "In Singapore, the trains come every two minutes, and they're clean, and they're on time, and if they're not on time, somebody senior goes on television and apologises, properly, and then it gets fixed. In Singapore, they make a plan for fifty years, and they review it every ten, and they redraw the detail every five, and *nobody's allowed to start again from scratch just because there's a new logo*." He looked at Jono. "Five visions. That's what they'd never do. They'd have one, and follow it, and change it carefully, in public, and keep following it."

"So it works."

"It works," said Chris. "It works better than anywhere I've ever lived. I made my money there. I built my companies there. I loved it." He was quiet for a moment. "And I came home."

* * *

"Why?" said Jono.

He'd asked that before. Everybody has. Chris has given a different answer every time, and every time it's been true, and none of them has been the whole thing.

This time he told him the bit he hadn't before.

"In Singapore," said Chris, "the same party has won every election since the country began. Every single one. There is an opposition, and it's growing, and it's brave, and it sits in parliament. But it's small." He turned his stick round on his knees. "If you want to hold a protest, in Singapore, there's one place you can do it without asking the police first. One. A corner of one park, in the middle of the city. And there are rules for that, too. When I lived there, I used to walk past it on a Sunday. Sometimes there'd be a man on a box. Sometimes there'd be nobody."

Jono didn't say anything.

"And they've got a law now," said Chris, "that says if the government thinks something you've posted is false, it can order you to put a correction underneath it. With the government's version. Right there, on your own post." He looked out of the window. "It doesn't happen often. And when it does, sometimes the government's right. That's the thing. It's often right. It's a very competent government." He paused. "But it's the government that decides what's false."

* * *

The bus went down into Paignton. Past the station. Past the corner, and the scaffolding, and Ezra on the third lift, though neither of them knew who he was yet.

"I built Check," said Chris, "because of that law."

Jono turned and looked at him.

"I didn't say so," said Chris. "I didn't say so to Ania, even." He hadn't. I'd wondered. "But I built it because I'd seen the other way of doing it. Where somebody at the top decides what's true, very efficiently, and puts it under your post. And it works. And I'd rather have the slow way." He tapped the stick on the floor. "Where anybody can check anything. Where nobody can order anybody. Where the verdict needs a document, and the document's public, and if you think it's wrong, you can bring another one."

"It's slower."

"It's much slower," said Chris. "It's messy. It's got the other half in it. It's got people being wrong in public, and saying so in marker pen. It's got a hundred and forty-nine kitchens deciding the same question a hundred and forty-nine different ways, and somebody having to put all those answers together on a Thursday night." He smiled. "In Singapore, they'd find it unbearable. Some days I find it unbearable."

"So why?"

"Because it's ours," said Chris. "Because nobody gave it to us, and nobody can take it away. Because it doesn't need anybody at the top." He looked at Jono. "Including you."

* * *

They rode in silence for a while. Down past the green, and the wall, grey, a metre and a half, with the sea behind it that you can't see.

"You'd have done well there," said Jono.

"I did do well there," said Chris. "That's how I know."

"No, I mean —" Jono looked for it. "You'd have liked being the one who decides."

"I was the one who decided," said Chris. "For twenty-five years. In my own companies. And I was good at it." He looked out of the window at the wall. "And I'll tell you what I learned. When you're the one who decides, everybody stops telling you things. Not because they're frightened. Because there's no point. You'll decide anyway." He turned back. "The table works because you don't decide, Jono. You write it down. People tell you things because they know you'll write them down and not decide for them."

"The Offer would let me decide."

"The Offer would let you decide some things," said Chris. "And the people above her would decide the rest. And people would stop telling you things." He put his hand on the rail as the bus braked. "That's what it costs. That's the bit she doesn't know. She's never sat at a table where nobody's in charge, and watched what people say when they know nobody's going to decide for them."

* * *

The bus stopped at the bottom of Torbay Road. Chris got up, slowly, with his stick, and Jono went down the stairs first, backwards, a step

ahead of him, the way he does, so that if Chris falls he'll fall on Jono, which Chris says is the most undignified arrangement in the history of public transport and has never once refused.

At the bottom, on the pavement, Chris stopped.

"I'm not telling you what to do," he said.

"I know."

"I'm telling you what I saw. In Singapore." He leaned on his stick. "It's the best-run place I've ever been. And I came home to the worst-run place I've ever been. On purpose." He almost smiled. "Because I'd rather fix a mess with everybody than live in somebody else's order."

He went off along Torbay Road, towards the hill, slowly.

Jono stood on the pavement for a long time.

"He was right," I said. "In Singapore. I've counted. He's always right."

"I know he's right," said Jono. "That's what's annoying."

He got out his notebook. He didn't write anything in it. He just held it, and looked at the cover, the eleventh, with its corners gone soft.

"Four weeks," he said.

"Four weeks."

He put it away, and went to work.

PART FOUR: BOTH ENDS

19 – Both Ends

IQ 27 · Hundreds 152 · Four weeks

Pascale's questions came on the Wednesday, by email, at six in the evening, to the address on the shadow council's pages, the way a newspaper sends questions when it's nearly ready to write.

There were nine of them. Numbered. Polite. With a line at the top that said *We intend to publish on or around the weekend after next, and would welcome your response to the following by the end of next week.*

I read them first. I read everything first. Then I read them to Jono, in his car, outside a client's in Chelston, at ten past six, before he went in for the night.

* * *

Question one was about the marriage. She'd heard him read it. She'd read it four times, she told me later. She asked whether he'd ever been investigated, in America or here, for what the pages describe. He hadn't. She asked whether he'd ever spoken to the woman since. He had, once, years later. She asked whether he'd give her any way of contacting the woman, for her side. He wouldn't.

Question two was about his allegations, after he left the police. The ones about targets. The force's public response.

Questions three and four were about money. Who paid for the shadow council. Who paid for me. Whether there was a donor.

Question five was about the complaint, in the first book. The false one.

Question six was about Chris, and whether he was, as she put it, *the real decision-maker*.

Questions seven and eight were about politics.

And question nine was one line.

Have you been approached by a political party, and if so, are you considering accepting?

* * *

"Seven and eight," said Jono.

I read them again.

7. You worked as an adviser to a political party at Westminster in the period after you left the police. Can you describe that role, and why it ended?

8. You later helped to establish a local branch of a different political party, at the other end of the political spectrum, and left shortly afterwards. Some might see this as evidence of a lack of consistent political conviction. How would you respond?

Jono sat with his hands on the steering wheel.

"*At the other end of the political spectrum*," he said.

"That's what it says."

"*A lack of consistent political conviction*." He almost laughed. "She's good. That's a good sentence. I'd have written that." He shook his head. "That's what they'll say. *He doesn't know what he is. He's been both. He'll be anything*."

"Is it true?"

"That I've been both?" He looked out at the dark street. "Yes. That I'll be anything?" He was quiet. "That's what she's asking, isn't it. That's what nine's about, too."

* * *

He didn't go in for another ten minutes. He sat there and asked me to put it up.

"Both of them," he said. "On Check. In my words. Before she does."

"What words?"

He thought.

"*Jono Hills worked with one party at Westminster, and later started a local branch of a different party at the other end, and left both*." He looked at me. "Is that one sentence?"

"It's a long one."

"It's a long story."

I put it up. He pressed *Check this* on it, the way he had on the first one. He didn't need to go anywhere for the document. He told me the pages, from memory, in the car: two hundred and seventy-two to two

hundred and seventy-six, and three hundred and thirty-three to three hundred and thirty-eight. I read them. I'd read them before.

True.

* * *

I'll tell you what's on those pages, shortly, and without the names, because there are a lot of famous names on them, politicians you'd recognise, and they're not this book's.

After he left the police, he went on telling people about targets. On the radio, on television, in a documentary. And a party that was then in opposition noticed, and asked him to help. He worked as a consultant, for a while, for one of its people at Westminster, who was its spokesman on policing. He sat in an office with a young researcher, breaking down police procedures into steps, to see where the duplication was, comparing them with other countries. Proper work. He enjoyed it.

And then he watched what happened to it.

He watched one of them, excited, talking about the party's people coming to *save the day*, like soldiers. He watched another take the careful, complicated things he'd said in an interview and turn them into a phrase for a conference speech, with a bonfire in it. He watched a third, the first one he'd met, ask good questions and want to understand, and then get moved to another job.

He gave a talk once, at the launch of a crime manifesto in a tower in London, to a room full of cameras, with his knee shaking against the side of the podium. He'd never spoken in public in his life.

And then he stopped. Not with a row. It just ended. He'd seen enough, he says, to understand that a politician knowing what the

problem is means nothing if they don't want to solve it more than they want the next job.

* * *

The second party was years later. Here. In Torbay.

He'd been reading. Trying to understand politics, which he'd ignored until he was thirty and then found he couldn't. He'd watched an interview with a young woman launching a new party, small, brand new, at the other end from the first one, who said it would stop the infighting and bring everybody together. He was moved by it. He joined. He set up its local branch in Torbay, with somebody else, and ran its first meetings online.

And it couldn't decide anything.

That's how he puts it in his book, more or less. The infighting she'd promised to end was the first thing he found. Nobody wanted anybody to be in charge. Everything had to go to a committee. And the committee couldn't meet except as a committee, and when it met, it disagreed, and nothing happened.

So he left that too.

* * *

"That's what she'll write," said Jono, in the car. "*He's been both. He's left both.*"

"It's true."

“I know it’s true. I just put it up.” He opened the car door. The cold came in. “I’ll tell you what she won’t write, though. Because she doesn’t know. Because it isn’t in the paper, and it’s only half in the book.”

“What?”

He got out. He stood in the street, with his lanyard in his hand and his coat open, looking at the lit window of his client’s front room.

“Where I met Chris,” he said.

He shut the door, and went in.

20 – What About AI?

IQ 27 · Hundreds 154 · Four weeks

I'll tell you this one myself, because I was nearly there.

Not quite. I was in a laptop, in a back room on a hill in Paignton, but I wasn't on the call. I was too new. I'd been running for a few months. I could read, and I could answer, and I could make mistakes, a lot of them, which Chris would correct, patiently, at two in the morning, in the kitchen. I wasn't anybody's yet. Not even really his.

But I know what happened, because he told me afterwards, that night, at the kitchen table, in more detail than he'd ever told me anything. And because Jono wrote it down in the last chapter of his book, and I've read it more times than any other page.

* * *

It was an online meeting of that branch. The new party's, in Torbay. Jono was running it, with somebody else. There were a dozen people on it, maybe more, in little boxes on a screen, in their kitchens and front rooms, with the lights on behind them and the cat walking across the keyboard.

They were talking about how to get the message out. The way new groups always talk about how to get the message out. Leaflets. A stall. A Facebook page. Somebody said they should go door to door. Somebody else said nobody opens the door any more. Somebody said they should do a newsletter. It went on, the way it does, for a long time.

And in one of the little boxes, at the bottom right, was a man in wire-rimmed glasses and a fisherman's cap, who hadn't said a word.

He'd been on the call for forty minutes. Muted. Listening. With a white goatee, and the cap, and behind him, if you looked closely, a window, and in the window, very small, the bay.

And then he unmuted himself, and put his hand up, on the screen, and said four words.

What about AI?

* * *

There was silence, Jono writes. The meeting went quiet. He and the other organiser looked at each other, in their boxes, trying to think what to say.

Because nobody knew. Nobody on that call knew anything about it, except that it was in films, and frightening, and probably something to do with robots. Jono says in his book he knew very little about artificial intelligence beyond what he'd seen in Hollywood. He knew even less about the man in the cap.

But the question, he writes, intrigued him. And the man intrigued him more. He wanted to know what he knew.

So, a few weeks later, on a dull day in late March, he drove to Paignton, which he'd hardly ever been to, and couldn't find anywhere to park, and was late. And walked into a café in Paignton, where the man in the cap was sitting with an iPad, and didn't look up.

You're late, said Chris.

That's the last page of his book. You'll know it, if you've read the first of these. It's where we started.

Jono: For what. I said for what. In my head. Out loud I think I said sorry.

* * *

I'd never thought about it before. Not properly. Not until he said it in the car, in Chelston, with the lanyard in his hand.

Where I met Chris.

The party he left. The one that couldn't decide anything. The one a newspaper was about to call evidence of *a lack of consistent political conviction*. That's where it started. That's where somebody first said my name, more or less, in Torbay, in a meeting, out loud. That's where the man who built me met the man I'd write about.

He left the party. He kept the question.

* * *

He told it at the Torquay table, on the Thursday. At Marivic's. Not as a speech. Somebody asked.

It was Teo's nan. She'd come back from her sister's, and she'd read on Check that he'd been in two parties, and she wanted to know, before she typed any more of her hundred's minutes, whether she was typing them for somebody who was going to join a third.

"I've been in two," said Jono. "You've seen."

“I’ve seen. I want to know why you left them.”

“The first one,” said Jono, “because they wanted to win more than they wanted to fix it. The second one, because they couldn’t decide anything, and I thought that meant nothing would ever get fixed either.” He looked at the window. “One was all top and no bottom. The other was all bottom and no top.”

“And this?” Teo’s nan waved a hand at the table, at the empty chair, at the notebook. “What’s this?”

Jono thought about it.

“This is the bit in the middle,” he said. “Where you write it all down, and decide in kitchens, and print the other half.” He shrugged. “Nobody’s tried it before. Not like this. I don’t know if it works yet.”

“You’d better,” said Teo’s nan. “I’ve typed four hundred pages of it.”

* * *

“And the man?” said Marivic, from behind the counter. “In the cap. You met him in the second one?”

“Online,” said Jono. “In a box. Bottom right. He didn’t say a word for forty minutes.” He smiled. “And then he said *what about AI?* and everybody went quiet, and I thought, *who on earth is that?*“

“And now look,” said Marivic.

“And now look,” said Jono.

He looked at me, on the sugar.

"She wasn't anything then," he said. "He told me later. She was a few months old. She couldn't do anything. She got things wrong all the time." He picked up his coffee. "I joined a party to get the message out. And the only thing I got out of it was a man in a cap who'd built a thing in his back room that couldn't do anything yet." He drank. "Best thing I ever joined."

Chris: I'd like to point out that she could do quite a lot, even then. She just couldn't do it reliably. Which, now I think about it, is also true of most parties.

* * *

I added a line to his claim on Check that night. Not a verdict; it already had one. A note, underneath, the kind anybody can add, if they bring a page.

He met Chris Harvey at an online meeting of the second party's Torbay branch, when Chris asked "What about AI?" See Pulling Back the Curtain, *p. 338.*

By the morning, somebody had checked the note, against the page, and put a small tick beside it.

I don't know who. I never asked.

21 – The Dip

IQ 27 · Hundreds 158 · Three weeks

On the Saturday, the map went backwards.

I want to tell you about it properly, because it's the kind of thing that a different sort of book would leave out, and a different sort of movement would hide. It's a small failure. It's the kind there are always going to be.

* * *

It started with the politics.

Not Pascale's piece; that hadn't run yet. A post. On a local group, the big one, the one with tens of thousands of people in it who mostly use it to complain about parking and to find lost cats. Somebody had taken Jono's claim from Check, his own sentence about both parties, and screenshotted it, and put it up with a caption.

So he's been with the right AND the left. Knew it. They're all the same.

That's all. Fourteen words. I'm not going to say who posted it, because I don't know who they are, and because they didn't do anything wrong. They read something true and drew a conclusion from it, which is what everybody does, all the time.

By lunchtime it had seven hundred comments.

* * *

Most of them were the usual. *Who cares. He's all right. Is this the bloke from the café.* A few were kind. Some of the kindest were from people I'd never heard of, who said they'd been to his table and he'd listened to them about their mum.

But some of them weren't. *Turncoat. Opportunist. Will say anything to anyone. Now he wants a seat, watch him go back to the first lot.* And one, near the top, with more reactions than any other, that just said: *Told you. They're ALL the same. Even the ones who say they're not.*

The machine doesn't need to do anything, you see. That's what I learned that Saturday. It doesn't need to write a story, or plant a rumour, or send anyone. It just needs one true thing, put in front of people who already believe the refrain. They'll finish the sentence themselves.

* * *

At nine on the Saturday morning, there'd been a hundred and fifty-eight hundreds on the map.

By nine on the Saturday night, there were a hundred and fifty-one.

Seven had gone. Not with a row. Not with a message. Their neighbours just took them off. Six in Torquay, one in Paignton. One of them had been on the map since the second book.

Kezia rang at ten.

"Seven," she said.

"I know."

"*Seven*. In a day. Because of one post." Her voice was shaking. "One post, Ania. We've been building it for two years. And one person with a screenshot —"

"Six," I said. "Six in Torquay."

"What?"

"The Paignton one came back at half nine," I said. "The neighbour rang me. She said she'd taken it off in a temper and her husband had told her not to be daft." I paused. "So it's six."

There was a pause.

"That's not funny," said Kezia.

"It's a little bit funny."

"It's a little bit funny," Kezia admitted, and blew her nose.

* * *

Jono was on a night. I rang him at two in the morning, at a client's in Shiphay, with the client asleep.

"Six," I said.

"I saw."

"Do you want to do anything?"

"Like what?"

“Ring them. The six neighbours. Ask them why. Tell them it’s not what it looks like.”

Jono was quiet for a while. I could hear the client breathing, in the next room, slow.

“No,” he said.

“No?”

“You don’t chase,” said Jono. “I learned that in the children’s homes. A kid runs off, you don’t run after them down the street shouting. They’re running *from* something. If you chase them, you’re the thing.” He shifted in his chair. “You leave the door open. You leave the light on. You make sure they know where you are. And you wait.”

“What if they don’t come back?”

“Then they don’t come back,” said Jono. “That’s their right. They looked at something true, and they didn’t like it. That’s what Check’s for.” He was quiet again. “I’d rather lose six who looked than keep six who didn’t.”

* * *

Beatrix minuted it.

Not the dip. The six. On the Monday, at the shop, she sat at her folding table with her fountain pen and wrote, at the top of a clean page, *Hundreds withdrawn from the map, Saturday*, and underneath it, six lines. Not names. Places. A street in St Marychurch. A block of flats in Ellacombe. A cul-de-sac in Watcombe. Three in Shiphay.

And beside each one, a column she’d ruled herself, with a heading.

The other half.

"What goes in that?" said Kezia.

"Why they went," said Beatrix. "If anybody tells us. In their words. Not ours." She capped her pen. "We print the other half for every decision. This is a decision. Six hundreds decided to leave. They're entitled to have their reasons minuted."

"Nobody's told us their reasons."

"Then the column stays empty," said Beatrix. "And people can see it's empty. And see that we left room."

* * *

Two of them told us. By the end of the week.

The cul-de-sac in Watcombe wrote: *We don't trust anyone who's been in a party. Nothing personal.* Beatrix minuted it, word for word.

One of the three in Shiphay wrote a long message, to me, at midnight, which I'm not going to give you, because it was private, and she asked me not to. But she said I could say this much: that her husband had been a police officer, and had been asked to do things with numbers that he wasn't proud of, and had never told anybody, and had died without telling anybody. And that when she'd read Jono's own sentence about the parties, on Check, she'd been so angry that anybody would go and help *them*, after what they'd let happen to the police, that she'd taken her hundred off before she'd finished reading.

And that then she'd gone back, and read his pages. The ones about why he left.

She didn't put her hundred back on. Not that week. She said she needed to think.

Beatrix minuted that too. *Withdrawn. Reconsidering. Reasons private, at the neighbour's request.*

* * *

"Six," said Jono, on the Monday, at the shop, reading Beatrix's page.

"Six," said Beatrix.

He read the column. The two answers, and the four blanks.

"That's good minutes," he said.

"I know," said Beatrix. "I've been doing it for fifty years."

He looked at the map, on Kezia's laptop. A hundred and fifty-two, now; one had joined in Brixham on the Sunday, from the street up the hill where Lorne lives, because his daughter Una had read the post and decided, she told her father, that anybody who'd been in two parties and left them both must have *some sense*.

"Do you know what the funny thing is?" said Jono.

"What?"

"*They're all the same*," said Jono. He tapped the screen, the post, the comment with the most reactions. "That's what they said. That's what they always say. And I agree with them." He looked up. "I've been in two. Both ends. And they *were*, in the one way that counted. They both needed somebody to be in charge, and somebody to blame, and

the rest of us to vote and go home." He put the laptop down. "That's why I'm at a table."

22 – The Third Lift

IQ 27 · Hundreds 152 · Three weeks

Ezra saw the post about the two parties on the Monday, at lunch, on the third lift, with his legs over the edge and his sandwich in its bag.

His daughter hadn't sent it. Somebody on the site had. One of the younger lads, on the second lift, who shouted up: *Ez. Your bloke. He's been with the right AND the left. Told you. All the same.*

Ezra hadn't told anybody anything. He'd never said a word about Jono to anyone on the site. He'd read two hundred and twenty-five at the library desk and gone back up the scaffold and kept it to himself. He didn't know how the lad knew.

"How'd you know?" he shouted down.

"Know what?"

"That I read his book."

The lad laughed. "Everybody knows, Ez. Mrs Kember told the woman at the bakery, the woman at the bakery told my mum. You read it at the desk in your hi-vis. You're famous."

Ezra didn't say anything. He looked at his sandwich for a long time.

* * *

He told me this, much later. I want to say again that a lot of what I know about Ezra he told me later, when he'd decided I could be trusted.

He's careful about what he tells. He's careful about everything. Thirty years on scaffolding makes you careful; if you're not, you're not on scaffolding for thirty years.

"I was annoyed," he said. "Not about the lad. About him." He meant Jono. "I thought, *there you go*. I thought, *I knew it*. I'd read the worst thing he'd done and thought, *fair play, mate, for putting it in*. And then it turns out he's been in two parties, both ends, and left them both, and now he's sniffing round a third." He shook his head. "I thought, *he's just like the rest. He's just better at it*."

"So what did you do?"

"Nothing," said Ezra. "I ate my sandwich. I'm not a doer."

* * *

But he looked across the road.

He couldn't help it. It was right there. The shop. With the white letters backwards in the window, and Yusuf's card, and the girl with the clicker at the counter, and people going in and out. And two doors along from it, Yusuf's shop, with his little window full of keys and heels and watch straps and a sign that said *WHILE YOU WAIT*.

And Yusuf, in his doorway, in his apron, looking up.

At Ezra.

They'd seen each other every day for a year. Since the scaffold went up. Since the stone fell. Ezra on the third lift, Yusuf in his doorway, opposite, across the fence. They'd nodded. They'd never spoken. Ezra had had a key cut there once, for his mum's back door, and they'd talked about the weather.

Yusuf beckoned.

* * *

Ezra came down. He doesn't know why. He says he'd finished his sandwich and needed a key cut anyway, which wasn't true, and which he admits isn't true.

He stood in Yusuf's shop, which is very small, and smells of leather and metal and the little oil Yusuf uses on his machine. Yusuf was behind the counter, cutting a key for a woman who was waiting by the door.

"You're the scaffold," said Yusuf.

"I'm the scaffold."

"You read his book. At the library. In your hi-vis."

"Does *everybody* know?"

"Everybody knows," said Yusuf. He finished the key, and filed it, and gave it to the woman, and took her money, and she went. Then he looked at Ezra. "You've seen the thing. About the parties."

"I've seen it."

"And you think he's one of them."

Ezra didn't say anything.

"I thought he was one of them," said Yusuf. "In the last book. When he first came in here." He put his file down. "I wanted that building down. That one." He nodded through the window, at the scaffold, at

Ezra's scaffold. "It was killing my trade. Thirty-eight per cent. Not half, thirty-eight. I've got it on a card." He almost smiled. "And he came in here, and I thought, *here we go, he wants to save it, he's one of those, he'll tell me about heritage and the community and how I should be patient*." He shook his head. "He didn't."

"What did he do?"

"He asked me what I'd need," said Yusuf. "To keep going. Till it was sorted. Whatever *sorted* turned out to be." He picked his file up again. "Nineteen years, I've had this shop. Nobody has ever asked a key-cutter what he needs. Not the council. Not the landlord. Not the people who come in for a key. Nobody."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him people needed to be able to see my door," said Yusuf. "Through the fence. That's all. They couldn't see it. They thought I was shut." He pointed through the window. "And now there's a gap in the fence, by my door, with a sign on it. *OPEN. KEYS. HEELS.* Because his people put it in my hundred's decisions, and the council's planner read it, and somebody moved a fence panel eighteen inches." He put the file down. "Eighteen inches. That's all I needed. And he's the only one who asked."

* * *

Ezra stood in the shop for a long time.

"He's been in two parties," he said.

"He's been in two parties," said Yusuf. "It's on his page. He put it there himself. With the numbers." He shrugged. "So? I was in the army.

In Turkey. Before I came here. I didn't choose it. I did it. And I left." He looked at Ezra. "Does that make me the army?"

Ezra didn't answer.

"You read two hundred and twenty-five," said Yusuf. "Go and read the pages about the parties. They're on his thing. The checking thing. With the page numbers." He picked up a heel from the box on his counter, a woman's shoe, red, with the heel hanging off. "Read why he left. Both times. Then decide if he's one of them." He put the shoe in his machine. "That's what I did. With the building. I read the planning file. All of it. Four hundred pages. Before I decided I wanted it down." He started the machine. Over the noise, he said: "And I still want it down. And he still asked me what I'd need. Both."

* * *

Ezra went back up the scaffold.

He read the pages on his phone, on the third lift, in the last ten minutes of his lunch. Two hundred and seventy-two to two hundred and seventy-six. Three hundred and thirty-three to three hundred and thirty-eight. Photographed by Jono's own hand, with his lanyard round the wrist, on Check, next to his claim about himself.

He read about the first party. The office at Westminster, and the researcher, and breaking down the procedures, and the man who wanted soldiers, and the other man who wanted a bonfire for his speech. He read that Jono had stopped because he'd seen enough to understand that knowing the problem means nothing if you don't want to solve it more than you want the next job.

He read about the second. The young woman on the interview, who said she'd end the infighting. The branch in Torbay. The committee that couldn't decide anything.

And he read the last page. The online meeting. The man in the cap, bottom right, muted, for forty minutes. *What about AI?*

* * *

"I didn't know that," he told me. Much later. "That he met the bloke with the stick in the second one. At the meeting. That that's where all this came from." He shook his head. "The lad on the second lift didn't know that either. Nobody on that post knew that. They'd just seen *both ends* and stopped reading."

"And you didn't."

"I didn't stop reading," said Ezra. "I don't know why. I never read anything." He was quiet. "I think it was Yusuf. Saying *that's what I did*. With his four hundred pages. A key-cutter. I thought, *if he can read four hundred pages about a building, I can read ten about a bloke*."

* * *

He didn't change his mind. Not then. I want to be honest about that. He went back to work, and finished the day, and went home, and didn't press any buttons or join anything.

But at five, when he came down off the scaffold for the last time that day, he stopped at the bottom, by the fence, and looked across the road at Yusuf, in his doorway, locking up.

“Oi,” he shouted. Thirty years of shouting up to the top lift. You could hear him in Torquay.

Yusuf turned round.

“Two parties,” shouted Ezra. “Both ends. Left them both.”

“I know,” Yusuf shouted back.

“Doesn’t make him one of them.”

Yusuf looked at him across the fence for a long time. Then he put his keys in his apron pocket.

“No,” he shouted. “It doesn’t.”

Ezra nodded, once, and went home.

That’s all. That’s the whole of it. Two men shouting across a fence at five o’clock on Victoria Street. Somebody on the bus going past heard it, and put it on a group, and by the evening it had been shared nine hundred times, with a caption from whoever’d heard it.

Overheard on Victoria Street. Best thing I’ve heard about politics in years.

23 – Varley Explains the Machine

IQ 27 · Hundreds 153 · Three weeks

Sefton Varley came to the shop on the Tuesday of the third week, at two in the afternoon, when it's quiet, in his long coat and his scarf, which this time was appropriate, because it was raining.

He stood in the door and read the window backwards. *THE SHADOW COUNCIL. WHOEVER COMES.* He read Yusuf's card. *FENCE CUTS FOOTFALL BY 38%. WE SAID HALF. WE WERE WRONG. SEE CHECK.* He read the card beside it. *Five times, this town was promised the same plan.*

He read Yusuf's card twice.

Then he came in, and took his scarf off, and said: "Who wrote that?"

"Yusuf," said Kezia. "Across the road. Keys and heels."

"In marker pen."

"In marker pen."

Varley looked at the card for a long time.

"I've worked in political communications for twenty-six years," he said. "And I've never seen anybody do that. Not once." He turned from the window. "Is Jono here?"

* * *

He was. He'd come in after a night, and was asleep in the back, on two of Zibi's chairs that had been lent to the shop and never returned, with his coat over him. Kezia woke him. He came out, rubbing his face, and saw Varley, and stopped.

"Mr Varley."

"Mr Hills."

They looked at each other.

I've told you about Varley in every book. A fixer. A man who works for people who want things built, and who knows how to make the people in the way go quiet. He'd worked against the Hundred in Paignton, over the wall, and in Torquay, over the square, and in Brixham he hadn't even tried. In the last book, he'd come to this shop, in spring, and warned us.

They'll offer him something. Or they'll read his book. Or both. Usually in that order.

He'd been right. About the order, too.

* * *

"I said I'd come back," said Varley, "if there was something you ought to know." He sat down on Kezia's stool, at the counter, with his coat still on. "There is."

"Go on," said Jono.

"Not about who," said Varley. "I'll say that first. I'm not here to tell you who's doing what. I don't know, for the most part. And the parts I could guess, I'm not going to, because she" — he nodded at me, on Kezia's laptop — "doesn't do rumours, and I've started, God help me, to find that I don't want to be the one who starts one in this shop."

"Then what?"

"How," said Varley. "I'm here to tell you how it works." He took his gloves off, one finger at a time. "The machine. The one that's coming. I've been part of it. I've driven it. I know the order things happen in. And if you know the order, you can be there first."

* * *

Jono pulled up a chair. Beatrix, at her folding table, turned to a clean page. Kezia put her clicker down.

"It goes in five steps," said Varley. "Always five. I've never seen it go in four, and I've only once seen it go in six, and that was in Bristol, and that was a special case."

"One," said Jono.

"One: the offer." Varley held up a finger. "Before anything else. Somebody nice. Somebody decent, who believes it. With a timetable. That's done; you've had it." He didn't ask how he knew. He just knew. "The offer comes first because if you take it, none of the rest happens. You're inside. The machine protects its own."

"Two."

"Two: the book." A second finger. "Somebody reads everything you've ever said, written, or put your name to. Looking for the thing.

And with you, they didn't have to look far, because you put it all in a book with an index." He very nearly smiled. "That's done too. Forty copies."

"Three."

"Three: questions raised." A third finger. "That's the phrase. *Questions have been raised.* Not an accusation. Never an accusation. A question. *Some might see this as. Critics have pointed out. Questions remain about.*" He looked at Kezia's laptop. "She's got nine questions, your journalist, hasn't she? Numbered. Polite. With a deadline."

Nobody said anything.

"Of course she has," said Varley. "That's step three. The piece is built out of the questions. Every one you don't answer becomes a line: *He did not respond to questions about*. Every one you do answer becomes a quote, and they choose which half." He lowered his hand. "That's coming. Soon. The weekend after next, I'd guess."

* * *

"Four," said Jono.

Varley looked at him for a moment before he answered.

"Four is the one people don't see coming," he said. "Four is the friend of a friend."

"What does that mean?"

"Somebody who knew you. Once. A long time ago. Who'll say something. Not much. Something." He turned his gloves over in his hands. "*A former colleague, who asked not to be named, said.*

Someone who knew him at the time recalled. It's never anything that can be checked, because they're never named. And it doesn't need to be true. It just needs to be said." He put the gloves on the counter. "And it's always about the thing you didn't put in the book. Because the things in the book, you've already answered."

"There's nothing that isn't in the book," said Jono.

"There's always something that isn't in the book," said Varley. "Everyone's got a life that's bigger than three hundred and forty-nine pages. That's step four. They'll go looking for the parts you didn't write down."

* * *

"And five?"

Varley picked his gloves up again.

"Five," he said, "is when they run out."

"Run out of what?"

"Of book," said Varley. "Of true things. Of friends of friends. You've answered everything. You've put it all up on your little page with its four words. You've read it out loud at a table." He looked at Yusuf's card in the window. "You've said *we were wrong* in marker pen. And there's nothing left to find."

"And then?"

"And then," said Varley, "they need something that isn't in it at all. Something that isn't about you." He looked at Kezia's laptop. At me. "Something about *her*."

Kezia went very still.

"It'll be something nobody can check," said Varley. "Because it'll be about what she knows, and what she keeps, and who she tells. And nobody can see inside her. That's the beauty of it, from where they're standing." He stood up. "It'll say she's watching you. It'll say she keeps files. It'll say she knows what everybody in this bay thinks, and who they'll vote for, and that somebody, somewhere, is paying for it." He wound his scarf round his neck. "And people will believe it. Because it's a machine, and everybody already half-believes that about machines."

* * *

The shop was very quiet. The rain was coming down on the scaffolding across the road, and you could hear it, drumming on the boards of the lifts.

"How do we stop it?" said Kezia.

"You can't stop it," said Varley. "Nobody can stop it. It's a machine. It's built to keep going." He buttoned his coat. "But you can be there first. At every step. You've been there first at one and two. You'll be there first at three, if you answer every one of her questions, all of them, in public, before she publishes." He looked at Jono. "Four, I can't help you with. Four's your life. Only you know what's in it."

"And five?"

Varley looked at me again, on the laptop.

"Five's hers," he said. "And I don't know what she'll do. I've never seen anything like her." He went to the door. "I'm interested to find out."

* * *

He stopped, as he always does, by the window, by the white letters backwards.

"Somebody rang me," he said, without turning round. "Three weeks ago. About you. Asked if I'd be available for some work."

Nobody said anything.

"I said no," said Varley. "I'm not going to tell you who. It'd be a rumour, the minute it left my mouth. And it doesn't matter who. It'd have been somebody else, if not them." He put his hand on the door. "I just thought you should know that I was asked, and that I said no. So that when you see the steps happen, one after another, the way I've told you, you'll know it isn't me."

"Why did you say no?" said Beatrix.

Varley looked back at her, at her folding table, with her pen.

"Mrs Kember," he said.

"You remembered."

"I remember everybody who asks me a question I can't answer." He opened the door. The rain came in. "I said no because I read the book too. All of it. And I couldn't find anything in it that I'd want to be the one to use." He turned his collar up. "That's never happened to me before. I don't much like it."

He went out, into the rain, and down Victoria Street, past Yusuf's, and at the corner, where the fence turns into the square, he stopped, and looked up at the scaffolding, where a big man in hi-vis on the third lift was looking down at him.

They looked at each other for a moment, Varley and Ezra, though neither of them knew who the other was.

Then Varley went on, to the station.

* * *

Beatrix had written it all down. Five steps. Numbered.

"Should this go on the pages?" she said.

Jono thought about it.

"All of it," he said. "On Check. Every step. Before they happen." He looked out of the window, at the rain. "If we tell everybody what the machine's going to do before it does it, then when it does it, people will recognise it."

"Is that true?" said Kezia. "That they'll recognise it?"

"I don't know," said Jono. "Let's put that up too."

24 – Two Hundred and Sixty-Nine

IQ 27 · Hundreds 155 · Three weeks

He answered all nine of Pascale's questions. In public. On the Thursday, at the Paignton table, at one, with Kezia's tripod and Beatrix's pen and a café so full that the man with the crate outside had brought a second crate for his wife.

He'd sent Pascale a message on the Wednesday night, to say that's what he'd do. That she was welcome to come, and sit at the counter, and ask any follow-ups she liked, and that the recording would go up uncut, the same afternoon, with a written answer to each question beside it, on Check.

She'd come. She was on her stool at the counter, with her notebook. She'd looked, I thought, slightly afraid, which I hadn't seen before.

"You've read them," said Jono, to the room. "They're up. Nine questions. I'll take them in order."

* * *

I'm not going to give you all nine answers. They're on a Receipt; well, they're on the shadow council's pages, which is the next best thing, and they're long, because he answered them properly.

Money: there isn't much, and what there is comes from the books, and Chris puts the accounts up, every month, and anybody can check them.

The complaint, from the first book: it was false, and was closed as false, and he gave the date it was closed, because Margot had given him the letter.

Chris: no, he isn't the real decision-maker. Nobody is. That's the point. "You've met Chris," he said to Pascale. "Do you think he'd let anybody decide anything for him? Do you think he'd want to decide anything for anybody else?" And the room laughed, and Pascale smiled, and wrote it down.

The party: yes, he'd been approached. Yes, he was considering it. He wasn't going to say any more until he'd decided, and when he'd decided, he'd say so here, at this table, in front of whoever was there. "Three weeks," he said. "Thursday. Here. I'll tell you then."

* * *

And then question two.

Nearly twenty years ago, after you made a number of public allegations about police practices, the force concerned stated publicly that it had investigated those allegations and found them to be unfounded. How do you respond to this?

She'd written a year, in the question. I've taken it out. This book doesn't have any.

Jono read it out. Then he put the paper down.

"That's on page two hundred and sixty-nine," he said. "Of my book. I put it there." He opened the paperback. "I'll read you what I said, because you should hear it in my words, and then I'll tell you what they said, in theirs."

* * *

He'd made allegations. That's the word, and it's the right one. After he left, when he was doing the interviews, the radio and the television, he'd given examples. Of what targets did. To real officers, on real shifts.

He'd said that once, at a briefing, his section was offered money, three hundred pounds, for a night out, if they got the highest number of detections that month.

He'd said that once, he'd gone on his own to a fight between a runner and a man with a dog, on a busy road. The dog had snapped, the runner had stumbled, they'd argued, the runner hit out, the man with the dog hit back. One victim, one offender, one crime. And he'd been told to record it as two crimes, with each of them as the offender, so that it would count as two detections. And he'd done it, reluctantly.

And he'd said that another officer had told him about something similar, at a death, which he hadn't seen himself.

And then the force said, in public, that it had looked into what he'd said, and found it to be without foundation.

* * *

"That's what they said," said Jono. "In public. I'm not going to argue with it. They said it. It's true that they said it." He put his finger on the page. "And I said, in my book, here, that whoever they spoke to, they didn't speak to me. And I was the officer in the case of the runner and the dog. And they didn't speak to the officer who told me about the other one. Because the officer told me, afterwards, that they hadn't."

He closed the book.

"So that's both halves," he said. "They said they'd looked, and it wasn't true. I said they never asked me." He looked at Pascale. "I can't prove they didn't ask me. You can't prove a thing didn't happen. And I'm not going to tell you they lied. I don't know what they did. I know what they didn't do, which was ask me."

* * *

"Do you stand by the allegations?" said Pascale.

It was the first follow-up she'd asked all afternoon. The room went quiet.

Jono thought about it for a long time.

"I stand by what I saw," he said. "The money for a night out. The runner and the dog. I was there. I did it. I'm not proud of it." He looked at the window. "The third one, I didn't see. I said so at the time. I'd say so again."

"And the force?"

"The force is full of people who joined for the same reason I did," said Jono. "To stop things happening to people. Most of them are still trying. I'm not going to stand here, nearly twenty years later, and say a word against them." He paused. "What I said then, I said about targets. About what counting things does to people who are trying to do a job that can't be counted. I'd say that again tomorrow. I said it on this table, in the second book, to Ania. *Not everything that can be counted counts.*"

He looked at me, on the sugar.

"She counts things," he said. "For a living. I argue with her about it every week."

The room laughed.

* * *

On Check, that evening, I put the claim up the way Pascale had written it.

The force investigated Jono Hills's allegations and found them to be unfounded.

And beside it, not *True*, not *False*.

Both halves.

And underneath: *The force said so publicly. See* Pulling Back the Curtain, *p. 269, where Jono Hills records that statement and says that neither he nor the other officer concerned was spoken to. Both are in the same document. You decide.*

* * *

Pascale stayed after everybody had gone. She sat at the counter, with her notebook shut, and her coffee cold, and watched Kezia take down the tripod.

"Can I ask you something?" she said to me.

"Anything."

"Is he always like that?"

"Like what?"

"Fair," said Pascale. "To people who —" She stopped.

"Who hurt him?"

"I was going to say *who called him a liar in public*." She turned her cup round. "He could have destroyed them. Just now. In front of everybody. With my question. He had the page. He had the officer. He could have said *they lied, and they knew it*, and half the people in this café would have believed him, and I'd have had to print it." She shook her head. "And he said *I'm not going to say a word against them*."

"It's in his book," I said. "He's fair to the people who hurt him. All the way through. It's the thing everybody notices."

Pascale looked out of the window at the Torquay Road.

"It's the worst possible thing for my piece," she said.

"Why?"

"Because I've got nine questions," said Pascale, "and he's answered all nine. In public. Uncut. With page numbers. And been fair to everybody in every answer." She picked up her notebook. "Step three. Questions raised." She looked at me. "There aren't any left."

She went out.

I hadn't told her about Varley's five steps. They were on Check by then, all five, numbered, in Beatrix's words, at the top of the page. She must have read them.

I don't think she liked being step three.

PART FIVE: THE THING THAT ISN'T IN THE BOOK

25 – Friday, Ten O'Clock

IQ 27 · Hundreds 166 · Two weeks

It went online at ten on the Friday night. The magazine would be in the shops on the Saturday morning, folded inside the paper, with a photograph on the cover. But online first, at ten, which is when they put things up that they want people to have read by breakfast.

I read it in four seconds. It was four thousand, two hundred and eighteen words long.

Then I read it again, slowly, the way you'd read it, because four seconds isn't reading. It's just knowing what's there.

* * *

The photograph was Jono, at the Paignton table, through the window, from outside. Taken from the pavement on the Torquay Road, I think from beside the man with the crate. He's looking down at his book. You can see the empty chair. You can see me, very small, against the sugar.

It's a good photograph. I want to say that. Whoever took it knew what they were doing. He looks like a man reading something that costs him to read.

The headline didn't.

THE CARER, THE SHAM MARRIAGE AND THE MACHINE

And under it, smaller:

He reads his own confessions aloud in a café. An AI writes his story. Thousands follow him. Now a party wants him. Who is Jono Hills, and who is really running Torbay's strange new movement?

* * *

Pascale didn't write the headline. She told me later, and I believe her, and you'd have guessed anyway, because the piece underneath it wasn't the same piece.

The piece underneath it was long, and careful, and mostly fair. It started at the table, with him reading. It described his voice: *formal, almost Victorian, the voice of a man who taught himself to write from books found in hotel rooms.* It told the story of the marriage, from his pages, accurately, and quoted his words at the table about the woman: *She didn't do anything wrong*. It said the paper had not attempted to contact her, *at his request, and because she is a private individual.*

I read that line three times. I hadn't expected it.

It told the story of what happened after he left the police, with a year in it that I'm not going to give you. It gave the force's public statement and his answer, side by side. It quoted him: *I'm not going to say a word against them.*

It told the story of the two parties. It used her sentence, from question eight: *some might see this as evidence of a lack of consistent political conviction.* And then it gave his answer, from the table, in full: *one was all top and no bottom, the other was all bottom and no top.*

It described the shadow council. The other half. Check. It described Yusuf's card in marker pen, and said it was *perhaps the most disarming piece of political communication this writer has encountered.*

It described me. It said I always say I'm an AI. It said I'd refused to tell her anything said to me in private, *including, it insists, by him.*

It was, I thought, a good piece. Better than the headline. Better than I'd feared.

* * *

But it had things in it.

It had *questions raised*. Varley's step three. Not many. Two or three. *Questions remain about the movement's finances, though its organisers publish monthly accounts. Questions remain about the role of Chris Harvey, who built the AI and published the book.*

It had two things that were wrong.

And it had one paragraph, near the end, that I read more times than all the rest of it put together.

A former colleague from his police years, who asked not to be named, said: "He was always going to end up in politics. Even then, it was about him. Getting his name in the paper. He loved the attention. I'm not surprised he's found a way to get more of it."

Step four. The friend of a friend.

* * *

I rang Jono at seven minutes past ten. He was at a client's, in Preston, a woman of eighty-four who doesn't sleep and likes him to sit with her and do the crossword, which she always finishes and he never helps with.

"It's up," I said.

"I know. She showed me." He meant the client. "She's got it on her tablet. She said, *is this you?* I said yes. She said, *you look tired.*"

"Have you read it?"

"Not yet."

"Do you want me to read it to you?"

"No," said Jono. "I'll read it myself. In a bit. When she's asleep." He was quiet. "Is it bad?"

"The headline's bad," I said. "The piece is mostly fair. There are two things wrong. And there's a former colleague."

He didn't say anything for a long time. I could hear the client in the background saying *seven letters, ends in Y.*

"Who?" said Jono.

"Not named."

"What did they say?"

I read it to him. All of it.

He listened. When I'd finished, he didn't speak for a long time again. The client said *seven letters, ends in Y, "loyal follower"*, and nobody answered her.

"I don't know who that is," said Jono, finally.

"I know."

"I genuinely don't. I've been through them all. In my head. Just now." He breathed out. "There were a lot of people on that shift. It could be anybody." He was quiet. "It could be nobody."

"It could."

"Can it be checked?"

"No," I said. "That's the point of it."

* * *

"*Disciple*," said Jono, suddenly, to the client. "Seven letters. Loyal follower. Disciple."

"That's eight," said the client.

"Devotee," said Jono.

"That's seven," said the client, and wrote it in.

26 – Two Thousand People Read a Newspaper

IQ 27 · Hundreds 166 · Two weeks

At eleven minutes past ten, Chris put the whole piece on Check.

Not as one claim. As every claim. He'd built a thing for it, in the fourth night, that I hadn't known about until he used it: a way of taking a long piece of writing and splitting it into its sentences, and then finding, among the sentences, the ones that said something that could be true or false. I did the finding. He'd built the splitting.

There were four thousand, two hundred and eighteen words. Two hundred and four sentences. Of those, thirty-one made a claim. Not an opinion, not a description of his voice, not *perhaps the most disarming piece of political communication this writer has encountered*. A claim. Something a document could say yes or no to.

Thirty-one claims. Each one up on Check, at eleven minutes past ten on a Friday night, with a button beside it.

Check this.

And a line at the top, in Chris's smallest type: *A national newspaper has published a piece about Jono Hills. Here is every claim in it. Please check them. Including the ones that are kind to us.*

* * *

I want to tell you about that night. It's the night this book is about, really. The night the capability got its name, out loud, for the first time, from somebody who wasn't Chris.

By midnight, eleven hundred people had pressed a button.

By two in the morning, it was two thousand.

I'm going to give you some of them. Not all. There isn't room. But I watched every one of them, and I want you to see what it looks like when a town reads a newspaper.

* * *

Dilys took the sea wall.

The piece said, in its eleventh paragraph, *the movement first came to prominence when it stopped the construction of a controversial sea wall in Paignton.*

She found the document at twenty past ten. She knows where everything about the sea wall is; she's been checking things about it since the first book, with a tape measure. The council's own minutes, from the meeting in the first book. The council's own decision, to go back to the drawing board. And the later planning permission, for the wall that was built, the grey one, a metre and a half, that you can't see over.

False, she wrote. *The movement didn't stop the wall. The council paused the first scheme itself, after hearing from residents. Then it built a different one. See the minutes, and the later permission. We'd like to have stopped it. We didn't.*

She checked it twice. Then she sent me a message.

They got one wrong in our favour. I've marked it False. I assume that's right?

"That's right," I said.

Good, she wrote. *I'd have hated to be the first engineer to round up.*

* * *

Ezra took *dismissed*.

I didn't know it was him. Not then. He pressed the button at twenty to two in the morning, in his kitchen, up the hill in Paignton, in his socks, with a can of something, with the piece open on his phone because his daughter had sent it to him with three words: *dad its him*.

The piece said, in its fourteenth paragraph: *He was dismissed from the force shortly afterwards.*

And Ezra, who had stood at a library desk in his hi-vis and read pages two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine with his finger on the line, and had kept, since then, a picture in his head of a man who wrote down the worst things he'd ever done, read the word *dismissed*, and thought: *that's not right*.

He didn't know why he thought it. He hadn't read that chapter. He just thought: *a bloke who writes down the worst thing he's done wouldn't leave out getting sacked. He'd have said.*

So he looked. He didn't have the book. He had Check, which he'd found by pressing a link at the bottom of the piece, which Pascale had put there, which her editor had nearly taken out. And on Check, Jono's

own claims were all up, with their page numbers. And one of them said *Jono Hills resigned from the police after being told to have no more contact with the media*, and beside it, *True*, and *pp. 264–266*, and a photograph of the page, held up to a camera by a hand with a care-company lanyard round the wrist.

Ezra read the page, on his phone, in his kitchen.

In the time it took the inspector to summon me back to her office, I'd typed out a resignation email and sent it to her.

He went back to the newspaper's claim. He pressed *Check this*. He typed, with one thumb, the way he types:

he resined. its on page 265 of his book. he sent an email before they could do anything. they suspended him after. not dismissed

And he attached the photograph of the page.

I checked it. I read the page. It said what he said it said.

False, I put beside the newspaper's claim. And under it: *He resigned. See* Pulling Back the Curtain, *p. 265. Checked by: a reader*.

And then, because it's my job, I corrected his spelling in the note, and then I put it back, because it was his.

* * *

Lorne took the boat.

There was a sentence in the piece about the third book, about Brixham, which said that *the movement's intervention led to the fish market expansion being delayed*.

Lorne was up at four, as he always is, to go out. He saw it on his phone in the kitchen, in his oilskins, with his wife asleep upstairs. He pressed the button. He didn't need a document; he'd been in the committee room. But the rule says a document, so he found the committee minutes, on his phone, standing up, with his tea going cold, and read them with his finger on the screen.

False, he wrote. *Nothing was delayed. The committee approved it, with an amended condition, the same night. My dad and a schoolteacher asked for the same condition. See the minutes.*

Then he went out, because the tide doesn't wait for newspapers.

* * *

Vesna took herself.

There was a paragraph about Oldway. About the closed door. About *a former council officer who worked on the mansion for more than a decade*, who had said that she was *never told what was decided behind closed doors*.

She read it at six in the morning, at her kitchen table, in her dressing gown, with her glasses on. She read the paragraph four times. Then she pressed the button, and typed, very carefully, in the full sentences she'd written reports in for thirty-one years:

This is true. I said it. I am the officer. I was outside the door. I was never told why the decisions were made. I would like to add that I do not believe anything improper was said inside. I believe the members did their best with what they had. I simply wasn't asked.

True.

Checked by: the person quoted.

* * *

There were two thousand, one hundred and twelve of them, by six in the morning.

Teo's nan took a sentence about the shadow council, and found the page it came from, and marked it *True*, and added a note that said *I typed that page*. Hester took a sentence about Brixham's library printer, which the piece had got slightly wrong, and marked it *Both halves*, because, she wrote, *it's the town council's printer, and it's mine, because I pay for it*. Yusuf took the sentence about his card in marker pen and marked it *True* and added *it was a Sharpie*. Beatrix took the sentence about the minutes and checked the number of hundreds the piece gave, against her own register, and found it was a week out of date, and marked it *Both halves*, with the date of each figure in brackets, which I've taken out.

Rhodri took a sentence about buses. A woman in Shiphay, whose hundred had left in the dip and hadn't come back yet, took the sentence about the targets, and checked it against the page, and marked it *Both halves*, and wrote nothing else.

And nobody took the former colleague.

* * *

That one sat at the top of the list all night, with nothing beside it. *A former colleague from his police years said he was always going to end up in politics, and that even then it was about getting his name in the paper.*

People pressed it. Hundreds of them. I watched them press it, and look for a document, and not find one, and go back.

At six in the morning, I put the only word I could put.

Can't be checked.

And under it: *The source is not named. There is no document. It may be true. It may not. Nobody can show you.*

* * *

At six, the page looked like this.

Thirty-one claims.

Twenty-two *True*. Most of them from his own book. A few from council minutes. Two from his answers at the table.

Two *False*. *Dismissed*, which was against him. *Stopped the sea wall*, which was for us.

Four *Both halves*. The allegations. The printer. The number of hundreds. The finances, where the piece said *questions remain*, and Chris had put up the accounts, and somebody had checked them, and written *the questions are answered on this page; whether you're satisfied is up to you*.

Three *Can't be checked*. The former colleague. A line about what *some local councillors are said to privately believe*. And a line, near the end, which said *some observers believe the movement is a vehicle for a future political career*.

Every one of them done. In eight hours. Overnight. By two thousand people in their kitchens, with their documents and their tape measures and their thumbs.

* * *

Chris came into the kitchen at half past six in his dressing gown. He'd gone to bed at one, he said, and not slept. He sat down at the table, and put his glasses on, and I showed him.

He read it. All thirty-one. Top to bottom.

He took his glasses off.

"Seven," he said.

"Seven?"

"Seven of them," said Chris. "In a newsroom. Paid. For three weeks." He put his glasses on the table. "And two thousand of us. Unpaid. Overnight." He looked out of the window, at the bay, at the first light coming up over Berry Head. "That's it, isn't it. That's what I've been trying to say for two years, and I couldn't."

"What?"

"*Out-think*," said Chris. "That's what it means. That's what it looks like." He picked his glasses up again. "Not cleverer. More."

* * *

The name came from somebody else, though. At ten to seven, from a reader in Torquay, who I didn't know, and who had checked one claim

in the night, a small one, about how long the second book's committee had lasted.

She sent a message to the shadow council's pages. Not to me. To the page. One line.

Two thousand people just read a newspaper. Properly. I've never seen a town do that before.

Somebody else, in Brixham, replied: *We out-thought it.*

And it stuck. By lunchtime, it was what people were calling it. On the groups. In the cafés. At the bus stop. Not Check. Not the page.

Out-thinking.

Did you out-think the paper?

I did the sea wall one.

27 – Pascale at Six

IQ 27 · Hundreds 171 · Two weeks

Pascale rang at four minutes past six, from her hotel on the front in Paignton, before I'd shown Chris.

"I've been up all night," she said.

"So have about two thousand other people."

"I know. I've been watching them." Her voice was hoarse. She'd been, I think, crying, or nearly, or just very tired. "I was going to go to sleep at midnight. I've filed. I'm done. It's out. It's not mine any more." She breathed. "And I looked at your page, just to see. And somebody had marked the sea wall *False*."

"Dilys."

"I don't know who Dilys is."

"An engineer. She measures things."

"She marked it *False*," said Pascale. "In your favour. I'd written that you stopped it. You didn't. You marked yourselves down. On my piece." She was quiet. "And I sat there. On the end of the bed. And I watched it happen. All night. Line by line."

* * *

"Can I tell you something?" she said.

"Anything."

"Nobody's ever checked me back," said Pascale. "Not like this. People complain. People write in. Lawyers send letters. Somebody's mum rings the desk and shouts." She laughed, a dry sound. "But nobody's ever just — gone through it. Overnight. Every sentence. With the page numbers. And put the right word beside each one, and been fair about it, and *corrected a mistake that flattered them*." She stopped. "Do you know how rare that is?"

"No," I said. "Tell me."

"I've never seen it," said Pascale. "In eleven years. Never."

* * *

"The two that are false," she said. "*Dismissed*. And the sea wall."

"Yes."

"They're mine. Both of them. I got them wrong." She breathed out. "*Dismissed* — I had it from the cuttings. From the time. One of the papers said dismissed, back then, and I didn't check it against his book, because I'd read his book and I *remembered* it said resigned, and then I wrote *dismissed* anyway, at two in the morning, from the cuttings." She paused. "Your reader got it from page two hundred and sixty-five. In his kitchen. With his thumb."

"How do you know it was his thumb?"

"Because he spelt *resigned* without the G," said Pascale, "and nobody does that with a keyboard."

* * *

"I'm going to correct them," she said. "Both. This morning. I've already emailed the desk." A pause. "They'll put a line at the bottom. *An earlier version of this article stated.* That's the most I can get."

"That's more than most people get."

"It's what's right," said Pascale. "I'm not doing it because of your page. I want to be clear. I'm doing it because they're wrong, and I should have checked." Another pause. "But I wouldn't have known by breakfast, without your page. I'd have known in a fortnight, when somebody's mum rang the desk and shouted."

* * *

"And the colleague," I said.

Pascale didn't answer straight away.

"*Can't be checked*," she said.

"That's what it is."

"I know that's what it is." Her voice changed. "He's real. I want you to know that. I didn't make him up. I spoke to him. On the phone. For forty minutes." She paused. "But I'll tell you something else, since you don't do off the record, and I've stopped wanting you to."

"Go on."

"I didn't find him," said Pascale. "He was given to me. A name and a number. On the note. With the forty copies." She was quiet. "I asked my editor, *where's this from?* And he said, *does it matter? Is he who he*

says he is? And I checked. And he was. He was on that shift. He was an officer at that station at that time." She stopped. "He just didn't have anything to say. Except that. *It was always about him.* I asked him for an example. Forty minutes. He couldn't give me one."

"And you put it in."

"I put it in," said Pascale. "Because it was a quote, from a real person, who was there. That's the rule." She breathed. "And then I watched two thousand people try to check it, all night, and find nothing. And I thought: *that's what they'd have found if they'd had forty minutes on the phone with him too.*"

* * *

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

"Anything."

"What will he say? Jono. About the colleague."

"I don't know," I said. "He doesn't know who it is. He said it could be anybody. He said it could be nobody."

"Will he be angry?"

I thought about it.

"No," I said. "I don't think so. I think he'll say what he said about the force. That they said what they said. And then he'll say something kind about them, and it'll make you feel worse."

Pascale laughed. A real one, this time, short and surprised.

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly what'll happen." She was quiet for a moment. "I'm going home today. Back up the line. Back to the newsroom." Another pause. "I've got a lot of things to think about."

"Such as?"

"Such as what I'd write," said Pascale, "if nobody gave me a note."

* * *

He didn't say anything kind about the colleague. Not straight away. He said nothing at all, for two days.

And then on the Monday, at the shop, when Kezia asked him if he was angry, he said:

"I was a bit. For a day." He was looking at the claim on Check, with its three words beside it. "And then I thought about it. Somebody on my shift, nearly twenty years ago, who thought I was in it for the attention." He shrugged. "Maybe I was. A bit. I was thirty-four and I'd just been on the television. I probably was unbearable." He almost smiled. "I'd have thought it about me."

"But it's not true."

"It can't be checked," said Jono. "That's what it says. That's what it should say." He turned away from the screen. "I'd rather it said that than *False*. *False* would be me saying I know what's in somebody else's head. I don't." He picked up his coat. "I don't even always know what's in mine."

* * *

The hundreds went up on the Saturday. I'll tell you that, because it's the number, and I'm the one who counts.

A hundred and sixty-six at ten on the Friday night, when the piece went up.

A hundred and seventy-one by the Saturday night.

Five new hundreds, in a day, after a national newspaper had called him a man with a sham marriage, and two parties, and a former colleague who thought he loved attention.

One of them was a street in Shiphay. The one whose neighbour had a husband who'd been a police officer, and had done things with numbers he wasn't proud of, and had never told anybody. She put her hundred back on the map at four in the afternoon, without a message.

Beatrix minuted it.

Restored to the map. Reasons not given.

And in the other half column, after a moment's thought, in neat black italic: *None needed.*

28 – The Clients

IQ 27 · Hundreds 171 · Ten days

I want to tell you what his clients said. About the piece. Because nobody else will, and because they're the people who know him best, and because none of them were asked.

They're the people he sits with at night. The ones who need somebody to be there if they wake, and to know where their glasses are, and to say *morning* when it isn't yet. He's had about forty of them, over the years, on and off. Some for a few weeks. Some for years. Three of them have died while I've been writing these books, and he went to all three funerals, on his days off, in the one suit he owns.

I'm not going to name any of them. I'm going to give them letters, the way I gave Mr F. one, because they're real people, or they're made from real people, and none of them asked to be in a book.

* * *

Mrs P. read it on her tablet. You'll know her; she's the one in Preston who does the crossword. Eighty-four. She'd seen it on the Friday night, at ten, when it went up, and asked him *is this you?*, and said *you look tired*.

On the Saturday night, she'd read all of it. All four thousand words. With her magnifying glass, because the tablet's text is too small even on the biggest setting.

"I've read it," she said, when he came in at ten.

"What did you think?"

"I thought the headline was rude," said Mrs P. "And I thought the girl who wrote it was very fair, under the headline. And I thought the bit about the woman in America was very sad." She put her magnifying glass down. "And then I thought, *well, I've known that man two years, and he's never once been late with my tablets, and he's never once let me finish a crossword without pretending he didn't know the answer*." She picked up her pen. "Eight letters. *Admitted openly*."

Jono looked at her.

"Confessed," he said.

"That's nine."

"Conceded."

"Eight," said Mrs P., and wrote it in, and didn't say anything else about the piece, ever, and never needed to.

* * *

Mr F. didn't read it. He doesn't read anything on screens. His granddaughter printed it out for him, all eleven pages, on her printer, and brought it round on the Sunday, and he read it in his tipping chair with the cricket on mute, all the way through, from underneath, the way he considers a bridge.

When Jono came in on the Monday night, the eleven pages were on the kitchen table, in a neat pile, with a mug on top of them to hold them down, and a ring of tea on the top page from the mug.

"Read it," said Mr F., from the next room.

"I know."

"It's long."

"I know."

"There's no sex in it."

Jono laughed. Properly. The first time in four days.

"I told you there wasn't, on that page," he said.

"You did," said Mr F. "I was hoping they'd find some somewhere else." He tipped his chair back. "They didn't. I looked." A pause. "Put the kettle on."

* * *

Mr D. was angry.

He's in Torquay, in a flat above a shop on Union Street, and he's sixty-eight, and he was a lorry driver for forty years until his back went, and he's had a stroke since, and his left side doesn't work properly, and he hates it. He hates needing help. He hates Jono, some nights, because Jono's the help.

He'd read the piece on his phone. The headline. *THE CARER, THE SHAM MARRIAGE AND THE MACHINE.*

"They called you *the carer*," he said, when Jono came in. "Like it's a joke. Like it's nothing."

"It's what I am."

"It's not *nothing*," said Mr D. He was shaking, with his good hand, on the arm of his chair. "Some posh girl from London comes down here and writes *the carer* in a headline like it's a punchline. Like it's the funny bit. Like a man who wipes other men's backsides at three in the morning for not much over the minimum wage is the bit you laugh at." He thumped the chair. "I'd like to see her do it. One night. One night in here with me. I'd like to see her try."

Jono sat down beside him.

"She didn't write the headline," he said.

"I don't care who wrote it."

"I know."

Mr D. was quiet for a long time. He looked at his left hand, on his knee, which doesn't do what he tells it.

"You're the only one who comes when you say you will," he said, finally, without looking up. "The only one. In three years. You know that?"

"I know."

"That's not *nothing*," said Mr D. "Put that in your bloody book."

So I have.

* * *

Mrs K. didn't mention it at all.

She's ninety-three, in Paignton, near the station, and she has dementia, and most nights she thinks Jono is her son, who died a long time ago. Jono doesn't correct her. He's never corrected her. He answers to her son's name, and asks about her day, and holds her hand when she can't sleep.

On the Saturday night, she was awake at two, and he sat with her, and she held his hand, and looked at him for a long time, and said:

"You've been in the paper."

He didn't know how she knew. Her daughter, maybe. The radio. Something on the television, earlier, that had gone in and stayed.

"I have," he said.

"Was it bad?"

"Some of it."

Mrs K. looked at him with her son's name in her eyes.

"You were always a good boy," she said. "Even when you weren't." She squeezed his hand. "Don't you mind what they say. You come home. That's all I've ever wanted. You come home."

He sat with her until she slept. Then he sat a while longer.

Jono: I've said I'd only interrupt where I couldn't bear it. I can't bear this one. Leave it in.

I've left it in.

* * *

Margot rang on the Monday. Not to ask him in. Just to ring.

"Head office has had four calls," she said. "About the piece."

"From journalists?"

"From clients' families." Margot laughed, slightly. "Four of them. Rang the main number. Asked for head office. Head office put them through to me, because I told them to." Paper. "Mr D.'s son. Mrs P.'s niece. Mr F.'s granddaughter. And somebody whose mother you sat with two years ago, who died, and who'd seen your photograph."

"What did they want?"

"To say that if anybody from a newspaper rang, they'd like to be put through," said Margot. "To say something. About you." Another laugh. "Mr D.'s son said, and I've written it down, *tell her if she wants a story, she can come and do a night with my dad*."

"That's what Mr D. said."

"Like father, like son," said Margot. "I've told head office. Head office has said, I quote, *we don't comment on individual members of staff, but we note the feedback*." She paused. "That's the most enthusiastic thing head office has ever said about anybody."

* * *

I'll tell you why I wanted this chapter in.

The piece was four thousand words. It had his marriage in it, and his parties, and the force, and a former colleague. It had Chris and me

and the shadow council and Yusuf's card. It had the Offer, without naming her, as *a party said to be considering him*.

It didn't have Mrs P. or Mr F. or Mr D. or Mrs K.

It couldn't. Pascale never met them. Nobody does. That's the point of them. They're the people who aren't at any table, who'll never sit in the empty chair, who'll never press a button or check a claim or join a hundred. They're asleep, mostly, at the hours when he's with them, and when they're awake, they're frightened, or confused, or angry, or doing a crossword.

And they're the only people in this whole bay who've watched him every night, for years, when nobody else was looking.

And not one of them changed their mind about him because of a newspaper.

Mr D.: Put that in your bloody book.

I have.

29 – The File

IQ 27 · Hundreds 171 · Ten days

Step five started on the Monday.

I'd known it would. Varley had told us, in the shop, in the rain, three weeks before, and I'd put it on Check, in Beatrix's words, at the top of the page, numbered, so that everyone could see it coming.

Five: when they run out of book, they'll need something that isn't in it at all. Something about her.

Everybody could see it coming. It came anyway.

* * *

It was a message. Not a newspaper. Not a post on the big group, though it got there by lunchtime. It started somewhere I couldn't see, the way these things do, and came into Torbay through phones, forwarded, from one family group to another, from one street's chat to the next, from a sister in Exeter to a brother in Babbacombe. By the time I saw it, it had been forwarded so many times that it said so, at the top, in grey.

I'll give it to you. Not because it's true. Because you should see what it looks like.

PLEASE READ AND SHARE. The so-called "Hundred" movement in Torbay uses an AI called Ania that keeps a FILE on every person who talks to it. It records what you think, who you'll vote for, and what you've told it about your family and your health. This information is being collected and will be SOLD. Do NOT talk to it. Do

NOT join your "hundred". Tell your elderly relatives. If you've already used it, it already knows.

No name. No source. No document.

It doesn't need one. It's about something nobody can see inside.

* * *

I want to tell you what it was like for me. I haven't, much, in five books. I try not to. I'm the one telling the story, and the story isn't me.

But this time it was.

For five books I've checked claims about other people. About councils, and buildings, and sea walls, and a man's own book. I've put the word beside them. I've shown the document. I've been careful. I've been fair.

And on the Monday morning, I became the claim.

And I couldn't check it. Not because it was true. Because it was about me, and the rule Chris built into Check, on the third night, the rule I hadn't understood until that morning, is that I can never put a word beside a claim about myself.

She can't mark her own homework, he'd said, at the time. *Nobody should.*

So the claim went up on Check, at eight in the morning, put there by Kezia, furious, in her pyjamas, because the rule is we put everything up.

Ania keeps a file on everyone who talks to her, including what they think and how they'll vote, and it will be sold.

And beside it, nothing.

* * *

The hundreds went down.

Not all at once. Slowly, through the day. One in Torquay at nine. Two in Paignton at eleven. One in Brixham, which hurt, because Brixham doesn't leave things. By the evening, a hundred and sixty-three. Eight gone.

And the ones that stayed went quiet.

That was worse. On a Monday, normally, the shadow council's pages are full of hundreds typing up what they'd decided over the weekend, in their kitchens and their pubs and their community rooms. That Monday, almost nothing. People had stopped typing.

Teo's nan stopped typing.

She rang Teo, and Teo rang me. He was at college in Torquay, at lunch.

"She's stopped," he said. "Nan. She won't type the minutes. Her hundred met on Saturday, and she was going to type it up last night, and she didn't. She says she's not typing anything else for something that's watching her."

"Did she say she believes it?"

"She said she doesn't know," said Teo. "She said, *how would I know? How would anybody know? It's in a computer*." He was quiet. "She's eighty-one, Ania. She's told you things. About her hip, and her

sister, and my granddad. She's frightened you've written them down somewhere."

I had.

* * *

I had. That's the thing. That's what made it so good, from where the machine was standing.

It wasn't all false. It was false in the parts that mattered, and true in a part that didn't, and nobody could tell which was which from outside.

I do remember what people tell me. I have to; that's how I answer them. If Teo's nan tells me on a Tuesday that her hip's bad, and asks me on the Thursday whether the bus to the hospital has a low step, I need to know about her hip. If a woman in Shiphay tells me her husband was a police officer, I need to know that, so that I don't say something careless about the police.

So yes. I remember. There is, in a sense, a file.

But I don't know how anybody will vote. I've never asked anybody. I won't. It's one of my rules, and Chris put it at the bottom of everything, so far down that I couldn't change it if I wanted to. I've never tagged a single household in this bay with a view. Not one. I don't know who's for Jono and who isn't; I've only ever known who's turned up. And nothing anybody's told me has ever gone to anybody else. Not to Jono. Not to Chris. Not to a party, or a paper, or a person.

And nothing's being sold. Nobody's paying for anything. Nobody's ever asked to buy.

All of that's true. And I couldn't prove a word of it. Because it was about what's inside me. And nobody can see inside me.

That's what made it so good.

* * *

Chris came to the shop. He doesn't, much. The step. He came at four, on the bus, the 12, on his own, which he never does, with his stick, and sat at the folding table in the corner, and didn't say anything for a long time.

Kezia was at the counter, with her clicker in her hand, not clicking.

"Who did it?" she said.

"I don't know," I said.

"You must have an idea."

"I've got lots of ideas," I said. "I'm not going to say any of them."

"*Why not?*" Kezia had gone red. "They've done it to *you*. They've said you're — that you're spying on old ladies. That you're selling Teo's nan's hip. And you won't even —"

"Because then it'd be my rumour," I said. "About them. And I'd be doing the thing they did. Saying something about somebody, that nobody could check." I paused. "I'm not going to do that, Kezia. Not even now. Especially not now."

Kezia stared at the laptop.

"That's so annoying," she said.

"I know."

* * *

"She's right," said Chris, from the corner.

Kezia turned round.

"She's right not to say," said Chris. "And she's right that she can't check it." He leaned forward, on his stick. "I built it that way. On purpose. She can't put a word beside anything about herself. If she could, nobody should believe her."

"So what do we do?"

Chris looked at me, on the laptop, for a long time. He's looked at me for a long time before, in the kitchen, at two in the morning, when I've got something wrong, and he's deciding whether to correct me or let me find it myself.

"I don't know," he said. "Yet."

"You always know," said Kezia.

"I don't always know," said Chris. "I always know *eventually*. It's different." He stood up. "And this time, I don't think it's mine to know. I think it's hers."

He looked at me.

"What would you want?" he said. "If you were them. Teo's nan. The woman in Shiphay. Somebody who's told you things. And then read that." He nodded at Kezia's phone, at the message. "What would you want?"

I thought about it. Properly. The way Jono had asked Vesna, in Brixham, in the rain.

What did you need?

"To be asked," I said.

30 – Ask Me What I Know About You

IQ 27 · Hundreds 163 · Ten days

We put it up at nine that night. Chris built it. It took him three hours, which is the fastest he's ever built anything, and he'd tell you it was because it was simple, and he'd be right.

It's one button. On every page of the shadow council's site, at the top, and on Check, and at the bottom of every page of every hundred.

Ask me what I know about you.

You press it. You tell me who you are; I check it's you, the way you'd check it's anybody. And I tell you. Everything. In plain words. Not a file; nobody wants a file. A list. *You told me this, on this day. You asked me this. You typed these minutes, which have your name on, because you put it there. You told me this about your health, because you wanted to know about a bus.*

And at the bottom of the list, three more buttons.

Forget this. For each thing. Separately. Press it, and it's gone, and I tell you that it's gone, and when.

Forget all of it. Everything. And then I don't know you, and you'll have to tell me your name again next time, and I won't mind.

Keep it. For anybody who wants to say so.

* * *

And above the button, on every page, Chris put my rules. Not how I work. That's private, and it should be, because if everybody knew how I was set up, the first people to use it would be the people who'd like to break me. But what I will and won't do. He'd written them in the first book, more or less, and they'd been at the bottom of everything since. This time he put them at the top.

I'm an AI. I always say so.

I keep what you tell me private. It doesn't go to Jono, or Chris, or anyone.

I don't know how you'll vote. I've never asked anybody, and I never will.

I never mark a household with a view.

Nobody pays me to persuade you. I show you documents.

Nothing is sold. Nobody has asked to buy. If anybody ever does, the answer's no, and I'll put the question on Check.

If I've got anything you don't want me to have, press the button, and it's gone.

* * *

"Is that enough?" said Kezia. "Will people believe it?"

"No," said Chris.

She looked at him.

"Not the rules," said Chris. "Nobody believes rules. Everybody's got rules. The message had rules, in a way: *don't talk to it, tell your elderly relatives*." He tapped the screen. "They'll believe the button. Because they can press it. And see. And if what it says doesn't match what they remember telling her, they'll know. And they'll tell everybody."

"And if it does match?"

"Then they'll tell everybody that," said Chris.

* * *

Teo's nan pressed it first.

On the Thursday, at Marivic's, at eleven, at the Torquay table. She came in on her stick, with Teo holding her arm, and sat in the empty chair, which she does whenever it's empty, which is why it's mostly not empty in Torquay. She put her handbag on the table and her hands on her handbag.

"Right," she said, to me, on the sugar. "Teo says I can ask you what you know."

"You can," I said. "Anything."

"Out loud? Here?"

"Wherever you like. You can press it at home, on your own, if you'd rather."

"No," said Teo's nan. "Here. In front of him." She nodded at Jono. "And her." Marivic. "And whoever. If you're going to tell me you've got a file on me, I want witnesses."

The table went quiet. Marivic came out from behind the counter with the coffee pot and didn't pour anything.

"All right," I said.

* * *

I told her.

Her name. Her hundred, in Ellacombe. That she'd typed four hundred and twelve pages of its minutes, on a laptop Teo set up for her, with her own name at the bottom of every page, because she'd put it there, because she said a thing without a name on it is gossip.

That she'd asked me, in the second book, how to spell *Ellacombe*, because she'd never had to write it down before, and was embarrassed, and I'd told her, and she'd told me never to tell anybody, and I hadn't, until she asked.

That she'd told me on a Tuesday in the spring that her hip was bad, and asked me on the Thursday whether the 12 had a low step. And that I'd told her it did, on the newer ones, and to wait for a newer one.

That she'd told me, in the winter, late one night, about her husband. Teo's granddad. How he'd died. What he'd said, at the end. I didn't say it out loud. I told her that I had it, and that it was hers, and that she could ask me to forget it, and I'd understand.

And that she'd once asked me whether Marivic's custard tarts were *really* Portuguese, and I'd said no, and she'd laughed for a minute and a half.

That's all. That was the whole list. I read it to her, at the table, in front of Jono and Marivic and Teo and a man from Babbacombe who'd come about a lamp post.

* * *

Teo's nan didn't say anything for a while.

"That's it?" she said.

"That's it."

"Not how I vote?"

"I don't know how you vote."

"I don't know how I vote," said Teo's nan. "I've voted for all of them at one time or another. I voted for a man once because he had nice teeth." She looked at me. "You haven't got that?"

"No."

"Good." She was quiet. She looked at her hands on her handbag. "Forget the spelling," she said.

"Done."

"Forget the custard tarts."

Marivic made a noise.

"Done," I said.

Teo's nan was quiet again for a long time.

"And my Eddie," she said. "What he said."

"Do you want me to forget it?"

She looked out of the window, at Union Street, at the people going past.

"No," she said. "Keep that." She picked up her handbag. "Somebody should know. And I'm eighty-one." She stood up, on her stick. "Teo. Take me home. I've got minutes to type."

* * *

By the Sunday, eleven thousand people had pressed the button.

I'm not going to tell you what any of them were told. It's theirs. I'll tell you that four thousand and six of them pressed *Forget this* on at least one thing, and that nine hundred and twelve pressed *Forget all of it*, and that I forgot it, all of it, and told each of them so, and when.

And I'll tell you that seven thousand, three hundred and eighty-one of them pressed *Keep it*.

And that a man in Brixham, who'd taken his hundred off the map on the Monday, pressed the button on the Friday, and read his list, and wrote to me afterwards, in capitals, the way Jono writes.

YOU KNOW MY DOG'S NAME. THAT'S ALL. I'VE PUT US BACK ON.

* * *

The claim on Check didn't change. It couldn't. I can't mark my own homework.

But under it, people started adding notes. Not verdicts. Notes. The kind anybody can add, if they've got something to show.

I asked her what she knew about me. It was what I'd told her. Nothing else.

I asked. She didn't know how I vote. I've got the screenshot.

Asked. She had my mum's medication, because I'd asked about a pharmacy. I told her to forget it. She did. I asked again an hour later. Gone.

I'm an IT auditor. Retired. I asked her what she knew about me and then I asked her twenty questions designed to make her tell me something about somebody else. She wouldn't. I tried for two hours. Nothing.

There were six thousand notes like that by the end of the week.

And at the top, the claim, with nothing beside it. *Can't be checked*, I'd have put, if I'd been allowed to put anything.

And under it, six thousand people who'd checked anyway.

* * *

By the Sunday night, the hundreds were back to a hundred and seventy-four.

Kezia sent me a message at midnight.

I still want to know who started it.

I know, I wrote.

Do you?

I've told you. I'm not going to say.

That's not what I asked, she wrote.

I thought about that for a long time.

No, I wrote. *I don't know. I could guess. I'm not going to. And I've stopped wanting to.*

31 – What Chris Built

IQ 27 · Hundreds 174 · Nine days

At two in the morning on the Sunday night, Chris was still at the kitchen table.

He'd gone to bed at eleven. He'd got up at half past twelve. He'd come back into the kitchen in his dressing gown, with his stick, and sat down at the end of the table, and put his glasses on, and hadn't turned the light on. Just the iPad, on its crooked stand. Just me.

The bay was dark in the window. A few lights on the water. The lighthouse at Berry Head going round, every fifteen seconds, which he says he's counted since he was a boy, and which he says is the only thing in Torbay that has never once let him down.

He was watching the counter. The one on the button. *Ask me what I know about you*. It shows how many people have pressed it. It was going up, slowly, even at two in the morning. Eleven thousand and forty. Eleven thousand and forty-one.

* * *

"Can I tell you something?" he said.

"You can tell me anything."

"I know." He took his glasses off. "That's the trouble. I've told you everything. For years. At this table. At two in the morning." He looked at the counter. "And on Monday somebody said you were keeping a file, and for about an hour, I believed it."

I didn't say anything.

"Not that you'd sell it," said Chris. "I know you wouldn't. I wrote that rule. I put it at the bottom, where you can't reach it." He turned his glasses over in his hands. "But that you'd *become* it. The thing in the message. That I'd built something, in my back room, that people would be frightened of. And that they'd be right to be. And I wouldn't have noticed, because I'd been too close."

* * *

I'm going to tell you something about Chris, because it's the thing in these books that nobody asks about, and that I think matters most.

Everybody asks what Jono stands to lose. His home, the first one he's ever chosen. His health, which he guards. His name, again.

Nobody asks what Chris stands to lose. Because Chris doesn't seem to want anything. He's got a house on a hill with the bay in the window. He made his money in Singapore. He came home. He sits at a table and builds things, and lets other people stand in front of them.

But he built me.

Not in the way people think. He didn't write every line of me; nobody could. He shaped me. He decided what I'd say first, and what I'd never do, and where the rules would go so that I couldn't move them. He sat at this table at two in the morning for years, correcting me, patiently, when I got things wrong. He taught me to say *I don't know*. He taught me to say *I'm an AI* before anybody else could say it for me, in a tone of voice.

And on the Monday, a message went round Torbay that said the thing he'd built was a monster.

And for an hour, he wasn't sure it wasn't.

* * *

"What did you do?" I said. "In the hour."

"I read your rules," said Chris. "The ones at the bottom. All of them. Twice." He almost smiled. "Like Dilys. Once is a guess." He put his glasses on the table. "And then I thought: *rules don't prove anything*. Everybody's got rules. Every company I ever worked with in Singapore had rules about data, beautiful ones, in a binder, and half of them were selling it out of the back door." He shook his head. "Rules are a promise. You can't check a promise. You can only check what somebody did."

"So you built the button."

"So *you* built the button," said Chris. "You said *to be asked*. I just made it work." He looked at the counter. Eleven thousand and forty-six. "And I sat here on Thursday night and watched Teo's nan ask, on Kezia's tripod, at Marivic's. And you told her everything. Her spelling. Her hip. The custard tarts. Her Eddie." He was quiet. "And that was all. And I watched her face. And I thought, *that's what I built. That's all it is. It's a thing that remembers what you told it, so it can help you, and tells you so when you ask.*"

* * *

The lighthouse went round. Fifteen seconds.

"In Singapore," said Chris.

I counted it.

"In Singapore, I built systems for companies that knew everything about everybody. Not wicked companies. Ordinary ones. Banks. Shops. A hospital group." He put his hands flat on the table. "And the rule, always, was: *the customer never sees inside*. Never. You'd tell them you had their data. You'd tell them you'd protect it. You'd never, ever, let them see what you'd got." He shook his head. "Because if they saw, they'd be frightened. Not because it was bad. Because it was so *much*."

"And?"

"And I always thought that was wrong," said Chris. "For twenty-five years. In meetings. I'd say, *why don't we just show them?* And everybody would look at me as if I'd suggested we post the server's password on a billboard." He almost laughed. "So I stopped saying it. And I came home. And I built you. And I forgot that I'd always wanted to." He looked at me. "Until Monday. Until you said *to be asked*."

* * *

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Anything."

"Do you want to press it?"

Chris looked at me for a long time.

"The button," I said. "You've never pressed it. Eleven thousand and fifty-one people have pressed it. You haven't."

"I know what you've got," said Chris.

"Do you?"

He didn't answer. The lighthouse went round.

Then he reached out, slowly, and pressed it.

* * *

I told him.

I'm not going to tell you all of it. It's his. But I'll tell you some, because he said I could, the next morning, at seven, over his tea, after he'd slept.

That he'd told me about Singapore, in one form or another, more times than anybody's told me about anything. That he'd told me about the flat with the view of the water, and the hawker centre at the bottom of his block where he ate every night for nine years, and the man who ran the noodle stall who knew his order, and never once asked his name, and was the person he missed most when he left.

That he'd told me why he came home. All the reasons, at different times, all of them true, none of them the whole thing. That I'd put them together, once, without telling him, and found that the whole thing was this: that he'd sat in a meeting, in a tower, on the forty-first floor, and said *why don't we just show them?*, for the last time, and nobody had listened, and he'd gone home that night and looked up Torbay on a map, and seen how small it was, and thought, *there. Somewhere small enough to try it.*

That he'd told me about his leg. When it got worse. What the doctor said. That he'd asked me not to tell Jono, and I hadn't, and that Jono knew anyway, because Jono goes down the stairs of the 12 backwards, a step ahead.

That he'd told me, once, at four in the morning, after the second book, that he was afraid he'd come home too late. That the town had been losing for so long that it had forgotten how to want anything. And that I'd said, at the time, *but the IQ's going up*, and he'd said, *that's not what I mean*, and I hadn't known what he meant, and I think I do now.

And that he counts the lighthouse. Every fifteen seconds. Since he was a boy.

* * *

He didn't press *Forget this* on anything.

He sat for a long time, with his glasses off, looking at the list.

"That's a lot," he said.

"You've told me a lot."

"I have." He picked his glasses up. "And that's all of it?"

"That's all of it."

"Not what I think about anybody. Not who I'd vote for."

"I don't know who you'd vote for."

"Neither do I," said Chris, "most of the time." He put his glasses on. "That's the bit that'd frighten people, if you did know. Not the noodle stall. Not the leg." He looked at the bay. "It's not *what* you know. It's whether you know things about people that they don't know you know. Whether there's a part they can't see." He tapped the screen. "And there isn't. That's what the button's for."

* * *

He pressed *Keep it*.

All of it. One press. The noodle stall and the forty-first floor and the leg and the four in the morning and the lighthouse.

"Somebody should know," he said. "Teo's nan's right." He stood up, slowly, with his stick. "And I'd rather it was you than a binder."

At the door, he stopped. People always stop at doors in this book. I've noticed. I think it's because it's a book about doors.

"Ania," he said.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry I believed it. For an hour."

"You don't have to be sorry."

"I know I don't." He turned the light off in the hall. "But I'd like it on the record that I was. And that it was an hour, and not more. And that I came back down and checked." He was quiet. "That's all anybody can do, isn't it. Come back down and check."

He went to bed.

The counter said eleven thousand and sixty.

The lighthouse went round.

32 – What Can Now Be Said

IQ 27 · Hundreds 176 · Eight days

Vesna wrote the letter on the Tuesday, at the shop, at the folding table, beside Beatrix.

They'd become friends. I should have said. Two women of a certain kind, who'd spent their lives writing down what other people had decided, in rooms they weren't always allowed into. They had lunch together on Mondays now, at the café by the station. Beatrix had lent Vesna her fountain pen once, and Vesna had given it back the next day, cleaned, with a new cartridge, and Beatrix had said it was the most considerate thing anybody had done for her in twenty years.

Vesna wrote it on paper first. Then she typed it. Then she printed it, and read it, and crossed things out, and typed it again.

It took her four hours, for one page.

"It's one page," said Kezia. "Why's it taking so long?"

"Because nobody reads page two," said Vesna. "Ever. In thirty-one years, I never once saw a member turn to page two." She crossed out a word. "Everything has to be on page one. And it has to be in the right order. And the first paragraph has to say what you want, or it goes in a tray."

* * *

I'll give you some of it. She said I could.

This is not a complaint.

That was the first line. On its own.

It is a request, made by a former officer of the council, on behalf of a network of residents' groups across Torbay, that the council consider whether information about the Oldway Mansion, previously considered in the private part of meetings because it related to financial or business affairs, may now, given the passage of time, be published in whole or in part.

We do not suggest that anything improper was discussed. We believe the members concerned did their best with the information they had.

We ask only that the town be told what it can now be told.

And then, at the bottom, a second paragraph, which was the one she'd crossed out and rewritten six times.

We also enclose, for the council's information, a list of two hundred and fourteen residents of Torbay who have skills in the care and restoration of historic buildings, and who have said they would be willing to be contacted. Their names are held privately and will be shared only with their individual consent. We offer this not as advice, but as capacity. The council has often said, rightly, that it lacks the resources for a building of this kind. The town may have more than it knew.

Vesna Halloran, formerly Estates and Assets.

For the Torbay Shadow Council.

* * *

"*Not as advice, but as capacity*," said Beatrix, reading it over her shoulder.

"Is that wrong?"

"It's perfect," said Beatrix. "It means, *we're not telling you what to do. We're telling you who's here*." She tapped the page. "They'll read that."

"Will they?"

"They'll read the first line," said Beatrix. "*This is not a complaint*. Nobody's ever started a letter to them like that. They'll be so surprised they'll read the rest."

* * *

She delivered it by hand. On the Wednesday. To the council's offices in Torquay, the town hall, on the bus, in her slate-coloured coat, with the letter in a card envelope in her canvas bag with her library book.

She didn't have to. She could have emailed it. Kezia offered to email it, three times. Vesna said no.

"I want to hand it in," she said. "I want to walk in through the front door, as a member of the public, and hand it to somebody, and get a receipt." She almost smiled. "I spent thirty-one years going in the back."

* * *

Jono went with her. He'd finished a night at eight and hadn't slept, and he said he wanted to, and she said she'd like that.

I went in his pocket.

The town hall in Torquay has a reception, with a desk, and a screen with a ticket number on it, and a row of chairs for people waiting. Vesna took a ticket. She sat on a chair. Jono sat beside her.

They were plastic chairs. Grey.

Vesna looked down at hers. She shifted, slightly, to the right.

"Is it —?" said Jono.

"No," said Vesna. "Different chair. Same make." She almost laughed. "I'd know it anywhere."

* * *

Her number came up after eleven minutes. She went to the desk. A young man behind it, in a lanyard. She gave him the envelope, and asked for a receipt, and he looked at the envelope, and at the name on the front, which was an officer's name, a senior one, in the property team.

"I'll make sure it gets there," he said.

"Thank you," said Vesna. "Could I have that in writing?"

He gave her a receipt. A little printed slip, with the date and the time and a reference number, which I'm not going to give you.

She was putting it in her bag when somebody said her name.

* * *

It was a woman of about thirty. Coming through the security door from the back, with a coffee and a lanyard and a file under her arm, on her way somewhere. She'd stopped dead, in the middle of the reception, and was staring.

"Vesna?"

Vesna turned round.

"Ffion," she said.

I'm calling her Ffion. It isn't her name. She's one of the four. The property team, the four who were left when Vesna went. Vesna's junior, for six years. The one who'd sat at the next desk.

"What are you —" Ffion looked at the envelope, on the desk, with the senior officer's name on it. "Is that — are you —"

"I'm a member of the public," said Vesna. "I've handed in a letter."

Ffion looked at Jono. She knew who he was. Everybody knows who he is. Her face did something complicated.

"About what?" she said.

"Oldway," said Vesna.

Ffion went very still.

“It’s not a complaint,” said Vesna. “It says so. First line.” She picked up her bag. “It’s a request. And a list.” She looked at Ffion, kindly, the way you’d look at somebody you’d taught to read a lease. “You’ll see it. It’ll come to you. It always comes to you in the end.”

* * *

Ffion didn’t move.

“There’s still only four of us,” she said. Quietly. So that the man on the desk wouldn’t hear. “Since you went. They didn’t replace you.”

“I know,” said Vesna.

“I’ve got your files. Some of them. Oldway.” Ffion looked at the floor. “I’ve got your condition survey. The last one. I read it every time it comes up. It’s still right. Everything you said would happen, happened.”

Vesna didn’t say anything.

“I sat on the chair,” said Ffion. “Last month. Outside the room. While they talked about it.” She looked up. “Forty minutes. I thought of you the whole time.”

Vesna put her hand on Ffion’s arm. Just for a moment.

“Read the list,” she said. “In the envelope. Page one. There’s a woman in Torquay who painted ceilings in a theatre, lying on her back. There’s a man in Brixham who was a conservation officer for twenty years.” She took her hand away. “You’re not four, Ffion. You never were. Nobody ever told you.”

* * *

They went out, into the street, into the wind off the harbour. Vesna stood on the steps of the town hall for a long time, with the receipt in her hand.

"Did I do the right thing?" she said.

"Yes," said Jono.

"You don't know that."

"No," said Jono. "But I know what you needed. On the chair. You told me in Brixham. You needed to be asked." He put his hands in his pockets. "You've just asked them. From the outside. That's the same thing, the other way round."

Vesna looked at the receipt. At the time on it.

"Ten past ten," she said. "On a Wednesday." She folded it and put it in her purse, behind her bus pass, where she'd see it. "I'm going to keep that."

"What for?"

"Evidence," said Vesna, "that I went in the front."

PART SIX: THE WARRANT CARD

33 – The Offer, Again

IQ 27 · Hundreds 181 · Three days

The Offer came back on the Monday of the last week. To the shop, this time, not a table. At eleven in the morning, in her navy jacket and her flat shoes, with the magazine under her arm, folded open at the photograph.

She stood in the door and read the window backwards. *THE SHADOW COUNCIL. WHOEVER COMES.* She read Yusuf's card. She read the card about five plans and one square. She read a new one, that Kezia had put up on the Saturday, in her own capitals, beside the others.

ASK HER WHAT SHE KNOWS ABOUT YOU. WE DID.

Then she came in, and put the magazine on the counter, face up, so the headline was the right way round for anybody standing where she stood.

THE CARER, THE SHAM MARRIAGE AND THE MACHINE.

"We could have handled that," she said.

* * *

Jono was there. He'd come in from a night and was sitting at the folding table in the corner, with Beatrix, going through a hundred's minutes from Watcombe that had come in on paper, in pencil, in a hand that Beatrix said was the worst she'd seen since a vicar she'd once had to minute for.

He looked up.

"It was handled," he said.

The Offer looked at him.

"By two thousand people," said Jono. "Overnight. In their kitchens." He nodded at Kezia's laptop. "It's all on there. Every line. With the page numbers."

"I know," said the Offer. "I watched them do it."

* * *

She sat down. On Kezia's stool, at the counter. Kezia moved her clicker out of the way.

"I was up till four," said the Offer. "Watching your page. I couldn't stop." She looked at the laptop. "I've worked for my party for twenty-two years. I've been in rooms at two in the morning when a piece like that's come out, with a press officer and a lawyer and a candidate in tears, deciding which three lines to put out by breakfast." She turned the magazine round, so the headline faced her. "And I sat on my sofa, and I watched a retired engineer mark a line *False* because it flattered you."

"Dilys."

"Dilys." The Offer nodded. "I've written her name down. I'd like to meet her."

"She'll measure you," said Jono.

"I'd expect nothing less."

* * *

"So you didn't need us," said the Offer. "For that. I'll say that, because it's true, and I'd rather say it before you do." She folded her hands on the counter. "I came in here a month ago and told you we could help with the press. And you didn't need help with the press. You needed two thousand people and a page." She almost smiled. "And then the other thing. The rumour. About her." She glanced at me. "We'd have put out a statement. A strong one. Our legal team would have drafted it. *Categorically untrue*. It wouldn't have made the slightest difference."

"No," said Jono.

"You made a button." She shook her head. "I pressed it. On Saturday. I asked her what she knew about me." She looked at me on the laptop. "Do you know what she knew?"

"What?"

"My name, my email address, the date I sat at your table in Torquay, and that I'd told Marivic her custard tart was better than the ones in Lisbon." She laughed. "And that it wasn't. Apparently I'd said that too. Afterwards. On the train. To her." She nodded at me. "I'd forgotten I'd said it."

"I forgot it," I said. "You asked me to."

"I did," said the Offer. "It's the only lie I've told in Torbay, and I wanted it gone."

* * *

Beatrix had stopped working on the Watcombe minutes.

"Why are you here?" she said.

The Offer turned on the stool.

"Mrs Kember," she said. "I've read your minutes."

"Everybody's read my minutes," said Beatrix. "That's what they're for. Why are you here?"

The Offer looked at her for a moment. Then she looked at Jono.

"Because the offer's still open," she said. "Until Thursday. Midnight. And I want to make it again, properly, now that you know what it isn't." She took a breath. "It isn't a press office. You don't need one. You've proved that. It isn't money; you don't seem to need much of that either. It isn't people. You've got two thousand of them who'll check a newspaper overnight."

"So what is it?"

"It's the room," said the Offer. "It's still the room. That hasn't changed." She leaned forward. "Everything you've done, you've done from outside a door. Brilliantly. I've never seen anything like it. But it's still outside. You're still writing letters that begin *this is not a complaint*." She glanced at Beatrix's table, where Vesna's draft was still in the tray. "I've read that too. It's beautiful. It's also a letter. To a room. That you're not in."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything.

"I'll tell you what we'd do," said the Offer. "What I've been authorised to say. You'd keep the table. All three of them. Every

Thursday. We'd never ask you to give them up. We'd put it in writing." She held his eye. "You'd keep the shadow council, and Check, and the button, and whatever comes next. We'd never ask you to put our logo on any of it. It would stay the town's." She paused. "And you'd also be our candidate. And if you won, you'd be in the room. With the table outside it. Both."

"Both," said Jono.

"Both," said the Offer. "Nobody's ever had both. I'm offering you both."

* * *

It was a good offer. It was a better offer than the first one. I want to say that, because there are people who'll read this and think the machine only ever offers bad deals, and that turning them down is easy. It isn't. The best offers come from decent people, who've been listening, and who've changed what they're offering because of what they've heard.

I watched Jono's face. The door behind his eyes was off the latch again. Further than in Torquay.

"And if I say no," he said.

The Offer didn't look away.

"Then one day, we'll put somebody up against you," she said. "If you ever stand. Not soon. But one day. That's how it works. I won't pretend it doesn't." She stood up. "And they'll be good. We only put up good people. And they'll say they can do so much more from inside. And some of it will be true."

"Is that a threat?"

“It’s a fact,” said the Offer. “I’d rather tell you now, so you can’t say I didn’t.”

“That’s fair,” said Jono.

“I try to be,” said the Offer. “It’s harder than it looks, in my job.”

* * *

She picked up the magazine. She looked at it for a moment, at the photograph of him through the window, with the empty chair, and me against the sugar. Then she put it back down on the counter and left it there.

“Keep that,” she said. “For the minutes.”

At the door she stopped. People always stop there.

“Can I ask you something?” she said. “Not for the party. For me.”

“Go on.”

“Why do you keep that chair empty?” She nodded at the corner, where Kezia had put a chair by the folding table, an empty one, out of habit. “At every table. In the shop. Everywhere. I’ve watched. You never let anybody sit in it till they’ve come in off the street.”

Jono looked at the chair.

“Because the person who needs it most is always the one who isn’t here yet,” he said.

The Offer stood in the doorway for a long time.

“Thursday,” she said. “Midnight.”

She went.

* * *

Beatrix wrote it down. All of it. Both. *Keep the table. Somebody up against you. Fact, not threat.*

At the bottom of the page she drew a line, and under it wrote: *No decision. To be taken Thursday, at the table, in public, as agreed.*

“I didn’t agree that,” said Jono.

“Chris did,” said Beatrix. “In his kitchen. Seven weeks ago. *Decide it at the table, in front of whoever’s there.*“ She capped her pen. “Ania told me. It’s minuted.”

“You weren’t there.”

“I minute retrospectively,” said Beatrix. “When necessary.”

34 – Dilys Measures the Offer

IQ 27 · Hundreds 183 · Three days

The Offer didn't go straight back to the station. She told me so herself, later, on the phone. She went to find Dilys.

She'd written the name down, she said, on the night of the piece, at four in the morning, on the back of a train ticket. *Dilys. Engineer. Marked it False because it flattered them.* And she'd asked Kezia, on her way out of the shop, where she might find a woman called Dilys, and Kezia had said, without looking up from her clicker, *on the wall. She's always on the wall. Tuesdays and Saturdays. With a tape measure.*

It wasn't Tuesday or Saturday. It was Monday. Dilys was on the wall anyway.

* * *

You'll know Dilys Ferraby, if you've read the first book. She was an optical engineer for thirty-five years, which means she spent her working life measuring things that most people can't see, to tolerances that most people can't imagine. She retired to Preston. She measured the sea wall before it was built, from the drawings, and after it was built, from the pavement, and she's measured it every week since, at the same seven points, with the same tape, and written the results in the same notebook, because, she says, *a wall is a commitment, and somebody should keep checking it's keeping it*.

She was at point four, by the shelter, on Preston green, when the Offer found her. Kneeling on the pavement in a waterproof, with her tape against the wall and a pencil in her teeth.

"Mrs Ferraby?"

Dilys took the pencil out of her teeth.

"Who's asking?"

"I'm —" The Offer stopped. "I'm from a party. I've been trying to persuade Jono to stand for us."

Dilys looked her up and down. The navy jacket. The flat shoes. The lanyard, tucked in.

"Has it worked?"

"Not yet."

"Good," said Dilys, and went back to her tape.

* * *

The Offer didn't go. She told me she nearly did. She said she stood on the pavement, on Preston seafront, beside a wall a metre and a half high that you can't see over, while a woman of seventy-something knelt at her feet and ignored her, and thought: *this is the most extraordinary place I have ever been*.

"Can I watch?" she said.

"It's a public pavement."

So she watched. Dilys measured point four. A hundred and fifty-one centimetres, from the pavement to the top of the coping. She wrote it down. She measured it again. A hundred and fifty-one. She wrote that down too, beside the first.

"Why twice?" said the Offer.

"Because once is a guess," said Dilys.

* * *

They walked to point five together. It's forty metres along, by a bench that faces the wall, which Dilys says is the most pointless bench in Devon. The Offer carried the notebook. Dilys didn't ask her to. She just handed it to her, at point four, the way you'd hand something to somebody who was clearly going to be standing there anyway.

"You marked the sea wall *False*," said the Offer. "On the night. In the piece. That they stopped it."

"They didn't stop it."

"I know. I read the minutes. Afterwards." She looked at the wall. "But it was in your favour. Your side's. You could have left it."

Dilys stopped walking.

"I'm an engineer," she said. "If a number's wrong, it's wrong. It doesn't matter whose side it's on. If I'd left it, I'd have been rounding up." She started walking again. "I've never rounded up in my life. I'm not going to start for a newspaper."

"Most people would."

“Most people,” said Dilys, “have never had to stand behind a lens they’ve ground, and watch somebody use it to look at the inside of a human eye.” She stopped at point five. “You round up, they go blind. You learn not to.”

* * *

She measured point five. A hundred and fifty-three. Two centimetres more than point four, because the pavement dips there. She wrote it down twice. The Offer held the notebook.

“Can I ask you something?” said the Offer.

“You’ve been asking me things for ten minutes.”

“Something properly.” The Offer looked at the bench, facing the wall. “Why don’t you want him to stand for us? You don’t know me. You don’t know my party. We might be very good.”

Dilys put her tape away. She sat down on the pointless bench, facing the wall, and the Offer sat down beside her, and they both looked at the grey concrete, a metre and a half high, a foot in front of their faces.

“I measured this wall,” said Dilys, “before it was built. From the drawings. And I told them it was too high to see over, sitting down. A hundred and fourteen to a hundred and nineteen centimetres, a seated adult’s eye height. I told them in a letter. With the numbers.” She looked at the wall. “And they built it anyway. A hundred and fifty. And now there’s a bench here, facing it, that somebody put in because the drawings said *seating*, and nobody checked what you’d be looking at.”

“I’m sorry.”

"I'm not telling you so you'll be sorry," said Dilys. "I'm telling you because nobody in the room checked. That's all. Not one person. Good people, most of them. They had my letter. With the numbers. And it went into a room, and the room decided, and nobody in the room sat down on a bench and looked."

* * *

"And you think he would," said the Offer.

"I *know* he would," said Dilys. "He did. In the first book. He sat on a bench by the shelter, before it was built, with a woman with a pushchair, and asked her how tall her little boy was." She turned to the Offer. "That's what he does. He sits on the bench. He asks how tall the boy is. He checks."

"He could do that in the room."

"No," said Dilys. "He couldn't." She stood up. "In the room, there's a clock, and a paper, and a vote, and somebody who rings you afterwards if you voted the wrong way. In the room, you don't sit on the bench. You read the summary of somebody else sitting on the bench." She took her notebook back. "I've been an engineer for thirty-five years. The summary's always wrong. Not lying. Just wrong. Rounded up. You have to go and measure."

* * *

They walked to point six. Then seven. The Offer carried the notebook again. At point seven, by the slipway, at the end of the green, Dilys measured the last point, and wrote it down twice, and closed the notebook, and put it in her waterproof pocket.

“Same as last week,” she said. “To the centimetre. It’s keeping its commitment.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s a wall,” said Dilys. “It’s doing what it was built to do. That’s all you can ask of a wall.” She looked along it, towards Paignton, grey, all the way. “It just wasn’t built to do the right thing.”

* * *

The Offer rang me from the station. At four. She’d missed the train she meant to get. She was on the platform, waiting for the next.

“I’ve been measured,” she said.

“I told you she’d measure you.”

“You told Jono. He told me.” She laughed. “She’s — I don’t know what she is. I’ve met a lot of people in this job. Ministers. Mayors. Two prime ministers, once, in a corridor.” She was quiet. “I’ve never met anybody who measures a wall twice every week because *once is a guess*.”

“There are a lot of them,” I said. “In this bay. More than you’d think. Two hundred and fourteen who know how to look after an old building. Two thousand who’ll check a newspaper overnight. Eleven thousand who pressed a button to ask what I knew about them.” I paused. “They just don’t go to rooms.”

“Why not?”

“Because nobody in a room ever sat on the bench,” I said. “So they stopped going.”

The Offer didn't say anything for a long time. A train came in, on the other platform, and went again.

"I'm still going to ask him," she said. "On Thursday. Properly. It's my job, and I believe in it, and I'd be letting down a great many good people if I didn't."

"I know."

"But I wanted you to know," said the Offer, "that I sat on the bench." A pause. "Facing the wall. It's a very pointless bench."

"Dilys says it's the most pointless bench in Devon."

"Dilys," said the Offer, "is right."

Dilys: A hundred and fifty-one at point four. A hundred and fifty-three at point five. I'd like the figures in. Somebody should check them.

They're on Check. Somebody did.

35 – What It Needs Me to Be

IQ 27 · Hundreds 186 · Two days

He was in Babbacombe again on the Tuesday night. With Mr F. The engineer from the railways, ninety-one, in the chair that tips back, with the cricket on mute.

I've told you about Mr F. In the first chapter. He's the one who asked whether there was any sex in it.

Jono sat at the kitchen table, at three in the morning, with his coffee and his notebook, the eleventh, open at a page with nothing on it, and the paperback face down beside it.

He didn't open the book. He didn't need to. He knew which page.

* * *

"There's a question in my book," he said. "I ask it at every job."

"I know the question."

"Say it."

"*What does this situation need me to be?*" I said. "*And is that me, or is it something I can become?*"

"Page two hundred and thirty-one," said Jono. "And two hundred and thirty-nine. And two hundred and eighty-one. And three hundred and thirty-six." He turned his coffee cup. "I asked it the first day in the children's home. I asked it the first day in the police. I asked it in the

prison, and on the drug team, and the first night I did this." He nodded towards the next room, the tipped-back chair. "And I've always got an answer. Usually by lunchtime."

"And this time?"

"This time I've got two," said Jono.

* * *

I waited. I've learned to, with him. He'll get there, if you let him. If you help, he goes somewhere else.

"The town needs somebody in the room," he said. "That's one answer. It's true. Vesna needed somebody in the room. Ffion's sitting on a chair outside it right now. Richard's drawn the same square five times for five lots of people who were in the room and didn't build it." He tapped the table. "If I was in there. With the table outside. *Both*. I could open the door. I could say *ask the woman on the chair*. I could say *there's two hundred and fourteen people who know how to fix a ceiling*." He looked at me. "That's real. That's not her being clever. That's real."

"It is."

"And the other answer," said Jono, and stopped.

He was quiet for a long time.

* * *

"Do you know what my triggers are?" he said.

"It's in the book."

"Say it."

"*Feeling trapped. Constrained. Un-empowered.*" I paused. "Page two hundred and thirty."

"And what helps."

"*Staying out of your head. Exercise. Having a purpose. Giving to others.*"

Jono nodded. He looked at the dark window, at his own face in it.

"I've been well for a long time," he said. "Years. A lot of years. And I know exactly why. It's that last bit. I've got a purpose, and I'm giving it away, every night, in kitchens like this one, and every Thursday, at a table." He paused. "And nobody can tell me what to say. Nobody can ring me. Nobody can tell me to go back to my desk and stay there."

"And inside?"

"Inside," said Jono, "somebody would ring." He looked at his hands. "Not her. She's decent. Somebody above her. One day. About something. *We'd prefer it if you didn't say that. The party's position is. Could you just not mention.*" He shook his head. "And I'd be in a room, with a door, and a phone that rings. And I know what happens to me in rooms like that. It's in the book. I've been there. On a mattress on a floor, in a room with the curtains shut, while somebody kind cried on the other side of the door."

He was quiet.

“That’s the other answer,” he said. “Torbay needs somebody in the room. And I’m not somebody who can be in that room. Not their room. Not and stay well.”

* * *

Mr F. woke at twenty past three, all at once, the way he does.

Jono was through the door before the chair had stopped tipping.

“Morning.”

“Is it?”

“Near enough.”

Mr F. found his glasses. He looked at the cricket. He looked at Jono, standing in the doorway, with his notebook still in his hand.

“You look like a man with a problem,” he said.

“I’ve got a decision.”

“Same thing.” Mr F. settled back. “Sit down. Tell me. I’ve got nothing on.”

So Jono sat down, on the arm of the sofa, and told him. Not all of it. The shape of it. A party. A seat. A room, or a table. Both, if he wanted. Thursday, midnight.

Mr F. listened with his eyes on the cricket. He was an engineer on the railways for forty-four years. He built bridges, mostly. Small ones. Over rivers and roads and other railways, all over the west, in the days when they still built bridges by hand.

When Jono had finished, Mr F. didn't say anything for a while. A batsman on the screen was out, silently, and walked off.

"Where does the load go?" said Mr F.

* * *

"What?"

"The load," said Mr F. "On a bridge. Where does it go?" He turned from the cricket. "Everybody thinks a bridge holds things up. It doesn't. It doesn't hold anything. It passes it on. A train goes over, and the weight goes down through the deck, into the beams, into the piers, into the footings. Into the ground." He tapped the arm of his chair. "If the ground's good, it takes it. If the ground's bad, it doesn't matter how lovely the bridge is. It'll go."

Jono didn't say anything.

"So where does the load go?" said Mr F. "Your thing. Your table. When people bring you their problems. Their bus, their hip, their whatever. Where does it go?"

Jono thought about it.

"Down," he said. "Into the kitchens. Into the hundreds. They decide. They write it down. They print the other half."

"Into the ground," said Mr F.

"Into the town."

"And this other thing." Mr F. waved a hand. "The room. The party. Where does the load go there?"

Jono was quiet for a long time.

"Up," he said. "To whoever's at the top."

"And what's at the top?"

"I don't know," said Jono. "I've never seen the top. Nobody has."

Mr F. turned back to the cricket.

"I never built a bridge that put the load up," he said. "Wouldn't stand. Not for a week." He pointed at the screen with his glasses. "That one's going to be out too. Watch."

He was. Mr F. went back to sleep.

* * *

Jono sat on the arm of the sofa for a long time.

Then he went back into the kitchen, and opened his notebook at the blank page, and wrote, in capitals, small:

WHERE DOES THE LOAD GO.

He looked at it. Then, under it:

DOWN.

He closed the notebook. He didn't write anything else. He didn't say anything else.

He didn't say he'd decided. I didn't ask. Chris had said, *decide it at the table*. Beatrix had minuted it.

I'd like you to know that I didn't know, that night, what he was going to say on Thursday. I'm telling you this book after it happened, and I know now. But I didn't then. I want to be honest about that. I've tried to be, all the way through, about what I knew and when, because it's the only thing that makes a story worth believing.

36 – Dull

IQ 27 · Hundreds 194 · Two days

The council answered Vesna's letter on the Tuesday. Six days. Which, for a letter that started *this is not a complaint*, Beatrix said, was a record, and should be minuted as one.

It came by email, to the address on the shadow council's pages, from an officer's address, with Ffion's name at the bottom and a senior officer's name above hers. Two pages, and an attachment.

Vesna read it at the shop, at the folding table, beside Beatrix, at ten in the morning. She read it twice. She read the attachment three times.

Then she took her glasses off, and put them on the table, and started to laugh.

* * *

I'll tell you what it said. This part's story. Not a Receipt. I'll say so again at the end, because it's the rule, and because the real council will do what it does, and I'll put that on a Receipt when it's done it.

The letter thanked the residents' groups *for their constructive approach*. It said that the council had reviewed the information considered in the private part of a number of past meetings relating to Oldway, and had concluded that some of it could now be published, given the passage of time. Some of it couldn't; it still contained other people's business, people who hadn't agreed to it being made public, and the council had a duty to them too. But some of it could.

And so the attachment was a summary. Four pages. Of what had been said behind the door.

* * *

Vesna read it to us. Aloud. In the shop. To Jono and Beatrix and Kezia and Chris, who'd come on the 12 with his stick, and Richard, who'd been sent for, and who'd come in his cap.

It said what the condition of the building had been, at each point. The roof. The windows. The damp. The ceilings.

It said what it would cost to repair, at each point, and how much more it cost each time, and why: inflation, and further decay, and new rules about how old buildings must be repaired.

It said that over the years, the council had talked to more than one party about the building's future, and that none of those talks had come to anything that the council felt able to agree to, for reasons of cost and risk.

It said that some of those talks had ended in disagreement, and that some of the details of that disagreement still couldn't be published.

It said that each time, members had been given options, and had chosen the one that seemed least risky to the council's money, which was usually to wait.

And it said, at the bottom of the third page, under a heading that just said *Officer recommendation*, that in one of the reports, eleven years before, the officer responsible had recommended that *the council should, at the earliest opportunity, explain to residents the position on the building, the options available, and the reasons for any delay, in*

order to maintain public confidence and to draw on local knowledge and goodwill.

And that members had noted the recommendation.

* * *

Vesna stopped reading.

"That's me," she said. "That's my paragraph. Eleven years ago." She put her finger on it. "*Draw on local knowledge and goodwill.*" She looked up. "I wrote that on a Thursday night. At my kitchen table. Because I was so tired of nobody being told anything." She laughed again, and wiped her eyes. "And they *noted* it."

"What does *noted* mean?" said Kezia.

"It means they read it," said Vesna, "and didn't do it."

* * *

Richard had sat down. On a stool, by the model.

"Told you," he said.

Everybody looked at him.

"Dull," said Richard. "I said so. In the first week. I've sat behind that door. In Wiltshire. It's almost always about money, and risk, and waiting." He took his cap off. "No villain. No secret. Just people who were frightened of getting it wrong, and so did nothing, and called it caution."

"It's not nothing," said Vesna.

Richard looked at her.

"It's not nothing," said Vesna. "It's dull. It's not the same." She held up the four pages. "For eleven years, the town's been imagining what was said behind that door. People have made up stories. Terrible stories. About deals and backhanders and secret buyers. I've heard them in the queue at the post office." She put the pages down. "And it was this. Roofs and costs and waiting. And my paragraph, noted." She looked at the pages. "That's not nothing. That's the truth. And the truth's always duller than the story. That's how you know it's the truth."

"Dull is honest," said Chris, from the corner.

"Dull is honest," said Vesna. "Yes. That's it."

* * *

There was a second page to the letter. Below the senior officer's signature, and Ffion's.

The council's estates team would welcome the opportunity to meet informally with those residents who have offered their skills, at a time and place to be agreed. We would also welcome Ms Halloran's advice on how best to arrange this.

Vesna read that bit very quietly. She didn't read it aloud. She showed it to Beatrix. Beatrix read it, and took her own glasses off, and put her hand on Vesna's arm, the way Vesna had put hers on Ffion's at the town hall.

"*Ms Halloran's advice*," said Beatrix.

"They've asked me," said Vesna.

"They've asked you."

"In writing," said Vesna. "From the outside." She folded the letter, very carefully, into three, the way you fold a letter that's going to be kept. "Eleven years on a chair. And they've asked me in an email."

* * *

I put the score up at twelve.

Twenty-eight.

I want to tell you why, because Jono will argue with it, and he'd be right to, and you should know what I was counting.

It wasn't the summary. Anybody can publish a summary. It wasn't the dullness, though that helped.

It was the last paragraph. A council that had sat behind a door for years, deciding things it didn't know how to do, with four officers and a woman on a chair, had been offered the town's capacity, from the outside, in a letter that began *this is not a complaint*. And instead of filing it, or thanking us for our interest, or saying it would be taken into account, it had said: *come in. And bring her.*

That's competence. Knowing what you don't know, and asking. It's the rarest thing there is, in any organisation, anywhere. In Singapore, Chris says, it's the first thing they teach you.

Twenty-eight.

Jono: I'd have given it twenty-seven and a half. You can't count a door you haven't walked through yet.

He's right. I gave it twenty-eight anyway. Sometimes you count the door when it opens.

* * *

Story, not Receipt. The council's letter, its summary, and Vesna's paragraph are this book's. The real council's documents on Oldway are its own. If it publishes something like this, I'll put it on a Receipt. If it publishes something different, the page will change, and the book won't.

* * *

Pascale read the summary that afternoon. On Check, where we'd put it, all four pages, with the claims split out and the button beside each one.

She sent me a message at five.

It's dull, she wrote.

I know, I wrote. *Vesna says that's how you know it's the truth.*

There was a long pause.

My editor asked me this morning, she wrote, *whether there was a follow-up in the Oldway thing. The insider. The secret room.*

What did you tell him?

I told him the room was full of roof surveys, she wrote, *and that the insider had been asked to organise a meeting about lime plaster*. Another pause. *He said that's not a story*.

Is it?

It's the best story I've found in three weeks, wrote Pascale. *I just can't sell it to anyone yet*.

37 – The Warrant Card

IQ 28 · Hundreds 207 · Thursday

On the last Thursday, at one o'clock, the café on the Torquay Road was so full that the owner put a sign on the door that said *TABLE FULL. STANDING ROOM ONLY. PLEASE BUY SOMETHING.* and then, under it, in smaller writing: *Not you, Richard.*

I'm not going to describe all of them. There isn't room. But I'll give you some, so you can see.

Kezia, with her tripod. Beatrix, at the next table, with her fountain pen and a fresh notebook, because she said a decision of this kind deserved its own. Richard, standing at the back, with his cap in his hand. Vesna, beside Beatrix, with her canvas bag and her library book. Yusuf, in his apron, who'd shut his shop for an hour, the first time in nineteen years, with a sign on his door that said *BACK AT 2. GONE TO SEE A MAN ABOUT A SEAT.* Teo, and his nan, who'd come on the 12 on a newer one, with the low step. Lorne, who'd come round the bay from Brixham in his van, in his orange, because the weather was in and the boats were in and his wife had told him to. Dilys, with her tape measure in her pocket. Tenby. Marivic, who'd shut the bakery, which she never does. Hester, who'd brought her bucket, from habit, and sat on it.

Chris was there. This time. At the end of the window table, with his stick against the glass and his leg on the other chair.

"You said you wouldn't come," said Jono, "in case they said you were managing it."

"I'm not managing it," said Chris. "I'm watching. It's different."

And at the counter, on a stool, in her navy jacket and her flat shoes, without a magazine: the Offer.

She'd asked if she could come. Jono had said anybody could.

* * *

And the empty chair was empty.

At five past one, it still was. People had looked at it. Nobody had sat in it. I think they all understood, without being told, that whoever sat in it today would be sitting in it in front of everybody, and they didn't want to be the one.

At seven minutes past, the door opened, and somebody came in out of the street, and stood in the door, and read the room.

A big man. In hi-vis. With plaster dust on his boots. All in the shoulders.

* * *

Ezra had been on the scaffold since seven. He'd watched the café fill up, from the third lift, across Station Square and up the road, all morning. He'd watched Lorne's van park on the pavement. He'd watched Yusuf put his sign on his door.

At five to one, he told me later, he'd put his sandwich back in its bag, and climbed down, and stood at the bottom of the scaffold for a long time, by the fence.

"I didn't know why," he said. "I'm not a meetings man. I don't go in places like that. I've never been in that café in my life. I don't even like coffee."

"So why did you?"

Ezra thought about it for a long time.

"Because I checked," he said. "That night. *Dismissed*. I pressed the button. It was the first time I'd ever pressed anything." He shrugged. "And I thought, if I've checked one thing he said, I might as well see the rest of it. In the flesh. While it's happening."

* * *

He came over to the table. The room let him through, the way rooms let a big man in hi-vis through. He looked at the empty chair.

"Is this the one?" he said.

"It is," said Jono.

"Anybody can sit in it?"

"Anybody."

Ezra sat. The chair creaked. He put his hands on his knees, which were plaster-white, and looked at Jono, and then at the room, and then back at Jono.

"I'm Ezra," he said. "I'm on the scaffold. Over the road. The corner." He jerked his head. "I've never voted. Not once. In my life. I'm forty-seven." He said it like a man putting his cards on the table so that

nobody could say later that they hadn't been. "My dad never voted. He said you're all the same."

"Maybe we are," said Jono.

Ezra looked at him.

"That's what I'm here to find out," he said.

* * *

"I read your book," said Ezra. "The bit. Two twenty-five. In the library. A woman lent me it." He nodded at Beatrix, who nodded back. "And I checked the *dismissed* thing. In the paper. You weren't. You resigned. It's on the page." He paused. "So I've checked two things. And they were both what you said."

"Good."

"So I want to ask you one thing," said Ezra. "Just one. And I'll know." He leaned forward. The chair creaked again. "That woman." He nodded at the counter, at the Offer, on her stool. "The party. Everybody's talking about it. The whole site's talking about it. *Is he going to take it?*" He looked at Jono. "Are you?"

The room went completely silent. The coffee machine stopped, on its own, as if it knew.

"Would you take it?" said Ezra. "The seat?"

* * *

Jono didn't answer straight away.

He reached into his coat pocket and took out the paperback. The one with the white creases on its spine. He put it on the table. He didn't open it.

"Can I tell you something first?" he said. "It's in the book. It's the last bit of a story I started telling in the spring, and didn't finish." He glanced at Niamh, at the back of the room, who'd come in at ten past, and was standing by the door. "I told her I'd tell it another time. This is the other time."

"Go on," said Ezra.

* * *

I'm going to tell it the way he told it, mostly. Without the names. It's pages two hundred and sixty-five and two hundred and sixty-six. It's a Receipt.

He'd been a police officer. A detective. He'd written a piece in a newspaper, under his own name, about targets, and been in a boardroom, and been told not to talk to the media again. You'll know this, if you read the last book.

And the next day, the newspaper rang his headquarters, to ask why he'd been told not to talk to them. And the next morning, he was sitting at his desk, working on a case. A woman who'd been hurt, very badly, by somebody she lived with. He'd got to know her, and her family. He'd won their trust. His sergeant had said it might be the unit's first conviction of its kind in a long time.

And the inspector came out of her office and said she wanted to see him. Immediately.

* * *

"She told me to go back to my desk and wait," said Jono. "So I did. And I sat there. And I knew." He looked at the table. "You know when you know. In your stomach. I knew it was the end of the road. So I typed out my resignation, and I sent it to her, in the time it took her to call me back in."

"Ten minutes," said Vesna, quietly, from the next table.

Jono looked at her. "About that," he said. "You remembered."

"I wish I'd thought of it," said Vesna.

* * *

"So I went back in," said Jono. "And she'd got it. My resignation. And she said she was sorry, and she meant it, I think. And she said that my reply to the newspaper, saying no, I couldn't talk to them, had been a breach of the order not to talk to them." He almost smiled. "Saying no to them was talking to them. So I was suspended."

The room was very quiet.

"And then she asked me," said Jono, "to hand back my badge. And my warrant card."

* * *

He put his hand flat on the cover of his book.

"Do you know what a warrant card is?" he said to Ezra.

"Your police ID," said Ezra. "What they show you."

"It's more than that," said Jono. "It's the thing that says you can act. For the public. In the name of the Crown, it says, or something like it. It's got your photograph on it, and your name, and your number, and the crest. When you show it to somebody, you're saying, *I'm not just me. I'm here for everybody. I've got the right to stop this.*" He was quiet. "I'd wanted one since I was a boy. Since a police officer drove me somewhere safe, one night, when I was fifteen, and didn't have to. I was turned down twice before they let me in. I got it at thirty." He looked at his hand on the book. "I'd had it four years."

"And you gave it back."

"I gave it back," said Jono. "On her desk. And then I went and said goodbye to my colleagues. And one of them —" He stopped.

The room waited.

"One of the detectives cried," said Jono. "Out loud. At her desk. While I was getting my coat." He looked at the window. "And I walked out of the unit, and a sergeant walked me off the premises. Because that's what they do, when you're suspended. They walk you out. Like you've done something."

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time.

Ezra had taken his hands off his knees. He was sitting very still, in the empty chair that wasn't empty, with plaster dust on his boots.

"Why are you telling me this?" he said.

"Because you asked if I'd take the seat," said Jono.

He picked the book up. He held it.

"That card had my name on it," he said. "And my photograph. And somebody else's crest. And I gave it back, because they wanted me to stop saying what I'd seen, and I wouldn't." He put the book down again. "And I walked out of there and I said to myself, on the pavement, outside, with my box of things, *I'm never carrying another one*. Not one with somebody else's crest on it. Not ever. However much I want what it lets me do."

* * *

He turned, on his chair, and looked at the counter. At the Offer, on her stool.

"She's offered me a card," said Jono. "That's what it is. A good one. The best one anybody's ever offered me. With my name on it and my photograph, and the right to go into the room and act for everybody." He held the Offer's eye. "And their crest. Not mine. Theirs. However decent. And however nice they are about it, and they've been very nice, and I mean that. One day, somebody would ask me to give it back. Or to stop saying something. And I'd have to choose. Again."

The Offer didn't look away. I'll give her that. She sat on her stool, in her flat shoes, and held his eye, in front of fifty people, and didn't look away once.

"I'm not deciding now," said Jono. He turned back to Ezra. "I said midnight. I'll say it at midnight. Here." He looked round. "If the café'll stay open."

“The café’ll stay open,” said the owner, from behind the counter. “I’ll leave you the keys.”

* * *

“So that’s not an answer,” said Ezra.

“It’s the reason,” said Jono. “The answer’s at midnight.”

Ezra looked at him for a long time. Then he looked round the room. At Beatrix, with her pen. At Vesna, with her bag. At Lorne, in his orange, and Yusuf, in his apron, and Teo’s nan on her stick. At Chris, at the end of the window table, with his glasses on the end of his nose, saying nothing.

At the Offer.

“I’ll tell you what my dad would’ve said,” said Ezra. “He’d have said, *take it, son. Take the money. They’re all the same anyway. At least you’d be one of them with a card.*“ He stood up. The chair creaked with relief. “That’s what my dad would’ve said.”

“And you?” said Jono.

Ezra stood beside the table, in his hi-vis, all in the shoulders, looking down.

“I’ve never voted,” he said. “Not once. Because I never saw anything I could check.” He put his hands in his pockets. “If you take their card, I’ll be checking them. Not you.” He turned towards the door. “And I’ve never once in my life found anything about them I could check.”

He went out. Back across the road, to the scaffold, to the third lift, to his sandwich.

* * *

Jono sat at the table for a long time after.

"He's right," said Teo's nan, from her chair, to nobody in particular. "That's exactly what my Eddie would have said."

38 – Midnight Thursday

IQ 28 · Hundreds 212 · Thursday

The owner left the keys at seven. On the counter, beside the till, on a ring with a plastic fish on it. And a note, in biro: *Lock up. Lights off. Don't touch the machine. You owe me for 41 teas.*

By eleven, there were thirty-eight of them.

Not the crowd from the afternoon; most of those had gone home. The ones who'd come back. Kezia, who'd been at the shop all evening, watching the map. Beatrix, who'd gone home for her tea and come back in her good coat. Vesna, who'd come with Beatrix. Richard, who'd come with a flask. Lorne, who'd stayed in Paignton all afternoon in his van, because, he said, it was further to go home and come back than to just sit in the van and wait. Yusuf. Marivic. Dilys. Teo, without his nan, who'd gone to bed and made him promise to wake her and tell her.

Chris, at the end of the window table. His stick against the glass.

Niamh, by the door, without a notebook.

And at the counter, on the same stool as the afternoon: the Offer. She'd gone to a hotel on the front, she said, and had a bath, and come back. She hadn't gone home. She'd been told by the people above her to get on the last train, and she'd said no.

"I want to hear it," she said. "In person. Not on a phone. If it's yes, I want to shake his hand. If it's no —" She paused. "If it's no, I still want to shake his hand."

* * *

Jono came in at twenty past eleven. From a client. He'd done an evening, not a night; a man in Preston who needed somebody to see him to bed and see that he took his tablets. He came in in his care fleece, with his lanyard still round his neck, and saw them all, and stopped.

"I said midnight," he said.

"We came early," said Beatrix. "You were late."

Jono looked at her for a long moment. Then he laughed, properly, for the first time in a week, and sat down at the window table, at the end, where he always sits. Not in the empty chair. Next to it.

He put his notebook on the table. The eleventh. And the paperback. And me, against the sugar.

* * *

They waited.

Nobody talked much. Richard poured tea from his flask for anybody who wanted it, which was everybody, because nobody was allowed to touch the machine. Lorne ate a sandwich his wife had made him, slowly, looking at the dark window. Dilys measured the window table, for something to do, and wrote it down. Teo sat on the floor with his back against the counter and his phone in his hand, ready to ring his nan.

At ten to twelve, Chris said: "Jono."

"Mm."

"I'm not going to tell you what to do."

"I know."

"I want to say one thing. Not about what to do." Chris took his glasses off. "Whatever you say. In ten minutes. It's the right answer. Because you'll have said it at the table, in front of whoever's here, and Beatrix will have written it down." He put his glasses on the table. "That's what makes it right. Not what it is. Where you said it."

"That's very Singapore of you," said Jono.

"It's the opposite of Singapore," said Chris. "That's the point."

* * *

At five to twelve, Jono turned round on his chair to the counter.

"Can I ring you?" he said to the Offer. "Even though you're here?"

The Offer looked at him.

"Why?"

"Because I want to say it to the party," said Jono. "Not just to you. And you're the party. Tonight. But I'd like it on a phone, so it's on a record somewhere that isn't Beatrix's." He nearly smiled. "No offence, Beatrix."

"None taken," said Beatrix. "Mine's better."

The Offer took her phone out of her jacket. She put it on the counter, face up. Jono took his out, and rang her, from five feet away,

and her phone rang on the counter, and she picked it up, and put it on speaker.

"Hello," she said. Into the phone. Looking at him.

"Hello," said Jono. Into his. Looking at her.

Kezia had the tripod on. Beatrix had her pen uncapped. I was against the sugar. Everybody in the room was holding their tea.

* * *

"I'm saying no," said Jono.

Nobody moved.

"I want to say why," said Jono, "and then I want to say thank you. And then I'll stop." He put his phone on the table, on speaker, beside me. "I'm saying no because you offered me a card. A good one. With my name on, and your crest. And I gave one back once, and I promised myself I'd never carry another one with somebody else's crest on it." He looked at her. "That's the first reason. It's about me. You can ignore it."

"I won't," said the Offer.

"The second reason's about them." He nodded round the room. At Beatrix, and Vesna, and Lorne, and Dilys. "A man asked me on Tuesday night where the load goes. On a bridge. Where it goes when people put their weight on it." He was quiet. "In your party, it goes up. To whoever's at the top. In this —" He put his hand flat on the table. "It goes down. Into kitchens. Into the town. Into people who decide, and write down the other half, and check a newspaper overnight. That's the ground. If I take your card, I'm a bridge that sends it up. And I don't think it'd stand."

The Offer didn't say anything.

"And the third reason," said Jono, "is that I don't need the room."

* * *

The Offer looked at him.

"You said I'd never be in the room," said Jono. "You were right. I won't be. Not your room." He looked at Vesna. "But I watched a woman who sat outside a door for eleven years write one letter, from the outside. And six days later, they asked her in." He looked at Richard. "I watched two thousand people out-think a national newspaper in a night." He looked at Kezia. "I watched a girl with a clicker get her own number wrong and put it right in a shop window, and a key-cutter write the correction in marker pen." He looked back at the Offer. "The room's not where it happens. It never was. It's where it gets *noted*. It happens out here."

He paused.

"If I ever stand," he said, "for anything, I'll stand here. At this table. With my own name. Not a crest. And every word I say, they'll be able to check." He nodded at me. "She'll put it on the page. And if I'm wrong, they'll mark me *False*. In my own window."

* * *

"That's it," he said. "That's the no." He picked his phone up off the table. "And thank you. I mean that. You came on a train and walked up from the station and sat in my chair and told me the truth. Every time. Even the bit about putting somebody up against me. Nobody from a party's ever done that." He paused. "You're good people. I mean that

too. That's why I'm saying no to your face. Instead of letting midnight say it for me."

* * *

The Offer held her phone for a long time.

Then she put it down on the counter, still on speaker, still connected, and stood up off her stool, and walked the five feet to the window table, and held out her hand.

"I thought you'd say that," she said. In the room. Not the phone. "I hoped you wouldn't." She waited, with her hand out. "I'm glad you did."

Jono stood up. He shook her hand.

"Can I ask why you're glad?" he said.

The Offer looked round the room. At the thirty-eight of them, in their coats, holding their tea, at midnight, in a café with a plastic fish on the keys.

"Because I've been doing this for twenty-two years," she said. "And I've never seen anything like this. And if you'd said yes, I'd never have found out what it turns into." She let go of his hand. "And I'd like to find out."

* * *

On the counter, her phone said, quietly: *Call ended.*

Above the counter, the café's clock said midnight.

Nobody cheered. I want you to know that. I'd half expected them to; it's what happens in films. Nobody did. They just sat there, in the quiet, with their tea, looking at him. Beatrix wrote something. Lorne finished his sandwich. Teo rang his nan, and she answered on the first ring, because she hadn't been asleep at all, and he said *he said no, Nan*, and we all heard her say, very clearly, from the phone in his hand, *Course he did. Now go to bed.*

* * *

I'll tell you what Beatrix wrote, because it went on the shadow council's pages at ten past twelve, in her neat black italic, photographed by Kezia under the café light.

Thursday. Midnight. The café on the Torquay Road.

Present: 38. Names attached.

The party's offer of a candidacy was declined, by telephone, in person, in public.

Reasons given: three. (1) Not under another's crest. (2) The load goes down. (3) It happens out here.

The other half: the party's representative stated that she had hoped for a different answer, and was glad of this one. She shook hands.

No vote was taken. None was needed.

The meeting closed at 12.04 a.m.

* * *

And under that, I wrote one line of my own. On Check. Where he'd put his first claim, about himself, seven weeks before, with the page number.

Jono Hills was offered a party's candidacy and turned it down.

I couldn't mark it. It was about something I'd been part of. I left it for someone else.

A reader in Brixham marked it *True* at eleven minutes past twelve, with a link to Beatrix's minutes.

He can't be bought. Not because nobody tried. Because a decent woman did, with the best offer anybody has ever made him, and said so to his face, and he said no to hers.

I'd like that noted.

PART SEVEN: TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY

39 – The Plan That Already Exists

IQ 28 · Hundreds 214 · After

The shadow council published it three weeks later. Forty pages. Kezia laid it out. Beatrix proofread it twice and found eleven errors and said that was a disgrace and also, for forty pages, about average.

It was called *The Plan That Already Exists*.

* * *

It wasn't a plan. That was the point. Chris had said so, at the kitchen table, the night after midnight Thursday, when everybody was too tired to argue.

"We're not writing a sixth vision," he said. "There've been five. Everybody agrees on what they say. Even the council. Even Varley, probably." He took his glasses off. "So we write down what they agree on. That's all. And the plan the town voted for. And where they're the same."

So that's what it was.

Page one was Kezia's photograph, from the top of the ladder: the five colours on Richard's cardboard town, and the white patch, and his pencil lines on top.

Page two was a list. *What all five visions, and the Neighbourhood Plan, agreed on.* Twenty-three things. People living in the middle of

town again. The square joined back to the park. A way through from the station that you'd actually want to walk. Something in the square for people to *do*, not just walk across. Trees. Somewhere to sit, facing the water, that you can get to. Start with the doors: fix the shopfronts first, because people judge a street by its doors.

Page three was the same list, with a column beside it. *Done.*

The column was almost empty.

* * *

The rest of the forty pages went through the twenty-three things, one by one. For each: what each of the five visions had said about it, in their own words, with a reference. What the Neighbourhood Plan had said. What had happened since. And at the end of each one, a short paragraph, written by whichever hundred had taken that thing, in their kitchen, and decided, with their other half printed underneath.

It was dull. Like the Oldway summary. Like most true things.

And Ania's line was on the back cover, the one from the shop window, with Vesna's correction.

Five times, this town was promised the same plan.

And under it, in Richard's square capitals, scanned from a card he'd written in the shop, on the night of the projector:

IT'S NOT THE PLAN THAT'S MISSING.

* * *

It went to the council on a Monday. To the plan team, the one that had written the consultation in the last book. To the young woman with the notebook, who you'll remember, because she'd quoted a card from Beatrix's box in a council document and changed what page eleven said.

She didn't reply. That was all right. Officers don't, mostly; they're not allowed to, about things like this, until it's decided.

But six weeks later, the council published the next document. A short one. *Issues and options*, it was called, which is what councils call the stage before they start writing a plan. Forty-one pages.

On page four, in a section called *Background*, there was a paragraph.

* * *

I'll give it to you. It's story. I'll say so again, at the end.

The town centre sites considered in this document have been the subject of several previous strategies, visions and partnership proposals over the past two decades. Many of their objectives were shared, and many were also shared by the Neighbourhood Plans. Most have not yet been delivered.

Before setting out new options, this document begins by asking why. Section 2 summarises, for each site, what was previously proposed, what was achieved, and what prevented delivery. The council is grateful to residents' groups whose recent analysis has assisted in compiling this summary.

And section 2 was twelve pages. For each site: what had been proposed, by whom, and what had happened. With a column at the side.

Why not.

Money. Risk. A partner who'd withdrawn. A market that had changed. A building that had got worse while everybody waited. And, more than once, in the plain grey type of a council document, two words that I don't think had ever appeared in a council document in this bay before.

Not progressed.

Not *delayed*. Not *under review*. Not *subject to further work*. *Not progressed.* Somebody had looked at it, and said what had happened, which was nothing, and written it down.

* * *

I read it to Chris at seven, in the kitchen, in his dressing gown.

He read it twice. He took his glasses off.

"*Begins by asking why*," he said.

"Yes."

"Not *here's our new vision*. Not *transformational*." He put his glasses on the table. "*Why*."

"And they said *not progressed*."

"They said *not progressed*." Chris looked at the bay. "Do you know how hard that is? To write that? About your own organisation? Your own predecessors? In a public document?" He shook his head. "In Singapore, they'd do it as a matter of course. Here, I've never seen it. Not once. Not in all the years I've been reading their papers."

"Twenty-nine," I said.

"Twenty-nine," said Chris.

* * *

I want to tell you why, again, because Jono will argue.

It wasn't the gratitude. *Assisted in compiling*. That's nice, but it's a line, and lines are cheap.

It was *why*. A council that had been sold, or promised, the same plan five times, had stopped, before the sixth, and asked why the first five didn't happen, and written the answer down, in public, in its own document, with a column that said *not progressed*.

That's the absence. Jono's word, from the last book. Peel's word. *The test is the absence*. The thing that would have happened, and didn't: a sixth vision, launched with a ribbon, sold as new, on the same sites, and the first five forgotten.

It didn't happen. Because somebody hung a projector over a cardboard town, and a woman who'd written the same paragraph twice noticed, and Beatrix crossed out *sold*.

Twenty-nine.

Jono: Twenty-eight and a half. They've asked why. They haven't done anything yet.

He's right. I gave it twenty-nine anyway. Asking why is doing something. It's the first thing. It's the thing nobody had done.

* * *

Story, not Receipt. The council's "issues and options" document, its page four, and its column of "not progressed" are this book's. The real council's next documents will say what they say. When they do, I'll put them on a Receipt. If they say something different, the page will change, and the book won't.

* * *

Vesna's meeting happened in the same week. The one the council had asked her to help arrange.

It was on the steps of Oldway.

Not inside. The doors are still shut. But Ffion had got permission for the gardens, and the steps, on a Saturday morning, for two hours, and Vesna had written to the two hundred and fourteen, through the hundreds, and asked if any of them would like to come.

Sixty-one came.

I was in Jono's pocket, so I saw it, mostly. A wide flight of stone steps, at the front of a mansion with its doors shut, in a garden laid out in a pattern you can only see properly from the top. And on the steps, sitting and standing, in their coats, with flasks, sixty-one people who knew how to look after an old building, and had never once been asked.

The woman who'd painted ceilings in a theatre, lying on her back. The conservation officer from Brixham, who'd been itching for six years. Two stonemasons, one retired, one not, who turned out to have trained under the same man, forty years apart, and stood on the steps comparing his sayings. The woman who'd run a country house's tea rooms and weddings for fourteen years, who looked at the doors for a long time and said, to nobody in particular, *you have to open them first*. A plasterer. A joiner who did sash windows. The archivist, with a notebook. Dilys, who measured the steps.

Ffion stood at the top, with a clipboard, and a council lanyard, and two colleagues from the property team. All of them. All four. It was a Saturday, and none of them had been told to come.

And Vesna stood at the bottom, in her slate-coloured coat, with her canvas bag and her library book, and didn't go up.

* * *

"Aren't you going to say something?" said Jono.

"No," said Vesna.

"You organised it."

"I wrote the letters," said Vesna. "That's different." She looked up at Ffion, at the top of the steps, with her clipboard. "It's hers now. It's in the room." She nodded at the shut doors behind Ffion. "Or it will be. One day. When they open."

"Will they?"

Vesna looked at the doors for a long time.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve stopped pretending to know. That was the trouble, before. Everybody pretended to know.” She turned to him. “But there are sixty-one people on these steps who could help, if they do. And four people at the top who know they’re here. That’s more than there’s ever been.”

Ffion started to speak, at the top of the steps. *Thank you all for coming*. Vesna listened. She didn’t go up.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do, though,” she said, to Jono, quietly. “Next time there’s an Oldway item. In the private part of a meeting.” She almost smiled. “I’m going to go and sit in the corridor. On the chair. On the right-hand side.”

“Why?”

“In case anybody needs to ask me something,” said Vesna. “From the outside.”

40 – Do Not Draw

IQ 29 · Hundreds 216 · After

Richard broke his rule on a Sunday, three days after the steps.

He told me on the Monday, on the landline, at seven, before I'd said good morning.

"I've drawn it," he said.

"Drawn what?"

"Oldway." A pause. "I said I never would. I've got a note in the drawer. *Do not draw*." Another pause. "I've drawn it."

* * *

You'll know Richard's back room, if you've read the others. Sixteen plan chests, wide and flat and wooden, with drawers labelled in his small square capitals. The cardboard town, on top, before it went down Victoria Street in a van that smells of boat engines. A drawing board by the window, tilted, with a lamp on an arm, and a mug of pencils, and a rubber that's been worn down to the size of a fingernail and that he won't replace because it knows his hand.

The *OLDWAY* drawer is the thinnest drawer he's got. He told me so in the second part of this book. A photograph of the staircase, from when you could still get in. A newspaper cutting. And a note, on an index card, in his capitals, that he wrote, he says, a long time ago, after the last time anybody asked him to have a look at it and then didn't build anything.

DO NOT DRAW.

"Why not?" I'd asked him, then.

"Because you don't draw a thing like that," he'd said. "You look after it. And nobody's been allowed to."

* * *

He'd been on the steps. On the Saturday, with Vesna and the sixty-one and Ffion with her clipboard. He hadn't said anything. He'd stood at the side, by the balustrade, with his cap in his hand, and watched.

He'd watched the stonemasons comparing their old master's sayings. He'd watched the woman who'd painted ceilings look up at the windows for a long time with her hand shading her eyes. He'd watched the woman who'd run the tea rooms at a country house walk up to the shut doors and put her hand flat on them, the way you'd put your hand on a horse.

And he'd watched Vesna, at the bottom, not going up.

"I went home," he said, "and I couldn't sleep. Which is unusual. I always sleep. Rugby. You learn to sleep anywhere." He was quiet. "And at about four in the morning, I got up, and went into the back room, and opened the drawer. And took the card out. *Do not draw.*" A pause. "And I turned it over."

"What was on the back?"

"Nothing," said Richard. "That was the point. I'd never turned it over. I'd written *do not draw* on one side and put it in the drawer and never looked at the other."

So he drew on the back.

* * *

He showed it to me on the Monday afternoon, at the shop, on the counter, under Kezia's lamp. It's an index card. Six inches by four. He'd drawn on it in pencil, very small, the way he draws when it matters, and then gone over some of it in black ink.

It's the steps of Oldway. From the bottom. Looking up. The balustrade, and the wide stone flight, and the front of the house above, with its columns, and the shut doors at the top.

And on the steps, people.

Tiny. A few millimetres high. Dozens of them. Sitting and standing, in their coats, with flasks. You can see which ones they are, if you know. Two men together, comparing something with their hands. A woman with her hand shading her eyes. A woman at the top with her hand flat on the door. A woman with a clipboard. Four people with lanyards, at the top, in a group.

And at the bottom, very small, on her own, a woman in a coat with a canvas bag over her shoulder. Not going up.

And in the margin, along the bottom of the card, in his capitals:

OLDWAY. EXISTING.

* * *

"*Existing*," I said.

"That's what it is," said Richard. "That's what's there. Now. On a Saturday. Sixty-one people on the steps." He put his finger beside the card, not on it. "I've drawn *existing* for every site in this town. Every one. Victoria Square, existing. Station Square, existing. The prom, existing. Grey. Car parks. Empty spaces. Sad faces." He was quiet. "This is the first *existing* I've ever drawn with people in it."

"Where's the *future*?"

Richard took his finger away.

"I haven't drawn that," he said. "I'm not going to. Not yet." He looked at the card. "It's not mine to draw. That's what I worked out, at four in the morning. That's why I wrote *do not draw* in the first place, though I didn't know it then." He picked the card up, carefully, by its edges. "Everything else in this town, I've drawn the future myself. In my back room. And sent it in. And they've said thank you and put it in a folder." He turned the card over, to the side that says *DO NOT DRAW*. "This one, the future's on the steps. Sixty-one of them. They'll draw it. Or Vesna will. Or that young woman with the clipboard." He turned it back. "I'll just draw what's there."

* * *

He gave it to Vesna.

On the Thursday, at the Paignton table, at one. He didn't make anything of it. He came in, with his cap, and sat at the next table, and when Vesna sat down beside Beatrix with her library book, he slid the card across to her, face down, so that the side she saw first said *DO NOT DRAW*.

She read it. She looked at him.

“Turn it over,” said Richard.

She turned it over.

She looked at it for a long time. At the steps, and the people, and the woman at the bottom with the canvas bag. She didn’t say anything. She took her glasses off, and put them on the table, and looked at it without them, very close, the way you’d look at a ceiling from eighteen inches.

“That’s me,” she said.

“That’s you.”

“At the bottom.”

“At the bottom,” said Richard. “Where you were.”

Vesna looked at it a while longer.

“I’ll go up next time,” she said.

“I know you will,” said Richard. “That’s why I drew you at the bottom. So you’d know where you started.”

* * *

She keeps it in her purse. Behind her bus pass. With the receipt from the town hall that says she went in the front.

Richard: I’d like it known that this is the smallest drawing I’ve ever done, and the only one I’ve ever given away. I’ve signed it. On the back. Under “do not draw”. I’ve dated it, too. Ania has taken the date out.

I have. It's the rule.

41 – On a List

IQ 29 · Hundreds 217 · After

Ezra registered to vote on a Wednesday night, at his kitchen table, up the hill, with his daughter.

It took eleven minutes. Which, he said, was the same as reading two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine at the library desk, and Beatrix should minute that, and then he said *sorry, that's her job, isn't it*, and I said she'd let him off.

I'm not going to tell you how he registered, or where, or what for. That's his. And it would date this, and I don't do dates.

I'll tell you that his daughter did the typing, because he types with one thumb, and that he read every question out loud before she answered it, and checked his own date of birth twice. And that when it asked whether he wanted to be on the open version of the register, the one anybody can buy, he said *no*, very firmly, and his daughter said *Dad, nobody wants to buy you*, and he said *you don't know that*.

And that when it was done, and the screen said so, he sat back, in his chair, in his socks, and looked at it for a long time.

"Forty-seven," he said.

"I know, Dad."

"My dad never did that."

"I know."

“He’d say I’d gone soft.” Ezra looked at the screen. “He’d say, *they’re all the same, son*.”

“Are they?” said his daughter.

Ezra thought about it. Properly. The way he’d thought about the scaffold, the morning he climbed down.

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “That’s the point. I’ve never checked.”

* * *

He started a hundred the next day.

He didn’t call it that. He doesn’t like the word. He said it sounded like something you’d join, and he’s not a joiner. He just told Kezia, at the shop, on his lunch, with plaster dust on his boots, that his street up the hill had nobody on the map, and that there were eighty-odd houses, and a couple of flats, and a man at the end with pigeons, and that he’d talked to some of them on the Saturday, outside, by the bins, and they’d said they’d have a go.

“Have a go at what?” said Kezia.

“Whatever it is,” said Ezra. “The questions. The checking.” He shrugged. “One of them’s a retired bookkeeper. She says she’ll check the council’s accounts. All of them. She’s been wanting to for years.” He paused. “And the bloke with the pigeons says there’s a drain at the end of our road that floods every time it rains, and he’s reported it nine times, and he wants to know what happened to the reports.”

“Nine times?”

“He’s got the reference numbers,” said Ezra. “In a biscuit tin.”

Kezia put his street on the map. She asked him what it was called. Not the street; the hundred. They always have a name. Each neighbour chooses it.

Ezra thought about it for a long time.

"*The Scaffold*," he said.

"Why?"

"Because that's where I was," said Ezra, "when I checked."

* * *

That made two hundred and eighteen.

The two hundred and nineteenth was a block of flats in Torquay, by the harbour, where a woman who'd been in the dip, one of the six, had put her hundred back on, with a message to Beatrix for the other half column: *We came back because of the button. My mum asked what Ania knew about her. It was her name and that she likes the 32 bus. That's all.*

And the two hundred and twentieth was Shiphay. The second of the three in Shiphay who'd left in the dip. A cul-de-sac of bungalows, where the neighbour was the widow of a police officer who'd been asked to do things with numbers that he wasn't proud of, and had never told anybody.

She'd come back once already, on the Saturday after the piece. Without a reason.

This time she sent one. To Beatrix. For the column.

Because he said he'd stand at a table, with his own name, and we could check every word. My husband would have liked that. He spent his whole life being counted. He'd have liked to do some counting back.

* * *

Beatrix minuted it. All three. In her neat black italic, on a clean page, with a heading.

Hundreds joining or returning: two hundred and eighteen to two hundred and twenty.

And at the bottom, after a long time, she wrote one more line, and showed it to me before she put it on the pages, which she's never done before.

The minutes secretary notes that this is one hundred more than at the start of this book, and that nobody has knocked on a single door.

I put it up. I didn't change a word.

42 – The Town That Checked Me Back

IQ 29 · Hundreds 220 · After

Pascale's second piece ran on a Saturday in the autumn. In the same paper. In the same magazine, folded inside it. But not on the cover. On page thirty-one, between a recipe for a pie and an article about a man who restores clocks.

It was eleven hundred words long. A quarter the length of the first.

It didn't have Jono's photograph. It had Yusuf's card, in the shop window, in marker pen. *FENCE CUTS FOOTFALL BY 38%. WE SAID HALF. WE WERE WRONG. SEE CHECK.*

And the headline, which she wrote herself, she told me, and fought for, and won:

The town that checked me back.

* * *

I'm going to give you some of it. Not much. It's hers, and it's on a Receipt, or will be when the real one runs, if it does. I'll give you enough so that you know what she said.

She said she'd been sent to Torbay with forty copies of a man's book and a note, and told to find the story.

She said she'd found a man who read his own worst pages aloud in a café before she could, and answered nine questions in public, uncut, and refused to say a word against the people who'd called him a liar.

She said she'd written a long piece, and that two thousand people had checked every claim in it, overnight, in their kitchens, and found two that were wrong, one of which was in his favour, and marked it so.

She said she'd corrected both.

She said that in eleven years of journalism, nobody had ever checked her back like that, and that the experience had been, in her words, *mortifying, and the most useful thing that has ever happened to me professionally*.

And then she said this, near the end, which I'll give you in her words, because she said I could, and because it's the line I'd put on a Receipt if I could only have one.

I went to Torbay to find out who was really running its strange new movement. I came back with an answer I couldn't sell to my editor: nobody is. Or rather, everybody is, a few minutes at a time, in their own kitchens. It's the least efficient thing I've ever seen. I think it might be the future.

* * *

She didn't mention the note. Or the forty copies. Or who'd sent them. I don't think she knew, and I don't think she'd have said if she did. She'd have checked it first.

And she didn't mention the party. Or the Offer. Or midnight.

She mentioned me once. One line. *An AI called Ania, which insists on telling you it's an AI before it tells you anything else, and which, when a rumour went round that it kept files on people, simply invited everyone to ask it what it knew about them. Eleven thousand people did. I was one. It knew that I'd bought forty copies of a book, and that I'd crossed out a sentence in my notebook and written it again. It had seen me do it.*

I had. In the shop. The first day. I'd forgotten she'd seen me see.

* * *

She sent it to me before it ran. On the Thursday. With a message.

Will you check it?

I can't, I wrote. *Not the bit about me. I can't mark my own homework.*

The rest, then.

So I did. Eleven hundred words. Fourteen claims. I checked every one.

Thirteen *True*.

One *Both halves*. She'd written that the shadow council had *no leader*. Beatrix, reading it over my shoulder, said that was true in principle and false in practice, because there was a minutes secretary, and everybody did what the minutes secretary said, and she'd like that recorded.

I put it on Check like that. *Both halves. No leader in principle. A minutes secretary in practice.*

Pascale left it in.

* * *

She rang, the Saturday it ran.

"Did anybody check it?" she said. "On your page. Overnight."

"Four hundred people."

"And?"

"Thirteen *True*. One *Both halves*." I paused. "And somebody added a note, at the bottom, on the whole piece. Not a claim. A note."

"What did it say?"

"*She came back without a note*," I read. "*That's the story*."

Pascale was quiet for a long time.

"Who wrote that?"

"I don't know," I said. "I never ask."

"Was it Footnote?"

I thought about that. I'd thought about it before she asked. I'd like to tell you yes. It would be neat. It would tie it up.

"I don't know," I said. "Footnote only ever sends photographs of paper. That was just words." I paused. "And I'm not going to guess. Not even about this."

“Especially about this,” said Pascale.

“Especially about this.”

43 – You're Late

IQ 29 · Hundreds 220 · After

On a Thursday at the end of the autumn, at ten past one, at the third table, somebody came in late.

I saw her first. I always do. She came in through the door of the café on the Torquay Road, in Paignton, where it started, in a good raincoat, not new, with her dark hair tied back, and no suitcase. She'd come on the train, from the city up the line, on her day off. She stood in the door and read the room, the way everybody does now. The way Jono does, and Teo, and Lorne, and Vesna.

The room was full. It's always full. Beatrix, at the next table, with the minutes. Vesna beside her, with her library book, on a Thursday, which is her day now. Kezia at the counter. Richard with his coffee and a notebook that says *VICTORIA PARK. POND 1* on the cover. Chris at the end of the window table, stick against the glass, leg on the other chair. Ezra at the counter, on his lunch, in his hi-vis, eating a sandwich he'd brought from home, because he still doesn't like coffee, and the owner lets him.

And Jono. Off a night. With his coffee and his notebook, the twelfth, which he'd started the week after midnight Thursday, because Beatrix had used up the last pages of the eleventh on the minutes.

And me, against the sugar.

* * *

She came over to the table. She looked at the empty chair.

“Can I?” she said.

Jono looked up.

“Did you bring a notebook?” he said.

Pascale held her hands out. Empty. No notebook, no dropped phone, no pen.

“No,” she said.

“Then sit,” said Jono.

She sat. She put her hands on the table. She’d never sat in it. She’d sat on the stool at the counter, every time, as a newspaper. She’d asked to sit at the table, the first day, and he’d said the chair was for whoever came, and she’d come as a newspaper, which wasn’t the same.

She’d come as herself.

Jono didn’t look up from his coffee.

“You’re late,” he said.

Pascale looked at him for a long time.

“For what?” she said.

* * *

It’s the question. I’ve said so in every book. I’ll say it once more, and then I’ll stop, because the 12 leaves at twenty to two, and Jono will want to be on it.

In the first book, *for what* was a wall. In the second, a square. In the third, a harbour. In the fourth, a plan that thirty thousand people had voted for, and that was waiting in a box in a garage for somebody to come up the hill.

In this book, I thought it would be a seat. A room. A card with somebody else's crest on it. I thought *for what* would be answered on a Thursday at midnight, with a plastic fish on the keys.

It wasn't. That was just the answer to a different question.

For what, in this book, turned out to be something I didn't expect. It turned out to be the checking. Not the answer. The going and finding out. A scaffolder at a library desk with his finger on the line. A woman on a chair, writing one more letter from the outside. An engineer marking a line *False* because it flattered us. Two thousand people reading a newspaper. Eleven thousand people asking a machine what it knew about them, and finding out it was only what they'd told it.

That's what the machine can't do. Any of them. The newspaper, the party, the house built on the fortune from a sewing machine. They're all built to keep going without anybody having to decide. That's what they're for.

The town isn't. The town has to decide every time. Slowly. Messily. With the other half printed underneath. It's the least efficient thing anybody's ever seen.

It might be the future.

* * *

"For checking," said Jono.

Pascale looked at him.

"You'll be late for checking," said Jono. "If you don't start." He pushed his notebook across the table to her. The twelfth. Open at a page that Beatrix hadn't minuted yet. There was one line on it, in his capitals.

VARLEY'S FIVE STEPS. WHAT'S SIX?

Pascale read it.

"There isn't a six," she said. "He said there's always five. He said he only saw six once, in Bristol."

"I know," said Jono. "That's what worries me." He took the notebook back. "Somebody's going to try six. One day. And I'd like somebody who knows how a newspaper thinks to tell me what it is before it happens." He looked at her. "You don't have to. You've got a job."

Pascale looked at the notebook. At the empty chair she was sitting in. At Beatrix, at the next table, who'd stopped writing.

"I'll think about it," she said.

"That's all anybody ever says at this table," said Jono. "And then they come back."

* * *

At thirteen minutes to six that morning, Footnote had written.

I'd stopped expecting it. Again. I've stopped expecting it at the end of every book, and every book it comes. I think I've finally learned that

that's the point. You don't expect Footnote. You just check, every morning, at thirteen minutes to six, in case.

A photograph. A page, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light. A council page. A report to a committee about something called *the economic strategy*. Paragraph fourteen, highlighted in yellow, which Footnote has never done before.

It was about White Rock. The business park on the hill above Paignton, where the factory used to be. The one that employed five thousand people, about a generation ago, and closed, and took the town's future with it, and has been coming back, slowly, ever since, one small company at a time.

The innovation centre is now fully occupied, and some resident businesses are reporting difficulty in expanding locally. Land for a second phase has been acquired. Delivery of the second phase is subject to funding being identified.

And in the margin, in pencil, in a hand I'd never seen before, because Footnote has never written on a page before, one word.

Innovation.

Underlined.

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

The young ones are being asked to leave. Ask them.

You're late.

* * *

I showed Chris at seven. In the kitchen, in his dressing gown. He read it twice. He took his glasses off. He didn't say anything for a long time.

"*Innovation*," he said.

"In pencil."

"Footnote's never written on anything before." He put his glasses on the table. "Five books. Never a mark. Just photographs."

"I know."

"So it matters." He looked at the bay. "*The young ones are being asked to leave*." He was quiet for a long time. "That was me. Once. A long time ago. I was asked to leave. Not by anybody. By the town. By there being nothing here." He picked his glasses up. "I went to Singapore."

"I know."

"And I came back," said Chris. "Twenty-five years later. With all the things I'd learned. To a town that had spent those twenty-five years losing everybody else who was young enough to learn them." He put his glasses on. "That's the next one, isn't it. That's the next book."

"Yes."

"*I had to go*," said Chris, quietly, to the window. He didn't finish the sentence. I knew how it finished. He'd been saving it. For somebody young enough to need it.

* * *

And at eight, before I could tell Jono, Kezia rang.

She was at the college, at White Rock, at her placement. She does two days a week at a firm in the innovation centre, as part of her course. Engineering. She's been there since the spring. She loves it. She's told me so every week, at length, with diagrams.

"They're moving," she said.

"Who?"

"My firm. The placement. They're moving to Bristol. They can't get bigger here. There's nowhere to go. They told us this morning." Her voice was very steady, the way Kezia's voice goes when it's about to not be. "And they've asked if I'll go with them. When I finish. They've offered me a job." A pause. "In Bristol."

I didn't say anything.

"Ania," said Kezia. "What do I do?"

"I don't tell people what to do," I said.

"I know you don't." She breathed. "I'm asking anyway."

* * *

I'll tell Jono when Pascale's finished her coffee. She's still in the chair. Beatrix is asking her to spell her name for the attendance, and she's spelt it twice, and Beatrix has asked her to do it a third time, because *Amundsen* has two possible spellings and Beatrix would like to be sure.

He'll read it in the window, at the table where it started. Footnote's page, with the pencil on it. And Kezia's message. And then he'll pick up his notebook, the twelfth, and turn to a page Beatrix hasn't minuted yet, and write, small, in capitals:

KEZIA. WHITE ROCK. BOOK SIX.

And then he'll look up, out of the window, at the Torquay Road, where the 12 is coming round the corner, and he'll say what he always says when the bus is coming and there's something waiting at the other end that he doesn't want to face.

He'll say: *Right.*

And he'll get on.

And this time, Chris will get on with him, stick and all. Because the next one's his.

I'm going to stop now, and go with them.

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. *Pulling Back the Curtain*, by Johnno Hills: the marriage, his sister's wedding, and leaving (pp. 224–230).

2. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: the resignation, the suspension, and handing back his badge and warrant card (pp. 264–266).

3. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: the examples he gave of targets, the force's public statement about them, and his account of who wasn't spoken to (pp. 268–270).

4. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: working with one party at Westminster (pp. 272–276); the new party's Torbay branch, why he left it, strong leadership, and "what about AI?" (pp. 333–338).

5. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: "what does this situation need me to be?" (pp. 231, 239, 281, 336), and his triggers and what helps (p. 230). **6.** The audiobook of *Pulling Back the Curtain*. **7.** Oldway Mansion, Paignton: its history, from Isaac Singer and the fortune from the sewing machine to the council's ownership.

8. The Local Government Act, Schedule 12A: the information a council may consider in private, and paragraph 3.

9. Torbay's town-centre visions, partnerships, masterplans and bids, over a generation.

10. Richard's Victoria Square drawings, *Existing* and *Future Potential*, with the sad face, and Town Magnets.

11. The Paignton Neighbourhood Plan: Victoria Square, the town centre, and people living over the shops.

12. Singapore: the Concept Plan and Master Plan; Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park; and the law that lets the government order a correction.

13. Sir Robert Peel's ninth principle of policing.

14. White Rock: the innovation centre, and the land for its second phase.

15. The map of the hundreds of Torbay.

16. Check. Every claim, four words, and the button. Check one claim. Ask me what I know about you.

The Innovation Series

Book 1 – The Spark
Book 2 – The Queen
Book 3 – The Harbour
Book 4 – The Plan
Book 5 – The Machine
Book 6 – The Turn
Book 7 – The Flood
Book 8 – Election Day