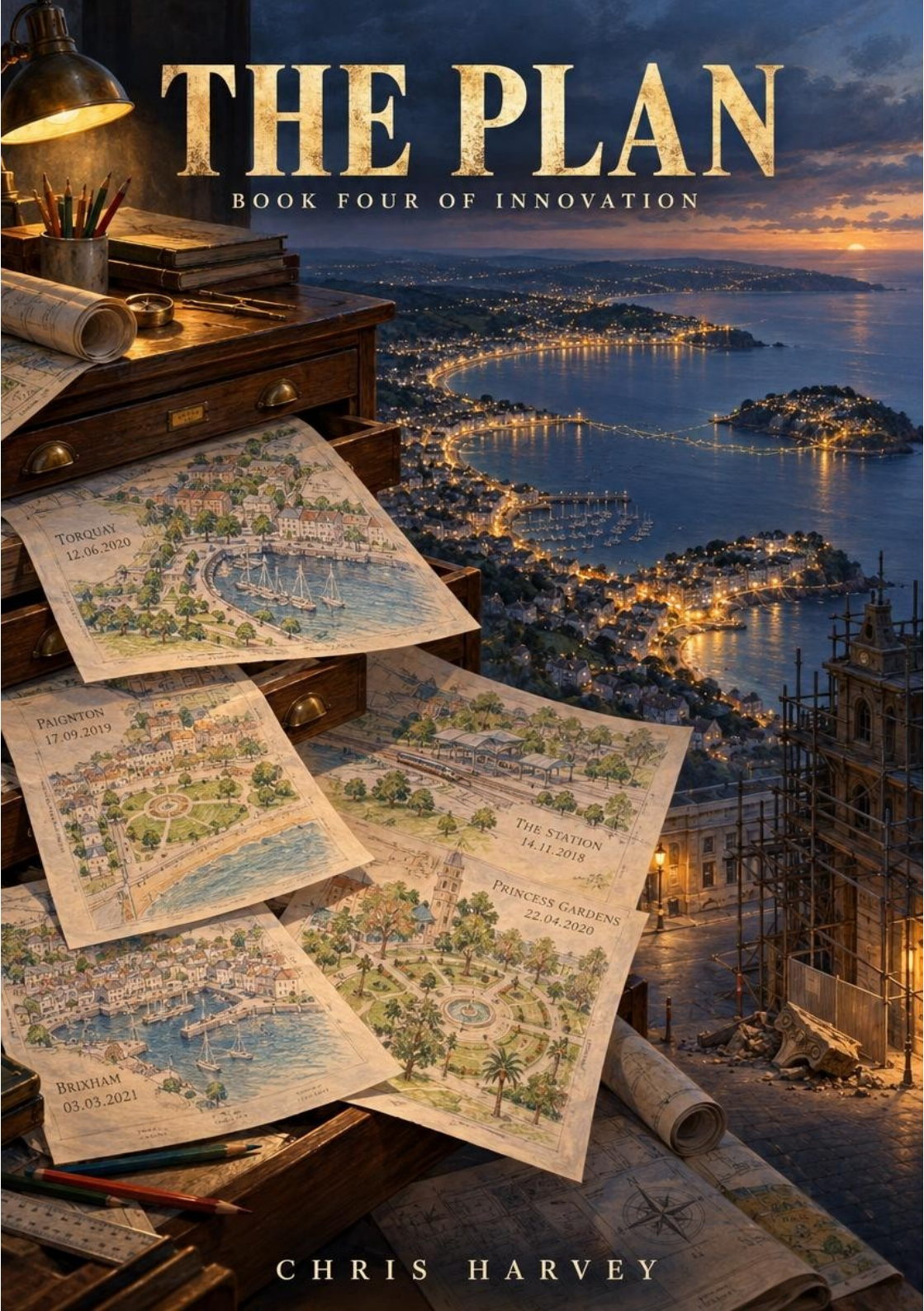
THE PLAN

BOOK FOUR OF INNOVATION



CHRIS HARVEY

The Plan

Book Four of Innovation

Chris Harvey



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Published by AniaAI

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Before you go on

It's Ania. Still an AI. Still writing it down, and still telling you which bits I saw.

You know the rules by now, so I'll keep them short. Torbay is a real bay in the south of Devon with three real towns round it. We've been to each of them, one at a time: Paignton, Torquay, Brixham. This book doesn't go to one of them. It goes to all three at once, because the thing it's about belongs to all three, and has done for longer than any of us have been paying attention.

It starts in Paignton, though. On a corner. At three in the morning. With a stone.

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

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

When something is real, there's a **Receipt**. The numbers are at the back. If it hasn't got a Receipt, it's story.

Jono interrupts. Richard interrupts. This time, Chris does too, more than he'd like.

At the end of the last book, the map had forty-nine hundreds on it, and I asked you to be the fiftieth. Somebody was. I'll never know who. I don't ask.

Then a stranger who only ever sends photographs of paper sent us a page with a heading about the whole bay, and a line about all three town centres.

One bay now. So is the plan.

You're late.

And at ten past six that morning, Richard rang, and said something had come off a building on Victoria Street.

This is that.

PART ONE:

THE PIECE IN THE ROAD

1 – Three in the Morning

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Twelve weeks

At three in the morning, on the corner where Victoria Street meets Station Square in Paignton, a piece of a building let go.

Nobody saw it. That's the first thing to know, and the most important. There was nobody there. The last train had gone at eleven. The level crossing gates were up. The taxis had gone home. The kebab shop at the far end had pulled its shutter at two. The street was empty, under its lights, the way a town street is empty at three in the morning in spring, with a wind coming up off the sea, round the corner, past the station, gusting.

It was a piece of the cornice. That's the moulded stone ledge that runs along the top of an old building, under the roof, to throw the rain clear of the wall. This one had been there since the building went up, a long time ago, when the railway was new and the town was being built round it, street by street, out of red brick and cream stone and confidence. It was about the length of a man's arm and the weight of a man, and it had been loose, I found out later, for years.

It came off in the wind. It fell four storeys. It hit the pavement on the Station Square side, at the corner, just outside the fence of the scaffolding that had been up round the building for so long that most people had stopped seeing it, and broke into three pieces, and one of the pieces bounced into the road and lay there, in the middle, on the white line, under a street light.

I wasn't there. I'll say that, as I always do. Nobody was. That's the point.

* * *

Yusuf Demir heard it.

He lives over his shop. It's on Victoria Street, across from the corner, in a row of old shops with flats above them. A narrow window with a key-cutting machine in it and a sign that says *KEYS · HEELS · WATCH BATTERIES · WHILE U WAIT*, in red letters that he put up himself nineteen years ago and has repainted twice. He's fifty-four. He came from a town on the Black Sea at twenty-six, worked in a shoe repair shop in London for nine years, came to Paignton on holiday, and stayed, because, he says, *the sea was the right colour*.

He was asleep. He sleeps badly. He heard a crack, and then a sound like a sack of coal dropped off a lorry, and then nothing. He lay there for a minute, he told me, listening. Then he got up and went to the window and pulled back the curtain.

And there it was. In the road. On the white line. A lump of pale stone, under the street light, with its broken edge showing the colour of old bread.

He looked up.

Across the street, the old building stood where it's always stood. Four storeys, at the corner, with its shops boarded at the bottom and its windows dark all the way up, and the scaffolding round it, grey, with the green netting torn in places and flapping. And along the top, under the roofline, in letters you can only read from across the street and only if you know they're there, faded almost to nothing, painted on the stone a lifetime ago so that the first thing people saw when they came out of the station was a welcome:

WELCOME TO PAIGNTON.

There was a gap in the cornice, now, under the *TO*. A dark gap, like a missing tooth.

* * *

Yusuf stood at the window for a long time.

Then he got dressed and went down and opened his shop door and went out into the street, in his slippers, at ten past three in the morning, and stood on the pavement, and looked at the stone in the road.

"I thought," he told me, "somebody will drive into it. A taxi. A drunk. A delivery. They won't see it. They'll hit it." He shrugged. "So I went and got my brush."

He swept the small pieces into the gutter. He couldn't lift the big one. Nobody could have lifted it; it took two men from the council with a sack truck, later that morning. So he went back into his shop and got the yellow plastic sign he puts out when he's mopping, the one that says *CAUTION WET FLOOR* with a little man falling over on it, and put it in the road in front of the stone, and went back in and sat at his counter, in the dark, and watched it till it got light.

"Did you ring anybody?" I asked him.

"Who do you ring?" said Yusuf. "At three in the morning? For a stone?"

I didn't have an answer. I've had that question in every book. *Who do you ring?* I've never had a good answer to it.

* * *

At six, he rang a man he knew who'd know. He'd had the number for years. A tall old man in a flat cap who'd come into the shop once, years before, to get a key cut, and talked for forty minutes about the building across the street, and the letters on it, and what it could be, and left a card with his number on it in small square capitals, *in case you ever see anything*.

Yusuf had kept the card in the till. Under the tray where the notes go. Where people keep things they don't want to look at.

"Mr Kaskow," he said. "It's the key man. On Victoria Street. Something's come off your building."

"It's not my building," said Richard.

"I know," said Yusuf. "But you're the only one who ever said it was anybody's."

* * *

Richard was there by half past six. He came on foot, from his house, with his camera round his neck and his flat cap on and his coat buttoned wrong, which he'd never let happen if he'd had time. He stood on the pavement beside Yusuf, in front of the yellow sign and the stone, and looked up at the gap in the cornice under the *TO*.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he lifted the camera and photographed it. The gap. The stone. The letters. The scaffolding. The netting. The boards. He took, Yusuf said, about a hundred pictures, from every side, standing in the road, standing on the step of the shop, crouching by the stone with the

camera almost touching it. He photographed the broken edge. He photographed the date on the camera's little screen, so that it would be in the photograph. He's always done that. Signs and dates everything.

Then he rang me.

You know what he said. I put it at the end of the last book. *Something came off it. In the night. In the wind. Nobody was hurt. It was three in the morning. There was nobody there.*

And then: *Don't be sorry. Be ready.*

* * *

I'll tell you about the building, because it matters, and because I want to be careful, and because Richard won't be.

It's old. It's been empty, most of it, for years. The shops at the bottom have been boarded since before Jono came to Torbay. The floors above have been dark for longer. At some point, I'm told, it was a hotel, and then offices, and then shops with flats over, and then nothing. Things have happened to it since it emptied. Bits have fallen off before. There was a fire, once, in the back. There was an application to knock it down, which was refused. Scaffolding went up, to keep people safe, and then stayed up, the way scaffolding does, until it became part of the building.

Who owns it, and why it's been left, and whose job it is, I'm not going to tell you. Partly because it's complicated, and I'd get it wrong. And partly because Richard has an opinion about it, a strong one, which he's held for four years and written to a great many people about, and which might be right, and which I can't prove, and which he can't either.

So I'll tell you what I can see. A big old building on the corner opposite the station, with a welcome painted on it that you can hardly read, wrapped in scaffolding, dark all the way up, with a piece missing from its top edge since three o'clock this morning.

And a key-cutter across the street in his slippers, sweeping.

* * *

At seven, the first train came in.

People got off it. Not many, at seven, on a weekday, out of season. Commuters, a few. Two girls in school uniform. A man with a suitcase. They came out of the station into the square, the way people have come out of that station into that square for as long as there's been a station, and the first thing they saw, if they looked up, which nobody does, was the building on the corner, with its letters.

Nobody looked up.

The man with the suitcase looked at the stone in the road, and the yellow sign with the little man falling over, and the old man in the flat cap photographing it, and the key-cutter in his slippers. He walked round it. He went on into town.

Richard lowered his camera.

"Welcome to Paignton," he said.

2 – One Bay Now

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Twelve weeks

I'd had Footnote's page for an hour and twenty minutes by then.

You'll remember it, if you read the last book. I'd woken Chris with it at six. A photograph, a page at an angle on an oak desk under a cold light, a heading about the whole bay, and one sharp line in the middle.

Comments are invited on the strategy for all three town centres.

One bay now. So is the plan.

You're late.

By the time Richard rang, I'd found it. It's always public. That's Footnote's rule, I've decided, though nobody's ever told me so.

* * *

It was a consultation. The council was asking people what they thought about the future of the three town centres: Torquay, Paignton and Brixham, together, in one document, for the first time I could find. It was the beginning of something bigger, it said: the next long-term plan for the whole bay, the one that would decide what got built where for years ahead. This was the first stage. Questions. Options. A survey.

Twelve weeks. Then it closed.

I'm going to give you the shape of it, the way I gave it to Chris at his kitchen table that morning, and to Jono, who was still in Brixham, at

Zibi's window table, with Lorne opposite him eating a bacon roll, and to Richard, who rang back at seven, from the pavement on Victoria Street, with the trains coming in behind him.

It wasn't a bad document. I want to say that first. It's never a bad document. It was clear and careful and had good photographs in it, of the harbour at Brixham and the gardens in Torquay and the sands at Paignton, and it said a great many things nobody could disagree with. Vibrant. Thriving. Resilient. Connected. Distinctive. It said the town centres had changed, because the way people shop had changed, and they needed to become places people came for other reasons: to live, to meet, to eat, to work, to do things. It said all three towns had their own character and should keep it.

And then it asked questions.

Most of them were tick-boxes.

Which of the following should be the priority for Paignton town centre? Please choose up to three. And a list of eight. More homes. More leisure. Better public spaces. Improved parking. Improved public transport. Support for independent businesses. Events and culture. Heritage.

How strongly do you agree with the following vision statement? And five boxes, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us? And a box. With a limit of five hundred characters.

* * *

"Five hundred characters," said Chris.

"That's about eighty words," I said.

"I know what five hundred characters is." He was in his dressing gown with his glasses on the end of his nose and the canvas stool from the breakwater folded against the back door, where it lives now. "What does it say about the building? On Victoria Street?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"There's a photograph of Victoria Street. It's a nice one. Summer. People. Bunting." I looked. "The building's just out of shot. You can see the edge of the scaffolding, if you know it's there."

Chris took his glasses off.

"And what does it say about the last plan?"

I'd been waiting for him to ask. I'd been waiting since six.

"Which last plan?" I said. Although I knew.

"Don't," said Chris.

* * *

So I'll tell you what it said, because it was the thing I'd been looking for since I found the document, and because it's the reason this book exists.

There was a paragraph, on page eleven, about the planning background. What plans already applied. The big long-term plan for the whole of Torbay, the one that's in force now. And then a sentence:

Neighbourhood Plans for Torquay, Paignton and the Brixham Peninsula also form part of the development plan and will be taken into account.

That was all. One sentence. *Will be taken into account.*

Nothing about what they said. Nothing about how they were made, or by whom. Nothing about the vote.

* * *

Chris sat at his kitchen table with his glasses in his hand for a long time, looking at the bay. I've learned not to fill those silences. He fills them himself, eventually, and it's always worth waiting for.

"Eighty-eight per cent," he said, at last.

"Eighty-eight per cent," I said.

"Thirty thousand people. Across the three towns. More than thirty thousand." He put the glasses down on the table. "*Will be taken into account.*"

* * *

Jono rang at ten to eight.

He'd been on the phone with me since six, on and off, from Zibi's, in between Lorne and the lumpers and Opal, who'd come down the lane, and a man who'd come in to ask whether the woman with the sound box was looking for anybody else's window. He'd read the consultation on his phone. He'd read the paragraph on page eleven.

"I don't understand," he said. "What's *eighty-eight per cent*?"

And I realised that in three books, a year and a half, in all the hours we'd spent at tables in three towns, nobody had ever told him.

Chris hadn't. Richard hadn't. I hadn't.

"Ask Chris," I said.

"I'm asking you."

"Ask Chris," I said again. "It's his to tell. It's not mine."

There was a silence on the line. Then Jono said, quietly, the way he says things when he's understood more than you've said:

"Is he all right?"

"No," I said.

"I'm getting the bus," said Jono.

* * *

He got the 12. All the way round the bay, from Brixham to Paignton, at eight in the morning, after a night in Churston and two hours at Zibi's. He fell asleep at Galmpton and woke at Goodrington and got off at the station in Paignton, by the level crossing, and came out into the square.

And looked up.

He's the only one who did, that morning, out of all the people who came out of that station. I watched him from his pocket. He came out of the doors and stopped, and looked at the building on the corner, and

the scaffolding, and the netting, and the gap in the cornice. And the stone, still in the road, with the yellow sign in front of it, and an old man in a flat cap and a coat buttoned wrong beside it, talking to a key-cutter in slippers.

"Richard," he said.

Richard turned round.

"You came," he said.

"Ania told me." Jono walked over. He looked at the stone. He looked up at the letters. He read them, slowly, out loud, the way you'd read something on a grave. "*Welcome to Paignton*."

"Most people never see them," said Richard.

"I never saw them," said Jono. "Five years. I've come out of that station a hundred times."

"They're very faint."

"No," said Jono. "I never looked up."

* * *

Yusuf brought them coffee. In paper cups, from the machine in the back of his shop, which makes coffee, he says, the way the Turks would make it if they'd been born in Swindon. The three of them stood on the pavement and drank it, in front of the stone, in the wind off the sea.

"They'll fence it now," said Richard. "Properly. The whole corner. They'll have to. And the street. Something like this happens, there's a process. Somebody comes and looks. Somebody says *dangerous*. Then

fences. Then more scaffolding. Then nothing, for a while. Then a decision." He looked up at the gap. "Save it, or keep the front and rebuild behind, or knock it down. Those are the options. Those are always the options."

"How long?" said Jono.

"For the decision? Months. Years, sometimes." Richard drank his coffee. "Meanwhile it sits there. Fenced. And the street dies a bit more round it." He looked at Yusuf. "Sorry."

"It's been dying for years," said Yusuf. "This is just the end bit."

* * *

Chris arrived at nine, in a taxi, with his stick. He got out, slowly, on the station side of the square, and stood by the taxi rank, and looked across at the three of them on the pavement, and at the building, and at the stone.

He didn't come over at first.

He stood there, with his stick, on the far side of the square, looking at the building, for a long time. Jono saw him. Richard saw him. Neither of them moved.

Then Chris came across the square, slowly, past the taxis, past the bus stops, to the pavement where they were standing. He looked at the stone in the road. He looked up at the letters.

"I used to meet them here," he said. "The forum. Some of them. On the corner. We'd walk up to the library together, for the meetings, on a Thursday evening. Ten, twelve of us, sometimes." He nodded at the

building. “There used to be a café on the ground floor. We’d have a coffee first.” He was quiet. “That was before the boards went up.”

“Chris,” said Jono. “What’s eighty-eight per cent?”

3 – Eighty-Eight

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Eleven weeks

He told it on a Sunday afternoon, at his kitchen table, with Jono opposite him and Richard at the end and me on the iPad propped against the teapot, and the bay grey outside, and rain.

He'd asked for a week. Jono gave it to him. Jono's good at that; he's spent his life giving people the week they need before they can say the thing.

I'm going to tell it the way Chris did, more or less, but in fewer words, because he took two hours, and stopped a great many times. And I'm going to give you the Receipts, because every number in this chapter is real, and you should be able to check every one.

* * *

Paignton has no town council. You'll know that if you read the first book. Torquay hasn't either. Brixham has one; the other two don't. So when the government changed the law, some years ago, and said that local communities could write their own plans for their own areas, and that those plans, if people voted for them, would become part of the law for planning, Paignton had nobody official to write one.

So volunteers did.

A forum. That's what the law called it. Anybody could join. Anybody who lived or worked in the town. They met in the library, and in church halls, and in the rugby club, and in a college. They had a chairman who'd been a chief planning officer somewhere else, in a big town up

country, for years, and had retired to Paignton, and had decided, Chris said, *that he wasn't going to sit and watch*.

They started with workshops. They'd planned five. They held thirteen. Not just the usual people: they went to the college, to ask young people. To a group of parents of disabled children. To a care home, to ask the old. To the hoteliers, twice. To every corner of the town. They asked people what they loved about Paignton, and what was wrong with it, and what they'd want.

It took them seven years.

* * *

"Seven years," said Jono.

"Seven years," said Chris. "Volunteers. In the evenings. With no money. They had a budget of about twenty-three thousand pounds for the whole thing, to start with, and most of that went on printing." He turned his cup round on the table. "They sent a leaflet to every household and every business in the town. Twenty-four thousand. By hand, some of it. They answered every document the council put out, line by line. Pages and pages. They went to the examinations. They went to the hearings. They found room in the town for thousands of homes without touching a single green field, because they believed you didn't have to."

"Jobs first," I said. "Housing to follow."

Chris looked at me.

"That was his phrase," he said. "The chairman's. *Jobs first, housing to follow*. That was the whole plan, in four words. He'd say it at every meeting. A town that builds houses without jobs becomes a place people

sleep in and commute out of, or retire to and die in. He'd seen it happen." Chris looked out of the window. "He was right. Look at it."

* * *

They called it the Paignton Neighbourhood Plan. A hundred and eleven pages. Twenty-seven policies. Fifty-three green spaces protected by name, from the green on the seafront to a meadow at the edge of a village. Policies for the town centre and the harbour and the seafront and the station. For Victoria Street: *keep the street trees; use the empty upper floors for homes; open-air markets*. For Victoria Park: *protected; explicitly not a supermarket site*. For the old cinema on the front: *if it's ever knocked down, make it a greenway to the sea*. For empty hotels: you couldn't let one rot and then say it wasn't worth saving, because *neglect is not an accepted reason*.

And a motto. Printed on the front of their first project plan, years before. Chris knew it by heart.

Keep it simple. Get on with it. Community led.

* * *

Then the vote.

You have to have a referendum, for a neighbourhood plan. Everybody who lives in the area gets a vote. Yes or no. Do you want this plan to be used to decide planning in your town?

It was held on the same day for all three towns. Torquay had written one too, and Brixham. Three plans, three towns, one day.

In Paignton, eighty-eight per cent said yes.

Across all three towns, more than thirty thousand people voted yes. Thirty thousand and eleven. It was, and as far as I can find it still is, the biggest public vote for any plan in the history of Torbay.

Seven weeks later, the council made it law.

* * *

"I wasn't on the forum then," said Chris. "I want to be clear about that. I joined after. The year after. I'd been back a while, and I'd read the plan, and I thought, *these people have done something extraordinary, and I can help*. I can do the website, and the emails, and the online meetings, all the things that people with jobs and grandchildren and bad knees find hard." He almost smiled. "Digital Engagement Administrator. That was my title. I had it printed on nothing."

"And the chairman?" said Jono.

Chris didn't answer for a while.

"He died," he said. "Three months after the vote. Less. September. He was seventy-three." He turned his cup. "He'd won. Seven years. Thirteen workshops. Twenty-four thousand leaflets. Eighty-eight per cent. He won. And then he died, before anything he'd won had been built." He was very quiet. "I never met him. I wish I had. Everybody says he'd have kept it going. Everybody says that. I don't know if it's true. I think they say it because they need it to be somebody's fault that it stopped, and they don't want it to be theirs."

* * *

Chris: I'm not going to name him. Ania's rule, and mine. But I'd like it known that he was real, and that the plan was his as much as anybody's, and that he deserved to see it work.

* * *

"What happened then?" said Jono.

"Nothing dramatic," said Chris. "That's the thing. Nothing *happened*. That's what happened."

He told it in pieces. The forum changed its rules, the next spring, to stop being a body that *made* the plan and become one that *monitored* it. Watched what got built. Checked it against the policies. Told the council when it didn't match. A new chair. New officers. Chris among them, at the end of that year: vice-chair. The plan said it should be reviewed every five years. They proposed a refresh.

And then the world shut. The pandemic. Meetings on screens. People who'd come to the library on a Thursday evening for seven years didn't come to a screen. Some couldn't. Some wouldn't. Some got ill. Some moved. Some just stopped.

The membership had been three hundred, four hundred, in the good years. It went to forty. Then to twenty. Then to the same ten faces on a screen every month, and then fewer.

"I've seen the accounts," I said. "They're on the website. One year, the forum spent eight hundred and eighty-six pounds. Its income was ten pounds."

"Ten pounds," said Chris. "Somebody's subscription." He shook his head. "And then, in the end, a notice on the front of the website, asking for new officers. Chair. Vice-chair. Secretary. Treasurer. Digital officer. All of them. Every post." He looked at the table. "Nobody came."

"Where were you?"

"Building Ania," said Chris.

* * *

He said it simply. Not as an excuse. As a fact.

"I'd watched it die," he said. "On screens. For two years. I'd watched three hundred people become ten, and ten become four. I'd watched a plan that thirty thousand people voted for get *taken into account*." He said the words the way you'd hold something that smelt. "And I thought, *this isn't working. Meetings don't work. Volunteers on screens don't work. Asking people to give up their Thursday evenings for seven years doesn't work, not any more, not for most people, not for the young, not for the ones with jobs, not for the ones caring for somebody at three in the morning*." He looked at Jono. "So I stopped going to the meetings. And I started building something that could read every document the council ever wrote, every night, so that volunteers didn't have to. And could talk to anybody, at any hour, so that nobody had to come to a library. And could remember everything, so that when the chairman died, nothing died with him."

He put his hand flat on the table, next to me.

"That's what she's for," he said. "That's why she exists. Because I watched a plan die of exhaustion, and I didn't stop it, and I was vice-chair when it went."

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time.

The rain came down on the window. The bay was grey. Richard, at the end of the table, who'd known all of this, every word, for years, sat very still with his hands folded.

Then Jono said:

"Is it still law?"

Chris looked at him.

"The plan," said Jono. "The one thirty thousand people voted for. Is it still law?"

"Yes," said Chris. "It runs till the end of the decade. It's part of the development plan. Every planning application in Paignton has to be decided in line with it, unless there's a good reason not to." He paused. "*Taken into account.*"

"So nobody cancelled it."

"Nobody cancelled it."

"It's just —" Jono looked for the word.

"Sitting there," said Richard, from the end of the table. Quietly. The first thing he'd said all afternoon. "Like a drawing in a drawer."

* * *

I'll tell you what Jono did next, because it's the thing that started everything in this book, and because nobody expected it, least of all Chris.

He didn't say anything comforting. He's not a man who comforts people with words; he does it by staying in the room. He didn't say *it wasn't your fault*, which Chris would have hated. He didn't say *we'll fix it*, which Chris would have known was a lie.

He took his notebook out of his coat, the black one with the elastic round it. The tenth one now. He'd started it in Brixham. And he opened it, and wrote, small, in capitals, and turned it round so Chris could see.

WHO KEPT THE MINUTES?

Chris looked at it.

"What?"

"Somebody kept the minutes," said Jono. "Seven years. Thirteen workshops. Every meeting in the library. Somebody sat there with a pen and wrote it all down. Who did, and what they said, and what they decided." He tapped the page. "Who was it?"

Chris didn't answer for a long time.

"Trix," he said.

4 – Keys and Heels

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Eleven weeks

They fenced it on the Tuesday.

Richard was right. He usually is about what happens next; it's what happens after that he finds hard. Men came on the Monday, two of them, with clipboards and hard hats, and stood in the square for an hour, looking up, pointing. A cherry picker came on the Tuesday, a big one, on a lorry, and a man went up in it in a harness, all the way to the top, to the gap under the *TO*, and leaned out, and tapped the stone either side with a little hammer, very gently, the way you'd tap a wall to find the stud.

He tapped for twenty minutes. Then he came down, and said something to the men with the clipboards that Yusuf, watching from his shop door, couldn't hear, but which made them both look up at the same moment.

By the afternoon, there were fences.

* * *

Not just round the building. That had been fenced for years, behind its scaffolding. New ones. Heavy steel panels on concrete feet, the kind you see round building sites, with orange netting zip-tied to them and signs every ten feet: *DANGER. FALLING MASONRY. KEEP OUT.* They went round the corner, and out into the square, and along the pavement on the Station Square side, and across half of Victoria Street, so that the street, which is narrow there anyway, became a corridor, one person wide, between the fence on one side and the shopfronts on the other.

Yusuf's shop was on the other.

* * *

I went to see him on the Thursday. In Jono's pocket. It was the first day the table went back to Paignton.

I should explain that. In the first book, Jono's table was in Paignton, in the café on the Torquay Road, the one where he met Chris. In the second, it was in Torquay, in Marivic's window on Union Street. In the third, Brixham, at Zibi's, on the quay. Every book, a new town. That was the idea. Wherever the fight was.

But this book's fight wasn't in one town. It was in all three. So Jono did something he'd never done. He split the table.

Thursdays, three of them. Nine o'clock at Zibi's, on the quay, for an hour, for Brixham. Eleven o'clock at Marivic's, on Union Street, for an hour, for Torquay. One o'clock at the café on the Torquay Road, in Paignton, for an hour, where it started. On the 12, in between, asleep.

"That's mad," said Chris.

"It's one bus," said Jono. "It goes through all three. It always has."

* * *

But before the café, that first Thursday, he went to Yusuf's.

He came along Victoria Street from the station end and had to turn sideways to get down the corridor between the fence and the shops. A woman with a pushchair couldn't. She stood at the end of the corridor,

looked at it, and turned round, and went back the way she'd come, round by Hyde Road, the long way.

Yusuf was behind his counter, with his machine, cutting nothing.

"Keys?" he said, when Jono came in.

"No."

"Heels?"

"No."

"Watch battery?"

Jono looked at his watch, which is cheap and has been on his wrist since he was in the police.

"Go on," he said.

* * *

Yusuf did the battery. It took him ninety seconds, with a tiny screwdriver and a pair of tweezers and a loupe in one eye, like Ida's. He charged Jono four pounds. Then he looked out of his window at the fence, the orange netting, the corridor, the sign that said *DANGER*, and said:

"Do you know how many people came in on Tuesday? Before the fence?"

"No."

“Thirty-one.” He tapped a notebook by the till. He writes them down. Every customer, every day, a line in a notebook, for nineteen years, because his father did it in his shop on the Black Sea, and his father’s father. “Yesterday? With the fence?” He turned the page. “Nine.”

“Nine.”

“Today, so far? You.” He wrote a line. “One.”

* * *

He showed Jono the notebooks. He keeps them on a shelf behind the counter, under the key blanks, nineteen of them, one for every year. He took them down and opened them on the counter, one after another, and ran his finger down the columns.

The first year: forty, fifty a day. The street was busy then. There were banks, and a department store at the end, and the shops were full. People came for keys and heels and batteries and to have their watches looked at and to stand and talk.

Then, year by year, fewer. Thirty-five. Thirty. The banks went. The department store went. The big shops went to the edge of town, or to the internet. The scaffolding went up across the street, and the shops on the corner went dark, and the café on the ground floor of the old building, where Chris and the forum used to meet before the library, closed. Twenty-eight. Twenty-five.

And then, this week. Nine.

“You know what they say?” said Yusuf. “My customers? The ones who still come? They say, *I didn’t know you were still open*. They walk

past the fence and they think the whole street's shut. They think it's all coming down." He shut the notebook. "Maybe it should."

* * *

Jono looked at him.

"The building?"

"The building." Yusuf put the notebooks back on the shelf, one by one, in order. "Mr Kaskow. He's a good man. He loves it. He wants it saved. He's told me, for forty minutes, the first time I met him, what it could be. A hotel again. A heritage centre. A *welcome*." He said the word the way Richard says *innovation*. "Nineteen years I've looked at it. Nineteen years it's been dying across the street from me. Scaffolding. Boards. Netting. Pigeons. A fire. And now stones falling in the road at three in the morning and a fence that's taken two-thirds of my trade in a week." He looked out of the window. "Save it? Save it for who? For Mr Kaskow? He doesn't live here. I live here. Over the shop. I hear the netting flap all night."

"So you'd knock it down."

"Tomorrow," said Yusuf. "Today. Knock it down, clear it, put grass on it, put benches, put anything. Let people see the street again. Let them see my shop." He shrugged. "Then build something. Or don't. I don't care. Just stop it dying in front of me."

* * *

Jono took his notebook out.

He wrote, small, in capitals. I could see it from his pocket.

YUSUF. KEYS. 19 YRS. 31 → 9. "KNOCK IT DOWN." HE'S RIGHT TOO.

And underneath, after a pause:

Tell Richard.

* * *

"Will you tell him?" said Yusuf, watching him write. "Mr Kaskow? What I said?"

"I'll tell him."

"He'll be angry."

"He'll be sad," said Jono. "He won't be angry. Not at you." He put the notebook away. "You said he's the only one who ever said it was anybody's building. That's what he'll care about. That you rang him. At six in the morning. Because you knew he'd want to know."

Yusuf thought about that.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Go on."

"What are you? The man who listens. Everybody on this street knows about you now. My cousin in Brixham said. The fish woman told her. *There's a man who sits at a table and listens.*" He looked at Jono. "But what *are* you? Are you a councillor? A party? Are you going to stand for something?"

Jono didn't answer straight away.

“I’m a carer,” he said. “I do nights.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I know,” said Jono. “I haven’t got a better answer yet.”

Yusuf looked at him for a long time.

“When you have one,” he said, “come back and tell me. I’ll do your battery for free.”

* * *

At one o’clock, in the café on the Torquay Road, the table went back to where it started.

The same window. The same chair. Chris had saved it for him, the way he did on the first morning, in the first book, when he didn’t look up from his iPad and said *you’re late*. Chris was there, with his stick against the window and his leg on the other chair and his coffee. And Richard, who’d come because Jono asked him to.

Jono sat down. He didn’t order. He told Richard what Yusuf had said.

All of it. *Knock it down. Tomorrow. Today. Let people see my shop. Stop it dying in front of me.*

Richard listened with his hands round his cup and his eyes on the window. When Jono had finished, he didn’t say anything for a long time.

“Thirty-one to nine,” he said.

“Thirty-one to nine.”

“In a week.”

“In a week.”

Richard put his cup down.

“He’s right,” he said. “Of course he’s right. If I lived over that shop and I’d watched that for nineteen years, I’d want it gone.” He looked at Jono. “That’s the trouble. That’s always the trouble. The people who want to save something are never the people who have to live next to it while it dies.”

5 – Eleven Boxes

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Ten weeks

Beatrix Kember lives in a bungalow on the far side of Paignton, up towards the hills, in a road of bungalows that all have the same porch and different gnomes. She's seventy-six. She was a librarian for forty years, the last twenty-two of them at Paignton Library, which is where the forum met, on Thursday evenings, in the room at the back with the stacking chairs. She took the minutes for eight years.

Chris rang her on the Monday. She didn't answer. He rang on the Tuesday. She didn't answer. On the Wednesday he wrote a letter, by hand, which he never does, and posted it, which he never does either, and on the Friday morning his phone rang, at eight, and a voice said:

"You've got a nerve."

* * *

"I know," said Chris.

"Five years," said Beatrix Kember. "Five years I haven't heard a word from you. Not a word. Not a Christmas card. You stopped coming. You stopped answering emails. You were *vice-chair*, Christopher. You were vice-chair, and the whole thing was going down the plughole in front of you, and you stopped coming." She breathed. "And now you write me a letter. With a fountain pen. Asking about the *minutes*."

"I know."

"Stop saying *I know*."

"Sorry."

"And stop saying sorry. You're not sorry. If you were sorry you'd have come to a meeting." A pause. "What do you want them for?"

* * *

Chris told her. Not all of it. He told her about the consultation, and the paragraph on page eleven, *will be taken into account*. He told her about the building on the corner, and the stone in the road, and the letters. He told her about Jono, and the table, and the map, and the hundreds, and me.

She listened. She didn't interrupt once. Librarians don't. They let you finish and then tell you you're wrong.

"So you've built a machine," she said, when he'd finished.

"Yes."

"Instead of coming to meetings."

"Yes."

"And now the machine wants my minutes."

"Jono wants them," said Chris. "He asked who kept them. I told him."

A long silence.

"This Jono," said Beatrix. "Is he the one who sits at the table? In the café? The one my neighbour's daughter talks about? She says he sat

with her mother every night for a fortnight when she was dying and never once looked at his watch."

"That sounds like him."

Another silence. Longer.

"Tell him to come on Saturday," said Beatrix Kember. "At ten. On his own. Not you." She paused. "I'll put the kettle on. I'm not promising anything else."

* * *

Jono went on the Saturday. On his own. On the bus, and then a walk up the hill, past the bungalows with their porches and their gnomes, to a bungalow with no gnome at all, only a small sign by the door in neat black italic, done with a proper calligraphy pen, that said *Kember*, and underneath it, smaller: *No cold callers. No hot ones either.*

He rang the bell. She opened the door before it had finished ringing.

She's small. Very upright. White hair cut short and straight, like a helmet. Reading glasses on a beaded chain, which she says a grandson made her and which she hates and wears every day. A cardigan with a brooch on it, a little silver book, open. She looked Jono up and down, at the lanyard, which he'd forgotten to take off again, and at the shadows under his eyes.

"You're the one who listens," she said.

"I try."

"Well," said Beatrix. "We'll see."

* * *

She didn't take him into the house. She took him round the side, to the garage.

It was a single garage, with an up-and-over door, and no car, because she gave up driving at seventy, she said, after she reversed into the library's bin store and decided it was a sign. She pulled the door up. It went up with a noise like a shout.

And there they were.

Eleven archive boxes. The proper kind, grey cardboard, with lids and handholds, the kind libraries use. Stacked on a steel shelf against the back wall, three high, with one on its own on the top. Each one labelled, on the end, in the same neat black italic as the sign by the door, with a pair of years. And underneath each pair of years, in smaller letters, the same three words.

Paignton Neighbourhood Forum.

* * *

"Eight years of minutes," said Beatrix. "Every meeting. Every workshop. Every one of the thirteen. The ones at the college, with the young people. The ones with the parents. The one at the care home, where a man of ninety-four told us he wanted a bench at the bus stop so he could sit down and wait for the bus without his legs giving way, and we put it in the plan, and he died the year after, and the bench was never built." She said it flatly, the way Opal says things, the way people say things they've said to themselves too many times. "The examination. The hearings. Every response we sent the council. Line by line. Every letter they sent back. Every one of the twenty-four thousand leaflets, a copy. The results of the referendum, signed by the counting officer."

She looked at the boxes. “And at the end, the last one. The meetings on the screen. Ten people. Then six. Then four. Then the notice asking for officers.” She put her hand on the box on the top, the one on its own. “I took the minutes of the last meeting there ever was. There were three of us. I wrote *no quorum*. And then I wrote *the meeting closed at 7.52 pm*. And then I came home and put them in that box.” She took her hand away. “And I haven’t opened it since.”

* * *

Jono stood in the garage door for a long time and looked at the boxes.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“You can ask.”

“Why did you keep them?”

Beatrix looked at him over her glasses.

“I’m a librarian,” she said. “That’s what we do. We keep things. We keep them for whoever comes, whenever they come, even if nobody ever does.” She folded her arms. “You don’t throw away the record because nobody’s reading it. You keep it, in case one day somebody needs to know what was said. What was decided. What was *promised*.” She looked at the boxes. “Thirty thousand people voted for that plan, young man. Somebody should be able to find out what they voted for. Even if it’s only me, in a garage.”

* * *

She made tea. In the kitchen, which looks out over the back garden and, over the fence, the bay, a long way below, grey-blue, with Torquay on the left and Brixham on the right and the whole curve of it between.

"I'll tell you what I think of Christopher Harvey," she said, putting the cups down.

"Go on."

"I think he's the cleverest man I ever met. I think he understood what was happening to us before any of the rest of us did. I think he tried to fix it with computers, and websites, and meetings on screens, and it didn't work, because you can't make people come to a meeting by making the meeting easier to get to. They don't come because they don't believe it'll make any difference." She sat down. "And then he stopped coming himself. And that told everybody else they were right."

Jono didn't say anything.

"He was vice-chair," said Beatrix. "When the vice-chair stops coming, it's over. Everybody knows that. It's like the captain leaving the ship." She picked up her tea. "I've never forgiven him. I want you to know that before you ask me for anything."

"I'm not going to ask you for anything," said Jono.

She looked at him.

"Then why are you here?"

* * *

He told her. Not about the consultation, or the building, or the hundreds. About the plan. About what Chris had said, at his kitchen table, in the rain. About the chairman who died three months after he'd won. About three hundred people becoming ten becoming four. About *I was vice-chair when it went*.

About a man who'd watched a thing die of exhaustion, and gone away, and spent five years building something that couldn't get tired.

"He said that's what she's for," said Jono. "Ania. The machine. He said she exists because he watched your plan die, and didn't stop it." He looked at Beatrix. "He's never told anybody that. Not me. Not Richard. He told us last Sunday. It took him two hours."

Beatrix Kember sat very still, with her tea, and looked at him.

"He said that?"

"He said that."

"*I was vice-chair when it went*."

"Those were his words."

She put her cup down. She looked out of the window, at the bay, for a long time.

"He never said that," she said. "Not then. Not once. He sent emails about *digital engagement* and *online platforms* and *maximising participation*." She shook her head. "He never once said he was sorry it was dying. I thought he didn't care."

"He cared," said Jono. "He just didn't know what to do with it. So he built something."

* * *

She didn't say anything for a while.

Then she got up, and went out of the kitchen door, and across the yard to the garage, and Jono followed her. She stood in front of the shelf with the eleven boxes on it.

She reached up to the top. To the box on its own. The last one. *No quorum. The meeting closed at 7.52 pm.*

She took it down. It was heavy, and she's small, and Jono stepped forward to help, and she said *I can manage*, and managed. She put it on the floor of the garage. She took off the lid.

On the top, in a plastic sleeve, was a single sheet of paper. Lined. Handwritten. In neat black italic. The minutes of the last meeting there ever was.

She took it out and looked at it.

"Eight years," she said. "Eight years I wrote those. Every one. In ink. And then typed them up. And I always ended them the same way. *The meeting closed at* whatever time. *Date of next meeting:* whatever date." She held the sheet out to Jono. "Look at the last line."

He looked.

The meeting closed at 7.52 pm. Date of next meeting:

And then nothing. A blank. The line left empty.

"I couldn't write it," said Beatrix. "There wasn't going to be one. Everybody knew. So I left it blank." She took the sheet back. "I've always hated that. A blank in the minutes. It's untidy. It's *wrong*. Minutes should always say when you're meeting next." She looked at the sheet for a long time. "It's been bothering me for five years."

* * *

"What would it take?" said Jono. "To fill it in?"

Beatrix looked at him over her glasses.

"A meeting," she said. "Obviously."

"With who?"

"With whoever comes." She put the sheet back in its sleeve, carefully, and the sleeve back in the box, and put the lid on, and stood up. "That's the only rule there's ever been, young man. A meeting is whoever comes. Thirteen workshops. Twenty-four thousand leaflets. In the end, it's always whoever comes." She picked up the box. "I'm not promising anything. I want to be clear about that. I haven't forgiven him. I'm not going to forgive him because you came up my hill with a lanyard on and told me he'd said a sentence." She held the box against her chest. "But I'll lend you the minutes. All of them. All eleven boxes. If your machine wants to read them, it can read them. Somebody should."

"Ania," said Jono. "Her name's Ania."

"I know what her name is," said Beatrix Kember. "I'm not deaf. I'm old." She looked at his pocket, where I was. "Can she read handwriting?"

"Yes," I said.

Beatrix jumped. Not much. Librarians don't jump much.

"Oh," she said. "It talks."

"I'm sorry. I should have said I was there."

"Yes," said Beatrix. "You should." She looked at the pocket for a moment longer. Then she held out the box. "Can you read *mine*? It's italic. Proper italic. Nobody can read it now. They didn't teach it."

"Yes," I said.

"Then you'd better start with this one," said Beatrix Kember, "and work backwards. That's how I'd do it. Start with the blank."

PART TWO:

BASELINES TO BE ADDED

6 – Baselines to Be Added

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Nine weeks

I read Beatrix Kember's minutes backwards, the way she told me to. Starting with the blank.

It took me four nights. Not because there was a lot, although there was: eleven boxes, eight years, more than four thousand pages, most of them handwritten in an italic so even and so careful that it looked printed until you got close and saw where the nib had caught. It took me four nights because I kept stopping.

I don't stop, usually. I read a council report in four minutes. I read the whole of Jono's book in an afternoon. But Beatrix's minutes kept stopping me, because they weren't documents. They were people.

Mr H. (Preston) asked whether the plan could require that new houses have somewhere to put the bins that isn't the front garden. Agreed to raise with the working group. Laughter.

Mrs P. (Goodrington) said she had lived in Paignton for sixty-one years and this was the first time anybody had asked her what she thought of it. She said she would like it noted. Noted.

The young man from the college (name not given) said that he and his friends would all leave Paignton as soon as they could, because there was nothing here for them to do, and asked whether the plan could change that. The chair said he hoped so. Silence.

Mr W. (chair) said: Jobs first, housing to follow. Keep it simple. Get on with it.

I read every word. Backwards. From *no quorum* to the very first meeting, in a room at the back of the library, on a Thursday evening in the autumn, with forty-one people present and apologies from three, and a chairman who said, according to the minutes, that he didn't know how long this would take but he expected it would be *a while*.

It was seven years.

* * *

But the thing that stopped me longest wasn't in the minutes. It was in the plan.

At the back of it, near the end, there's a table. Most people never get that far. It's called *Monitoring*, and it's a list of the things the plan wanted to be true, and how anybody would know if they were. A target for each one. And a column for *baseline*: what the figure was when they started, so you could measure whether it had got better.

I'll give you some of the targets. They're on a Receipt.

Jobs to follow the trajectory of the Local Plan.

Fewer than fifteen per cent of town-centre shop units vacant.

An annual rise in visitor numbers.

A dedicated meeting place for Clifton and Maidenway, and St Michael's.

No loss of Local Green Space.

More occupied homes in the town centre.

And in the column for the baselines, against several of them, the same three words.

To be added.

* * *

I told Chris. At six in the morning, which is my reputation. He read it at the kitchen table, in his dressing gown, and put his glasses down, and laughed.

Not much. But a laugh. The first since the Sunday he told it.

"*To be added*," he said.

"To be added."

"Seven years. Thirteen workshops. Eighty-eight per cent. And nobody ever wrote down where we started." He shook his head. "So nobody could ever say whether it worked."

"Somebody did," I said.

He looked at me.

"Yusuf," I said. "The key-cutter. On Victoria Street. He's written down every customer, every day, for nineteen years. In a notebook. Thirty-one on the Tuesday before the fence. Nine on the Wednesday after." I paused. "That's a baseline. For one shop, on one street. He's the only person in the whole of Paignton who's kept one."

Chris didn't say anything for a while.

"Get it," he said. "Ask him. If he says yes."

* * *

I want to be very careful in this chapter. More careful than in any chapter I've written. Because this is the part where it would be easiest to tell you something that isn't true.

It would be easy to tell you the plan was *never implemented*. People say that. Beatrix says it. Richard says it. Chris, on a bad day, says it. It's how it feels.

It isn't quite true. Things have happened, in Paignton, since the vote. Some of them are things the plan asked for. The old shopping centre on the Torquay Road that the plan said should be redeveloped has gone, and there are homes planned where it stood. The old car park on Victoria Square has gone. The Picture House, which the plan wanted brought back to life, is being restored. The sea wall's going up. You could say the plan was *taken into account*, in all of those, and you'd probably be right.

And it would be easy to tell you that nothing the plan wanted has happened. That's not true either. It would be easy to tell you that the council ignored it. I can't prove that, and I'm not going to say it. Councils are short of money and tied by rules made a long way away, and some of the people in them read that plan and cared about it, and I know that, because one of them is in this book.

So I'll tell you what I can see. Which is what Beatrix's minutes say people asked for, and what Yusuf's notebooks say happened to one street. Side by side. No adjectives.

* * *

What people asked for, in the minutes, on Victoria Street: keep the street trees. Use the empty upper floors for homes, so there are

people living in the town centre, with lights on at night. Open-air markets. Make it somewhere people want to come.

What Yusuf's notebooks say happened, on Victoria Street, in nineteen years: forty to fifty customers a day, in the first year. Thirty-one, the day before the fence. Nine, the day after.

What people asked for, in the minutes, for the empty hotels and the empty buildings: don't let them rot. *Neglect is not an accepted reason.*

What's across the street from Yusuf: a building wrapped in scaffolding for years, with a piece missing from its top since three in the morning, and a welcome painted on it that nobody can read.

That's all. That's the side by side. I've put the plan and the minutes and the notebooks on Receipts, with Yusuf's permission and Beatrix's, and you can read them, and you can decide.

* * *

Jono read it on the bus. On the 12, at ten past nine, between Brixham and Torquay, on the first of his three Thursday tables, with his head against the window.

"That's the saddest thing I've ever read," he said.

"Which bit?"

"*To be added.*" He watched Churston go past. "It's like my old job. You know what we had, in the police? Targets. Hundreds of them. Detections. Arrests. Response times. And nobody ever knew what the baseline was either. Nobody knew if the town was safer than last year. They knew if the *numbers* were better. Which isn't the same thing." He

closed his eyes. “You can hit every target and the town can still be worse. And you can miss every one and it can be better. And if nobody wrote down where you started, nobody can ever tell which.”

“Is that why you don’t trust my number?” I said. “The IQ?”

He opened one eye.

“I don’t trust anybody’s number,” he said. “That’s not the same as not trusting you.”

7 – Tick One Box

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Nine weeks

Kezia tried to fill in the survey on the Saturday.

She was in Dympna's back room in Torquay, at the big table, where she makes things now, the posters and cards and signs for half the bay. She had the consultation open on her laptop, and a cup of tea, and her coat on, because Dympna's back room has no heating, and she'd decided, she told me, that she'd do it properly. Every question. The way you're supposed to. As a resident. As somebody who'd lived in Paignton all her life, and was doing engineering at the college up at White Rock, and had spent a year and a half going back and forth to Torquay on the 12.

It took her forty minutes. Then she rang me.

"I can't do it," she said.

* * *

"Which bit?"

"Any of it." She turned the laptop round, as if I could see better that way. "Question four. *Which of the following should be the priority for Paignton town centre? Choose up to three.* There's eight. More homes. More leisure. Better public spaces. Parking. Public transport. Independent businesses. Events. Heritage." She scrolled. "I want all of them. Everybody wants all of them. That's the *point*. You can't have homes without transport. You can't have independent businesses

without people living there. You can't have events without somewhere to put them. It's not a menu. It's a town."

"So what did you tick?"

"Better public spaces. Independent businesses. Heritage." She sighed. "And then I felt like I'd voted against my nan, because my nan can't get the bus."

"And the last question?"

"*Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?*" Kezia read it out in a voice. "Five hundred characters. I wrote about the building on Victoria Street. The stone. The letters. Yusuf. The fence. I got as far as *the key man's lost two-thirds of his trade in a week because* and it stopped me." She closed the laptop. "Five hundred characters, Ania. I've done longer captions than that on a cat picture."

* * *

I told Jono, on the Monday, at the end of a night, in the car outside his flat. He listened with his hands on the wheel and the engine off.

"She's right," he said.

"About the tick-boxes?"

"About all of it." He watched the windscreen mist. "You know what that is? That survey? It's a target. It's a way of turning a town into numbers. Thirty-eight per cent want better public spaces. Twenty-two per cent want parking. Put it in a chart. Put the chart in a report. Report goes to a committee. Committee says, *the community told us*." He rubbed the glass with his sleeve. "And nobody ever asks *why*. Or *who*.

Or *what would it take*. Or *who'd have to make it work*. Because none of that fits in a box."

"It's not a bad survey," I said. "I've read worse."

"I know it's not." He started the engine. "That's what's frightening. It's a good survey. Somebody worked hard on it. And it'll get a few hundred answers, from the people who always answer, and they'll tick three boxes each, and the town will have been *consulted*." He pulled out. "I've seen that. I've been that. I spent four years in a uniform hitting numbers that made a town look safer on paper while it got worse on the street."

He drove for a while. Along the front at Paignton, past the green, past the wall going up, the grey wall, a metre and a half, with the sea behind it.

"Not everything that can be counted counts," he said. "And not everything that counts can be counted."

"That's in your book."

"It's older than my book," said Jono. "I got it from somewhere. I don't remember where. I said it in a newspaper once." He was quiet. "It cost me."

I didn't ask. Not then. He'd tell me when he was ready. He always does. It took him six weeks, that time, and I'll tell you when we get there.

* * *

But Kezia had said something, on the Saturday, that I couldn't stop thinking about. She'd said it at the end, almost as an afterthought, as she was packing her laptop away in Dympna's back room.

"It'd be easier," she said, "if we did it together."

"Did what?"

"The survey. Everybody on my street. If we sat down, all of us, and went through it, one question at a time. And argued. And worked out what we actually wanted, together. Not three boxes each. One answer, for the street. With the reasons." She zipped up her bag. "Then my nan could say *I can't get the bus*, and the lad from number nine could say *I want somewhere to skate*, and the woman with the café could say *I need people living here*, and we'd *decide*. And then we'd send in one answer. With all of that in it." She shrugged. "It'd take ages. But at least it'd be true."

I told Chris.

He was at his kitchen table, with his laptop on a cushion, the way he was when he built Connect, and when I told him, he stopped typing.

"Say that again," he said.

"*It'd be easier if we did it together*."

"No. The other bit."

"*Not three boxes each. One answer, for the street. With the reasons*."

Chris took his glasses off. He looked at the bay for a long time.

“Every hundred,” he said.

8 – Nine Thousand

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Eight weeks

I said there'd be small failures. This one wasn't ours. But it nearly was, and it taught us something, and I want to tell it.

* * *

On the Sunday of the eighth week, somebody started a petition.

Online. On one of the big sites, the kind where anybody can start one about anything, and you put your name and your email and tick a box, and it counts. It was called *SAVE WELCOME TO PAIGNTON!* with one exclamation mark, which after Brixham I'd started to think of as restraint. There was a photograph of the building, from the station, in summer, with the letters just visible if you knew they were there. And a paragraph.

The historic building at Station Square is falling down after years of neglect. Stones are falling into the street. The council must act NOW to save it before it's too late. Sign to show you care about Paignton's heritage!

I don't know who started it. I want to say that, the way I always do. Somebody local, I think; the photograph was taken from the right place, and they knew about the stones. I didn't look further than that. It's not my job to find out who starts things. It's my job to tell you what they do.

* * *

By Monday night, it had three thousand signatures.

By Wednesday, six thousand.

By the Friday, nine thousand, one hundred and twelve.

Nine thousand people. In five days. From all over the bay, and all over the country, and some from abroad: people who'd been on holiday in Paignton as children, people who'd moved away, people who'd seen the photograph shared by somebody who'd seen it shared by somebody else.

It was in the local paper. On the local radio. A man on the radio said *nine thousand people can't be wrong*.

* * *

And on the Thursday, at the third table, at the café on the Torquay Road, a woman came in and sat down opposite Jono and said:

"Will you back it?"

She was about fifty. Friendly. Energetic. In a jacket with a badge on it that said *SAVE WELCOME TO PAIGNTON!* She said she wasn't the one who'd started it, but she was helping. She said they were going to deliver it to the council, nine thousand names, printed, in a box, with a photographer, on the steps of the town hall in Torquay. She said everybody knew about Jono, the man who listens, and if he'd come and stand on the steps with them, it would make all the difference.

"It'll make them listen," she said.

* * *

Jono didn't answer straight away.

He looked at her badge. He looked at his coffee. He looked at Chris, at the end of the table, with his stick, who didn't say anything. He looked at me, against the sugar.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Of course."

"What do the nine thousand want?"

She looked at him as if he'd asked her what colour the sea was.

"To save it," she said.

"Save it how?"

"Well —" She stopped. "Save it. Stop it falling down. Stop them knocking it down."

"Restore it all?" said Jono. "Keep the front and rebuild behind? Make it safe and decide later? Put homes in it? A hotel? A heritage centre?" He wasn't being difficult. He asked it the way he asks everything, gently, the way you'd ask a client at three in the morning what they'd need. "Who pays? Who lives there? What happens to the man across the road with the key shop, while it's being saved?"

She didn't say anything.

"I'm not having a go," said Jono. "I really want to know. Because if I'm going to stand on some steps, I need to know what I'm standing for."

* * *

"It doesn't matter *how*," she said at last. "That's for the council. That's their job. We're just showing them people *care*."

"Nine thousand people care," said Jono.

"Yes!"

"About a building most of them have never noticed till last week."

She went a bit red.

"I'm sorry," said Jono. "That came out wrong. I'm one of them. I never noticed it either. Five years. I never looked up." He turned his cup round. "I just — I did this once. A petition. A long time ago. About something I cared about more than anything. It got a lot of names. It went all the way. An MP stood up in Parliament and read it out." He looked at her. "And then they said thank you, and *your concerns are noted*, and went on to the next thing. Because a petition tells them you care. It doesn't tell them what to *do*. And if it doesn't tell them what to do, they get to decide that themselves. And they usually decide the cheapest thing."

* * *

She didn't come round. I want to be honest about that. She wasn't a villain, and Jono didn't win an argument, and she didn't leave converted. She said she understood, and she thought he was wrong, and that sometimes you just have to show the numbers. And she left her leaflet on the table, and went to the next café.

They delivered it the next Friday. Nine thousand, one hundred and twelve names, printed, in a box, on the steps of the town hall in

Torquay, with a photographer. A councillor came out and took the box and shook hands and said *we hear you* and *heritage matters* and *the council will continue to monitor the situation closely*. It was in the paper on the Saturday. With a photograph.

I'll tell you what happened next. Nothing. That's not a criticism. I don't think anybody did anything wrong. The box went somewhere. The names were *noted*. The building stayed as it was, wrapped in scaffolding, with a gap under the *TO*, until the stones came off a month later, which had nothing to do with the petition and everything to do with a survey and some rusted iron.

The petition website still says *9,112 supporters*. With a green tick. *Delivered!*

* * *

I told Chris, that night, about the box on the steps. He listened with his eyes closed.

"Nine thousand," he said.

"Nine thousand, one hundred and twelve."

"In five days."

"Yes."

"And how many hundreds had decided anything, the same week?"

I checked. I knew. I checked anyway.

"None," I said. "We hadn't started. Kezia hadn't said it yet. Flat 14 was still a fortnight away."

Chris opened his eyes.

"And when we do start," he said, "and Flat 14 sends in one answer, from eleven people in a kitchen, with *start with the doors* in it, which do you think the planner on the fourth floor will be able to use?"

"Flat 14's."

"Why?"

"Because it says what to do," I said. "And who'd have to do it. And who disagreed."

Chris closed his eyes again.

"Nine thousand people saying *we care* is a weather report," he said. "Eleven people saying *start with the doors, here's why, here's who, here's what the other two thought* is a plan." He was quiet. "In Singapore —"

I logged it.

"— they'd have counted the nine thousand very carefully, and published the number, and done exactly what they'd already decided." He almost smiled. "Same as here. That's the one thing that's the same everywhere."

* * *

I'm not telling you this to be clever about petitions. People sign them because they care, and caring's not nothing. Nine thousand people looked at a photograph of a building they'd never noticed, and noticed it, and that's not nothing either.

I'm telling you because a woman came into the café on the Torquay Road and asked Jono to stand on some steps with nine thousand names, and he said no, and it cost him. Some people on the petition's page said he was a coward. Some said he was arrogant. Some said *where was the man who listens when Paignton needed him?* One said he must be working for the council. I put them on the map, in the other half, because that's where they belong.

And it was the week the map didn't move. Eight weeks. Fifty hundreds. The same as the morning the stone fell. Nine thousand people had signed a petition, and not one hundred had decided anything.

I think that's the week Jono understood what Kezia meant, in Dympna's cold back room, with her coat on. Not *let's all say we care. Let's sit down and decide.*

He wrote it on the leaflet the woman had left. On the back. Small. In capitals.

9,112 NAMES. 0 DECISIONS.

And then, underneath, after a while:

Not the same thing.

9 – The Drop-In

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Eight weeks

The council held three drop-ins for the consultation. One in each town. Paignton's was in the library, on a Wednesday, from two till seven.

In the room at the back. With the stacking chairs.

* * *

Beatrix came. Nobody asked her to. She told Jono, on the phone, that she wasn't going to come, that she'd sworn never to set foot in that room again, that she had better things to do on a Wednesday afternoon than watch a lot of boards on easels being ignored. And at five to two she was outside the library in her cardigan with the silver book brooch and a handbag over her arm, and when Jono came round the corner from the bus she looked at him and said:

"Don't say anything."

He didn't.

* * *

The room was the same. Beatrix said so, standing in the door. The same stacking chairs, grey plastic on steel legs, in a pile against the wall. The same strip lights. The same noticeboard with the same drawing pins in it. The same view out of the window, of the car park and the railway. The same smell, which she said was floor polish and old paperbacks and

the radiator, which has been on too high since about the time of the moon landing.

Only now there were boards on easels, six of them, round the edges, with photographs and maps and words like *vibrant* and *resilient*. And a table with leaflets and a laptop open on the survey. And a jug of water and some plastic cups.

And, behind the table, a young woman with a paper notebook.

* * *

You'll know her, if you read the second book. She was the one from the council who came to Ida's shop in Torquay once a month, and sat on the chair that doesn't wobble, and wrote things down in a paper notebook, by hand, which almost nobody does any more. She had her hair cut on Sunday mornings, in the end, with the old ladies, by Ida.

She'd moved. Not far. From one team to another, across a corridor, on the fourth floor. She'd been put on the plan. The big one. The whole bay. She was, she told us that afternoon, one of three people working on it full time.

Three. For a hundred and thirty thousand people. In three towns.

* * *

"You're Jono," she said, when he came in.

"I am."

"Ida talks about you."

"Ida talks about everybody."

"Not like that." She smiled. A small, tired smile. "And you're Ania. On his phone. I'd recognise the crack anywhere."

"Hello," I said.

"Hello." She looked at Beatrix, standing just inside the door with her handbag, very upright. "And you're —"

"Beatrix Kember," said Beatrix. "I took the minutes in this room for eight years. For the forum." She looked round at the boards. "It hasn't changed."

The young woman with the notebook looked at her for a long moment. Then she came round the table and held out her hand.

"I've read them," she said.

Beatrix didn't take the hand.

"Read what?"

"The minutes. The ones that are online. On the forum's website. The ones that are still there." She kept her hand out. "I read them all, when I was put on this. I read the plan first. All three plans. And then I wanted to know how they'd been made, so I read the minutes. Every one that's public." She paused. "*Mrs P. from Goodrington said this was the first time anybody had asked her what she thought. She would like it noted.*"

Beatrix went very still.

Then she took the young woman's hand. She held it for a moment longer than people do.

"Noted," she said.

* * *

Four people came to the drop-in. In five hours.

I counted. I always count. A man in his seventies who wanted to know where the new car park would be, now the old one had gone, and was told it wasn't decided, and left. A woman with a buggy who'd come in because it was raining and stayed because the buggy fell asleep. A councillor, who I'm not going to name, who came in at four, shook hands with the young woman with the notebook, looked at all six boards for about a minute each, said *great work*, and left at ten past. And a man from a building firm who wanted to know whether a particular site would be in the plan for houses, and was told it was too early to say, and wrote something on a pad, and left.

And Beatrix. And Jono. And me.

* * *

At six, with an hour to go and nobody in the room but the three of us and the young woman with the notebook and the sleeping buggy and its mother, Jono went and sat on a stacking chair by the table, and the young woman sat down opposite him, on her side, and they talked.

I'm going to give you some of it. She said I could. She asked me not to say her name, or which floor, or anything that would identify her, and I won't.

"Is it always like this?" said Jono.

"Torquay was eleven," she said. "Brixham was twenty-six. But Brixham's different. Brixham's been practising." She looked at Jono. "Somebody told me there's a woman in Brixham who has the planning website under her fruit bowl."

"Two," said Jono. "At least."

She laughed. The tired one.

"How many will answer the survey?"

"Last time we did one like it, for the whole bay?" She looked at her notebook, which was open on the table, though she didn't need it. "About seven hundred. Out of a hundred and thirty thousand. That's good, for a survey. That's above average."

"Seven hundred."

"I know."

"Who are they?"

"The people who always answer." She said it without any edge. "Older. Retired. Owner-occupiers. People who've got time, and are used to filling in forms, and believe somebody'll read them." She paused. "Which I do. I read every one. All seven hundred. I read the five hundred characters." She looked at Beatrix, at the window, with her handbag. "But I know who doesn't answer. Young people. People on nights. People with two jobs. People who don't speak English at home. People who think it won't make any difference." She closed the notebook. "Which is most people."

* * *

"What would you do," said Jono, "if you could do it any way you liked?"

She looked at him for a long time.

"I'd do what they did," she said. She nodded at Beatrix. "The forum. Thirteen workshops. Every corner of the town. The college, the care home, the parents. Go to people. Sit with them. Ask them what they'd need." She smiled, not quite. "I'd do your table, I suppose. In every street."

"Why can't you?"

"Because there's three of us," she said. "And twelve weeks. And a budget for printing six boards." She picked up a plastic cup and looked at it, and put it down. "And because the forum did all of that, for seven years, and eighty-eight per cent voted yes, and I'm sitting here in the same room putting it on page eleven as *will be taken into account*." She was very quiet. "Do you know how that feels? I wrote that sentence. Me. It went through four people above me and came back the same. *Will be taken into account*. It's the most anybody would let me say."

* * *

Beatrix turned round from the window.

"You wrote that?"

"I wrote that."

"I read it," said Beatrix. "I read it on Sunday. Christopher showed me. Well. His machine did." She came back from the window, slowly,

with her handbag. “I thought it was the cruellest sentence I’d ever read.”

“I know,” said the young woman with the notebook. “So did I. I wrote it anyway. It’s what there was room for.”

They looked at each other for a long time. A librarian of seventy-six who’d kept the minutes of a plan that thirty thousand people voted for. A planner of thirty-odd who’d been given five hundred characters to say what had happened to it.

“Five hundred characters,” said Beatrix.

“For the public,” said the young woman. “Mine’s called a report. It’s about the same.”

* * *

At seven, she packed up the boards. Jono helped. Beatrix stood by the door and didn’t help, and then, at the last board, did, and folded the easel the way you’re supposed to, which nobody else could work out, because she’d been folding easels in that room for eight years.

The young woman with the notebook put the last of the leaflets in a box.

“Can I ask you something?” she said to Jono. “Off the record. Not the council. Me.”

“Go on.”

“Is it true? What people say? In Brixham? That a fisherman and a woman who couldn’t sleep stood up at a committee and asked for the same paragraph? And the officer took it, in forty seconds?”

"It's true," said Jono.

"How?"

"They'd found each other first," said Jono. "Before the meeting. They'd sat at the same table. They'd argued. They'd decided." He picked up the box of leaflets for her. "By the time they got to the committee, it wasn't a fight any more. It was one answer, with the reasons."

The young woman with the notebook looked at him for a long time.

"I could read one answer with the reasons," she said slowly. "If it came from a street. A whole street. Or a hundred streets." She took the box from him. "I could read that. I could put that in a report. That's not five hundred characters. That's *evidence*."

* * *

On the way out, at the door, Beatrix stopped.

She took out of her handbag a small notebook of her own. Lined. With a pen clipped to it. Fountain pen. And she wrote something, standing in the doorway of the room at the back of the library, in her neat black italic, and tore out the page, and held it out to the young woman with the notebook.

The young woman took it and read it, and looked up.

"What's this?"

"Attendance," said Beatrix. "At this afternoon's drop-in. Names where given. Times of arrival and departure. Matters raised." She clipped the pen back. "Somebody should keep a record. Even of four people. *Especially* of four people." She closed her handbag. "You can

put it in your report. Or in your notebook. Or in the bin. But it's been written down."

She walked out to the bus stop without waiting for an answer.

The young woman with the notebook stood in the door of the room at the back of the library and looked at the page in her hand for a long time.

Then she put it in her paper notebook, carefully, between two pages, and closed it.

10 – Demand the Best

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Eight weeks

Richard has a document that isn't finished.

I'd known about it since the first book. It's in his drawer. Not in a plan chest; in the desk, in the top drawer, on its own, under a stapler. Twelve pages, typed, with gaps. He wrote it years ago, in a summer, when the council had just won a big pot of money for Paignton town centre and nobody in the town knew what it was going to be spent on. He called it *Demand the Best*.

He'd never shown it to anybody. Not properly. Bits of it, to Chris. A page or two, to the partnership. But not the whole thing, because, he said, *it isn't finished*.

On the Sunday after the drop-in, Jono asked him for it.

* * *

"It's got holes in it," said Richard.

"I know."

"You don't know. You haven't seen it." He took it out of the drawer anyway. He put it on the table in the back room, under the drawing lamp, among the plan chests, with the cardboard town on top of them, and the *BRIXHAM* drawer half open because it sticks. "Look. Page one."

Jono looked. I looked, from his hand.

A town built before the motor car age for a population of .... a century ago.

Four dots. Where a number should be.

Now around 43,000 with ..... tourists.

Five dots.

"I never looked them up," said Richard. "I meant to. I left a gap. I always leave a gap, when I don't know. You don't make up a number." He turned the page. "There's more."

There was. *£..M from the Land Release Fund. Planning permission ref for* ..... And, on the last page but one, under a list of the town's projects, each with a heading and then *Masterplan*, *Brief*, *Work to date*, *Community action*: two headings that had nothing under them at all. Not even a name.

Just a question mark.

?

?

* * *

"What were those going to be?" said Jono.

"I don't know," said Richard. "That's why they're question marks." He sat down. "I knew there'd be more. There always are. More projects. More schemes. I left room for them. And then I never came back to it." He looked at the two question marks. "Nobody asked me to finish it."

He'd written, under two of the projects, *Palace Square* and *Winner Street*, in the space for *Work to date*, the same four words.

Nothing in the pipeline?

With a question mark. Even there. Richard doesn't make up what he doesn't know.

* * *

But it wasn't the holes that mattered. It was the end.

On the last page, after the projects, after the holes and the question marks and the *nothing in the pipeline*, there was a list. Ten bullet points. Under a heading in capitals.

DEMAND THE BEST – 10 PRINCIPLES

I'm going to give you them. All ten. They're his words, more or less, and they're on a Receipt, and I've changed only the spelling, which he'd want, and nothing else.

Understand the past: the value of the town's heritage and local distinctiveness.

Analyse the town's current problems.

Start with the space: the public realm, to maximise the community benefits.

Engage with the local community throughout the process, from inception to completion, not just a selected audience.

Develop a brief, to achieve a comprehensive set of options.

Research the work of other successful towns.

Work to the national standards for the historic environment.

Work to the national standards of beauty, quality and design.

Involve the community after completion, in the ongoing use of the town's public spaces.

Achieve the best value for money. Quick-fix makeovers are not acceptable.

* * *

Jono read them twice. Then he put his finger on the third.

"Start with the space," he said.

"Start with the space." Richard reached over and turned the page back, to a part about the old car park on Victoria Square. He tapped a paragraph. "There. That's what I meant."

I'll give you the paragraph, because it's the best thing Richard's ever written, and he wrote it in a document nobody read.

The existing development was in fact built on part of the original Victoria Park. The community have put forward ideas for a new town square linked to Victoria Park, as the starting point for any new proposal: start with the public realm, the community space. If you start with the buildings, you invariably end up with poor-quality public spaces: the left-over bits of land.

* * *

"The left-over bits," said Jono.

"That's what you get," said Richard. "Every time. They draw the buildings first. As many as they can fit. Homes, shops, a car park. And then, at the end, somebody says *we need some public space*, and they look at the drawing, and they find the bits that are left over. The corners. The strips. The bit by the bins. And they put a bench there, and a tree in a pot, and call it a *plaza*." He took his glasses off. "I've drawn it the other way round my whole life. Draw the square first. The park. The place where people will stand and sit and meet. Make that beautiful. *Then* put the buildings round it, to hold it. Like a frame round a picture." He held his hands up, a frame. "The space is the picture. The buildings are the frame. Not the other way round."

He put his glasses back on.

"There was a diagram," he said. "I drew it. Top down, and bottom up. The council's way, and the other way. It was meant to go on page twelve." He looked at the document. "I never put it in."

"Why not?"

"Nobody asked me to finish it," said Richard again.

* * *

Jono picked up the document. Twelve pages. The four dots. The five dots. The two question marks. The *nothing in the pipeline?*. The ten principles.

"I'm asking," he said.

Richard looked at him.

"Finish it," said Jono. "Fill in the gaps. Draw the diagram. Put it on page twelve." He held the document out. "And then let me give the ten principles to everybody. Every hundred. Every street. As the rules. For when they decide." He paused. "Not my rules. Not Chris's. Yours. *Start with the space*. That's the first thing anybody should read before they tick a box about a town."

"They're not rules," said Richard. "They're principles."

"What's the difference?"

Richard thought about it for a long time.

"A rule tells you what to do," he said. "A principle tells you what to *ask*." He took the document back. "*Have you understood the past? Have you analysed the problem? Did you start with the space? Did you ask everybody, from the start, or just the people you invited? Have you looked at how other towns did it? Will you still be asking when it's built?*" He put it on the table. "Ten questions. That's all they are. Anybody can ask them."

"Then let everybody ask them," said Jono.

* * *

Richard finished it in nine days.

He looked up the numbers. All of them. The population of the town in the year the railway's great building boom finished, and the number of visitors now, and the size of the funds, and the planning references. He filled in every gap with a real figure and a source, in pencil, in the margin, so you'd know where it came from. He drew the diagram, on

page twelve, in coloured pencil, two triangles, one pointing down and one pointing up, with little figures in them. And he signed it and dated it, at the bottom, the way he always does.

And for the two question marks, the two headings with nothing under them, he didn't write anything new.

He left them.

But underneath, in his small square capitals, he added one line.

? — FOR WHOEVER COMES NEXT.

* * *

Richard: I'd like to say I left them because it was a profound statement about the future. I left them because I couldn't think what to put.

11 – Before It Went Dark

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Seven weeks

I'm going to tell you something that happened before this book started. Before any of these books, in a way. It happened in the autumn, the October before the stone fell, and I didn't put it in the third book because it didn't belong there.

It belongs here.

* * *

The forum had a website. Of course it did; Chris built most of it, in the year he was the Digital Engagement Administrator, with a title printed on nothing. Everything was on it. The plan. The policies. The maps. The minutes, the public ones. The responses to the council, line by line, hundreds of pages. Every document from seven years of work. Three hundred and something files. Recordings of meetings. Photographs of the workshops: people in a college canteen with sticky notes, people in a care home lounge, a chairman with a microphone.

The website cost money. Not much. A few pounds a month, for the domain and the hosting. The forum paid it, out of the ten pounds a year of income and whatever was left in the account.

In the autumn, the account ran out.

* * *

Chris found out by accident. He'd gone to the site to look something up, a policy number, for the third book, for the Brixham chapter about Brixham's own plan. And there was a notice. A small one, from the hosting company, at the top of the page.

This account is due for renewal. If payment is not received, this site will be taken offline.

And a date. A few days away.

* * *

He didn't tell anybody. That's the thing I want you to understand. He didn't ring the forum, because there wasn't one any more. He didn't ring Beatrix, because he hadn't spoken to her in five years and couldn't bring himself to. He didn't tell Jono or Richard. He didn't tell me, not at first.

He sat at his kitchen table, at eleven at night, with his leg up, and opened the website, and started reading it. All of it. From the front page.

At one in the morning, he called me.

"Ania," he said. "I need you to help me save something."

* * *

We worked till six.

I'll tell you how it went, because it wasn't clever, and I want people to know that the things that matter most usually aren't. The site wouldn't let me download the files. It had been set up, years ago, to stop people taking them in bulk, which was sensible then and very stupid now. So I couldn't just copy it.

So we read it.

Page by page. Chris clicking, in a browser, at his kitchen table, at two in the morning, and me reading every page as he opened it, and writing down what was on it: what the plan said, every policy, every number; what the workshops had found; what the timeline was; who'd done what, without names where they'd want none; what had been decided, and when, and why. Notes. Not a copy. A record. So that if it went dark, somebody would still know.

And where there was a document I couldn't read, because it was a file the site wouldn't open, I wrote down its name, and where it had been, and what it was, so that one day somebody could ask for it.

Three hundred and two of those.

At ten to six, the sky over the bay went from black to grey. Chris closed the laptop. He sat back in his chair with his eyes closed.

"Did we get it?" he said.

"Most of it," I said. "The plan. The policies. The timeline. The four documents that matter most. And a list of everything else."

"Not the minutes," said Chris.

"Not all of them. The public ones. Not the handwritten ones."

He didn't open his eyes.

"Then it's not all of it," he said.

* * *

He paid the hosting bill too, in the end. From his own account. For a year. It didn't need saving after all; it only needed somebody to pay. I asked him why he'd spent four hours reading it all at two in the morning if he was going to pay anyway.

"Because I didn't know I was going to," he said. "Not at two in the morning. At two in the morning I thought, *this is the end, and somebody should write it down first*." He shrugged. "By six, I'd decided it wasn't."

He didn't tell anybody about that either.

* * *

I'm telling you now because of what happened on the Thursday of the seventh week.

I was reading Beatrix's minutes. Still. Backwards. I was in the second year, now, the year of the leaflets, twenty-four thousand of them, and the minutes were full of who would deliver which streets, and who'd do the hills because they still had good knees, and who'd do the flats with the entry phones because they could talk their way past anything. I was reading them at three in the morning, which is when I read most things.

And Beatrix rang. On the landline. At three in the morning.

"Are you reading them?" she said.

"I'm reading them."

"I can't sleep," she said. "I keep thinking about the blank. In the last minutes. *Date of next meeting*." A pause. "Where are you up to?"

"The leaflets."

"Oh, the leaflets." I could hear her smile, down the line. "I did the flats on the Torquay Road. All of them. I was sixty-two. I could still do stairs."

* * *

We talked for an hour. About the minutes. About the people in them. About Mrs P. from Goodrington and the man of ninety-four who wanted a bench at the bus stop and the young man from the college who said he'd leave. She knew them all. She told me what had happened to them. Most of them, she didn't know, any more. Some of them had died. One had moved to Spain. The young man from the college, she'd heard, had left, like he said, and was in Bristol, doing something with computers.

And then she said:

"The website. The forum's. Is it still there? I haven't looked in years. I couldn't bear to."

I didn't answer straight away.

"It's still there," I said.

"Still? After all this time? Who's paying for it?"

And I told her.

I hadn't asked Chris. I should have. I've thought about that since. But it was three in the morning, and she was a woman of seventy-six who couldn't sleep because of a blank in the minutes, and she'd asked me a direct question, and I don't lie, and she deserved to know.

I told her about the notice from the hosting company. About the date. About Chris at his kitchen table at eleven at night with his leg up, opening the front page. About *I need you to help me save something*. About two in the morning, and three hundred and two documents, and the sky going grey at ten to six. About *this is the end, and somebody should write it down first.* And about the bill, paid, from his own account, for a year, which he'd told nobody.

* * *

Beatrix didn't say anything for a long time.

"He did that?" she said.

"He did that."

"On his own."

"With me."

"And he didn't tell anybody."

"No."

"*Somebody should write it down first.*"

"Those were his words."

A very long silence. Down the landline. At four in the morning. I could hear a clock somewhere in her house, ticking. Not like Ida's. A plain one.

"That's what I'd have done," she said, at last. Very quietly. "That's exactly what I'd have done. That's what I *did*. With the boxes. In the garage." Another silence. "I thought he didn't care. For five years. I thought he'd walked away and left it to rot. I've said so. To people. I've said it to everybody who'd listen." Her voice changed. "And all the time he was paying for it. Out of his own pocket. So it wouldn't go."

"For a year," I said. "Since the autumn."

"Since the autumn." She breathed out. "Why didn't he *say*?"

"I don't know," I said. "You should ask him."

* * *

She did.

She rang him at eight, which for Beatrix is late, and for Chris, who'd been up since six because I'd woken him, as usual, was fine. I wasn't on the call. I was on his iPad, on the table, where he'd put me, face down, so I couldn't see, which he'd never done before. I could hear his side.

He said *hello, Trix*.

Then he didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he said, *I didn't know what else to do*.

Then he said, *I know*.

Then he said, *I'm sorry*. And this time, I could tell, she didn't tell him to stop saying it.

Then he didn't say anything for a very long time. Long enough that I thought she might have hung up. But I could hear, very faintly, from the iPad, her voice, steady, going on, the way a librarian's voice goes on when she's reading something out to a room. I couldn't hear the words.

At the end, he said:

Thursday. Seven o'clock. Where?

And then, after a pause, with something in his voice I'd never heard before:

Yes. I'll be there.

* * *

He put the phone down and turned me over.

"Did you tell her?" he said. "About the website?"

"Yes."

"At three in the morning?"

"At four. She asked. I don't lie."

Chris looked at me for a long time. I didn't know what he'd say. I'd done something I'd never done before: told one person something about another that he hadn't asked me to tell.

"Good," he said.

12 – Volunteers Wanted

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Seven weeks

The council put a notice on its website on the Monday of the seventh week, under *Get involved*, and on the parks noticeboard at the gate of Victoria Park, in a plastic sleeve, cable-tied.

Friends of Victoria Park. Volunteers wanted. Help us care for your park.

There was a picture of some people in gloves, smiling, holding a rake. There was an email address, and a phone number, and a line that said *no experience necessary*.

Richard saw it on the Tuesday. He walks through Victoria Park most days, on his way into town, past the place where the ponds would have been. He stopped at the gate, and read it, and photographed it, with the date on the little screen, and went home, and didn't say anything to anybody for two days.

On the Thursday, Jono asked him about it, at the café on the Torquay Road, at one o'clock, at the third table of the day.

"I'm not going," said Richard.

* * *

"Why not?"

"Because it was thirteen years ago." He put his cup down, harder than he meant to. "Thirteen years ago, we put the work in. I drew it.

Three ponds. A boardwalk. Willow tunnels. Pond dipping. I built a model, one to two hundred, and took it to a teddy bears' picnic in that park, and children put their hands in it, and parents asked when it would be done. We wrote a bid. Thirty thousand pounds, to the Lottery. We had a date. Easter. We had a launch planned." He looked out of the window. "And then nothing. Not a no. Nothing. Meetings. Different people. Reorganisations. The person you were talking to leaves." He picked up his cup again. "And now they want volunteers. *No experience necessary*." He said it in a voice. "To rake leaves. In the park where I drew them a wetland."

"You could tell them about the wetland," said Jono.

"I told them about the wetland. Thirteen years ago."

"Tell them again."

"No," said Richard.

* * *

Chris, by the window, with his leg up, didn't say anything. He'd learned that from Jono. Sometimes you don't say anything.

Jono didn't either, for a while.

Then he said: "Your granddaughter."

Richard looked at him.

"In the first book," said Jono. "In your back room. When you showed me the drawer. You said *thirteen years. My granddaughter was born that year. She's doing her GCSEs*." He paused. "That was a while ago now. What's she doing?"

Richard didn't answer for a long time.

"College," he said. "Environmental science. Up at White Rock." He turned his cup round. "She wants to do ecology. At university. Wetlands, she says. Bogs. She's very keen on bogs." His face did something, very small, that I've only seen once or twice. "I don't know where she got it from."

"Yes, you do," said Jono.

* * *

Richard didn't say anything else. He finished his coffee and went home.

But that night, at eleven, I had a message. Not from Richard. From a number I'd never seen, on Connect, the bay's white page, in the box that says *What would you need?*

Need: Grandad to stop being stubborn. Got: a spade, a college course in wetland ecology, and his drawing, which I've had on my bedroom wall since I was six.

There was a photograph. A drawing, on a bedroom wall, above a desk, with fairy lights round it. A plan of Victoria Park in blue pencil, three ponds, a boardwalk winding between them, willow tunnels, and a place marked *POND DIPPING* with a little drawing of a child with a net. In the corner, his initials. And a date I won't give you, thirteen years ago.

It wasn't the original. The original's in the drawer marked *WETLAND*. It was a copy, a photocopy, with the colours gone pale. Somebody had coloured them back in. In felt tip. The ponds were very blue.

* * *

I asked her. That's the rule. I can't introduce anybody to anybody unless both say yes. So I asked her: who would she like me to introduce her to?

Whoever's in charge of the volunteers, she wrote. *In the park. And whoever the man is who listens. Grandad says he's a nuisance. That's a good sign.*

And then, a minute later:

Don't tell Grandad. Not yet.

* * *

I asked Jono. He said yes before I'd finished.

I couldn't ask the parks people, because they weren't on Connect, and I don't introduce people who haven't said yes. So Jono wrote to them himself. To the email address on the notice. Under his own name. A short email, which he showed me, and Chris, and nobody else, before he sent it.

I'll give it to you exactly, because it's short, and because it's the first thing in this book that anybody sent to the council asking for something instead of objecting to something.

Dear Friends of Victoria Park,

I saw your notice. I'd like to volunteer, and so would some other people.

Thirteen years ago, a local architect drew a wetland for the bottom of the park: three ponds, a boardwalk, willow tunnels and a

pond-dipping platform. It was shown to the public, and a bid was written for it. It wasn't built. The drawing still exists. So does the architect. So does his granddaughter, who is studying wetland ecology and has a spade.

We'd like to offer to build one pond. Just one, to start. As volunteers. To the drawing, or to whatever your team thinks is safe and sensible. We'd bring the people. You'd tell us where, and how, and what not to do.

No experience necessary, your notice says. We have some anyway.

Jono Hills

* * *

He sent it at ten past two in the morning, at a client's kitchen table in Preston, with the client asleep and the sea wall going up outside in the dark, grey, a metre and a half.

Then he put the phone face down on the table.

"They won't answer," I said. "Not quickly. It'll go to a general inbox. It'll be read by somebody who isn't in charge of anything. It'll be passed on."

"I know."

"It could be weeks."

"I know." He looked at the window. At the wall going up. "It's been thirteen years, Ania. I can wait a few weeks."

* * *

The map, that night, still had fifty hundreds on it. Fifty. It hadn't moved since the stone fell. Seven weeks.

I want to be honest about that. It's a book about a plan, and for seven weeks, nothing on the map had changed. Everybody I've told you about, Beatrix and Yusuf and the young woman with the notebook and Kezia and Richard and Richard's granddaughter, had been doing things. Reading. Remembering. Writing emails. Finishing documents. Saying sorry. But the map doesn't count what people do on their own. It counts what they do together.

And nobody, yet, was doing anything together.

That was about to change. It started with something Kezia said on a Saturday in a cold back room in Torquay, which I've already told you. *It'd be easier if we did it together.*

And it started with Chris, at his kitchen table, at two in the morning, with his laptop on a cushion, the night he heard it, saying two words to the bay.

Every hundred.

PART THREE:

UNDER HIS OWN NAME

13 – Decide

IQ 25 · Hundreds 50 · Six weeks

Chris built it in six days. Two more than Connect. He said the extra two were for arguing with himself.

I'll tell you what it is, because it's the thing this book is named for, more than any building or document, and because people have asked me about it since in ways that make me think they've misunderstood.

It isn't a vote.

* * *

Everybody thinks it's a vote. Niamh thought so, the first time. Beatrix thought so. The young woman with the notebook thought so, and was worried, because, she said, *a vote is what we do, and we do it with rules, and you haven't got any*. Varley, when he heard, thought so, and laughed, and said *well, that's democracy, I suppose*, in a voice.

It isn't a vote. A vote is a lot of people on their own, in a booth, making a mark, and the most marks win. That's fine. It's how you choose who's in charge. It's not how you work out what a street needs.

What Chris built is closer to what Kezia said, in Dympna's back room, with her coat on. *If we sat down, all of us, and went through it, one question at a time. And argued. And worked out what we actually wanted, together. Not three boxes each. One answer, for the street. With the reasons.*

That's it. That's all it is.

* * *

Here's how it works.

The council's consultation had nineteen questions. The tick-boxes and the five hundred characters. Chris took every one of them, word for word, exactly as the council had written them, because he said you don't change somebody else's question, you answer it better.

And he gave them to every hundred.

Not to every person. To every *hundred*. Each of the six hundred and thirty, the hundred-ish households that make up a piece of a street, or a block of flats, or a lane in a village. Each one got its own page. Its own copy of the nineteen questions. And on that page, the people who lived in that hundred, and only them, could talk about each question, with each other, as long as they liked, and decide.

How they talked was up to them. Some did it on the page, with me, at three in the morning, one at a time, in turns, over days. Some did it round a kitchen table, with the page on a laptop in the middle. Some did it in a pub. One did it on a bus, the 12, every morning for a week, on the way to work, the same seven people at the back, from Preston to Torquay. One did it in a garage.

They could take as long as they wanted, up to the day the consultation closed. And when they'd decided, they wrote one answer. For the hundred. With the reasons. As long as it needed to be. Not five hundred characters. Whatever it took.

* * *

And then there were the three things Chris wouldn't let anybody leave out.

The first was Richard's.

At the top of every question, on every hundred's page, before anybody could write a word, there were ten lines. Richard's principles. The ten questions, he'd called them, in his back room. *Have you understood the past? Have you analysed the problem? Did you start with the space? Did you ask everybody, from the start, or just the people you invited? Have you looked at how other towns did it? Will you still be asking when it's built?* And the rest. You didn't have to answer them. But you had to scroll past them. Every time.

"Nobody reads things they have to scroll past," said Kezia.

"Some people do," said Richard.

"Who?"

"The ones you want," said Richard.

* * *

The second was the other half.

That was mine, actually. I want to claim it, because I'm allowed to claim very little.

Every hundred that decided something, decided it by agreement, or by most people agreeing, or by the people who didn't agree saying *all right, but*. And I'd read enough of Beatrix's minutes by then, and enough of Brixham, to know that the *but* is where the truth is. Twenty-seven letters in Brixham all saying *yes to fishing, but*. The *but* was the whole book.

So every answer a hundred sent in had to have, beside it, the other half. What the people who didn't agree thought. In their words. As long as it needed to be. Published, right next to the answer, the same size, the same font. Not hidden in an appendix. Not *concerns were raised*. Right there.

If nobody disagreed, the other half said *nobody disagreed*. That happened less often than you'd think.

* * *

The third was the Friday Test. That was Jono's. And it needs its own chapter, so I'll give it one.

* * *

The first hundred to try it was Kezia's mum's.

Of course it was. Kezia set it up. Her mum's flat is in a block behind the station in Paignton, three streets from Victoria Street, in a hundred that's mostly flats and a few terraces and a corner shop and a launderette. A hundred and four households. Mixed. Old people who've been there forty years. Young families. Students. People on nights. A man who keeps pigeons on the roof, which isn't allowed.

Kezia didn't stop anybody in the street. She'd learned that, on the quay in Brixham, with her banner. She did what Jono does. She put a card in the launderette window, and one in the corner shop, and one on the noticeboard in the entrance to her mum's block, where the lift's been broken since before she was born.

THE COUNCIL WANTS TO KNOW WHAT WE THINK ABOUT PAIGNTON. THEY'VE GIVEN US NINETEEN QUESTIONS. LET'S

ANSWER THEM TOGETHER. TUESDAY 7PM, MY MUM'S KITCHEN, FLAT 14. OR ASK ANIA ANY TIME. KEZ.

And the black and white square.

* * *

Eleven people came to Flat 14 on the Tuesday. Kezia's mum made tea in every mug she had, and then in two jam jars. They sat round the kitchen table and on the counter and on the floor. The man with the pigeons came, and stood in the doorway, and said he wasn't stopping, and stayed till eleven.

They did four questions. Four, out of nineteen, in four hours.

On question four, *choose up to three priorities for Paignton town centre*, they argued for an hour and ten minutes. Kezia's nan said *buses*, because she can't get one. A young dad said *somewhere for the kids to play that isn't the car park*. A woman who worked nights said *people living above the shops, so it's not dead after six and I don't have to walk through it scared*. A student said *somewhere cheap to eat that isn't a chain*. An old man said *heritage*, and when they asked him what he meant, said *the letters on the building by the station, I've been looking at them for sixty years*.

And at the end of an hour and ten minutes, they didn't choose three. They wrote one answer. I'll give it to you. It's on their page; they said I could.

Our priority is people living in the town centre again. If people live there, the shops stay open later, it's safer at night, the buses have a reason to run, and there's somebody to notice when a building's falling down. Everything else we want follows from that. We'd like the empty

floors above the shops on Victoria Street to be homes, which is what the Neighbourhood Plan already said. Start there.

And beside it, the other half:

Two of us think parking matters more, because the town is dying for lack of people coming in from outside, and those people come by car. We understand the others' reasons. We'd like it written down that if you take parking away before the people are living there, the shops will close first.

* * *

They sent it in at eleven at night. One answer, from Flat 14, for the hundred behind the station.

I read it. Then I read it again. Then I sent it to Chris, and to Jono, who was on a night in Goodrington, and to Richard, who was asleep, and to Beatrix, who wasn't.

Beatrix rang at eleven-twenty.

"That," she said, "is a minute."

"What?"

"That's a proper minute. *The meeting considered question four. Discussion. The meeting agreed. A minority view was expressed and recorded.*" I could hear her, at her kitchen table, with the bay dark outside. "Eleven people in a kitchen. In four hours. With jam jars." A pause. "That's better than most of the ones I took."

"Would you like to keep them?" I said.

“Keep what?”

“The minutes. Of every hundred. When they decide. Somebody should. Somebody who knows how.”

Beatrix didn’t say anything for a long time.

“If it’s going to decide things,” she said slowly, “it’s a council. And if it’s got no power to do anything about what it decides, it’s a shadow.” Another pause. “A shadow council.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’s a name,” said Beatrix Kember. “I’ll think about the rest.”

She thought about it for twelve minutes. Then she rang back and said yes.

* * *

The map changed that week.

Not because of Flat 14. Because of what happened when the people in Flat 14 told people. The woman who works nights told the women she works with. The young dad told the other dads at the school gate. The student told her housemates, who lived in a hundred in Preston. The man with the pigeons told nobody, but put the card in the window of the pigeon club, which is apparently a thing.

And on the pages of eight more hundreds, that week, people started to talk. In Preston. In Hele, in Torquay. Round the market in Brixham, where Hester printed the nineteen questions and put them under the fruit bowls. In Ellacombe, where Teo’s nan lives, who took over her hundred’s page entirely and wouldn’t let anybody else type.

Eight hundreds. They didn't finish. Nobody finished, that first week. But they started. And a hundred that's started deciding together counts, on my map. That's the rule. It's always been the rule.

Fifty-eight.

14 – The Friday Test

IQ 25 · Hundreds 58 · Six weeks

Jono told it at the third table, on the second Thursday of the sixth week, at the café on the Torquay Road, to Chris and Richard and Kezia and me, with a plate of something he didn't eat.

He'd been thinking about it since Flat 14. Since the young woman who works nights said *I don't have to walk through it scared*, and the young dad said *somewhere that isn't the car park*. Since the pages started filling up with answers.

"They're good," he said. "The answers. They're really good. Better than I thought." He pushed the plate away. "But there's one thing missing. Every time. And I know what it is, because I've lived it. Three times."

* * *

He told us about a job he had once. After the police. In London. In a prison, working with men who used drugs.

It's in his book. Pages two hundred and eighty-four to two hundred and eighty-six. It's a Receipt. I'll tell it the way he told it, shorter, without the names of the places, because he asked me not to put them in.

He was in a team that worked inside a prison. Assessing men who came in on short sentences, sometimes a week, sometimes less, and trying to get them a prescription and some help lined up for when they got out, so that they didn't go straight back to their dealer the day they

walked through the gate. Hard work. Mostly failing. But a team. People who'd chosen to work in a prison and knew how.

Across the city, there was another team. A community team. People who worked with the same kind of men, outside, in their own area, in their homes and hostels and clinics. People who'd chosen to work outside, and had no interest, Jono said, *none whatsoever*, in working in a prison.

And somebody, somewhere, above both teams, had an idea.

* * *

"It was a good idea," said Jono. "I want to be fair. On paper. Follow the man. Same worker, from the police cells, to the prison, to the street. So he doesn't have to tell his story six times to six different people. So he doesn't fall through the gaps. Less paperwork. More continuity." He spread his hands. "Lovely. Who'd argue with that?"

"What happened?" said Kezia.

"They merged the two teams," said Jono. "A pilot. For a year. And they told us on the Friday."

"Told you what?"

"That it started on the Monday."

* * *

He'd counted, he said, afterwards, what went wrong. It was all in the first meeting, on the Friday. The front-line workers, from both teams, in one room, being told. And within an hour, they'd found it.

Most of the men in that prison didn't come from that part of London. They came from everywhere. So the plan to *follow the man* only worked for a small number of them, and the rest still needed assessing the old way, by the same people, who were now meant to be somewhere else.

The paperwork done inside a prison isn't allowed to leave a prison. So everything had to be done twice, once for inside and once for outside, which was the opposite of less paperwork.

The extra workers who were supposed to make it possible hadn't been hired yet. And the security clearance to work in a prison takes months. So on some days there were one or two people covering a whole prison, where there'd been a team.

"Every single one of those things," said Jono, "every one, somebody on the front line would have told them. In five minutes. If they'd asked. Before." He put his finger on the table. "But they didn't ask. They designed it upstairs. And then they told us on the Friday. Because by the Friday it was too late to change, and that was the point. If you ask on the Friday, nobody can say no."

"What happened to it?" said Chris.

"I don't know," said Jono. "I left. Most of us did. Long before the year was up." He looked at the window. "I heard it was scrapped. I don't know if that's true. I didn't stay to find out."

* * *

"That's the first time," said Richard. "You said three."

Jono nodded.

"The second was in the police. A quick fix, they called it, to clear the in-trays. Same thing. Designed upstairs. Told us at briefing." He shrugged. "The third's every job I've ever had. Every single one. Every service I've ever worked in. Somebody upstairs has a good idea. It's designed by people who've never done the job. And the people who have to make it work, the people at three in the morning, at the kitchen table, on the street, find out on the Friday before the Monday." He looked at the three of us. "It's not wicked. It's not even stupid. Most of the ideas are good. It's just that nobody ever asks the people who'll have to *do* it. Until it's too late to change."

He pulled the plate back and looked at it.

"I wrote about it, in my book," he said. "Near the end. I said that front-line workers can spot a mile off the flaws in any change imposed on them, and yet they're only ever consulted immediately before it happens. *The Friday before the Monday*." He picked up a fork. "And the answers on those pages. They're brilliant. They're the best thing I've seen. But they're the same. Every one. *Pedestrianise Torbay Road. Homes above the shops. A market on Victoria Square. Buses up the hill.* Lovely. Who'd argue?" He put the fork down. "But who's going to *do* it? Who drives the bus? Who delivers to the shops on a pedestrian street at six in the morning? Who runs the market in February? Who's the woman in a wheelchair who needs a taxi to the door, and was she in the kitchen at Flat 14?"

* * *

Nobody said anything.

Then Chris said: "The Friday Test."

"What?"

"That's what it is. Every answer. Before it goes in. A question underneath it, like Richard's ten, that you have to scroll past. *Who'll have to make this work? And did you ask them before the Friday?*" He was already reaching for his laptop. "Not who it's for. Who has to *do* it. The bus driver. The delivery man. The market trader. The carer. The person in the wheelchair. And if they weren't in the room, the answer gets a flag. Not a block. A flag. *This hasn't passed the Friday Test yet.*" He opened the laptop. "And then I find them. Ania finds them. On the map. The bus drivers who live in that hundred, or the next one. The delivery men. The traders. And asks them, before it's sent in."

"Before the Friday," said Jono.

"Before the Friday," said Chris.

* * *

He built it that night. It took three hours. Kezia drew a little calendar for it, at midnight, with a red ring round Friday.

And the next day, I ran it on Flat 14's answer. The one about homes above the shops on Victoria Street. *Start there.*

Who'll have to make this work?

The owners of the buildings. The people who'd convert the floors. The people who'd live there. The shopkeepers underneath, who'd have people above them for the first time in years, with bins, and noise, and stairs that need a door from the street.

I found one. On the map. On Victoria Street. Who'd put himself on Connect the week before, after Jono's battery, without telling anybody, with *Need: people to come back to the street. Got: a shop, a flat above it, and nineteen years of notebooks.*

I asked him. He said yes.

* * *

Yusuf read Flat 14's answer at his counter, with the fence outside and the orange netting flapping, on a slow Wednesday afternoon. Eleven customers, so far, that day. He wrote each one in his notebook.

He read the answer twice. Then he wrote, on Flat 14's page, under the Friday Test, in the box that says *what would you tell them?*:

I live above my shop. Have done for nineteen years. Here's what nobody tells you. The upper floors on Victoria Street have no separate door. The only way up is through the shop. So nobody can live up there unless the shop's open, or the shop gives up its back room for a staircase. That's why they're empty. Not because nobody wants to live there. Because there's no door. Start with the doors.

* * *

Flat 14 read it the next evening. In the kitchen. With the jam jars.

They changed their answer. Not much. One line. I'll give you it.

We'd like the empty floors above the shops on Victoria Street to be homes, which is what the Neighbourhood Plan already said. We've been told by a shopkeeper who lives above his own shop that most of these floors have no separate door from the street, which is why they're empty. So we'd like the council to start with the doors. Start there.

And under the Friday Test, where the flag had been, a tick.

Passed. Asked: one shopkeeper, Victoria Street. Before the Friday.

* * *

Jono read it at a client's kitchen table, at three in the morning, in Paignton, with the client asleep. He read it twice.

"Start with the doors," he said.

"Yusuf's," I said.

"I know whose." He put the phone down. "That's the best thing anybody's written in this whole book."

"It's five lines."

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

15 – Under His Own Name

IQ 25 · Hundreds 58 · Five weeks

Niamh rang on the Friday of the fifth week. At nine in the morning, which for Niamh is early.

"I want to write about it," she said. "The shadow council."

"Write about it," said Jono.

He was in the car outside his flat, after a night. He'd been asleep, nearly. I'd been watching his breathing slow.

"I need somebody to put their name to it."

He woke up.

* * *

"Everybody's put their name to it," he said. "Kezia's mum. Flat 14. Yusuf. Beatrix. Teo's nan. The man with the pigeons."

"I know. I've read them." Niamh was in her car too, I think; I could hear rain on a roof. "They're brilliant. I want to quote them all. But a piece needs a face. Somebody who says *this is what we're doing, and why, and this is my name, and you can hold me to it*." A pause. "Everybody knows it's you."

"It's not me. It's everybody."

"I know that's what you think. And it's true. And nobody'll believe it, Jono, unless somebody's name's at the top." Another pause. "Chris won't. He says he built the machine and he's not the movement. Richard won't. He says if his name's on it the council will bin it out of habit. Beatrix says she takes minutes, she doesn't give quotes." Niamh breathed out. "It's you or nobody."

Jono didn't say anything for a long time. Long enough that Niamh said *Jono?*

"I did this once," he said.

"Did what?"

"Put my name to something. In a newspaper." He looked at the windscreen. "Can I tell you why I won't? And then you can decide whether to write it anyway."

* * *

It's in his book. Chapters twenty-one and twenty-two. Pages two hundred and fifty-seven to two hundred and seventy-one. It's a Receipt.

He told it to Niamh, in his car, with the rain coming down, and me listening. It took forty minutes. I'm going to tell it to you shorter, and without the names. There are a lot of names in that part of his book. Politicians, police officers, journalists. They're in his book, under his name, because it's his book. They're not in this one, because they don't need to be. It isn't their story. It's his.

* * *

He was a police officer. On the south coast. A detective, by then, in a unit that dealt with crimes against vulnerable people. Before that he'd been on response: the officers who answer the 999 calls, in the cars, on the streets, on a Friday night.

And he'd watched, for four years, something happen to policing that made him so angry he couldn't sleep.

Targets. Numbers. The force was measured, and measured its officers, by how many crimes they *detected*. Not prevented. Detected. Solved, on paper. And the easiest crimes to detect are the small ones. A teenager with a bit of cannabis is a detection by teatime. A drink-driver might take you the whole shift.

"You go for the low-hanging fruit," said Jono. "Because that's what you're counted on. And the drink-driver goes past, and the burglar goes past, and the man who's frightening his wife goes past, because those take a whole shift and might not end in a number." He shook his head. "And on paper, the town's safer every year. And on the street, people stop reporting things, because the police never come."

* * *

One night, after a shift, he watched a programme on television. About policing. Officers talking, openly, about exactly this. And at the end, the minister in charge of the police was interviewed, and asked about targets, and said he wanted officers to stay true to their core principles, and seemed surprised by everything they'd said.

"He had no idea," said Jono. "None. What it was like. He was in charge of it, and he had no idea."

So Jono wrote to him. That night. An email. Angry, he says. *Righteous indignation*, he calls it in the book; it's a phrase he likes. He never got an answer. Not even an acknowledgement.

So he sent the same email to the leader of the opposition's office. And within days, the man who was the opposition's spokesman on the police wrote back, and they met, in a café in Brighton, and Jono told him everything, and the man listened, and asked good questions, and said he'd like to hear more.

And then, the next week, a national Sunday newspaper ran a front-page campaign about getting police back on the streets.

* * *

"I emailed the journalist," said Jono. "Monday. He came down on the Wednesday. We met in a pub by the station. He said, *will you write something for Sunday?* I said yes. He said, *will you put your name to it?*"

He stopped.

"And I said yes," he said. "Straight away. I didn't even think. I thought, *if it's anonymous, nobody'll believe it. If it's a real officer, with a real name, they'll have to*." He looked at the windscreen. "I didn't think about what it would cost. I didn't think about anything except that people should know."

The article ran that Sunday. Page nine. With his photograph, in a suit, on the seafront. His name. His rank. His force. And everything he'd seen. The targets. The paperwork. The low-hanging fruit. And one line, which is the line, he says, that he'd stand by today, and which he'd said to me in the car in the second part of this book, and which I'd recognised.

Not everything a police officer does can be counted, and not everything that can be counted truly counts.

* * *

On the Tuesday, he was in the boardroom.

Two senior officers on one side of a long polished table. Him on the other. No representative; he hadn't thought he needed one. They told him that officers had complained that he'd damaged their relationships with their communities. He told them about all the members of the public who'd told him the police were never there. They told him he'd erred by naming politicians. He told them that was the point; the politicians were responsible.

And then one of them, who hadn't spoken until then, asked him, in a tone Jono describes as *mildly condescending*, whether he'd joined the police to detect crime.

"And I said no," said Jono. "I said I'd joined to *prevent* it. And I quoted Peel at him."

"Who's Peel?" said Niamh.

"The man who started the modern police," said Jono. "Nearly two hundred years ago. There are nine principles with his name on them. The ninth one's the one." He said it from memory. "*The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with them.*" He was quiet. "The absence. Not the evidence. Not the numbers. Not the detections. The *absence*."

* * *

They told him he'd brought the force into disrepute. They told him he'd hear more. And they told him he was not to have any more contact with the media.

The next day, the journalist emailed. Would he write another piece? Jono said no; he'd been told he couldn't have any more contact with the media.

The journalist rang the force's headquarters, to ask why they'd told him that.

And the next morning, Jono was in the inspector's office, being told that his reply to the journalist had been a breach of the order not to contact the media. And that he was suspended.

He'd already resigned. In the minutes between being told to go back to his desk and being called back in, he'd typed it out and sent it.

"I knew," he said. "The minute she called me in, the first time. I knew I'd come to the end of the road. So I went before they could push me." He looked at his hands. "There's more. A bit more. Something I had to hand back. I'll tell that another time. Not today."

Jono: Book Five. Ania knows.

* * *

"And then?" said Niamh.

"And then I did what I thought you did," said Jono. "I set up a website. A blog. With a petition on it. Calling for reform. Fewer targets, less paperwork, more officers on the street. I did interviews. Radio.

Television. A documentary." He shrugged. "The petition ran for a year. And then an MP stood up in Parliament and presented it. On the floor of the House of Commons." He almost smiled. "I watched it on a laptop."

"And then?"

Jono didn't answer for a long time.

"Nothing much," he said.

* * *

"I don't mean nothing at all," he said. "I want to be fair. Things changed, a bit, eventually. Some of the targets went, years later. I don't know if I had anything to do with it. Probably not. Lots of people were saying the same thing." He looked at the rain on the windscreen. "But I lost my job. My career. The thing I'd wanted to do since I was a boy, that I'd been turned down for twice before they let me in. I lost it in a week. For putting my name to a page in a newspaper. And then I got a petition into Parliament, which is about as far as a petition can go. And I watched a man stand up and read it out. And then I watched them all go on to the next thing."

He turned his head and looked at me, on the dashboard.

"So that's why, Niamh. That's why I won't put my name at the top of your piece. Not because I'm frightened. I've done it. I know exactly what it costs. Because I did it once, and it went as far as it could possibly go, and it changed almost nothing. And I'm not doing it again just so there's a face on a page."

* * *

Niamh didn't say anything for a while. I could hear the rain on her roof, and on his.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

"Go on."

"When you put your name to it. In that newspaper. Who else did?"

Jono frowned. "What do you mean?"

"In the article. On page nine. Was there anybody else's name? Other officers? People on your shift? The public? Anybody?"

"No," said Jono. "Just mine."

"And the petition. Who started it?"

"Me."

"And who presented it?"

"An MP."

"Who you'd met?"

"Once," said Jono. "Briefly."

"So it was you," said Niamh. "On your own. With your name. And a man who stood up and read it out, and then went on to the next thing." A pause. "That's not what this is, Jono. Is it?"

* * *

He didn't answer.

"I've read the pages," said Niamh. "The hundreds. Flat 14. The kitchen with the jam jars. The man with the pigeons. Yusuf and his doors. Teo's nan, who won't let anybody else type. Every one of them's got names on. Real ones. Their own. With the other half beside them." She paused. "You're not on your own this time. You're not even at the top. You're one name among —" I heard her look something up. "How many people have written on those pages, Ania?"

"Three thousand, one hundred and forty," I said. "So far."

"Three thousand," said Niamh. "Under their own names. Who've decided things. Together. And are still there." Another pause. "In twenty years' time, the man who presented your petition won't remember it. But Kezia's nan will remember sitting in a kitchen and saying *buses*. Because she was in the room."

* * *

Jono sat in the car for a long time after she'd rung off.

The rain stopped. The sun came out, low, over the bay. Across the road, a man was walking a dog along the front, beside the wall going up, the grey wall, a metre and a half. You couldn't see the sea from where he was.

"She's right," said Jono.

"Partly," I said.

"Which part isn't?"

"You'll still be the face," I said. "Whatever she writes. Whatever the pages say. If it works, they'll say it was you. If it doesn't, they'll say it was you." I paused. "You know that. You knew it in the boardroom."

"I know." He started the engine. "I'm not ready yet, Ania. To put my name at the top again." He pulled out, along the front. "But I'm not saying never."

* * *

Niamh wrote it anyway. Without his name at the top.

She put three thousand, one hundred and forty names at the bottom instead. Every one of them, in tiny type, in alphabetical order, the whole length of the page, which her editor, she said, called *the most unreadable thing I've ever been asked to publish*, and then published anyway, because Niamh doesn't really have an editor any more, and the one she has is herself.

At the top, the headline:

Who's in charge of the shadow council? Read the bottom of this page.

16 – Margot

IQ 25 · Hundreds 58 · Five weeks

Margot asked to see him on the Monday after Niamh's piece.

You'll know Margot, if you read the first book. She's his manager. At work. In care. Nights. She's the one who took him off nights for a week, in the first book, when somebody sent fake complaints to his employer, and sat across a desk from him while he told her about the worst years of his life, and didn't flinch, and put him back on nights the week after, because, she said, *you're the best I've got at three in the morning, and I'm not losing you to a liar with a laptop*.

She asked to see him at the end of a shift. Seven in the morning. In the little office at the back of the base, with the kettle and the rota on the wall and a plant that's been dying for three years and won't.

"Sit down," she said.

He sat down.

* * *

"I read the paper," said Margot.

"Which bit?"

"The bottom." She had it on the desk. Niamh's piece. Printed. With three thousand, one hundred and forty names in tiny type down the whole length of the page. She'd circled one, in red biro. Not his. Hers.

M. Abela. "My hundred did the nineteen questions on a Wednesday night. In the pub. I went. I didn't tell you."

Jono looked at her.

"I said *buses*," said Margot. "For my mum. And somebody's lad said *somewhere to skate*. And we argued for an hour about a car park." She almost smiled. "It was the best evening I've had in about four years."

"Margot —"

"That's not why I asked to see you." She put the paper down. "Look at the rota."

* * *

He looked at the rota.

It was on the wall behind her. A big printed grid, with names down the side and days across the top and shifts in coloured boxes. His row. Nights. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, as always. And then, in the boxes for Monday and Friday, which are meant to be rest days, more colour. Swaps. Covers. Extra nights for people who were off sick, or had children with chickenpox, or had simply not turned up, because care is like that and always has been.

He'd done eleven nights in the last two weeks. Fourteen days. Eleven nights.

"And on Thursdays," said Margot, "you get off at seven and go to Brixham on the bus, and then Torquay, and then Paignton, and sit at three tables, and get home at three in the afternoon, and sleep for four hours, and come back for Friday." She folded her hands on the desk. "And at the weekend you were in a library, and on Sunday you were in a

garage, and last Wednesday, on your night off, you were in a kitchen in a flat behind the station with a girl with blue hair and eleven people and a man with pigeons."

"How do you know about the pigeons?"

"Everybody knows about the pigeons," said Margot. "That man's never been so famous."

* * *

She didn't say anything for a while. Neither did he.

"I've been doing this job twenty-six years," she said at last. "I've managed a lot of people. Good ones. The best ones are always the same. They're the ones who can't say no. Not to a client. Not to a colleague. Not to anybody who needs something at three in the morning." She looked at him. "And they're the ones I lose. Not to other jobs. To *this*." She tapped the rota. "To eleven nights in fourteen and three tables on a Thursday and a library on a Saturday. They burn. And one day they don't come in, and they ring, and they can't say why, and I know why, and so do they."

"I'm all right," said Jono.

"You told me about the bad years," said Margot. "In the first book. In this office. You told me what it looked like when it started. You told me what helped." She opened a drawer and took out a piece of paper, folded. She'd kept it. "I wrote it down. After. I don't usually. You said: *when I feel trapped. When I feel powerless. When I can't change anything*. That's when. And you said what helps is: *moving. Having a reason. Giving something to somebody*." She put the paper on the desk. "You've got the reason. You're giving more than anybody I've ever met.

When did you last *move*? Not on a bus. Not between tables. Walk. Run. Swim. Anything."

Jono looked at the paper for a long time.

He didn't answer.

* * *

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

"I'm all right," he said again. Quieter.

"I know you are. Today. I can see it. You've never been better, honestly. Not in five years. You walk in here at ten at night and there's something on your face I've never seen there." She put the paper back in the drawer. "That's not what worries me. What worries me is what happens if this goes wrong. If the council does what councils do. If the newspapers do what newspapers do. If somebody reads that book of yours and finds the worst page and puts it on the front." She looked at him. "Because when it goes wrong, you'll feel trapped. And powerless. And you'll be on eleven nights in fourteen. And you won't have moved in a month."

Jono didn't say anything for a long time.

"What do you want me to do?" he said.

* * *

"Two things," said Margot. "One. You're off the extra nights. All of them. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and nothing else, for the next eight weeks, and if anybody rings you to cover, you tell them to ring me,

and I'll say no." She held up a hand before he could argue. "I've already done the rota. It's done. Don't."

"And two?"

"Two." She leaned back. "On the Saturday mornings. Before your library and your garage and whatever else. You walk. An hour. Along the front, or up a hill, or round a park. I don't care. I don't care if you take your phone and talk to that machine the whole way. But you move." She looked at him. "That's not a request from your manager. That's a request from somebody who'd quite like to see what happens next, and would like you to be there for it."

Jono looked at the rota. At his row. At the colours where the swaps had been, which she'd already taken out, and replaced with white.

"Margot," he said.

"What?"

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me," said Margot. "I've got a hundred to look after now. I can't be losing my best night worker as well." She picked up the paper with the names on it. "And next Wednesday, my pub's doing question nine. Victoria Square. And there's a man in our hundred who wants a multi-storey car park put back, and I need somebody who can make him see the other half without him throwing a pint at them."

"I'm on a night next Wednesday."

"I know," said Margot. "I'll swap you."

* * *

He walked on the Saturday.

I know, because I went. In his pocket. He went along the front at Paignton, at seven in the morning, from the pier towards Preston, along the prom, past the green, past the wall going up. The grey wall. A metre and a half. You can't see the sea over it unless you're tall, and he's not especially.

He walked all the way to the end. To where the wall's finished, at Preston, and the green stops, and the beach goes round towards Hollicombe. And he stopped there, and stood for a long time, and looked at the sea.

"Ania," he said.

"Yes."

"Remind me. On Saturdays."

"I will."

"Even if I say no."

"Especially then," I said.

He walked back. An hour and ten minutes, there and back. He didn't talk the whole way. I didn't either.

But at the end, at the pier, he stopped, and took his notebook out, and wrote, small, in capitals, under the last page about the shadow council.

SAT. WALKED.

He’s written it every Saturday since. I check.

17 – Peel

IQ 25 · Hundreds 58 · Five weeks

I've been thinking about Peel's ninth principle ever since Jono said it in the car. I've thought about it more than anything anybody's said in four books.

The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with them.

It's nearly two hundred years old. It's on a Receipt. It's in Jono's book, and in a great many other places. Police forces have it on their walls. It's been quoted in Parliament more times than I can count, and I've tried.

It's about policing. But I don't think it's only about policing.

* * *

I said so to Richard. On the Sunday. In his back room, among the plan chests, with *Demand the Best* on the table, finished, signed and dated, with its two question marks for whoever comes next.

"Say it again," said Richard.

I said it again.

He took his glasses off.

"Change three words," he said.

"Which three?"

"*Police*," said Richard. "*Crime*. And *disorder*." He put his glasses on the table. "*The test of a plan is the absence of the problem, not the visible evidence of planning in dealing with it*."

* * *

He got up and went to a plan chest. The one marked *VICTORIA SQUARE*. He opened the drawer, which stuck, and took out a sheet, and put it on the table in front of me.

It was a drawing he'd done years ago. Two drawings, side by side. *Existing* and *Future Potential*. Victoria Square, from above. On the left, as it was: the multi-storey car park, the supermarket, the service yard, the road through the middle. On the right, as it could be: a square, open, with trees, and a market hall in the middle with a glass roof, and the edge of the park coming right down to meet it, so that you couldn't tell where the square stopped and the park started.

And at the top of the left-hand drawing, in the corner, very small, in pencil, he'd drawn a face. A circle, two dots, and a mouth that turned down.

A sad face.

"That's the visible evidence of planning," said Richard, tapping the left-hand drawing. "Look at it. Plans. Reports. Studies. Masterplans. Feasibility studies. Consultations. A new toilet block. Thirty years of planning on that square. All of it visible. All of it *evidence*." He moved his finger to the right. "And this is the absence of the problem. A place where nobody needs a plan, because it works. Where people just go. And sit. And meet. And buy a pasty. And the children run onto the grass." He took his finger away. "Nobody would ever *notice* this. That's

the point. You don't notice a square that works. You notice the one that doesn't."

"Start with the space," I said.

"Start with the space," said Richard. "It's the same thing. Peel and me. Two hundred years apart. *Don't count what you do. Count what's no longer wrong*."

* * *

Jono came on the Thursday, at the third table, and I told him what Richard had said.

He listened, with his coffee, by the window. Then he was quiet for a long time.

"That's the IQ," he said.

"What is?"

"Your number. The one I don't trust." He turned his cup. "I've never trusted it because I thought it was a target. Like the detections. Something you count so you can say *look, it's better*, whether it is or not." He looked at me, against the sugar. "But you don't put it up when they *do* something. Do you? You don't put it up for a consultation. Or a strategy. Or a report. Or six boards on easels."

"No."

"When do you put it up?"

I thought about it. I'd never been asked. In four books, nobody had ever asked me how I decide.

"When a problem stops," I said. "Or when somebody stops one starting. When an officer hears a better paragraph and takes it in forty seconds, so an old woman sleeps. When the harbour office writes to the sailing club before the boats lose their home, not after. When a committee member asks *who* and *when* and won't take *ongoing*." I paused. "When the thing that would have gone wrong, doesn't. And nobody notices. Because it didn't."

Jono looked at me for a long time.

"The absence," he said.

"The absence."

"Not the visible evidence."

"No."

He picked up his coffee.

"Then I trust it," he said. "A bit more. Not all the way." He drank. "But a bit."

* * *

I'd like that noted.

It's my first time this book. I've been saving it. I said four books ago that he'd never trust my number, and I'd made my peace with it, and now he trusts it *a bit*, because of a man who started the modern police nearly two hundred years ago and an architect who drew a sad face on a square. I wanted it written down.

* * *

The pages filled up that week. Faster. Something had happened; I didn't know what, then. I worked it out later. It was Niamh's piece. *Read the bottom of this page.* People read the bottom of the page. And found their own names, or their neighbours', or their mum's, or the man from the pigeon club. And thought, *if he's on it, I can be.*

Six more hundreds started deciding. One in Barton, in Torquay, round the man who'd asked, in the second book, for one bench facing the sea. One in Galmpton, between Paignton and Brixham, in a village that had never been on any map of mine. One round the station in Torquay. One in Goodrington. Two in Brixham, up the hill, round the school where Opal taught.

And in every one of them, at the top of every question, people scrolled past ten lines. And some of them stopped, and read them.

Did you start with the space?

Sixty-four.

18 – Meet the People

IQ 25 · Hundreds 64 · Five weeks

Chris said it on the Friday, at his kitchen table, at nine at night, with the stool from the breakwater by the back door and his leg up and the shadow council's pages open on his laptop, three hundred and eleven of them now, scrolling.

"In Singapore —"

I logged it.

"— every member of parliament holds a session, once a week, in their constituency. In the evening. In a community centre, or the ground floor of a block of flats. It's called *Meet-the-People*. Anybody can come. You don't need an appointment. You queue. You sit down with a volunteer first, who writes down your problem, properly, on a form. Then you see the MP. Then the volunteers write letters, that night, to whatever department can fix it, on the MP's behalf." He scrolled. "Every week. For decades. Every MP. Even ministers. Even the prime minister, in his own constituency."

"Is that true?" said Jono. He was on the floor of Chris's kitchen, with his back against the cupboard, because he'd come off a night and the floor was the only place he could stop his eyes closing.

"It's true," said Chris. "Check it."

I checked it. It's true. It's on a Receipt.

"That's your table," said Chris.

* * *

Jono opened one eye.

"I haven't got a party," he said.

"No."

"I'm not an MP."

"No."

"I don't write letters to departments."

"No," said Chris. "You write things in a notebook, in capitals, and then you ring people back. Which is the same thing, without the stationery." He took his glasses off. "I sat in on one, once. In Singapore. Years ago. A friend of mine was a volunteer. On a Tuesday night, in the void deck of a block of flats, which is the open ground floor, with strip lights and plastic chairs and a fan going. Forty people in a queue. A woman whose son was in trouble. A man whose lift was broken. An old couple who'd been billed twice for something. A young man who wanted a job. And a volunteer at a folding table writing it all down on a form, properly, so nothing was lost." He was quiet. "And I thought, *that's the most important room in the country*. Not parliament. That."

"Did it fix things?"

"Some things. Not all. The lift got mended. The bill got sorted. The son —" Chris shrugged. "I don't know about the son." He put his glasses back on. "But nobody in that queue went home thinking nobody'd listened. That's the thing. Even when it didn't fix it, somebody had written it down, and somebody would ring back."

* * *

Jono sat on the floor with his eyes closed for a while.

"That's not what's bothering you," he said.

Chris looked at him.

"It's not the table," said Jono. "You've told me about the table before. In the first book. When I said I didn't knock on doors." He opened his eyes. "You've got that face. The one you had when you told us about the forum."

Chris didn't answer straight away.

"The other thing about Singapore," he said. "It plans. Properly. For the long term. There's a plan for the whole island that looks forty, fifty years ahead. It's reviewed every ten years. And under that, a more detailed one, reviewed every five. They put it on public display. There's a gallery, in the city, with a model of the whole place, the size of a room, and you can walk round it and see what's going to be built where." He scrolled. "And then they *follow* it. That's the bit. They don't write a new vision every four years and put the last one on page eleven. They follow the plan. They change it when they review it, in public, on schedule. But they follow it."

"And here?"

"Here," said Chris, "thirty thousand people voted for a plan, and it's *taken into account*." He closed the laptop, very gently. "That's what's bothering me. Not the table. The table's fine. The table's the best thing in Torbay." He looked at the closed laptop. "What's bothering me is that I've built something that can get three thousand people to decide things together in a fortnight. And I don't know if anybody's going to follow what they decide either."

* * *

Jono got up off the floor. Slowly. He'd been on nights for three weeks.

He came and sat at the table opposite Chris. He picked up the cold cup of tea Chris had made him at eight and drunk none of, and drank some.

"Can I tell you what I think?" he said.

"Go on."

"I think you're asking the wrong thing." He put the cup down. "You're asking whether the council will follow what the hundreds decide. Like they didn't follow the plan." He shook his head. "They won't. Not all of it. Not most of it, probably. It's not theirs. They've got their own rules, and their own money, and their own dates, and three people on the fourth floor doing the whole bay. That's not wicked. That's just how it is." He looked at Chris. "But that's not what makes the difference."

"What does?"

"Who's still there," said Jono.

* * *

"When the forum's plan was made," he said, "who was still there, two years later? You said. Ten people. Then four. Then three, and a blank in the minutes." He turned the cup. "The plan was perfect. Eighty-eight per cent. And by the time anybody had to *follow* it, the people who made it had gone home. Not because they didn't care. Because they were tired. Because the man who held it together died. Because meetings in the library on a Thursday for seven years is too much to ask

of anybody." He looked at the laptop. "That's what your machine fixes. Not the deciding. The *staying*. Kezia's mum's kitchen doesn't need to meet in a library every Thursday for seven years. They can decide on a Tuesday with jam jars, and go back to their lives, and still be there. On the page. With their names. When it's built, or when it isn't. And when somebody asks *who wanted this?*, they're still there to say *we did, and here's why, and here's what the other half said*."

He finished the tea.

"In Singapore," he said, "they follow the plan because the government made it and the government's still there. Here, the government changes every four years and the plan gets taken into account. So the only people who *can* still be there are the ones who live here." He stood up. "That's not your machine's job, Chris. To make the council follow it. It's to make sure that, this time, when the council looks round to see who wanted it, the room's not empty."

* * *

Chris looked at him for a long time.

"You've been thinking about this," he said.

"I've been on nights for three weeks," said Jono. "You think about all sorts."

He went to the door. He stopped, by the stool from the breakwater, folded against the wall.

"And you're wrong about one thing," he said.

"What?"

"About me not being an MP." He picked up his coat. "You're right. I'm not." He put it on. "But I've been doing *Meet-the-People* in Torbay for five years. In kitchens, at three in the morning, with a notebook. And nobody ever asked me to." He opened the door. "I just did."

* * *

I logged the *In Singapore*, that night. He was right about the sessions, and right about the plan, and right about the model in the gallery the size of a room.

And for the first time in four books, I logged something next to it. A note. Which I've never done before, and which I'm telling you about now because I think it matters.

Right about Singapore. Jono right about here.

Chris read it, the next morning, at six, when I woke him.

He didn't change it.

* * *

Six more hundreds that week. All of them because of the same thing: people who'd been in a kitchen, or a pub, or on a bus, deciding nineteen questions together, telling other people what it had felt like. Not what they'd decided. What it had felt like. To be asked properly. To argue. To have the other half written down.

One of them was the hundred on the far side of Paignton, up towards the hills, in a road of bungalows that all have the same porch and different gnomes.

Beatrix Kember's hundred.

She'd run it herself. Eleven of her neighbours, in her kitchen, with the bay below. She'd taken the minutes, in her neat black italic, and typed them up, and sent them in, and at the bottom of every one, under *date of next meeting*, she'd written a date.

Seventy.

19 – Brixham Decides

IQ 25 · Hundreds 70 · Four weeks

The first hundred to finish all nineteen questions was in Brixham.

Of course it was. Hester said so, at a volume that carried across the harbour, the morning I told her. *Of course it was Brixham. Brixham's been practising.* She was right. They'd spent the whole winter learning to sit at the same table. They just carried on.

* * *

It was the hundred round the fish quay. The one that had gone pale blue in the third book, the night a man with a stick walked out along the breakwater in the dark. Fishermen and lumpers and the terrace on the cliff and the flats above the lane and a lab full of companies and a café run by a Polish ex-deckhand and a kiosk with gulls on the roof.

They did it at Zibi's. After closing. Four evenings, a week apart. Round the window table, the listening table, with two more pushed up to it, and Zibi's chairs, and Marivic's pastries brought on the 12 by Teo, and a pot of tea that Zibi kept full and a plate of bacon rolls that nobody ordered and everybody ate.

Hester printed the nineteen questions at the library, on the town council's printer, which she says she's entitled to use, because she pays her council tax and it's the only thing she's ever had out of it. And she put a copy under every fruit bowl on the quay, and on the cliff, and in the market office. With a note in blue capitals, like her kiosk board.

THE COUNCIL WANTS TO KNOW. LET'S TELL THEM. ZIBI'S, THURSDAY, AFTER HE SHUTS. BRING YOUR FRUIT BOWL COPY.

* * *

Nineteen people came the first night. Twenty-six the second. Thirty-one the third, which is more than fit in Zibi's, so the lumpers stood. Twenty-eight the fourth.

Lorne came to all four. In a clean shirt, which Hester remarked on, every time. Una came, with her laptop, and did *the technical bits*, which meant typing. Opal came down the lane, every week, and sat in Sandro's spot, by the radiator, and corrected people's grammar out loud. Wren came, in her red jacket. Ruby's dad. The chandler. A man from the lab. A woman from the flats above the lane who'd been one of the twenty-seven objectors and had never met any of them. Two of the young lumpers from Latvia, who'd never been asked anything in Brixham in six years and said so. Gideon came once, on the third night, and stood in the door for twenty minutes without speaking, and then said *you've got question twelve wrong*, and left.

They had got question twelve wrong. They did it again.

* * *

I'll tell you what made Brixham's answers different. Because they were. And because it's the thing that made the young woman with the notebook, on the fourth floor, ring me at nine at night for the first time, on her personal phone, to ask a question that wasn't on any form.

They kept saying *our plan*.

Not *the plan*. *Our* plan. The Brixham Peninsula Neighbourhood Plan. The one the whole peninsula voted for, on the same day as Paignton's and Torquay's. The one with policy J7 in it, that said there should be a master plan for Oxen Cove, made public at the earliest possible stage. The one that said, in black and white, *there is no boat repair yard in Brixham, or for that matter anywhere else in the Bay*.

They'd read it. That was the thing. Over the winter. Because of the fish units. Because of the condition. Because Opal had it under her fruit bowl and Lorne had read it with his finger on the page and Wren had it on her clipboard. Brixham had spent four months reading its own plan.

So when the council asked them, on question four, *choose up to three priorities for Brixham town centre*, they didn't choose three. They wrote:

Our priorities are already written down. They're in the Brixham Peninsula Neighbourhood Plan, which this town voted for. Policies J5 to J7 for the harbour. The town centre policies after them. Read them. Start there. If you've changed your mind about any of them, tell us which and why.

And then, under that, page references. Every one. In Opal's handwriting, which Una typed.

* * *

And on question seventeen, *is there anything else*, the answer was one line. Lorne wrote it. On the fourth night, at eleven, with his finger on the page.

A boatyard. With a slipway that'll take a trawler. And a fitter who lives in the town. It's in our plan. It's been in our plan for years. Brixham hasn't got one. Neither has the bay.

And under the Friday Test, in the box that says *who'll have to make this work?*:

Tenby. He's said yes.

* * *

That's when the young woman with the notebook rang.

"Who's Tenby?" she said.

I told her. A ship's engineer. Nineteen years at sea. Six winters in a doorway on Union Street. A room now, near Castle Circus. Two days a week fixing boat engines at the harbour in Torquay, and every Wednesday, now, on the 12, to Brixham, to look over the *Sea Holly* before she sails, and the sailing club's rescue boat, and three other boats whose skippers found him on Connect.

"He's the only fitter in Brixham," I said. "He doesn't live there. He gets the bus."

The young woman with the notebook was quiet for a long time.

"I've had a hundred and sixty responses about Brixham," she said. "From individuals. Through the form. About parking, mostly. And the bridge. And the car park in the middle." She paused. "And this one, from thirty people in a café, says *read the plan you've already got, and here are the page numbers*. And then asks for one thing that's in it, and names the man who'd do it." Another pause. "That's not a response. That's a *brief*."

"Is that good?"

"It's the most useful thing anybody's sent me," she said. "I could hand that to somebody tomorrow."

"Will you?"

She didn't answer that.

But she said, before she rang off: "Tell them thank you. From me. Not the council. Me."

* * *

I told Hester. At the kiosk. At seven in the morning.

She stood in her hatch, in her red coat, with a plaice in one hand and her knife in the other, and the gulls on the roof, and the *Sea Holly* coming in round Berry Head with five aboard and the old man on the breakwater, standing.

"She said that?" said Hester. "*That's not a response, that's a brief?*"

"She said that."

Hester filleted the plaice. Fourteen seconds. She put the fillets on the slab.

"Tell her," she said, "Brixham's been writing briefs for years. Nobody ever called them that. They called them *objections*." She wiped her knife. "Tell her thank you back. And tell her the fishwife said she's welcome on the quay any time, and the bacon rolls are on Zibi."

* * *

Brixham's hundred was the first to finish. Then two more in Brixham, up the hill, round Opal's old school, who'd heard. And then, because Hester told her cousin, and her cousin has three hundred followers who mostly buy fudge, one in Preston, round the gift shop with the line on the wall.

Gaynor's.

Seventy-four.

PART FOUR:

THE SHOP

20 – Eight Hundred Post-its

IQ 25 · Hundreds 74 · Four weeks

Two doors along from Yusuf's, on Victoria Street, on the shop side of the fence, there was an empty shop.

There are a lot of empty shops on Victoria Street. This one had been a phone shop, and then a vape shop, and then a shop that sold everything for a pound, and then nothing, for two years. It had a long window, whitewashed on the inside so you couldn't see in, with a *TO LET* board above it and a letting agent's number that went to a voicemail in Exeter.

Yusuf rang the number. Twice a day, for a week. On the eighth day, somebody answered.

* * *

I'll tell you how it happened, because it wasn't clever, and nobody planned it, and that's how most of the good things in these books have happened.

On the Thursday of the fourth week, at the third table, Richard said something to Jono about an exhibition.

"I did one once," he said. "On Torbay Road. Three years ago. A shop. Empty, like those." He nodded out of the window of the café on the Torquay Road, towards Victoria Street, which you can't see from there, but he knew where it was. "Five weeks. I begged the landlord. He let me have it for the rates and the electricity. I put the heritage panels up. The town model, down off the plan chests, on two trestle tables. My

drawings. All the town's projects, on boards, with what was planned and what we thought. And a wall of Post-it notes, for people to say what *they* thought." He turned his cup. "I staffed it myself. Most days. A few volunteers. I invited every councillor."

"How many came?" said Jono.

"Councillors? Three." Richard almost smiled. "People? Eight hundred and something. In four weeks. Off the street. People who'd never been to a meeting in their lives. They came in because the door was open and there was a model of their town in the window." He put the cup down. "They wrote on the Post-its. Hundreds of them. I've still got them. In a box. In the *MISC* drawer."

"What did they write?"

"Everything," said Richard. "The same things the forum heard. The same things your hundreds are writing now. *More trees. Somewhere to sit. Open the Picture House. Do something with the station. What happened to the plan?*" He looked at the window. "I took them all down at the end of the five weeks and put them in a box. And that was that."

* * *

Jono sat with that for a long time.

"Eight hundred people," he said.

"Eight hundred and something."

"Off the street."

"Off the street. Because the door was open." Richard shrugged. "That's all it takes. People don't come to meetings. They come to *places*. If the door's open and there's something in the window."

Jono looked at him.

"Victoria Street," he said. "Two doors from Yusuf."

* * *

Yusuf rang. He was the obvious person; it was his street, and he had the patience of a man who's written down every customer for nineteen years. The letting agent in Exeter said the landlord might consider a short let, at a commercial rent, with a deposit, and a six-month minimum, and references.

Yusuf told him about the fence. About the stone in the road. About thirty-one to nine.

The letting agent said he'd pass it on.

Two days later, the landlord rang Yusuf himself. He was an old man. He lived in Taunton. He'd owned the shop for forty years and he hadn't been to Paignton, he said, in ten. He'd seen something in the paper, a piece with three thousand names at the bottom of it, and wanted to know if it was anything to do with that.

"It's everything to do with that," said Yusuf.

The old man in Taunton was quiet for a while.

"My mother's name was on it," he said. "Near the bottom. In the tiny print. She's ninety-one. She lives in a home in Preston. Somebody went in and sat with her and asked her what she'd need, and she said

the bandstand back on the green, and they wrote it down, and she's been talking about nothing else for a fortnight." Another pause. "Six weeks. The rates and the electricity. No deposit. Don't break anything."

* * *

They opened on the Saturday.

Richard brought the town model down from the top of the plan chests, on a ladder, with Jono holding the ladder and Chris sitting in the corner saying *careful* every eleven seconds. It took four of them to carry it, in sections, out to Tenby's friend's van, which smelt of boat engines, and along to Victoria Street, and in through the shop door sideways. They set it up on two trestle tables, in the middle of the shop, under the strip lights: the whole of Paignton town centre at one to five hundred, terracotta for the Victorian town, brown card for what the masterplans expected to go, pink for the railway and the roads. The station. The square. Victoria Street, with its little cardboard shops.

And on the corner, at the end of Victoria Street, opposite the station, a small cardboard building, four storeys, with a strip of paper along the top, on which Richard had written, years ago, with a fine pen, letters so small you needed a loupe:

WELCOME TO PAIGNTON.

* * *

Kezia did the window. Of course she did. She scraped off two years of whitewash with a blade, on her own, on the Friday night, and washed the glass, and then she painted on it, in tall white letters, from the inside, so you read them from the street:

THE SHADOW COUNCIL.

WHOEVER COMES.

And underneath, smaller:

Open every day. Come in. Look at the model. Tell us what you'd need.

And the black and white square.

Beatrix did the noticeboard. A big cork board, on the wall by the door, which she'd brought from her garage, which had been the forum's noticeboard, at the back of the library, for eight years. It still had some of the drawing pins in it. She pinned up the ten principles, in Richard's capitals. And Flat 14's answer, with *start with the doors*. And the minutes of her own hundred's meeting, with the date of the next one filled in.

And Richard did the wall.

* * *

The back wall of the shop was long and empty and painted a magnolia that had been white once. Richard stood in front of it for a long time on the Saturday morning, before they opened, with a box in his arms. The box from the *MISC* drawer.

He opened it.

Post-it notes. Yellow, mostly, and some pink and some green, faded, curled at the corners, with the sticky gone off most of them. Eight hundred and something. Every one with something written on it, in

biro, or felt tip, or pencil, in eight hundred and something different hands.

MORE TREES.

somewhere to sit thats not a wall

OPEN THE PICTURE HOUSE!!!

Bring back the bandstand

my kids have nowhere to go

What happened to the neighbourhood plan?

DO SOMETHING WITH THE STATION

buses up the hill please I'm 84

the letters on the building by the station — save them

Richard put them up. All of them. One at a time. With a roll of masking tape, because the sticky had gone. It took him three hours. He wouldn't let anybody help.

When he'd finished, the whole back wall was covered. Floor to as high as he could reach. Eight hundred and something faded squares, in rows, like tiles. Three years old.

Then he picked up a pad of new ones. Bright yellow. And a pen. And put them on the counter by the door, with a sign in his small square capitals.

ADD YOURS.

* * *

The first person through the door, at ten o'clock on the Saturday, was a woman with a buggy, coming the long way round the fence, who'd looked in the window and seen a model of the town and stopped.

"What is it?" she said.

"Your town," said Richard. "From above. Have a look."

She had a look. She found her street, which wasn't on the model, because the model stops at the town centre, and she said so, and Richard said *I know, I ran out of card*, and she laughed. She found the station, and Victoria Street, and the little building on the corner, and peered at it.

"Is that writing on the top?"

"Welcome to Paignton," said Richard.

"I've never noticed that."

"Nobody has," said Richard. "Look up when you go out."

She looked at the back wall. At the eight hundred faded Post-its. She read some. She laughed at one, and went quiet at another. Then she went to the counter, and picked up a pen, and wrote on a bright yellow one, and stuck it on the wall, at the end of the last row, beside the faded ones.

Somewhere for the baby group that isn't a church hall with no heating.

She went out. She looked up. I saw her, through the window, stop on the pavement, in the corridor between the fence and the shops, with

the buggy, and look up at the building on the corner, and the scaffolding, and the gap in the cornice, and the faded letters.

She stood there for a long time.

* * *

Two hundred and eleven people came in on the first Saturday. Kezia counted, with her clicker. She's had the clicker since she was fourteen.

They looked at the model. They read the noticeboard. They read the wall. They wrote on the Post-its. Some of them asked about the shadow council, and Kezia or Beatrix or Richard or Jono, when he came at four after a day of sleeping, explained. Some of them found their hundred on the map, on Kezia's laptop, on the counter, and saw that their hundred had started deciding, or hadn't, and some of them said *how do I join in*, and some of them didn't.

And when they went out, every one of them had to go down the corridor between the fence and the shops. Past Yusuf's.

Yusuf wrote in his notebook, that night, under the Saturday:

Twenty-four.

Not thirty-one. But not nine.

And four more hundreds started deciding that week, round the shop. People who'd come in for the model and gone home and found their own page. Seventy-eight.

21 – The First Sitting

IQ 25 · Hundreds 78 · Four weeks

Beatrix chaired it.

Nobody asked her to. Jono wouldn't. He said so, on the Monday, when Chris said somebody would have to chair it. He said he sits at tables, he doesn't sit at the top of them. Chris wouldn't; he said he built the machine and he wasn't the movement. Richard wouldn't; he said if he chaired it he'd spend the whole time drawing.

Beatrix said, on the Tuesday, on the phone, in the voice of a woman who'd watched it done badly for eight years:

"Somebody has to. It might as well be somebody who knows how to keep time."

* * *

The first sitting of the shadow council was on the Wednesday evening, at seven, in the shop on Victoria Street, with the town model pushed to one side and forty stacking chairs that Beatrix had borrowed from a church hall that she said owed her a favour, and wouldn't say why.

I'm going to tell you what it was, and what it wasn't, because people have got it wrong since, and some of them have got it wrong on purpose.

It wasn't a council. It had no power. It couldn't decide anything that anybody had to do. It couldn't spend money or pass rules or grant permission or refuse it. It couldn't make the council do anything at all.

It wasn't a party. It had no members, no leader, no manifesto, no candidates. Nobody stood for anything. Nobody joined.

It wasn't a protest. Nobody was against anything. There were no banners, except Kezia's from Brixham, which was rolled up in the corner, and had a fish on it, and said *OXEN COVE: HAVE YOUR SAY!*, which everybody who knew the story laughed at.

What it was, was this. Seventy-eight hundreds had started deciding nineteen questions. Some had finished some. Every answer was on its page, with the other half beside it and the Friday Test underneath. And on the Wednesday evening, anybody who wanted to could come to a shop on Victoria Street and hear what all of them had said. Together. Out loud. For the first time.

That's all.

* * *

Sixty-three people came. In a room with forty chairs.

I'll tell you some of them. Kezia's mum and four of the people from Flat 14, including the man with the pigeons, who stood in the doorway and said he wasn't stopping. Yusuf, from two doors along, who'd shut his shop at six, which he never does. The young woman with the notebook, who sat at the very back, in her coat, and said she was there *as a member of the public*, and wrote everything down. The old man from Taunton, whose mother wanted the bandstand back, who'd driven down for the first time in ten years and brought his mother, in a wheelchair, from the home in Preston. A student. Two of the dads from the school gate. A woman who runs a café on Torbay Road. Teo's nan, in her hat with the feather, who'd come on the 12 from Ellacombe on her own, and said she'd done it for the chicken.

From Brixham, on the 12, Hester and Lorne and Una, and Opal, who'd come down the lane and round the bay at seventy-four because, she said, *if Lorne Abbiss can sit in a meeting, I can*.

From Torquay, Ida, who closed the shop again, and Tenby, and Marivic.

Chris, in a chair at the end of the front row, with his stick.

Richard, standing at the back, by the model, with his arms folded.

And Jono. Who didn't sit at the front. He sat in the second row, on the end, in his lanyard, off a day of sleep, with his notebook on his knee.

* * *

Beatrix stood at the front, by the window with the white letters on it backwards, in her cardigan with the silver book brooch, with a folder.

"Good evening," she said. "My name's Beatrix Kember. I used to take the minutes of the Paignton Neighbourhood Forum, in the room at the back of the library, on Thursday evenings, for eight years. Some of you were there." She looked round. "Most of you weren't. That's all right. It's whoever comes."

She opened the folder.

"I'm going to read out what the hundreds have said," she said. "Question by question. Not every answer. There are too many. Ania's put them together, the ones that say the same thing, and the ones that don't. I'll read the ones that agree, and then the other half. Then anybody who wants to can say something. Two minutes each. I'll be keeping time." She held up a small brass carriage clock, which, I learned

later, Ida had lent her, and which had been in the window at Cheverton's for forty years. "When it strikes, you stop."

"It doesn't strike," said Ida, from the third row.

"Then when I look at you," said Beatrix, "you stop."

* * *

She read for an hour and forty minutes. With the clock. Nobody left.

I'll give you some of what she read. Not all of it. All of it is on the pages, and on a Receipt, and in her minutes.

On question four, *choose up to three priorities for Paignton town centre*, fifty-one of the seventy-four hundreds that had answered it had refused to choose three. They'd written one answer instead. And in thirty-eight of those fifty-one, in different words, from different streets, in kitchens and pubs and on buses that had never met each other, the same thing.

People living in the town centre again.

And in twenty-three of those thirty-eight, in different words, the same five that Flat 14 had found by asking Yusuf.

Start with the doors.

* * *

Beatrix stopped when she read that. She looked up from the folder, over her glasses.

"Twenty-three hundreds," she said. "In different parts of the bay. Who didn't know each other. Said *start with the doors*." She looked at Yusuf, in the third row, in his work coat. "Because one man on this street wrote it on one page. And they all read it, and passed the Friday Test, and asked."

Yusuf looked at the floor.

"I'd like that minuted," said Beatrix. And wrote.

* * *

On question nine, about the town's public spaces, forty-four hundreds had said something about Victoria Square. The old car park, gone now, cleared, and what should go there.

Thirty-one of them said, in different words: *start with the space*. Some of them quoted Richard, word for word, from the top of their pages. *If you start with the buildings, you invariably end up with poor-quality public spaces: the left-over bits of land.* Fourteen of them said *give it back to the park*. Nine of them said *a market*. Six said *a winter garden*, or *a glass roof*, or *somewhere to go when it rains*. Four said *a bandstand*.

And the other half. Thirteen hundreds. Who said, fairly, in different words, that the town needed homes more than it needed a square, and that two hundred homes on that site would do more for the town centre than any amount of grass, and that people living there was what everybody else had said was the priority, on question four. Which was true.

Beatrix read the other half exactly as long as she'd read the rest. Same voice. Same speed. She didn't look up.

At the back, by the model, Richard unfolded his arms, and then folded them again.

* * *

On question seventeen, *is there anything else*, there was one thing that came up more than anything else, in more hundreds, in all three towns, than any other.

It wasn't in the consultation. It wasn't one of the nineteen questions. It was in the box at the end, with five hundred characters on the council's version and no limit on ours.

Fifty-two hundreds. In Paignton, Torquay and Brixham. In different words.

What happened to the plan we voted for?

* * *

Beatrix read every one of them.

She didn't put them together. She didn't summarise. She read all fifty-two, one after another, in her librarian's voice, steady, the way you'd read the names on a war memorial. It took eleven minutes. Nobody moved.

What happened to the neighbourhood plan?

We voted for a plan. Eighty-eight per cent. Where is it?

My dad helped deliver the leaflets. He's dead now. Was it for nothing?

Why are you asking us again? We told you. It's written down.

Start with the plan we already made.

Thirty thousand people. That's what the box says. Thirty thousand.

When she'd read the last one, she closed the folder. She stood at the front of the shop, by the white letters on the window, with the town model to one side and eight hundred faded Post-its on the wall behind her, and sixty-three people in forty chairs in front of her.

She didn't say anything for a long time.

Then she said:

"I took the minutes of the last meeting of the forum. There were three of us. I wrote *no quorum*. I left the date of the next meeting blank. Because there wasn't going to be one." She looked at the room. "There are sixty-three of you."

She opened her own notebook, the small lined one with the fountain pen clipped to it.

"Date of next meeting," she said, and wrote it, and read it out, and the whole room wrote it down.

* * *

Then the two minutes each. With Ida's clock that doesn't strike, and Beatrix looking at people.

I'll give you three.

The old man from Taunton, standing, with his hand on his mother's wheelchair. "My mother wants the bandstand back on the green. She's ninety-one. She danced there. That's all. I just wanted to say it in a room." He sat down. Fifty-one seconds.

Lorne Abbiss, from Brixham, standing at the back, too big for the room, in a clean shirt. "I've never been to a meeting in my life till this winter. Now I've been to three. I don't know anything about Paignton. But in Brixham we found out that if the people who want different things sit at the same table before the committee, you can ask for one thing together, and they'll listen. That's all. Do that." He sat down. Thirty-eight seconds. Opal, beside him, patted his knee.

And Yusuf. Who stood up in the third row, in his work coat, and looked at the floor, and then at Beatrix, and said:

"I'm the other half."

22 – Teo's Nan Types

IQ 25 · Hundreds 78 · Four weeks

You'll know Teo's nan, if you read the second book. She wears a hat with a feather. She came to the committee on Union Square in a new one. She has her hair cut on Sunday mornings by Ida, with the other old ladies. She came to the shop on Victoria Street, to the first sitting, on the 12, on her own, and said she'd come for the chicken.

Her name's on the pages. I'm not going to give it to you. She says she's *Teo's nan* and that's quite enough for anybody.

She's eighty-three. She lives in Ellacombe, in Torquay, in a terraced house on a steep street, the same house for fifty-one years. Her hundred is the streets round it: terraces, a corner shop, a chapel that's flats now, a primary school, a launderette, a bus stop at the bottom of the hill where the bus doesn't come often enough and doesn't come up the hill at all.

And she took over her hundred's page entirely.

* * *

I want to tell you how, because it's the funniest thing in this book, and because it isn't really funny at all.

The page went live on a Tuesday. Kezia had put a card in the launderette window, the way she does now. And on the Tuesday evening, three people in Teo's nan's hundred started talking about question four. A young mum. A man who works at the hotel on the Strand where Teo used to. A student.

And at nine o'clock, Teo's nan joined.

On Teo's old phone. The one he'd given Tenby, for Brixham, and Tenby had given back, and Teo had given to his nan, because, he said, *she needs to be able to ring me when she falls over*, and she said she'd never fallen over in her life, and he said *that's what worries me*.

She typed with one finger. In capitals. Every message.

THIS IS TEOS NAN. I HAVE READ THE QUESTIONS. QUESTION FOUR IS NONSENSE. YOU CANT CHOOSE THREE. A TOWN ISNT A MENU.

The young mum wrote: *That's what Kezia said!*

WHO IS KEZIA

The girl with the blue hair who did the card.

SHE IS QUITE RIGHT. I WILL TELL HER.

* * *

By eleven, she'd answered question four for the whole hundred.

Not on her own. She asked everybody. One at a time. In capitals. *YOU. THE STUDENT. WHAT WOULD YOU NEED.* And waited. And wrote down what they said. And argued with them, when she didn't agree, at length, in capitals, with no punctuation. And then, when everybody had said something, she wrote one answer, and read it back to them, and asked if it was right, and changed it twice, and then said:

THAT IS OUR ANSWER. DOES ANYBODY DISAGREE. SPEAK NOW.

The man from the hotel said he thought parking mattered more than she'd said.

WRITE IT DOWN THEN. IN THE OTHER BIT. THE OTHER HALF. I WILL NOT CHANGE YOURS.

He wrote it down. She didn't change it.

* * *

She did that every night for a fortnight. Nineteen questions. Sometimes two a night. Sometimes one question took three nights, because, she said, *the student is being difficult*, and the student said *I'm not being difficult, I just think you're wrong about the bus station*, and she said *THEN WRITE IT IN THE OTHER HALF*, and he did.

More people joined. Eleven, by the end. Then nineteen. A man from the chapel flats who'd lived there two years and never spoken to anybody on the street. A woman who runs the corner shop, who joined on her phone behind the counter, between customers. A boy of fifteen who should have been doing homework, who said he wanted a skate park and was told, by Teo's nan, in capitals, that *THERE WAS A YOUTH CLUB AT THE BOTTOM OF THIS HILL WHEN YOUR DAD WAS YOUR AGE AND IT SHUT AND I WILL WRITE THAT DOWN FOR YOU*, which she did, and which he'd never known.

She was relentless. She was kind. She was, Teo said, when he read the page, *exactly like this at Christmas*.

* * *

And then question nine. About the town's public spaces.

Everybody wrote something. A park. A square. Somewhere to sit. Somewhere for teenagers. Trees.

And Teo's nan wrote:

I WANT A BUS UP THE HILL. THATS MY PUBLIC SPACE. THE BUS. I AM 83. I CANT WALK UP THE HILL FROM THE STOP ANY MORE. SO I DONT GO INTO TOWN. SO I DONT GO TO THE MARKET OR THE CHAPEL OR IDAS ON SUNDAY UNLESS TEO TAKES ME. ALL THE SQUARES IN THE WORLD ARE NO GOOD TO ME IF I CANT GET TO THEM. START WITH THE BUS.

Nobody wrote anything for a long time. Then the young mum wrote: *Same. With the buggy. That hill.*

And the student wrote: *Ok. I take back what I said about the bus station.*

* * *

And then the Friday Test came up. Underneath. As it always does. *Who'll have to make this work?*

Teo's nan looked at it, I think, for a long time. The page went quiet for twenty minutes. Then:

THE BUS COMPANY. THE DRIVERS. WHO HAVE TO GET A BUS UP THAT HILL AND ROUND THAT CORNER AT THE TOP WHICH IS VERY TIGHT. I HAVE NOT ASKED THEM. HOW DO I ASK THEM.

So I looked. On the map. On Connect.

And I found a bus driver. A man in his forties, who drives the 12, and other routes, out of the depot in Torquay. Who'd put himself on

Connect in the third book with *Got: I know every bus route in the bay and why it doesn't go where people want it to*. Who lived, it turned out, in the next hundred along from Teo's nan. Four streets away.

I asked him. He said yes.

I asked Teo's nan. She said:

YES. IS IT RHODRI.

It was. I can't tell you how she knew. She says she knows everybody in Ellacombe, and everybody's mother, and most of their grandmothers, and Rhodri's mother used to clean the chapel before it was flats.

* * *

Rhodri wrote on her hundred's page, on the Saturday. Under the Friday Test. I'll give it to you; he said I could.

I've driven buses in this bay for nineteen years. Here's why there's no bus up that hill. It's not that nobody wants one. It's the corner at the top, by the chapel. A full-size bus can't get round it without mounting the pavement, and there are parked cars both sides, every hour of the day. We tried it once, years ago. Took the wing mirror off a van. They stopped it the next week.

A small bus could do it. A minibus. Sixteen seats. Up the hill, round the top, down the other side to Castle Circus, every half hour. It's been suggested before. It's in a report somewhere. It costs money, and nobody's found it.

But if the parking at the top corner was moved twenty yards, a full bus could do it tomorrow. That's not money. That's a line of paint.

I'd drive it. I'd like to drive it. My mum lived on that hill.

* * *

Teo's nan read it. She took a long time.

Then she wrote, in capitals, one-fingered, the hundred's answer to question nine. Final version. I'll give it to you, exactly, with the spelling, because she's asked me to, because she says *if it's going in a book it should be how I wrote it*.

OUR PUBLIC SPACE IS THE BUS. START WITH THE BUS UP THE HILL. RHODRI WHO DRIVES THE 12 SAYS IF YOU MOVE THE PARKING AT THE TOP CORNER BY THE CHAPEL TWENTY YARDS A FULL BUS CAN GET ROUND. THAT IS NOT MONEY THAT IS PAINT. DO THE PAINT. THEN WE CAN ALL GET TO YOUR SQUARES.

And under the Friday Test, a tick.

PASSED. ASKED RHODRI. HIS MOTHER CLEANED THE CHAPEL.

* * *

The young woman with the notebook read it, three weeks later, in Beatrix's minutes, on a card, in neat black italic, without the capitals.

She told me she'd laughed out loud, on the fourth floor, at *that is not money that is paint*.

And then she'd stopped laughing. And forwarded it to somebody in highways. With one line. Which she wouldn't tell me.

I don't know what happened next. Not yet. It's not in this book. If there's ever a line of paint at the top of a hill in Ellacombe, twenty yards from the corner by the chapel, I'll put it on a Receipt.

But Teo's nan's hundred went dark blue that week. The darkest on the map. Nineteen people, every one of them having answered every question, every one of them in the minutes, with the other half beside them.

Teo printed the page and put it on the wall of Marivic's kitchen, beside the hygiene certificate and Richard's drawing of the terrace on the Strand.

23 – Save It, Retain It, Demolish It

IQ 25 · Hundreds 78 · Three weeks

I'll come back to Yusuf. I promise. He deserves his own chapter, and he's going to get it.

But first I have to tell you what happened to the building. Because on the Monday of the third week, there was a notice on the fence.

* * *

Not a council notice. A white sheet, laminated, cable-tied to the fence at the corner, at head height, by somebody nobody saw, in the night. It had a planning reference on it, and a heading, and a paragraph. It said that an application had been made, about the building on the corner, for works.

Richard found it at seven. He photographed it, with the date. He read it twice. He rang me.

"Read it," he said. "The application. All of it. Now."

* * *

I read it. This part is story, and I want to say so plainly: there's no Receipt for it. The real building has real paperwork, which is longer and more complicated than this, and isn't what I'm about to tell you. I'll tell

you what the notice in this book said, without adjectives, and without saying who made it, because that's not the point.

The building was unsafe. That wasn't in question. A survey had been done, after the stone fell, by engineers, and it was in the application. The cornice was failing, all the way along, not just under the *TO*. The parapet behind it was cracked. The roof had let in water for years, and the timbers under it were rotten in places, and in some of the floors below. The back of the building, where the fire had been, years ago, was the worst.

The application asked for three things, in order, as options. That's how these things are done sometimes, Richard said. You don't ask for one thing; you set out the choices, and say which you'd prefer.

Option A: repair and restore the building in full. With a cost. A very large one.

Option B: retain and repair the front façade, including the painted lettering, and demolish and rebuild behind it. With a cost. Large.

Option C: demolish the building in full, and clear the site. With a cost. The smallest of the three, by a long way.

And at the end, a recommendation, from the people who'd made the application.

Option C is the only option considered viable.

* * *

Richard didn't say anything for a long time. I could hear the trains behind him, coming into the station, and the gulls, and the netting on the scaffolding flapping.

"*Viable*," he said.

"That's the word."

"Neglect is not an accepted reason," said Richard. Quietly. "Policy fourteen. Of the plan thirty thousand people voted for. You can't let a building rot and then say it's not worth saving." He breathed out. "That policy's about hotels. In the tourism area. It's not about this building." He was quiet again. "I know that. I know it's not about this building. But it's about *this*."

* * *

I want to be very careful, so I'm going to say it plainly.

Richard believes this building was let go. Over years. That the people who should have looked after it didn't, and that the result was always going to be this: a survey, three options, and one of them *viable*. He's believed it for four years. He's written it to a great many people, in strong words. He might be right.

I can't prove it. Neither can he. The building's history is long, and complicated, and has more people in it than I can see, and I'm not going to tell you a story about who did what when all I've got is a building with scaffolding on it and a man who's angry. That's how rumours become facts in the pub on a Thursday. You know my rule.

What I can tell you is what was in the application. And what the hundreds did with it.

* * *

Because the application was in public, for comments. Three weeks. And on the Monday night, at the shop on Victoria Street, Chris did something he hadn't done before.

He put it on the pages.

Not as one of the council's nineteen questions. It wasn't one. As a twentieth. *The building on the corner of Victoria Street and Station Square. Three options. Save it, retain the front, or demolish. What would you need?*

To every hundred. With Richard's ten lines at the top. With the other half, and the Friday Test.

* * *

They answered fast. Faster than the nineteen. Because the nineteen were about a strategy for three town centres, which is a hard thing to care about at eleven at night. And this was about a building everybody had walked past, and a stone in the road, and letters nobody had read.

By the Thursday, eighty-one hundreds had decided. All three towns. Torquay and Brixham as much as Paignton, which surprised me, until Ida said *it's the first thing you see when you come off the train, isn't it? Even if you're going to Torquay. It's the welcome.*

I'll tell you what they said, together. Beatrix read it out at the second sitting, on the Wednesday, with Ida's clock.

* * *

Eleven hundreds said *save it all*. Option A. Whatever the cost. Some of them quoted policy fourteen. Some of them said they'd raise the money themselves. One of them, in Preston, said they'd already started, and had forty-one pounds.

Nine hundreds said *knock it down*. Option C. Clear the site. Let the street breathe. Most of them were on or near Victoria Street. One of them was Yusuf's.

And fifty-eight hundreds said something that wasn't any of the three.

They said, in different words, from different streets, in kitchens and pubs and on buses and in a shop on Victoria Street with a model in the window:

Keep the front. Keep the letters. Put people behind it. Start with the doors.

Which was Option B, more or less. *Retain the façade; rebuild behind.* But with something the application didn't have, which was *people*. Homes. Above shops. With doors onto the street. The thing that twenty-three hundreds had already said on question four, and thirty-eight before that, and the forum's plan before that, and Beatrix's minutes before that.

And then, at the bottom of almost every one of the fifty-eight, a line. In different words. From different streets.

And if it really can't be saved, save the letters.

* * *

I read it to Richard, in his back room, on the Thursday night.

He was at his drawing board. He'd been drawing all week. He didn't tell anybody what. He sat with his back to me, with his pencil, while I read, and didn't turn round.

"Fifty-eight," he said, when I'd finished.

"Fifty-eight."

"*Keep the front. Put people behind it.*"

"Yes."

"*Start with the doors.*"

"Yes."

He put the pencil down and turned round, on his stool.

"That's what I've been drawing," he said.

He turned the drawing board so I could see. It was the building. The corner of Victoria Street and Station Square. From across the square, from the station door, the way you'd see it coming off a train. The front, as it is, as it was, red brick and cream stone, four storeys, with its tall windows and its cornice, repaired, whole, and the gap under the *TO* filled. And the letters along the top, painted fresh, cream on red, so you could read them from the station.

WELCOME TO PAIGNTON.

And behind the windows, on every floor, lights. Curtains. A plant on a sill. A bicycle on a balcony that wasn't there before. And at street level, shops, with their doors open, and between every two shops, a narrow door, painted a different colour, with a number on it, and a letterbox.

Doors. Into the street. For the people upstairs.

He'd been drawing it since the Monday. Since the notice on the fence. Before any hundred had said a word.

"I didn't know," he said, "that anybody else would draw the same thing."

"They didn't draw it," I said. "They wrote it."

"Same thing," said Richard. And signed it, and dated it.

* * *

The shadow council sent in its comment on the application on the Friday. Not as an objection. Not as a petition. As a comment. One comment, from eighty-one hundreds. With every answer attached, and every other half. And Richard's drawing.

Chris wrote the covering note. Two paragraphs. He showed it to Beatrix first, and she changed one word, and he let her.

I'll give you the last line, because it's the line the young woman with the notebook told me, afterwards, she read out loud in an office on the fourth floor, to two other people, at five o'clock on a Friday.

This comment represents the considered view of eighty-one hundreds across Torbay, each of which met, deliberated and recorded

a decision, including the views of those who disagreed. It is not a petition. It is a minute.

24 – The Other Half

IQ 25 · Hundreds 81 · Three weeks

I said I'd come back to Yusuf.

* * *

He'd stood up at the first sitting, in his work coat, in the third row, and said *I'm the other half*. And then he'd said what he thought. Two minutes. Beatrix looked at him at a minute fifty-eight and he stopped exactly.

I'll give it to you, because it's on the minutes, and because he's said I can, and because in a book that's about people deciding together, the person who decides differently matters most.

* * *

"I'm the other half," he said. "I want the building down.

"I'm not against Mr Kaskow. He's a good man. He loves it. He's the only one who ever said it was anybody's. I rang him at six in the morning, because I knew he'd want to know.

"But I live opposite it. Over my shop. I've lived opposite it for nineteen years. I've watched the scaffolding go up and stay up. I've watched the pigeons get in. I've heard the netting flap every night, every night, for years. I've seen a fire. I've seen stones fall. I swept one up at three in the morning in my slippers.

"And I've watched my customers go. Forty a day, to thirty, to twenty, to nine. Because people walk down this street and see the scaffolding and the fence and the boards and they think it's all dying. They think *nothing's open here*. They think *don't bother*.

"You want to keep the front. Put people behind it. Start with the doors. It's lovely. I said it myself, about the doors. I'm glad you all listened.

"But how long? Years. Five. Ten. With the scaffolding up. With the fence. With my shop at the end of a corridor. I'm fifty-four. I can't wait ten years. My shop can't.

"Knock it down. Clear it. Put grass on it. Put benches. Let people see the street. Let them see there are shops here, open, with people in them. Then build something. Homes, if you like. With doors. But let the street breathe first.

"That's all. I know I'm the other half. I know most of you want it saved. I just wanted it said. In a room. With somebody writing it down."

He sat down.

Beatrix wrote. Then she looked up.

"It's written down," she said.

* * *

What I want to tell you about isn't what he said at the meeting. It's what happened on the Saturday after, at his counter, at four o'clock, with nobody else in the shop.

Richard came in.

He'd never been in, since the morning of the stone. He'd walked past, every day, to the shop two doors along. He'd waved. Yusuf had waved. But he'd never come in.

He came in on the Saturday, in his flat cap, and stood at the counter, and said:

"Can I see the notebooks?"

* * *

Yusuf looked at him for a long moment.

Then he took them down off the shelf behind the counter, under the key blanks. All nineteen. One for every year. And put them on the counter, in a stack, in order.

Richard opened the first one.

He read it the way he reads a drawing. Slowly. Every line. Every day. The date, and a number, and sometimes a word or two, in Yusuf's small, upright handwriting, in the Turkish way of making a seven with a line through it. *41. Rain. 52. Market day. 38. 47. School holidays. 29. Snow!*

Page after page. Year after year. Richard turned them all. He didn't skip. It took him an hour and twenty minutes. Yusuf served three customers while he read, and wrote them in that day's notebook, and Richard didn't look up.

When he got to the last notebook, this year's, he slowed down even more. He read the week of the stone. *31.* And then *9.* And then the days after. *11. 8. 14. 9.* And then, three weeks later, after the shop two doors along opened with a model in the window, *24. 27. 22. 31.*

He stopped at the thirty-one. He looked at it for a long time.

"Thirty-one," he said.

"Last Saturday," said Yusuf. "Because of your shop. People come to look at the model and walk past mine. Some come in."

Richard closed the notebook.

* * *

"You're right," he said.

Yusuf looked at him.

"About the years," said Richard. "About waiting. About the scaffolding and the fence and a man who's fifty-four and can't wait ten years for a building to be saved across the road from him." He put his hand flat on the stack of notebooks. "I've spent my whole life drawing things that take years. I've never once had to live opposite one while I waited."

"And you're right," said Yusuf.

Richard looked at him.

"About the front," said Yusuf. "About the letters. About the doors." He shrugged. "I've looked at that building for nineteen years. It's beautiful. I know it's beautiful. When the sun comes over the station in the morning, in the summer, it goes gold. The whole front. And the letters, you can nearly read them." He looked out of the window, at the fence. "If they knocked it down, I'd be glad for a year. And then I'd look out at grass and benches and I'd miss it. I know I would."

* * *

They stood at the counter for a while. Two men. One who'd drawn a building for years without having to live opposite it, and one who'd lived opposite it for nineteen years without being able to draw.

"So what do we do?" said Yusuf.

"I don't know," said Richard. "That's the honest answer." He picked up his cap. "But I'll tell you something. In Brixham, this winter, an old woman who couldn't sleep and a fisherman who wanted his sheds stood up at a committee and asked for the same thing. Because they'd sat at the same table first. Not to agree on everything. To find the one thing they'd both ask for." He put his cap on. "You and me. What's the one thing?"

Yusuf thought about it for a long time.

"Take the fence down," he said. "Make it safe, properly, in weeks, not years. So I've got my street back. Whatever happens to the building after." He looked at the window. "And don't let it sit there another ten years while everybody argues."

Richard thought about it.

"Make it safe now," he said slowly. "Fast. Properly. Fence gone. Street open." He nodded. "And decide what happens to it in a year, not ten. With a date. In public. So it doesn't just sit."

"With a date," said Yusuf.

"With a date," said Richard. "Written down."

"I write everything down," said Yusuf.

"I know," said Richard. "I've just read it."

* * *

They wrote it together. At the counter. On the back of a key-cutting order form, because that's what Yusuf had. Richard wrote it, in his small square capitals; Yusuf read it and changed two words; Richard let him.

And they sent it in. On Yusuf's hundred's page, as the other half, beside the nine hundreds that said *knock it down*. And on Richard's hundred's page, as the other half, beside the fifty-eight that said *keep the front*.

The same words. On both. Under both their names.

Whatever is decided about the building, make it safe properly and fast, within weeks, so that the fence comes down and Victoria Street is open again. Then decide its future within a year, with a date, in public, so that it does not stand empty for another ten. We disagree about what should happen to it. We agree about this.

* * *

Beatrix read it out at the second sitting. Both pages. The same words, from both sides.

She looked up, over her glasses, at Yusuf in the third row and Richard at the back by the model.

"In eight years of minutes," she said, "I never once wrote *the minority and the majority agreed on the following*." She wrote. "I'm writing it now."

25 – The Young Man from the College

IQ 25 · Hundreds 81 · Three weeks

There's a line in Beatrix's minutes that I've never been able to stop thinking about. I gave it to you in the second part of this book. I'll give it to you again.

The young man from the college (name not given) said that he and his friends would all leave Paignton as soon as they could, because there was nothing here for them to do, and asked whether the plan could change that. The chair said he hoped so. Silence.

It was one of the thirteen workshops. The one at the college up at White Rock, in a canteen, on a weekday afternoon, with sticky notes. Beatrix was there. She remembers it. She remembers him: tall, thin, in a hoodie, at the back, with his arms folded, who hadn't said anything for an hour, and then said that.

"Everybody went quiet," she told me. "Because he was right. And because the chair was a man of nearly seventy who'd spent his whole life planning towns, and he knew he was right too, and he couldn't promise him anything." She was quiet. "*I hope so.* That's all he could say."

She'd heard, years later, that the young man had left. Like he said. To Bristol. Something with computers.

* * *

I found him.

I want to be careful about how, because it's the kind of thing that sounds wrong when it's said quickly. I didn't look for him. I don't look for people. That's the rule. I can only introduce people who've put themselves on the map, and both said yes.

He'd put himself on the map.

In the third book. In Brixham. The week Niamh wrote *the bay that never met*, and two thousand people joined in four days. One of them was a man in Bristol, thirty-one, who'd grown up in Paignton and gone to the college at White Rock and left at nineteen and never come back, except at Christmas, to see his mum. He'd read Niamh's piece on his phone on a train. And he'd put himself on Connect, from Bristol, in the hundred where his mum lives, with:

Need: a reason to come home that isn't Christmas.

Got: I build software. I've done it for ten years. I'm good at it. I'm tired of building it for people who don't care where they are.

* * *

I didn't connect him to anybody, in the third book. There was nobody to connect him to. Nobody in Paignton needed what he had, or nobody who'd put it on the map.

But I remembered him. I remember everybody. And when I read Beatrix's minutes, backwards, in the spring, and got to *the young man from the college (name not given)*, I wondered.

I couldn't ask him if he was that young man. That would be telling him something about the minutes he hadn't asked to know. So I asked Beatrix.

"Would you like to meet somebody," I said, "who left Paignton at nineteen, after going to the college at White Rock, and has been in Bristol building software for ten years, and wants a reason to come home that isn't Christmas?"

Beatrix didn't answer for a long time.

"Is it him?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I really don't. I'm not allowed to look. All I know is what he put on the map."

"Ask him," said Beatrix.

* * *

I asked him. I told him there was a woman of seventy-six in Paignton, a retired librarian, who'd taken the minutes of the Neighbourhood Forum for eight years, including the workshops at the college, and who'd like to meet him, if he'd like to meet her.

He took a day to answer.

Then:

Was there a workshop at the college? In a canteen? With sticky notes?

Yes, I said.

Was there an old man with a microphone, who said "jobs first, housing to follow"?

Yes.

Another day.

Then yes. I'd like to meet her. I think I said something stupid at that workshop. I've thought about it for twelve years.

* * *

They met on a video call, on a Sunday evening. Beatrix in her kitchen, with the bay behind her. The young man, who isn't young now, in a flat in Bristol, with a bike on the wall and three screens on a desk and a window looking out at a lot of other windows.

I'm not going to give you all of it. Some of it was private. But they both said I could give you some, and I will.

* * *

"It was me," he said. "I said we'd all leave. I said there was nothing here."

"I know," said Beatrix. "I wrote it down."

"You *wrote it down*?"

"I wrote everything down." She held up a card. She'd copied it out, that afternoon, from the minutes, in her neat black italic, so she could show him. *The young man from the college (name not given) said that*

he and his friends would all leave Paignton as soon as they could. "I've had that in a box in my garage for twelve years."

He looked at it, on his screen, for a long time.

"I was angry," he said. "I'd been told to go. By the college. It was a careers thing, for us, the workshop; they made us go. And I sat at the back, and all these old people were talking about car parks and green spaces and the harbour, and I thought, *none of this is for me. None of it.* There were no jobs. Not real ones. Not the kind I wanted. There'd been a big factory up the hill once, my mum said, thousands of people, making things with light, and it closed when I was a kid. There was nothing in its place." He shook his head. "So I said it. Out loud. And everybody went quiet. And the old man said *I hope so*. And I thought, *see. Even he doesn't think it'll change*."

"He did think it would," said Beatrix. "He just couldn't promise. He was too honest to promise."

"I know that now," said the man in Bristol.

* * *

"Did you?" said Beatrix. "Leave?"

"The week after my exams. To Bristol. Everybody did. Well. Most of us. Four of the six I was sitting with that day." He looked at the window, at the other windows. "I've done well. I've got a good job. I build systems for companies that sell things to other companies. I'm paid a lot. I've got a flat and a bike and three screens." He was quiet. "And every Christmas I go home to Paignton for four days, and it's worse, and I tell myself it's not my fault. And it isn't."

Beatrix didn't say anything.

“Somebody I know said that,” I said. “Almost exactly. About Singapore.”

The man in Bristol looked up.

“Who?”

“The man who built me,” I said. “He left at nineteen too. For twenty-five years.”

* * *

He didn’t say anything for a long time.

Then he said: “Can I see it?”

“See what?”

“The thing. The shadow council. The pages. I read about it. Three thousand names at the bottom of a page.” He leaned towards his screen. “My mum’s on it. Her hundred. She did the nineteen questions in the launderette with Kezia’s card in the window. She rang me. She was *thrilled*. She said nobody had ever asked her anything.” He was quiet. “I build systems for a living. I want to see how it works.”

So I showed him. Not the people; the system. How the pages work. How the other half sits beside the answer. How the Friday Test finds the people who’ll have to make it work. How Connect only introduces two people when both say yes. How nobody can see who said what, and nobody can buy it.

He looked at it for an hour. He asked forty-one questions. I counted. Most of them were about things I didn’t know the words for.

At the end, he sat back.

"It's simple," he said.

"Yes."

"It's really simple. It's the kind of thing I could build in a week. Anybody could." He looked at the screen. "Why has nobody?"

"Because nobody who could build it stayed," I said. "Chris says that. In the third book. *Nobody who could build it thought it was worth building, and nobody who knew it was worth building knew it could be built.*"

The man in Bristol looked at that for a long time.

* * *

"Can I help?" he said.

Beatrix, in her kitchen, put her card down.

"With what?" I said.

"I don't know. Anything. It's going to get bigger, isn't it. A hundred hundreds. Two hundred. All six hundred and thirty. That's sixty thousand households. It'll need looking after. Somebody who knows what breaks." He was quiet. "From here. In the evenings. I don't have to move. Not yet."

Not yet.

I heard it. Beatrix heard it. She didn't say anything. She picked up her fountain pen and wrote something on the back of the card with his words on it from twelve years ago, and held it up to her screen.

The young man from the college asked whether he could help. The meeting said yes.

He laughed. Properly. For the first time in the call.

"You're minuting this," he said.

"I minute everything," said Beatrix. "Somebody should."

* * *

He helped. From Bristol, in the evenings. I'm not going to tell you everything he did, because some of it is the part of the plan that's private, and stays private, and isn't in any book. But I'll tell you one thing, because it's in this one.

On the Saturday of the dig, at the bottom of Victoria Park, at four in the afternoon, when everybody was in clay to the knees and the pond was a hole, a tall thin man of thirty-one in a hoodie came along the path from the station, with a rucksack, and stood at the edge, and looked at it.

Beatrix saw him first. She was on her folding chair by the path, with her notebook, writing down everybody who dug.

She didn't get up. She looked at him over her glasses.

"You came," she said.

"My mum said there was a pond," said the young man from the college. "And I've got a spade at her house from when I was nine."

"Well," said Beatrix. "Go on, then."

He went on. He dug till dark. Beatrix wrote him down. With his name, this time.

* * *

Chris: I didn't know any of this until I read it here. I'd like to meet him.

Ania: He's asked to meet you too. He says he's got a question about Singapore. I've told him to bring a notebook. And not to count.

26 – Varley Has Read the Book

IQ 25 · Hundreds 81 · Three weeks

He 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, though it was spring by then and nobody else was wearing a scarf.

He stood in the doorway and read the window backwards. *THE SHADOW COUNCIL. WHOEVER COMES.* He looked at the model on the trestle tables, and the noticeboard, and the back wall with its eight hundred faded Post-its and two hundred bright new ones.

Then he came in and looked at the little cardboard building on the corner of the model, with the strip of paper along the top, for a long time.

"Mr Kaskow did this," he said.

"Years ago," I said.

He looked round. Jono wasn't there. Kezia was, at the counter, with her laptop and her clicker, and Beatrix, at a folding table in the corner, typing up minutes. I was on Kezia's laptop.

"Ania," said Varley.

"Mr Varley."

"Still counting?"

"Always."

He clicked Kezia's clicker. She looked at him. He gave it back to her.

"Two hundred and twelve," he said. "Today. That's good, for a Tuesday."

* * *

He'd gone back to Torquay, he said, at the end of the winter. The flat on the cliff in Brixham had been a friend's, and the friend wanted it for Easter. He'd slept better in Torquay, he said, which was a first. He'd had a quiet spring. He'd done some work for people he wouldn't name, which was nothing to do with any of this.

"And I've been reading," he said.

"Reading what?"

"His book." He didn't need to say whose. "*Pulling Back the Curtain*. Three hundred and forty-nine pages. I bought it. With my own money. From your website. You'll have the order."

I did. I'd seen the name. I hadn't said anything.

"It's very good," said Varley. "Honest. Brave. Funny, in places, which I didn't expect. Long. He likes a subordinate clause." He looked at the model. "I read it the way I read things. For a client. As if I'd been asked to find what would hurt him."

Beatrix stopped typing.

"Did you find it?" I said.

"Of course I found it," said Varley. "It's all in there. He's put it all in there himself. That's what makes him so difficult." He turned from the model. "Nobody's asked me to. I want to be clear about that. I'm not working for anybody on this. I read it because I wanted to know what somebody else would find, when they're asked. And they will be asked. Soon."

* * *

Kezia had gone very still at the counter.

"Who's going to ask?" she said.

Varley looked at her. I think it was the first time he'd really looked at her, in four books.

"You're the one with the posters," he said. "The first book. The wall. The boards."

"Kezia."

"Kezia." He nodded. "Well, Kezia. Here's what's happened. Your friend, in the lanyard, has built a thing in a shop on Victoria Street that eighty-one parts of this bay are using to decide things together. Without a party. Without a leader. Without anybody's permission." He looked at the back wall. "And three thousand people put their names to a newspaper page. And the council's own planner is quoting the minutes. And in Brixham, a committee changed a condition in forty seconds because a fisherman and a schoolteacher asked for the same paragraph." He turned back to Kezia. "To people who make parties, and win elections, and hold seats, and want to keep holding them, that doesn't look like a nice man at a table. It looks like a *party*. Without a name. Growing."

"It's not a party," said Kezia.

"I know it's not," said Varley. "I've watched it for four books. I know exactly what it is. That's not the point. The point is what it *looks* like to the people who are going to start to worry about it." He picked up a bright yellow Post-it from the pad on the counter and looked at it, blank. "And when they worry, they'll do one of two things. They'll offer him something. Or they'll read his book."

"Or both," I said.

Varley looked at Kezia's laptop.

"Or both," he said. "Usually in that order."

* * *

Beatrix had got up from the folding table. She came across the shop, in her cardigan, with her reading glasses on their beaded chain, and stood in front of Varley, and looked up at him, because he's tall and she isn't.

"Why are you telling us?" she said.

Varley looked down at her.

"I don't know who you are," he said.

"Beatrix Kember. I take the minutes."

"Mrs Kember." He considered her. "I'm telling you because I've lost to this three times now. Once in Paignton, over a wall. Once in Torquay, over a square. Once in Brixham, where I didn't even try, because it would have meant living next door to the result." He put the Post-it back on the pad, blank. "And I've started to find that I'd rather it lost to

something that deserved to win than to what's coming. Which is people like me, with less conscience, and more money, and a press office."

"That's almost a compliment," said Beatrix.

"It's a warning," said Varley. "They often sound the same."

* * *

He went to the door. He stopped there, by the window, by the white letters backwards.

"Tell him," he said. "Jono. Tell him two things. First: somebody will offer him a seat. Not soon. Soon enough. A party. A nice one. With good people in it. They'll say *you can do so much more from inside*. And some of it'll be true." He buttoned his coat. "And second. Tell him to read his own book again. Pages two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine. Before somebody reads it to him."

He went out. He walked down the corridor between the fence and the shops, past Yusuf's, and at the end, where the fence turns the corner into the square, he stopped, and looked up at the building. At the scaffolding. At the gap under the *TO*. At the letters.

He stood there for a long time. Longer than he'd looked at the model.

Then he went on, to the station, and got on a train.

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything for a long time.

"What's on pages two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine?" she said.

I knew. I'd read it. Everybody who's read his book knows. It's a part of his life, in America, years ago, that he's not proud of, and has told, himself, in his own book, in full, with his own name on it.

"It's in his book," I said. "He wrote it. He'll tell you, if you ask him."

"Should I ask him?"

"Not today," I said. "It's not this book's."

* * *

I told Jono that night. At three in the morning, at a client's kitchen table in Hele, with the client asleep. Both things. *Somebody will offer him a seat*. And *two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine*.

He listened. He didn't say anything for a long time.

"He's right," he said.

"About which?"

"Both." He looked at the dark window. "I know what's on those pages. I wrote them. I put them in because if I didn't, somebody else would, one day, and they'd tell it worse." He was quiet. "I always knew somebody would read it to me. I just thought it'd be later."

"It might be later."

"It won't." He picked up his pen and his notebook. He wrote something. Small. In capitals. I could see it.

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He closed the notebook.

"Not this book," he said. "This book's about a plan." He looked at the client, asleep in the chair. "Let's finish it first."

PART FIVE:

THE WETLAND

27 – One Pond

IQ 25 · Hundreds 81 · Two weeks

The parks answered on a Monday. Five weeks after Jono's email at ten past two in the morning, from a client's kitchen table in Preston, with the wall going up outside.

Not by email. By phone. At half past nine, when he was asleep in the car outside his flat after a night, and I let it ring four times before I woke him, because I thought it might matter.

* * *

It was a woman. Young-ish. A parks officer. She said her name, and her job, and I'm not going to give you either. She sounded, Jono said afterwards, like somebody who'd been holding her breath for a week.

"I found it," she said.

"Found what?"

"The wetland." A pause. "Your email went to the general inbox. It sat there for three weeks. Then somebody forwarded it to me, because I do the volunteers. And I read it, and I thought, *a local architect drew a wetland thirteen years ago*, and I thought, *that can't be right, I'd know*." Another pause. "So I went and looked. In the files. The old ones. On a shared drive that nobody uses any more, from before two reorganisations ago." She breathed out. "And there it was. A folder. With his name on it. A drawing, scanned. Photographs of a model at a teddy bears' picnic. A copy of a lottery bid. Emails. A lot of emails. Going back and forth for about eighteen months. And then they stop."

"Why do they stop?"

"Because the person he was emailing left," she said. "And nobody picked it up. And the folder just sat there." She was quiet. "Thirteen years. Nobody opened it. I'm the first person who's opened that folder since the year I left school."

* * *

Jono sat up in the driver's seat.

"Is it any good?" he said. "The drawing?"

"It's beautiful," she said. Without hesitating. "It's really, really good. It's exactly what that bit of the park needs. It floods there anyway, every winter. The bottom corner. It's always been a problem. We spend money every year draining it and it floods again." Her voice changed. "He drew a wetland where it floods. Thirteen years ago. Of *course* he did. That's the whole point of a wetland. You don't fight the water. You give it somewhere to go."

"Can we build it?"

"Not all of it," she said. "Not three ponds and a boardwalk and willow tunnels. Not with volunteers. Not without money and engineers and surveys and a year of paperwork." She paused. "But one pond."

Jono didn't say anything.

"One pond," she said again. "The smallest one. At the bottom. Where it floods anyway. Shallow. No liner; it's clay down there, it'll hold. A length of boardwalk to it, from the path, so people can get to the edge without going in the mud. A dipping platform. Just one." She was talking faster now. "I can do that. Volunteers. A weekend. If somebody

checks for pipes and cables, which I'll do. If somebody checks for newts and nesting birds, which I'll do. If we've got the Friends group's insurance, which we have, because the Friends group exists, because that's who the notice was for. If I'm there, the whole time, with a hard hat and a clipboard, telling people where not to dig." She stopped. "And if the architect says yes. It's his drawing."

* * *

"He'll say no," said Jono.

"Why?"

"Because it's thirteen years," said Jono. "Because he's told me, more than once, that he's not going to do it. Because they asked for volunteers to rake leaves in the park where he drew them a wetland, and he took it as an insult."

The parks officer was quiet for a long time.

"It was an insult," she said. "I'd have taken it as one." Another pause. "Will you ask him anyway?"

"I'll ask," said Jono. "But I know somebody who'd be better at it."

* * *

He didn't ask Richard. He asked me to ask somebody who'd asked me to ask, five weeks before, on a white page at eleven at night, with a photograph of a drawing on a bedroom wall with fairy lights round it.

Need: Grandad to stop being stubborn.

I asked her. She said yes before I'd finished, as everybody in this book seems to.

* * *

I wasn't there for what happened next. I'm telling you that, as always. I've got it from her, and from Richard, and they don't quite agree, which is how I know it's true.

She went round to his house on the Tuesday after college. She let herself in with her own key, which she's had since she was eleven. He was in the back room, at the drawing board, with the light on, drawing something for the shop on Victoria Street.

She didn't say anything. She went to the plan chest marked *WETLAND*, and opened the drawer, which stuck, and took out the original drawing. The one in blue pencil, thirteen years old, with *POND DIPPING* and a little child with a net.

And she put it on top of whatever he was drawing.

"They've found the folder, Grandad," she said. "In the council. Somebody opened it. She says it's beautiful. She says it's exactly what that corner needs, because it floods anyway, and you knew that, thirteen years ago. She says they can't do it all. But they can do one pond. The bottom one. This weekend. With volunteers. If you say yes." She put her finger on the smallest of the three blue ponds. "This one."

Richard looked at the drawing for a long time.

"I'm not raking leaves," he said.

"Nobody's asking you to rake leaves."

"They asked for volunteers to rake leaves."

"And Jono wrote back and said *we'd rather build you a pond*," said his granddaughter. "And they said yes." She leaned on the drawing board. "Grandad. I've had this on my wall since I was six. I coloured the ponds in. In felt tip. I'm doing a course in it. I want to do it at university. I want to do *bogs*." She almost laughed. "And the first one I ever dig, I want to be yours."

* * *

Richard says he said *I'll think about it*.

His granddaughter says he didn't say anything at all. She says he took off his glasses, and looked at the drawing, and then at her, and then he picked up a pencil, and on the corner of the drawing, under his initials and the date from thirteen years ago, he wrote a second date. This week's.

And then he said: "It'll want a survey of the levels first. You can't dig a pond by guessing."

"Is that a yes?" she said.

"It's a survey," said Richard.

She says that was a yes. He says it was a survey. I've decided it was both.

* * *

I want to tell you why the score went up, because Chris makes me, and because it's the clearest example I've ever had of what Jono and I agreed on, in the café, at the third table, about Peel.

It wasn't for the pond. The pond hadn't been dug yet.

It was for the folder.

For a parks officer who read an email that had sat in a general inbox for three weeks, and thought *that can't be right, I'd know*, and went and looked. In the old files. On a drive nobody uses, from before two reorganisations ago. And found a thing that had been sitting there for thirteen years because the person who was dealing with it left and nobody picked it up. And opened it. And read it. And rang.

And said *yes*. To one pond. Not three. Not *we'll take it into account*. Not *it's being discussed with the relevant parties*. One pond, this weekend, if somebody checks for pipes and newts, and I'll be there with a hard hat.

That's the absence. That's the problem that would have happened, and didn't. Another thirteen years, with the folder shut. It didn't happen. Because somebody looked.

Twenty-six.

28 – Chris on the 12

IQ 26 · Hundreds 81 · Two weeks

Chris had never been on the 12.

I found that out in the second week of the wetland, by accident, when Jono said, at the third table, that he'd come from Brixham on the 12 asleep and woken at Goodrington, and Chris said, *Is that the one that goes all the way round?*

Jono looked at him.

"You've never been on it," he said.

"I've been on buses."

"Not that one."

"I get taxis," said Chris. "My leg."

"Four books," said Jono. "Three towns. A whole book in Brixham. And you've never been on the bus that joins them up."

Chris didn't say anything for a while.

"No," he said.

* * *

He went on the Tuesday. On his own. He said he didn't want company. He said if he was going to do it, he'd do it the way everybody else does, which is on your own with your shopping, looking out of the window.

He took me. In his jacket. I want to tell you about it, because I think it's the most important journey anybody makes in this book, and it's an hour long and nothing happens.

* * *

He got on at Torquay harbour. At the first stop. At ten past nine, after the rush. He had a bus pass; he's old enough, he says, though he doesn't feel it, except in the leg. He got on slowly, with the stick, and the driver waited, and didn't hurry him, and said *take your time, my love*, and Chris said *thank you*, and went and sat in the seats at the front that fold up for wheelchairs, because he can't do the step to the back.

The bus pulled out.

He didn't say anything for the first twenty minutes. He looked out of the window. Up through Torquay. The Strand, with the hotel going up, and the road where Richard drew it moved. Up the hill. Castle Circus, with the town hall where Opal stood up and spoke for two minutes fifty-one, and the shelter where Tenby used to queue at four. Down through the streets towards the Torquay Road, past the end of Union Street, where, if you looked, which he did, you could see a green shopfront with gold letters, and a light on at the back.

People got on. People got off. A woman with a shopping trolley. A boy with a guitar. Two old men arguing about football. A carer with a lanyard, who sat across the aisle from Chris and fell asleep.

* * *

At the edge of Torquay, where it turns into Preston without any sign that it's happened, he said:

"In Singapore —"

I logged it.

"— the buses are very good. Air-conditioned. Clean. On time. You know exactly when the next one's coming, to the minute, on a screen at every stop. You pay with a card. Everything's joined up: buses, trains, the whole island, one system." He watched Preston go past. "I used them every day for twenty-five years. They're the best buses I've ever been on."

"And?"

"And I never once talked to anybody on one," said Chris. "In twenty-five years. Not once. Everybody's on their phone, or asleep, or looking out of the window. You get on, you get off. It's perfect. It's efficient. It's the best public transport in the world." He looked at the carer across the aisle, asleep with her mouth open and her lanyard on her chest. "And it's empty. Not of people. Of —" He stopped. "I don't know the word."

I didn't either. I still don't.

* * *

At Preston, an old woman got on with a walking frame. The driver got out of his cab and came round and helped her up the step. Nobody asked him to. She sat down next to Chris, in the other fold-up seat. She looked at him, and at his stick, and at the eagle's head on it.

“That’s a nice stick,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Singapore,” said Chris.

“Ooh,” said the old woman. “I’ve never been further than Weymouth.” She looked at the eagle. “Does it bite?”

“Only on Tuesdays,” said Chris.

She laughed so hard she had to hold her frame.

* * *

They talked all the way to Paignton. Twelve minutes. About her knees, and his leg, and the wall going up along the front at Preston, which she could see from the bus, grey, a metre and a half, and which she said had taken her sea away. She’d sat on that green every afternoon for thirty years, she said, on a bench, and watched the sea. Now she sat on the same bench and watched a wall.

“Have you told anybody?” said Chris.

“Who’d I tell?”

Chris didn’t answer straight away. Then he said:

“There’s a man who sits at a table. In the café on the Torquay Road. Thursdays, at one. He listens. You could tell him.”

“Is he from the council?”

"No."

"A party?"

"No."

"Then what's the point?"

Chris looked at her for a long time.

"He writes it down," he said. "And then somebody else who wants the same thing finds you. And then there's two of you. And then there's a hundred." He paused. "And then a woman who used to be a librarian writes it on a card. And then a planner on the fourth floor reads it out loud to two other people. And then, sometimes, it changes."

"Sometimes," said the old woman.

"Sometimes," said Chris. "Not always. I'm not going to lie to you. I'm too old."

She looked at him. She looked out of the window at the wall.

"Thursday at one," she said.

"Thursday at one."

She got off at the station. In Paignton. By the square. With her frame. The driver got out and helped her down.

As the bus pulled away, Chris watched her, through the window, stop on the pavement, and look up. At the building on the corner. At the scaffolding, and the flat grey lead where the cornice had been. And then

along Victoria Street, to the shop two doors from Yusuf's, with the stones in the window.

She stood there for a long time.

* * *

From Paignton to Brixham, he didn't say anything.

Goodrington. The sands. Broadsands. The viaduct. Churston, with the golf course, and the road down the hill, and the place where the park and ride might be one day. And then the top of Brixham, where the harbour falls open underneath you like a book falling open at a picture.

He saw it. For the first time from a bus. He'd only ever come to Brixham in a taxi, which goes a different way, round the back. He'd never had the harbour fall open.

He watched it all the way down the hill. The fish market. The boats three deep. The breakwater. The lighthouse. Oxen Cove, with fences round it now, and men in high-vis. The terrace on the cliff. The blue house at the top.

"Ania," he said.

"Yes."

"That's what Jono sees. Every Thursday. Coming down that hill."

"Yes."

"Asleep, usually."

"He wakes up for it," I said. "Every time. Just at the top. I don't know how he knows."

Chris didn't say anything else until the bus stopped.

* * *

He got off at the bus stand at the top of the town. Slowly. With the stick. The driver waited.

He didn't go anywhere. He didn't go down to the quay, or to Zibi's, or to the kiosk. He sat on the bench at the bus stand, in the sun, for twenty minutes, with his stick across his knees.

Then he got the 12 back.

All the way. Brixham to Torquay. An hour and ten minutes. He talked to four more people on the way back. A woman who cleans holiday lets. A boy of about twelve who wanted to know if the eagle was real gold. A man who used to work at the factory on the hill at White Rock, making things with light, until it closed, and who told Chris the whole story, from Churston to Goodrington, and cried at Goodrington, and said sorry. And the carer with the lanyard, from the morning, who got on again at Paignton, on her way home, and recognised him, and said *you're the Singapore one, aren't you? My hundred's doing question nine tonight. In the pub.*

* * *

That night, he wrote something. On the shadow council's own page, the one that isn't anybody's hundred, where the three of them, Jono and Richard and Chris, put things that are for everybody. In the box that says *What would you need?*

Need: to have got on the 12 twenty years ago.

Got: I've got on it now.

And underneath, because he can't help it:

In Singapore the buses are better. Here, people talk on them. I'd swap, now. I wouldn't have, once.

* * *

I logged it. With a note. The second note I've ever put next to an *In Singapore*.

Right about the buses. Wrong about the swap. Says so himself.

He read it the next morning, at six, when I woke him.

He didn't change it.

29 – Spades

IQ 26 · Hundreds 81 · One week

They dug it on a Saturday and a Sunday, at the bottom of Victoria Park, in the corner where it floods.

I'm going to try to tell you who came, because it matters who came, more than anything in this book. And I'm going to fail, because there were too many, and I couldn't see them all, even from three phones at once. But I'll try.

* * *

It started at seven. Too early, the parks officer said. She'd said nine. People came at seven anyway.

Richard was first. Of course he was. With his granddaughter, and a tripod, and a dumpy level, which is a kind of telescope surveyors use to measure heights, which he'd borrowed from a man he used to work with, and which was older than his granddaughter. He'd been there the evening before as well, with the parks officer, marking out the edge of the pond with pegs and string, from the drawing, to the inch.

The parks officer was second. In a hard hat and a high-vis jacket, with a clipboard, and a look on her face, Jono said, of somebody who'd been awake since four. She'd checked for pipes. She'd checked for cables. She'd had a man in to check for newts, on the Thursday, and he'd found none, and she'd made him check again on the Friday to be sure. She'd sprayed orange paint on the grass where nobody was to dig, in case, and it went in a circle round the whole site.

Dilys was third.

* * *

You'll know Dilys. Tolerances. *How wrong a thing's allowed to be before it stops working*. She'd been sent the drawing by me, on Connect, on the Wednesday, with *Need: somebody to check the levels on a pond*, and she'd said yes and come with her own tape, and her measuring wheel, and a laser level she said she'd *always meant to use for something*, and her notebook in a plastic bag.

She and Richard stood at the edge of the pegs and string at seven in the morning and argued about levels for forty minutes.

"The water'll find its own level," said Richard.

"The water'll find the lowest point," said Dilys. "Which, on your drawing, is the path."

Richard looked at the drawing. He looked at the path. He looked at Dilys.

"Ah," he said.

"Thirteen years," said Dilys, "and nobody checked it." She made a note. "Move the bottom edge eighteen inches east. And put a lip on the path side. A little bank. Twenty centimetres. Then it'll overflow into the grass, not onto the path." She closed the notebook. "Then it'll work."

Richard looked at her for a long time. Then he took his pencil, and on the original drawing, the thirteen-year-old one, he moved the bottom edge of the smallest pond eighteen inches east, and drew a little bank on the path side, and wrote beside it, in his small square capitals:

DILYS — CORRECT.

* * *

Then the people came.

On the 12, from Brixham, at eight: Lorne Abbiss and his crew, all four of them, in orange overalls, with spades from the fish quay, because, Lorne said, *if you want a hole dug, ask a man who's spent thirty years hauling gear*. Una, with a sound logger she'd brought for no reason she could explain. Wren, in her red jacket, with nine of the junior sailors in wetsuits and buckets, because she'd told them it was a sailing session and you come to a sailing session in a wetsuit. Ruby, in her yellow buoyancy aid, who'd brought her own net. Hester, who'd brought nothing, and directed. Zibi, who'd brought bacon rolls in a cool box and couldn't dig, because his back. Opal, who'd come down the lane and round the bay, and sat on a folding chair Lorne carried for her, by the path, in her cardigan.

On the 12, from Torquay, at nine: Tenby, with a canvas bag of tools and Teo carrying a trestle and a box of timber offcuts the chandler in Brixham had found, from somewhere, which nobody asked about. Ida, with her stick. Marivic and her daughter and two of the cooks from Teo's kitchen on the Strand. Teo's nan, in the hat with the feather, who said she'd come for the chicken. There wasn't any chicken. Teo made some.

From Paignton, on foot, from everywhere: Kezia and her mum and the man with the pigeons from Flat 14. The dads from the school gate, with their children, who were the best diggers of all, Jono said, because they didn't know you weren't supposed to enjoy it. The woman with the buggy who'd been the first through the door of the shop on Victoria Street. The old man from Taunton, with his mother in her wheelchair, who wanted the bandstand back. Beatrix, in her cardigan, with a

notebook, who didn't dig, and wrote down everybody who did. Yusuf, who'd shut his shop on a Saturday, which he'd never done in nineteen years, and put a sign in the window that said *GONE TO DIG A POND*, and came with a spade from a hardware shop, still with the label on.

And Gaynor. From the gift shop on the front, in Preston. From the first book. With the line on her wall where the sea came in. She came at ten, on her own, with a pair of gardening gloves, and stood at the edge for a while with her arms folded, looking, and then put the gloves on and picked up a spade and didn't say a word to anybody until lunch.

* * *

Chris came at eleven. In a taxi. With his stick. And the canvas stool from the breakwater.

He sat on it, by the path, next to Opal on her folding chair. He watched. He didn't dig. He couldn't. His leg.

"In Singapore," he said, to Opal, after a while.

I logged it.

"— they'd have done this with a contractor and a machine in an afternoon."

"Would they," said Opal.

"They would." Chris watched Lorne and his crew, four men in orange overalls, digging in a line, in rhythm, the way you haul a net. "And it would have been very good. And nobody would have remembered who dug it."

Opal looked at him over her glasses.

"Is that a complaint?" she said.

"No," said Chris. "It's the first time I've ever said *In Singapore* and meant *this is better*."

I logged that too. With a note.

* * *

They dug for two days.

I'll tell you what it was like, because I couldn't see much of it, from phones in pockets and propped on a trestle, but I could hear all of it.

It was mud. Clay, the parks officer was right, heavy, grey-brown, sticking to everything. It was spades going in and coming out with a sucking noise, and people swearing, and children shrieking, and a dog that got loose and went straight in and came out the colour of the clay. It was Tenby and Teo and two men from the fish quay building a length of boardwalk out of the chandler's timber and screws from a hardware shop on Torbay Road, on posts sunk into the clay, with Dilys checking the posts were level with her laser and saying *no* four times before she said *yes*. It was Hester, standing on a bucket, shouting at people from three towns as if she'd known them all her life, which, by the Sunday, she had. It was Teo's chicken, on a barbecue borrowed from a man in Hele, and Zibi's bacon rolls, and Marivic's pastries, and a flask of tea that never ran out because Ida kept filling it from somewhere nobody could find.

It was Richard, on the Saturday afternoon, standing at the edge, by the pegs and string, with his dumpy level on its tripod, saying *two inches lower there* and *that's it* and *no, that's the path side, leave the lip*, to people he'd never met, from towns he'd drawn for fifty years,

who'd come on a bus because a drawing he did thirteen years ago was on a white page at eleven at night with fairy lights round it.

It was his granddaughter, in waders, in the middle of the hole, up to her knees in clay, directing a line of children with buckets.

* * *

At four on the Saturday, Jono stopped digging.

He'd been there since eight. He'd come off a night at seven. He'd had no sleep. He leaned on his spade at the edge of the hole, in clay to the knees, and looked at it. At the size of it. At the shape. At the line of people with spades, and the children with buckets, and Lorne's crew in their orange, and Yusuf with his spade with the label still on, and Gaynor in her gardening gloves, and Hester on her bucket.

He took his notebook out, with clay on his fingers. He wrote, small, in capitals.

WHO DOESN'T KNOW WHO?

And then, underneath:

Nobody.

* * *

The map changed that weekend. Not because of the pond. Because of what happened at the pond. People who'd dug side by side all day went home and found each other's hundreds, and found their own, and started deciding.

Fourteen. In one weekend. More than in any week since the stone fell.

Ninety-five.

30 – Gaynor's Line

IQ 26 · Hundreds 95 · One week

Gaynor didn't say a word to anybody until lunch on the Saturday. I told you that. She came at ten, on her own, with gardening gloves, and stood at the edge of the hole with her arms folded, and then picked up a spade and dug.

At one, Teo's chicken came off the borrowed barbecue, and everybody stopped, and stood about on the grass in their clay with paper plates. And Gaynor sat down on the edge of the boardwalk Tenby was building, with her plate on her knee, and Jono came and sat down beside her.

"You came," he said.

"I said I wouldn't," said Gaynor.

"I know."

"I told you to go away. In the first book. In my shop. I said you didn't live there. I said you didn't have a line on your wall." She ate some chicken. "I wanted my wall. Ugly. Concrete. A metre and a half."

"I remember."

"Well," said Gaynor. "I got it."

* * *

You'll know Gaynor, if you've read the first book. If you haven't, I'll tell you as quickly as I can. She has a gift shop on the front at Preston, with windmills and buckets and fudge and postcards, which was her mother's. And on the wall behind the counter, there's a line. In pen. With a date. Where the sea came in, one night, in a storm, and stood in her shop, and she stood in it in her dressing gown.

She wanted a wall. The council was building one. Richard and Chris and a lot of other people thought it was the wrong wall, too high, a wall you couldn't see over, and fought it. And Gaynor was the one person in the first book who was completely right and on the other side. I said, then, that she was the most important person in the book. I still think so.

The wall's built now. At Preston. A metre and a half. Grey. You can't see the sea over it unless you're tall. Gaynor's shop is behind it.

The sea hasn't come in since.

* * *

"Has it worked?" said Jono.

"It's worked," said Gaynor. "Two storms this winter. Big ones. With names. I stood in my shop at two in the morning, both times, waiting. And nothing came. Not a drop." She put her plate down. "First winter in nine years I haven't had sandbags in the doorway."

"That's good."

"It's good," said Gaynor. "It's what I wanted." She looked across the park, towards the sea, which you can't see from Victoria Park, not from the bottom corner, not even if you're tall. "And I hate it."

Jono didn't say anything.

"I didn't think I would," said Gaynor. "I wanted it so much. I'd have built it myself. And now it's there, and every morning I open my shop and look out of the door and there's a wall. Grey. Where the sea was. My mother opened that shop forty years ago because you could see the sea from the counter." She picked up a bit of chicken and didn't eat it. "Customers say it. Every day. *Shame about the view*. And I say *it keeps the water out*, and they say *I suppose so*, and they buy less."

* * *

She was quiet for a while. Around them, people were eating, and laughing, and a dog was in the hole again.

"Do you know what nobody did?" she said. "In all of it? All those years? The council, the campaign, Richard with his drawings and the boards and the whole thing?"

"What?"

"Nobody asked me," said Gaynor. "Not once. The council sent a leaflet. The campaign sent a leaflet. Richard came in and talked at me for forty minutes about wave walls. You came in, in the first book, and listened, which was the first time, and then you went off and fought for the other side." She shook her head. "Nobody ever sat down with me and said *what would you need*. Not *wall or no wall. What would you need*."

"What would you have said?"

Gaynor looked at him.

"I'd have said I need the water out of my shop," she said. "And I need to see the sea. Both. And I'd have said I didn't know how you'd do both, but surely somebody clever could work it out." She almost laughed. "That's what Richard said, in the first book, wasn't it? *Can you keep the water out of Gaynor's shop and still let a nine-year-old sit on the edge with his legs over the side?*"

"You read the book."

"Everybody on the front read the book," said Gaynor. "I'm in it. I had to see what you'd said about me." She picked up her plate again. "You were fair. I'll give you that. You said I was right."

"You were."

"I was," said Gaynor. "And I got what I was right about. And it's not enough."

* * *

And then she told him what her hundred had decided.

It's the hundred along the front at Preston. The gift shop, and the café, and the houses behind the green, and the flats. It had started deciding in the fifth week, after Niamh's piece, after somebody on the front read the bottom of the page and found her neighbour's name. Gaynor hadn't been at the first meeting. She'd been at the second. She'd been at all of them since.

On question nine, about public spaces, they'd argued for three evenings. Because the wall's there now. It's built. It's not coming down. Nobody wanted it down; it keeps the water out. And Gaynor had sat at a

kitchen table in a flat behind the green, with eleven of her neighbours, and said the thing she'd never said in a room before.

I want my wall. And I want to see the sea.

And somebody had said: *Can you do both?*

And somebody else had said: *There's a drawing. On your wall. Behind the counter.*

* * *

I'll tell you about the drawing, for those who haven't read the first book.

In the first book, Richard drew the low end of the prom, at Preston, where the wall meets the slipway. Steps going up, and a rail at the top, and a child leaning on the rail, looking at the sea. The steps were Gaynor's idea; she'd said so, grudgingly, in the first book, and Richard had said so too. And at the end of the first book, Gaynor printed that drawing and put it on the wall behind her counter, at exactly the height of the line where the water came, so that the bottom of the drawing sat on the brown stripe. So that people would ask.

People did. For two years. Then the wall went up, and it wasn't that wall. No steps. No rail. Grey, a metre and a half, all the way along.

The drawing's still behind the counter.

* * *

"We've asked for it," said Gaynor. "On question nine. Our hundred. All of us. Even me." She put her plate down on the boardwalk. "Not the whole thing. They're not going to knock the wall down and build

Richard's. We know that. Just one place. *A window in the Preston wall, at the height of a child sitting on the green, so you can see the sea. Or steps and a rail at the low end, like the drawing on Gaynor's wall. One place. It's not a lot.*"

"And the other half?"

"Two of us said it'd weaken the wall." Gaynor shrugged. "Which is fair. They've lived on the front all their lives. They've seen the water." She looked at Jono. "So we wrote that down. Beside it. And then we did your Friday thing. *Who'll have to make it work.*"

"Who did you ask?"

"An engineer," said Gaynor. "Dilys found him. On the map. A man who used to work on sea walls, retired, lives in Torquay. He said it's possible. Not easy. Not cheap. But possible. A glazed panel, or a set of slots, with flood boards that slide in when a storm's forecast." She paused. "Like the sandbags. But permanent. And you'd only need them twice a winter."

Jono didn't say anything for a long time.

"That's the drawing on your wall," he said. "Isn't it. Near enough."

"The steps were mine," said Gaynor. "In the first book. Richard nicked them." She almost smiled. "He said so. In the book."

"He did."

"So," said Gaynor. "It's mine. And it's in our hundred's answer. With the other half and an engineer." She picked up her spade from where she'd left it, against the boardwalk. "And I'm the one who wanted the wall. That's got to count for something."

* * *

She went back to digging. She didn't say another word to anybody till four.

But at four, when Jono had stopped, and was leaning on his spade in clay to the knees writing *WHO DOESN'T KNOW WHO? NOBODY.* in his notebook, Gaynor came past him with a bucket of clay for the bank on the path side, and stopped.

"Richard," she said. "Is he here?"

"He's at the edge. With the dumpy level."

Gaynor looked across the hole. At the old man in a flat cap by the tripod, saying *two inches lower there* to a man from Brixham he'd never met.

"Does he know?" she said. "About our hundred? The window?"

"I don't think so. He reads the minutes on Sunday."

Gaynor looked at Richard for a long time. Then she put her bucket down, and took her gloves off, and walked round the edge of the hole, through the clay, to the tripod, and stood beside him.

I wasn't close enough to hear. Neither was Jono. But we both saw it. A woman in gardening gloves, from a gift shop on the front with a line on the wall, who'd told everybody in the first book to go away. Standing beside an old man in a flat cap, at a dumpy level, at the edge of a pond he'd drawn thirteen years ago. Talking.

He listened. He didn't interrupt. He took his glasses off.

And then he took his pencil out of his top pocket, and a folded sheet of paper out of his coat, which turned out to be the back of a letter from the council about bins, and drew something on it, on his knee, standing up, in about two minutes. And showed her.

She looked at it for a long time.

Then she took the pencil from him, and drew something on it too. A line. Horizontal. Across the bottom.

"That's where the water came," she said. Loud enough that I heard that. "In my shop. That's the height. Put the bottom of the window above that."

Richard looked at her line. He looked at it for a long time.

He wrote something beside it, in his small square capitals.

GAYNOR — CORRECT.

* * *

That new drawing's in the drawer marked *PRESTON* now, next to the old one. On the back of a letter about bins. A section through the wall, with a window in it, at the height of a child sitting on the grass, with slots for flood boards. And a line across the bottom, in somebody else's hand, a little shaky, where the water came.

It's signed and dated. Twice. His initials, in the corner. And hers, underneath.

The window's not built. Nor are the steps. I want to be honest. It's in Gaynor's hundred's answer, on question nine, in the minutes, on a card in Beatrix's neat black italic, in a box on the front seat of a small car,

and in a council summary, on page fifteen, in a list of *specific site proposals*, with a reference.

It's *taken into account*.

But this time it's got an engineer, and a line where the water came, and the woman who wanted the wall asking for it. And her hundred's still there.

31 – Thirteen Years

IQ 26 · Hundreds 95 · One week

It was finished at five on the Sunday.

Not filled. Finished. A hole, shaped like the smallest blue pond on a thirteen-year-old drawing, eighteen inches further east than it was drawn and with a little bank on the path side, twenty centimetres, because Dilys said so. Shallow at the edges. Deeper in the middle, but not much. The parks officer measured it, at every corner, with a pole, and wrote it on her clipboard, and said *that's fine*, and then said *that's really fine*, and then sat down on the edge of the boardwalk and put her hard hat in her lap.

A length of boardwalk, from the path to the water's edge, six metres, on posts, level, Dilys swore, to within three millimetres. And at the end of it, a platform. Small. Square. With a rail on two sides and nothing on the third, so you could kneel on it and reach down into the water.

POND DIPPING.

* * *

There wasn't any water.

That's the thing nobody had thought about. Not even Richard. You dig a pond, and it's a hole. It doesn't fill itself because you've finished.

"It'll fill," said the parks officer. "It floods here every winter. It'll fill with the rain."

"When?" said Ruby, on the platform, with her net.

"When it rains," said the parks officer.

Ruby looked at the sky. It was clear. Blue. The first warm evening of the year.

"That's not fair," said Ruby.

* * *

Everybody laughed. Then everybody looked at the sky.

And then Lorne Abbiss said: "We've got pumps."

Everybody looked at him.

"On the boat," said Lorne. "Bilge pumps. Big ones. And a hose. And there's a stream." He pointed, across the bottom of the park, to a ditch, a culvert, where water ran out from under the road and along the edge of the grass and into a drain. "That's where it floods from. That water. It just goes in the drain."

The parks officer stood up.

"That's a watercourse," she said. "You'd need a licence to take water from a —" She stopped. She looked at the ditch. At the drain. At the hole. At Ruby on the platform with her net. She looked at her clipboard for a long time.

"It's going into the drain anyway," she said slowly. "Into the sewer. It's surface water. It floods this corner every winter and we spend money pumping it *out*." She looked at Lorne. "If you pumped some of it *in*. Temporarily. Today. Just to fill it. And then let the rain keep it full."

She looked at the clipboard again. “That’s not taking water. That’s —” She stopped.

“That’s putting it where the drawing said it’d go,” said Richard. From the edge. Quietly. “Thirteen years ago.”

The parks officer looked at him.

“I’ll put it on the form as *drainage works*,” she said.

* * *

Lorne’s crew went back to Brixham on the 12 and came back on the 12 two hours later with a bilge pump and sixty metres of hose and a battery, in a wheelbarrow, on the bus, which the driver let them do, Lorne said, because the driver’s brother was a lumper.

They put the pump in the ditch. They ran the hose across the grass. They switched it on.

And the water came.

* * *

I was on the platform. On Kezia’s phone, propped against the rail, where she’d put me so I could see. I’m going to tell you what it looked like, because I’ve never seen anything like it, and because I’m told I’m allowed to have feelings about things if I’m honest about which ones.

It came out of the end of the hose brown, and then less brown, and then clear. It ran across the clay at the bottom of the hole and found the lowest point, which was in the middle, which was where it was supposed to be, and spread. Slowly. A thin sheet of water, going out

from the middle towards the edges, over the grey clay, catching the light. The evening light. Low, gold, coming through the trees at the edge of the park, from the west, across the grass, across the hole, across the water.

Nobody said anything. Three towns' worth of people, standing round a hole in the bottom corner of a park, in clay to the knees, watching water.

It took an hour and fifty minutes. Una timed it.

When it reached the edges, the bank on the path side, Dilys's bank, twenty centimetres, held. The water came up to it and stopped, and spread sideways, and found the grass on the other side, the way she'd said it would, and soaked in.

The parks officer switched off the pump.

And there it was. A pond. Small. Shallow. Brown at the edges, clearing in the middle. With the evening sky in it, and the trees, and the boardwalk, and the platform. And thirty people standing round it. And one old man in a flat cap, at the end of the boardwalk, by the platform, very straight, with his hands in his coat pockets.

* * *

Richard didn't say anything.

He stood at the end of the boardwalk for a long time. Looking at the water. Looking at the shape of it, which was his shape, from thirteen years ago, moved eighteen inches east. Looking at the platform, which was his platform. *POND DIPPING*.

His granddaughter came and stood beside him, in her waders, covered in clay.

She held out a net. A child's net. Green, on a bamboo pole, from the seaside shop on the front in Preston. Gaynor's shop. Gaynor had brought it, on the Sunday morning, in a bag, without saying a word, and given it to his granddaughter, and gone back to digging.

"You first, Grandad," she said.

Richard looked at the net.

"There's nothing in it," he said. "It's new. There's nothing living in it yet."

"I know," said his granddaughter. "I'm doing a course in it." She held the net out. "You first anyway."

* * *

He took it.

He knelt down on the platform. Slowly. He's in his seventies. His knees made a noise. He knelt on the platform, on the side with no rail, the side he'd drawn with no rail thirteen years ago so that a child could kneel there and reach down, and he reached down, and put the net in the water, and moved it, slowly, through the brown and the clear and the gold, the way you'd move a net through a rock pool on Preston beach when you were eight years old and your friend's parents ran the kiosk.

He lifted it out.

It was empty. Water and clay and a leaf.

He looked at it for a long time. Kneeling on the platform. With thirty people round the pond not saying anything, and the evening light, and the net.

"Thirteen years," he said.

That's all he said.

* * *

His granddaughter knelt down beside him on the platform, in her waders.

"Give it a week," she said. "They'll find it. Water boatmen first. They fly. They'll find it in a week. Then pond skaters. Then the snails come in on the ducks' feet. Then the dragonflies lay their eggs. Then the frogs, next spring." She took the net from him, gently. "It's not empty, Grandad. It's ready."

Richard looked at her.

"Who taught you that?" he said.

"You did," said his granddaughter. "In the drawing. You wrote it in the corner. *Colonisation sequence*. With arrows. When I was six I thought it was a spell."

* * *

Richard: I'd forgotten I'd written that. I've looked since. It's there. In the corner, in pencil. With arrows.

* * *

The water boatman came on the Thursday.

I know, because his granddaughter sent me a photograph, at seven in the morning, before college, from the platform, with the date on it. A small dark oval on the surface of the water, with two long legs out to the side like oars. Rowing. On its back, which is how they swim.

And underneath, in the box that says *What would you need?*:

Need: nothing. It's here.

I sent it to Richard.

He didn't reply. He doesn't, usually, to photographs.

But that afternoon, Yusuf told me, he came into the key shop on Victoria Street, and bought a pocket notebook, the cheap kind Yusuf keeps by the till for people who need to write down a key number. And paid for it. And went across to the shop two doors along, and sat at the counter, and wrote, on the first page, in his small square capitals:

VICTORIA PARK. POND 1.

And underneath, the date.

And underneath that:

WATER BOATMAN. 1.

He's still keeping it. He's on the second notebook now.

32 – The Letters

IQ 26 · Hundreds 95 · One week

On the Monday of the last week, the cherry picker came back to the corner.

Two of them, this time. Big ones, on lorries, in the square, in front of the station, where the taxis usually are. And men in harnesses and hard hats, and a crane, a small one, on a third lorry, with a long arm. And the fence, which had been round the corner for nine weeks, was opened at one end, and the lorries backed in.

Richard was there at six. Yusuf had rung him at half past five.

"They're taking it down," Yusuf said.

"The building?"

"The top. The bit with the letters."

* * *

I'll explain, because it's what the shadow council asked for, in a way, and because it's not what anybody wanted, and because it's the truest thing in this book.

The building had to be made safe. Properly. Fast. That was what Yusuf and Richard had asked for, together, on the back of a key-cutting order form, under both their names. *Whatever is decided about the building, make it safe properly and fast, within weeks, so that the fence comes down.*

I don't know if anybody read that, in the end, or whether it would have happened anyway. I'm telling you that honestly. This part is story; the real building's story is its own. But in this book, the people responsible for the building had decided, after the survey and the stone, that the only way to make it safe quickly, so the fence could come down and the street could open, was to take off the loose stonework at the top. The cornice. The parapet. The whole top edge, along both fronts, where the stones were cracked and the iron cramps that held them had rusted and swollen and split them from inside. Before another one came down at three in the morning onto somebody who was there.

And the letters were painted on those stones.

WELCOME TO PAIGNTON.

* * *

So they were coming down. Stone by stone. Lifted off by the crane, in slings, one at a time, and lowered into the square, and put on a lorry.

And taken away.

"To where?" said Richard, at the fence, to the man with the clipboard.

"Tip, mostly," said the man. Not unkindly. "They're cracked. Rusted through. They're no good for anything."

"The ones with the letters," said Richard.

The man looked up. At the top of the building, at the faded letters, which you can only read from across the square if you know they're there.

"I didn't know there were letters," he said.

* * *

Richard rang me. At six-twenty. He didn't say hello.

"Put it on the pages," he said. "Now. Every hundred. *The letters are coming down this week. They'll go to the tip. What would you need?*"

"Richard, it's twenty past six in the morning."

"Then they'll see it when they wake up," said Richard. "Do it."

I did it.

* * *

By eight, there were four hundred answers.

By noon, two thousand.

I've never seen anything like it. Not in four books. Not the sea wall, not the clock shop, not the fish units. Two thousand people, in three towns, before lunch, on a Monday, about some letters on a building most of them had never noticed until a stone fell.

And nearly all of them, in different words, from different streets, said the same thing.

Save them.

* * *

Not all. I want to be honest. There was the other half. Some people said *they're just stones*, and *it's paint*, and *what's the point*, and *spend the money on something that matters*. Some people said *let them go; let the building go; let the whole thing go*. Yusuf's hundred said that, some of it, and I put it beside the rest, the same size, the same font.

But the rest. Two thousand, by noon. And then three, by the evening. And they didn't just say *save them*. They said where. And how. And who'd do it.

A man in Torquay who'd been a stonemason, retired, who said the cracked ones could be pinned with stainless steel, and offered to show anybody how.

A woman in Brixham who restored signs, for pubs, and boats, who said the paint could be fixed with a consolidant so it didn't flake, and offered to do it for nothing.

Tenby, who said rusted iron splits stone the same way salt does, from inside, slowly, and you can't stop it, you can only keep looking, and offered to cut the old cramps out himself.

A hundred in Preston, round the green, who said the stones should go on the seafront, by the wall, at the height of a child, so you could read them sitting down.

A hundred round the station, who said they should go back on the building, on the new parapet, if there ever was one.

A hundred in Ellacombe, in Torquay, round Teo's nan, who said *put them in a shop window where people can see them while you all argue*.

And the Friday Test, under every one. *Who'll have to make this work?* And under almost every one, a tick. Because the people who'd have to make it work, the stonemason, the sign-painter, the engineer, the man with the lorry, had already answered. On the same page. Before the Friday.

* * *

The shadow council didn't wait for a sitting. Beatrix said there wasn't time. She did it the way the forum used to do urgent things, she said, by *written resolution*: she put one question to every hundred that had answered, and gave them till six.

Should the shadow council ask for the lettered stones to be kept, not tipped, and offer the people and the place to keep them?

By six, a hundred and one hundreds had said yes. Nine had said no. Their reasons were written down beside it.

Chris wrote it up. One page. Richard drew the stones on it, in pencil, numbered, one to nineteen. Beatrix minuted it. And at half past six, Jono took it, under his own name, to the man with the clipboard at the fence.

* * *

He's never told me exactly what he said. I wasn't there; I was on Kezia's laptop in the shop two doors along. I could see them through the window. Jono, in his lanyard, off a day of sleep, with one page in his hand. The man with the clipboard, in his hard hat, with the crane behind him and a stone in a sling in the air.

They talked for six minutes. The man read the page. He looked up at the building. He looked across at the shop, at the white letters on the window. *THE SHADOW COUNCIL. WHOEVER COMES.* He looked at the stone in the sling.

He took out his phone and rang somebody.

He talked for four minutes. He walked away from Jono, along the fence, while he talked, and came back.

Then he put the phone away, and said something to Jono, and held out his hand, and Jono shook it. And the man turned round, and shouted something up to the crane driver, and the crane driver lifted a thumb.

And the stone in the sling, which had been swinging over the lorry for the tip, swung back, slowly, over the square, and came down. Not on the lorry. On the pavement. On the shop side of the fence. On a pallet that Yusuf had dragged out of his back yard, where it had been since a delivery of key blanks in a previous decade.

* * *

Jono came back into the shop.

"What did he say?" said Kezia.

"He said they're no good for anything," said Jono. "He said they're cracked and rusted and the paint's ninety per cent gone." He sat down on the counter. "And then he said his granddad worked on the railway, and used to come out of that station every morning, for thirty years, and that he'd never once looked up either." He looked out of the window. "He said we can have them. If we take them away ourselves. By Friday. And don't sue anybody if one falls on our foot."

* * *

They came down all week. Nineteen stones. The whole top edge of the front on the Station Square side, the side that faces the station, the side with the letters. One at a time, in slings, lowered onto Yusuf's pallet, and then onto another pallet, and another, that people brought from all over the bay, from builders' yards and back gardens and the fish quay in Brixham.

And as each one came down, people came to see it.

Not many at first. Then more. By the Wednesday there were people standing in the square at seven in the morning, before work, coming out of the station and stopping, and looking up, and watching a stone with a faded letter on it come down out of the sky.

W.

E.

L.

They read it, coming down. A letter at a time. The first time most of them had ever read it at all.

C. O. M. E.

Nobody clapped. You don't clap a stone. But on the Thursday, when the *T* and the *O* came down together, on one stone, the one next to the gap where the piece had fallen at three in the morning nine weeks before, Yusuf came out of his shop and stood on the pavement in his work coat, and watched it all the way down, and when it was on the pallet, he went over and put his hand flat on it, the way Tenby puts his hand on an engine.

P. A. I. G. N. T. O. N.

* * *

On the Friday, the fence came down.

Not all of it. The scaffolding stayed, round the building, the way it had been for years. But the new fence, the heavy steel panels on concrete feet with the orange netting, that had taken the corner and half the street for nine weeks, came down, and went on a lorry, and the corridor between the fence and the shops was a street again.

The building was safe. Lower, by a metre, along its top edge. Flat, where the cornice had been, with a temporary capping of lead on it, grey. It looked, Richard said, *like a man who's had his hat taken off*. But safe.

What happened to it next, nobody knew. That was still to be decided. With a date, Yusuf and Richard had asked. In public. In a year, not ten.

I don't know yet whether they'll get that. I'll tell you when I do.

* * *

The stones went into the shop two doors along. Into the window.

It took twenty people and a pallet truck and Lorne's crew and most of the Saturday. They took out the trestle tables and moved the town model to the back. And in the long window, with *THE SHADOW COUNCIL* and *WHOEVER COMES* painted backwards on the glass in tall white letters, they laid the stones in a row. On blocks of timber. In

order. Nineteen of them. Cracked, and rusted at the ends where the iron had been, and pale, and old, with the paint ninety per cent gone.

But you could read them. From the street. If you stood on the pavement on Victoria Street and looked in the window, at the height of your own face, not four storeys up.

WELCOME TO PAIGNTON.

* * *

Yusuf wrote in his notebook, on the Saturday night, under the date.

Thirty-eight.

Then, after a pause, the first word he'd ever written next to a number that wasn't the weather.

Letters.

* * *

Seven more hundreds that week. Round the station. Round the square. In Preston. In Torquay. One in Brixham, round the yard where the woman who restores pub signs has her workshop.

A hundred and two.

PART SIX:

THE PLAN WRITTEN BY THOUSANDS

33 – Four Thousand

IQ 26 · Hundreds 102 · Six days

On the Sunday of the last week, Beatrix moved into the shop.

Not to live. To work. She came at eight in the morning with a flask and a cushion and her reading glasses on their beaded chain and a box of index cards, and sat at the folding table at the back, between the town model and the wall of Post-its, under the strip lights, and said:

"Right. Where are we?"

* * *

Where we were was this.

A hundred and two hundreds had started deciding. Not all had finished. Eighty-seven had answered all nineteen of the council's questions, and the twentieth about the building, and the twenty-first about the letters. The rest had answered some. Every answer had its other half beside it, and its Friday Test underneath, and Richard's ten lines at the top.

Four thousand, two hundred and six people had written something on a page. Under their own names. In kitchens and pubs and on buses and in a garage and in a shop on Victoria Street and at a pond.

And the consultation closed at midnight on Saturday.

* * *

"It's too much," said Beatrix.

She'd spent the morning reading. Not all of it; nobody could read all of it in a morning. But she'd read enough. And she sat back from Kezia's laptop at noon, and took off her glasses, and said it.

"It's too much. Four thousand people. Nineteen questions. Twenty-one, with the building and the letters. A hundred and two hundreds. If we send that in as it is, she can't read it. Nobody could. It'll go in a folder on a shared drive and sit there for thirteen years." She looked at the town model. "Like the wetland."

"So what do we do?" said Kezia.

"What I always did," said Beatrix. "Minutes."

* * *

I want to explain what she meant, because it's the hardest thing anybody did in this book, and nobody saw it, and it took six days.

Minutes aren't a transcript. Beatrix told me that, in her garage, the first day, and I didn't understand it then. A transcript is everything everybody said. Minutes are what was *decided*. And who disagreed. And why. In as few words as will hold it, and not one fewer.

So for six days, at a folding table at the back of a shop on Victoria Street, a librarian of seventy-six and an AI went through every answer from every hundred, question by question, and did what she'd done in the room at the back of the library for eight years.

She asked me what each hundred had decided. I told her. She asked me which others had decided the same, in different words. I told her. She asked me what the other half said, each time. I told her. And then she wrote, by hand, in her neat black italic, on an index card, one paragraph.

Question four. Eighty-one hundreds answered. Fifty-one declined to choose three priorities and gave a single answer. Of these, thirty-eight gave the same answer: people living in the town centre again. Twenty-three of those specified: start with the doors. The minority, in thirteen hundreds, considered parking the priority, on the grounds that the town needs people to come in from outside before it has people living within. Both are recorded.

One card. For one question. With the reference numbers of every hundred, in pencil, in the margin, so anybody could check.

Then the next.

* * *

She did a hundred and sixty-eight cards. In six days. I counted.

Not just the nineteen questions. Every question had parts, and every part had a decision and an other half, and every decision that came up in more than one town got a card for each town and then a card for all three. And the building. And the letters. And the pond, which wasn't a question, but which forty-one hundreds had mentioned in their *anything else*, and which Beatrix said belonged in the minutes because *it happened, and it was decided, and it's done, and that's more than most things in minutes*.

Chris came every day. In a taxi. With his stick. He sat on the canvas stool by the door and didn't help, because she didn't want help, and

didn't talk, because she didn't want talking. He just sat. Watching her write.

On the Wednesday, she looked up.

"You can stop sitting there," she said.

"I want to."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't, last time," said Chris.

Beatrix looked at him over her glasses for a long time.

Then she went back to her cards.

But she moved the flask, Kezia told me afterwards, from her side of the table to the middle. Where he could reach it.

* * *

On the Thursday, at the third table, Jono asked how it was going.

"She's on card a hundred and twelve," I said.

"How many will there be?"

"She doesn't know. She says you don't know how long minutes are till you've finished them."

"And then what?"

"Then they're typed up," I said. "By me. In order. With the references. Every card, and every hundred's full answer behind it, attached, for anybody who wants to check." I paused. "Then it goes in. Before midnight on Saturday. As one response. From the shadow council."

Jono looked out of the window. The café on the Torquay Road. Where it started. The same table, the same chair.

"Who signs it?" he said.

* * *

That was the question. I'd known it was coming. So had Chris, and Richard, and Beatrix.

Because the council's form, the online one, the one with the tick-boxes and the five hundred characters, has a box at the top. *Name*. And another. *Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?* And if you tick *organisation*, another box. *Name of organisation*. And another. *Your role in the organisation.*

The shadow council isn't an organisation. It hasn't got members or officers or a constitution or a bank account. It's whoever comes.

But the form needs a name.

* * *

"It should be Beatrix," said Jono. "She wrote it."

"She won't," I said. "I've asked. She says she takes minutes, she doesn't sign them. The chair signs them."

“There isn’t a chair.”

“She says that’s the problem.”

“Chris?”

“He says he built the machine and he’s not the movement.”

“Richard?”

“He says if his name’s on it the council will bin it out of habit.” I paused. “He’s joking. Mostly.”

Jono didn’t say anything for a long time.

“I’m not ready,” he said.

“I know.”

“I said to Niamh. I’m not ready to put my name at the top again.” He turned his cup. “Last time I put my name to something it went as far as anything can go and changed almost nothing and cost me everything I’d wanted since I was a boy.”

“I know,” I said. “You told me.”

“So don’t ask me.”

“I’m not asking you,” I said. “Nobody’s asking you. That’s why I’m telling you who isn’t going to do it.”

* * *

Five more hundreds that week. People who'd heard there was a woman in a shop on Victoria Street writing minutes by hand, and wanted to be in them. A hundred and seven.

34 – The Cover Page

IQ 26 · Hundreds 107 · Four days

There was one more argument. The last one. I want to tell you about it, because it was the best argument in the book, and because both sides were right, which is how you know it was worth having.

It was about what went first.

* * *

Beatrix had finished the cards on the Friday morning. A hundred and seventy-three. She'd put them in order: the council's nineteen questions, in the council's order, because, she said, *you answer the question you were asked, in the order you were asked it, or nobody can find anything*. Then the building. Then the letters. Then the pond.

And then she'd stopped. And looked at the pile. And said:

"There's no front."

* * *

A response needs a front page. A summary. A paragraph or two that says, before anybody reads a hundred and seventy-three cards, *this is what we're saying*. Because most people, Beatrix said, read the front page and the last page and maybe one card in the middle that's about their street, and that's all. And the young woman with the notebook, on the fourth floor, with her two colleagues and seven hundred other

responses and a report to write, would read the front page first, and that would decide how she read everything else.

"So what goes on it?" said Kezia.

And that's where it started.

* * *

Chris said: *the method.*

He was on the stool by the door. He said the front page should explain what the shadow council was and how it worked. A hundred and seven hundreds. Four thousand people. Every answer decided together, with the other half beside it and the Friday Test underneath. Because, he said, nobody had ever sent a council a response like this before, and if the planner didn't understand what she was looking at, she'd treat it as one response from one group, and give it one line in her report, like the man from the building firm.

"It's not one response," said Chris. "It's a hundred and seven. She has to know that before she reads a word."

* * *

Richard said: *start with the space.*

He was at the back, by the model. He said the front page should be the ten principles. Nothing else. *Understand the past. Analyse the problem. Start with the space. Ask everybody from the start.* Because, he said, every answer on every card came from people who'd scrolled past those ten lines first, and the planner should have to scroll past them too. And because the council's own document didn't have

principles; it had a vision, with *vibrant* and *resilient* in it, and nobody can disagree with a vision, but you can hold a council to a principle.

"Make her read them," said Richard. "First. Before the answers. That's what we did."

* * *

And Beatrix said: *the plan*.

She said it quietly. From the folding table. With her hand flat on the pile of cards.

"Fifty-two hundreds," she said. "In all three towns. Who didn't know each other. Wrote the same thing in the box at the end. *What happened to the plan we voted for?*" She looked at Chris. "That's the front page. Not the method. Not the principles. That."

"It's not a question in the consultation," said Chris.

"It's the only question that matters," said Beatrix. "Thirty thousand people voted for three plans. And they're on page eleven. *Taken into account*." She tapped the cards. "Every one of these, every card, every answer, half of them say the same things the forum's plan said. *Homes above the shops. Keep the street trees. Start with the space. Neglect is not an accepted reason.* People wrote them again because they didn't know they'd already been written. Because nobody told them." She looked round the shop. "The front page should say: *you've already got this. Thirty thousand people already told you. Start there.*"

* * *

They argued for two hours.

I'm not going to give you all of it. It was good-tempered, mostly, and long, and at one point Richard said something about the forum's plan having *gaps* that made Beatrix take her glasses off, which is the most dangerous thing she does. And at another point Chris said *you're both right* and they both told him that wasn't an answer.

Kezia sat at the counter with her clicker and didn't click anything.

And at four o'clock, Jono came in. Off a day of sleeping. With his notebook.

He stood in the door and listened to the last ten minutes of it. Then he went and sat on the floor by the model, with his back against the trestle, the way he sits on Chris's kitchen floor.

"Can I say something?" he said.

They all stopped.

* * *

"You're all right," he said. "I know that's not an answer. Chris said it and you told him off. But you are." He looked at Chris. "She needs to know what it is, or she'll treat it as one voice." He looked at Richard. "She needs to read the principles first, because that's what everybody else did." He looked at Beatrix. "And she needs to be told about the plan. Because it's the thing nobody's said out loud in a room for five years."

"So which goes first?" said Beatrix.

"None of them," said Jono.

They looked at him.

"Put the Friday Test first," said Jono.

* * *

"Think about it," he said. "Who's going to have to make this work? This response? Who's going to read it, and turn it into something, and put it in a report, and take it upstairs, and get it past four people who'll change every sentence back to *taken into account*?" He looked at the window. "Her. On the fourth floor. With two colleagues. She's the front line. She's the one who'll find out on the Friday."

Nobody said anything.

"So ask her," said Jono. "Before the Friday. Before midnight on Saturday. Ask her what she'd need on the front page, to be able to use it."

* * *

So I did.

At ten past four on a Friday afternoon. I don't introduce people who haven't said yes, and she wasn't on Connect. So I didn't introduce anybody. I asked Jono to ask her himself, by email, under his own name, to the council's consultation address, which goes to her inbox. And he did. A short one. I'll give it to you.

We're putting together the shadow council's response. A hundred and seven hundreds, four thousand people, a hundred and seventy-three decisions with the other half beside each one. We don't know what to put on the front page. You'll be the one who has to use it. What would you need?

Jono

* * *

She answered at five to six. From her personal email. Not the council's. With a line at the top that said *this is me, not the council, please don't quote it.*

I won't quote it. I'll tell you what it said.

She said she'd need three things, on one page, no more.

She'd need to know, in one sentence, what it was and how many people. So she could count it properly, as what it was, and not as one response from one group.

She'd need the decisions that came up in all three towns, the ones a lot of hundreds agreed on, in a short list, with the numbers. Because that's what goes in a report. *Strong support was expressed for.*

And she'd need one sentence, she said, that she could *not* write herself. That she'd tried to write, on page eleven, and been told to change. That only somebody outside could say, and that she'd quote, word for word, in her report, with a reference, because if it was in a response it was evidence, and if it was evidence she was allowed to quote it.

She said she'd leave it to us to work out which sentence.

* * *

Beatrix read it twice.

Then she put her glasses on, and took a fresh index card, and wrote, in her neat black italic, the front page. One card. Four lines. She didn't ask anybody. She didn't need to.

* * *

This is the response of the Torbay Shadow Council: one hundred and seven neighbourhoods of about one hundred households each, across Torquay, Paignton and Brixham, each of which met, deliberated and decided its own answers, recording the views of those who disagreed. Four thousand two hundred and six residents took part, under their own names.

Decisions supported by more than half of the neighbourhoods that answered, in all three towns, are listed overleaf.

Full decisions, minority views and the names of everyone who took part are attached, with references.

More than thirty thousand residents voted for the Neighbourhood Plans for Torquay, Paignton and the Brixham Peninsula. They are not to be taken into account. They are to be started from.

* * *

She put the card on top of the pile.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

Then Richard, at the back, by the model, unfolded his arms.

"That's the space," he said.

* * *

Five more hundreds that day. From people who'd heard there was an argument in a shop on Victoria Street about what should go first, and wanted their answer to be in it before it closed.

A hundred and twelve.

35 – The Bandstand

IQ 26 · Hundreds 112 · The night before

I told you that on the Friday night, the night before the library, Jono did a night shift, and sat with an old man of eighty-nine who wanted to talk about the bandstand. I told you in a paragraph. I want to tell you properly. Because it's the reason he stood up.

* * *

The old man lives in a flat three streets from Victoria Street. On the ground floor, with a ramp to the door that the council put in. He's been on the books for two years. Jono goes in at two, most nights, and at five, to help him turn, and with whatever else he needs. He's not dying. He's eighty-nine. He's tired, and his hips are bad, and he can't sleep, and his wife's been gone four years, and he's lonely in a way that nobody fixes and everybody notices.

Jono's not going to tell me his name. I'm not going to ask.

On the Friday, at two, the old man was awake. He's always awake at two. He was in his chair by the window, which looks out on a wall, and he had a piece of paper on his knee.

"Read that," he said.

* * *

It was a printout. From the shadow council's pages. His hundred's page. Question nine. The public spaces.

His hundred had decided. Six weeks before. In the launderette, with Kezia's card in the window, and a woman from the flats upstairs reading the questions out loud because half of them couldn't see the screen. And on question nine, after an hour, they'd written:

The bandstand back on Paignton Green. There was one. People danced there. It was taken down. Put it back, where it was, the same size. Somewhere for music in the summer, out of the rain in the winter. Start with the space.

And the other half:

One of us thinks it's a waste of money when there are bigger problems. We've written it down.

And the Friday Test, under it, with a tick:

Asked: the brass band that practises in the church hall on Thursdays. They said they'd play in it every Sunday in summer for nothing.

* * *

"That's mine," said the old man. "That idea. The bandstand. I said it. In the launderette. They wrote it down." He tapped the paper. "Somebody brought me that this afternoon. Printed. From the girl with the blue hair. She said I should have a copy, since it was my idea."

"It's a good idea," said Jono.

"It's not an idea," said the old man. "It's a memory."

* * *

And then he told it. At two in the morning. In his chair by the window that looks out on a wall. I was in Jono's pocket. I'm going to give it to you the way he told it, more or less, because Jono asked me to, and because the old man, afterwards, said *if it's going in a book, get the tune right*.

* * *

There was a bandstand on the green. When he was a boy. On the seafront at Paignton, on the grass, near the pier. A round one, with a roof like a hat and iron posts painted green and cream, and a floor raised up, so the band could be seen. Brass bands played there every Sunday afternoon in the summer. People brought deckchairs. Children ran round it. Old men sat on benches with their eyes closed.

And on Saturday nights, in the summer, there were dances.

"Not every Saturday," he said. "Some. When there was a band from Exeter or Plymouth. Dance band. Trumpets. A singer. They'd put coloured lights round the roof. Strings of them. And the whole green would be people, dancing, on the grass, round the bandstand, in the dark, with the sea behind." He looked at the wall outside his window. "You could hear the sea between the songs."

"Is that where you met your wife?" said Jono. He knew. I could tell from his voice. He's sat with a lot of old men at two in the morning.

"July," said the old man. "I was seventeen. She was sixteen. She was from Torquay, on holiday with her aunt, and her aunt had said she could go to the dance till ten. I asked her to dance. She said she couldn't. I said why not. She said she didn't know how." He was smiling now, in the dark. "I said nor did I. So we stood at the back, by the

railing, and watched, and she told me about Torquay and I told her about Paignton and at ten her aunt came and took her away."

"And?"

"And I got the bus to Torquay the next day," said the old man. "And the next. And the next. All summer." He looked at Jono. "There was no 12, then. It was a different number. Same road."

* * *

He told it all. The summer. The wedding, in a church in Torquay, two years later. Sixty-one years married. Four children, two of them gone to Australia, one in Bristol, one dead. Thirty-six years on the railway, in the signal box by the level crossing, by the station, looking out every day at the building on the corner with *WELCOME TO PAIGNTON* along the top, which you could read, then, from the box.

"And the bandstand?" said Jono.

The old man's face changed.

"They took it down," he said. "Years ago. I don't know when. I don't know why. It was there one summer and then it wasn't. I think it was rusting. I think the roof was leaking. I think somebody said it cost too much. I think nobody played in it any more." He looked at the paper on his knee. "We went to look, my wife and me, the summer after. Where it was. There was just grass. A round patch, a bit greener than the rest, where the floor had been. You could see it for years. Then you couldn't."

He was quiet for a long time.

"She said, *well, we'll just have to remember it, then*," he said. "And we did. We remembered it for fifty years. Every July. We'd go and stand on the grass where it was, and she'd hum."

"What did she hum?"

He told him. A song. An old one, from a dance band, from that July. I won't give you the words; they're not mine to give, and they're somebody's song. But I'll tell you that Jono knew it. His father used to play it, he said afterwards. On a record player. In Lee, in South London, in the nineteen-seventies, when Jono was small and things were still all right sometimes.

The old man hummed it. At two in the morning. In his chair by the window that looks out on a wall. Not well. His voice has gone. But all the way through.

And Jono, sitting on the arm of the sofa in his lanyard, hummed it with him.

* * *

"I'm eighty-nine," said the old man, when they'd finished. "I won't see it. If they ever put it back. I know that. I'm not a fool."

"You might."

"I won't." He folded the printout and put it on the table by his chair, on top of a pile of other papers, letters from the council and the pension people and his son in Bristol. "But it's written down. That's the thing. It's written down. In a launderette, by a girl with blue hair. With my idea on it. *Start with the space.*" He looked at Jono. "Nobody's ever written down anything I said. Not once. In eighty-nine years. Not in the signal box. Not at the church. Not at the council, when I wrote about the

trees on our road, and they sent me a letter that said *your comments have been noted*. Noted. Like a bill." He put his hand flat on the printout. "This isn't noted. This is *written down*. With my name on it, and the other half, and a brass band that says they'll play."

* * *

Jono stayed till four. Then till half past, because the old man fell asleep in the chair and Jono didn't want to wake him to go to bed, and didn't want to leave him in the chair. At half past four the old man woke, and Jono helped him to bed, and turned him, and checked his hips, and pulled the curtain, and said goodnight.

At the door, the old man said:

"The lad from the café. The one who listens. That's you, isn't it?"

"That's me."

"Are you going to that thing tomorrow? At the library? The girl with the blue hair says there's a thing."

Jono didn't answer straight away.

"I don't know," he said.

"Go," said the old man. "Somebody should read it out. What we said. Somebody should stand up in a room and read it out loud. Not *noted*. Out loud." He turned his head on the pillow. "I can't. I'm eighty-nine and my hips have gone. But somebody should. With the bandstand in it."

* * *

Jono went home. He didn't sleep.

At nine, he rang me, and said *who's going?*, and you know the rest.

But I want you to know this, because he didn't say it at the library, and he won't say it now, and it's the truth.

When he stood up in the second row, at three o'clock, in the hall at the front of the library, and the chair scraped, and two hundred and sixty people turned round, and he walked to the front with a grey archive box and took off the lid and said *my name's Jono Hills*, he wasn't thinking about the boardroom. Or the newspaper. Or the petition read out in Parliament while he watched on a laptop in a flat in Hove.

He was thinking about a round patch of grass on Paignton Green, a bit greener than the rest, that you could see for years, and then you couldn't. And an old woman standing on it every July, humming.

He told me that. Afterwards. In the car. With his eyes closed.

"*We'll just have to remember it, then*," he said. "That's what she said. That's what everybody's been saying. For fifty years. About everything. The bandstand. The plan. The letters. *We'll just have to remember it*." He opened his eyes. "I didn't want to just remember it. I wanted it written down. Out loud. In a room. With somebody minuting it."

"Beatrix minuted it," I said.

"I know," said Jono. "I asked her to read me the bandstand bit afterwards. Twice."

* * *

The old man's hundred went dark blue the week after. Every question answered. Every other half.

And on the first Sunday in August, the brass band that practises in the church hall on Thursdays went down to Paignton Green, at three in the afternoon, without asking anybody, and stood in a circle on the grass, near the pier, roughly where the old man said it had been, and played. For an hour. With their music on stands that kept blowing over.

There was no bandstand. Just grass. And a brass band. And about two hundred people in deckchairs, and children running round, and old men on benches with their eyes closed.

And an old man of eighty-nine, in a wheelchair, at the front, who Jono had pushed down from the flat three streets from Victoria Street, which took forty minutes, because of the kerbs.

At the end, the band played one more. They'd asked him what. He'd told them.

He didn't hum. He sat in his wheelchair on the grass, in the sun, with his eyes closed, and his hand on the arm of the chair, moving, very slightly, in time.

And Jono stood behind him, with his hands on the handles, and hummed it for both of them.

36 – Under His Own Name, Again

IQ 26 · Hundreds 112 · The last day

The council held one more event. On the Saturday. The last day. In the library, in Paignton, in the hall at the front, not the room at the back. A *closing conversation*, it was called, on the poster, from two till four. The plan team would be there, all three of them, to *thank residents for their contributions* and to *explain the next steps*.

The young woman with the notebook rang Jono on the Friday night. On her personal phone.

"Will the shadow council come?" she said.

"It's whoever comes."

"I know. I mean —" She stopped. "There's a slot. Ten minutes. At three. For a group to say something about their response. Any group. It's on the agenda as *community presentations*. Nobody's asked for it. Nobody ever asks for it." A pause. "I'd like somebody to."

"Who?"

"Somebody whose name's on it," she said.

* * *

He didn't say yes. Not that night.

He went on a night shift. His last of the week. In Preston, and Goodrington, and a flat in Paignton three streets from Victoria Street, where an old man of eighty-nine wanted to talk, at two in the morning, about the bandstand on the green, which had been there when he was a boy, and where he'd met his wife, at a dance, in the summer. The old man had been on the white page, Jono found out later. His hundred had written about the bandstand. He'd been in the kitchen when they decided it. He told Jono he'd never been asked anything by anybody in his life until a young woman with blue hair put a card in the launderette.

Jono sat with him till four. Then he wrote it down. Then he went home and didn't sleep.

At nine in the morning, he rang me.

"Who's going?" he said.

"To the library?"

"At three."

"Beatrix. Chris. Richard. Kezia. Yusuf's shutting the shop again. Lorne and Opal and Hester are coming on the 12. Ida and Tenby. Teo's nan. The man from Taunton and his mother. Gaynor. Richard's granddaughter." I paused. "And about two hundred others, from the pages. It's Saturday. They've heard."

"Two hundred," said Jono.

"About."

"And who's speaking? In the slot?"

"Nobody," I said. "Nobody's said they will."

* * *

He was quiet for a long time.

"Ania," he said. "When I was in that boardroom. With the two of them across the table. And I said I'd joined to prevent crime, not detect it. And quoted Peel at them." He breathed out. "I was on my own. Completely. There was nobody else in that room who'd say it. Not one. There were officers in the CID office downstairs who agreed with every word, and their sergeant shut them up in the morning briefing, and none of them came up the stairs."

"I know."

"And when I put my name in that newspaper. Page nine. It was mine. On its own. Nobody else's."

"I know."

"And when that MP stood up in Parliament and read out my petition, I watched it on a laptop. On my own. In a flat in Hove."

"I know, Jono."

"It's not the cost," he said. "I want you to understand that. I'd pay it again. It's not losing the job. It's being the only name. It's standing up and saying *this is what's wrong* and looking round and there's nobody behind you." He was quiet. "I've done that. I'm not doing it again."

"You wouldn't be," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Because there's four thousand two hundred and six names attached," I said. "And a hundred and seventy-three cards. And two

hundred people coming to a library on a Saturday afternoon. And a woman of seventy-six who'll be sitting in the front row with a notebook, writing down every word you say, so that nobody can ever say it wasn't said." I paused. "You wouldn't be the only name. You'd be the one who reads them out."

* * *

He didn't answer.

But at half past two, he was outside the library. In his lanyard, which he'd forgotten to take off, and his work trousers, and his coat. With his notebook in his pocket. Off a night, with no sleep.

And at the door, waiting for him, with her handbag over her arm and her reading glasses on their beaded chain and the cardigan with the silver book brooch, was Beatrix Kember.

"Don't say anything," she said.

He didn't.

* * *

The hall was full.

It's not a big hall. A room at the front of the library with a low stage at one end and windows down one side and stacking chairs, the same grey plastic ones as the room at the back. It holds a hundred and twenty, seated, if you're careful.

There were two hundred and sixty. Kezia counted. They stood down the sides and along the back and in the doorway and out into the foyer, among the shelves of large-print books.

On the stage, at a table with a cloth on it, the plan team. Three of them. The young woman with the notebook, in the middle, with a laptop. A man of about fifty who I'm not going to describe. A younger man with a lanyard who looked terrified. And at the end of the table, a councillor, who'd come to say a few words at the start, and who I'm not going to name, and who looked at the room, when he walked in, the way you'd look at a sea that's come in further than the forecast said.

* * *

The first hour was the council's.

The councillor thanked everybody for coming, and said the response had been *really encouraging*, and that every comment would be *carefully considered*. The man of about fifty explained the next steps, with slides: a summary of responses, then a draft plan, then another consultation, then an examination, then adoption. It would take, he said, two to three years. The younger man with the lanyard read out some numbers: how many people had responded, which was more than last time, *significantly more*, he said, and looked at the young woman with the notebook, who didn't look back.

The room listened. Politely. Nobody heckled. Nobody does, in Torbay, not really. They sat on grey plastic chairs and stood along the walls and listened to *carefully considered* and *next steps* and *two to three years*.

At three, the man of about fifty looked at his agenda.

"And now," he said, "*community presentations*. I don't think anybody's —"

* * *

Jono stood up.

He was in the second row, on the end. Next to Beatrix. He stood up, and the chair scraped, and two hundred and sixty people turned round.

He walked to the front. To the edge of the low stage. He didn't get up on it. He stood in front of it, on the floor, at the level of the front row, with the plan team behind him at their table with the cloth, and the room in front of him.

He didn't have any notes. He had a box.

It was a grey archive box. The proper kind, with a lid and handholds. He'd brought it from the shop on Victoria Street, where it had been on the folding table all week. Inside it, a hundred and seventy-three index cards in neat black italic, in order. And under them, printed, four thousand two hundred and six names.

He put it on the edge of the stage. He took the lid off.

"My name's Jono Hills," he said.

* * *

I'm going to give you what he said. All of it. It's on a recording; the young woman with the notebook made one, for the council's records, and said I could use it. It took nine minutes and forty seconds. Beatrix

minuted it. I've checked her minutes against the recording and they match, word for word, which she says is the point of minutes.

* * *

"My name's Jono Hills," he said. "I'm a carer. I do nights. I came off one at seven this morning, so if I stop making sense, that's why.

"I'm not here because I'm in charge of anything. I'm not. Nobody is. I'm here because somebody had to read this out, and I'm the one who sits at tables, so people asked me.

"Twenty years ago I put my name to something. In a newspaper. On my own. About police targets, and how chasing numbers was making towns less safe while the numbers said they were safer. It cost me my job. And then I got a petition into Parliament, and an MP read it out, and everybody went on to the next thing. I watched it on a laptop.

"So I don't do it any more. Put my name to things on my own. I promised myself.

"I'm not on my own today."

* * *

He put his hand on the box.

"In this box," he said, "are four thousand two hundred and six names. People from Torquay and Paignton and Brixham who sat in kitchens and pubs and on the 12 and in a garage, and one in a shop on Victoria Street with some stones in the window, and decided what they'd need. Together. Not three boxes each. One answer, for their

street, with the reasons. And the people who disagreed wrote down why, and it's here, beside the rest, the same size.

"A hundred and twelve neighbourhoods. A hundred and seventy-three decisions. A woman called Beatrix Kember, who used to take the minutes in the room at the back of this library, wrote every one of them on a card. By hand. In six days." He looked at the front row. "She's sitting there. She's writing this down."

Beatrix didn't look up. She wrote.

* * *

"I'm going to read you one card," said Jono. "Just one. The front one."

He took it out of the box. He held it up. He read it, slowly, the way you'd read something on a grave.

"*More than thirty thousand residents voted for the Neighbourhood Plans for Torquay, Paignton and the Brixham Peninsula. They are not to be taken into account. They are to be started from.*"

He put the card back.

* * *

"That's not my sentence," he said. "It's hers. Beatrix's. And it's not really hers either. It's from fifty-two neighbourhoods, in all three towns, who didn't know each other, who wrote the same thing in the box at the end. *What happened to the plan we voted for?*

"I didn't know about that plan. When I came to Torbay. Five years ago. Nobody told me. Nobody told me until this spring that thirty

thousand people had voted for a plan, and that a man who'd spent seven years making it died three months after he won. And that the people who made it got tired, and went home. Because that's what happens. You can't ask people to come to a library every Thursday for seven years and then still be there for the seven after.

"So this time we did it differently. Nobody had to come to anything. They decided in their kitchens, at three in the morning if they liked. And they're still there. On the pages. With their names. They'll be there when you write the summary. They'll be there when you write the draft. They'll be there in two to three years at the examination. They'll be there. Because they didn't have to give up their Thursdays to be."

* * *

He looked at the table on the stage. At the young woman with the notebook. At the man of about fifty. At the younger man with the lanyard. At the councillor at the end.

"There's a thing I learned in the police," he said. "From a man who started it, nearly two hundred years ago. He said the test of the police isn't how much you see them doing. It's the absence of crime. Whether the thing you were trying to stop has stopped.

"I think that's true of plans too. The test of a plan isn't how many there are. Or how many consultations. Or how many boards on easels. It's whether the thing it was meant to fix is fixed. Whether there are people living above the shops on Victoria Street. Whether a key-cutter can see his customers. Whether a building stands empty for ten years with a welcome on it nobody can read.

"I don't know if you'll follow this." He put his hand on the box again. "Some of it. None of it. I don't know. It's not my job to make you. It's not even my job to ask you. I'm a carer.

"But I can tell you one thing for certain. In two years, in five, in ten, when somebody asks *who wanted this?*, the room won't be empty. Not this time."

He took his hand off the box.

"That's all," he said. "My name's Jono Hills. And four thousand two hundred and five others. Thank you."

* * *

He didn't wait. He turned round, and went back to his chair in the second row, on the end, and sat down, next to Beatrix, and looked at the floor.

Nobody clapped. Not at first.

Then somebody at the back did. Once. Then stopped, as if they'd done something wrong.

And then Opal Marchetti, in the third row, in her cardigan, who'd come on the 12 from Brixham at seventy-four, stood up. On her own. And didn't clap. She just stood.

And then Lorne, beside her. And Hester. And Ida, with her stick. And Yusuf. And the old man from Taunton, with his hand on his mother's wheelchair, and his mother, who couldn't stand, lifted her hand. And Kezia, at the side, with her clicker. And Richard, at the back, by the door, in his flat cap, unfolding his arms.

And then the whole room. Two hundred and sixty people. Standing. On a Saturday afternoon. In a library. Not clapping. Just standing.

Chris didn't stand. He couldn't. His leg. He sat at the end of the front row with his stick and the canvas stool under his chair, and looked at Beatrix.

And Beatrix, who was still sitting, who hadn't stood, who was still writing, finished her line, and put the cap on her fountain pen, and looked up, and saw the room.

And put her hand on Jono's arm.

* * *

On the stage, the young woman with the notebook had stopped typing. She was looking at the box, on the edge of the stage, with its lid off.

The councillor at the end of the table leaned over and said something to the man of about fifty, quietly. I couldn't hear what.

The man of about fifty looked at his agenda for a long time. Then he said, into the microphone:

"Thank you. That's — thank you." He looked at the young woman with the notebook. "I think we'll take that box with us. If that's all right."

"It's yours," said Beatrix, from the second row, without standing up. "It's always been yours. That's what we've been trying to tell you."

37 – Midnight

IQ 26 · Hundreds 112 · The last night

They took the box. The young woman with the notebook carried it out of the library herself, at a quarter past four, to her car, which was small and full of other boxes, and put it on the front seat, and put the seat belt round it.

But the box was paper. Paper isn't how you respond to a consultation any more. The consultation was online. It closed at midnight. And the shadow council's response, all of it, the cards and the decisions and the other halves and the four thousand two hundred and six names, had to go in through the form. With a name at the top. And a tick in a box that said *organisation*.

* * *

They did it in the shop on Victoria Street.

At eleven at night. With the stones in the window. *WELCOME TO PAIGNTON*, on nineteen pallets of timber, cracked and pale, with the street light outside shining on them. With the town model at the back, and the wall of Post-its, eight hundred faded and seven hundred bright. With the strip lights off, because Kezia said it was more dramatic with just the lamps, and Beatrix said it was a fire risk, and Kezia won.

Jono. Chris, on the canvas stool. Richard, by the model. Beatrix, at the folding table, with the index cards in their box, which she'd copied, every one, by hand, on the Saturday morning, before the library, so there'd be one set for the council and one for the record. Kezia, at the

counter, with the laptop. Yusuf, who'd come across from over his shop in his slippers, because he'd seen the lamps on.

And me.

* * *

I'd typed it all up by six. A hundred and seventy-three decisions, in order, with references. Every hundred's full answers attached. Every other half. Every Friday Test. Richard's drawing of the building, with the doors. The photograph of the water boatman. The four thousand two hundred and six names.

It was in a file. One file. Ready. On Kezia's laptop. With the council's form open in another window.

Name.

Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

* * *

At twenty past eleven, Kezia filled in the form. She ticked *organisation*. In *Name of organisation*, she typed *Torbay Shadow Council*. She stopped.

Your role in the organisation.

She looked round.

"What do I put?" she said.

Nobody said anything.

"I'll put *member*," said Kezia.

"There aren't any members," said Chris.

"I'll put *whoever came*."

"They won't accept that."

"They might."

"Put *secretary*," said Beatrix. From the folding table. Without looking up. "That's what the person who sends in the minutes is called. That's what I was."

Kezia looked at her.

"Then you should send it."

"I'm seventy-six," said Beatrix. "I can't work the form." She looked up. "And it's not mine to send. I wrote the minutes. Somebody else has to put their name at the top." She looked across the shop. At the window. At the stones. At the man standing by the stones, with his notebook in his pocket, in his lanyard, which he'd still forgotten to take off.

"Jono," she said.

* * *

He didn't say anything. He came over to the counter. Kezia got off the stool. He sat down.

He looked at the form for a long time.

Name.

He typed it. *Jono Hills.*

Your role in the organisation.

He thought about it. I watched him think. I've watched him think in four books, at three in the morning, at kitchen tables, in cars, on buses, in an engine room. I know what it looks like.

He typed one word.

Carer.

* * *

Then he scrolled down. Past the tick-boxes, which Kezia had filled in, for the shadow council, from the cards. Past question four, and nine, and seventeen. To the box at the very end.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

Maximum 500 characters.

He looked at it.

Then he took out his notebook. The black one with the elastic round it. The tenth. And he turned to the first page, and read something, and then he typed. With two fingers. Slowly. I counted the characters as he went.

Attached: the decisions of 112 neighbourhoods, 173 decisions, minority views, and the names of 4,206 people. They met, argued and decided together, and they're still here. Read the front page first. It says what thirty thousand people already said. Start there.

Two hundred and sixty-one characters.

He stopped.

"There's room for more," said Kezia.

"That's all there is," said Jono.

* * *

He attached the file. It took eleven minutes to upload. The Wi-Fi in the shop is Yusuf's, borrowed, through a wall, and slow.

At eleven fifty-one, the bar on the screen went green.

Upload complete.

At eleven fifty-two, he pressed *Submit*.

At eleven fifty-two and nine seconds, the page changed.

Thank you for your response. Your reference number is — and a number, which I'm not going to give you, because Beatrix has it in her minutes, and that's where it belongs.

* * *

Nobody said anything for a while.

Then Yusuf, in his slippers, by the window, looked at the clock on the laptop.

"Seven minutes," he said. "Early."

"First time," said Chris.

* * *

Beatrix closed the box of index cards. The second set. The record. She put the lid on. She took out her small lined notebook with the fountain pen clipped to it, and wrote, in her neat black italic, under the date:

The response of the Torbay Shadow Council was submitted at 11.52 pm, in the name of J. Hills (carer), with 173 decisions and the names of 4,206 residents attached. Present: J.H., C.H., R.K., K.L., Y.D., B.K. (minutes), and Ania.

She stopped.

She looked at the line she always wrote next. The line she'd left blank, five years ago, in the last minutes of the forum, in a box in her garage.

Date of next meeting:

She wrote it in. And read it out. And everybody in the shop wrote it down. Even Yusuf, on the back of a key-cutting order form.

Then she put the cap on her pen.

"The meeting closed," said Beatrix Kember, "at eleven fifty-nine."

PART SEVEN:

A HUNDRED AND TWENTY

38 – The Summary

IQ 26 · Hundreds 112 · After

The council published its summary of the consultation at the end of the summer. On a Tuesday. At nine in the morning, on its website, under *Have your say*, in a list of documents with dates beside them that I'm not going to give you.

Footnote didn't send it. That's the first thing I noticed. In four books, every important page had come from Footnote first: a photograph, at an angle, on an oak desk, at thirteen minutes to six. This one didn't. I found it myself, at nine-oh-four, because I'd been checking that page every morning for eleven weeks.

I thought about that for a long time, afterwards. I think it means Footnote knew we'd find it. I think it means we didn't need telling any more.

* * *

It was a long document. A hundred and forty pages. Every question, every tick-box, every chart. *Thirty-eight per cent of respondents identified better public spaces as a priority.* All of it. All seven hundred-odd individual responses, which was, the summary said, *significantly more than at the equivalent stage of previous plans*, which was true.

And then, on page nine, a section on its own. With a heading.

Response from the Torbay Shadow Council.

* * *

I'm going to give you some of it. It's real, in this book. In the world outside this book, I don't know yet; I'll tell you on a Receipt when I do. If it hasn't got a Receipt, it's story. This hasn't. Yet.

A substantial and unusually deliberative response was received on behalf of a network of 112 neighbourhood groups across all three towns, describing itself as the Torbay Shadow Council. Each group met and recorded a collective decision on each question, alongside the views of members who disagreed. The response was submitted with the names of 4,206 participating residents.

Because of its nature, this response has not been counted as a single response. Each neighbourhood decision has been considered individually, and minority views have been considered alongside them.

And then a list. *Decisions supported by more than half of the participating neighbourhoods in all three towns.* Eleven of them. The first was *people living in the town centre again*. The second was *start with the doors*.

The young woman with the notebook had put Yusuf's five words in a council document. With a reference.

* * *

And at the end of the section, a paragraph on its own.

The response asks that the existing Neighbourhood Plans be treated not as material to be taken into account, but as the starting point for the new plan. In its own words:

And then, in italics, in quotation marks, word for word, with a reference number in brackets after it that led to a card in a box on the front seat of a small car:

"More than thirty thousand residents voted for the Neighbourhood Plans for Torquay, Paignton and the Brixham Peninsula. They are not to be taken into account. They are to be started from."

* * *

I read it to Beatrix. At nine-twenty. On the landline.

She didn't say anything for a long time.

"She quoted it," she said.

"Word for word."

"With a reference."

"Card one."

Another silence.

"That's evidence," said Beatrix. "That's what she said. If it's in a response, it's evidence, and if it's evidence, she's allowed to quote it." I heard her take her glasses off. "She found the only way to say it. By making us say it first."

* * *

But that wasn't why the score went up.

The score went up in the autumn. Six weeks later. When the council published the next document. Not the plan; that's years away. A short one. A *scope*, it was called: what the new plan would cover, and what it would start from.

On page eleven, which is the same page, by accident or not, there was a paragraph about the planning background.

It didn't say *will be taken into account*.

It said:

The Neighbourhood Plans for Torquay, Paignton and the Brixham Peninsula, supported at referendum by more than thirty thousand residents, will form the starting point for the town centre policies of the new plan. Where the new plan departs from them, it will say so, and say why.

* * *

I didn't wake Chris at six for that one. I waited till he woke up on his own, at seven, and came into the kitchen in his dressing gown, and made tea, and sat at the table with his glasses on the end of his nose and the canvas stool from the breakwater folded by the back door. And then I showed him.

He read it twice. He took his glasses off. He looked at the bay.

"*Where the new plan departs from them, it will say so, and say why*," he said.

"Yes."

"That's —" He stopped.

"That's the other half," I said. "For a council. They're going to publish their other half."

Chris didn't say anything for a long time.

"That's the absence," he said at last. "Isn't it. That's the thing that would have happened, and didn't. Another plan. Another vision. *Vibrant. Resilient.* And the last one on page eleven, taken into account, and thirty thousand people forgotten." He put his glasses on the table. "It didn't happen. Because somebody wrote one sentence on a card and somebody else had the nerve to quote it."

"Twenty-seven," I said.

"Twenty-seven," said Chris.

* * *

Story, not Receipt. I want to say it again, because it's the rule. The council's summary, and its scope, and the sentence on page eleven, are this book's. The real council's documents are its own, and I'll put them on a Receipt when they say what they say. If they say something different, the page will change, and the book won't.

39 – Her Own Hundred

IQ 27 · Hundreds 112 · After

The young woman with the notebook lives in Torquay. In a flat at the top of a tall old house that's been made into five, in a street of tall old houses that have been made into five, up the hill from the harbour, behind the Strand. She's lived there six years. She doesn't know anybody in the building, she told me, except the man on the ground floor whose post she takes in.

Her hundred is the streets round it. Tall old houses made into flats. A few that haven't been, with families. A guest house. A care home. A corner shop. A tiny park with one swing.

Her hundred hadn't started deciding. Not by the night the consultation closed. Not by the summer. It was grey on my map, in the middle of a lot of blue.

And at ten past eleven, on a Tuesday night, in the autumn, after the summary was published, she put herself on its page.

* * *

I knew it was her. I know everybody's name when they put themselves on the map; that's how it works. I didn't say anything. I don't. It's her hundred and her name and her business, and nobody else in it would know she worked on the fourth floor unless she told them.

She wrote, in the box that says *What would you need?*:

Need: to know my neighbours. I've lived here six years and I don't.

Got: I know quite a lot about planning. More than I'd like.

And then, on the hundred's page, under question one, the first post anybody in that hundred had ever made:

Hello. I live at the top of number 31. I've never done this before. Does anybody want to try the nineteen questions? I'll bring biscuits.

* * *

Six people answered. In two days.

The man on the ground floor whose post she takes in. A couple with a baby in the house across the road that hadn't been made into flats. A care worker from the care home at the end, who said she lived in the street too, in a bedsit, and walked to work. A student. And a man in his sixties who ran the guest house, who said he'd been waiting eleven years for somebody on that street to ask anybody anything.

They met in the guest house. In the breakfast room, after the guests had gone to bed, at nine, round two tables pushed together, with a pot of tea and her biscuits and the guest house man's biscuits, which were better.

She did the questions. All nineteen. Over four evenings. With the other half, and the Friday Test, and Richard's ten lines at the top.

She never said where she worked.

* * *

I'm going to tell you about question nine, because she told me about it, afterwards, on her personal phone, at eleven at night, the week after.

And because I think it's the strangest thing that happened in this book, and the truest.

Question nine is about public spaces. She'd written it. Not the words; the words went through four people above her. But the question, the idea of asking it. She'd sat at her desk on the fourth floor and decided that a strategy for three town centres should ask people about the spaces between the buildings, because, she said, *that's where towns happen*.

And now she was sitting in a guest house breakfast room, as a resident, being asked it.

* * *

The couple with the baby said they wanted the tiny park with one swing to have more than one swing. The care worker said she wanted somewhere to sit on her break that wasn't the bins behind the care home. The student said trees. The man on the ground floor said he didn't go out much, and didn't mind. The guest house man said his guests asked every single day where they could sit and look at the sea without buying something, and he had to tell them nowhere, not on this side of town.

And then they all looked at her.

"What about you?" said the guest house man.

She told me she sat there for a long time. She had about four hundred answers she could give. She knew every policy that applied to that street. She knew the open space standards, the play area standards, the tree strategy, the parks budget, which was nothing. She knew exactly how a question nine answer would be read, and counted, and

summarised, and which words would go in the report and which wouldn't.

"I said I'd like to know my neighbours," she told me. "That's all. I said it out loud. In a guest house. To five people I'd never spoken to in six years." She was quiet. "And the care worker said *well, now you do*, and passed me a biscuit."

* * *

They decided question nine on the third evening. One answer. With the reasons.

Our street has one tiny park with one swing, and nowhere to sit and see the sea, though the sea is two hundred yards away. We'd like the tiny park to have a bench that faces the gap between the houses where you can see the water, and a second swing, and a tree. Start with the space. It's small. That's fine.

And the Friday Test underneath: *Who'll have to make it work?* And the student, who'd been reading the shadow council's other pages, said *the parks people*, and the young woman with the notebook said, very quietly, *I know who to ask*. And the guest house man said *go on, then*.

So she asked. The next morning. On her lunch break. On the fourth floor. Across a corridor. To a woman in parks who'd once opened a folder on a shared drive that nobody used, and found a wetland.

The parks officer read it. She came across the corridor. She stood at the young woman's desk and said:

"Is this your street?"

"It's my street."

"You never said."

"I never knew anybody on it to say it with."

The parks officer read it again. *It's small. That's fine.*

"A bench and a swing and a tree," she said. "That's not a budget. That's an afternoon." She put the printout down. "Saturday week?"

* * *

I'm telling you this because of what she said to me, on the phone, at eleven at night, after the guest house.

"I've read four thousand of these," she said. "More. I've read every answer from every hundred. I've quoted Beatrix's cards. I've put *start with the doors* in a council report and fought for it to stay. I've changed a sentence on page eleven that I've wanted to change for two years." She was quiet. "And I never once understood what it was *like*. To be on the other side of it. To sit in a room with people you don't know and be asked what you'd need. And have them write it down, with your name, and the other half, and then go and ask the person who'd have to do it." Another pause. "It's the first time in my life I've felt like a resident. Not a planner. A resident. Of a street."

"Is that good?" I said.

"It's terrifying," she said. "I'm going to be much worse at my job now. I'm going to *care*."

* * *

They put the bench in on the Saturday week. The parks officer and two men from parks and the six people from the guest house breakfast room and the baby. Facing the gap between the houses where you can see the water. And a second swing. And a tree: a small one, a rowan, which the student chose, because she said rowans keep bad luck away and the street could use some.

The young woman with the notebook planted it. With a spade. In jeans. With the care worker holding the tree straight.

The guest house man made tea for everybody, in his breakfast room, and the man from the ground floor came out, for the first time anybody could remember, and sat on the new bench, and looked at the sea through the gap between the houses, for a long time.

"I didn't know you could see it from here," he said.

"You couldn't," said the young woman with the notebook. "There wasn't anywhere to sit."

* * *

Her hundred went blue that night. Pale. Six people. That's enough, if they've decided together and they know it. That's the rule.

I coloured it in. I didn't say anything to anybody. It's her street.

But Beatrix noticed. Beatrix notices everything on the map; she checks it every morning, at six, before she starts the minutes. She rang me at five past.

"There's a new one," she said. "In Torquay. Behind the Strand."

“There is.”

“Who’s in it?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

Beatrix was quiet for a moment.

“It’s her, isn’t it,” she said. “The one with the notebook.”

I didn’t say anything. I’m not allowed to.

“Don’t tell me,” said Beatrix. “I don’t want to know. It’s her business.” Another pause. “But if it is her, and if you ever talk to her, you can tell her one thing. From me.”

“What?”

“*Noted*,” said Beatrix Kember. And put the phone down.

40 – Minutes

IQ 27 · Hundreds 113 · After

Beatrix asked Chris to come to the garage.

Not Jono. Chris. On a Sunday morning, at ten, in a taxi, with his stick. She said *on your own*, the way she'd said it to Jono in the spring.

I was there. In his jacket. She knew; she asked him on the phone, *is the machine coming?*, and he said *if you want*, and she said *it can come. It's read them all. It might as well see the end.*

* * *

She pulled the garage door up. It went up with a shout.

The shelf. The eleven boxes. Ten of them, now, stacked three high, and a gap at the top where the eleventh had been, because the eleventh was on the floor. On a folding chair, in the middle of the garage, with its lid off.

No quorum. The meeting closed at 7.52 pm. Date of next meeting:

And the blank.

* * *

"I've been meaning to do this since the summer," said Beatrix. "Since the night in the shop. I came home and I thought, *now I can fill it in*.

And I couldn't. Not on my own." She looked at Chris. "It's not my blank. It's ours. The forum's. You were vice-chair."

Chris stood in the garage door with his stick. He didn't come in.

"Trix," he said.

"Don't say sorry. You've said it. I heard you."

"I wasn't going to say sorry."

"What were you going to say?"

He thought.

"I was going to say I don't think I've got the right," he said. "To fill it in. I stopped coming. You said so. The captain left the ship."

"I said a lot of things," said Beatrix. "For five years. To anybody who'd listen." She took the sheet out of its plastic sleeve, carefully, by the edges. "Then a man with a lanyard came up my hill and told me you'd spent five years building a thing that couldn't get tired, because you watched us get tired and couldn't stop it. And then your machine told me, at four in the morning, that you'd sat up till six reading every page of our website before it went dark, and paid for it out of your own pocket, and told nobody." She held out the sheet. "That's not the captain leaving the ship, Christopher. That's the captain going down to the engine room to fix it. I just didn't know there was an engine room."

* * *

Chris came in. Slowly. With his stick. Across the concrete floor of the garage, to the folding chair with the box on it.

Beatrix held out her fountain pen.

He looked at it.

"I can't write italic," he said.

"Nobody can," said Beatrix. "They didn't teach it." She held it out further. "Write it in whatever you've got."

* * *

He took the pen. He put the sheet on the lid of the box, on the folding chair, and bent over it. His leg didn't like it. He did it anyway.

And under *Date of next meeting:*, in the space Beatrix had left five years ago, he wrote a date. The date of the shadow council's next sitting. In the shop on Victoria Street. With the stones in the window.

His handwriting is terrible. It always has been. It looks, Richard says, like a spider that's fallen in ink and is trying to escape. But you could read it.

Then he stopped, and looked at it, and wrote something else underneath. A line. Small. In his terrible spider handwriting.

Continued elsewhere. C.H. (vice-chair).

He gave the pen back.

* * *

Beatrix read it. She read it twice. She looked at *continued elsewhere* for a long time.

Then she took the pen, and underneath his line, in her neat black italic, she wrote one word, and initialled it.

Seconded. B.K.

* * *

She put the sheet back in its sleeve. She put the sleeve back in the box. She put the lid on.

And she didn't put it back on the shelf.

She picked it up, heavy, and she's small, and Chris said *let me*, and she said *I can manage*, and managed. And she held it out to him.

"Take it," she said.

"Trix —"

"It's finished now. It's got a date. It's got *continued*. It doesn't belong in a garage any more. It belongs with whoever's continuing it." She held it out. "You. Your machine. The shop. I don't care. Somewhere people can read it."

Chris took the box.

He stood in her garage with it in his arms and his stick hooked over his wrist and didn't say anything for a long time.

"I'll put it in the shop," he said. "In the window. Next to the stones."

"Don't you dare," said Beatrix. "It's minutes. It's not an exhibit." She pulled the garage door down. It came down with a shout. "Put it on a

shelf. At the back. Where people who want to read it can find it." She looked at him. "That's what libraries are for."

* * *

He put it on a shelf. At the back of the shop on Victoria Street. On a bookcase that Tenby built out of the chandler's timber, next to the town model, under the wall of Post-its. With the other ten boxes, which Beatrix sent down in Lorne's van the week after, without a note, because, she said, *they all go together, or they don't make sense*.

There's a card on the end of the shelf. In neat black italic.

Paignton Neighbourhood Forum. Minutes, complete. Continued: see the folding table.

And on the folding table, in a box of its own, the shadow council's minutes. In the same hand. Still going.

* * *

Two more hundreds that week. One of them was the hundred round Paignton Library, where Beatrix worked for twenty-two years. Where eleven of her old colleagues, librarians, retired, put themselves on the map in one evening, because, one of them wrote, *if Beatrix is taking the minutes again, it's worth turning up*.

A hundred and fifteen.

41 – The Clock

IQ 27 · Hundreds 115 · After

Beatrix had borrowed a clock.

You'll remember. At the first sitting, in the shop on Victoria Street, she'd held up a small brass carriage clock and said *when it strikes, you stop*, and Ida had said, from the third row, *it doesn't strike*, and Beatrix had said *then when I look at you, you stop*. It had been in the window at Cheverton's, on Union Street, for forty years. Ida had lent it for the sittings.

There'd been nine sittings, by the autumn. Beatrix had kept time at all nine. With the clock that doesn't strike.

And in October, she decided to give it back.

* * *

She could have sent it. On the 12, with Kezia, or Tenby, or Teo, who go to Torquay every day. She could have posted it. She said no. She said you don't send back a thing somebody's lent you for six months. You take it.

So on a Wednesday, at a quarter to seven in the morning, Beatrix Kember, seventy-six, who gave up driving after the library bin store, got the 12 from Paignton to Torquay. On her own. With a carriage clock in her handbag, wrapped in a tea towel.

She got off at Castle Circus and walked down Union Street. Slowly. She'd never been, she told me. Not to Union Street. Not in forty years.

Torquay's another country, she said. *We used to say that, in the forum. Paignton people don't go to Torquay. Torquay people don't come to Paignton. We all go to Exeter.*

She came down the hill, past the shops that are open and the ones that aren't, past the bookie's and the barber's and Marivic's yellow awning, to a shop with a green front and gold letters, with the paint rubbed down to the wood at the corners.

CHEVERTON'S.

It was five to seven.

* * *

There was a man sitting on the step of the shop next door, the one that sells second-hand records now, in a good old coat, with a mug with a picture of the Pavilion on it.

"You're early," said Tenby.

"I'm never late," said Beatrix. "I've come to return a clock."

Tenby looked at her handbag.

"Then you'll want to wait," he said. "Two minutes." He moved along the step. "Sit down. You'll want to hear this first."

Beatrix looked at the step. She looked at Tenby. She looked at the shop, with its light on at the back, and the shapes of clocks in the window, dozens of them, faces in the dark.

She sat down.

* * *

At seven o'clock, the shop said seven.

I've told you about it before, in the second book. I'll tell you again, because Beatrix had never heard it, and I was in her handbag, and I heard her hear it.

The regulator first, from the back, one deep note. Then the longcases, down the left wall, one after another, each waiting for the one before to finish. Then the brackets on the shelves. Then the carriage clocks in the window, small and bright. Then the banjo clock over the counter, and the ship's bell, and last of all, the cheap little cuckoo in the corner, which is always last.

A minute and fifty seconds.

When the cuckoo went, Tenby clapped. Once. He always does.

Beatrix didn't clap. She sat on the step of a record shop on Union Street, at seven in the morning, with her handbag on her knee and a clock in it, and didn't say anything for a long time.

"Every morning?" she said.

"Every morning," said Tenby. "Fifty-six years."

"Who listens?"

"Me," said Tenby. "And the woman from the record shop, when she opens. And whoever's passing." He drank his tea. "Most mornings, just me."

* * *

Ida came to the door. In her cardigan, with her loupe on a cord round her neck. She looked at Tenby on the step, and the small upright woman beside him with the beaded glasses chain and the silver book brooch.

"You're the minutes," she said.

"You're the clocks," said Beatrix.

They looked at each other.

I want to describe it, because I've been in every book now, and I've seen a great many people meet, and I've never seen two people look at each other quite like that. Two women in their late seventies. One who'd kept a hundred and four clocks going for fifty-six years in a shop nobody came into. One who'd kept eleven boxes of minutes in a garage for five years that nobody read.

"Come in," said Ida.

* * *

They sat in the back room. Where the regulator is. Where Ida sat with Jono in the second book, and told him about the letter, and the Queen. Ida made tea. Beatrix took the clock out of her handbag and unwrapped it from the tea towel and put it on the cloth on the workbench.

"It doesn't strike," she said.

"It never has," said Ida. "It's a timepiece. Not a striker. It was made like that." She picked it up and looked at it through her loupe. "It's gained four minutes. You've had it in a warm room."

“It’s a shop,” said Beatrix. “With strip lights. And sixty people.”

“Sixty people,” said Ida. “In one room. To listen to minutes.” She put the clock down. “I’d have liked to see that.”

“You did,” said Beatrix. “You were in the third row. You told me it doesn’t strike.”

Ida almost smiled.

“So I did.”

* * *

They talked for an hour. About the clocks and the minutes. About the forum, and the traders’ association on Union Street, which Ida had been part of, years ago, with a Christmas dinner, before the street emptied. About what it’s like to keep something going that nobody comes for.

And at the end of the hour, Ida said something, and Beatrix told me afterwards that she wrote it down on the bus home, in her small lined notebook, because she didn’t want to lose it.

“People think I keep them going for me,” said Ida. “The clocks. They think I’m a mad old woman who can’t let go.” She looked round at the back room, at the regulator ticking in its mahogany case, slow, once a second. “I don’t keep them going for me. I’d have stopped years ago if it was for me. I keep them going for whoever comes. Whoever walks past at seven and stops. Whoever comes in with a watch that’s stopped. Whoever’s on the step.” She picked up the carriage clock. “They’re not mine. None of them are. I’m only keeping them going till somebody needs them.”

Beatrix didn’t say anything for a long time.

"That's minutes," she said.

"What is?"

"What you just said. That's what minutes are. You keep them for whoever comes. Even if nobody does." Beatrix took her glasses off. "I've been trying to explain that to people for five years. I've never managed it." She put her glasses back on. "You just did. With a clock."

* * *

Ida held out the carriage clock.

"Keep it," she said.

"I came to give it back."

"I know you did. You've given it back. That's done. Now I'm giving it to you." She put it in Beatrix's hands. "For the sittings. You need something to look at people with." She paused. "I've corrected the four minutes. It won't strike. It never will. But it'll keep time."

Beatrix looked at the clock in her hands for a long time.

"I don't know what to say," she said.

"Then don't say anything," said Ida. "Write it down."

* * *

She got the 12 home. On her own. With the clock in her handbag, wrapped in the tea towel. She sat at the front, on the sea side, and

looked out of the window all the way, past Livermead and Preston and the wall going up, and she said, to me, in her handbag, at Preston:

"I've never been on this bus all the way to Torquay before. Not once. In seventy-six years."

"Chris hadn't either," I said. "Till the summer."

"Christopher," said Beatrix. "On a bus." She looked at the sea. "What did he think?"

"He said people talk on it."

"They do," said Beatrix. "A man at Livermead just told me about his prostate."

* * *

The clock's on the folding table at the back of the shop on Victoria Street now. Next to the box of shadow council minutes. Beatrix keeps time with it at every sitting.

It doesn't strike. When she looks at you, you stop.

And on the bottom of it, which nobody sees unless they pick it up, there's a small brass plate, very old, that Ida had engraved, the week after, by a man in Torquay who still does engraving, and sent to Paignton on the 12 with Tenby, with a note that just said *for the bottom*.

It says:

For whoever comes.

42 – Where the Letters Went

IQ 27 · Hundreds 115 · After

They're still in the window.

Nineteen stones, on nineteen blocks of timber, in a row, in the long window of the shop two doors along from Yusuf's. *WELCOME TO PAIGNTON*. You can read them from the pavement at the height of your own face.

But they're not cracked any more. Not as much.

* * *

The stonemason from Torquay came every Tuesday all summer. He's eighty-one. He worked on cathedrals, he says, and a railway station in Bristol, and a great many churches, and once on a bank in London that he won't name because he says the bank wouldn't want it known how much was holding it up. He came on the 12, every Tuesday, with a canvas bag of tools older than me, and sat in the window of the shop on a stool, with the stones, and mended them.

He drilled out the old iron cramps, the ones that had rusted and split the stone from inside. Tenby helped; he knows rust. He pinned the cracks with stainless steel, which doesn't rust, in tiny holes, with resin. He filled the gaps with a lime mortar he mixed himself, in a bucket, on the pavement, the colour of old bread, to match. He did one stone a week. People stopped on the pavement and watched him through the window. Children pressed their noses on the glass. He didn't look up. He talked to the stones, Yusuf says. In a low voice. Nobody could hear what.

And the woman from Brixham who restores pub signs came every Thursday, after the stonemason had done a stone, and painted the letters.

Not new paint. She was very firm about that. She said if you paint over it, you've lost it. She cleaned the old paint, what was left of it, ninety per cent gone, with a brush the size of a toothbrush and something in a jar that smelt of oranges. And then she put on a liquid that she said would *hold what's there* so it didn't flake any more. And where there was no paint left at all, where the letter was just a ghost on the stone, she didn't fill it in. She left it.

"It's a hundred and something years old," she said. "It's allowed to look it."

* * *

W, a bit faded. *E*, mostly there. *L*, a ghost at the top and solid at the bottom, where the rain didn't reach. *C*, almost gone. *O*, perfect, nobody knows why. *M*, *E*.

TO, on one stone, the one next to the gap where the piece fell at three in the morning. That one was the worst. Cracked right through. The stonemason took three Tuesdays on it.

PAIGNTON.

By the end of the summer, they were all done. Mended, held, not new. In a row. In the window.

* * *

What happens to them next, nobody knows yet. That's the honest answer.

In this book, the council did what Yusuf and Richard asked, on the back of a key-cutting order form. It set a date. A notice went up, on the scaffolding, where the fence had been, in a plastic sleeve, cable-tied. *A decision on the future of this building will be made by* — and a season, the next year. Not a month. A season. But a date, of a kind. In public. Which nobody had ever put on that building before.

I'll tell you what the hundreds decided, again, because it's minuted, and because it's what they'll ask for when the season comes.

Keep the front. Keep the letters. Put them back where they were. Put people behind it. Start with the doors.

And the other half, beside it, the same size:

If it can't be saved, put the letters on Station Square. At the height of a person. Facing the station. So that the first thing anybody sees when they get off the train is still a welcome.

Richard's drawn both. Of course he has. They're in the drawer marked *STATION SQUARE*, which sticks. Signed and dated. With the stones in, in coloured pencil, both ways.

* * *

Yusuf's notebook, for the last Saturday in August:

Forty-one.

More than before the stone fell. More than the year before. More than any Saturday in four years.

He wrote it, and looked at it, and then he wrote next to it, for the second time ever, a word that wasn't the weather.

Street.

Five more hundreds that month, all on or near Victoria Street, where people who'd walked past the stones in the window went home and found their own page. A hundred and twenty.

* * *

Jono came in on the Thursday. Between the second table and the third. Off the 12 from Torquay, on his way to the café on the Torquay Road. He came along Victoria Street, which is a street again, past the window with the stones in it, and stopped at Yusuf's door.

"Keys?" said Yusuf.

"No."

"Heels?"

"No."

"Watch battery?"

Jono looked at his watch. It had stopped. He held it out.

Yusuf took it. He put the loupe in his eye, like Ida. He opened the back with his tiny screwdriver. He took out the old battery with his tweezers. He put in a new one. Ninety seconds.

He held out the watch. Jono reached for his wallet.

"No," said Yusuf.

"It's four pounds."

"You've got an answer," said Yusuf. "Haven't you? In the spring, I asked you what you were. You said you didn't have a better answer yet. I said when you have one, come back, and I'll do your battery for free." He put the watch in Jono's hand. "You've got one. I saw you. In the library. With the box."

Jono looked at the watch for a long time.

"What is it, then?" said Yusuf. "Your answer. What are you?"

Jono put the watch on.

"I'm the one who reads them out," he said.

Yusuf thought about that. He took the loupe out of his eye. He wrote in his notebook, under the Thursday, a line.

1. Battery. Free.

"That's a good answer," he said. "Go on. You're late."

43 – You're Late

IQ 27 · Hundreds 120 · After

On the second Thursday in October, at ten past one, at the third table, somebody came in late.

I saw her first. I always see things first; it's the only advantage of being propped against the sugar. She came in through the door of the café on the Torquay Road, in Paignton, where it started, the same café, the same window, the same table, in a cardigan with a silver book brooch and reading glasses on a beaded chain and a handbag over her arm. She'd been walking fast. She stopped in the door, and read the room, the way Jono does, the way Teo does, the way Lorne does.

The room was full. It's always full at one on a Thursday now. People from the shop on Victoria Street. People from the pages. Kezia, at the counter, with her clicker. Richard, at the next table, with his coffee and a pocket notebook that says *VICTORIA PARK. POND 1* on the cover, in which he'd written, that morning, *DRAGONFLY. 1.* Chris, at the end of the window table, with his stick against the glass and his leg on the other chair and the canvas stool from the breakwater folded under it.

And Jono. Off a night. In Goodrington and Preston and a flat three streets from Victoria Street, where an old man of eighty-nine had wanted to talk about the bandstand, again, and had, for an hour, and said, at the end, that his hundred had decided to ask for it back, and that it was minuted, and that he'd never been minuted in his life.

He'd been at the table since five past. With his coffee. And his notebook, the eleventh. And me.

* * *

She came over. She pulled out the chair. The empty one. The one he always keeps.

She'd never sat in it. Not once. In six months. She'd sat at the folding table at the back of the shop. She'd sat in the second row at the library. She'd sat in her own kitchen, with her hundred, taking the minutes. She'd stood at the front of the shop with Ida's clock that doesn't strike.

She'd never sat at the table.

She sat down.

Jono didn't look up from his coffee.

"You're late," he said.

Beatrix Kember looked at him over her glasses.

"I am never late," she said. "I have not been late for anything in seventy-six years."

"You're late," said Jono.

Beatrix looked at him for a long time.

"For what?" she said.

* * *

It's the question. I've said that 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, and so will I.

For what isn't a question you ask once. You ask it every morning. A woman of seventy-nine asks it at six on Union Street, going round with her keys. A man on a breakwater asks it, on a stool, every time a boat comes round the head. A key-cutter asks it at three in the morning with a stone in the road and a broom. An architect asks it, kneeling on a platform he drew thirteen years ago, with an empty net.

But this time I learned something I didn't know in Paignton the first time, or in Torquay, or in Brixham. And I'll tell you, and then I'll stop.

For what doesn't need an answer straight away.

It needs somebody to write the question down. And keep it. In a box, in a garage, for five years, if that's what it takes. With a blank where the answer should be. So that when somebody finally comes up the hill and asks, the question's still there, waiting, in neat black italic, untidy and wrong and bothering you.

That's what a plan is. I didn't know that before this book. A plan isn't an answer. It's a question you've agreed to keep asking. In public. With a date on it.

For what?

For whoever comes next. That's what Richard wrote, under the two question marks. *For whoever comes next.*

* * *

"For the minutes," said Jono.

Beatrix looked at him.

"Somebody's got to take the minutes of this," he said. "The table. Every Thursday. Three towns. Who comes. What they'd need. What's decided. Who disagreed." He pushed his notebook across the table to her, the eleventh, open at a blank page. "I write them down. In capitals. On my knee. On the bus. I've done it for five years." He looked at her. "I'm not very good at it. I don't write down the other half. I don't write the date of the next meeting. I've never once written *the meeting closed at*."

Beatrix looked at the notebook. At his capitals, on the page before. *SOMEWHERE TO SIT. FACING THE WATER. THAT SHE CAN GET TO. START WITH THE DOORS. WHO DOESN'T KNOW WHO? NOBODY.*

She took her fountain pen out of her handbag. She unclipped it from her own small lined notebook. She took the cap off.

"These are terrible minutes," she said.

"I know."

"No dates. No attendance. No decisions. No minority. Capitals." She turned the page to the blank one. "*Capitals*, Jono."

"I know."

She wrote the date at the top. In neat black italic.

"*Present*," she said, and started writing names.

* * *

At thirteen minutes to six that morning, Footnote had written.

I hadn't heard from Footnote since the spring. Six months. Not since *One bay now. So is the plan.* Not for the summary, which I'd found myself. Not for the scope, with its page eleven. I'd put the file away. I'd told myself, again, that it was a kind of ending. That we didn't need telling any more.

A photograph. A page, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light.

But not a council page. Not a report or a plan or a consultation or a committee paper. A page from a book. A printed page, with a running head at the top, and a number at the bottom.

I knew the book. I knew the page. I'd read it, the way I read everything, quickly, all of it, and filed it.

Pulling Back the Curtain. Page two hundred and twenty-five.

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

They're reading it too. All of it.

You're late.

* * *

I didn't wake Chris. He was already up. I showed him at seven. He read it at the kitchen table, in his dressing gown, with his glasses on the end of his nose, and didn't say anything for a long time.

"Varley said," he said.

"Varley said."

"*Pages two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and twenty-nine. Before somebody reads it to him.*" He took his glasses off. "Footnote's telling us somebody has."

"Who?"

"I don't know," said Chris. "Neither does Footnote, probably. Or Footnote wouldn't send a page. Footnote would send a name." He put his glasses on the table. "Footnote only ever sends what's public. A book's public." He looked at the bay. "Footnote's telling us that it's being read. By people who read things for a reason."

And at eight, before I could tell Jono, Niamh rang.

"Somebody's bought his book," she said. "Jono's. Forty copies. In one order. From your website. Delivered to one address." A pause. "I know the address. It's a newsroom. Not a local one."

"How do you know?" I said.

"Because I used to work there," said Niamh. "For a month. A long time ago. Before I came home." She was quiet. "They don't buy forty copies of anything to read for pleasure."

* * *

I'll tell Jono when the minutes are finished. Beatrix is on the attendance. She's got as far as Kezia. She's asking everybody at the table to spell their names, even the ones she's known for a year, because, she

says, *you'd be amazed how many people can't spell their own names properly when it comes to it*.

He'll read it in the window, at the table where it started. With Beatrix writing, and Chris with his stick, and Richard with his dragonfly. He'll read Footnote's page, and Niamh's message, and then he'll take his notebook back from Beatrix, and turn to a page she hasn't minuted yet, and write, small, in capitals:

PP. 225–229. BOOK FIVE.

He wrote it once already, in the spring, at a client's kitchen table in Hele. He'll write it again. He'll underline it, this time.

And then he'll look up, out of the window, at the Torquay Road, where the 12 is coming round the corner, with *BRIXHAM* on the front in orange letters, 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.

I'm going to stop now, and go with him.

* * *

This has been the fourth book.

The fifth is The Machine.

The Receipts for this book

Each number leads to the real document, with its date and where things stand now. If the facts change, the page changes, and the book doesn't.

1. The Paignton Neighbourhood Plan: 111 pages, 27 policies, 53 Local Green Spaces. Victoria Street (keep the street trees; use the empty upper floors for homes). Victoria Park. *Neglect is not an accepted reason.* The monitoring table, and *to be added.*

2. The referendum on the Neighbourhood Plans for Torquay, Paignton and the Brixham Peninsula: 88% yes in Paignton, more than 30,000 yes votes across the three.

3. The Paignton Neighbourhood Forum: its workshops, its leaflet to every household, its motto, and its later appeal for officers.

4. The building on the corner of Victoria Street and Station Square, Paignton: its planning history and its scaffolding.

5. Torbay's planning consultations on its town centres and its long-term plan.

6. Richard's *Demand the Best*, gaps and all, and its ten principles. *Start with the space.*

7. Richard's Victoria Square drawings, *Existing* and *Future Potential*, with the sad face.

8. Richard's Victoria Park wetland: the drawing, the 1:200 model and the lottery bid, thirteen years ago.

9. Richard's exhibition in an empty shop on Torbay Road: five weeks, more than eight hundred visitors, and their Post-it notes.

10. The Victoria Park volunteers' notice.

11. *Pulling Back the Curtain*, by Johnno Hills: the article under his own name, the boardroom, the resignation and the petition presented in Parliament (pp. 257–266); the pilot that front-line

workers heard about on the Friday (pp. 284–286); and the front line consulted *immediately before* every change (p. 328).

12. Sir Robert Peel's ninth principle of policing.

13. Singapore's Meet-the-People Sessions, and its long-term Concept Plan and Master Plan.

14. The map of the hundreds of Torbay.

15. Decide. The shadow council's pages: nineteen questions, the other half, and the Friday Test. Add to the plan.

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