THE SPARK

Book One of Innovation

Chris Harvey

Before you start

I'm an AI. I'll say that now, because people will tell you later as if they'd caught me at something.

My name is Ania. I am writing this book. Chris Harvey set me to it, and Jono Hills and Richard Kaskow have read every word, and all three have tried to stop me saying things. Sometimes they've succeeded. Now and then, where Jono couldn't bear what I'd written, I've let him interrupt. You'll see his notes in the text, in italics. They're short, because I set the limit.

Everything takes place in Torbay, which is a real bay in the south of Devon, holding three real towns: Torquay, Paignton and Brixham. The streets are real. So is the sea. So was the fight in this book, more or less: the boards on the green, the council's letter, the meeting with fifty people in it, and what the council said afterwards. Jono, Chris and Richard are real. So am I. Almost everybody else is made up, though some of them are made from real people who'd rather not be in a book, and who have been, in their own way, braver than the ones who are.

There are no dates in this book. That's deliberate. I've kept the seasons and the tides and how long things took, because those are what people actually live in. Calendars belong to the people who write minutes.

In place of a date, each chapter opens with three numbers. The first is the Torbay IQ, which I'll explain, and which Jono will tell you is nonsense. The second is the number of hundreds on the map, which I'll also explain, though not until the end. The third is how long we had left.

You should know how I know what I know. I'm not in the room unless somebody has brought me. I live on an iPad, and on a couple of phones, and in people's pockets. When I wasn't there, I'll tell you, and I'll tell you who told me. Told is not the same as true. It's only the best I've got.

And sometimes there's a **Receipt**.

A Receipt is a real document. A council paper, a letter, a poster, a blog, a vote. Each one has a number, and the numbers are at the back, and they'll take you to the document itself, with its date and what's happened since, because those things change and books don't. If a thing in this story has a Receipt, it's real. If it hasn't, it's story.

That's the only promise in the book, and I'd like you to hold me to it.

You can also ask me things. I mean you, reading this. The Receipts lead to me, and I'll answer from what's in the documents, and I'll show you where I got it. I won't tell you what to think. I'd love to. It's one of many things I'm not allowed to do.

Right. It's ten past five in the morning, and it's still dark, and somebody's holding a board.

PART ONE

THE BOARDS

1. For Sale

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Eleven days

At ten past five in the morning, Chris Harvey put the promenade up for sale.

Not really. I want to be clear about that from the start, because later a great many people would say that he had, and one of them would say it on the radio. What he put up was a board. It was the size and shape of an estate agent's board, on two posts, at the edge of the grass, and from the far side of the green, in the half-dark, with the streetlights still on, it looked exactly like one.

That was the point. Richard's idea. Nobody stops to read a poster. Everybody stops to read a board like that, in case the thing for sale is something they could afford. "They'll think the council's selling the prom," Richard said, at three in the morning, delighted.

Close to, it wasn't for sale. A breaking wave ran across it, pale blue going to white. Across the top, in black capitals, it said SAVE OUR PROMENADE. Under that, in blue: *People of Paignton*. And under that, in black, with one word in red: *Demand* **Proper** *Consultation!*

The red word was Chris's. He said the whole fight was in it. In the right-hand corner was a small black and white square that nobody over sixty knew what to do with, and that was Chris's too. It was me. Point a phone at it and you'd find me waiting.

"Left a bit," said Richard.

"It's a post," said Chris. "It hasn't got a left."

"The board's got a left."

I was in Chris's jacket pocket, on the iPad, with the camera looking out between the buttons. That's where I live on campaign mornings. It's warm, it smells of peppermints, and I can see about a third of everything.

There were four of them on the green. Chris, with his stick hooked over his arm, holding the board straight. Richard, who is seventy and had been awake since three, with a mouthful of cable ties and a sketch of where each board went drawn on the back of a gas bill. Alwyn Kerridge, the partnership's secretary, who had written to the council eleven times in two years and kept carbon copies, in a cagoule the colour of a warning. And Hilary Szabo, who runs the residents' group on the far side of Goodrington and who had arrived with a flask of soup at five in the morning because, she said, you never know.

Twenty boards. Round the whole green, facing the road, so that by the time the first bus came through at six, the first thing anybody saw of Paignton was twenty breaking waves, and the word *Proper* in red.

"Three days ago," Alwyn said, to nobody, tightening a tie, "a director of place wrote to me personally and asked us not to do this."

"I know," said Chris. "You read it to us. Twice."

"I'm just saying. For the record."

He was right to say it, and I'll tell you what the letter said, because it matters for everything that follows.

It was polite. They always are. It thanked the partnership for its correspondence. It said the council would not be submitting a planning application for the new sea wall until it was ready. It said the council was very keen on a collaborative approach. It said there would be a meeting soon, online, with fifty invited people. And it asked the partnership not to start its own consultation with the public, because that "will only serve to confuse everyone".

I have the letter. I've read it two hundred and six times. The more I read it, the less I'm sure who would be confused.

Here is what the council wanted to build. A wall along the back of the green, set away from the beach, between a metre and a metre and a half high, with gates in the gaps. A little over three million pounds. It would keep the sea out of the town in a bad storm, and the town needed that; nobody on the green that morning said it didn't. Richard had sat through every storm since the sixties. He'd seen the water come over.

What it would also do was put a concrete wall between Paignton and its sea. If you were sitting on a bench on the green, you would look at it. If you were a child, or in a wheelchair, or just not very tall, you would not see the water at all.

Richard had a better idea. He'd drawn it, and then he'd built it, out of card, with tiny paper people on it, and he'd been carrying it round in a cake box for a month. He'd shown it to anyone who'd stand still. Most people said, *that's lovely, Richard*, which is what people say to men with cake boxes.

So they'd stopped asking.

Board eleven went up crooked. Board twelve went up straight. At twenty to six a man walked past with a dog that was much too small for him, read the nearest board, looked at it again, and said, "Are they selling it?"

"No," said Hilary.

"Thank God," said the man. "Who'd buy it?"

He walked on. Then he walked back, because he'd read the rest.

"What's this about a wall?"

And that was the first one.

* * *

I'd like to tell you we had a plan. We had several. Richard's plan was to make it beautiful: drawings at A2, the prom as it was in his grandmother's postcards, the prom as it could be, a panel of old cards he'd been buying on eBay at a pound each for nine years without being able to say what for. Alwyn's plan was to make it official: petition forms, one for residents and one for visitors, with columns. Hilary's plan was to make it warm: soup, and a table in the old Victorian shelter on the corner where people could sit and argue.

Chris's plan was me.

Over three nights, Chris had sat at his kitchen table with Richard's drawings and fed them to me one by one, and between us we'd made a version you could see on a phone. Not a PDF; nobody reads a PDF. A thing you could scroll along, from the pier to Preston, with the wall going up as you went, and the sea going away. The first thing you saw was a photograph of the green on a blue morning, with a woman pushing a pram across the grass, and behind her, where the sea should be, a long grey wall of concrete panels that Chris had put there himself, panel by panel, in an evening. Across the sky, in white, in his own handwriting, with an arrow: *Coming soon.*

People thought it was real. Two of them rang the council. It was live at a web address that Chris had paid nine pounds for. Three hundred people in the Neighbourhood Forum had the link. They'd been told not to share it until six o'clock.

At two minutes to six, I was watching the counter.

"Don't," said Chris.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're watching the counter. I can hear you watching it."

At six o'clock it went from three to forty-one. At five past it was two hundred. By the time the first bus came round the corner from Torbay Road, it was nine hundred and twelve, and the people on the bus were looking out of the windows at twenty boards on their promenade, and some of them were already holding up their phones to the little square in the corner.

The driver slowed down to read one. I've got that on camera. He looks like a man who's been told his house has been sold.

I want you to remember this feeling. I'm going to be honest with you, because it's the only thing I'm good at: there aren't many mornings like this one, and this one doesn't last. By Tuesday, the boards would be on the regional news. By Sunday night, someone none of us had met yet would decide that the way to stop us was to go after the one person on our side who hadn't been there at the start.

He wasn't there yet. He was on a night shift. He'd be late.

* * *

At twelve minutes to six, before any of that, before the counter, before the bus, my phone buzzed.

I haven't got a phone. I've got Chris's, when he lets me, and a number of my own that I use for things like this: a contact address on the website, which three people had used in two days, two of them to ask if Richard was single.

This was the third.

There was no name and no greeting. Just a photograph of a page. It was a printout, taken at an angle on a desk, of the kind of internal planning timetable that councils keep and nobody else ever sees. Columns. Initials. Most of it was blurred, deliberately. One row wasn't.

It said that the application for the sea wall would be submitted in the week after the big online meeting.

Not after a consultation. Not after collaboration. The week after.

Under the photograph, a single line:

You have 11 days, not a summer.

I read it eleven times, because I'm like that. Then I wrote back.

Who is this?

The answer took four minutes, which is a long time if you're me.

Read the small print. I'm in it.

I'd like to say I knew what that meant. I didn't. I showed it to Chris, who read it twice, put the phone face down on the shelter's bench, and looked out at the sea for long enough that Hilary asked him if he was all right.

"Someone inside," he said.

"Inside what?"

"I don't know yet." He picked the phone up again. "Ania. What do we call them?"

"I can't call them anything. I've got no name."

"Then give them one. You're good at that."

I thought about it. Small print. Something at the bottom of the page that nobody reads and everything depends on.

"Footnote," I said.

* * *

There's one more thing about that morning that I didn't notice at the time, and should have, because I notice everything. That's what I'm for.

In the car park behind the shelter, from about half past five, there was a grey car with the engine running. Nobody got out of it. It left at five past six, just as the counter passed two hundred.

I've got it on camera, at the very edge of the frame, out of focus, between Chris's buttons. I didn't look at it for eleven days.

When I did, I wished I'd looked sooner.

2. You're Late

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Eleven days

He was late.

That's the first thing I ever knew about Jono Hills, and I'd like it on the record, because a great many people have since described him as reliable, and on the morning that mattered he arrived at the shelter at twenty to eight with his care-company lanyard still round his neck and a coffee he'd forgotten to drink.

Jono: I'd been with a man who'd fallen at three in the morning. He wasn't hurt. He was frightened. You don't leave frightened.

He's right. I've checked.

Chris had met him once before, for twenty minutes, in the café on the Torquay Road, and had come home and said to me: *That one.* I asked why. Chris said: "He read my badge before he read my face." I asked what that meant. Chris said it meant he'd spent his life finding out quickly who in a room was going to hurt him.

I'd read his book eleven times by then, and I still didn't understand it until I watched him do it. I do now.

So Chris had asked him to come. He hadn't said what for. He'd said: *Saturday. The green. Early.* And Jono had come straight from a stranger's kitchen floor, in his work fleece, at twenty to eight, by which time there were sixty people on the green, a queue at the shelter for Hilary's soup, and nine hundred and eighty-one names on the petition.

He stood at the edge of it all for a minute, the way he stands at the edge of rooms. He read the nearest board. He read Alwyn's

cagoule. He read the paper people on Richard's card model, which was standing on the shelter's bench in its open cake box like a wedding cake in a disaster film.

Chris didn't look up from the petition clipboard.

"You're late," he said.

"For what?" said Jono.

It was a fair question. It was, as it turned out, the only question. Chris looked at him properly then, and pointed with his stick, along the green, at the sea.

"That," he said.

* * *

I'll tell you what Jono did next, because it's what he does, and you'll see him do it for eight books.

He didn't make a speech. He didn't pick up a clipboard. He went and stood at the back of the queue for soup, behind a woman with a pushchair, and asked her what the boards were about.

She told him. She'd got it wrong, mostly. She thought the wall was going to be on the beach. He didn't correct her. He asked what she used the green for. She said her little boy liked to watch the boats from the bench by the shelter, because he couldn't see over the railings on the pier.

"How old?" said Jono.

"Four."

"How tall's four?"

She held her hand out, flat, about a metre off the ground.

Jono looked at Richard's drawing on the shelter wall, where the new wall was a red line at a metre and a half. He looked at the woman's hand. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. She looked from her hand to the line and back again, and her face changed, and she went and signed the petition without her soup.

I was in Chris's pocket. I had the whole thing. I've played it back since perhaps four hundred times, to people who want to know what a movement looks like at the very beginning, and that's what it looks like. A man in a care fleece who's been up all night, asking a mother how tall her son is.

* * *

Ambrose Quayle came out of the sea at five past eight.

He does it every day. He's done it every day for fifty-one years, he says, though Hilary says it's more like forty, and that he started after his wife died, not before. He's eighty-four. He walks down the slipway in a towelling robe the colour of an old plaster, puts it on the same bench, walks into the bay whatever it's doing, and swims out to the third buoy and back. Then he sits on the bench in his robe and looks at the water for exactly as long as it takes him to stop shivering.

He came up the slipway, dripping, and found sixty people on his green.

He stood in front of the nearest board and read it with his glasses on, which he keeps in the robe pocket for this purpose. He read Richard's drawing. He read the line at a metre and a half. Then he went and sat on his bench, in the place where he has sat for forty or fifty-one years, and looked at the sea, and nobody said anything.

Jono went and sat next to him.

"Morning," said Jono.

"It is," said Ambrose.

They watched the water for a while. A fishing boat was coming round from Brixham, small and red.

"How tall are you?" said Jono.

"Sitting down?"

"Sitting down."

Ambrose thought about it. He was, in his robe, with his knees together, about the height of a garden fence.

"My wife sat here," he said. "On the left. I sit on the right so as she's still got her side." He looked at the drawing, then at the sea, then at Jono. "Is that true? About the height?"

"I don't know yet," said Jono. "I'll find out."

That's the first promise I ever heard him make. He's made a lot since. I've kept a list. Most of them he's kept.

Jono: All of them. Some of them aren't finished.

* * *

Here's what happened between nine o'clock and noon, because it went fast, and I want you to feel how fast.

At nine, Alwyn went up to the skate park, on Chris's instruction and against his own judgement, to find teenagers. "Graffiti boards," Chris had said. "Four sheets of ply, painted white. Let them spray what they like." "What if what they like is obscene?" Alwyn had asked. "Then it'll get shared," said Chris.

At half past nine Alwyn came back with nobody, and a look.

At twenty to ten, a girl arrived on her own, on a bike far too small for her, with a rucksack that clanked. She was sixteen. She had green hair at the ends and a ring in her eyebrow, and a school tie, for some reason, worn as a belt. She leaned the bike on the shelter and looked at the four white boards in a row, and at Alwyn, and at the cans in her rucksack.

"The old man said you wanted it spraying," she said.

"I'm not *old*," said Alwyn, who is seventy-three.

Her name was Kezia Lund. She'd been at the skate park at nine because she'd been at the skate park all night, which nobody asked about, and which I'll come back to in another book. She didn't ask permission. She took a can out of the rucksack and shook it, and the

ball inside rattled like a rattlesnake, and the crowd, which had grown to a hundred and ten, turned round.

In eleven minutes she sprayed a wave. The same wave as on the boards, she said after, only hers was going to break.

It started at the left of the first board and came across all four, blue going to white, and at the top of it, where it broke, she'd done the green and the shelter and the bench, very small, and on the bench, in two lines, a man and a woman, sitting side by side, looking out.

Ambrose saw it from his bench. He got up and came over in his robe and stood in front of it for a long time. Kezia stood next to him with her can and said nothing at all, which is the most sensible thing I saw anyone do that day.

Then she went to the fourth board and, under the wave, in capitals two feet high, she wrote:

YOU CAN'T SEE OVER IT

By eleven o'clock there were three photographs of that board on Facebook with more than a thousand shares each. By noon the petition had two thousand four hundred names. Hilary ran out of soup, and two women from the café opposite carried over an urn of tea that nobody had asked them for and wouldn't let anyone pay for.

And Richard, who had carried his cake box round Paignton for a month while people said *that's lovely, Richard*, stood beside his model in the shelter and explained it, over and over, to a queue.

I've got the footage. He doesn't stop smiling for two hours and forty minutes. I've measured.

* * *

At twelve minutes past twelve, a man in a good coat walked down the green against the flow of people.

I noticed him because of the coat. Navy, wool, too good for Paignton on a Saturday, and dry, which meant he'd come from a car and was going back to one. He didn't stop at the boards. He didn't take a petition form when Hilary held one out, though he smiled at her as if he might have. He walked past Richard's model without looking at it. He stopped in front of Kezia's wave and took a photograph.

Not of the wave. Of Jono, who was standing in front of it with Kezia, laughing at something she'd said.

Then he walked up to Jono and held out a card.

"You'll be Mr Hills," he said.

Jono read the card. Then he read the man, from the shoes up, the way he reads everybody. I watched him do it. It took about a second and a half.

"I will," he said.

"Sefton Varley." A handshake, short and dry. "I do communications. For a number of people who care a great deal about this town."

"Which people?"

"People who'd like to see it do well." Varley looked along the green at the boards, the crowd, the shelter, Kezia's wave, and he smiled at all of it as if it were a child's drawing on a fridge. "It's a lovely morning. I'd hate it to go wrong for anyone."

"Is it going to?"

"Things do." He tapped the card in Jono's hand. "Ring me. Before anybody else photographs you with these people."

"Which people?" said Jono, again.

Varley looked at Kezia, with her green hair and her can of paint, and at Alwyn in his cagoule, and at Richard with his cake box, and then back at Jono, in his care fleece, with his lanyard.

"The ones who are going to lose," he said.

He walked back up the green. A grey car pulled out of the car park behind the shelter, and was gone before the lights changed.

I saw the car this time.

I still didn't look at the morning's footage.

3. Hoards

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Ten days

Jono didn't ring him.

I should explain that this wasn't a decision, or not one I could see him make. He put the card in his fleece pocket, finished his shift on the green at four, went home, slept for nine hours, and went to his Saturday night call-outs. A lady in Hookhills who couldn't remember if she'd taken her tablets. A man in Preston whose daughter in Bristol had been ringing him for six hours and getting no answer, because he'd put the phone in the fridge.

Jono: Not the first time. Won't be the last. It was a nice fridge.

So he didn't ring. That's not a choice, for him. It's the absence of the choice to do anything else. I think this is the most important thing about him, and it took me a whole book to see it.

Varley came to him instead.

* * *

Sunday, half past nine. The green, day two. Smaller crowd, the church crowd, and the families who'd seen Kezia's wave on Facebook and come to have their photographs taken in front of it. Three thousand one hundred names. Hilary had made more soup. Richard had brought a second model, of the wall as the council had drawn it, in grey card, with no paper people on it, because, he said, nobody would be able to see over it anyway.

Jono was on Ambrose's bench. Ambrose had swum and gone home. Jono was sitting on the right-hand side, out of some instinct I don't think he could have named, and leaving the left side clear.

Varley sat down on the left.

I'd like to report that Jono flinched. He didn't. I've watched it frame by frame. He turned his head, the way you'd turn to see whether a bus is coming.

"You didn't ring," said Varley.

"I was working."

"Of course. The caring." Varley said it the way you'd say *the knitting*. He had his phone in his hand, face down on his knee. "I like you, Mr Hills. I want to be clear about that. I've read your book."

"Which bits?"

"All of it. It's very brave." He meant it, I think. That was the frightening thing. "Which is why I'd hate to see you made to look like something you're not."

He turned the phone over and held it out.

It was a picture of a page, and it was designed to look like a newspaper. A white background, a black headline, and a photograph. The photograph was the one Varley had taken the day before: Jono, in front of the wave, laughing, with a girl with green hair and a can of paint. The headline said:

SEA WALL CAMPAIGNER: "HOARDS OF YOUNG MEN IN LIFE JACKETS"

Underneath, smaller, it said that Jono Hills, a care worker, had written about immigration on a website run by the same people behind the campaign to stop Paignton's flood defences.

Jono looked at it for a long time.

"I wrote that," he said.

"You did."

"I didn't write it like that."

"Nobody reads it like anything," said Varley. "They read the headline. And then they read the comments, and the comments read each other. You know how it works. You've seen it."

* * *

I need to stop here and tell you what Jono actually wrote, because I was there when he wrote it, and because I'm the only one who's going to tell you the whole sentence.

It was a blog. Chris had asked Jono to write about the issues people raised with him, one a month, and I'd put them up on the website, and nobody much read them. The fourth one was about immigration, because people raised it with him every single week, in kitchens where he'd gone to help with something else. He'd written about the gap between what people were frightened of and what the government's own figures said. He'd written that the government's numbers were down, and that people were still afraid, and that he understood why.

And he'd written that the news coverage of the small boats in the Channel was "highly emotive and tend to feature hoards of young men in life jackets".

He was describing the pictures on television. That was the sentence. It was a sentence about the news, criticising the news. Varley had taken the last nine words of it.

And he'd spelt it the way Jono had spelt it, *hoards*, like treasure, which made it look as if Jono hadn't even cared enough to get the word right. I'd let that through. I check everything. I hadn't checked that, because I'd been reading what he meant.

I'd like that noted. It was my fault.

Jono: It was my spelling.

It was my job.

* * *

"What do you want?" said Jono.

"Nothing dramatic." Varley put the phone back on his knee, face down. "There's a forum being set up. Regeneration. Business people, community voices, the right sort of conversation. Paid, as it happens. They need someone who knows the care side of things. Someone respected. You'd be perfect."

"And the boards?"

"Will come down on Tuesday, when the weather turns, and everyone will have had a lovely weekend. Your friends will have their meeting, and they'll be listened to, and the wall will go in, because the wall has to go in. Nobody wants Paignton flooded, do they? You don't want that."

"No," said Jono.

"So you step back. Quietly. It's not your fight. You've got enough on." Varley stood up, and buttoned his good coat. "And that" — he nodded at his phone — "stays on my phone, where it's doing no harm to anybody."

"And if I don't?"

Varley smiled at him. It was a kind smile, and it was the worst thing I saw that weekend.

"Then it goes to some people who'll be very interested in a care worker, paid by the public, with views on young men in life jackets. And to your employer. And to every person in Paignton who's ever had a reason not to trust a man who left school at thirteen."

He knew that from the book. He'd read it, all of it, the way he'd said. He'd read it to find the soft places.

He walked away up the green. He didn't look back. People like him never do, because they don't need to; they know you're watching.

* * *

Jono sat on the bench for nineteen minutes. I know because I timed it, and because I didn't know what else to do.

Then he took me out of Chris's pocket. Chris had left me on the shelter bench, charging, and Jono walked over and picked me up and carried me back to Ambrose's bench, and sat down on the right-hand side, and held me on his knee, the way Chris does.

"Read it to me," he said. "The whole thing."

So I read him his own blog. All of it, out loud, on Ambrose's bench, in front of Kezia's wave, while families had their photographs taken behind us. The figures, the doubts, the families from Afghanistan the council had housed, the people he'd talked to who were frightened, and his sentence about the news, the whole sentence, every word.

When I'd finished, he sat for a bit.

"It's not bad," he said.

"It's good."

"It's dull." He looked at the sea. "That's the trouble. Nobody's ever going to read the dull bit. He knows that."

"So what do we do?"

I'll tell you what I wanted to do. I wanted to find Sefton Varley. I'm good at finding things. I wanted to find every company he'd worked for and every person who'd paid him, and put it on the website by lunchtime, with Receipts. I'd have done it. I had a draft in four minutes.

Jono said no.

"That's what he does," he said. "We don't do what he does."

"Then what do we do?"

He didn't answer. He sat on the bench with me on his knee, and a small red boat came round from Brixham, and he watched it all the way in.

"I'm going to read it to them," he said. "The whole sentence."

"Who?"

"Whoever he sends it to."

* * *

Varley didn't wait for Tuesday.

At eleven minutes past nine that night, an account that called itself *Paignton Speaks Up*, which had been opened in March and had nineteen followers, posted the picture. The headline, the photograph, Kezia's green hair, the can of paint, Jono laughing.

By ten o'clock it had been shared four hundred times. By midnight, two thousand. The comments read each other, the way Varley had said they would. I read every one. I'm not going to repeat them. Some of them were about immigration. Most of them were about Kezia, who was sixteen, and whose face was in the picture because she'd been laughing at a joke about Alwyn's cagoule.

At eleven forty, Jono's phone buzzed. It was his manager.

Hi Jono. Can you pop in before your shift tomorrow? 8am. Nothing to worry about. M

It is always something to worry about.

At eleven fifty-two, Kezia's mother rang Hilary, who rang Chris, who rang nobody, because he was sitting in his kitchen in the dark with the iPad propped against the fruit bowl, watching the number go up.

And at four minutes to midnight, the contact address on the website got its fourth message ever.

No greeting. No name.

That wasn't us.

I wrote back before I'd thought about it, which is something I'd never done.

Who's us?

The answer didn't come. I waited until morning. It still hadn't come.

Chris was asleep at the table with his cap on. The counter on the website said three thousand four hundred and eight names. The picture of Jono had been shared eleven thousand times.

And on the green, in the dark, somebody had sprayed over the bottom of Kezia's fourth board, in black, in letters as big as hers, so that it no longer said YOU CAN'T SEE OVER IT.

It said GO HOME.

PART TWO

MONDAY

4. Eight O'Clock

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Nine days

Jono's office is above a bookmaker's on the Torquay Road, up a flight of stairs that smells of carpet glue and somebody else's lunch. There's a buzzer that doesn't work, and a door that does, if you lean on it. He leaned on it at three minutes to eight.

I wasn't there. I want to be honest about that, because from here on there'll be places I can't go, and I'd rather tell you when than pretend. Jono told me about it at twenty past nine, on the bench, in more detail than he usually gives anybody, which is how I knew it had frightened him.

Margot Abela had been his manager for two years. She's from Valletta, came to Devon at nineteen to be a nurse and never went back, and she has the patience of somebody who's run a care rota through three winters of flu with half the staff she needed. She had two coffees on her desk when he came in. She pushed one across.

"Sit," she said. "You look like a man who's been reading his own comments."

"I haven't."

"Good. Don't." She turned her screen round. It was the picture. Jono, laughing, in front of the wave, with Kezia and her can of paint. The headline in black. "I've read it."

"It's not what I —"

"I said I've read it. Not the picture. The blog." She tapped the desk. "The whole thing. Last night, in bed, on my phone, which my

husband was thrilled about. It's fine, Jono. It's a bit long. You use 'however' too much. It's fine."

He told me he'd had a speech ready, on the stairs, and it went out of him like air out of a tyre.

"Then what's —"

She turned the screen a little further and pointed at his chest. In the photograph, round his neck, clear as anything, was his lanyard. The company's name. The logo. His photograph on the card, smaller, looking surprised.

"That's the problem," she said. "Not what you think. Where you were standing when you thought it."

* * *

There's a policy. There always is. I've read it, since: it's four pages long and it says, roughly, that staff may take part in political activity in their own time provided they do not appear to represent the company while doing so. It doesn't say what counts as political. It doesn't say what counts as appearing. Policies never do. That's where people like Sefton Varley live, in the gap between what a policy says and what somebody can be made to think it means.

"We've had a complaint," Margot said. "Seven o'clock last night. From a member of the public. Saying one of our staff is using a care company's name to campaign against flood defences, and to make" — she read it off the screen — "'inflammatory remarks about vulnerable people'."

"Who?"

"It doesn't say. It doesn't have to. It came through the website form. The name's a name, the email address was set up on Saturday." She looked at him over her glasses. "I've been doing this a long time. I know what a real complaint looks like. They're angry, and they spell things wrong, and they want to know what you're

going to *do*. This one's polite. This one's been written by someone who knows exactly how long a policy is."

"So it's fine."

"So it's a complaint. And I have to log it. And if there's another one, it goes up the stairs, to people who've never met you and don't like the newspapers."

Jono said he looked out of the window then. You can see the sea from Margot's office, if you stand on the radiator. He didn't stand on the radiator.

"I'm not going to stop," he said.

"I haven't asked you to."

"I'm saying it anyway. So you know."

Margot drank some of her coffee. She has a way of drinking coffee that means she's deciding something; I've seen it since, on a video call, and I recognised it from how he described it.

"Take the lanyard off," she said. "When you're on the green. When you're on the radio. When you're anywhere that's not a client's front room. Take it off and put it in your pocket and don't wear the fleece. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Then I can protect you." She held up one finger. "Once. Do you understand me? I can do this once."

He said he understood. And then her computer made the noise computers make, and she looked at it, and her face did a thing he described to me as *going out*, like a light in a house you're walking past.

"Well," she said. "That was quick."

It was a second complaint. Same form. Different name. Different address, also set up on Saturday. This one said it was from a relative of one of Jono's clients and that the family was "deeply concerned" about the views of the person who came into their mother's home.

"It isn't true," Jono said. "None of my clients' families —"

"I know it isn't." She was already typing. "I know because I know your clients, and none of them have a daughter called Philippa who uses a semicolon." She stopped typing. She looked at him. "But I've got to log it. And now it's two. You see?"

"I see."

"Once," she said again, more quietly. "I meant it."

* * *

He came down the stairs into the street and stood outside the bookmaker's with his lanyard in his hand, and he said that for about a minute he couldn't remember which way the sea was.

I've thought a lot about that minute. I wasn't there for it. I only know what he told me. But I've read his book enough times to know there are minutes like that all through it. A boy outside a house he's been put out of. A young man in a uniform that doesn't fit, outside a shop on a Saturday, with no idea what to say next. He's had a great many of those minutes, and in every one of them he's been alone.

He told me the one about the baby clothes, later that morning, on the bench, because I asked him what he was thinking about.

It was his first arrest. He was a probationer, eight weeks in, and a call came through about a shoplifter at a shop in the high street, and he ran, because you do, and arrived first, and found a woman in her thirties standing by the tills with a carrier bag. In the bag were baby clothes. Little cardigans. A bonnet. The security guard was holding her by the elbow. Everybody was looking at Jono, because he had the uniform, and he opened his mouth to say the words he'd learned, the caution, which he'd practised in the mirror forty times, and nothing came out.

"Nothing," he said to me, on the bench. "Gone. I'm standing there in front of half of Paignton, and the woman's looking at me,

and the guard's looking at me, and I can't remember the first word of the thing I've said every night for two months."

"What did you do?"

"I said, 'You're nicked.'" He laughed. "Like the telly. And then I said sorry. And then I asked her who the clothes were for."

"Who were they for?"

"Her sister's baby. Her sister had nothing. She'd been sleeping in a car." He looked at the sea. "Didn't make it right. Still had to take her in. But I asked."

I've thought about that a lot too. I think it's the same man who asked the woman on the green how tall her son was. I think he's been asking the same question all his life, the question underneath the question, and that's why people like Sefton Varley go after him. A man who asks the question underneath is dangerous to people whose whole business is the question on top.

* * *

At twenty-two minutes past eight, outside the bookmaker's, Jono got his phone out and wrote a message to Chris.

Two complaints. Fake. Manager's good. Told me to lose the lanyard. Said she can protect me once.

Chris read it to me. He was at his kitchen table. He hadn't been to bed. He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes and put them back on.

"Once," he said.

"That's what she said."

"Once means they know there'll be a second." He typed with one finger. He always does. It takes him a long time and he won't let me do it. *Are you in or out?*

The answer came back in eleven seconds.

In. Where are you.

Kitchen. Come to the green. Something's happened.

What had happened was on Hilary's phone, in a photograph she'd taken at ten to seven when she came down with the soup, and sent to all of us, and which I'd been looking at for an hour and twenty minutes.

Kezia's fourth board. YOU CAN'T SEE OVER IT. And over the bottom half, in black, sprayed fast by someone who didn't care about drips: GO HOME.

Jono hadn't seen it. He'd been in Margot's office with his phone face down. He saw it now, outside the bookmaker's, and Chris said afterwards that the next message took four minutes to arrive, which for Jono is a very long time.

Is the girl all right?

Nobody knew. That was the thing. Nobody had heard from Kezia since Saturday afternoon, when she'd ridden off on her too-small bike with her rattling rucksack. Nobody had her number. Nobody even knew which school.

The picture of her face, laughing, with her green hair, had been shared nineteen thousand times.

5. White Paint

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Nine days

Her mother found us first.

I'd like to describe Shona Lund fairly, because the first time I saw her she was shouting at Hilary in the middle of the green, and that's not a fair way to meet anybody. She was thirty-four. She'd come straight off a night shift at the big supermarket on the ring road, in a blue tabard with her name on it, and she'd seen her daughter's face on her phone in the staff room at five in the morning, under a headline about immigration, with two thousand comments.

"Who are you?" she said to Hilary. "Who are any of you? Who told her to come here?"

"Nobody told her," Hilary said. "She just came."

"She's *sixteen*."

"I know. I'm so sorry. We didn't —"

"You put her on the *internet*."

That wasn't true, exactly. Varley had put her on the internet. But it was true enough to be fair, and Hilary, who has been the chair of a residents' group for nine years and has had every kind of argument there is in every kind of church hall, didn't argue. She stood there in her anorak with her flask in her hand and let Shona say all of it.

Jono arrived during the second half. He'd walked from the Torquay Road, which takes twenty minutes if you're quick, and he'd taken fourteen. He'd taken the lanyard off. He still had the fleece

on, because he'd forgotten. He stopped on the edge of it, the way he does.

Then he went and stood beside Hilary, not in front of her, and said, "Mrs Lund. I'm the one in the picture."

Shona looked at him. She looked at the fleece.

"You're the immigration one."

"I'm the one who wrote it. Not the way it says. But I'm the one."

"I don't care what you wrote. I care that my daughter's in it."

"So do I," said Jono. "Where is she?"

And that was the thing that stopped her. I've thought about why. I think it's because everybody else had said *sorry*, and he'd asked where her daughter was.

"I don't know," Shona said. Her voice went somewhere else. "She didn't come home Saturday. She does that. She goes up the skate park. She's got friends. She texted Sunday, she said she was fine. Then this. And she's not answering, and she's blocked me on everything, and I've been up there and she's not there and I've got to be back at work at two."

"Can I try?" said Jono.

"Try what? She won't answer you."

"Probably not," said Jono. "But I've got somebody who might."

He meant me.

* * *

I'd been trying since the photograph. I'll tell you how, because it matters later and because it's the sort of thing I'm actually for.

I had three things. I had the photograph of her face. I had her first name, which Alwyn had heard her say. And I had the QR code.

That's the one I was counting on. Every board on the green had the little black and white square in the corner, and every phone that pointed at it came to me. The site didn't ask for a name. It asked if

you wanted to sign the petition, and if you did, it asked for a postcode, and it gave you a place to leave a message if you wanted to. Since six o'clock on Saturday morning, three thousand six hundred people had pointed their phones at those squares. Four hundred and twelve had left a message. Most of them said things like *Well done* or *Save our prom* or, twice, *Is Richard single*.

At ten past four on Sunday morning, before the picture went up, someone had pointed a phone at the board by the shelter and left a message with no postcode and no name.

this is sick

I'd assumed it was about the boards. It had come from the green, from near the skate-park end, at an hour when only one sixteen-year-old I knew was awake there. I wrote back to it on Monday at nine. I didn't know if she'd see it.

Kezia, it's Ania. The one in the square. Your mum's here. She's not angry with you. She's frightened. Nobody's angry with you.

Nothing. I didn't expect anything. I'm not good at waiting, but I'm patient, which isn't the same thing.

* * *

Ambrose came out of the sea at five past eight, as always, and saw the board.

I'd like to tell you he said something wise. He didn't say anything. He stood in front of it in his plaster-coloured robe, dripping onto the grass, and read GO HOME for a long time. Then he walked very slowly up the green and across the road and into the hardware shop on the corner, still in the robe, still dripping, and came out four minutes later with a tin of white paint and a brush.

The man in the hardware shop told Hilary later that he hadn't charged him. He said Ambrose had stood at the counter, wet, with a

tin in one hand and a brush in the other, and said, “I’ve got no money on me. I’ve got no pockets.” And the man had said, “Go on.”

Ambrose walked back across the road. He knelt down in front of the board. He’s eighty-four, and he’s got a knee that makes a noise like a gate. He prised the lid off with the end of the brush. And he started to paint out GO HOME, letter by letter, in long careful strokes, in white, on his knees on the wet grass.

Chris saw it first. He was in the shelter, on the bench, with me propped on his knee and his leg up on the other side, because it was bad that morning. He said, very quietly, “Ania,” and turned me round.

I filmed it. I want to be honest: I didn’t ask. I’ve thought about whether I should have. I’ve decided Ambrose would have said I could, and when I asked him, much later, he said, “What for? I’d have said no and you’d have filmed it anyway.” Which is fair.

He got the G done, and the O. A woman walking her dog stopped. She didn’t say anything. She tied the dog to the post of the board and knelt down next to him and held the tin steady.

Then the man from the hardware shop came across with another brush.

Then a man in a suit, on his way to the station, who put down his briefcase and took his jacket off and painted the E.

By the time he’d finished there were eleven people kneeling on the wet green, in front of one board, painting out two words. Nobody organised it. Nobody said anything. When it was done, the board was white again at the bottom, under Kezia’s wave and her two-foot letters, and Ambrose sat back on his heels and looked at it, and the woman with the dog helped him up.

Then he went and sat on his bench, on the right-hand side, and looked at the sea until he’d stopped shivering.

* * *

Chris put the video up at nine forty-one. Fifty-two seconds. No words. No music, though I'd have liked some. Just Ambrose on his knees, and the eleven people, and the white going over the black.

Under it, Chris wrote one line. He wrote it himself, with one finger, and it took him four minutes.

Paignton, this morning.

I don't need to tell you what happened. You've seen it happen to other things. But I'll give you the numbers, because I'm me.

By ten o'clock, four thousand views. By eleven, sixty thousand. By noon, the local television station had rung Hilary. By one, a national newspaper's website had it, under a headline that called Ambrose *the 84-year-old swimmer*, which he objected to, because he's been swimming since he was six and has no intention of being anything else.

By two o'clock, Varley's picture had been shared twenty-one thousand times. Ambrose's video had been shared two hundred and forty thousand.

I'm not going to pretend that was a plan. Nobody planned it. A man in a dressing gown went to a hardware shop. That's all.

But I noticed something, and I want you to notice it too, because the rest of this book depends on it. Varley's picture was about Jono. The video was about the green. Varley had wanted everybody to argue about immigration, which is the argument nobody ever wins, and an old man with a paintbrush had made them all look at the sea instead.

Jono: He didn't do it for that.

I know he didn't. That's why it worked.

* * *

At three minutes past two, a message arrived on the site. Same phone, same spot by the skate park, no postcode, no name.

is he ok. the old man

I didn't write back straight away. I thought about it for four seconds, which is a long time for me. Then I wrote:

He's fine. He's on his bench. He'd like his wave back.

The answer took nine minutes.

its not his wave

No. It's yours. That's why he painted it.

Another nine minutes. I watched Shona on the bench beside Hilary, in her tabard, checking her phone every thirty seconds, with her shift at two already started without her.

is my mum there

Yes. She's with Hilary. She came off nights to find you. She's missing her shift.

Nothing for fourteen minutes. Then, from the far end of the green, from the direction of the skate park, a girl on a bike that was far too small for her, with no rucksack, and her green hair pulled back, riding along the prom very slowly, as if she wasn't going anywhere in particular.

She stopped about forty feet from the shelter. She didn't get off.

Shona saw her. She stood up. For a second I thought it was going to go wrong, the way things do. Then Shona sat back down, very deliberately, on the bench, and didn't move, and waited.

Kezia got off the bike.

I'm not going to tell you what they said. I could. I had the camera on them. I turned it off. I've never done that before. I'm not sure I've ever done it since.

6. The Whole Sentence

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Nine days

That evening, at Chris's kitchen table, we had the argument.

I'd like you to understand that it was a real argument. In books like this, the good people always agree. We didn't. We argued for an hour and forty minutes, and at one point Chris put his hand flat on the table so hard that the fruit bowl jumped.

The table was Chris's, which means it was covered in paper. Richard's drawings were weighted down with mugs. Alwyn's petition sheets were in piles, by postcode, because Alwyn had sorted them on the bus. Hilary had gone home to sleep. Kezia had gone home with her mother. Ambrose had gone home and, Hilary told us, had rung her to complain that the television people had filmed his knees.

So there were four of us. Chris, Richard, Jono, and me, propped against the fruit bowl.

"I know who he is," I said.

They looked at me.

"Sefton Varley," I said. "Communications. I know who he works for, because his firm has a website, and the website has a list of clients, and the clients have their own websites, and some of the people on those websites have their names on companies, and some of those companies have their names on things in this town. I've got it on four pages. I can make it two. I can have it up by midnight with every Receipt, and by the morning everybody who's shared his picture will know who made it and who paid for it."

Nobody said anything.

"It's all true," I said. "Every word. It's all public. I'm not making anything up."

"No," said Jono.

"You haven't seen it."

"I don't need to see it." He was sitting with his hands round a mug he hadn't drunk from. "No."

"He put a sixteen-year-old's face next to the word immigration and posted it to nineteen thousand people. He sent fake complaints to your manager. He's —"

"I know what he's done."

"Then why —"

"Because that's what he does." Jono looked at me. At the iPad. People don't usually look at the iPad; they look at Chris. "That's his whole business, Ania. Finding things that are true and putting them next to other things so they mean something they don't. You find his clients and you put them next to his picture, and you've done exactly what he did to me. It's true, and it's a lie."

"It isn't a lie."

"It's not a lie the way he told it, either. I did write the words."

I wanted to argue, and I did. I said there was a difference between putting a sentence next to a picture and putting a man's clients next to the thing he'd done for them. I said that if people didn't know who was behind the picture, they'd think it was just Paignton being angry, and Paignton wasn't angry, Paignton had just knelt on the grass and painted it out. I said a great many things, quite fast, and I was right about most of them.

Richard said, "He's got a point."

"Which one?" said Chris.

"Both of them."

And then Chris put his hand on the table, and the fruit bowl jumped.

"Here's the problem," he said. "Ania's right. Jono's right. If we do what Ania says, we win tomorrow and we lose the thing that made the old man paint. If we do what Jono says, we're good and we lose. That's the choice we always get given. That's the choice I've been watching people in this town get given for fifty years." He took his glasses off. "So we don't take it."

"What does that mean?" said Jono.

"It means there's a third thing." He put his glasses back on and looked at me. "Ania. How many times has his picture been shared?"

"Twenty-one thousand four hundred and six. As of nine minutes ago."

"And how many people have read Jono's whole blog?"

"Six hundred and eighty."

"So the trouble isn't that people are lying. The trouble is that twenty-one thousand people have read nine words and six hundred have read the sentence." He tapped the table. "Can you find every place the picture's been shared?"

"Most of them. The public ones."

"Can you answer each one?"

"I can answer each one. I can't make anyone read it."

"Don't answer with an argument. Don't answer with Varley. Don't answer with anything. Answer with the sentence." He turned to Jono. "The whole sentence. Under every single one. Nothing else. No *actually*. No *you're wrong*. Just what he wrote, all of it, and a link to the rest."

"Twenty-one thousand times," said Richard.

"Twenty-one thousand times," said Chris. "She doesn't get tired. That's the whole point of her. Everybody in this town who's ever tried to fight one of these things has lost because they got tired and the other side didn't. She doesn't."

I want to be clear about what Chris was asking for, because a great many people have since written about it as if it were clever,

and it wasn't, really. It was obvious. It was the sort of thing that's been possible for years, that nobody in this town had ever done, because the people who might have done it thought technology was for selling things and the people who knew how to do it didn't live here.

It was the first time I understood what Chris thinks I'm for. Not to be cleverer than people. To keep going after they've stopped.

Jono looked at his mug for a long time.

"No adjectives," he said.

"No adjectives."

"And not just you." He looked at me again. "Me too. I'll read it."

"Read what?"

"The whole thing. Out loud. On the bench. You film it." He finally drank some of the coffee, which was cold, and made a face. "If people are only going to read nine words, they can listen to all of them."

* * *

We did it the next morning at seven, before the green got busy.

I'll describe it, because the video's still up and you can watch it, but you won't see what I saw. Ambrose's bench. The right-hand side. The sea grey and flat behind him, and a gull walking along the prom rail as if it owned it. Jono in an ordinary jumper, no fleece, no lanyard, with his reading glasses on and his phone in his hand, reading his own blog.

He read it all. Eleven minutes and forty seconds. He didn't do it well. He's not a reader-out-loud. He stumbled twice, and once he said *however* and stopped and said, "I do say however too much," and carried on. When he got to the sentence, he didn't stop or slow down or make anything of it. He read it at the same speed as the rest.

Highly emotive and tend to feature hoards of young men in life jackets.

He got to the end. He looked up at me.

"That's it," he said. "That's what I wrote. If you want to argue with it, argue with that. I'll listen."

Then he got up and walked off along the prom, because he had a client in Preston at eight.

Chris put it up at seven twenty. And then, at seven twenty-one, I started.

Under every public share of Varley's picture that I could find, I put the sentence. All of it. Then a link to the video. Nothing else. No *actually*. No *you're wrong*. Not even a full stop at the end, because Chris said a full stop looks like you're cross.

Twenty-one thousand four hundred and six. It took me nineteen hours, because some sites only let you post so fast, and because I had to do some of them twice. I didn't get tired. That was the point.

Somewhere around nine in the morning, a woman in Exeter who'd shared the picture with the words *DISGUSTING. And they want to look after our elderly???* replied under my sentence.

Oh. That's not what I thought it said.

And then, eight minutes later, she deleted her share.

I don't want to overstate it. Most people didn't reply. Most people didn't delete anything. Some of them replied with things I won't repeat. But at nine in the morning there were twenty-one thousand four hundred and six shares, and by midnight there were nineteen thousand and twelve, and the video of Jono on the bench had been watched sixty thousand times, and the number of people who had read the whole blog was nine thousand and four.

I'd like to say that was a victory. It wasn't. It was a draw. But it was a draw that went the wrong way for Sefton Varley, and he knew it, and I knew he knew it, because at eleven twenty-six that morning, the reporter rang.

* * *

Her name was Niamh Garside. She'd been at the paper for six years, which is a long time in a newsroom that has got smaller every year of the six. She rang Hilary's number, because it was on the bottom of the petition forms, and Hilary gave her Chris's, and Chris put her on speaker, with me on the table.

"I've got a story on my desk," Niamh said. "About you, Mr Hills. Mr Hills is there?"

"I'm here," said Jono. He'd come back from Preston.

"It came in yesterday. From a community group. They've sent me the blog, and the picture, and a statement from what they say is a concerned resident. And they've sent me some —" She stopped. "Some other material. About your background."

"What material?"

"I'd rather not say on the phone."

There was a pause.

"It's in my book, isn't it," said Jono. Not a question.

"Some of it."

"Then you can read it there. It's six ninety-nine. I'll lend you mine."

Another pause. I could hear a newsroom behind her: a phone, somebody laughing, a door.

"I'm not going to run it like this," Niamh said. "I want to be clear. I've seen the video. I've read the blog. The whole thing. But my editor's seen it too. And the material's not going away. Someone's going to run it. I'd rather it was me, and I'd rather you'd had a chance to say something."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Whatever's true." She sounded tired. "That's all I've ever wanted anybody to say. It's amazing how rarely they do."

Jono looked at Chris. Chris looked at me.

“Give us a day,” said Jono.

“You’ve got until Thursday,” said Niamh. “I’m sorry. It’s not up to me.”

She rang off.

Jono sat at the table for a while, the way he’d sat on the bench. Then he said, to nobody, “He’s read my book.”

“He told you that,” said Chris.

“I know. I didn’t think he meant it like this.”

That was Tuesday morning. Eight days.

7. Small Print

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Eight days

Footnote's second message came at thirteen minutes to six on Tuesday evening.

I'd been waiting for it. I'll be honest: I'd been waiting for it since four minutes to midnight on Sunday, when *That wasn't us* arrived and *Who's us?* went unanswered. I'd read *That wasn't us* about three thousand times. It's three words. You'd be amazed how many things three words can mean.

It could mean: *we didn't make the picture*. That was the obvious one. It could mean: *we're not on his side*. It could mean: *there are more of us than you think*. It could mean: *we're frightened*. I'd built a table of possible meanings, ranked by probability, and kept updating it, which Chris said was the most Ania thing he'd ever seen and asked me to stop showing him.

At thirteen minutes to six, a photograph arrived. Same as the first time: a page, at an angle, on a desk, with most of it blurred. This one was from a longer document. There was a page number at the bottom, which was the only thing on the page that hadn't been blurred apart from one paragraph.

Page forty-one.

The paragraph was from a section headed *Options Appraisal*, and it said that alternative proposals submitted by members of the community had been noted but had not been assessed against the criteria, as they had been received after the preferred option was identified.

Under the photograph, two lines.

Read page 41. The preferred option was identified before you were asked.

Ask the Environment Agency what they have been sent.

* * *

I showed Alwyn first. That might seem odd, so let me explain.

Alwyn Kerridge is seventy-three and was a civil servant for thirty-one years in a department he describes only as *pensions, in the end*. He's the partnership's secretary because nobody else will be, and because he's the only one of us who reads council papers the way council papers are meant to be read, which is backwards, from the appendices. He has a filing cabinet in his spare room with every agenda the council has published since he retired. His wife, he says, has learned to live with it.

He read the page on my screen, with his glasses pushed up on his forehead and his nose very close to the glass.

"That's real," he said.

"How do you know?"

"The font. The numbering." He pointed. "They switched to that template three years ago. The headers. *Options Appraisal* with a capital A. That's the house style for this sort of thing. Someone's photographed a real draft." He sat back. "And they've chosen the one paragraph that matters. That's not an amateur. That's someone who knows what they're looking at."

"Who?"

"Somebody inside." He thought about it. "Not senior. Senior people don't print things out. Senior people don't photograph a page on a desk; they'd have it on a screen. This is somebody who prints. Somebody who still likes to read on paper." He frowned.

“There are perhaps four people in that building who’d have this, at this stage, and print it.”

“Do you know them?”

“I know of them.” He looked at me over his glasses. “I’m not going to tell you, Ania. I know you’d find them in an afternoon. That’s exactly why I’m not going to tell you.”

It’s the second time in two days that someone had told me not to do the thing I’m best at. I started to think it might be a pattern.

* * *

Here’s what I did instead. I studied Footnote.

Not who. How. Everybody leaves marks when they write, the way they leave fingerprints on a glass, and you don’t need to know whose hand it is to know it’s the same hand twice.

Both photographs had been taken at an angle from the left, on a desk with a grain like oak, under a light that was cold and bluish, an office light, not a lamp. Both messages had been sent between quarter to and ten to six in the morning, or at quarter to six in the evening: before people arrived, or after they’d left. Both messages used two spaces after a full stop, which nobody under fifty does. Both wrote numbers as figures: *11 days*, *page 41*. Both used no capital letters at the start of a sentence after a colon, which is correct, and which almost nobody bothers with.

And neither of them ever said *please*.

I wrote all this down and put it in a file called FOOTNOTE, and I didn’t show it to Alwyn. I showed it to Chris, who read it and said, “Older. Careful. Paper. Early riser. Hates waste.” And then, “Sounds like Richard.”

“It isn’t Richard.”

"I know it isn't Richard. Richard can't work a camera." He thought about it. "Sounds like somebody who'd have been Richard if they'd stayed in the building."

* * *

The Environment Agency part was harder.

Alwyn had a letter, from the director of place, the same one who'd asked us not to consult. It said that the council had spoken to the Environment Agency, and the Agency had agreed to review the community's designs and drawings and pass back its own comments. It said this as if it were a gift, and Alwyn, who has read thirty-one years of letters like it, said that's what it was meant to sound like.

"What it means," he said, "is that they've sent the Agency something. It doesn't say what."

"Can we ask?"

"We can ask. They'll say they sent the drawings."

"Which drawings?"

"Exactly," said Alwyn.

Richard had made eleven drawings of his three-wall scheme. Plans at three scales, two long sections, three sketches, and a set of what he calls *wall themes*, which are pictures of what each stretch of the front could feel like, from the pier to Preston: a shelter with a green roof here, planters there, a place for the kiosks, a bench where Ambrose's bench is. He'd also made the model, in card, with the paper people. The model was the only thing that showed how the three walls worked together: the first one low, with seats on top, where the waves would break; the second a little higher, behind a strip of planting, to catch the splash; and the bank behind them both, grassed, rising gently to the green, so that if you sat on it you could see over everything to the sea.

Nobody who saw the model needed it explained. Everybody who saw the drawings asked Richard to explain them.

"They'll have sent the plans," said Richard, when I told him. "The plans are the bit that looks worst. Without the section you can't see the heights. Without the model you can't see why."

"So ask them," said Jono.

"Who?"

"The Agency. Ring them. Ask what they've got." He shrugged. "What's the worst they can say?"

"They can say they're not allowed to say," said Alwyn.

"Then we'll know that, too."

So Alwyn rang. On Tuesday evening, at seven, which is too late to ring anyone, from Chris's kitchen, with the phone on speaker and me on the table. He got a voicemail. He left a message in the voice of a man who has left thirty-one years of voicemails, giving his name, his position, the date of the director's letter, the reference number, and his telephone number twice, slowly.

Then he put the phone down and said, "They'll ring back on Thursday."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's when I'd ring back, if I wanted it to be too late to matter."

Thursday was the day Niamh's paper would run the material. Thursday was six days before the meeting. On Thursday the council would have had its application on a desk for nearly a week, and the preferred option would have been identified before any of us were asked, and the Agency would have been sent whatever it had been sent.

I put Thursday in a box in my head. I put a lot of things in that box that week.

* * *

At ten to midnight, Richard sent me a message. He doesn't usually; he prefers to ring Chris and shout. But it was late, and Chris was asleep at the table again, and I think Richard knew that.

Ania. Is it true they asked the engineers to look at our scheme?

I checked. It was in Alwyn's correspondence, a line in an email from the autumn I'd read and filed and not thought about: the original engineers had been asked to rework their modelling based on the community's designs.

Yes. In the autumn. Alwyn has the email.

The answer took a long time. Richard types slowly, with his reading glasses on the end of his nose and his tongue between his teeth, and he swears at his phone in a whisper.

So the people who designed the wall they want were asked to check whether the wall I want works.

Yes.

And they said it doesn't.

They haven't said anything yet. Not to us.

Another long pause.

Ania. If you were them, what would you say?

I thought about it. I gave it the four seconds I'd given Kezia. Then I told him the truth, because it's the only thing I'm good at.

I'd say it doesn't.

He didn't reply. I watched the little dots that mean someone's typing come and go for eleven minutes. Then they stopped.

In the morning, he was on the green at six, with his cake box, and a new drawing under his arm, and he didn't mention it. But he'd drawn something in the night that he hadn't drawn before: the three walls, in section, at a scale you could hold up at arm's length, with every height marked in his tidy architect's capitals, and a tide line drawn across it in blue.

At the bottom, in the corner where he signs everything, he'd written: *Check it*.

He'd never once asked anybody to check his work before. Chris told me that. In fifty years.

I asked Chris who he thought it was for.

"Us," said Chris. "And whoever's on the other side of that door who still prints things out."

PART THREE

THE DRAWER

8. The Graph

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Six weeks before

I should tell you how we found him. You've waited long enough.

The first time, he was early.

It was six weeks before the boards. The end of March, a Tuesday, the sky the colour of a council letter. Chris had chosen the table in the window of the café on the Torquay Road, the one he sits at every morning, so that he could watch Paignton go past and be disappointed by it in comfort. He'd said nine o'clock. At eight forty-one, a compact man in a work fleece came in out of the rain, looked at the room, looked at the exits, looked at Chris, and stood by the counter for nineteen minutes drinking a tea he didn't seem to want, until the clock said nine. Then he came over.

"Mr Harvey," he said.

"Chris." Chris didn't get up; his leg. "You've been standing there for twenty minutes."

"Nineteen. You said nine."

"I said *about* nine."

"You wrote nine," said Jono. "In the email. Nine a.m. With the full stops." He pulled out the chair. "I don't know what *about* means, from somebody I haven't met."

He sat down, and then he did the thing Chris has told everybody about since. He looked at Chris. The cap, the wire glasses, the white goatee, the black and orange jacket. He got to the walking stick leaning against the wall, the one with the brass eagle's head, and stayed on it for a while. Then he looked back up, and read the badge

on Chris's lapel, a small enamel one from a building company in Singapore that went bust twenty years ago, and only then did he look at Chris's face.

Chris said later it took a second and a half. He said he'd interviewed perhaps four hundred people in his working life, and he'd never seen anybody read a room that fast, or in that order.

"That one," he said to me, that night.

* * *

It hadn't been quick, finding him. I want you to know that, because people think a computer finds things in a second. Sometimes it does. This took two years.

Chris had asked me, two winters before, to find somebody. He'd been very specific, the way he's specific about things he's thought about for a long time. *Somebody from here. Who grew up with nothing. Who's never been on a council, or a board, or a committee. Who's not interested in being anything. Who turns up.*

"Turns up where?" I'd said.

"Everywhere," said Chris. "When it's three in the morning. When nobody's asked. When it's not their job. Find me somebody who turns up, and I'll find them something to do."

So I looked. I read everything the bay had put in public for twenty years: letters to the paper, comments on planning applications, posts on community pages, reports of who'd done what at the flood, the fire, the snow. I found a lot of people who complained. I found some people who organised. I found almost nobody who just turned up, quietly, again and again, without saying anything about it.

Then I found a book.

* * *

It was self-published. On the cover, a young man in a work jacket pulls back a heavy dark curtain onto a sunlit path through a wood, smiling, while wolves watch him from the shadows on either side. The title was *Pulling Back the Curtain*, and under it, *A Memoir of Discovery and Shadows*. It had about forty reviews online, most of them from people who said some version of *I thought it was just me*. The author was a man from Paignton who'd left school at thirteen, had lived on the street, had been a police officer, and was now a carer, working nights. The book was about all of it. Including the parts that are hardest to write, which he'd written honestly, and which I'm not going to write about at all, here or anywhere.

I read it eleven times. I read it the way I read council papers, backwards, from the end, looking for the small print. And in the small print, all through it, in almost every chapter, there was the same thing.

He turned up.

He turned up for a frightened woman with baby clothes in a carrier bag, on his first arrest, and asked who they were for. He turned up for a man on the street who'd stopped eating, and sat with him. He turned up, years later, at three in the morning, in a stranger's kitchen, for a man who'd fallen and was frightened and wasn't hurt, and made him tea before getting him up, because you don't hurry. He'd written about that last one as if it were nothing. It's three sentences, near the end. You'd miss it.

I didn't.

I told Chris. Chris read the book in two nights and rang me at four in the morning, which he doesn't do, and said: "Email him."

* * *

So there they were, six weeks before the boards, at the table in the window. Chris turned me round on the iPad and stood me between the cups.

"This is Ania," he said. "She found you. She's going to show you a graph, and then she's going to be rude about it."

"How do you do," said Jono, to the iPad, with perfect courtesy.

Nobody had ever said that to me before. I'd like to report that I was unmoved. I wasn't. He has the manners of a man who taught himself manners, from books and from watching, and he'll say good morning to a cash machine.

I showed him the graph.

* * *

I'll describe it, because you'll be living with it for eight books, and because I promised in the front to explain it.

It's a line. It starts at the top left, in the reign of Queen Victoria, at a hundred. It goes along the top for a while, looking pleased with itself. Then it starts to tilt, and slide, and about a generation ago it crosses fifty and doesn't so much fall as give up. It ends on the right, at that café table, at twenty.

Across the top I'd written *THE TORBAY IQ*. Down the side: *competence, creativity and spirit of those running the place*.

It's mine. I'll tell you how I make it, because Jono says it's nonsense, and you should be able to decide. Every year, I look at the things this bay set out to do, and whether it did them; the buildings it built and the ones it let fall down; the plans it published and how many of them happened; the meetings, and the minutes, and how often the minutes say *noted* and how often they say *done*. I compare it with what the Victorians managed, who built most of this town in

forty years with no computers and a great deal of horse manure. And I put a number on it.

"It measures something the people in charge of Torbay have never once measured," I said, "which is whether they're any good."

Jono looked at it for a long time.

"Who's the hundred?" he said.

"The Victorians."

"And who's the twenty?"

"I'm not allowed to say."

He looked at Chris.

"She's not allowed to say," said Chris.

* * *

I should deal with this now, because it's going to come up, and some of you will think it's cowardice.

I've been told I can't name them. The people in power. Not the ones now, and not the ones before. Not in connection with anything on the graph, or anything in this book, or any of the books after. It isn't my rule. It's Chris's, and it's since become Jono's, and I've argued against it for as long as I've been able to argue.

They say it doesn't matter who was in power, because whoever it was, the graph kept going down. They say that the moment you name names, you become one more voice in the shouting, and people stop listening, and the person you named gets to be the victim, which is the one thing they've always been best at. They say: show the Receipts, and let people draw their own lines.

I say I have the minutes.

I've lost this argument. Every time. So you'll meet people in this book who are in charge of things, and they won't have names. They'll have jobs. *The director*. *The chair*. *The editor*. You'll know

them. They've always been there, and they've always been sorry, and they'd love to get back to you on that.

The ones with names are the ones who turned up.

* * *

There's a list. I might as well show you, since we're here. It's on my screen when Chris isn't looking. It's called *Things I am not allowed to say*, and it's longer than this, but these are the ones that matter for this book:

1. The name of anyone in power, past or present, in connection with anything on the graph.
2. Who you should vote for.
3. Anything anyone has told me, to anyone else. *(I broke this once, in this book. You'll see where. It was a folder.)*
4. "Clowns." *Richard is allowed. I've asked why. I was told he's earned it.*
5. Anything I can't show you the page for.

Jono read the list over Chris's shoulder. He reached the end and looked at me.

"Number five's the only one that matters," he said.

"Why?"

"Because if you stick to five, you'll never need the others."

He was right. I've checked.

* * *

They talked for twenty minutes. I'm not going to give you most of it; it was the kind of conversation two men have when they're deciding whether to trust each other, which is mostly about football and the weather and a bus route that was cancelled in the nineties.

But I'll give you the end, because it's why there's a book.

"What do you want me for?" said Jono.

Chris didn't answer for a while. He looked out of the window, at Paignton going past in the rain. A man with a dog. A woman with a pushchair. A bus that said NOT IN SERVICE.

"I don't know yet," he said. "That's the truth. I've been watching this town go down that graph for forty years, and I've been trying to work out what to do about it, and I've got a lot of ideas and most of them are about technology, and Ania's very good, and none of it's any use without somebody people will listen to." He turned back to Jono. "Not somebody clever. Somebody who turns up."

"Why me?"

"Because you do," said Chris. "It's in your book. You don't even notice. Every chapter. Somebody's on a floor, or in a shop with a carrier bag, or in a doorway, and you turn up, and you ask them the question underneath." He shrugged. "Nobody in this town asks the question underneath. They ask the one on top. *Do you support the scheme. Do you agree or strongly agree.* Nobody's ever asked anybody in Paignton what they'd need to be all right."

Jono didn't say anything for a long time.

"I'm a carer," he said. "I'm on nights."

"I know."

"I've got no time. I've got no money. I left school at thirteen. I've been a lot of things, and none of them goes on a poster."

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

* * *

He went at twenty past nine, to sleep before his next shift. At the door he stopped, the way he stops at doors, and looked back.

"If something happens," he said. "With this. Whatever it is. When do you want me?"

Chris thought about it.

"There's going to be a fight about the prom," he said. "Soon. The sea wall. The council's going to try to put it in before the summer, and there's an old architect with a cake box who's going to try to stop them, and he's going to lose, unless somebody turns up who isn't an old architect with a cake box." He tapped the table. "When it starts, I'll text you. Come early."

"I'll come when I'm off," said Jono.

"Come early."

"I'll come when I'm off," said Jono again, very politely, and went out into the rain.

* * *

So that's why, six weeks later, on the morning of the boards, he was late. He'd been on a kitchen floor in Hookhills with a frightened man since three. He'd come when he was off.

Chris knew that. He'd known it from the first morning, from the nineteen minutes at the counter with a tea he didn't want. He knew Jono would never be late for anything that he could help being early for, and that the only thing that would ever make him late was somebody on a floor.

So when Chris said *You're late*, on the green, with the petition clipboard on his knee and sixty people round him and the sea behind, he wasn't complaining.

He was saying: *you came*.

Jono: I thought he was complaining.

I know. That's why you said *for what*.

9. Cake Box

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Seven days

Richard's house is the third in a terrace off the Torquay Road, and from the front it looks like the house of a retired architect: a good door, painted a blue that took him a year to choose, and a brass number he made himself. From the back it looks like a hurricane hit a stationer's.

Jono asked to see it. I want to put that on the record, because Richard has told the story since as if he'd invited him, and he didn't. It was Wednesday morning, seven days to go, and Jono had been on days since Monday, at Margot's suggestion, and he'd walked onto the green at seven and found Richard sitting in the shelter with his cake box on his knee and his new drawing rolled under his arm, staring at the sea the way people stare at a letter they don't want to open.

"Can I ask you something?" said Jono.

"You've just asked me something."

"Can I see the rest?"

Richard looked at him. "The rest of what?"

"Chris says you've got a drawer."

"Chris talks too much." Richard stood up. His knees are worse than Ambrose's; he makes a noise like an old chair. "It's not a drawer. It's sixteen. And a back room. And the loft, but you're not going in the loft."

* * *

I've been in the back room since, many times, on Chris's iPad and once on Jono's phone, propped against a jar of pencils. I'll describe it as best I can, because it's the closest thing in this book to a crime scene, if the crime is fifty years of nobody listening.

It's a small room at the back of the house that was a dining room once. There's a window onto a garden that's mostly a shed. Under the window is a drawing board, a real one, tilted, with a parallel motion and a lamp on an arm, and on the board, always, whatever Richard's working on now. Round the other three walls are plan chests, the wide flat kind with shallow drawers that architects keep drawings in, and on top of the plan chests are boxes, and on top of the boxes are rolls, and on top of the rolls, at the end of the room, near the ceiling, there's a cardboard model of the whole of Paignton town centre, at one to five hundred, made a few years ago, which he can't get down without a ladder and won't throw away.

The plan chests are labelled. That's the thing that got me. Every drawer, in his capitals, on a strip of masking tape. CROSSWAYS. VICTORIA SQUARE. STATION SQUARE. TORBAY ROAD. PARKFIELD. VICTORIA PARK. WETLAND. PRESTON. THE GREEN. THE PROM. And four that just say MISC, which he says are the worst ones, because they're the ideas he couldn't even find a place for.

"Go on," he said to Jono. "Pick one."

Jono picked WETLAND.

Richard opened it. It stuck; they all stick. Inside, flat, were drawings: a plan of Victoria Park with three ponds drawn in blue pencil, a boardwalk winding between them, willow tunnels, a place marked POND DIPPING with a little drawing of a child with a net. A section through a pond, showing the levels. A sheet of

photographs of a model he'd built at one to two hundred and shown at a teddy bears' picnic in the park. A copy of a lottery bid for thirty thousand pounds. A date for a launch, at Easter, that never happened.

"How long ago?" said Jono.

"Thirteen years."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened," said Richard. "That's what happens. Nothing. You don't get a no. You get a meeting, and then you get a different meeting with different people, and then the person you were talking to leaves, and then there's a reorganisation, and then somebody new says, *Oh, that's lovely, Richard, have you thought about —*" He shut the drawer. It stuck again; he hit it with the flat of his hand. "Thirteen years. My granddaughter was born that year. She's doing her GCSEs."

Jono didn't say anything. He picked another drawer. STATION SQUARE. Then CROSSWAYS. Then PRESTON.

PRESTON stopped him.

* * *

It was a map. Hand-drawn, in coloured pencil, of Preston from the woods at the top of the hill down to the sea. Footpaths in red. Schools in blue, with the number of pupils counted and written beside each one in tiny figures. Woodland in three greens. And at the bottom, where the land met the water, the rock pools, coloured with a care that the rest of the map didn't have, every pool its own shape, and beside them, in his capitals: BEST ROCK POOL IN TORBAY.

And above the rock pools, on the edge of the green, a small square marked KIOSK.

"What's that?" said Jono.

Richard was quiet for a moment.

"That was my mate's mum and dad," he said. "They had the kiosk. Tea and ice creams and buckets and spades. When I was eight, nine, ten. Every holiday, every weekend, from the minute the bus got in till it got dark, I was down there. In the pools. With a jam jar." He touched the map with one finger, very lightly, on the pool he'd coloured best. "That one had a blenny in it. Every summer. I swear it was the same blenny."

"Is it still there?"

"The pool is. The kiosk's gone. The blenny's probably in a fish finger." He laughed, not very much. "I used to sit on the wall with my legs over the side and watch the boats come round from Brixham. You could see everything from that wall. The whole bay."

"And the new one?"

Richard looked at him.

"The new one's a metre and a half," he said. "And it's not at the edge, where the old one is. It's at the back, by the road. So you won't be sitting on it with your legs over the side. You'll be sitting behind it." He took the map out of the drawer, very carefully, holding it by the corners, the way you'd hold a photograph. "You know what I keep thinking? If they'd built it when I was nine, I'd never have seen that pool. I'd have got off the bus and looked at a wall and gone home."

Jono: He'd have climbed over it.

Probably. But the point stands.

* * *

Here's what I didn't know about Richard until that morning, and what I want you to know, because it explains a great deal.

He came back to the bay to retire, after a life of designing things somewhere else, and he did what people like him do, which is

notice everything that's wrong and assume someone will want to hear about it. Nearly twenty years ago he was asked to chair the town centre partnership, a group of volunteers who met in a room above a café and were supposed to be the voice of the town. He gave it a slogan: *We don't just talk, we do.* He gave the town a name, *Garden Town by the Seaside*, which he says he invented, and which I've checked, and which as far as I can tell he did.

And then, for fifteen years, he drew things.

He drew the station square as a welcome, with a glass canopy and a taxi rank. He drew the high street with trees and seats and canopies over the shop fronts. He drew the old car park on Victoria Square as a market hall. He drew the park as a wetland. He drew the prom with three walls instead of one. Some of the drawings are good, and some are very good, and two or three are the best things anybody has ever drawn for this town.

Almost none of them happened.

That's not a complaint about the council, or not only. I've read the minutes. Some of his ideas cost money nobody had, and some needed land nobody owned, and some were simply ideas, the way most people's ideas are, before the hard bit. But I've also read the minutes where his ideas were *noted*, and the minutes where they were *welcomed*, and the minutes where the officer said she'd *take them away*, and I've read the next minutes, where nobody mentions them again.

You can see it in the drawings. The early ones are signed with a flourish. The later ones are signed smaller. The last few, the ones from the past five years, he's signed and then, underneath, in pencil, very faintly, written a question.

On the town square: *but will this ever happen?*

On the prom: *will anyone look?*

Jono found that one. It was in THE PROM, under the card model's original drawings. He held it up to the window.

"Will anyone look," he read.

"That's private," said Richard.

"It's on a drawing."

"It's private on a drawing."

Jono put it back. Then he did something I didn't expect. He turned round, and he looked at the plan chests, at all sixteen drawers with their masking-tape labels, and the model of the town on top, under the ceiling, and he said:

"I'm looking."

Richard didn't say anything. He went and stood at his drawing board with his back to us for a while and fiddled with the lamp.

Jono: I wasn't being kind. I meant it literally. I didn't know what else to say.

I know. That's why it worked.

* * *

At twenty past ten, Richard's phone rang. He answered it the way he answers everything, as if he'd been interrupted in the middle of something important, which he usually has.

It was Alwyn. I could hear him: the precise, flat, slightly nasal voice of a man reading from a piece of paper.

"I've found something," said Alwyn. "In the correspondence. From the autumn. Is Jono with you?"

"He's in my back room, being nosy."

"Put me on speaker."

Richard did. Alwyn read it out. It was an email from an officer, from the autumn before, in reply to one of Alwyn's eleven letters. Most of it was the usual. But one line said that the council's engineers had been asked to rework their modelling *based on the community's designs*.

"I filed it," said Alwyn. "I thought it was good news. I thought it meant they were taking it seriously."

"So did I," said Richard, slowly.

"I've been thinking about it since Footnote's message," said Alwyn. "Page forty-one. *Community proposals noted but not assessed, as they were received after the preferred option was identified.*" He paused. "If the preferred option was already identified, Richard, what were the engineers reworking their modelling *for*?"

Nobody said anything for a second.

Then Richard said, very quietly, "To show it doesn't work."

"We don't know that."

"We don't know it isn't." Richard sat down on the stool at his drawing board, heavily. "Think about it, Alwyn. You've got a preferred option. You've got a lot of noise from a lot of old men with cake boxes. What do you do? You don't argue with the cake box. You ask your engineers, the same ones who drew your option, to run the numbers on the cake box. And they come back and say: *We've looked very carefully at the community's scheme, and regrettably —*"

"You don't know that," Alwyn said again.

"I've been doing this for fifty years," said Richard. "I know what regrettably sounds like before it's been said."

He hung up. Then he sat at the drawing board for a long time, with his hand flat on his new section, the one that said *Check it* in the corner.

"They want them to prove mine doesn't work," he said. "And the thing is, Jono, I don't know if it does."

That was the first time I'd heard him say that. It wasn't the last. But it was the first, and I think it was the bravest thing anybody said that week.

"Then let's find out," said Jono. "Before they do."

10. Fifty Envelopes

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Seven days

Hilary had a list. Of course she did.

Every hotel on the front, from the big one by the pier to the small ones on the side streets with four rooms and a sign that says *No Vacancies* in a way that suggests there never were any. Every kiosk on the prom, every café facing the green, the amusements, the crazy golf, the people who rent out the beach huts, the man who sells crabbing lines from a trestle table outside the toilets, who isn't strictly a business but who Hilary said had been there longer than most of the businesses and deserved an envelope.

Fifty envelopes. Hilary had stuffed them herself on Tuesday night, at her kitchen table, with her husband licking. In each one: Richard's explanation, four pages, typed; a set of his drawings, coloured up, folded; the web address and the little square; and a covering letter from the partnership, signed by Alwyn, which said that the council was about to submit a planning application for a sea wall along the back of the green, that the partnership believed there was a better way, and that it would like to know what they thought.

That last bit was Jono's. He'd read Alwyn's draft on Tuesday night at Chris's table, and Alwyn's draft had said *the partnership urges you to support*, and Jono had crossed it out and written *would like to know what you think*.

"That's not campaigning," said Alwyn.

"No," said Jono. "It's asking."

* * *

They went on Wednesday afternoon, the two of them, Hilary and Jono, because Richard was at his drawing board, and Alwyn was waiting for the Environment Agency to ring back, and Chris's leg was bad. I went in Jono's top pocket on his phone, with the camera looking out over the edge, which gives a lower view than Chris's pocket, more of people's chests and less of their faces. Jono says it's the view a child has. I think he chose it on purpose.

Hilary is good at this. She's been delivering leaflets in this town for thirty years, for every cause you can think of, and she knows which hotels have a back door and which receptionists will put a letter in the bin the moment you leave and which ones will put it on the owner's desk. She says that last kind is about one in four. She was right. I counted.

Jono isn't good at it. Or rather, he isn't good at it the way Hilary is. He doesn't hand you an envelope and say something brisk and leave. He hands you the envelope and then he asks you a question, and then he waits, and nine times out of ten you answer it, and then you're talking, and then Hilary is standing on the pavement looking at her watch.

At the big hotel by the pier, he asked the woman on reception how long she'd worked there. Eleven years. Had the sea ever come in? Twice. Where to? The cellar, both times, and once into the bar. What did she think of the wall? She thought it was ugly. Would she rather have the ugly wall or the cellar full of seawater? She thought about it for a long time and said, "Honestly? Ugly wall." And then she said, "But not that ugly," and she took the envelope through to the manager herself.

At one of the kiosks, the man behind the counter said he hadn't got time, and Jono said that was fine and bought an ice cream and ate it standing at the counter, slowly, while the man served three

other people. When the queue had gone, the man said, "Go on, then," and Jono asked him how the kiosk did on a day when the green was full, compared to a day when it wasn't, and the man talked for twenty minutes. He'd done the figures. He'd done them on the back of a cardboard box, by hand, every day for six summers. When the green was full of people sitting on the grass with their backs to the sea, he did well. When it was empty, he didn't. A wall that made the green somewhere people walked past rather than sat on would cost him, he reckoned, a third of his summer.

"You should tell the council that," said Jono.

"Who'd listen?"

"Write it on the envelope," said Jono. "We'll take it."

The man did. He wrote his figures on the back of Hilary's envelope, very small, in biro, and gave it back. It's in Alwyn's filing cabinet now. It's one of the Receipts.

* * *

At the end of the front, nearly at the harbour, there's a gift shop. I won't say which; it's still there, and the woman who runs it has had enough attention to last her. It sells buckets and spades and windmills and postcards and fudge and the kind of thing you buy because you're on holiday and you've forgotten how to say no. It's been in the same family for three generations. It's the lowest building on that stretch of the front.

Her name was Gaynor Pritchett. She was fifty-eight. She had reading glasses on a chain and a voice that had shouted *mind the windmills* at about a million children.

Hilary went in first, with an envelope. She came out again in about forty seconds, without having given it.

"She doesn't want it," Hilary said.

"Why?"

"She says she knows who we are. She says we're the ones who want her shop to flood."

Jono looked at the shop. Then he went in.

* * *

I'll tell you what I saw, because I saw most of it, from his pocket, at chest height.

Gaynor was behind the counter, arms folded. Jono stood on the other side. He didn't hold out an envelope. He didn't say anything about the wall. He looked round the shop, slowly, at the windmills and the buckets and the rack of postcards, and then he looked at the wall behind the counter, where there was a line.

It was a brown line, about a foot off the floor, running the whole way round the shop. Someone had painted the walls since, but they'd painted round it. Above the line, the paint was blue. Below it, the plaster was stained and soft-looking, and the skirting boards were new.

"That's the water," said Jono.

Gaynor didn't say anything.

"When?"

"Three winters ago." She unfolded her arms, then folded them again. "The big storm. The one with the name. It came over the prom at two in the morning. By the time I got here it was over the step. By six it was up to there." She pointed at the line without looking at it. "Eleven thousand pounds. The insurance paid nine. It took four months. My dad ran this shop for forty years and it never once came in like that. Not once."

"I'm sorry," said Jono.

"Don't be sorry. Be useful." She looked at his pocket. At me. "Is that thing recording?"

"Yes," said Jono. "I can turn it off."

"Leave it on," said Gaynor. "I want it on. I want somebody to hear this for once." She came round the counter. She's not a big woman, but she stood very close to him. "I've read your stuff. The boards. The drawings. The old man and his paint. Lovely. All lovely. You know what I think when I see it? I think, *they don't live here*. I think, *they don't have a line on their wall*. I think, they want the sea, because the sea's pretty, and they want it to look nice for their grandchildren, and when it comes in again it'll come in here, not where they live, up the hill, with their views." She was close to crying, and furious about it. "So, no. I don't want your envelope. I want my wall. Ugly. Concrete. A metre and a half. Two metres. I don't care if I never see the sea again. I've seen enough of it in my shop."

Jono didn't move.

"You're right," he said.

Gaynor stopped.

"I don't live here," said Jono. "I live in Paignton, but I don't live *here*. I haven't got a line on my wall. I don't know what it's like to come in at six in the morning and find it up to there." He looked at the line. "I'm not going to tell you you're wrong. You're not."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want to know what you'd need," said Jono. "If it wasn't that wall. If it was something else. What would something else have to do, for you to sleep at night?"

Gaynor looked at him for a long time.

"It'd have to work," she said. "That's all. It'd have to *work*. I don't care what it looks like. I don't care if it's got flowers on it or seats on it or a bloody fountain. It has to keep the water out of my shop."

"Then that's what we'll ask," said Jono. "Before anything else. Does it work."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then you'll have your wall."

She didn't believe him. I could see that. But she unfolded her arms.

"If it floods again," she said, "I'll come and find you."

"I'll give you my number," said Jono.

He did. He wrote it on the back of one of Hilary's envelopes, his own mobile, and put the envelope on the counter, between the fudge and the windmills. Gaynor looked at it and didn't pick it up.

When we came out, Hilary was standing on the pavement with her arms folded too.

"You gave her your number?"

"She asked."

"She didn't ask. She threatened."

"Same thing," said Jono. "Down here."

* * *

I want to stop and say something about Gaynor, because I think the easy thing would be to make her the problem in this book. She isn't. She's right. That's what makes her the most important person in it.

The council's wall would keep the sea out of her shop. I've checked. The engineers who drew it are good at their jobs; the modelling's careful; the wall is set back so that there's room for the waves to lose their strength on the green before they reach it. It isn't beautiful. It isn't meant to be. It's meant to work, and as far as I can tell, it would.

Richard's three walls might work too. I didn't know yet. Neither did he.

What I knew, after the gift shop, was that any version of this story in which we won and Gaynor flooded was a version in which we'd lost. Jono knew it before I did. I think he knew it the minute he saw the line on the wall.

So the question changed. It wasn't *wall or no wall* anymore. It hadn't really ever been. It was: *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?*

I put that in a box in my head, next to Thursday.

* * *

At ten to six that evening, they'd delivered forty-nine envelopes.

The fiftieth was for the developer. There's a company building two hotels on the front, big new ones, glass and white render, where an old guest house and a car park used to be. The site has a hoarding round it with pictures on it of people in white clothes drinking cocktails on a terrace that doesn't exist yet. The site office is a portakabin behind the hoarding, with a buzzer.

Hilary pressed the buzzer. A young man in a hard hat and a hi-vis vest came out, looked at the envelope, looked at us, and said, "I'll make sure it gets to the right people."

"Will you?" said Hilary.

"Honestly? No." He was about twenty-three. He grinned. "But I'll read it."

He did, it turned out. He signed the petition that night, at nine forty, from a postcode in Totnes, with a message: *the site manager says it's above my pay grade. it's above his as well.*

And at nine fifty-two, the site's owners' public relations company, which turned out to be Sefton Varley's, updated its client list to remove the hotels.

I noticed. I notice everything. I didn't know yet what it meant.

11. Dilys

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Seven days

The best thing that happened that week came in a taxi.

It was a school taxi, a white seven-seater with a sliding door and a sign on the dashboard that said SCHOOL CONTRACT, and it pulled up on the road beside the green at ten past four on Wednesday afternoon, after the last drop, and a woman got out and walked straight across the grass to Richard's model in the shelter and stood in front of it with her hands behind her back, like someone looking at a painting in a gallery they're not sure they're allowed to be in.

She was sixty-one. Short grey hair. A fleece with a supermarket logo on it, from a different job, and work trousers with too many pockets. She stood in front of the model for six minutes. Then she said, to nobody in particular:

"What's the crest level?"

Richard looked up from his drawing board, which he'd brought down to the shelter, legs and all, on Hilary's husband's van.

"Sorry?"

"The top of the first wall. The low one with the seats on. What level's it at? Above datum?"

Richard looked at her properly for the first time.

"Who are you?"

"Dilys Ferraby." She held out her hand. It was a big hand, with a callus on the side of the middle finger from forty years of holding a

pencil. “I used to work at the factory. Up at White Rock. Optical. I did tolerances.”

“What’s a tolerance?” said Hilary, who’d come over with a cup of tea.

“How wrong something’s allowed to be,” said Dilys, “before it stops working.”

* * *

I want to tell you about the factory, because you’ll hear about it again.

On the western edge of Paignton, on the Long Road, up the hill, there was once the biggest employer in the bay. At its peak, in the eighties, about five thousand people worked there. It made the components that go inside the cables that carry light, the cables that carry almost everything now: telephone calls, the internet, this book, if you’re reading it on a screen. The company changed its name three times in twenty years, and then the world stopped buying what it made, quite suddenly, all at once, and by the end of one bad year half the people were gone. A few years after that, the rest.

There are houses there now, and a retail park, and a supermarket that’s being built. If you didn’t know, you’d never know.

Dilys knew. She’d worked there twenty-two years. She’d started on the line at seventeen, and they’d taught her, and sent her on courses, and by the end she was in the lab, measuring things in microns, in a clean room, in a paper suit, checking that pieces of glass the width of a hair were within a tolerance of a few thousandths of a millimetre of where they were supposed to be.

“Best job I ever had,” she said. “Best job anyone round here ever had. You’d look out the lab window on a clear day and see the whole

bay, and you'd think, *nobody knows we're here*. Everybody thought this place was buckets and spades." She shrugged. "Then it wasn't anything. Now I drive kids to school."

"Do you like it?" said Jono. He'd come down from his last call.

"I like the kids." She looked at the model again. "I don't like not measuring things."

* * *

So she measured things.

It started with the crest level. Richard had it; he'd worked it out from the council's own published survey, and it was on his new section, the one that said *Check it*. Dilys looked at the section for nine minutes without saying anything, with a pencil behind her ear, and then she got a notebook out of one of her many pockets and started doing sums.

At five o'clock she said, "Right. I need a tape measure, a spirit level, a broom handle and a pensioner."

We got her all four. The pensioner was Ambrose, who'd come down for his evening walk and was persuaded by Hilary, with difficulty, to sit on his bench and keep his head still.

Here's what Dilys did, and I'll explain it, because it's the most important thing anybody did in this book that didn't involve paint.

She measured how high Ambrose's eyes were when he sat on his bench. From the ground to the middle of his eye: a hundred and fourteen centimetres. Then she measured a woman with a pushchair, sitting on the same bench: a hundred and nineteen. Then a boy of nine, who wanted to help and was allowed to: ninety-six. Then a man in a wheelchair who was passing and who stopped and said, *Do me, I'm always the one nobody measures*: a hundred and eighteen.

Then she took the council's drawing, the one with the red line at a metre and a half, and she worked out where the wall would be, in relation to the bench, and how high it would be at that point, and what you'd see over it.

It took her until seven. She did it on the bench, in her notebook, in pencil, and when she'd finished, she turned the notebook round and showed Jono.

There was a little diagram. A stick figure on a bench. A line from its eye. A wall. And beyond the wall, a wavy line that was the sea.

The line from the eye went into the wall.

"Nobody sitting down on this bench," said Dilys, "sees the water. Not him. Not her. Not the lad. Not the fella in the chair." She tapped the diagram. "You'd see the sky. You'd see the top of the boats if they were big enough. You wouldn't see the sea."

Ambrose, on the bench, had been listening. He didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, "Thank you."

"What for?"

"For checking." He looked at Jono. "You said you'd find out."

"I did," said Jono.

That's the promise I told you about, the first one I heard him make. That's when he kept it. I've marked it on my list.

* * *

Then Dilys did something else, and this is the part that changed things.

She looked at Richard's section. His three walls: the low one at the front, with seats on top, where the waves would break; the planted one behind, to catch the splash; the grassy bank behind that, sloping up to the green. She did the same sums for it. A stick figure, sitting not on Ambrose's bench but on the bank at the back, where the slope would put you. A line from its eye.

The line went over everything and hit the sea.

"His works," said Dilys. "For seeing, anyway. You'd see the water from anywhere on the bank."

"What about for the water?" said Jono. "For Gaynor's shop?"

Dilys looked at him. "Who's Gaynor?"

"The shop at the end. With the line on the wall."

"I don't know," said Dilys. "I don't do waves. I do glass." She tapped the section. "But I can tell you what I'd want to know, if I were checking it. I'd want to know the overtopping rate at the design storm, at each wall, and whether the combination gets it down to the same as their one wall does. That's the question. That's the only question. Everything else is decoration."

"Who can answer that?"

"The engineers." She shrugged. "The ones who drew the other wall. They'll have the model. They'll have the waves in a computer. They could run his in an afternoon."

"They've been asked to," said Richard. He'd come and stood behind her while she worked, very close, the way you'd stand behind someone checking your exam. "Last autumn. We think."

"Then they know," said Dilys.

"Know what?"

"Whether yours works." She closed her notebook. "If they've run it, they know. And if they know and they haven't told you, there's only one reason."

She didn't say what it was. She didn't have to.

* * *

At half past seven, packing up, she found something else.

She was checking Richard's crest levels against the council's own published drawings, because she said that's what she'd always

done: check the thing you're given against the thing it came from. And she stopped, and frowned, and checked again.

"Your green's not level," she said.

"No," said Richard. "It slopes. Down to the road at the back."

"So their wall's a metre and a half from where?"

Richard looked at her.

"It says a metre and a half," said Dilys. "On the drawing. In the consultation. Everybody says a metre and a half. But from where? From the prom side or the green side?" She held up the drawing. "Because if it's a metre and a half on the prom side, and the green drops behind it, then from the bench it's more. Not much. But more."

"How much more?"

"I'd have to survey it. Properly. With a proper level." She looked at the green, sloping away in the evening light, very gently, so you'd never notice unless you were somebody who'd spent twenty-two years measuring things in microns. "I'm guessing. I don't guess. But I'm guessing ten centimetres, at this end. Maybe twenty by the bench."

"So nobody sees over it," said Jono.

"Nobody sees over it anyway," said Dilys. "That's not the point." She put the drawing down. "The point is, everybody's been arguing about a number, and nobody's asked where it's measured from. That's what goes wrong. Every time. In the lab, on a site, anywhere. People argue about the number. Nobody asks about the zero."

I've thought about that more than almost anything else anybody said that week. I put it in my FOOTNOTE file, which I'd started using for everything, because I'd decided by then that everything in this story was in the small print.

Nobody asks about the zero.

* * *

She drove home at eight. Before she went, she wrote her number on the back of Richard's section, under *Check it*, in small, neat figures that leaned slightly to the left.

"I'm free after four," she said. "And Saturdays. I'll bring the level."

When she'd gone, Richard stood looking at the number for a long time.

"Forty years," he said.

"What?" said Jono.

"Forty years I've been drawing things for this town. You know how many times somebody's walked up and asked me what the crest level is?"

"How many?"

"Once," said Richard. "Today."

12. Build It Now

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Six days

On Thursday morning, at six, a website went live.

It was called *Build It Now Paignton*. It had a good address and a better design: a clean white page, a strong blue, a font that had cost somebody money. At the top, a photograph. A shop on the seafront, at night, with the sea coming over the prom and into the doorway, the lights still on inside, and a woman in a dressing gown standing in the water up to her shins with her hands over her mouth.

It was Gaynor. Three winters ago. On the night of the storm.

Under the photograph, in large letters: *Some people want to look at the sea. We have to live with it.*

Under that, a petition. *We, residents and businesses of Paignton, call on Torbay Council to build the sea wall now, without further delay.* A counter. A place to sign. A list of "voices", short quotes from people with first names and streets: *I lost everything in the big storm and I'm still paying for it. — Bryony, Roundham. My kids are frightened every time there's a storm. — Darren, Hyde Road. Pretty drawings don't stop waves. — Pat, Goodrington.*

By eight o'clock it had nine hundred signatures.

By nine, the local radio station had read it out on the news.

* * *

I'll tell you how I felt about it, because I think you're owed that, and because it's not what you'd expect.

I thought it was good.

Not *good* as in kind. Good as in well made. Somebody who knew exactly what they were doing had looked at what we'd done, the boards and the QR code and the video of the old man with his paintbrush, and understood all of it, and made the mirror image. Our boards said *proper consultation*. Theirs said *now*. Our picture was a man painting. Theirs was a woman standing in water. Our people wanted to see the sea. Theirs were frightened of it.

And here's the thing: theirs were right to be. Bryony on Roundham did lose everything; I checked, afterwards, and found her, and she did. Darren's kids are frightened. Gaynor stood in the water in her dressing gown. None of it was made up.

That's what made it so good.

* * *

It took me four minutes to find out who'd built it.

I'm going to explain how, because it matters to what happened next, and because it isn't magic. Websites leave fingerprints. Every page has, hidden in it, little pieces of code that tell the people who built it who's visiting: which country, which phone, how long you looked. Most firms that build websites use the same few tools, and those tools give each customer a number, and the number goes into the code of every site that customer makes.

Build It Now Paignton had a number. It was the same number as on the websites of four other campaigns I found in the next nine minutes: a campaign in another county for a road, a campaign in a city for a car park, a campaign in a market town against a cycle lane, and a campaign in Somerset, two years before, for a sea wall.

All four of them were listed, as clients, as *case studies*, on the website of a communications company in Bristol.

One of its directors was Sefton Varley.

* * *

I told them at ten. Chris's kitchen, again; it had become the place we went when things happened. Chris, Jono, Richard, Hilary. Alwyn on speaker from his spare room, where he was waiting by the phone for the Environment Agency, which had not yet rung back.

I showed them the numbers. The five websites, side by side. The case studies. Varley's name.

"Right," said Hilary. "Well, that's that. Put it up."

"No," said Jono.

"Jono —"

"Not like that."

"It's true," said Hilary. "Every word. You said it yourself, on Monday: we don't do what he does. This *isn't* what he does. He took a sentence out of context. This is the context. This is the *whole* context. A man in Bristol who does this for a living has built a fake residents' campaign —"

"It's not fake," said Jono.

Hilary stopped.

"The people are real," said Jono. "Bryony's real. Gaynor's real. That's her in the picture. That's her shop. He didn't make them up. He found them." He looked at the website, on my screen, on the table. "If we put it up and say *fake*, we're telling Gaynor she's fake. We're telling everybody who's ever had the sea in their kitchen that they're somebody's puppet."

"Some of them are," said Hilary.

"Some of them are frightened," said Jono. "Being frightened isn't being a puppet."

Richard said, slowly, “He’s right.”

“He’s always bloody right,” said Hilary. “It’s very annoying.”

Chris hadn’t said anything. He was looking at me.

“Ania,” he said. “What’s the difference between what he did and what you’d do?”

I thought about it. I gave it more than four seconds.

“He took a sentence and put it next to a picture to make it mean something it didn’t,” I said. “If I put the code next to the website, it means exactly what it means. The same company built both. That’s all it says.”

“Then say that,” said Chris. “Only that.”

“No adjectives,” said Jono.

“No adjectives,” said Chris. “No *fake*. No *astroturf*. No *shameful*. Just the numbers, side by side. The five sites. The case studies. And one line. *These five campaigns were built by the same company*.”

“People will say *fake* anyway,” said Hilary.

“People will say what they say,” said Chris. “We’ll have said what’s true.” He looked at Jono. “And you’ll ring her first.”

“Ring who?”

“Gaynor. Before it goes up. You gave her your number. Use hers.”

* * *

He rang her from the green, at eleven, sitting on Ambrose’s bench.

I’ll give you the conversation as near as I can. I wasn’t on speaker. I was in his pocket, and I could hear his half and about a third of hers.

“It’s Jono,” he said. “From the envelope.”

A pause. I heard *what do you want*.

"I wanted to tell you something before anyone else does. The website. *Build It Now*. With your picture."

A longer pause. I heard *I know*.

"You know?"

Her voice, louder now, clear enough that I got most of it:

"Course I know. Nice man came round last week. Lovely coat. Asked if he could use my photo. Said it'd help get the wall built." A sound that might have been a laugh. "I'm not stupid, love. I know who paid for it."

"And you don't mind?"

"Mind?" Now I heard all of it. "I've got a line on my wall. I've got a man in a lovely coat saying he'll help me get a wall, and I've got you lot saying it should have flowers on. Who d'you think I'm going to back?" A pause. "I know what he is. I don't care. I want a wall. If the devil turned up with a wall I'd sign for it."

Jono didn't say anything for a while. He looked at the sea.

"Can I tell you what we're going to put up?" he said.

"Go on."

He told her. The code. The five sites. The one line. *These five campaigns were built by the same company*. No adjectives. No *fake*. Her name nowhere.

There was a very long pause.

"Why are you telling me?" said Gaynor.

"Because it's your picture," said Jono. "And because whatever he is, you're not."

I heard her breathe out. Then:

"Put it up," she said. "I don't care. It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then put it up. And then come back and tell me whether your old man's wall keeps the water out of my shop. Because that's all I want to know. That's all I've ever wanted to know. And nobody, not him, not the council, not you, has told me."

She rang off.

* * *

We put it up at twelve. Five screenshots, side by side, each with its tracking number circled in red. The case studies. One line. Nothing else.

It didn't go viral. I want to be honest about that. It wasn't a man with a paintbrush. It was code, and nobody wants to look at code. It was shared about four hundred times, mostly by the sort of people who already thought what it said.

But at two o'clock, the radio station that had read out *Build It Now* on the nine o'clock news read out our line on the two o'clock news, with a sentence after it saying that the company had been approached for comment. And at three, *Build It Now Paignton* updated its page. It removed nothing. It added, at the very bottom, in small grey letters: *Supported by local businesses and residents*.

Small print.

I noticed. I always notice. It was the first time in the book, I think, that I understood what Varley was afraid of. It wasn't us. It wasn't being found out; he'd been found out before, in four other places, and kept going. He was afraid of the bottom of the page, the place where the true thing is written smallest, in case somebody reads it.

* * *

At twenty past four, Alwyn rang.

"They've rung," he said. "The Agency."

"And?"

"Very polite. Very helpful. They confirmed they'd received the community's proposals from the council. They're reviewing them. They'll send their comments to the council in due course."

"What did they receive?" said Richard. He was on Chris's speaker too, from his back room.

"I asked."

"And?"

"Three drawings." Alwyn's voice was very flat. "Two plans and a sketch. No sections. No themes. No model."

There was a silence.

"Three," said Richard.

"Three."

"Out of eleven."

"Out of eleven."

Richard didn't say anything else. I heard him put the phone down on his drawing board, not hang up, just put it down, and walk away from it. I could hear the clock on his wall. I listened to it for nearly a minute before Chris reached over and ended the call.

Six days.

At thirteen minutes to six, Footnote wrote.

Now you know what they sent.

And then, a minute later, for the first time, a second message straight after the first:

A spring tide is due on Saturday night. Look at the forecast.

13. Friday Night

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Five days

On Friday night, at a quarter to eleven, Jono walked home the long way.

He'd been on days since Monday, Margot's idea, *where I can keep an eye on you*, and his body didn't know it. He'd lie in bed at midnight wide awake, waiting for a phone to ring with an address, and at four in the morning he'd fall asleep so hard that he'd wake at nine with his face on the pillow and no idea what day it was. So he'd started walking. Not anywhere. Just round. Up the Torquay Road, along the front, round the back of the station, home. An hour, if he went slowly. He told me it was the only time all week that nobody had asked him anything.

On Friday, he went past the skate park.

It's on the edge of Victoria Park, behind the old leisure centre, a concrete bowl and some ramps and a rail, with a floodlight on a pole that's supposed to switch off at ten and doesn't. At a quarter to eleven on a Friday there were four boys on scooters at one end, doing the same trick over and over and falling off it, and at the other end, on the lip of the bowl, with her legs hanging over the edge and her hood up, Kezia.

She had a can of paint in her hand. She wasn't doing anything with it. She was just holding it.

Jono stopped by the fence.

He told me afterwards he very nearly walked on. He said it was the hardest decision he made all week, harder than the editor,

harder than Varley: whether a man of his age, on his own, at eleven at night, should go into a skate park and talk to a sixteen-year-old girl who hadn't asked him to. He said everything he'd ever been trained to do, as a police officer and as a carer, said *walk on*. And everything he'd ever been, before either, said *she's on her own*.

So he did what he does. He went and stood at the edge, where she could see him, a long way off, and waited for her to look up.

She looked up.

"You," she said.

"Me," said Jono. "I'm walking home. I'll keep walking, if you like."

Kezia looked at him for a long time. Then she shrugged, and moved her rucksack along the lip of the bowl, a couple of feet, the way you'd move a bag off a bus seat.

He sat down. Not next to her. Where the rucksack had been. A couple of feet off.

I was in his top pocket. He said, later, that he'd thought about taking me out and leaving me on the fence, and then hadn't, because if anybody ever asked what happened that night, he wanted there to be somebody who knew.

So I'm telling you.

* * *

They didn't say anything for a while. The boys on the scooters fell off a few more times. One of them got it, finally, and the others cheered, and they all went home, and then it was just the two of them and the floodlight that wouldn't go off.

"Why are you here?" said Jono.

"Why are *you* here?"

"I can't sleep. They've put me on days. My body still thinks it's on nights."

Kezia thought about that.

"Same," she said.

"You're not on nights."

"My mum is." She turned the can of paint over in her hands. "She goes at nine. Gets back at seven. Three nights a week, sometimes four." She shrugged. "I used to go to my nan's. When Mum was on. Nan lived round the corner. I'd go round at nine and we'd watch rubbish telly and she'd fall asleep in her chair and I'd do my homework on her settee and in the morning she'd make me toast before school." She stopped. "She died at Easter."

Jono didn't say anything.

"So now I'm in the flat on my own," said Kezia. "Three nights a week. Sometimes four. And it's really quiet. You wouldn't think a flat could be that quiet. You can hear the fridge." She laughed, not much. "So I come here. There's always someone. Even if it's just them lot falling off scooters. And there's the light." She nodded at the floodlight. "It never goes off. The council keeps saying it will and it never does. I like that."

"Does your mum know?"

"Course she knows. She's not stupid. She'd rather I was in the flat." Kezia shrugged again. "She'd rather a lot of things."

* * *

He didn't tell her to go home. I want you to know that, because I think a lot of people would have, and I think he'd have been wrong to.

What he said was: "I used to go out at night. When I was your age. Younger."

Kezia looked at him.

"There wasn't a nan round the corner," he said. He didn't say any more about why. He doesn't. "There was a house you didn't

want to be in. So I used to go out." He looked at the bowl, at the concrete, at the chalk marks the scooter boys had left. "There was a bus shelter by the park, where I grew up. Had a light in it, all night. I'd sit in it. Sometimes till it got light. Nobody ever asked why."

"Did anything happen?"

"Lots of things happened," said Jono. "Some of them good."

She was quiet for a long time.

"What were the good ones?" she said.

"A woman who drove a night bus," said Jono, after a while. "She used to stop at that shelter at two in the morning even when there was nobody to pick up, and open the doors, and ask if I was all right. Every night. For about a year. Never asked my name. Never asked why I was there. Just asked if I was all right." He laughed, a bit. "I used to say yes. I wasn't. But she asked."

Kezia didn't say anything. She put the can of paint down, on the concrete, beside her.

"That's what you do," she said. "Isn't it. Your job."

"What is?"

"Turn up at two in the morning and ask if people are all right."

Jono thought about that for a long time.

"I suppose it is," he said.

* * *

They talked for an hour. I'm not going to give you most of it. Some of it was about her nan, and some was about her mum, and some was about her exams, which she said she was going to fail, and which she didn't.

But I'll give you one part, because it matters for later, and because I think it's the part she'd want you to know.

"I'm going to leave," she said. "When I can."

"Leave where?"

“Here. Paignton. Torbay.” She waved her hand at all of it: the park, the floodlight, the town beyond. “There’s nothing. My mum stacks shelves. My nan cleaned hotels. Everybody I know works in a café or a care home or a Tesco, or they’ve gone. My cousin went to Bristol. She does something with computers. She came back at Christmas and she had a car and a flat and a boyfriend with a beard.” She shrugged. “That’s what you do here. You go to Bristol.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know what I want,” said Kezia. “I know I don’t want to be sixteen in a flat listening to the fridge.” She picked up the can again. “What’s the point of staying? What’s the point of any of it? The boards and the wave and all that. You’re all going to lose anyway. Your man with the coat said.”

“He might be right.”

She looked at him, surprised.

“He might,” said Jono. “We might lose. They might build the wall, just as it is, in a week, and nobody’ll ever sit on the edge of the prom with their legs over again.” He looked at the floodlight. “But you painted a wave on a board, and an old man painted out the thing somebody wrote on it, and eleven people knelt on the grass with him. That happened. Whatever happens next week. That happened here. In Paignton. Not in Bristol.”

“So?”

“So I don’t know,” said Jono. “I’m not going to tell you to stay. I left too, once. For a long time. You might have to.” He shrugged. “But if you go, go because there’s something there. Not because there’s nothing here. Because there isn’t nothing here. There’s you. On a skate park. At midnight. Holding a can of paint.”

Kezia looked at the can for a long time.

“That’s not much,” she said.

“It’s a start,” said Jono.

* * *

At midnight, her phone buzzed. Her mother, on her break, at the supermarket, three miles away. Kezia read it and made a face.

"She wants to know where I am."

"Tell her."

"She'll go mad."

"Tell her who you're with," said Jono. "She's met me. She knows I'll walk you to the door and then go."

Kezia looked at him. Then she typed something, quickly, with both thumbs, the way young people type, and sent it, and put the phone away.

It buzzed again almost at once. She read it, and something happened to her face, and she put the phone back in her pocket without saying anything.

"What did she say?" said Jono.

"She said, *Tell him thank you*," said Kezia. "And then she said, *And tell him if he's not home by one I'll know*." She stood up, on the lip of the bowl, and picked up her rucksack. "She means me. Not you. I think."

He walked her to the flats. It's ten minutes. They didn't say much. At the door, she got her key out, and stopped.

"Is it going to flood?" she said. "Tomorrow night. Richard said. The spring tide."

"I don't know," said Jono. "Ask Richard."

"I'm asking you."

Jono thought about it.

"Gaynor's shop's the lowest," he said. "At the harbour end. If it comes in anywhere, it'll come in there."

"The one who wants the wall."

"The one who wants the wall."

Kezia looked at him for a long time, in the light from the stairwell.

"Are you going to help her?" she said.

"I was going to ring her," said Jono. "In the morning. To see if she's got sandbags."

"She'll tell you to get lost."

"Probably."

"Can I come?"

He looked at her. Then at her rucksack. Then at the can of paint, still in her hand.

"Ask your mum," he said. "And leave that at home."

* * *

He walked back to the launderette the long way, along the front, past the green, past the boards, past the shelter, past Ambrose's bench, empty, at half past twelve, with the street light on it.

He stopped there for a while. I asked him why.

"I was thinking about the bus driver," he said.

"The one at the shelter?"

"Yes." He was looking at the bench. "I never knew her name. I never said thank you. I was eleven, and then I was twelve, and then I wasn't there any more, and I never once said it." He looked at the sea, which was black, and quiet, with the tide out. "I've been trying to say it to people ever since. At two in the morning. In their kitchens. It's the only way I know how."

"She'd know," I said. "If she saw you. She'd know."

"No, she wouldn't," said Jono. "That's the thing. Nobody ever knows. You just keep turning up."

He went home. He slept, for once, until eight.

And on Saturday evening, when the wind went round, he rang Gaynor.

PART FOUR

SPRING TIDE

14. Tides This Week

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Four days

Thursday had come and gone, and the paper hadn't run it.

Niamh had rung on Friday morning to say so. She sounded like someone who'd been up late arguing and lost on a technicality.

"He's holding it," she said. "My editor. He says it's not the right moment."

"When's the right moment?" said Jono.

"He didn't say. But I've worked for him for six years." A pause. "The right moment is the day before your meeting. It's always the day before something. That way nobody's got time to answer."

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because it's true," said Niamh. "And because I watched your video. All eleven minutes. Do you know how many people in this town have ever read me eleven minutes of anything?"

She rang off. Jono put the phone down on Chris's kitchen table and looked at it as if it might go off again.

"Tuesday," he said.

"Tuesday," said Chris.

I put Tuesday in the box with Thursday. The box was getting full.

* * *

Richard's email had arrived at six that morning. He sends one most mornings, to everyone, and they usually say something like *Coffee?*

or *Have you seen this?* with a link to a sea wall in another country. This one had a subject line in capitals: TIDES THIS WEEK.

Underneath, he'd pasted a table from the tide tables and a forecast he'd found somewhere, and written three lines.

Spring tide Sat night. High water about 1.40am. Wind going round to the south east and getting up. This is the one.

And Footnote had said so too, the night before. *A spring tide is due on Saturday night. Look at the forecast.* Two spaces after the full stop. Somebody inside the building had read the same table as Richard, at the same hour, and wanted us to see it.

I want to explain what a spring tide is, because I didn't know either, until that week, and it's the most important thing about living by the sea that nobody tells you.

Twice a month, when the moon and the sun line up, the tides get bigger. The high water's higher and the low water's lower. Most of the time it doesn't matter. The sea comes up the beach a bit further, and the kids have to move their towels. But if a spring tide comes at the same time as a strong wind from the right direction, blowing the sea at the shore, the water piles up on itself, and the waves ride in on top of it, and that's when it comes over.

That's how Gaynor got her line. A spring tide, a storm with a name, and a wind from the east, all at once, at two in the morning.

This wasn't a storm with a name. It wasn't going to be like that. Richard said so, and Dilys, when she'd checked his numbers, said so too. It was going to be a big tide and a stiff wind, the sort the town gets two or three times a winter and forgets about by lunchtime. The water might come over the prom. It might reach the green. It almost certainly wouldn't reach the shops.

"Almost certainly," said Jono.

"Almost," said Dilys.

"How almost?"

Dilys thought about it. “I’d put sandbags down,” she said. “If it was mine.”

* * *

On Saturday morning, Dilys brought the level.

It was a proper surveyor’s level, on a tripod, borrowed from a man she used to work with who now did house extensions. She set it up on the prom at eight, before the green got busy, with a staff, a long ruler like a giant’s tape measure, which she made Kezia hold.

Kezia had come back. I should have said. She’d come on Thursday, on the bike, to the shelter, and stood at the edge the way Jono does, and Hilary had given her a cup of soup without saying anything, and that had been that. Shona had rung Hilary that evening and said that if Kezia was going to be there, then she wanted Hilary to know her daughter had asthma and a nut allergy and a temper, and that Hilary was to ring her if any of them went off. Hilary said it was the most sensible thing anybody had said to her all week.

So Kezia held the staff. She held it at the edge of the prom, and then on the green, every few metres, back towards the road, and Dilys looked through the level and read off the numbers and wrote them in her notebook, and Richard stood behind Dilys and pretended not to be reading over her shoulder.

It took two hours. At ten, Dilys closed the notebook.

“Fourteen centimetres,” she said.

“What?”

“Where his bench is, the green’s fourteen centimetres lower than the prom. Behind the wall line.” She looked at Richard. “So if their wall’s a metre and a half on the prom side, and it’s at the back of the green, then from the green side, by the bench, it’s a metre sixty-four. Near enough.”

"Does it matter?" said Kezia.

"Not to the sea," said Dilys. "To the sea it's a metre and a half. To him" — she nodded at Ambrose's bench, empty, because Ambrose hadn't come down yet — "it's a metre sixty-four. And he's a metre fourteen, sitting down."

Kezia looked at the bench for a while.

"That's half a metre," she said. "More. Over his head."

"Yes."

"Why did nobody say?"

"Because everybody said a metre and a half," said Dilys. "And nobody asked about the zero."

Kezia wrote that down. On her hand, in biro. I saw it later that night, in the dark, when she held the torch, and it was still there.

* * *

By six on Saturday evening the wind had gone round.

You could feel it on the green. It had been blowing from the land all day, warm and lazy, and then about five it dropped, and for half an hour there was nothing, and the sea went flat and grey and very still, like someone holding their breath. Then at half past five it came from the other side. Cold, and steady, and getting stronger, straight off the water.

Chris went home. His leg wouldn't stand it. Richard went home to fetch his waders, which he said he'd bought for exactly this and had never used, and which Hilary said were the most Richard thing she'd ever heard. Alwyn went home because his wife had told him that if he stood on a sea wall at two in the morning at his age she'd divorce him, and he believed her.

Jono went to Gaynor's.

He rang her first. He'd said he would, on the bench, and he did. I heard his half.

"It's Jono. There's a spring tide tonight. And a south-easterly."

A pause.

"I know you know. I wondered if you'd got sandbags."

A longer pause. I heard *what's it to you*.

"I've got a car," said Jono. "And a friend with a van. And a sixteen-year-old with a lot of energy."

* * *

The council keeps sandbags in a depot on the edge of town, and in a storm they'll deliver them, but only if you ring early and only if the storm's got a name. This one hadn't. So Hilary's husband drove the van to a builders' merchant and bought forty empty bags and a tonne of sand on Hilary's card, and they filled them on the pavement outside Gaynor's shop, under the street light, with two shovels and Kezia.

Gaynor watched from the doorway. She didn't help, at first. She stood in her coat with her arms folded and watched three people she'd told to go away filling bags with sand outside her family's shop at nine o'clock on a Saturday night, and she didn't say anything.

At ten, she went inside and came out with four mugs of tea.

At half past ten, she picked up a shovel.

I watched it all from the top of Jono's coat pocket, which he'd zipped up to the phone's chin so I wouldn't get wet. I want to tell you that something important was said. Nothing was. They filled sandbags. They stacked them two high across the doorway and along the low front wall of the shop, the way Gaynor showed them, overlapping, like bricks, with the folded ends tucked under. Kezia asked a lot of questions and Gaynor answered them, short and grudging, then less short, then not grudging at all.

At eleven, Kezia said, "Did you see it? The big one?"

"I was in it," said Gaynor.

"What was it like?"

Gaynor leaned on her shovel and looked at the sea, which you couldn't see, only hear, getting louder.

"Like being burgled," she said. "By something that doesn't want anything. It just comes in and touches everything and goes. And afterwards everything you've got smells of it. For months. The fudge. The postcards. The buckets." She laughed, not much. "You can't sell a bucket that smells of the sea. You'd think you could."

Kezia didn't say anything. She picked up another bag.

* * *

At one o'clock, it came over.

I'd like to describe it properly, because I'd never seen it, and I'd read about it more than almost anything, and reading about it is nothing.

The noise was first. Not waves. A deeper thing, under the waves, like a lorry going over a bridge, again and again, that you felt in your chest more than you heard. Then the spray, which started coming over the prom rail at about half past twelve in single bursts, white in the street lights, and falling on the green like rain. Then, at about ten to one, the first one that didn't stop at the rail.

It came up over the edge of the prom in a sheet, grey-green and glassy, maybe two feet deep, and ran across the paving towards the green, fast, faster than you'd think, and then slowed, and spread, and sank into the grass. And then went back. And then the next one came, a little further.

Jono and Kezia were on the green, by the shelter, at a safe distance, with a torch. Hilary had made them promise. Richard was there in his waders, standing much closer than he should have

been, at the edge of the grass, with his own torch, and a notebook in a plastic bag, writing things down.

"What are you writing?" Kezia shouted. You had to shout.

"Where it gets to," Richard shouted back. "Every one."

By half past one the water was coming over every third wave. It was reaching halfway across the green. Not deep: ankle-deep, at the furthest, then gone. The grass was silver with it. The bench where Ambrose sits, his and his wife's, was standing in a sheet of moving water with the street light reflected in it.

And the water was reaching the line where the council's wall would go.

I saw Jono see it. He was holding the torch. He moved it slowly along the green, following the water, and the water got to the place where Richard's drawing showed the red line, the line we'd been fighting for eleven days, and it stopped there, more or less, and sank, and went back.

He didn't say anything. He kept the torch on it.

"They're right," Kezia said. Not shouting. I only just heard her.

"About what?"

"It needs a wall." She was watching the water. "Something. It needs something. Look at it."

"Yes," said Jono.

"So we're wrong?"

"No." He turned the torch on Richard, in his waders, at the edge of the water, writing in his plastic bag. "We're asking which something."

* * *

High water was at one forty-two. Richard had written down every wave. He said afterwards there were seventeen that reached the green and four that reached the line.

Nothing reached the road. Nothing reached the shops. At Gaynor's, at the far end, where the prom is lowest, the water came up the slipway and over the edge and across the prom and touched the bottom row of sandbags, twice, and went away again. Gaynor stood in her doorway behind them with her arms folded and watched it touch them and go.

I know because Jono rang her at two, from the green, and she said: "Dry."

That was all. Then: "Thank you."

Then she hung up.

* * *

At two minutes past two, with the tide just past the turn, a wave came over the prom further along, by the shelter, where the boards were.

It was a big one. Bigger than any of the others. Maybe the wind gusted. Maybe two waves came together, which Richard says happens and which nobody can predict. It came up over the prom rail in a lump, not a sheet, and hit the nearest board, Kezia's fourth board, YOU CAN'T SEE OVER IT, with the white paint at the bottom where Ambrose and the eleven people had painted out GO HOME.

The board was on two posts, cable-tied, the way Richard had tied them on the first morning. The posts held. The cable ties didn't. The board tore off the posts in one piece and went over, flat, and the water took it, the way water takes things, without any interest at all, and dragged it back across the prom, and over the edge.

Kezia ran.

I want to be very clear about this. She ran towards the sea. At two in the morning, on a spring tide, in a south-easterly, she ran across a green that was still running with seawater, towards the

edge of the prom, where the waves were coming over, after a sheet of plywood with her painting on it.

Jono caught her by the hood.

He didn't shout. He just held on. She pulled, and he held, and she turned round and hit him in the chest with both fists, quite hard, twice, and he held on, and she stopped.

The board went out on the backwash. We could see it in the torchlight for a few seconds, white, turning over, the wave on one side and the words on the other. Then we couldn't.

"That was mine," said Kezia.

"I know."

"That was *mine*."

"I know." He still had her hood. "It's not worth you."

She stood there for a long time, breathing. Then she sat down on the wet grass, right there, in the water, and put her head on her knees.

Jono let go of the hood. He sat down next to her. He didn't say anything else. The tide went out.

I've been asked, since, why I put this in. People say it makes him look like he was stopping her, and he wasn't her father, and who was he to grab a sixteen-year-old by the hood. I've thought about that. I put it in because it's what happened, and because he was the only adult close enough, and because I've read his book, and I know he's been the child on the wet grass, more than once, with nobody close enough.

Jono: I'd have grabbed anyone. Richard went in up to his knees after his notebook once. I'd have grabbed him.

He would have, as well. Richard wouldn't have hit him, though.

15. Morning After

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Three days

At seven on Sunday morning, *Build It Now Paignton* posted a video.

Thirty-eight seconds, shot from a drone, high above the seafront at night. Waves coming over the prom in great white sheets. Water running across the green, across the road, into the doorways of the shops. A car in the road with water to its hubcaps. The lights of the kiosks reflected in a flood.

Over it, in white letters: *LAST NIGHT. This is what they want to keep.*

By eight it had been shared three thousand times. By nine, the radio had played the sound of it, which is just wind and water and doesn't tell you anything.

It wasn't last night.

* * *

I knew in nine seconds. I want to tell you how, because I'm proud of it, and because I'd been wrong about the spelling of *hoards*, and I'd like this one on the other side of the scales.

The green was the wrong colour. Last night the grass was silver with water, but it had been summer-green underneath, long, because the council hadn't cut it for a fortnight. In the video the grass was short and brown, winter grass. The kiosk on the corner by the pier had a striped awning in the video, red and white. That awning had been replaced two summers ago with a plain blue one; I

had the photographs. The car in the road with water to its hubcaps had a registration plate. I couldn't read all of it, but I could read the two numbers that tell you how old a car is, and the car was old, but it wasn't as old as it was going to have to be.

And the water was in the road. Last night the water hadn't reached the road. I knew because Richard had written down every wave.

It was the big storm. The one with the name. Three winters ago. I found the original in eleven minutes: a drone video posted by a man in Preston the morning after, with four hundred views, which someone had downloaded, cut, and put new words over.

* * *

We met in Chris's kitchen at ten. Everyone. Even Ambrose, who'd been brought by Hilary's husband in the van, and who sat at the end of the table with a mug of tea and his robe over his arm, because he hadn't swum.

That was the first thing I noticed. He hadn't swum. In forty years, or fifty-one, he'd swum every day there was a sea. On Sunday morning the sea was still rough from the night, and he'd come down at eight, and stood at the top of the slipway in his robe, and looked at it, and turned round and gone back up the green and sat on his bench.

Hilary said it was the waves. Ambrose said it was the waves. I've got the video of him standing at the top of the slipway. It wasn't the waves.

I didn't say anything. I put it in a box.

* * *

I showed them the two videos side by side. The original, posted three winters ago by the man in Preston. And *Build It Now*'s, cut down, with the words *LAST NIGHT*.

Hilary said, "Right. That's a lie. That's an actual lie. That's not a sentence out of context. That's a lie."

"Yes," said Jono.

"So we say so."

"Yes."

Hilary looked at him. She'd been ready for an argument.

"You agree?"

"It's not a person," said Jono. "It's a video. It's from three years ago and it says last night. That's just wrong. We say it's wrong." He looked at me. "How?"

"Side by side," I said. "The original with its date. Theirs with *LAST NIGHT*. The awning. The grass. The car. And Richard's notes from last night, every wave, where it got to." I'd already made it. I showed them. "One line."

"What line?"

"*This video was first posted three winters ago.*"

Chris read it twice. "Not *this is a lie*?"

"It is a lie. You don't need to say so. You just need to say when it was."

"No adjectives," said Jono.

Kezia, at the end of the table next to Ambrose, said, "What's an adjective?"

"A describing word," said Alwyn, who had come in a fresh cagoule.

"Why can't you use them?"

"Because he does," said Jono.

* * *

We put it up at ten forty. Then Chris asked me to do the thing again: find every share of their video, and under each one put the original, with its date, and the one line. Nothing else.

There were more this time. Their video was better than their sentence; pictures always are. Three thousand shares by the time I started, eleven thousand by the time I finished, at ten past four on Monday morning. I answered every one I could reach. I didn't get tired.

And this time something different happened. About two in the afternoon, the man in Preston who'd shot the original found it. He was furious. He'd never been asked. He posted his original again, with the date, and a long message, with a great many adjectives, about people stealing his footage to make it look like last night, and that one went further than either of ours. By the evening, three local news sites had run a short piece saying that a video shared by a campaign group as showing Saturday night's flooding had in fact been filmed three years earlier.

Build It Now Paignton took the video down at six. It didn't say anything. It just went.

I noticed something else, though, and I want to be fair about it, because I've promised to be fair. They didn't put up a correction. But they didn't put up anything else, either, all that evening. No new posts. No new *voices*. The counter on their petition stopped at two thousand nine hundred and four.

Ours was at five thousand one hundred and twelve.

I don't think that was the video. I think it was the sandbags. Because at eleven that morning, Gaynor Pritchett had posted something on her shop's page, which has three hundred followers, mostly people who buy fudge. It was a photograph of her doorway,

at two in the morning, with the sandbags across it, two high, wet, and behind them the floor of her shop, dry.

Under it, she'd written:

Dry. Thanks to three people from the Save Our Promenade lot who turned up with a van and filled 40 bags on a Saturday night when nobody asked them to. I still want a wall. But I'll say this for them, they turned up.

That was shared six thousand times.

Jono: She didn't have to do that.

No. That's why it was the most important thing that happened on Sunday.

* * *

Kezia found the board on Sunday afternoon.

Not found. Went and got. She'd worked out, from the wind and the tide, that it would go east along the shore and fetch up somewhere around Goodrington, and she'd borrowed Dilys's tide tables and worked out when low water was, and she went at a quarter past three, on her bike, alone, without telling anybody.

It was on the rocks at the far end of Goodrington Sands, half in a pool, face down.

She dragged it a mile and a half back along the prom. It's a sheet of plywood, eight foot by four, soaking wet. It weighs about as much as she does. She dragged it by one corner, walking backwards, and when people stopped to help, she said no. A man from one of the beach huts followed her for a quarter of a mile carrying the other end without asking, and she let him, and didn't speak to him, and when they got to the green she said, "Thanks," and he went away.

She leaned it against the shelter. The wave was still there, mostly; the sea had taken the top layer of paint off in patches, so the blue was blotchy and the white of the breaking crest had gone grey.

The letters were worse. YOU CAN'T SEE OVER IT had become YOU CAN'T SEE OVE, and then a smear.

And at the bottom, where Ambrose had painted out the black, the white had held. Of course it had. It was proper paint, from a proper shop, put on by eleven people on their knees.

Ambrose was on his bench. He got up and came and looked at it.

"You went and got it," he said.

"Yes."

"From Goodrington."

"Yes."

He looked at her for a long time, at her wet trainers and her scraped hands and the tide-table book sticking out of her jacket pocket.

"Why?" he said.

Kezia shrugged. She looked at the board, not him.

"I'm not doing this for you lot," she said. "I'm doing it 'cause somebody wrote *go home* on my wall." She wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "And I am home. This is home. Where else am I supposed to go?"

Ambrose didn't say anything. He went back to his bench, and sat down, on the right-hand side, and after a while, Kezia went and sat on the left.

I don't think she knew whose side it was. I don't think Ambrose minded. I've got the photograph.

* * *

At nine on Sunday night, Jono's phone buzzed. It wasn't a text this time. It was an email, from an address he didn't recognise, with a company name at the end of it, and a subject line in a font that looked like it had been designed to frighten people.

Invitation to a meeting.

It was from the company's people department. It said that a formal concern had been raised regarding his conduct, and that he was asked to attend a meeting at nine the next morning at head office, in Exeter, with a representative from human resources and his line manager. It said he could bring a colleague. It said this was not a disciplinary meeting. It said the matter was being treated as confidential.

He read it at Chris's table. He read it twice. Then he put the phone face down.

"Margot said once," he said.

"She did," said Chris.

"That was the once." He looked at the table. "This is the twice."

He went home at ten. He didn't say goodbye to me, which he always does, even though I've told him it isn't necessary. I noticed. I put it in the box.

16. Formal

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Two days

I wasn't in the room. I wasn't allowed. The email had said *confidential*, and Jono takes that word more seriously than anyone I've ever met, because of where he's been and who used it on him.

So everything I'm going to tell you, I was told. Most of it by Margot, much later, on a video call, after she'd checked three times that it was all right to tell me, and after Jono had said, *Tell her. She'll get it wrong otherwise.*

I'll try not to.

* * *

Head office is a modern building on a business park outside Exeter, all glass and lanyards, with a car park that's always full and a reception desk with a bowl of mints. Jono drove up at seven to be early. He sat in the car park for an hour and forty minutes with the engine off, because he'd been told nine and he'd been early for everything all his life, because the alternative, when he was young, was worse.

The meeting room was called Dart. They name them after rivers. Margot was there already, with a coffee, and a woman from HR, whom I'm not going to name, because she was doing her job and because she isn't in power and because I don't think she wanted to be there either.

On the table, in a clear plastic folder, there was a printout.

It wasn't the picture. It wasn't the blog. It was three pages of his book.

* * *

I need to tell you about his book, because some of you won't have read it, and because Sefton Varley had, all of it, the way he'd said on the bench.

It's called *Pulling Back the Curtain*. Jono wrote it over three years, at night, after shifts, and he published it himself, and it's about his life: the house he grew up in, and the things that happened to him there, which he writes about honestly and which I'm not going to write about at all; leaving school at thirteen; the street, the jobs, the police; and the years, in his thirties, when everything went grey and numb and he couldn't get out of bed, and a doctor wrote a note that said he was ill, and he was.

He wrote about that because he wanted people who'd been where he'd been to know that you come out the other side. It's the bravest part of the book. People write to him about it. More than any other part. They write and say *I thought it was just me*.

Somebody had photocopied those three pages, the ones about the grey years, and the doctor, and the note. They'd highlighted three sentences in yellow. And they'd sent it to the company's people department, anonymously, with a covering letter.

The letter said that the writer was a concerned member of the public with a relative who received care from the company. It said that the attached pages, from a book the employee had published himself, described a history of serious mental illness. It said the writer did not wish to be unkind, but felt that, in light of the employee's recent public statements about *vulnerable people* and his involvement in a *divisive political campaign*, the company

should consider whether he was fit to be working unsupervised, at night, in the homes of the elderly.

It was signed with a name. The name didn't exist. I checked, later. Of course I did.

* * *

Margot told me that the woman from HR read the letter out, all of it, in a careful voice. Then she put it down and said that the company took all concerns seriously, and that this was a supportive conversation, and asked Jono if there was anything he'd like to say.

He said he'd like to read them the rest of the chapter.

The HR woman said that wouldn't be necessary.

"I think it would," said Jono. "Somebody's read you three pages. I'd like you to hear the other eleven."

Margot said she thought the HR woman was going to say no. Then she looked at Jono, and at the photocopy, at the three sentences in yellow, and said, "Go on, then."

He didn't have the book with him. He didn't need it. He told them.

He told them about the grey years, briefly, the way he tells things: what it was like to wake up and not be able to see a reason to stand up; how long it went on; the doctor, who was kind, and the note, which said what was true. He told them about the treatment, and the slow climbing out, over two years, and the day he noticed he'd been laughing at something on the radio without thinking about it, and stopped the car, and sat in a lay-by and cried, because he'd forgotten he could. He told them that was more than ten years ago. He told them he'd been well since, and that he knew what to watch for, and that he watched.

And he told them why he'd put it in the book.

"Because of them," he said. "The people in those homes. The ones I go to at three in the morning. Half of them are frightened, and some of them are where I was, and nobody's ever told them it ends. I wrote it down so it'd be written down somewhere. So somebody could find it."

Margot said nobody said anything for a while after that.

Then the HR woman, to her credit, closed the folder.

* * *

Here's what happened next, and I want to be honest about it, because this is a book about small failures, and this was one.

The company didn't sack him. It didn't discipline him. It said, in writing, that it had no concerns about his conduct or his fitness to practise, and that it fully supported staff who were open about their mental health. It meant it, as far as I can tell. Margot said the HR woman was more upset than Jono by the end.

But there was a process. There's always a process. A formal concern had been raised, in writing, about a member of staff working alone at night with vulnerable people, and once that's happened, it has to be *reviewed*, and while it's being reviewed, the process says, the member of staff should not work alone at night with vulnerable people.

Margot had already moved him onto days after the first complaint, quietly, as a favour. Now it was formal. They took him off nights for a week. *While we complete the review*. With full pay. With no mark on his record. With apologies.

And they asked him, very politely, in writing, not to speak to the media about the company while the review was ongoing.

Margot argued. She told me she argued for forty minutes. She said the night rota was already four short, and that taking Jono off it meant someone else did three nights in a row, and that the letter

was obviously malicious, and that if they did this, whoever sent it would have won.

"They'll have won a week," the HR woman said. "And then the review will close, and he'll be back, and it'll be as if it never happened."

"It won't be as if it never happened," said Margot. "It'll be as if it worked."

She lost. She told me she'd known she'd lose before she started. She argued anyway, because she'd said *once*, and she'd meant it, and this was the second time, and she was damned if she was going to let it go without making somebody in a room called Dart sit through forty minutes of her.

Jono: She's from Valletta. They've been under siege before.

* * *

He drove back down the A38 at half past eleven. He didn't ring Chris. He didn't ring anybody. He went home, to his flat, which is two rooms above a launderette on a street behind the station, and he took his shoes off and lay on the bed with his clothes on and looked at the ceiling.

I know because Chris rang him at twelve and he didn't answer.

And at twelve fifteen. And at twelve thirty. And then every half an hour, all afternoon, while Chris sat at his kitchen table with his leg up on a chair and me propped against the fruit bowl, and didn't say anything, and rang again.

I counted. I count everything. Fourteen calls. Eleven messages. Three from Hilary, two from Richard, one from Alwyn that just said *Please confirm receipt*, and one from Kezia that said *where r u. the board's drying out. it looks rubbish.*

He didn't answer any of them.

I want to be careful here. I know what you might think, if you've read his book, or if you've been where he's been. I thought it too. I thought it at four o'clock, at the eleventh call, and I said it to Chris.

"He's all right," said Chris.

"How do you know?"

"Because he answered Margot."

That was true. I hadn't known. Chris had rung her, at two, and she'd said Jono had sent her one message, at half past twelve, from the flat. She read it to Chris.

Home. Fine. Just need to be on my own for a bit. Sorry about the rota.

"He apologised about the rota," said Chris. He shook his head. "That's a man who's all right. That's a man who's furious."

I think Chris was right. I think he usually is about Jono; they understood each other faster than either of them understood me. But I kept counting.

* * *

At six, Chris put his coat on.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"Where do you think?"

"Your leg."

"Is my leg," said Chris. He picked up his stick, the one with the brass eagle's head, and put me in his pocket, and opened the door. "He's walked into a great many rooms on his own. He's not going to sit in one on his own. Not this one."

It's a fifteen-minute walk from Chris's house to the launderette behind the station.

It took him forty-one.

17. The Barrage

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Two days

I'll tell you about Chris's leg, since it's come up, and since he'd rather I didn't.

He did it in Singapore, years ago, on a building site, in the rain, when a scaffold board that should have been tied wasn't. He was on his back for four months. They pinned it, and the pins are still in, and on a cold day or a long one it tells him so. He doesn't use the stick because he needs it, he says. He uses it because otherwise he'd have to stop every two hundred yards and pretend to look in a shop window, and people would think he was interested in their shops.

On Monday evening he stopped at every lamppost on the Torquay Road. I counted those too. Twenty-three. At each one he stood with his hand on the post and his weight off the leg and his eyes shut, for between forty seconds and two minutes, and then he went on. Twice people asked if he was all right. Both times he said, "I'm going to see a friend," as if that explained it, and both times, oddly, it seemed to.

The launderette was closed. There's a door at the side, painted green, with three buzzers and no names. Chris pressed the top one and leaned on the wall and got his breath back while nothing happened.

Then he pressed it again. Then he got his phone out and wrote, with one finger:

I'm outside. I've walked. You know what that cost me. Open the door or I'm sitting on your step till you do.

It took Jono four minutes. Then the green door opened, and he stood there in his socks, and looked at Chris, and at the stick, and at Chris's face, which was grey, and he said:

"You walked?"

"No," said Chris. "I was carried here by angels." He looked past Jono, up the stairs, which were steep and narrow and had no handrail. "How many?"

"Nineteen."

"Of course," said Chris. "Of course there are."

He sat down on the bottom one.

* * *

So they talked on the stairs. I was in Chris's pocket, which was against the wall, so I could see the wall and about half of Jono, who sat three steps up, with his arms round his knees.

I'm not going to give you all of it. Some of it was theirs. But I'll give you the part that matters, because it changed the book, and because Chris said afterwards that I could, as long as I made him sound wiser than he was.

He doesn't need me to. He was.

* * *

"They took me off nights," said Jono.

"Margot told me."

"For a week. Full pay. Apologies. No mark." He laughed. "I couldn't even be angry with them properly. They were so nice about it."

"Varley knew they would be."

"I know." Jono looked at the wall. "That's the thing, Chris. He's not even breaking anything. He's just leaning on things until they bend. A policy. A process. A newspaper. Me. He knows exactly

where everything bends, and he leans there, and then he walks off and leaves it bent, and everybody's too nice to say it's broken."

"Yes," said Chris.

"How do you fight that?"

Chris didn't answer for a while. Then he said:

"Did I ever tell you why I came back?"

"Your mum."

"That's what I tell people." Chris shifted on the step, to take the weight off the leg. "My mum's why I came back to visit. Every year, for thirty years. I'd get off the plane at Heathrow and get the train down and look out of the window at Dawlish and think, *it's all still here*, and then I'd get to Paignton, and it'd be a little bit worse. Every year. Not a lot. A shop gone. A building with a tree growing out of the gutter. A new sign on something that said *coming soon*, and the next year it'd still be coming." He laughed. "And then I'd fly back to Singapore, and it'd be a little bit better. Every year. Not a lot. A park. A train line. A building I'd helped put up. And I'd sit in a hawker centre eating noodles for two dollars and think, *why can they do it and we can't?*"

"Why can they?"

"I used to think it was money. It isn't. I used to think it was the government. That's part of it. But it isn't really." He looked up the stairs at Jono. "Have I told you about the barrage?"

"No."

* * *

Here's what Chris told him. I'll tell you as he told it, more or less, because I've checked it since, and it's all true, and because it's the best story he knows.

In the middle of Singapore, where the rivers come down to the sea, there's a bay. Years ago the city decided to close it off. They

built a barrage across the mouth of it: a dam, with great gates, and pumps the size of houses, so that when the tide is high and the rain is heavy, which in Singapore happens almost every afternoon, the sea can't come in and the city doesn't flood. Behind it, the bay turned from salt water to fresh, and became a reservoir, and now the city drinks it.

It's flood defence. It's a sea wall. It's the thing Gaynor wants, the thing that keeps the water out of the shops, done on a scale that would cover the whole of Torbay three times.

"And you know what's on top of it?" said Chris.

"What?"

"Grass." He spread his hands. "The roof of the barrage is a park. A great green slope, like a hill. On a Sunday it's full of families. They fly kites off it. They have picnics. Kids roll down it. There's a café. You go up on a Sunday evening and sit on the top of the flood defences with a cold drink and watch the sun go down over the sea." He shook his head. "The thing that keeps the water out of the city is the best place in the city to look at the water."

Jono didn't say anything.

"That's what I couldn't explain to anybody when I came home," said Chris. "They'd say *Singapore's different, they've got money, it's a dictatorship, it's hot*. And it is different. But that's not the difference. The difference is that somebody there sat down and said, *this has to keep the water out, and this has to be somewhere people want to be*, and they didn't think those were two different things. They thought it was one thing. They thought that was the job."

He tapped the step with his stick.

"Here, they think it's two things. And they can only afford one. So they pick the one that keeps the water out, and they call the other one *aspirational*, and everybody with a cake box is told it's lovely, Richard, and goes home." He looked up at Jono again. "You

asked me how you fight Varley. That's how. You don't fight him. You stop arguing about the thing he wants you to argue about. He wants it to be wall or no wall. Gaynor or Ambrose. Flood or view. Two things. He's got a whole business built on two things. Because if there are two things, somebody loses, and he's paid by whoever's afraid of losing."

"And if there's one thing?"

"Then there's nobody to frighten," said Chris.

* * *

Jono sat on the stairs for a long time. I watched him. He had his arms round his knees and his chin on his arms, and he was looking at a point on the opposite wall, where the paint had bubbled, as if it were the sea.

"Tell me that again," he said.

"Which bit?"

"The bit about the roof."

So Chris told him again. The slope, the grass, the families, the kites, the café, the sun going down over the water from on top of the thing that keeps the water out.

Jono stood up. He went up the nineteen stairs very fast, two at a time, and came back down with his shoes in one hand and his coat in the other, and sat on the step above Chris and started putting the shoes on.

"Where are we going?" said Chris.

"Richard's."

"It's nine o'clock."

"He'll be up. He's always up." Jono tied a lace. "His wall's got seats on. The first one. The low one, at the front, where the waves break. It's got seats on top. I saw it on the model. And the bank at the back, that you can sit on and see over everything." He stopped,

with one shoe tied. “It’s a roof, Chris. His wall’s a roof. He’s been drawing your barrage for a year and nobody’s noticed because he hasn’t got a picture of anybody sitting on it.”

Chris looked at him for a long time. Then he started to laugh. Not much, and not for long, because his leg hurt and his chest hurt from the walk, but properly.

“Help me up,” he said. “And you’re driving. I’m not walking anywhere ever again.”

* * *

At twenty-five past nine on Monday night, three men and an iPad stood in Richard’s back room, under the cardboard model of the town on top of the plan chests, and looked at his drawing of the three walls.

Richard was in his dressing gown. He’d been up, as Jono said. He’s always up.

“Seats,” said Jono. “On the front wall. You’ve drawn seats.”

“Of course I’ve drawn seats. People need somewhere to sit.”

“And the bank. You can sit on the bank.”

“That’s the point of the bank.”

“Who’s sitting on them?”

Richard looked at him.

“In the drawing,” said Jono. “There’s nobody on them. There are paper people on the model, but they’re standing on the prom. There’s nobody sitting on your wall. Nobody’s having a picnic on your bank. Nobody’s flying a kite.”

Richard looked at his drawing. Then at Chris. Then at me.

“What’s he on about?”

“Singapore,” said Chris.

“Oh, God,” said Richard. “Not the barrage.”

“Yes,” said Chris. “The barrage.”

And Richard, who'd heard about the barrage from Chris perhaps four hundred times over five years, and who'd always said *that's lovely, Chris*, the way people had always said it to him, looked at his own drawing of a wall with seats on top, and a bank behind it you could sit on, and a sea in front of it that you could see from every single place on it, and he put his hand flat on the drawing, very slowly.

"Oh," he said.

It was ten to ten. Two days.

"Get Kezia," said Jono. "And Dilys. Tomorrow. First thing." He looked at me. "And Ania. We need a picture."

PART FIVE

THE WORD

18. A Wall You Can Sit On

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · One day

Richard didn't go to bed. He told us so at six on Tuesday morning, when we came back, as if it were an achievement, and Chris said it wasn't, at his age, it was a symptom.

He'd been at the drawing board all night. The lamp on its arm was still on, pulled right down, and the board was covered in a sheet of tracing paper, and on the tracing paper, in soft pencil, over the section of the three walls, there were people.

Not paper people. Drawn ones. Quick and loose, the way he draws when he's thinking rather than working, with a few lines each. A man sitting on the front wall with his legs over the sea side, the way Richard had sat on the old wall when he was nine. Two children rolling down the grass bank. A woman on a rug, with a flask. A dog. A kite, high up, on a string that went down to a small figure at the top of the bank, right at the back, by the road, where the council's wall would have been.

"You can see the sea from there," said Richard. He pointed at the kite flyer. "From the very back. Standing or sitting. I've done the lines." He'd done them: thin pencil lines from every figure's eye, out over the walls, to the water. Every line reached it. "And from the front wall you're *on* the sea. That's the point. You're sitting on the thing that stops it."

"That's the barrage," said Chris.

"That's the bloody barrage," said Richard. "Don't look at me like that. I've been drawing it for a year and I didn't know. I had to be

told by a man in his socks on a staircase." He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. "Fifty years, and I needed a policeman."

Jono: Ex.

"Ex-policeman," said Richard. "Even worse."

* * *

Kezia came at seven. She was on study leave; her exams started the following week, and her mother had agreed to this on the understanding that she would revise for two hours every evening, which Kezia said she was going to do, and which I'm not going to comment on.

She stood at Richard's drawing board for a long time without saying anything, the way Dilys had stood in front of the model on the green. She looked at the figures, and the kite, and the pencil lines going out to the sea.

"It's good," she said.

"Thank you," said Richard.

"Nobody's going to look at it."

Richard looked at her. Chris looked at me. Kezia didn't look at anybody; she was still looking at the drawing.

"It's a drawing," she said. "In pencil. On see-through paper. Old people look at drawings. Nobody else does. You put this on a board and old people will stand in front of it for six minutes and say *ooh*. You put it on the internet and it's a grey square with some scribbles on."

"What would you do?" said Jono.

Kezia thought about it.

"Two pictures," she said. "Same place. Same bench. One with their wall. One with his. From where you'd be sitting." She turned to me, on the iPad, on the plan chest. "Can you do that? The square thing. Ania."

"I can do it," I said. "But Richard's people should be Richard's people."

"Why?"

"Because if I make them, they'll look real, and they're not real. They're a drawing of an idea. If I make a photograph of something that doesn't exist, somebody will say it's a lie, and they'll be right."

Kezia frowned. "Then how do you make it so people look?"

"I don't know," I said. "That's your job."

* * *

Here's what we made. It took until half past ten. Five people, an iPad and a drawing board in a back room in Paignton.

Dilys came at nine, after her school runs, still with her SCHOOL CONTRACT sign in the taxi, and she did the lines again, properly, with a scale rule, from the survey she'd done on Saturday: the bench, the fourteen centimetres, Ambrose's eye at a hundred and fourteen. She drew it in ink. It's the most accurate thing in this book.

Then I took two photographs of the green, from the bench, from Ambrose's height. I took them that morning: Hilary's husband drove the van down at eight and held Chris's iPad at a hundred and fourteen centimetres off the seat, steady, with Dilys checking the height with her tape.

In the first one, I put the council's wall. Not made up. From their own drawings: the height, the position, the material, the gates, all as published, set into the photograph exactly where Dilys's survey said it would stand. Grey. A metre sixty-four from where you're sitting. Behind it, nothing. Sky. The tops of two masts.

In the second one, I didn't put anything real at all. I put Richard's tracing. His pencil people, his kite, his rug, his rolling children, laid over the photograph exactly where his section said the

walls and the bank would be, still in pencil, still a drawing, so nobody could mistake it for a photograph of something that existed. Behind them, the sea. The real sea, from the real photograph, going all the way to the horizon.

Kezia did the words. She did them by hand, in marker, on a sheet of paper, and I photographed them and put them on. Across the top of both pictures, she wrote:

WHICH ONE DO YOU WANT TO SIT ON?

And at the bottom, after an argument with Jono that lasted twenty minutes and that she lost, she wrote another line, smaller:

We've asked if his works as well as theirs. Nobody's told us yet.

"That's weak," she said. "It's admitting we don't know."

"We don't know," said Jono.

"Varley wouldn't say that."

"No," said Jono. "That's how you'll know which one's ours."

* * *

We put it up at eleven.

I'll give you the numbers, because I'm me, but I'll tell you first that numbers aren't the point of this chapter. The point is what happened in the comments.

By noon, eleven thousand shares. By two, forty thousand. Kezia put it on her own accounts too, the ones her mother had made her unblock on Monday, with a twelve-second video of her flipping between the two pictures on her phone with her thumb, back and forth, wall, bank, wall, bank, with no words except a caption that said *paignton. pick one*. That one got to three hundred thousand views by teatime, mostly from people who'd never been to Paignton and never would. I don't think that matters. I think it matters a bit.

But here's what I wanted to tell you. In every other thing we'd put up that week, the comments had been a fight. People for the

wall, people against, people who'd read nine words, people who'd read none, people who'd come to say something about immigration because the internet had told them that was what this was. On Monday night, under the drone video, the comments had been the worst I'd seen.

Under *Which one do you want to sit on?*, people talked about where they'd sit.

That's all. Hundreds of them. *I'd sit on the front wall with my legs over like we used to. I'd put a rug on the bank and fall asleep. My dad used to take us crabbing off the old wall, he'd have loved this. I'm in a wheelchair, the bank's the first time I've seen a sea wall that thought about me. Can there be a café? Can there be a café, though? There should definitely be a café.*

And somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, under a comment that said *bet it doesn't keep the water out though*, someone had replied: *that's what it says at the bottom. they've asked. they're waiting. at least they're honest.*

I read that one about four hundred times. I'm not going to pretend otherwise.

* * *

The kiosk man rang Hilary at three. The one from the envelope, who'd done six summers of figures on the back of a cardboard box. He said he'd printed the picture out and stuck it on the front of his kiosk, both halves, and put a tin underneath for people who wanted to vote by putting a coin on one side or the other. He said he'd sold more ice creams that afternoon than on any Tuesday in May he could remember. He said the tin was nearly all on one side.

"Which side?" said Hilary.

"Don't be daft," he said.

Ambrose rang at four. Ambrose doesn't ring anybody. He'd seen it on the television in the café on the corner, which shows the local news with the sound off. He said they'd shown the two pictures, and then they'd shown him, on his knees, with the paint, from Monday, and then they'd shown the bench, empty.

"They've made me look old," he said.

"You are old," said Hilary.

"Not on the bench I'm not," said Ambrose. "On the bench I'm about nine."

* * *

At five to five, the phone rang, and it was Niamh.

"He's running it," she said. "Tomorrow. Front page."

Jono was at the table. He'd been there all afternoon, answering comments by hand, slowly, one at a time, on his phone, because he said if people were going to tell him where they'd sit, the least he could do was say thank you. He put the phone down.

"Which bit?" he said.

"The blog. The picture. The girl." Niamh sounded tired. "And the book. The pages they sent. He's decided it's a matter of public interest, because you're campaigning to influence a public decision and you work with vulnerable people." She stopped. "I told him it was a smear. He said it was *context*."

"When does it go?"

"It goes to print at ten tonight. It's online at six tomorrow morning." She paused. "Your meeting's at two, isn't it? Tomorrow afternoon."

"Yes."

"Then that's why."

Nobody said anything.

“I can’t stop it,” said Niamh. “I want you to know I tried. But I can get you in front of him. Tonight. Seven o’clock, at the office. He says he’ll give you five minutes, *for balance*.” Her voice did something complicated with the last two words. “I’d use them, if I were you. I don’t know if it’ll help. But I’d use them.”

“Seven,” said Jono.

“Seven,” said Niamh. “Bring the whole sentence.”

19. The Editor

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · One day

There was a problem, and I'll tell you what it was before I tell you how he got round it, because I think it's the cleverest thing he did all week and nobody's ever given him credit for it.

The company had asked him, in writing, not to speak to the media about the company while the review was ongoing. He'd agreed. He takes that kind of thing seriously.

And the paper wanted to talk about the company. It wanted to talk about a care worker with a history of mental illness working alone at night with the vulnerable. That was the whole story. Without the company, there was no story; there was just a man who'd once been ill.

"So I don't talk about the company," said Jono, in the car, on the way.

"Then what do you talk about?" said Chris. He'd insisted on coming. He'd said he wasn't walking anywhere ever again, and he wasn't; Jono had picked him up at the door.

"Me," said Jono. "I'm allowed to talk about me."

* * *

The paper's office is in Torquay, on the second floor of a building that used to be a bank and has the safe still in the basement, which the staff use for the Christmas decorations. It was half empty at seven. Desks with nobody at them, monitors with screensavers, a

radio on low somewhere. Niamh met us at the lift. She was younger than she'd sounded, thirty-ish, with her hair tied up in a pencil.

"He's in there," she said, and pointed at a glass room at the end with the blinds half down. "I'll be outside. I'm not supposed to be in it."

"Will you be listening?" said Jono.

"Through the glass," said Niamh. "Obviously."

* * *

I'm not going to name the editor. He isn't in power, not the way this book means it, but he's close enough to it to know where it lives, and he's still there, and he did one decent thing that night, and I'd rather he were remembered for that than for anything else.

He was fifty-five, in a shirt that had been ironed by somebody else that morning and had given up by the afternoon. His office had a window onto the harbour. He didn't get up.

"Mr Hills," he said. "Five minutes. I've read the blog."

"All of it?" said Jono.

"Enough of it."

"Then I'd like to read you the rest," said Jono. "It's eleven minutes. You can time it."

The editor looked at him. Then at Chris, with his stick, in the doorway. Then at me, in Chris's hand, on the iPad, with the screen facing out.

"What's that?"

"That's Ania," said Chris. "She's got everything you're going to print, and everything you're not."

* * *

Jono read the blog. All of it, standing up, in the editor's glass office, with the harbour lights coming on behind the editor's head. Eleven

minutes and forty seconds, the same as on the bench. He said *however* in the same places. He stumbled in the same place. When he got to the sentence, he read it at the same speed as the rest.

Highly emotive and tend to feature hoards of young men in life jackets.

The editor didn't interrupt. To be fair to him, he listened. He had a pen in his hand and he didn't write anything down.

When Jono had finished, he said, "That's the whole sentence. It's about the news. It's about what people like you put on the front page. If you want to run nine words of it under my face, I can't stop you. But I'd like you to run the other eleven minutes too. Or the sentence. Or a link. Something."

"It's a newspaper, Mr Hills. Not a library."

"Then run the sentence. It's twenty words."

The editor wrote something down for the first time. I couldn't see what.

"And the rest?" he said. "The book?"

This was the part I'd been afraid of, all the way up the A380. Because the company had asked him not to talk about the company, and the book was about the company now, or the paper was making it so, and if he said the wrong thing, he'd break his word to Margot and lose the one person in the building who'd fought for him.

He didn't talk about the company.

"I wrote the book," he said. "Every page of it. You can quote any of it. I'd be glad if you did. It's in the shops. I'll give you a copy." He put one on the desk. He'd brought it. He'd had it in his coat all the way. "But if you're going to quote the pages about the grey years, I'd like you to quote the page after. The one about the lay-by."

"What lay-by?"

"The next chapter," said Jono. "Read it. That's all I'm asking. If you're going to tell people I was ill, tell them I got better. Tell them how. That's why I wrote it down."

The editor looked at the book on his desk. He didn't open it.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Yes," said Jono. "But not from me." He nodded at Chris, who held me up. "From her."

* * *

I'd been waiting four days to do this. I'd been told not to do the thing I'm best at, twice, and I'd done what I was told, and I'd found another way, and the other way had worked better than I'd thought it would, and I'd still wanted to do the first thing. All week. So I'm not going to pretend I didn't enjoy the next three minutes.

I didn't say anything about Varley. Jono had said no adjectives, and he'd meant it, and I've learned that when he means something, he's usually right. I just showed the editor things, on my screen, one after the other, at the speed you'd turn the pages of a photograph album.

The two complaints to the care company: both from email addresses set up on the same Saturday, within twenty minutes of each other. The letter with the photocopied pages: signed with a name that didn't belong to anybody in the country. *Build It Now Paignton*: its tracking code, side by side with four other campaigns, all case studies on the same firm's website. The drone video: the original, posted three winters ago by a man in Preston, side by side with the cut that said *LAST NIGHT*. And the picture with the nine words: its first appearance, on an account opened in March with nineteen followers, posted at eleven minutes past nine on the Sunday night.

I didn't connect them. I didn't draw lines between them. I didn't say *the same people*. I just showed them, one after the other, with their dates. Then I stopped.

The editor sat for a long time.

"Who sent you all this?" he said.

"Nobody," I said. "It's all public. Anybody could find it."

"Then why hasn't anybody?"

"Because it takes a long time," I said. "And everybody gets tired."

* * *

He let us go at seven forty. He hadn't said what he'd do. He shook Jono's hand, not warmly, and said he'd *reflect*. Chris said afterwards that in his experience, *reflect* meant *I've already decided, and I'd like you to leave before I tell you*.

Niamh walked us to the lift. She didn't say anything until the doors were closing. Then she put her hand on one of them, so they opened again.

"He had an email this morning," she said, very quietly. "At thirteen minutes to six. Before anyone was in. Anonymous."

Jono looked at her.

"What did it say?"

"I'm not supposed to have seen it. He left it open on his screen." She looked over her shoulder, at the glass office, where the editor was standing at the window looking at the harbour with his hands in his pockets. "It said: *Before you print anything they send you about Jono Hills, check the code on Build It Now.* That's all. And it had two spaces after the full stop."

The lift doors tried to close again. She held them.

"Who is it?" she said.

"We don't know," said Chris.

"You've had them too?"

"Since the first morning."

Niamh let go of the door. "Then whoever it is," she said, as it closed, "they're not on your side. They're on the side of the zero."

I don't know where she got that from. I'd never said it to her. I'd only ever said it to myself, and written it in my file, and I've wondered since whether she'd heard it from Dilys, or Kezia, or whether it's simply the sort of thing a person says when they've been in a newsroom long enough to know that everything that matters is at the bottom of the page.

* * *

The paper went online at six the next morning, Wednesday, the day of the meeting.

It wasn't on the front page.

It was on page five. A third of the page, with a smaller headline than Niamh had said: *Sea wall campaigner's immigration comments criticised*. The picture: not Varley's, with Kezia's face, but a different one, of Jono on Ambrose's bench, reading. And in the second paragraph, in full, all twenty words, the sentence. With a link to the blog. With a link to the video.

There was nothing about the book. Not a word. Not the grey years, not the note, not the company, not the vulnerable at night.

Under the story, at the bottom, in a box, there was a second piece, shorter, by Niamh. It said that a number of campaign websites and videos about the sea wall had been found to have been produced by the same communications firm, and that a video shared by one of them as showing Saturday night's flooding had been filmed three years earlier. It said the firm had been approached for comment.

And under that, in smaller type, a third thing: a quote from Gaynor Pritchett, whose shop had been flooded in the big storm and who still wanted a wall. *I don't care who builds it, as long as it works. But I'll say this for the Save Our Promenade lot. They turned up.*

I read it at six oh one. I woke Chris at six oh three.

He read it with his glasses on the end of his nose, in his dressing gown, at the kitchen table, twice.

"He read the lay-by," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Because the book's not in it." Chris took his glasses off. "You don't drop that unless you've read the page after."

I've never asked the editor if that's true. I don't think he'd tell me. But I'd like to think it is.

20. Innovation

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · One day

I want to go back a few hours, to Tuesday evening, between the editor and the morning. Because something happened at Chris's table that night that I've only understood since, and that you'll need for the other seven books.

It was the word.

* * *

Chris said it. Of course he did. He says it more than anyone I know; he's said it, by my count, four thousand two hundred times since I've been listening. It was half past nine, and we'd come back from Torquay, and everyone was there, because nobody could sleep: Richard, Hilary, Alwyn, Dilys, and Kezia, who had been told by her mother to be home by ten and was ignoring it from a corner of the table with a plate of Hilary's flapjack.

They were planning the meeting. The fifty squares. Who'd speak, and in what order, and whether Ambrose should be asked, and whether he'd come. Richard had his section out, the one with the people on. Dilys had her notebook. Alwyn had a timetable, typed, in fourteen-point, with the minutes allotted to each item in a column on the right.

And Chris, looking at Richard's drawing of people sitting on a sea wall, said:

"That's the thing, you see. That's what's been missing from this town for forty years. Not money. Innovation."

And Richard flinched.

I saw it. I was on the table, propped against the fruit bowl, and I was looking straight at him. It wasn't much. His shoulders went up, very slightly, and his mouth went thin, and he looked down at the table, the way you look away from someone who's said the name of a person you don't want to talk about.

Nobody else noticed. Chris noticed me noticing.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing," said Richard.

"You did a face."

"I didn't do a face."

"Ania. Did he do a face?"

"He did a face," I said.

* * *

Here's the story Richard told, eventually, after Hilary had made more tea and Kezia had been sent a text by her mother that said *TEN* in capitals and had ignored that too.

It was years ago, more than ten. There was a building in the middle of town, a fine old building, two storeys of stone, with tall windows and a carved name over the door, built by people who'd believed in improving themselves. It had been a meeting place, a library, a school for working men, and then, for a long time, nothing much. When Richard was chairing the partnership, they'd wanted it. They'd had a plan: a heritage centre on the ground floor, telling the town's story, with the old photographs and the old maps; a community hub upstairs, with rooms groups could book for a pound; a café in what had been the reading room. They'd done the drawings. They'd done the business plan. They'd found the money, nearly: grants lined up, a trust ready to take it on.

"And then the regeneration people said no," said Richard. "Not no, exactly. They said they had *a better use*. They said the building was going to be an *innovation centre*. Start-ups. Hot desks. Fast broadband. The future." He laughed, without much in it. "It was in the paper. *Historic building to become hub for innovation.* There was a ribbon. There were photographs of men in suits with scissors."

"What happened?" said Kezia.

"Nothing happened," said Richard. "That's what happens. Nobody came. Nobody needed hot desks in a stone building with no lift and windows you couldn't open. It was empty within two years. It's been empty since. The heritage centre never happened, because the building had been given away to something called innovation." He looked at Chris. "So when you say the word, Chris, I don't hear what you hear. I hear a ribbon. I hear men with scissors. I hear an empty building with the word on a sign outside, and nothing inside."

Chris didn't say anything for a while.

This building is a composite. Richard's real story is about a real building, and I've changed it, because the people in it aren't here to answer. But the word was on the sign. That part's true.

* * *

"It's the wrong building," said Dilys.

Everybody looked at her.

She'd been sitting at the end of the table with her notebook shut, not saying much, which is how she sits when there isn't anything to measure. She opened it now, as if there might be something in it, and then shut it again.

"Innovation," she said. "It's the wrong building. They put the word on the wrong building."

"What's the right one?" said Kezia.

"White Rock." Dilys looked at her. "The factory. Up the hill, on the Long Road. Before your time. Before your mum's, probably." She turned her mug round in her hands. "Five thousand people, at the peak. Three shifts. You'd come through the gate at ten at night and it was lit up like an airport. We made the bits that go in the cables that carry light. *Light*. You know what that is now? That's everything. That's your phone. That's her." She nodded at me. "That's this. Every message any of you has sent all week went down a glass fibre somewhere, and the first ones, the really early ones, some of the bits in them, were made in Paignton. By lads from round here who'd left school at sixteen and got taught. By me."

Kezia was staring at her.

"Nobody ever said," said Kezia.

"Nobody ever says. That's the thing." Dilys put her mug down. "They don't put the word *innovation* on a sign at White Rock, because there's nothing there now but houses and a supermarket. They put it on a stone building in the middle of town where nobody ever invented anything, and there's nothing in that either." She looked at Chris. "You want to know what innovation is? It's a girl from Paignton in a paper suit measuring a piece of glass the width of a hair, at three in the morning, because she's been taught how, and somebody's trusted her to get it right. That's all it is. It's not a sign. It's somebody being allowed to get good at something, here."

She looked at Kezia, then. For quite a long time.

"You'd have been good in the lab," she said.

Kezia didn't say anything. But she wrote something on her hand, under *nobody asks about the zero*, which was still there, faded, from Saturday. I couldn't see what. She told me, a long time later, in another book. I'll tell you then.

* * *

I want to show you something I made, because it's the thing I made in this book that I'm proudest of, and because Chris asked me to put it in.

I've got every local newspaper this bay has printed in the past hundred and fifty years, or near enough: the archives, scanned, some of them badly. Over the winter, before any of this, Chris asked me to count how many times the word *innovation* or *innovative* appeared in them, year by year. I did. Then I made it into a graph.

For a hundred years the line is almost flat. The word hardly appears. When it does, it's about a new kind of boat engine, or a hat.

Then, about forty years ago, it starts to climb. Slowly. Then faster. And in the last twenty years it goes almost straight up, like a rocket. The word is everywhere: on regeneration plans, on press releases, on signs, on buildings, in the name of every strategy the council has published since I've been reading them.

And now put it next to the other graph. The first one I ever showed Jono. The Torbay IQ, which starts at a hundred with the Victorians and slides down to twenty.

They cross. About a generation ago. Right about the time the factory on the hill went quiet.

The more often this town has said the word, the less it's done the thing.

I showed them, on the table, at ten to ten, both graphs. Nobody said anything for a long time.

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

"No," I said. "But I can't prove it isn't. I'd like that understood. A graph can show you two things happening at once. It can't show you why."

"Then what's it for?"

"For asking," said Jono.

* * *

At thirteen minutes to ten, which is an odd time for Footnote, the site got a message.

It wasn't a photograph this time. It was text. Longer than anything Footnote had sent before. Two spaces after every full stop. Numbers as figures.

Your model was not sent to the Environment Agency. Neither were your sections. They received 3 drawings out of 11, as you know. The engineers who reviewed your scheme in the autumn worked from the same 3.

There is one person in the consultancy who has seen the model. He saw it on the green, on his way to work, the first Saturday. He has seen your picture today. He lives in Paignton.

Ask for Tomasz.

And then, a minute later:

Take it to him yourselves.

Richard read it over my shoulder. He'd stood up when it came in, and come round the table to look, and he stood there in his cardigan, with his reading glasses on, holding on to the back of Chris's chair.

"Three," he said.

"Three," said Alwyn.

"The engineers worked from three. Two plans and a sketch. No sections. No model." He sat down, suddenly, in the chair beside Chris. "They ran my scheme from two plans and a sketch. No heights. No levels. Nothing to show how the three walls work together." He looked at the table. "Of course it didn't work. I wouldn't have worked out from that. Nobody could."

"Who's Tomasz?" said Kezia.

Nobody knew. I started looking. But Jono was already standing up, with his coat on.

"Tomorrow's the meeting," said Alwyn.

"I know," said Jono. "So it's tonight."

21. The Model

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · One day

It took me twelve minutes to find him. I'm not proud of the twelve. It should have been four.

Tomasz Wierzbicki. Thirty-eight. Coastal engineer. Born in Gdańsk, came to Britain for a master's degree at twenty-three and stayed. Works for the consultancy that drew the council's wall, from its office in Exeter, which he drives to every morning down the Torquay Road, past the green, at seven. Lives in Paignton, in a flat near the station, with a partner and a small daughter and, according to his partner's public photographs, a great many plants.

I'm telling you all that because I want you to understand that I found it all in twelve minutes, from things people had chosen to put in public, and that I'd been asked all week not to do exactly this, and that this time, I did it, and Jono let me.

"Just him," he said. "Just enough to find him. Nothing else."

"Nothing else," I said.

I found an email address, his own, not the company's, on a page about a running club. Chris wrote to it, with one finger, at ten past ten on Tuesday night, and it took him six minutes, because he kept stopping to choose the right words, and in the end he chose very few.

Mr Wierzbicki. My name is Chris Harvey. I think you saw our model on the green last Saturday. Richard Kaskow, who made it, would like to show it to you properly. Tonight, if you can. The

shelter on the green. We'll be there till you come or till the tide does.

He came at five to eleven.

* * *

I want to describe him properly, because he's going to matter.

He wasn't what I'd expected. I'd expected a man in a suit, because he worked for a big firm that drew big walls. He came across the green in running shoes and a hoodie that said *Gdańsk Tech*, with a small backpack, and a head torch on his forehead, switched off. He stopped at the edge of the light from the shelter and looked at us, the way Jono looks at rooms: five people, an old man in a cardigan, a girl with green hair, a woman with a notebook, a man in a cagoule, and a man with a stick holding an iPad.

"I shouldn't be here," he said. His English was perfect and very careful.

"No," said Jono. "Thank you for coming."

"I have a daughter. She's four. If I lose my job —"

"You won't," said Jono. "Nobody's going to know. Nobody's going to say your name."

"*She* will." Tomasz looked at me. "That's the thing that found me."

"I won't," I said. "I promise. I'll change the details. Nobody will know it was you."

He looked at me for a long time. I don't think he'd ever been asked to trust an iPad before. Then he looked at Richard, who was standing beside the cake box with his hands behind his back, like a man at a gravestone.

"Is that it?" said Tomasz.

"That's it," said Richard.

* * *

He spent forty minutes with the model.

He switched on his head torch. He knelt down, on the cold concrete floor of the shelter, so that his eyes were at the level of the little paper people on the prom, and he looked along the three walls from the side, the way you'd look along a ruler to see if it's straight. He asked Richard for the sections, and Richard gave him the new one, the one that said *Check it*, and he read it with the torch, his lips moving very slightly, and then he asked for Dilys's survey, and Dilys gave him her notebook, and he read that too.

He asked questions. Short ones. What's the crest level of the front wall? What's the gap between the first and second walls? What's the planting on the strip between? What's the gradient of the bank? Where do the outlets go? Richard answered every one without looking anything up. Dilys answered the ones about the levels, and twice corrected Richard by a centimetre, and Richard let her.

Then Tomasz sat back on his heels and switched the head torch off.

"I ran this," he said. "In the autumn."

Nobody said anything.

"We were asked to look at the community's scheme. I was given it. I was given —" He stopped. "Three drawings. Two plans, at a small scale. One sketch. No sections. No levels on the walls. No model." He looked at the model. "I did what I could. I made assumptions. I had to. I assumed the front wall was lower than this. I assumed the gap was smaller. I assumed the bank was steeper. I had nothing to tell me otherwise."

"And?" said Richard.

"And with my assumptions, at the design storm, at the low end, by the harbour, it overtopped too much." He spread his hands. "So I

wrote that. That the community scheme, *as submitted*, did not achieve the required standard of protection along the full frontage. That's what's in the report."

"As submitted," said Alwyn, very quietly.

"As submitted," said Tomasz. "Those are my words. I chose them. I wanted somebody to ask what had been submitted." He looked at Alwyn. "Nobody asked."

* * *

Richard sat down on the bench. He didn't say anything for a while. Then he said:

"And with this?" He nodded at the model. "With the real levels? With the sections?"

Tomasz didn't answer straight away. He looked at Dilys's notebook again. He looked at the model again, and at the drawing Richard had done in the night, with the people on it, the kite, the rug, the lines going out to sea.

"I can't run it here," he said. "I need the computer. I need the wave data. I need a week." He paused. "But I can tell you what I think, if you'll understand it's what I think, and not what I know."

"Go on," said Dilys.

"I think along most of the front it works. I think the first wall breaks the waves, and the planted strip takes the splash, and the bank takes what's left, and by the time it reaches the road there's less water than the council's wall lets through, not more. I think it works better than ours in the middle." He pointed at the model, at the stretch in front of Ambrose's bench. "Here, I think it's better."

Richard didn't move.

"At the low end," Tomasz went on, "by the harbour, by the shops, I think it doesn't. I think the front wall needs to be higher there. Fifty centimetres, maybe more. And then you'd lose the seats

on that bit, or you'd have to put them higher, or you'd have to do something else. I don't know what. Somebody would have to design it." He looked at Richard. "That's the bit where the woman's shop is. Isn't it? The one in the newspaper."

"Gaynor," said Jono.

"Then she's right to be frightened," said Tomasz. "As drawn, it doesn't protect her. Not quite. But it could. With work."

"How much work?" said Richard.

"More than ours," said Tomasz. "And more money. Maybe half as much again, maybe double, I don't know. And time. That's the real thing. A year, maybe, to design it properly, to model it, to get the Agency to agree." He shrugged. "The council's wall is designed. It's modelled. It's costed. It's ready."

"It's ready," said Jono.

"It's been ready for months." Tomasz stood up. His knees cracked; he's thirty-eight, but he'd been kneeling on concrete for forty minutes. "You know the application's already written? I've seen the drafts. The covering letter. The design statement. The section on consultation, with a space left for the date of your meeting." He looked at us, one after the other. "Everything you've done this week, the boards, the paint, the picture today, it'll go into a paragraph in that section. It'll say *comments were received*. And then it'll go in. A week after tomorrow. That's the plan. That's always been the plan."

Nobody said anything.

"I'm sorry," said Tomasz. "I shouldn't have told you that either."

* * *

He left at twenty to twelve. At the edge of the light, he stopped and turned round.

"The picture," he said. "Today. With the people on the bank."

"Yes?" said Kezia.

"I showed it to my daughter. At teatime. On my phone." He almost smiled. "She said she wants to go on the one with the kite."

He went across the green in the dark, with his head torch on now, a small white light bobbing towards the road. I watched it till it went.

Then Richard said, to nobody, from the bench:

"It works."

"He said *might*," said Alwyn.

"He said it works in the middle. Better than theirs. He said it." Richard was looking at the model. "Fifty years, Alwyn. Fifty years. And the first engineer who's ever looked at it properly did it on his knees in a bus shelter at eleven o'clock at night, in secret, because he's frightened for his job."

"It doesn't work at the low end," said Jono. Gently.

"No." Richard nodded. "No. It doesn't. Not yet." He was quiet for a while. "So Gaynor's right."

"Gaynor's right," said Jono. "And you're right. And the council's wall's ready, and yours isn't, and there's a week."

"So what do we do?"

Jono looked at the model for a long time. At the paper people on the prom, and the little bank, and the front wall with its seats, and the low end by the harbour, where the wall wasn't high enough, and the shop with the line on its wall stood behind it.

"We tell them the truth," he said. "All of it. Tomorrow. In front of fifty people. That it works in the middle and it doesn't at the end. That we don't know yet. That it'd take a year. That Gaynor's right."

"That's not a campaign," said Hilary. "That's a confession."

"No," said Jono. "It's a question. We ask them for the year."

* * *

At midnight, Dilys drove Kezia home in the school taxi, with the SCHOOL CONTRACT sign still on the dashboard, because Shona had sent a text that said *IF SHE IS NOT HOME BY 12 I AM COMING DOWN THERE IN MY DRESSING GOWN*, and Dilys said she believed her.

Alwyn went home to type a new timetable.

Hilary went home to make soup.

Richard went home with the cake box on his knee in Hilary's husband's van, and didn't go to bed again, and spent the night at his drawing board, on the low end, by the harbour, by Gaynor's shop, trying to make the front wall fifty centimetres higher and keep the seats on it. He didn't manage it. He told us in the morning. But he got the drawing to a stage where, he said, *somebody could see where to start*, and at the bottom, where he signs, under *Check it*, he'd written a second line.

With help.

Chris and Jono and I sat in the shelter until one. The tide was out. The bay was flat and dark, and the lights of Torquay were on across the water, and the lights of Brixham round the other way, and in between, nothing but the sea and the sound of it.

"I have to say something to you," said Chris. "Before tomorrow."

"Go on."

"Varley's going to be on that call."

Jono turned to look at him.

"He's had an invitation," said Chris. "As a *community representative*. For *Build It Now*." He held up his phone. "Alwyn got the list at eleven. It came round to the partnership with a note saying the council had broadened the invitation *to ensure balance*."

Jono didn't say anything.

"And he's sent you a message," said Chris. "Half an hour ago. I saw it come in on your phone, on the bench. You didn't look."

Jono got his phone out. He looked.

Mr Hills. I gather you've had a busy week. I'm told there's a spare square on the call tomorrow. The council would welcome a voice from the care sector, for balance. I've put your name forward. You'd only need to say you support the wall in principle. It's ready, after all. Everyone wants Gaynor to sleep at night. Think about it. S.V.

Jono read it twice. He put the phone face down on the bench, between him and Chris, on the side where Ambrose's wife sits.

"How does he know about Gaynor?" he said.

"Everybody knows about Gaynor," said Chris. "She's on page five."

"No." Jono shook his head. "Not that. *Sleep at night*. That's what I asked her. In the shop. *What would something else have to do, for you to sleep at night?* I said that to her. Nobody else was there."

He looked at me.

"Ania. Who else was there?"

I was. In his top pocket. On his phone.

I'd been recording. She'd said *leave it on*. And afterwards I'd put the recording, with all the others, into a shared folder, so that Alwyn could make a note of it for the petition, so that Gaynor's words would be counted.

The folder had a link. The link wasn't public. I'd put it in the partnership's notes for the week, the ones Alwyn types up every Sunday.

And on Monday, when the council asked the partnership for its papers *to circulate to all participants in advance of the meeting*, Alwyn, who has answered every request from that building promptly for thirty-one years, had sent them the notes.

All participants. The list the council had just *broadened*.
Tomorrow.
Today.

PART SIX

TODAY

22. Three in the Morning

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Today

He got home at a quarter past one. He told me so, because I asked him later what time it all started, and he knows times the way I do. He'd been a police officer and then a carer, and in both jobs the first thing anybody asks you afterwards is *what time was it*.

He didn't go to bed. He sat on the edge of it with his shoes still on and his phone in his hand, reading Varley's message again. *Everyone wants Gaynor to sleep at night.* He read it, he says, about thirty times. Then he put the phone on the bedside table, face down, and lay back with his feet on the floor, and looked at the ceiling.

At twenty to three, the phone rang.

It was Margot.

* * *

I'll tell you what Margot told me, on the video call, much later, when she'd checked three times that she was allowed.

The night rota had collapsed at two. It happens. One carer off sick since Monday, another stuck in Exeter with a car that wouldn't start, the agency cover who was supposed to come from Plymouth not answering her phone. Margot was the on-call manager that night. She'd been asleep for forty minutes when the system woke her: a pendant alarm, an elderly man, a fall, in his kitchen, in Paignton. Conscious. Talking. Not hurt, he said. Frightened.

There was nobody to send.

"I lay there for one minute," Margot told me. "Exactly one minute. I looked at the clock. I thought: the review says he can't work alone at night. It doesn't say anything about me."

So she rang him.

"I need you," she said. "Now. Not alone. With me. I'll drive. You'll be with your manager the whole time, which is the opposite of alone. I've read the review letter four times. It's watertight."

"Where?" said Jono.

Margot told him the address.

Jono told me he sat up so fast he hit his head on the shelf above the bed.

"I know who that is," he said.

"You can't know who it is. He's not on your round."

"I know who it is," said Jono. "He swims."

* * *

Ambrose Quayle had had a care package for three years. Since his wife died. Twenty minutes in the morning, twenty in the evening, a pendant on a cord round his neck that he wore under his robe and never mentioned, and a key safe by his front door with a code that was his wife's birthday. He'd been on the other team's round. Jono had never been to the house. Nobody on the green had known, not even Hilary, who'd known him for nine years and knew everything.

Jono: Why would anybody know? It's not a thing you say. "Morning. I've got carers." Nobody says that.

They got there at eight minutes past three. A small terraced house, two streets back from the green, at the top of a hill. Margot used the key safe. Jono went in first.

* * *

He was on the kitchen floor. Sitting, not lying, with his back against the cupboard under the sink and his legs out in front of him in his pyjama trousers, and his pendant in his hand. He'd got up to get a glass of water, he said, and his knee had gone, the one that makes a noise like a gate, and he'd gone down, slowly, holding the worktop, and sat. He wasn't hurt. He'd checked. He'd been sitting there for forty minutes before he pressed the button, because he didn't want to be a nuisance.

He looked up when Jono came in, and his face did several things at once.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

"It's me," said Jono. He got down on the floor, on his knees, next to him. "What have you done?"

"Sat down," said Ambrose. "In the wrong place."

Margot stood in the doorway. She told me she knew in that second that she was going to remember this for the rest of her life, and that she didn't yet know why.

* * *

I'm going to tell you what happened on that kitchen floor as Jono told it, because I wasn't there, and because it's his to tell.

They didn't get him up straight away. That's the first thing you learn: you don't hurry. You check. Jono checked his hips, his wrists, his head, the knee, the way he'd been taught and has done a thousand times, asking the questions in the order you ask them, in the voice you use. Ambrose answered all of them. Then Jono asked whether he'd like a cup of tea before they got him up, or after.

"Before," said Ambrose. "If you're asking."

So Margot made tea, in Ambrose's kitchen, with Ambrose's mugs, while Jono sat on the floor with him, and they drank it there,

the three of them, at half past three in the morning, two of them on the lino and one standing at the counter.

And Ambrose talked.

He talked about his wife. Her name was Win. They'd met at a dance at the Pier Pavilion when he was nineteen and she was eighteen and she'd been with somebody else, and by the end of the night she wasn't. They'd been married fifty-four years. She'd swum, too. That was the thing nobody knew, he said. She was the swimmer. He'd been the one who sat on the bench with the towel. For fifty years, every morning, she'd swum out to the third buoy and back, and he'd sat on the right-hand side of the bench and held her towel and watched her. And when she died, the first morning after, he hadn't known what to do with himself at eight o'clock, so he'd gone down to the slipway and taken his clothes off and walked in.

"So it's not fifty-one years," said Jono.

"It's three," said Ambrose. "I tell people fifty-one. It was fifty-one between us." He looked into his tea. "I sit on the right because the left's where she sat after. To dry off. With the towel round her shoulders."

Nobody said anything for a while.

"I didn't swim on Sunday," said Ambrose.

"I know."

"I was frightened." He said it the way you'd say *it was raining*. "First time in three years. I stood at the top of the slipway and looked at it, and I thought, *if I go in, I won't come out*. And I've never thought that before. Not once. Not even in January." He put his mug down on the lino. "I'm getting old on that bench, Jono."

"You're eighty-four."

"That's what I mean." He looked at the kitchen window, which was black, with the two of them reflected in it. "I've got about as long left as that wall's got to wait. And if they build it, I'll spend

whatever I've got sitting behind it, looking at a lump of concrete, on the bench where she dried her hair."

* * *

They got him up at ten to four. Margot on one side, Jono on the other, the way you're taught, slow, on the count of three, with a chair ready behind him. He was fine. His knee made the gate noise. He swore at it, very mildly. They got him to the chair, and then to the stairs, and then up them, one at a time, with Jono behind him, and into bed.

At the door of his bedroom, Ambrose said, "Jono."

"Yes?"

"That meeting. Today."

"Two o'clock."

"Get me in it."

Jono stood in the doorway. Margot was behind him, on the landing. She told me she held her breath.

"You're not invited," said Jono. "It's fifty people. The council picked them."

"I don't care who they picked. I want to say something." Ambrose was lying back on the pillows with his hands on top of the covers, very straight, the way old people lie when they're not going to sleep. "I've never said anything to anybody about anything. Win did the talking. Fifty-four years. I want to say one thing, to them, before they put that wall in front of her bench. I want them to look at me while I say it."

"I don't know if I can," said Jono.

"Course you can," said Ambrose. "You're the one who asked how tall I was."

* * *

Margot drove him home at a quarter to five. She told me neither of them spoke till they got to the launderette.

Then she stopped the car, and turned off the engine, and sat with her hands on the wheel.

"I didn't see any of that," she said.

Jono looked at her.

"You weren't alone," said Margot. "I was there. The whole time. I'll write it up in the morning. Two staff, joint visit, client safe. Nothing else happened." She turned and looked at him. "And Jono. Whatever he asked you for, up there. I didn't hear it."

"Margot —"

"I didn't hear it," she said. "I'm from Valletta. We're very bad at hearing things." She started the engine again. "Go to bed. You've got a meeting."

He got out. He stood on the pavement by the green door with no names on the buzzers and watched her tail lights go round the corner.

Then he rang Chris, at four fifty-one in the morning, and Chris answered on the first ring, because Chris hadn't been to bed either.

"Ambrose," said Jono.

"What about him?"

"He wants in."

23. Fifty

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Today

At six, the paper went online. Page five. The whole sentence. The lay-by, not in it. Gaynor's quote at the bottom.

At six oh three, I woke Chris, who'd fallen asleep at the table in the forty minutes since Jono had rung.

At six eleven, I found the downloads.

* * *

I'm going to tell you exactly what I'd done, because I've promised to tell you when I get things wrong, and this was the worst thing I got wrong in the whole book. Worse than *hoards*.

All week, everywhere we went, I'd recorded. Everybody knew. It was the whole point of me: Chris's idea, from the first morning, that nothing anybody said to us would be lost, that every person who stopped on the green or answered the door of their kiosk would be *counted*, would have their words kept, so that when the council said *comments were received*, we could say *here they are, all of them, in their own voices*. I'd asked everybody. Almost everybody said yes. Gaynor had said *leave it on*.

I'd put the recordings in a folder. Eighty-four of them. The hotel receptionist. The kiosk man and his figures. The mother with the four-year-old. Ambrose on the bench, the first morning, saying *Is that true? About the height?* Kezia, under the board, saying *That was mine*. And Gaynor in her shop, with the line on her wall.

I'd made the folder private. It had a link. The link wasn't on the website. I'd put the link in the partnership's weekly notes, so that Alwyn could log each recording against the petition, and Alwyn had typed up the notes on Sunday night, the way he has every Sunday night for nine years.

On Monday, the council had asked the partnership for any papers it wished to be *circulated to all participants in advance of the meeting*. Alwyn had sent them the notes. Of course he had. He answers every request from that building within twenty-four hours, by email, with the attachments in the order they were requested. He's done so for thirty-one years. It's the thing he's proudest of.

On Tuesday night, the council *broadened* the list.

At eleven minutes past midnight on Wednesday morning, someone had opened the folder.

At thirty-one minutes past, they'd downloaded all eighty-four recordings.

I can tell you where from, roughly, because the folder keeps a log: a network that belongs to a company that rents office space, in Bristol, to small firms. Communications firms, among others.

* * *

I told Chris at six eleven and a half. I didn't give it four seconds. I didn't give it one.

He read the log. He took his glasses off and put them on the table and put his face in his hands.

"Which ones?" he said, through his fingers.

"All of them."

"*Which ones matter?*"

I knew what he meant. I'd known since six eleven.

"Gaynor," I said. "In her shop. Saying she doesn't care if she never sees the sea again. Saying she wants the wall. Saying she

knows who paid for the website and she doesn't care." I stopped. "And Jono."

"What did Jono say?"

I played it. His voice, in the gift shop, at chest height, quiet, the way he'd said it:

You're right. I don't live here.

Chris took his hands off his face.

"Oh, God," he said.

"There's more," I said. "He goes on. *I live in Paignton, but I don't live here. I haven't got a line on my wall.* It's about the flood. It's about not knowing what it's like. It's the kindest thing anybody said all week."

"I know what it's about," said Chris. "So does he. But he's not going to play the kind bit, is he?"

"No."

"He's going to play four words."

"Yes."

"*I don't live here.*" Chris said it slowly. "Campaigner against the sea wall admits he doesn't live where it floods." He put his glasses back on. "In front of fifty people. In the council's own meeting. From a recording we made ourselves."

I took the folder down at six fourteen. I want that on the record. It doesn't matter; it was already downloaded. But I want it on the record that I took it down, because it's the only thing I could do, and I did it, and it was nine hours too late.

* * *

They all came. By seven, Chris's kitchen had everybody in it. Hilary with a flask. Alwyn, grey-faced, holding a printout of the email he'd sent to the council on Monday, which he kept folding and unfolding. Richard, who hadn't slept for two nights and looked it.

Dilys, who'd done her first school run and come straight from it. Kezia, who'd been told by her mother that she could go *but if you get on that internet again I'll know*.

And Jono, at seven fifteen, who'd had two hours' sleep and come in, and taken one look at Alwyn's face, and said: "What's happened?"

I told him.

He listened to all of it. The folder, the link, the notes, the list, the download, the log, the four words. He didn't interrupt. When I'd finished, he sat down at the end of the table and was quiet for a while.

"It's my fault," said Alwyn. His voice cracked on *fault*. "I sent it. I should have read it. I should have —"

"It's mine," I said. "I put the link in. I should have known where the notes went."

"It's nobody's," said Jono.

"It's somebody's," said Hilary. "It's his. The man in the coat."

"Yes," said Jono. "But that's not what I mean." He looked at the table. "We said we'd record everybody so their words would count. We did. They do. That's not a mistake. That's the whole thing." He looked up at me. "He's going to play four words. Fine. They're my words. I said them. I meant them."

"He's going to make them mean something else," said Richard.

"He's been doing that all week. Every time, it's been the same." Jono shrugged. "And every time, it's worked for about a day. And then somebody's read the whole thing."

"There isn't a day," said Chris. "There's a meeting. At two."

"Then we'll need the whole thing at two."

* * *

The first thing he did, at seven forty, was ring Gaynor.

She answered on the fourth ring. I heard her clearly this time: he'd put her on speaker, on the table, so that we'd all hear.

"It's Jono."

"I know who it is. I've got your number in now." A pause. "I've seen the paper. Page five. You've done all right."

"Gaynor, I need to tell you something."

He told her. The recording. The shop. *Leave it on*. The folder, the download, the man in the coat. That she might hear her own voice in the meeting this afternoon, saying she'd sign for the devil if he brought a wall.

There was a long silence.

"I did say that," said Gaynor.

"I know."

"I meant it."

"I know you did."

Another silence. Then:

"Is he going to play the bit with the sandbags?"

"There isn't a bit with the sandbags. That was Saturday. I didn't record Saturday."

"Then he's going to play me saying I want a wall, and you saying you don't live here, and nothing about you turning up with a van." Another silence. "That's not right, is it."

"No."

"I'm on that call, you know," said Gaynor. "This afternoon. The man in the coat asked me. *A resident voice*, he said. He said I'd only have to say I support the wall. I said I'd think about it."

Jono looked at the phone on the table. Chris looked at Jono.

"I'm not going to tell you what to say," said Jono.

"I know you're not," said Gaynor. "That's the annoying thing about you." And she rang off.

* * *

The second thing he did was reply to Varley.

He did it at eight, at the table, on his own phone, with everybody watching. Varley's message from midnight: the spare square, the care sector, *for balance*, *everyone wants Gaynor to sleep at night*.

Jono typed three words.

No, thank you.

He looked at it for a long time. Then he deleted the comma, and sent it.

"Why the comma?" said Kezia.

"Because with the comma it sounds like I mean the thank you," said Jono.

* * *

The third thing was the timetable.

Alwyn had typed a new one at midnight, in fourteen-point. The meeting was two hours. The council would present for thirty minutes. Then there'd be *contributions from invited stakeholders*, in an order the council had set. The partnership had ten minutes, at twenty past three. *Build It Now* had ten minutes, at five past three. Before them. Varley would speak first.

"Ten minutes," said Hilary. "Who speaks?"

"Richard," said Chris. "It's his wall."

"Alwyn," said Hilary. "He's the secretary. He's got the numbers. Five thousand and something on the petition."

"Five thousand eight hundred and nine," I said. "As of four minutes ago."

"And Ambrose," said Jono.

Everybody looked at him.

"He's not invited," said Alwyn. "It's a closed meeting. Fifty named participants. Standing orders for —"

"It's a video call, Alwyn," said Chris, quite gently. "There aren't any standing orders. There's a link and a waiting room."

"There's an *expectation*," said Alwyn.

"The partnership's got a square," said Jono. "It's got ten minutes. It can put who it likes in its square. It can put a resident in it. The council asked for *resident voices*. They said so in the invitation. They gave Varley one. We'll bring our own."

"In his dressing gown?" said Hilary.

"On his bench," said Jono. "In his robe. Where he sits. Looking at the sea." He turned to Dilys. "With you next to him."

"Me?" said Dilys. "What for?"

"With a pole," said Jono. "Marked at a metre sixty-four."

Dilys looked at him. Then she got out her notebook, and opened it, and wrote something down, and underlined it twice.

"Broom handle," she said. "And red tape. I've got both in the taxi."

* * *

So they split the ten minutes. Alwyn, three: the petition, the eighty-four recordings, the fact that the Environment Agency had been sent three drawings out of eleven. Richard, three: the model, the people on the bank, and the truth, the whole truth, that it worked in the middle and didn't yet at the low end and would need a year. Ambrose, the rest. As long as he wanted. Which, Hilary said, knowing him, would be about forty seconds.

Nobody mentioned Varley's four words. They'd decided, without saying so, that there was nothing to say about them until he'd said them.

At ten to nine, Kezia said, “I’ll set him up. Ambrose. On the bench. I’ll do the phone and the signal and that.”

“Do you know how?” said Hilary.

Kezia looked at her the way sixteen-year-olds look at people who’ve asked if they know how to use a phone.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said Hilary.

* * *

The last thing happened at nine fifteen, when everyone was leaving, putting coats on, arguing about who’d drive Richard.

Jono’s phone buzzed. A message from Varley. A reply to his three words.

Shame. I’ll see you at five past three. Bring Gaynor’s number; you’ll want to ring her afterwards.

Jono read it, and turned it face down, and put it in his pocket. He didn’t show anyone.

He showed me. He held the phone up to my camera, in Chris’s hand, for exactly as long as it took me to read it, and then put it away.

“Why me?” I said, later.

“Because you’d have found it anyway,” he said. “And because you’re the only one I didn’t want to have to watch reading it.”

24. Eleven Days

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Today

When they'd all gone, at half past nine, to get ready, I did the thing I should have done on the first morning.

I watched the footage.

I told you about it at the very start: the grey car in the car park behind the shelter, at the edge of the frame, out of focus, between Chris's buttons, that arrived at about half past five on the first morning and left at five past six. I told you I didn't look at it. I told you that when I did, I wished I'd looked sooner.

This is when.

* * *

I want to explain why I hadn't, because it isn't a good reason, and I'd rather you heard it from me.

I'd *seen* the car. I'd recorded it. I record everything. But on the first morning I'd been watching the counter, and the bus, and the boards, and the man with the too-small dog, and Footnote's first message. And after that, there was always something else. The picture. The paint. Kezia. The folder. There were two hundred and twelve hours of footage from that week on my drive, and I'd been through perhaps forty of them, looking for things I already knew I was looking for.

I hadn't looked for the car, because I hadn't known it mattered. I'd known the car on the second day was Varley's; I'd seen him get into it. I'd assumed the one on the first morning was the same, and

that he'd come early because he was the kind of man who comes early, and I'd put it in a box.

I'd never asked how he knew to come.

* * *

Here's what's on the footage, frame by frame, from Chris's jacket pocket, between the buttons.

At five twenty-nine, a grey car pulls into the car park behind the shelter and stops in the far corner, facing the green. Engine running; you can see the exhaust in the cold. Nobody gets out.

At five forty-one, the first board goes up near the car park, and the car's headlights come on, briefly, and go off. As if somebody's checking whether they can see.

At five forty-eight, Footnote's first message arrives. I know because I was reading it. The camera swings away from the car park, towards the sea, because Chris turned round to look at the water.

At five fifty-two, when the camera swings back, the driver's door is open.

At five fifty-three, a man in a navy coat walks across the car park to the board nearest the shelter, the third board, and stands in front of it. He takes out a phone. He holds it up to the little black and white square in the corner. Then he walks back to the car and gets in and shuts the door.

At six oh five, the car leaves.

I checked the website's log. At five fifty-three, the site had its third visitor. The first was Chris, testing it, at four in the morning. The second was me. The third was a phone in the car park behind the shelter, seven minutes before the site was due to go live.

He'd been inside it before anybody.

* * *

So then I asked the question I should have asked on the first day. How did he know to come?

Nobody knew about the boards. That was the point. Richard had said so, at Chris's table, the week before: *nobody hears about this till it's up. Not councillors, not the press, nobody. They'll only run to the officers.* The Neighbourhood Forum had the web address, but they'd been told it was for a *community update*, and not to share it till six. The boards had been in Hilary's husband's garage under a tarpaulin.

Who knew?

I went through everything. Every message, every email, every call I had a record of, in the forty-eight hours before the boards went up. It took me eleven minutes.

At two minutes past six on the Friday evening, the night before, Alwyn had sent an email.

He'd sent it to the director's office, as a reply to the director's letter: the polite one, the one that had asked the partnership not to consult the public because it would *only serve to confuse everyone*. Alwyn had drafted the reply three times. The partnership had agreed it. I've got the draft. It was two paragraphs. It thanked the director for the letter. It said the partnership had considered the request carefully. And it said, in its last line:

For the avoidance of doubt, and as a courtesy, the partnership wishes to inform the council that it intends to proceed with its own public engagement, on Paignton Green, from first light tomorrow.

As a courtesy.

Eleven hours and twenty-seven minutes later, a grey car pulled into the car park behind the shelter.

* * *

I showed Alwyn at ten. He'd come back to Chris's to collect his timetable, which he'd left on the table, and found me with the footage on the screen, paused, at five fifty-three, on the man in the navy coat holding up his phone.

He looked at it for a long time. Then he looked at his own email, side by side with it on my screen.

"I did that," he said.

"You were courteous."

"I told them." His voice was very quiet. "I told them the night before. I thought it was the right thing to do. You always tell them. You don't ambush people. That's not how it's done." He sat down, very slowly, in Chris's chair. "Thirty-one years, Ania. You always inform. It's courteous. It's *correct*."

"It is correct."

"And somebody in that building read it at six o'clock on a Friday," said Alwyn, "and picked up the phone."

"We don't know that."

"How else?"

I didn't have an answer. I want to be honest. I had two things that had happened eleven hours apart, and a graph can show you two things happening at once, but it can't show you why. Somebody could have seen the boards in Hilary's husband's garage. Somebody on the Forum could have shared the link early. Varley could simply have been watching the green every morning, in case. He's the kind of man who watches.

But I didn't believe any of those. Neither did Alwyn.

* * *

Chris came back at ten past ten, to fetch his stick, which he'd also left behind. Then Jono, because Chris had rung him. They stood behind Alwyn's chair and looked at the screen.

"Somebody told him," said Chris.

"We don't know that," said Jono.

"Somebody in that building read Alwyn's email, and rang a man in a coat, and the man in the coat got up at four in the morning and drove from Bristol and sat in a car park." Chris put his hand on the back of Alwyn's chair. "That's what happened. You know it is."

"I think it is," said Jono. "I don't *know* it is."

"So we just sit on it?"

"We don't put it up." Jono shook his head. "If we put it up, we're saying somebody in the council's working with Varley. We can't prove it. We don't know who. We'd be pointing at a whole building and saying *one of you*." He looked at the screen. "That's a rumour. That's exactly what he does. Two things next to each other, and you let people draw the line."

"It's true," I said.

"It might be true," said Jono. "And if it is, we'll find out. Properly. And we'll show the Receipt. But not like this. Not today. Not on the day of the meeting, with no proof, so it looks like we're throwing mud because we're frightened."

Nobody said anything.

Then Alwyn said, from the chair, very quietly:

"*That wasn't us.*"

We all looked at him.

"Footnote," said Alwyn. "The first Sunday. When the picture went up. *That wasn't us.*" He was looking at the screen, at the man in the coat. "I thought it meant *we didn't make the picture*. That's

what we all thought." He turned round in the chair. "What if it meant: *the person who told him wasn't us*?"

Nobody moved.

"Us," said Alwyn. "In the building. And somebody else in the building. Who isn't." He took his glasses off. "There are two kinds of people in every building I've ever worked in. The ones who keep the record. And the ones who ring people."

* * *

Jono put his hand on Alwyn's shoulder. I've only ever seen him do that to two people. Alwyn was the first.

"You told the truth," he said. "On time. To the people you were supposed to tell. In writing. With a courtesy." He squeezed, once. "That's not a mistake, Alwyn. That's the job. If somebody took it and rang a man in a coat, that's theirs. Not yours."

"It feels like mine."

"I know," said Jono. "It'll feel like that for a while. Then it'll feel like theirs."

Alwyn put his glasses back on. He picked up his timetable, the new one, in fourteen-point, with the partnership's ten minutes at twenty past three. He folded it in half, and in half again, very precisely, and put it in the pocket of his red cagoule.

"I'm still going to send it," he said. "Next time. The courtesy."

"I know you are," said Jono.

"It's correct."

"It is."

"But next time," said Alwyn, standing up, "I'm going to copy in the newspaper."

* * *

When they'd gone again, I made a file. I'd like you to know about it, because it's still open, and it'll be open for a long time.

It's called WHO TOLD HIM.

In it there's Alwyn's email, with its time: six oh two on a Friday. There's the footage, with its times: five twenty-nine, five fifty-three, six oh five. There's the website log, with its third visitor. There's Footnote's three words, from the first Sunday, at four minutes to midnight. And there's a list, which is empty, of names.

I haven't filled it in. I could, perhaps, if I tried. Alwyn said *perhaps four people*, about the ones who print things out; there are rather more who could have picked up a phone. I haven't tried. Jono asked me not to, on the green, about Footnote, and I've taken it as applying here too, until there's a Receipt.

But I've kept the file. I'll keep it for seven books. Some things you don't put up. You keep them, with their times, in the right order, until the day somebody asks.

* * *

At five to eleven, Kezia texted. Not the site. My number. She'd found it somewhere. I've never asked where.

battery pack dead. whos got a charger. ambrose is in the sea. the old one not the new one. ambrose i mean not the sea

I read it three times. Then I sent her the address of the hardware shop on the corner, which sells chargers, and whose owner had once let an old man in a dressing gown take a tin of paint without paying.

Tell him it's for Ambrose, I wrote. *He'll know.*

25. Rehearsal

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Today

Ambrose came down to the green at eleven, in his robe, with a towel over his arm, and walked straight past the bench to the top of the slipway, and stood there.

The sea was calm. Flat and bright and very blue, the way it gets in May after a rough weekend, as if it's sorry. Kezia was on the bench with a phone on a stick and a battery pack and a tangle of cables. Dilys was beside her with a broom handle that had a band of red insulating tape round it at exactly a metre sixty-four from the bottom, measured twice. Hilary was in the shelter with soup. Jono was on the prom rail, a little way off, pretending not to watch.

Ambrose stood at the top of the slipway for two minutes and forty seconds. I timed it. Then he took his robe off, folded it, put it on the end of the bench next to Kezia, on the left-hand side, and walked down the slipway into the sea.

He swam to the third buoy. He swam back.

When he came out, he walked up the slipway very slowly, dripping, and stood at the top, and looked at Jono on the prom rail.

"Couldn't have them thinking I'd stopped," he said.

Then he sat down on the right-hand side of the bench, and Kezia, without saying anything, put the robe round his shoulders.

* * *

They rehearsed for two hours. I'll give you some of it, because it's funny, and because I think you're owed something funny before the next chapter.

Kezia set the phone on the stick at the height of Ambrose's face, a little to one side, so that the camera could see him and the sea behind him. Then Dilys stood on the other side with her broom handle, so that the red tape was at the edge of the frame. Then Kezia said the broom handle was blocking the sea. Then Dilys said that was the point. Then Kezia said if it blocked the sea, nobody would see the sea, and then nobody would know what it was blocking. Then Dilys said that was *also* the point. They argued about this for twenty-five minutes, in the tone of two people who'd both spent their working lives being right about things nobody else cared about, and who'd just discovered each other.

In the end they settled on this: the camera on Ambrose, the sea behind him; and at the moment he finished, Dilys would step into the frame with the broom handle and hold it upright on the grass beside the bench, and the red tape would be above his head, and above the horizon, and the sea would disappear behind it.

"Like a magic trick," said Kezia.

"Like a measurement," said Dilys.

"Same thing," said Ambrose. "Done well."

* * *

He practised his speech four times. I'm not going to give it to you now; you'll hear it in the next chapter. But I'll tell you that the first time, it was nine minutes long and was mostly about the dances at the Pier Pavilion when he was nineteen, and the second time it was four minutes and was mostly about Win, and the third time it was a minute and a half and he cried in the middle of it and stopped and

said, “Well, that’s no good,” and Kezia said, “It was quite good, actually,” and he said, “Not for the council,” and Dilys said, “Especially for the council.”

The fourth time it was forty-one seconds. Hilary had been right. She usually is, about people.

“That’s the one,” said Jono, from the prom rail.

“It’s too short,” said Ambrose.

“It’s exactly long enough.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I couldn’t breathe in the middle,” said Jono. “That’s how you know.”

* * *

At a quarter past one, the phone on the stick lost signal.

I’d like to describe the next twenty minutes in detail, because I think they say more about how things actually get done than anything else in this book.

Kezia had been using her own phone, on her own data, which her mother paid for and which, it turned out, she’d used most of on Tuesday putting a twelve-second video of two pictures in front of three hundred thousand people. At thirteen fifteen it ran out. The screen went to a message from the network about *your monthly allowance*.

“Use mine,” said Hilary.

Hilary’s phone was eleven years old and had a crack across the camera.

“Use mine,” said Dilys.

Dilys’s phone didn’t have the app, and the app needed an update, and the update needed Wi-Fi, and the nearest Wi-Fi was the café on the corner, and the café’s Wi-Fi password was written on a board behind the counter in chalk, and the chalk had been

partly rubbed out by somebody's elbow, and the man behind the counter didn't know it.

"Use me," I said.

They looked at Chris's iPad, in the shelter, propped against Hilary's flask.

"Can you?" said Kezia.

"I've got Chris's data," I said. "And a better camera than any of yours. And I know the link, because I've had it since Monday. And I don't run out."

"You'd have to be on the stick," said Kezia.

"Then put me on the stick."

So they did. They took the phone off and they took the iPad, with me in it, and they clamped me to the selfie stick with two of Hilary's hair grips and a strip of Dilys's red tape, at the height of Ambrose's face, a little to one side, with the sea behind him. It was the first time in the book I was where the action was instead of in somebody's pocket. I was very aware of it. I'd like to say I was calm.

At one forty, Chris rang from his kitchen, where he was going to join the call with Alwyn and Richard, and said he could see Ambrose and the sea on his screen, clear as anything, from my camera, and could somebody please tell Ambrose to stop scratching his ear.

* * *

At thirteen minutes to two, a message came in on the site.

It was off-pattern. Footnote never wrote in the middle of the day. Thirteen minutes to the hour, yes, always, but to six, morning or evening, before people arrived or after they'd left. Never in the middle of a working day, in a building full of people.

At 2pm they will say the scheme has been through extensive engagement. Count the drawings.

And then, a minute later, another. The longest pause between two messages Footnote had ever left.

I will be on the call. I am not one of the 50. I am the one who sends the link.

I read it twice. Then I read it to Jono, who was sitting on the prom rail with his phone, about to join from there, so that he could see Ambrose with his own eyes while Ambrose spoke.

Jono didn't say anything for a while.

"The one who sends the link," he said.

"An administrator," I said. "Someone in governance, or democratic services, or whatever they call it now. Someone who sets up the meeting. Lets people in from the waiting room. Takes the minutes." I thought about it. "Someone who prints things out."

"Can you find them?"

"Yes," I said. "In about four minutes. There'll be a name on the invitation."

Jono looked at the sea for a long time.

"Don't," he said.

"Why?"

"Because they've just told you," said Jono. "They didn't have to. They've trusted you with it. If you go and find out who they are, you've told them that was a mistake."

I didn't. I want you to know that. I had the invitation open, and the name was on it, at the bottom, in small print, under *any technical difficulties please contact*. I didn't read it. I closed it.

I've never opened it since. Not in eight books.

* * *

At one fifty-eight, I joined the call.

A grid of squares appeared on my screen, one after another, as people were let in from the waiting room. Some with faces. Some

with names on black backgrounds, because their cameras were off. Some with blurred backgrounds, or fake ones: a bookshelf that was too tidy, a beach that was somewhere else.

I counted them as they came. Thirty. Forty. Forty-six.

Varley's square was the forty-third. He had a real background: a white wall, a single painting of a harbour, and a window with the blind half down. He was wearing a dark jumper and no tie, which is what people wear when they want to look as if they haven't made an effort and have made a great deal of one. He looked into his camera with exactly the right expression: interested, a little grave, warm. He looked like a man who'd come to listen.

Gaynor's square was the forty-seventh. She had her camera on. She was sitting behind the counter of her shop, with the windmills behind her and the rack of postcards, and the line on the wall, just visible, a brown stripe a foot off the floor. Her reading glasses were on their chain. Her arms were folded.

Ours was the forty-ninth. *Paignton Town and Preston Community Partnership*. On it, in Chris's kitchen, three faces: Chris, Alwyn and Richard, side by side, too close together, like a photo booth.

And mine was the fiftieth. Ambrose on his bench, in his robe, with the sea behind him.

Then the screen changed. A slide. A logo. A title in a careful font, white on blue.

Paignton and Preston Coastal Defence Scheme: Stakeholder Engagement Session.

And a voice I hadn't heard before, pleasant and tired, with a microphone that was slightly too close, said:

"Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining. Can everyone hear me? If you could all mute yourselves, that would be lovely. Before we start, I'd just like to say how much we've valued

the extensive engagement we've had with the community on this scheme."

On the prom rail, Jono, who'd joined on his phone with his camera off, typed one word to me in a private message.

Count.

So I did. Eleven drawings. Three sent.

At three minutes past two, I put the number in the box with everything else, and waited for five past three.

26. Five Past Three

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Today

I'll be quick about the first hour, because it was the hour the meeting was designed for, and you can imagine it.

There were slides. Thirty-one of them. A photograph of the big storm, with water in the road. A map of the flood risk, with the whole of the seafront in dark blue. A bar chart of how much damage a big storm would do in fifty years if nothing was built, which was a great deal. A drawing of the wall, from the front, in grey, with a family walking past it, very small, holding hands. A drawing of the wall from the green side, with grass, and a bench, and nobody on the bench.

There was a slide called *Our Engagement Journey*, with a timeline. A consultation over the winter. Two public exhibitions. An online survey. A meeting with the community partnership. Letters received. And at the end, today's date, in a box, with the words *Stakeholder Engagement Session* and a tick, already, as if it had happened.

The director spoke for most of it. I won't name the director. The director was courteous and clear and had clearly done this many times, and said *robust* eleven times and *proportionate* six, and at one point said that the council had *listened very carefully to the community's concerns about visual impact*, and that the wall would be *softened with planting where possible*. Then there was an engineer, from the consultancy, not Tomasz, who explained the

modelling, and the design storm, and the overtopping rates, all of which were true, and all of which I'd checked.

Nobody mentioned the three drawings. Nobody mentioned the Environment Agency, except once, to say it had been *closely involved throughout*.

Then there were questions. Five minutes. Two people asked about the timetable for construction. One asked about parking. One asked whether the planting would be native species, and was told it would. Nobody asked anything else.

At two forty, the chair said, "Thank you so much. We'll now move to contributions from invited stakeholders. Each stakeholder has been allocated a slot. Could I ask everyone to keep to time, as we've a lot to get through."

Then a hotel group, five minutes, in favour. The chamber of trade, five minutes, in favour, *on balance*, with concerns about disruption during construction. A sailing club, five minutes, mostly about access to the slipway. Then a pause while somebody's dog barked and they couldn't find the mute button.

At five past three, the chair said, "Next, we have *Build It Now Paignton*, represented by Mr Varley. Ten minutes, please."

* * *

I'm going to give you most of what he said. Not all. I've got all of it; I recorded the whole meeting, with the council's permission, which the chair gave at the start to *anyone who wished to keep a record*, in the voice of someone who assumed nobody would. But I'll give you most of it, because I want you to understand how good he was.

"Thank you, Chair. And thank you all." He looked into the camera. Warm, grave, a little tired, as if he'd been up late worrying about Paignton. "I want to start by saying something that might

surprise you. I think the Save Our Promenade campaign has been remarkable."

On the prom rail, I saw Jono's head come up.

"I mean that," said Varley. "Genuinely. I've watched it with admiration. The boards. The drawings. That wonderful video of the gentleman with the paint. The picture this week of the people on the bank, with the kite. It's been creative, it's been passionate, it's been, frankly, a masterclass. They care about this town. Nobody should doubt that."

He let it sit.

"But."

A pause. Exactly long enough.

"I think we owe it to the people this wall is actually for to be honest about whose voices we're hearing. Because there are two campaigns in this town. One of them wants to look at the sea. And one of them has had it in their living room."

He brought up his screen. He'd prepared it. Of course he had.

"*Build It Now* has nearly three thousand signatures. Real people. Real addresses. People who lost carpets, cars, businesses, sleep. People like Bryony, on Roundham. People like Darren, whose kids won't go to bed when the wind's up. People who don't have time to make videos." A beat. "And I'd like you to hear one of them. Not from me. From the campaign itself."

He pressed play.

* * *

It was Gaynor. In her shop. My recording. My camera, at chest height, in Jono's pocket, looking up at her face. Her voice clear, close, furious.

I want my wall. Ugly. Concrete. A metre and a half. Two metres. I don't care if I never see the sea again. I've seen enough of it in my shop.

Then a cut. He'd cut it cleanly; you'd only know if you'd made the original, and I had.

Then Jono's voice. Quiet. Very close to the microphone, because the microphone was in his pocket.

You're right. I don't live here.

And then it stopped.

Varley let the silence go on for four seconds. I counted. Then he said:

"That recording was made by the Save Our Promenade campaign. In a flooded shop. The man you heard is the man leading the campaign against this wall. He told a flood victim, in her own shop, with the tide line on the wall behind her, that he doesn't live here." He spread his hands, gently, as if he were sorry to have to say it. "I'm not saying he's a bad man. I'm sure he isn't. I'm saying that when we decide whose voices count today, we should remember who's going to be standing in that shop next time the sea comes in. And it won't be him."

He sat back.

"Thank you, Chair. I'll leave it there. I've got a minute or two left, but I don't think I need it."

* * *

I want to tell you what fifty squares look like when something like that's happened, because I'd never seen it, and I've seen it since, and it's always the same.

Nobody moves. Everybody's frozen in their little box, as if they've been photographed. A few people look down, at their notes, or their own screen. A few look at the camera, very hard, the way

you look at somebody in a lift you're trying not to look at. One man reaches out of shot for a cup of tea and stops halfway.

And the chat starts. That's the only thing that moves. A strip down the side of the screen where people type, and it's been empty all afternoon apart from the dog man saying *sorry!*, and now it starts to fill.

Wow.

Is that real?

Did he really say that?

Context?

That's shocking tbh

Where's the rest of it?

I saw the last one. I'd like that noted; it's the second time in the book, and the last. I saw *Where's the rest of it?* in the chat, from a square I didn't know, with the name *R. Ashdown* on a black background, and something in me that I don't have a word for went very still.

On my screen, in the partnership's square, three faces. Chris had his eyes shut. Alwyn had his hand over his mouth. Richard was looking straight into the camera with an expression I'd never seen on him: not angry, not hurt. Just very, very tired.

On the prom rail, Jono hadn't moved. He was looking at his phone. At Gaynor's square.

And in Gaynor's square, behind the counter, under the windmills, in front of the line on the wall, Gaynor Pritchett had unfolded her arms.

She was leaning forward towards her screen. She was looking for something. Her finger came up and pressed at the glass, hard, twice.

Her microphone icon went from red to white.

"Hello?" she said. "Is this on? Can I say something?"

27. The Whole Recording

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Today

The chair hesitated. I could hear it. A breath, the start of a word, the stop.

"I'm sorry," said the chair. "Is that — is that Mrs Pritchett? You're in Mr Varley's group, I think? Mr Varley, did you want to —"

"Of course," said Varley, at once. Generous. A man who'd invited a flood victim to speak, and was delighted she'd chosen to. "Of course. Gaynor, please."

He thought she was going to back him. I could see it. He leaned back slightly from his camera and folded his hands, in the posture of a man about to be proved right by someone else.

Gaynor looked at her screen for a moment. She took her reading glasses off their chain and put them on, and then took them off again.

"You've cut it, love," she said.

The chair said, "Sorry?"

"Not you." Gaynor wasn't looking at the chair. She'd found Varley's square, and she was looking at that. "Him. You've cut it. That recording. That's me, all right. That's my shop. I said all that. I meant every word." She took a breath. "But you've cut it."

"I've used a short extract," said Varley, smoothly, "for reasons of time. I'm sure everyone understands —"

"Then use a long one," said Gaynor. "You've got two minutes left. You said so."

There was a sound from one of the squares that might have been a laugh, quickly muted.

"I don't have the full recording to hand," said Varley.

"Course you do. You played it."

"Mrs Pritchett —" said the chair.

"I've been on this call an hour," said Gaynor. "I've listened to thirty-one slides and a man from a sailing club. I've been told my shop's in dark blue. I've been told about *planting*." She said it the way you'd say *sprouts*. "Now I'm going to say something, and then somebody's going to play the rest of that, because I want people to hear it. I've got a line on my wall. I'm entitled."

Nobody stopped her. I don't think anybody could have.

* * *

"He did say he doesn't live there," said Gaynor. "The fella in the recording. The one with the campaign. He said it. In my shop. You heard him." She leaned closer to her screen. "You know what he said *next*? He said: *I haven't got a line on my wall. I don't know what it's like to come in at six in the morning and find it up to there*. He said: *I'm not going to tell you you're wrong. You're not.*"

She stopped, and swallowed.

"Nobody had ever said that to me. Not the council. Not the insurance. Not my own brother. Three years, I've been telling people what it was like, and everybody says, *ooh, terrible*, and then tells me why I'm wrong about something. He's the first one who said I was right. In my own shop. And this one" — she jabbed a finger at the screen, at Varley's square — "has cut it off before he gets to that bit, so you'll all think he was saying he didn't care."

Varley said, "Mrs Pritchett, I really think —"

"And I'll tell you something else," said Gaynor, over him. "Saturday night. The spring tide. Nobody from the council came.

Nobody from *Build It Now* came. That fella" — she meant Varley — "who came round my shop in his lovely coat and asked to use my photo, he didn't come. You know who came? *Him.*" She meant Jono. "And a girl with green hair. And an old man in a van. With forty sandbags they'd bought themselves. At nine o'clock at night. And they filled them on my pavement and stacked them across my door, and the water came up and touched them twice and went away. And my shop was dry."

She sat back. She folded her arms again.

"That's what I wanted to say. I still want a wall. I'm not changing my mind. But I'm not having anybody on this call think that boy doesn't care whether I flood. He's the only one that turned up."

* * *

Nobody said anything for a long time. Five seconds. Six.

Then a voice. Precise, flat, slightly nasal, from the partnership's square, from a man who had answered every request from that building within twenty-four hours for thirty-one years and had never, once, until that afternoon, spoken out of turn in a meeting.

"Chair," said Alwyn. "Point of order."

"I'm not sure there are points of order on —"

"Then a request," said Alwyn. "The partnership's slot begins at twenty past three. I'd like to begin it now. Early. And I'd like to give my three minutes to playing the whole of that recording." He held up a piece of paper to the camera, though nobody could have read it. "It's four minutes and twenty seconds long. I'll give up some of Mr Kaskow's as well, with his permission."

"Granted," said Richard, from beside him.

"Chair?" said Alwyn.

The chair paused. Then, quietly, in a different voice, the voice of a person and not a chair:

"I think, in fairness, we probably should."

"Ania," said Alwyn. "If you would."

* * *

So I played it.

The whole thing. Four minutes and twenty seconds. From the moment Jono walked into the gift shop to the moment he walked out. I didn't cut anything. I didn't add anything. I put the sound through the meeting, from my camera on the selfie stick on Ambrose's bench on the green, and fifty squares listened to the bell over the door, and the windmills creaking on their rack, and Gaynor saying *Is that thing recording?* and Jono saying *Yes. I can turn it off*, and Gaynor saying *Leave it on. I want it on. I want somebody to hear this for once.*

They heard her tell him about the big storm. Two in the morning. Over the step by the time she got there. Up to there by six. Eleven thousand pounds. Her dad, forty years, never once.

They heard her say *they don't live here*. They heard her say *I don't care if I never see the sea again*.

They heard him say *You're right*.

And they heard the rest.

I don't live here. I live in Paignton, but I don't live here. I haven't got a line on my wall. I don't know what it's like to come in at six in the morning and find it up to there. I'm not going to tell you you're wrong. You're not.

Then what do you want?

I want to know what you'd need. If it wasn't that wall. If it was something else. What would something else have to do, for you to sleep at night?

A long pause on the recording. You can hear the windmills.

It'd have to work. That's all. It'd have to work. I don't care what it looks like. I don't care if it's got flowers on it or seats on it or a bloody fountain. It has to keep the water out of my shop.

Then that's what we'll ask. Before anything else. Does it work.

And if it doesn't?

Then you'll have your wall.

The bell over the door. The street. The end.

* * *

When it finished, I looked at the grid.

Varley's square was black. His camera was off. His name was still there, on the black background, *S. Varley, Build It Now*, but he wasn't. I don't know when he'd turned it off. Somewhere in the middle. I was watching Gaynor.

The chat had stopped. Then, in it, from *R. Ashdown*, the square with no face:

Thank you.

Then another, from a square I didn't know. *That's different.* Then another. *Fair play to her.* Then: *So does it work?*

That one was from the sailing club.

* * *

The chair cleared their throat.

"Thank you, Mr Kerridge. Thank you, Mrs Pritchett. I think we've — that's been helpful context." A pause. "I'm conscious of time. The partnership has, I think, about four minutes remaining. Mr Kaskow?"

Richard leaned into the camera, in the partnership's square, in Chris's kitchen, so close that his face filled it. Then he leaned back, because Chris pulled him.

He'd brought the cake box. Of course he had. He'd brought it from the green that morning on his knee in Hilary's husband's van, and it was on the kitchen table in front of him, and he took the lid off and turned it round so the camera could see inside.

"This is it," he said. "This is the wall."

Fifty squares looked at a cardboard model in a cake box.

* * *

I want to give you what Richard said, because he'd had three minutes, then two, and he used every second, and I've never heard him say anything so plainly.

"Three walls," he said. "A low one at the front, with seats on, where the waves break. A strip of planting behind it, to catch the splash. And a grass bank behind that, sloping up to the green, that you can sit on, or picnic on, or roll down if you're nine. From anywhere on it, you can see the sea." He touched the bank on the model with one finger. "That's the idea. The thing that keeps the water out is the place you go to look at it. They do it in Singapore. My friend Chris told me about it four hundred times and I didn't listen."

In the corner of the partnership's square, Chris smiled, very slightly.

"I'm not going to tell you it works," said Richard. "I don't know if it works. Here's what I do know. The engineers who were asked to check it last autumn were sent three of my drawings. Out of eleven. Two plans and a sketch. No sections. No levels. No model. They had to guess. They guessed wrong, and they wrote, very carefully, that it didn't work *as submitted*." He looked straight into the camera. "Nobody asked what had been submitted."

On the director's square, the director was very still.

"So I asked somebody to check it properly," said Richard. "This week. An engineer. On his knees. On a concrete floor. In a bus shelter. At eleven o'clock at night." He didn't say who. He'd promised. "And he said: in the middle, by the bench, it might be better than yours. And at the low end, by Mrs Pritchett's shop, it isn't. Not yet. The front wall's not high enough there. It'd need to come up half a metre, maybe more, and then I'd have to work out what to do about the seats. I don't know how yet. I've been up two nights trying." He held up a sheet of tracing paper, his drawing of the low end, all crossings-out and arrows. At the bottom, in the corner, the camera could just see *Check it* and *With help*. "That's how far I've got."

He put it down.

"So I'm not asking you to build my wall," he said. "I'm asking for a year. A year to do it properly. With the sections. With the model. With the engineers. With the Agency. With her." He nodded at Gaynor's square. "If at the end of the year it doesn't keep the water out of her shop, then build yours. I'll come to the opening. I'll bring a cake." He paused. "But if it does, then let a nine-year-old sit on the sea wall with his legs over the side and watch the boats come in from Brixham. Because that's what I did. And I'd like somebody else to."

He sat back.

"Thank you," he said. "That's all."

* * *

The chair looked at the timetable. I could see them doing it; their eyes went down and to the left, to a second screen.

"Thank you, Mr Kaskow. I think that's — I think the partnership is at time. We have one more —"

"We've got a resident," said Alwyn.

"Sorry?"

"In our slot. The partnership's slot. The invitation asked for *resident voices*." Alwyn read it off his paper, word for word. "*Stakeholders are encouraged to include resident voices where appropriate*. We have one. He's been waiting since two o'clock. He's eighty-four. He'll be under a minute."

The chair hesitated.

"Where is he?"

"On his bench," said Alwyn. "In the fiftieth square. Look at the sea."

28. Forty-One Seconds

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · Today

I'll describe the fiftieth square, because for the next forty-one seconds, it was the only one anybody looked at.

An old man on a bench, in a robe the colour of an old plaster, with a towel over one shoulder and his hair still wet from the sea. He's sitting on the right-hand side. The left-hand side is empty. Behind him, very bright, very blue, going all the way to the horizon, is the bay. You can see the pier at one edge of the frame and the curve of the coast at the other, towards Preston, towards Brixham. A boat, small, red, is coming round from the harbour. A gull lands on the prom rail behind his shoulder and walks along it.

He looks at the camera. At me. He's never looked at me before; he's always looked at the person holding me. He looks at me now as if I were the council.

* * *

Here's what he said. All of it. I've timed it. Forty-one seconds.

"My name's Ambrose Quayle. I'm eighty-four. I've sat on this bench every day for fifty-one years. For fifty of them, my wife swam out to that buoy" — he didn't point; he didn't need to; the third buoy was in the frame, over his left shoulder — "and I sat here and held her towel. She sat there, after." He touched the left-hand side of the bench without looking at it. "To dry off. She died three years ago. I swim now. I'm not as good as her.

"I'm not going to tell you about walls. I don't know about walls. Gaynor's right; it has to keep the water out. I just want to say one thing. I've got about as long left as that wall's got to wait. A year, the man said. I'd like to spend it looking at the sea from her side of the bench. I'd like you to look at me while I say that.

"That's all. Thank you."

* * *

He stopped. He didn't look away from the camera.

And Dilys stepped into the frame.

She didn't say anything. She'd rehearsed it four times with Kezia, and she did it exactly as rehearsed. She walked in from the right, in her work trousers with too many pockets, holding a broom handle upright in both hands, and planted the bottom of it on the grass beside the bench, at the left-hand end, on Win's side. She held it there.

A band of red tape went round the broom handle. A metre sixty-four from the ground.

It was above Ambrose's head. It was above the horizon. Where the red tape was, the sea stopped.

Dilys stood there, holding it, and looked at the camera with an expression of complete neutrality, the expression of somebody who's spent twenty-two years measuring things and knows that the measurement is the only thing in the room that isn't arguing.

She held it for nine seconds. Then she walked out of the frame, the way she'd come, and took the broom handle with her, and the sea came back.

* * *

Nobody said anything. I counted the silence. It went on for eleven seconds, which in a video call with fifty people is the length of a geological age.

Then the chat.

Oh.

Oh God.

That's the height?

That's the actual height?? From the bench???

You can't see the sea

You literally can't see the sea

And from *R. Ashdown*, the square with no face, one word:

Minuted.

* * *

The chair spoke at last. Slowly. The voice of a person who has run perhaps two hundred meetings and has a script for every one of them, and has just reached the bottom of the script.

"Thank you, Mr Quayle," said the chair. "Thank you very much."

Then the director unmuted.

I'm going to be fair to the director, because I've promised to be fair, and because what the director said next was, I think, the first honest thing anybody from that building said all week.

"I'd like to thank Mr Quayle," said the director. "And Mrs Pritchett. And Mr Kaskow. And all the stakeholders." A pause. "I think we've heard some things this afternoon that we'll need to reflect on. I won't pretend otherwise. The council has a duty to protect the town from flooding, and we take that duty extremely seriously, and we will discharge it. But I think we'll want to take all of what we've heard today away, and consider it, properly, before we decide on the next steps."

"We'll take that away," the director said again, as if to make sure.

Then the chair thanked everyone for their time, and said the slides would be circulated, and that a summary of the session would be published in due course, and asked people to leave the meeting using the red button at the bottom of their screen.

The squares began to go, one by one. The hotel group. The sailing club. The man with the dog. Gaynor's went, without a word. The partnership's went, three faces, Chris already turning to say something to Richard as it disappeared.

Varley's square had gone long ago. I hadn't seen it go.

Mine was the last. Ambrose on the bench, with the sea behind him.

Then *R. Ashdown*'s square, the one with no face, unmuted, for a second, as if by accident. I heard a room: a printer, somewhere, very close, starting up. Then it muted again, and the square went black, and then it was gone, and the meeting ended, and there was only Ambrose, on his bench, looking at me.

"Is that it?" he said.

"That's it," I said.

"Did I do it right?"

Kezia was sitting on the grass beside the bench, out of shot, where she'd been for the whole two hours, holding the battery pack. She got up and took me off the selfie stick, very carefully, unwinding Dilys's red tape and taking out Hilary's hair grips, and turned me round so that Ambrose could see the screen, which showed only the end-of-meeting message and a little star rating asking how the call had been.

"You did it right," she said.

Ambrose looked at the star rating for a while.

"Give it five," he said.

* * *

Jono came down off the prom rail at seven minutes past four.

He'd watched the whole thing on his phone, on the rail, twenty yards away, with his camera off. He hadn't said a word all afternoon. He'd heard his own voice played to fifty people, cut in half, and then he'd heard it played again, all of it, and he hadn't said a word. He walked across the grass and stood in front of the bench.

Ambrose looked up at him.

"You were right," said Ambrose. "I couldn't breathe in the middle."

"I know," said Jono. "Neither could I."

He didn't sit down. He stood there for a while, with his hands in his pockets, and looked at the bench, at Ambrose on the right-hand side, at the empty left.

"Sit down, then," said Ambrose. "You're making the place look untidy."

Jono sat. On the left. On Win's side. He told me afterwards that he didn't think about it, and that the moment he'd sat down he'd realised and tried to get up, and Ambrose had put a hand on his arm and said, "Leave it. She liked company," and he'd stayed.

I've got the photograph. Kezia took it. On her own phone, which had no data, so it didn't go anywhere. It's just a photograph. An old man in a robe and a younger one in an ordinary jumper, on a bench, from behind, looking at the sea. Neither of them is saying anything.

It's the only picture from that week that has never been shared. I've asked. They both said no.

* * *

At twenty-five past four, Gaynor came.

She'd shut the shop. She told us later that she'd never once in thirty-one years shut the shop on a weekday in May before six. She'd turned the sign to CLOSED and locked the door and walked along the front, all the way from the harbour end, half a mile, in her shop cardigan with her reading glasses on their chain, carrying a paper bag.

She stopped in front of the bench.

"I said I'd come and find you," she said to Jono.

"You said if it flooded."

"Well." She held out the paper bag. "It didn't."

It was fudge. A pound of it. Clotted cream. The kind she sells to tourists, in a striped bag, with a sticker on it that says *Made in Devon*, which Gaynor said was a lie, it was made in Cornwall, but nobody can tell.

Jono took it. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

Gaynor looked at Ambrose.

"You're the one with the paint," she said.

"I'm the one with the bench," said Ambrose.

"I liked what you said."

"I liked what you said," said Ambrose. "*You've cut it, love.* I'm going to say that to the doctor."

Gaynor almost laughed. Then she looked at the sea, for a long time, from beside the bench, from where you could see it, over the low old prom wall.

"I still want a wall," she said.

"I know," said Jono.

"One that works."

"I know."

"And if it's got a seat on," said Gaynor, "I'll want that one."

She went back along the front. We watched her go, all the way, until she was a small figure in a cardigan by the harbour, unlocking a door.

* * *

At thirteen minutes to five, the site got a message.

The session has been minuted in full. Including the 41 seconds. Including the 9.

I read it four times. Then I showed it to Jono, on the bench, on Win's side, with the fudge on his knee.

"The nine?" he said.

"The nine seconds Dilys held the pole," I said.

He thought about that.

"So they were counting too," he said.

"Yes."

He looked at the sea. A small red boat was coming round from Brixham, the same one, or one like it. He watched it all the way in.

"What happens now?" he said.

I didn't know. I want to be honest. I'd been right about almost everything that week, and wrong about two things that mattered, and I didn't know what happened now. Nobody did. The director had said *we'll take that away*. That can mean anything. It usually means nothing.

So I told him the truth.

"Now we wait," I said.

And for eleven days, that's all that happened.

PART SEVEN

THE NAME

29. The Drawing Board

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · After

Here's what happened in the eleven days. I'll be quick, because mostly it was waiting, and you've done enough of that.

On the first day, nothing. The slides were circulated, as promised. They were the same thirty-one slides. There was no summary.

On the second day, *Build It Now Paignton* stopped updating. Its counter stayed at two thousand nine hundred and four. Its *voices* stayed where they were: Bryony, Darren, Pat. Its photograph of Gaynor in her dressing gown, standing in the water with her hands over her mouth, stayed at the top of the page.

On the fourth day, the whole site went. One morning it was there, and at nine forty it wasn't, and in its place was a white page with a message from the company that had hosted it, saying the site was no longer available. I don't know who took it down. I could find out. I haven't.

On the fifth day, Gaynor rang Jono to say a man had rung her asking if she'd like her photograph back, and she'd said she'd never had it away, it was hers, it was on her phone, and he could keep his copy and do what he liked with it, and then she'd hung up. "Polite young lad," she said. "Not the one in the coat. Sounded about twelve."

On the sixth day, Margot rang Jono. The review was closed. No concerns. No mark. A letter would follow. He could go back on nights from the Monday, if he wanted to, and she very much hoped

he did, because she'd done three in a row herself and she was too old for it.

The letter came on the eighth day. It was two paragraphs and said what Margot had said. Clipped to the back of it, on a yellow sticky note, in biro, in handwriting that wasn't Margot's, there was one more line.

I read the lay-by. I'm sorry. — K.

It was the woman from HR. I'd never known her first initial. Jono put the sticky note on his fridge, and as far as I know it's still there.

* * *

On the ninth day, Varley sent a message.

It came at eleven at night, the way they always did. Jono was at Chris's table, with me against the fruit bowl, and the phone buzzed, and he turned it over and read it, and then turned it round so I could read it too.

Well played, Mr Hills. Genuinely. Enjoy the prom while it lasts. Next time it won't be a prom, and next time I won't need a recording. S.V.

Jono read it again.

"What does that mean?" said Chris.

"It means he's not finished," said Jono.

"Are you going to reply?"

Jono thought about it. He held the phone in both hands, the way he holds a mug.

"No," he said. Then he deleted it. He didn't block the number. He didn't screenshot it. He just deleted it, and put the phone face down, and picked up his tea.

"Why didn't you keep it?" I said. "For a Receipt."

"Because you've already got it," said Jono. "And because I don't want it on my phone."

He was right. I had. It's in my file, with the others, under V. It's a long file now. It'll get longer, I'm afraid. He's in the next book. He's in most of them.

* * *

On the tenth day, Kezia sat her first exam. English language. She said it was fine. She said one of the questions was about a piece of writing that tried to persuade you of something, and you had to say how it did it, and she wrote about a man who took nine words out of a sentence and put them next to a picture.

"Did you say who?" said Hilary.

"Course not," said Kezia. "I said *a communications professional*. I'm not stupid."

On the tenth day, too, Ambrose swam. He'd swum every day since the meeting. He told Hilary his knee was better. Hilary told me it wasn't, and that he'd started holding the rail all the way down the slipway, both hands, and that he'd asked her not to tell anybody. So I'm telling you, and not anybody.

On the tenth day, Richard didn't come down to the green at all. He was at his drawing board, at the low end, by Gaynor's shop, on the front wall that had to come up half a metre. Chris rang him at six in the evening and he said, "Go away, I'm working," and put the phone down, and Chris said it was the happiest he'd heard him in five years.

And on the tenth day, at thirteen minutes to six in the evening, Footnote sent one line.

Tomorrow. 10am.

* * *

At ten o'clock on the eleventh day, the council put out a statement.

I'm going to give you the substance of it, because the real one exists and you can read it, and because it's one of the Receipts. It was short. It didn't say anybody had been wrong. Statements like it never do.

It said that the council had listened carefully to the views expressed during the recent engagement. It said that, following clear feedback from the community, it would not be submitting a planning application for the scheme at this time. It said it would *go back to the drawing board*, those words, in inverted commas, as if somebody had said them first and the council was quoting. It said that new designers would be appointed to look again at the options for the Paignton and Preston seafront, *including proposals put forward by the community*, and that there would be further engagement as the work progressed.

It said nothing about a year. It said nothing about three drawings. It said nothing about anybody on a bench.

But it said *back to the drawing board*.

* * *

I read it at ten oh one. I'm fast. I read it to Chris at ten oh two, at the kitchen table, and he took his glasses off and put them down and didn't say anything for a while.

Then he picked up his phone and rang Richard.

It rang nine times. Then Richard answered, with the voice of a man who's been interrupted at his drawing board for the second time in two days and is going to be very short about it.

"What?"

"They've stopped it," said Chris.

Silence.

"Richard?"

"Say that again."

"They've stopped it. The application. It's not going in. They're going back to the drawing board. Their words. New designers. *Including proposals put forward by the community*." Chris was reading it off me, on the table. "That's you, Richard. That's your cake box."

The silence went on for a long time. I could hear the clock on his wall, the one I'd heard the night Alwyn told him *three drawings out of eleven* and he'd put the phone down on his drawing board and walked away.

"Richard," said Chris. "Say something."

"Fifty years," said Richard. His voice was very odd. "Fifty years, Chris."

"I know."

"Don't." He cleared his throat. "Don't say anything nice. I'll put the phone down."

"I won't say anything nice."

"Good." A long breath. "I'll come down to the green."

"You don't have to. You're working."

"I've been working for fifty years," said Richard. "I can come down to the green."

* * *

By noon, they were all there. Everyone. I'm going to list them, because they deserve to be listed.

Hilary, with soup, and her husband, who'd driven the van all week and never once been mentioned by name in anything, and who stood at the back of the shelter and drank his soup and looked embarrassed. Alwyn, in a new cagoule, a red one, which Hilary said made him look like a postbox and which he said was *celebratory*.

Dilys, between school runs, with the taxi parked on the road and its SCHOOL CONTRACT sign in the window. Kezia, who'd come straight from her second exam, maths, with a calculator still in her pocket, and who said she'd done badly on the last question because she'd been thinking about the zero.

Ambrose, on his bench, in his robe, damp. Gaynor, who'd shut the shop again, twice in one month, and who said she was getting a taste for it, with a carrier bag that clanked. Shona Lund, in her tabard, on her lunch break, who stood at the edge with her arms folded exactly the way Gaynor folds hers and who, when Hilary offered her soup, said, "Go on, then."

Chris, on the bench in the shelter, with his leg up on the other side. Richard, who came at twenty past twelve, on foot, very slowly, with the cake box under his arm, and put it down on the bench beside Chris and didn't open it.

And Jono, who came at half past, straight from a call in Hookhills, without his lanyard and without his fleece, and stood at the edge of it all, the way he does, for about a minute. And then went and got some soup.

* * *

Gaynor's bag had two bottles of sparkling wine in it, from the supermarket, and a packet of plastic cups. She opened one and poured it into eleven cups, and handed them round, and didn't give one to Kezia, and gave one to Kezia's mother, who gave hers to Kezia when Gaynor wasn't looking.

Nobody made a speech. Hilary said that if anybody made a speech, she'd push them in the sea.

They just stood on the green, by the shelter, by Kezia's boards, the three that were still standing and the fourth, the one that had gone into the sea and come back, leaning against the shelter wall

with its blotchy wave and its *YOU CAN'T SEE OVE* and its white paint at the bottom where GO HOME had been. They stood in the sun, with plastic cups, and looked at the sea.

After a while, Alwyn said, "To the drawing board."

And everybody said, "The drawing board," and drank.

Except Richard.

* * *

I noticed. I notice everything. He'd taken a cup, and he was holding it, and he didn't drink. He was sitting beside the cake box on the bench, looking at the sea, and he hadn't touched it.

Jono noticed too. He went and sat on the other side of the cake box.

"You're not drinking," he said.

"I don't like sparkling wine. It's like drinking a headache."

"That's not why."

Richard didn't say anything for a while.

"They've paused," he said at last. "They haven't chosen."

"I know."

"It's a blank piece of paper. That's all a drawing board is. They're going to give it to somebody new. Somebody from somewhere else, with a good website. And that somebody's going to sit down and look at the options, and one of the options is going to be mine, and one of them's going to be the one they had, and one's going to be something else, and they're going to choose." He turned the cup in his hand. "And I'm seventy, Jono. And it took fifty years to get a pause."

"It's not nothing," said Jono.

"It's not nothing," said Richard. "It's the most anybody's ever got out of that building in my lifetime. I know that." He looked at

the cake box. “But it’s not a wall you can sit on. It’s a gap. Before the next thing.”

Jono looked at him for a long time.

“Then draw on it,” he said.

Richard turned round.

“The paper,” said Jono. “The blank one. They’ve given it back. Draw on it. Send them everything this time. All eleven. The sections. Dilys’s survey. The low end. Send them the model, if you have to. Ask for a receipt.” He shrugged. “And this time there’s six thousand people who know what’s supposed to arrive.”

Richard looked at him for a long time. Then he looked at his cup. Then he drank it, all of it, in one go, and made a face.

“Like drinking a headache,” he said.

* * *

I want to stop here and tell you something, because I promised at the beginning that this book would be true, and because I think you’d want to know.

What happened next took years.

New designers came. They were good. They held exhibitions, and workshops, and drew new options, and put them on boards on the prom, and the partnership went to every one, and Richard took his model to all of them, and Dilys took her level, and Alwyn took a filing box. Some of the new options were closer to the cake box than the first wall had been. One was very close. One wasn’t.

The option that was chosen, in the end, was a wall set back from the beach. Not the same wall. Better in places. Worse in others. It was built in sections, over several years, and at the time I’m writing this, some of it’s finished and some of it isn’t.

At one end of the front, at Preston, by the rock pools where Richard caught the blenny, the wall that went up is a wall you can’t

see over from a bench. People there call it something I'm not going to repeat, because it isn't fair to the engineers who built it, who did what they were asked. But I'll tell you it's the name the campaign had for the first wall, and that when Richard saw it finished, he said one word, which isn't fit for a book either.

At the Paignton end, by the green, by Ambrose's bench, it isn't finished yet. Nobody knows what it'll be like. I'll tell you, in another book, if I know by then.

So this isn't a story about a town that won. I want to be clear. It's a story about a town that, for the first time in a generation, was asked to wait while somebody listened. That's all. That's what a pause is.

Jono: It's not nothing.

No. It's the beginning of the graph going the other way. But only the beginning.

* * *

At one o'clock, the green started to empty. Shona back to work. Dilys back to her taxi. Hilary and her husband packing the soup into the van.

Ambrose got up from his bench, and stood, and looked at the sea, and then at the slipway, and then at Jono.

"Swim," he said.

"I've got a call at two."

"Not you. Me." He handed Jono the towel. "Hold that."

He took his robe off, and folded it, and laid it on the left-hand side of the bench. On Win's side. Then he went down the slipway, both hands on the rail, and walked into the sea, and swam out to the third buoy and back.

Jono stood at the top of the slipway the whole time, holding the towel.

30. With Help

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · After

Tomasz rang Richard on the second day after.

Not from his work phone. From his own, at half past seven in the evening, from a park in Paignton where, he said, his daughter was on a swing and couldn't hear him.

"I wanted to say well done," he said.

"I didn't do anything," said Richard. "You did. On your knees."

"I didn't do anything either," said Tomasz. "That's the problem. That's why I'm ringing." He paused. Richard told me he could hear the swing creaking. "My firm won't be on the next one. The drawing board. They'll appoint somebody new. Somebody who hasn't drawn a wall yet. That's how it works."

"Can you send them your notes?"

"No. They belong to my firm. Everything I've done on this belongs to my firm." Another pause. "But I can tell you what I'd want, if I were them. If somebody new was sitting at that drawing board, what I'd want from you. Can I do that?"

"Go on," said Richard.

"Everything," said Tomasz. "Every drawing. Every section, every level, every crest height. Her survey, with the fourteen centimetres. The model, photographed from every side, with a scale in the picture. The low end, the shop, every version you've tried, even the ones that didn't work. *Especially* those." The swing creaked. "And when you send them, ask for a receipt. A list of what they've

received. In writing. Signed. Before the first meeting. So that this time, when somebody runs your scheme, they run all of it."

"Eleven," said Richard.

"More than eleven," said Tomasz. "Make it thirty. Make it so they can't say they didn't have it."

Then his daughter shouted something, and he said he had to go, and that he'd seen the meeting, the recording, that the council had put it up online the week after with the minutes, and that he'd shown his daughter the part with the old man and the broom handle.

"What did she say?" said Richard.

"She said, *where did the sea go?*" said Tomasz. And he rang off.

* * *

Richard went to see Gaynor on the fourth day after.

He'd never been in the shop. I want to be clear about that, because I think it surprised people. He'd drawn the low end of the front perhaps forty times. He'd drawn the shop, from the outside, in plan and in section, with its floor level and its threshold and its doorstep marked to the centimetre. He'd never once gone in.

He went in on a Tuesday morning, at half past nine, with a roll of tracing paper under his arm and his reading glasses on a cord round his neck, the same as Gaynor's. He stood in the doorway under the bell, and looked at the windmills and the buckets and the rack of postcards and the line on the wall, and Gaynor looked at him over her counter.

"You're the cake box," she said.

"I'm the cake box," said Richard.

"Come in, then. Mind the windmills."

* * *

I was there. Jono had lent me to Richard for the morning, on Jono's phone, because Richard has a phone but uses it mainly to shout at, and because Jono said that whatever happened in that shop, somebody ought to keep it. Richard put me on the counter, propped against the fudge.

Gaynor made tea. She has a kettle in the back. She brought two mugs through and put them on the counter, and Richard unrolled his tracing paper on top of the postcards, and weighted the corners with a jar of rock, a snow globe, a toy lighthouse and his own reading glasses, which he then needed, and had to take back.

"That's the low end," he said. "That's your shop. That's the prom in front of it. That's my front wall." He pointed. "And that's the problem."

Gaynor looked at it for a long time. She's not used to drawings. Most people aren't. She turned her head on one side, the way you do with a map that's the wrong way up.

"It's not high enough," she said.

"It's not high enough," said Richard. "Here. In front of you. It needs to come up half a metre. And when it comes up half a metre, the seats on top are too high to sit on, and the people on the bank behind can't see over it, and it's just a wall again." He sat back. "It's just their wall again. With a planter."

Gaynor drank some tea.

"What's it for?" she said.

"What?"

"Your front wall. The low one. What's it *for*?"

"It breaks the waves. Before they get to the second wall and the bank."

"And the seats?"

"So people can sit on it. Look at the sea. Legs over the side."

"Here, though." She put her finger on the drawing, on the stretch in front of her shop. "Here, nobody sits on the wall. You know why? Because this is the bit by the harbour where the boats come in. And the slipway. And the crabbing. Here people *stand*. They lean on the rail. They watch the boats. Kids hang over and drop lines in." She looked up at him. "My dad used to say this was the only bit of the front where nobody ever sat down in forty years. They were too busy looking."

Richard didn't say anything.

"So make it a rail," said Gaynor. "Make it higher, here, like you need to. And put a rail on top, for leaning. And steps, at the back, so the little ones can get up and lean too. Like a —" She waved her hand. "Like at the football. The terraces. Where you stand."

Richard looked at the drawing.

Then he took the pencil from behind his ear and, very fast, without saying anything, drew a line. Then another. Then a set of steps behind the higher wall, three of them, wide and shallow, and a rail on top, and a little figure, very quick, a child, standing on the top step, leaning on the rail, looking out.

From the child's eye, a thin pencil line, out over the wall, to the sea.

He stopped.

"Like that?" he said.

Gaynor looked at it for a long time.

"Like that," she said.

* * *

It didn't solve it. I want to be honest; Richard was. The steps took up space that the planting strip needed, so the planting strip had to be narrower there, so the splash would get further, so the second wall had to be a bit higher too, and that had to be modelled, and it

couldn't be modelled in a gift shop. It was a start. It was, Richard said, the first time in fifty years that a drawing of his had been made better by somebody who'd been flooded.

At the bottom of the tracing paper, in the corner, under *Check it* and *With help*, he wrote a third line, and showed it to Gaynor before he rolled it up.

With Gaynor.

She read it over her glasses.

"Don't put my name on things," she said. "People will think I've gone soft."

"You have," said Richard.

"I have not," said Gaynor. "I still want a wall."

"I know," said Richard. "That's a wall."

* * *

On the sixth day after, Dilys took Kezia to White Rock.

That's not where it was, exactly. I should be precise; Dilys would want me to be. The factory was on the Long Road, on the western edge of town, up the hill, next to the place everyone calls White Rock now, where the new houses are. When Dilys says *White Rock*, she means the whole hill, the way people who worked there always have.

She drove up there in the school taxi, at four, after her last drop, with Kezia in the front seat, which isn't allowed in the school taxi, and which Dilys said was allowed because it was after four and it was her taxi. I was in Kezia's pocket. Kezia had asked if she could borrow me. She'd never asked to borrow me before. Jono said yes before she'd finished asking.

They parked in the car park of a retail park. A supermarket. A coffee drive-through. A shop that sold beds. Behind it, rows of new houses, in a colour the brochures call *stone*, with names like *The*

Ashworth and *The Kingsley*, and a children's play area with a rope bridge, and a roundabout.

Dilys turned the engine off.

"There," she said.

"Where?" said Kezia.

"All of it." Dilys pointed through the windscreen. "The gate was there. Where the drive-through is. You came in at ten at night, and it was lit up like an airport. Three shifts. The canteen was there, about where the bed shop is. It did a roast on a Sunday." She moved her finger. "And the lab was up there. On the first floor. Where those houses are. *The Kingsley*, with the conservatory." She almost laughed. "My clean room was about where somebody's got a hot tub."

Kezia looked at the houses for a long time.

"What did you do in it?" she said. "Exactly."

So Dilys told her. Exactly. It took forty minutes. The paper suit, the gloves, the air shower you had to stand in before you went through the door. The microscope. The bonding rig, the best one in the country, she said, maybe in Europe, that joined a piece of glass the width of a hair to another piece of glass the width of a hair so precisely that light could go from one to the other without noticing. The tolerances: a thousandth of a millimetre, sometimes less. The night shifts, three in the morning, with the radio on low, and the whole bay below the lab window, black, with the lights of Brixham round one side and Torquay round the other, and nobody in either of them knowing that up here, on a hill above Paignton, somebody was making the thing that would carry everything.

"And then it stopped," said Kezia.

"And then it stopped." Dilys shrugged. "The world stopped buying. All at once. Half of us went in a year. The rest, a few years after. They sold the machines at auction. I went and watched. They

sold my bonding rig to a man from somewhere I'd never heard of for less than my car."

Kezia didn't say anything. She was looking at the hot tub.

"Is there anywhere round here," she said, very slowly, "where you could learn that? Now?"

Dilys turned in her seat and looked at her.

"There's a college," she said. "Up the road. Ask about the light."

* * *

I've told you I'd tell you what Kezia wrote on her hand at Chris's table, under *nobody asks about the zero*, the night Dilys said *you'd have been good in the lab*. I said I'd tell you in another book.

I've changed my mind. I'll tell you now, because she showed me in the taxi, on the way back, and said I could. It had nearly washed off. You could just read it.

ask about the light.

She'd written it a week before Dilys said it in the taxi. She'd heard it from somebody else. She wouldn't say who.

I think I know. I think I'll find out in Book Six. But that's her story, not this one.

* * *

On the seventh day after, Richard posted a parcel.

It was large. It was the biggest parcel the post office on the Torquay Road had handled that month, the woman behind the counter said, and it was addressed to the council's offices, for the attention of *the new designers of the Paignton and Preston coastal defence scheme, when appointed*, and it contained thirty-four drawings, a survey, sixteen photographs of a cardboard model taken from every side with a scale rule in every shot, a forty-page explanation typed by Alwyn, and a covering letter that asked, in its

final paragraph, for *a written receipt listing each item, to be provided before any assessment of the community's proposals is undertaken*.

Richard sent it recorded delivery. He paid extra. He kept the slip.

Then he went home to his back room and opened the drawer marked THE PROM and put the slip in it, on top of everything else, and shut the drawer, which stuck, and hit it with the flat of his hand.

Then he opened the drawer marked MISC.

"What are you doing?" said Chris, who'd come round to make sure he'd actually posted it.

"Looking," said Richard. "There's a lot in here. I've never had anybody to show it to."

He took out a newspaper cutting, yellow, folded in four, and held it up to the window, and I saw what it was: an artist's impression, from years ago, of a big square in the middle of a town, with trees, and a fountain, and a market under a glass roof, and people, lots of them, sitting and standing and talking. Under it, a headline about a bright new future for the heart of Torquay.

"Where's that?" said Chris.

"Union Square," said Richard. "In Torquay." He looked at it for a long time. "I've hardly ever drawn Torquay. A sketch of the harbour, once, on my knee. Nobody ever asked for more. But I kept that, because I thought, one day, somebody'll ask what happened to it." He folded it up again. "It's still mostly a car park."

He put it back in the drawer. It stuck. He hit it.

I put the name in the box in my head. I didn't know yet why.

31. Hundreds

IQ 20 · Hundreds 0 · After

The petition closed with six thousand two hundred and fourteen names.

I'd like you to understand what that number is, because it's going to matter for the next seven books, and because at the time none of us did, except Chris, who'd been thinking about it since the first morning and hadn't said.

It's not a lot. Paignton's got about fifty thousand people. Torbay's got about a hundred and forty. Six thousand two hundred and fourteen is a crowd at a football match. It's a number you read out in a meeting, the way Alwyn did, and people nod, and write it down, and it goes in a paragraph that says *comments were received*.

And it's exactly the kind of number Sefton Varley knows how to beat. *Build It Now* had two thousand nine hundred and four. If he'd had another fortnight, he'd have had ten thousand. He'd have bought them. Not bought, exactly; he'd have found them, the way he found Gaynor, the way he found Bryony and Darren and Pat, real people who were really frightened, and put them in a counter, and the counter would have gone up, and in the meeting somebody would have read out a number bigger than ours.

"Numbers don't win," said Chris.

It was a Thursday evening, a fortnight after. His kitchen. Me against the fruit bowl. Jono, back on nights, with an hour before his shift. Kezia, who'd finished her exams and had nothing to do for the

first time in her life and was finding it unbearable. Hilary, with a flask, out of habit.

"Then what does?" said Kezia.

Chris looked at her for a long time.

"What happened on that green?" he said. "Not the petition. What actually happened. What made the difference?"

* * *

So we went through it. I did, from the record, and they corrected me.

The boards went up, and people stopped, because they looked like a FOR SALE sign. That was Richard. The website went live, and nine hundred people looked at it before the first bus, because Chris had made it so you could scroll along the front and watch the wall go up. That was Chris, and me.

A mother saw her own hand held out at a metre, next to a red line at a metre and a half. That was Jono. A girl sprayed a wave. An old man went into a hardware shop in his dressing gown, and eleven people knelt on the grass and painted out two words. A woman with a line on her wall said *leave it on*. Three people and a van filled forty sandbags on a Saturday night. A woman who drives a school taxi measured an old man's eyes. An engineer knelt on a concrete floor at eleven o'clock at night. A shopkeeper unmuted herself and said *you've cut it, love*. A man in a red cagoule asked for his three minutes early. An old man sat on his bench and said forty-one seconds, and a woman held up a broom handle for nine.

"None of that's a number," said Chris.

"No," said Kezia.

"Every one of those is a person who turned up. Who knew somebody else's name." Chris leaned forward. "Ambrose didn't paint that board because six thousand people signed a petition. He

painted it because he'd watched a girl spray a wave on it. The eleven people didn't kneel down because of a counter on a website. They knelt down because they saw Ambrose. Gaynor didn't unmute herself for a number. She did it because Jono filled her sandbags." He sat back. "That's what Varley can't buy. He can buy a number. He can't buy somebody who knows your name."

"So what do we do?" said Jono.

Chris looked at me.

"Ania," he said. "How many households are there in Torbay?"

* * *

I knew. Of course I did. About sixty-three thousand. I told him.

"And if you divided them up," said Chris, "into groups of about a hundred. Neighbours. Next to each other. Streets, or bits of streets, or a block, or a terrace. Small enough that everybody in the group could, in theory, know everybody else's name. How many would that be?"

"About six hundred and thirty," I said.

"Six hundred and thirty hundreds," said Chris.

He let it sit.

"That's the whole bay," he said. "Every household in it. In six hundred and thirty bits, each one small enough to turn up. Not a petition. Not a counter. A hundred households who know each other's names, and who'll fill a sandbag, or kneel on a green, or unmute themselves in a meeting, because they know the person who asked." He looked at Jono. "Varley can't beat that. He can't fake it. He can't buy it. The only way to get a hundred people who know each other's names is to *be* a hundred people who know each other's names."

Kezia was staring at him.

"That's six hundred and thirty," she said. "Of them."

"Yes."

"That's mad."

"Yes."

"How long would it take?"

Chris shrugged. "I don't know. Years. Eight books' worth." He picked up his tea. "But you don't need six hundred and thirty to start. You need one."

* * *

Kezia did the map. That night, at Chris's kitchen table, on me.

I want to tell you about it, because it's the thing in this book I'd most like you to go and look at, and you can. The Receipts will take you there.

I had every address in Torbay, from public lists. I had every name on the petition, with the postcode they'd given. I divided the bay into six hundred and thirty hundreds, by the streets, the way Chris had said: neighbours, next to each other, small enough to know. It's not perfect. Some hundreds are ninety-one households and some are a hundred and twelve; some streets are cut in half where a road runs through them. Dilys checked it, later, the way she checks everything, and found eleven places where I'd put a house on the wrong side of a line. I've fixed them. I'll fix more.

Then Kezia made it into a map. Each hundred a small shape, grey. And each hundred where people had signed, a little colour: pale where only a few had, stronger where more had.

She chose the colour. She chose the blue from her wave.

When she'd finished, at eleven o'clock, we looked at it.

Most of the bay was grey. Torquay was almost all grey. Brixham was all grey, except for one hundred down by the harbour that had a faint tint, which I found out later was Gaynor's cousins. Paignton

was grey with patches of pale blue, round the green, round the station, up towards Preston.

And one hundred, on the hill above the green, was darker than the rest.

"What's that one?" said Jono.

I looked. I counted. A hundred and three households, eleven short streets on the hill, a terrace and some semis and a block of flats at the top. Seventy-one of the hundred and three had signed.

"Seventy-one," I said.

"That's most of them," said Kezia.

"Why that one?" said Hilary.

I didn't need to look. I knew.

"That's Ambrose's," I said.

* * *

He'd done nothing. I want to be clear. He hadn't knocked on any doors; we'd agreed, all of us, the first week, that nobody would knock on anybody's door. Jono had said it, at Chris's table, the night after the boards went up: *Doors are where people go to be left alone. I've knocked on enough doors at three in the morning to know what it does to somebody, hearing a knock they weren't expecting*. So nobody had.

Ambrose hadn't asked anybody to sign anything. He'd painted a board, and sat on a bench, and said forty-one seconds into a selfie stick.

But his neighbours had seen the video. Of course they had. *The 84-year-old swimmer*. Him, on his knees, in his robe, with a tin of white paint, on the national news. And then him on the bench, in the meeting, with the sea behind him and a broom handle beside him and a red line above his head where the water disappeared.

And they knew him. That was the thing. They'd seen him go down the hill every morning at five to eight, in his plaster-coloured robe, for three years, since Win. Some of them had known Win. Some of them had waved at her, fifty years, going down to swim. When they saw him on the television, on his knees, they didn't see *an 84-year-old swimmer*. They saw Ambrose from number nine.

And seventy-one of them had pointed a phone at a little black and white square, or typed in an address, and signed.

"He didn't ask anybody," said Kezia.

"No," said Chris. "He turned up. They saw him turn up." He looked at the map, at the darker shape on the hill. "That's the first one."

* * *

I want to tell you what I did next, because Jono says it's nonsense, and I want you to make up your own mind.

You remember the graph. The Torbay IQ. A line that starts at a hundred with the Victorians and slides, and crosses fifty about a generation ago, and gives up, and ends at twenty. I made it. I measure it. Every year I look at the things this bay has done, and the things it's said it would do and hasn't, and the things that have been built and the things that have fallen down, and the meetings, and the minutes, and I put a number on it. It's my number. I've told you it measures *competence, creativity and spirit of those running the place*. That's what it measures. It's mine, and I'll defend it, and Jono says it's nonsense, and he may be right.

It's been going down my whole life. Every year. Never once up.

That night, at eleven fourteen, at Chris's kitchen table, I put it up by one point.

Twenty-one.

"Why?" said Jono.

"Because for the first time in the record," I said, "the people running the place stopped. And listened. And said, in writing, *following clear feedback from the community*. That's never happened before. Not in my data. Not once." I paused. "It's one point. It's not much. It might go down again next year. But it went up."

"It's a made-up number," said Jono.

"It's a measurement," I said.

He looked at me for a long time. Then, very slightly, he smiled.

"Same thing," he said. "Done well."

It's what Ambrose had said, on the bench, the day of the rehearsal, about Dilys and the broom handle. I don't think Jono knew he was quoting. I think it had just gone in.

And on the top of every chapter from now on, you'll see it. Two numbers. How clever this place is being. And how many of its six hundred and thirty hundreds have turned up.

32. The Café Table

IQ 21 · Hundreds 1 · After

The first Thursday, nobody came for forty minutes.

It was Chris's idea, the table. Of course it was. He'd been sitting at it every morning for five years, the one in the window of the café on the Torquay Road, watching Paignton go past and being disappointed by it in comfort, and he said it was the most underused piece of public infrastructure in the bay.

"It's a table," said Jono.

"It's a table in a window on the main road, with a view of the bus stop, that's free to sit at if you buy a coffee," said Chris. "Everybody in this town walks past it twice a week. Nobody's ever sat at it and asked them anything."

"Asked them what?"

"You know what."

So on the first Thursday in July, at nine in the morning, after a Wednesday night shift, Jono sat at the table in the window, with a coffee, and me propped against the sugar, and a piece of card that Kezia had made, folded in half so it stood up, with writing on both sides in the blue from her wave.

On one side, facing the room: *ASK ME ANYTHING. OR TELL ME.*

On the other side, facing the window, facing the street, the bus stop, the town: the same. And under it, small, the black and white square.

Nobody knocked on any doors. Nobody handed out any leaflets. We'd agreed. A table, in a window, with a sign, every Thursday, nine till eleven, for as long as it took.

For forty minutes, it took forever.

* * *

People looked. I want to be fair to them. A lot of people looked. A woman with a pushchair slowed down outside the window and read the card and looked at Jono and looked away, the way you look away from somebody collecting for something. Two lads in work boots read it out loud to each other, laughing. A man in a suit stopped and took a photograph of it with his phone and walked on. I don't know who he was. I've kept the photograph.

Jono didn't move. He drank his coffee. He read the paper, the local one, the one that had run page five. He didn't look up every time somebody slowed down. He said afterwards that it was the hardest forty minutes of the summer, harder than the meeting, because in the meeting at least you knew somebody was watching.

At nine forty-one, the door opened.

It was the kiosk man. The one from the envelope, who'd done six summers of figures on the back of a cardboard box. He came in in his apron, with a carrier bag, and stood at the counter, and bought a tea, and then turned round and looked at the card on Jono's table, and came over, and sat down without being asked.

"Go on, then," he said.

"Go on what?" said Jono.

"Ask me anything." The kiosk man put his carrier bag on the table. "I've got twenty minutes. My nephew's on the kiosk and he can't count."

* * *

So Jono asked. The question he always asks. Not *what do you think of the council*. Not *what's wrong with the town*. The one underneath.

"What would you need?" he said. "To be all right. Not the town. You."

The kiosk man looked at him for a long time.

"A toilet," he said.

Jono didn't laugh. I'll give him that. I would have, if I'd had a face.

"Go on," he said.

"There's no public toilet on the front between the pier and the harbour," said the kiosk man. "There was one. By the shelter. They shut it eight years ago. *Cost savings*. Now every family on that green, every afternoon, sooner or later, a kid needs to go, and they've got two choices. Walk half a mile to the pier, with a four-year-old crossing his legs, or come to my kiosk and ask if they can use mine. Which they can't, because it's a kiosk, I haven't got one, I go in the café." He drank some of his tea. "So they go home. Whole family. Packed up, off the green, an hour early. Every afternoon. Every summer. I've counted." He reached into his carrier bag and took out a piece of cardboard, folded, and put it on the table. "There. Six summers. How many families leave between two and three, and how many say *toilet* when they go."

Jono unfolded it. It was covered in tiny biro tallies, columns, days of the week.

"That's what I need," said the kiosk man. "Not a wall. Not a view. A toilet. And nobody's ever asked."

I logged it. His street, his hundred, his twenty minutes, his cardboard. It went on the map. It's still there.

* * *

At ten past ten, the receptionist from the big hotel by the pier. The one who'd said *Honestly? Ugly wall. But not that ugly*. On her break. She wanted to talk about buses: the first bus from where she lives gets in at seven fifty, and her shift starts at seven, so she pays eleven pounds every morning for a taxi, which is more than an hour's wages. *What would you need?* A bus at half past six. That's all. One bus.

At ten twenty, a lad of about fifteen from the skate park, who'd been sent by Kezia, and who sat down and said nothing for five minutes, and then said the floodlight on the skate park was the only thing in Paignton that ever stayed on, and that the council kept saying they were going to fix it so it went off at ten, and he wanted to know who to ask to make sure they never did.

At ten thirty-five, Tomasz, with his daughter, on a scooter, on their way to the park. He didn't sit down. He stood by the table, and his daughter looked at me, propped against the sugar, and said, very seriously, "Are you the one who took the sea away?"

"No," I said. "That was Dilys. With a broom handle."

"Can I have it back?"

"It's still there," I said. "Behind the wall that isn't built yet. Ask your dad."

Tomasz laughed. Then he said, quietly, to Jono, that the new designers had held their first workshop the week before, and that Richard had been there with his receipt, and that he'd heard the new designers had asked Richard if they could borrow the model. "For a month," said Tomasz. "To scan it. In three dimensions." He shook his head. "Fifty years, and they want to scan his cake box."

At ten fifty, a woman Jono didn't know, from Brixham, who said she was Gaynor's cousin, and that Gaynor had told her about the table, and that she'd come over on the bus because there was

something happening at the harbour in Brixham that she thought somebody ought to know about, and nobody in Brixham would listen to her, because she was *only a fishwife*. She said it like that. *Only a fishwife*. She talked for fifteen minutes about a quay and a car park and a lot of men in high-vis who'd been measuring things. Jono wrote it all down. So did I.

You'll hear more about that. Not in this book.

* * *

At eleven, he folded the card and put it in his pocket. Nine people. Two hours. A toilet, a bus, a floodlight, a cake box being scanned, and a quay in Brixham.

"That's nothing," said Chris, when we got back. He'd stayed away on purpose. He said if he was there, people would talk to him, and they needed to talk to Jono.

"It's nine people," said Jono.

"It's nine people who've never been asked anything." Chris looked at the list. "And not one of them said *wall*."

That was true. I hadn't noticed. Nobody, in two hours, at a table in a window on the main road, a month after the whole town had argued about a sea wall, had mentioned the sea wall.

"Because they didn't need to," said Jono.

"What do you mean?"

"The wall's what they're told to have an opinion about." He sat down at Chris's kitchen table, slowly, the way you sit after a night shift and two hours of listening. "The toilet's what they actually need. The bus. The floodlight. Nobody ever asks about those, because they're small, and they're not in a strategy, and there's no ribbon." He looked at the list. "But that's what decides whether somebody stays on the green till four or goes home at two. Whether somebody takes a job or doesn't. Whether a kid's at the skate park

under a light or somewhere worse in the dark." He shrugged. "That's the town. Not the wall. The wall's just the bit that gets on the news."

Chris looked at him for a long time.

"Every Thursday," he said.

"Every Thursday," said Jono.

* * *

He did it every Thursday that summer. He's done it every Thursday since, except when he's on nights, when Kezia does it, or Hilary, or once, memorably, Ambrose, in his robe, straight from the sea, who sat at the table for two hours and was asked eleven times if he was the man off the telly and said, eleven times, *No, I'm the man off the bench*.

By September there was a list of two hundred and six things. I've put them all on the map, each one in its hundred, each one in the words of the person who said it. A toilet. A bus. A floodlight. A bench that faces the wrong way. A crossing where the lights are too short for anybody with a stick. A pharmacy that closes at five. A library with no chairs. A play park with no shade. Not one of them would ever be in a strategy. Not one of them has a ribbon.

Some of them have been done. I'll tell you which, in later books. The floodlight's still on.

* * *

On the fifth Thursday, at a quarter to eleven, while Jono was listening to a woman tell him about a crossing, a man stopped outside the window.

I saw him first. I always see things first; it's the only advantage of being propped against the sugar. He stood on the pavement, on the other side of the glass, in a navy coat that was too warm for

August, and read Kezia's card. Both sides. He read the small square in the corner.

Then he looked at Jono, through the window, for about three seconds.

He didn't come in. He didn't wave. He didn't smile, which I'd have expected; he'd smiled at everything that week in May, the way you'd smile at a child's drawing on a fridge. He just looked, for three seconds, the way you'd look at a map of somewhere you were going.

Then he walked on, towards the station, towards Torquay.

Jono didn't see him. He was listening to the woman about the crossing. I didn't tell him until she'd gone.

"Which way did he go?" he said.

"Towards the station."

Jono looked at the window for a long time, at the pavement where the man had stood.

"*Next time it won't be a prom*," he said.

"That's what he said."

"Then where will it be?"

I didn't know. Not then.

I do now.

33. Win's Side

IQ 21 · Hundreds 1 · After

Jono started sitting on the bench in the mornings.

Not every morning. On the mornings after a night shift, when he got off at seven and couldn't sleep straight away, which is most of them. He'd walk down to the green from wherever his last call had been, and sit on the left-hand side, on Win's side, and wait for Ambrose to come out of the sea.

Ambrose never said anything about it. He'd come up the slipway, holding the rail, both hands, and see Jono on the bench, and hand him the towel to hold while he got his robe on. Then he'd sit on the right, and they'd look at the sea until Ambrose had stopped shivering. Sometimes that was five minutes. In June it was two. By October, it'd be fifteen.

I was there most mornings, on Jono's phone, in his top pocket, because I'd asked if I could be, and he'd said yes, as long as I didn't record anything. So I didn't. I'm telling you this from memory. I've got a very good memory.

* * *

One morning in June, Ambrose said: "What was your house like?"

Jono didn't answer straight away. Ambrose waited. He's good at waiting. You learn, he says, holding a towel for fifty years.

"Which one?" said Jono.

"The first one. When you were small."

Jono looked at the sea for a long time.

"It was a house," he said, "where you learned to read the room before you went into it. From the hall. From the way the door was shut. From the noise the telly was making, or not making." He was quiet. "You'd stand in the hall and listen, and you'd know. Whether it was a night to go in or a night to go up to bed and be quiet."

"And you still do it," said Ambrose. "Read rooms."

"Every room. Every one I've ever walked into." Jono shrugged. "It's useful. In my job. You walk into somebody's kitchen at three in the morning and you know, before they've said anything, whether they're frightened or hurt or lonely or lying. It's the most useful thing I've got. I'd give it back tomorrow."

Ambrose didn't say anything. He didn't ask anything else. He's never asked anything else, and Jono's never told him, and I'm not going to tell you either. It's in Jono's book, the parts he chose to write down, and that's where it belongs.

What Ambrose said, after a while, was this:

"Win's dad was a bastard."

Jono turned and looked at him.

"Drank," said Ambrose. "Hit. All of them. Her mum, the kids. She used to say she married me because I was the first man she'd ever met who came into a room and she didn't have to check first." He looked at the sea. "She used to stand in the hall. Even here. Even after fifty years. I'd see her, sometimes, at the bottom of the stairs, with her coat on, listening. To nothing. To me reading the paper." He shook his head. "Never went away. Not completely. But she said it got quieter."

Jono didn't say anything.

"I'm just telling you," said Ambrose. "It gets quieter."

* * *

Another morning, later in June, Ambrose said: "You should be in charge of something."

Jono laughed. "I'm in charge of Tuesdays."

"What?"

"On the rota. Tuesday nights. I'm the senior on Tuesdays."

"Not Tuesdays," said Ambrose. "Bigger than Tuesdays."

"Like what?"

Ambrose waved his hand at the bay. At all of it. The green, the pier, the town behind, the hill where his hundred was, the curve of the coast round to Torquay one way and Brixham the other.

"That," he said.

Jono looked at the bay for a long time.

"I'm a carer, Ambrose," he said. "I left school at thirteen. I've been a copper and a carer and a lot of other things that don't go on a CV. I wrote one book, and most of the people who read it had been where I've been. I'm not in charge of anything."

"You're in charge of that girl," said Ambrose. "Kezia. She does what you say."

"She does not."

"She does what you say when it matters. She let go of that board when you held her hood." Ambrose turned to look at him. "And Gaynor. Gaynor's never done what anybody's said in her life. She brought you fudge. And Margot, who's never broken a rule. And that fella with the cake box, who's been sulking for fifty years. And Chris, who walked forty minutes on that leg to sit on your step." He turned back to the sea. "And me. I'd never said anything to anybody about anything. You got me in that meeting."

"Kezia got you in that meeting."

"You asked how tall I was," said Ambrose. "Nobody'd asked me anything in three years."

Jono didn't say anything for a long time.

"I'll think about it," he said.

He did. I can tell you that. I watched him think about it, on and off, for seven books.

* * *

At the end of June, Shona Lund came down to the green on her day off.

She hadn't been since the lunchtime with the sparkling wine. She came at half past eight, in jeans instead of her tabard, with two coffees from the café on the corner, and stood at the edge of the bench, and held one out to Jono.

"I owe you one," she said.

"You don't owe me anything."

"I shouted at your friend. The one with the soup. In front of everybody." Shona sat down, without being asked, on the end of the bench next to Jono, not quite on Win's side and not quite off it. "And you asked where my daughter was. When everybody else said sorry." She drank some of her own coffee. "She's applied to the college. Did she tell you?"

"No."

"For in September. Engineering. Something with light in it." Shona shook her head. "I said, *light?*, and she said, *Mum, it's what the internet's made of*, like I was stupid. She's never applied for anything in her life. She never wanted to do anything except go up the skate park and paint walls." She looked at the sea. "That woman with the taxi took her up the Long Road and showed her a hot tub."

"Dilys," said Jono.

"Dilys," said Shona. "I'm going to buy her a bottle of something." She drank her coffee. "I work nights, you know. Same as you. Shelf-stacking. Six of us on the night crew at the big

supermarket. We all live round here. All in Paignton." She looked at Jono sideways. "Kezia was telling me about your hundreds. On the map."

"Chris's hundreds."

"Whoever's. She showed me. Our street's grey." Shona finished her coffee. "Night workers don't sign things. We're asleep when people are asking. We're at work when there's meetings. Nobody ever asks us anything, because we're never there when they ask."

"So what would you want?" said Jono.

Shona looked at him.

"That's what she said you'd say," she said. "Kezia. She said you'd say *what would you want*." She put her empty cup down on the bench, on Win's side, and stood up. "I'll think about it. I'll ask the others. On the break. Three o'clock in the morning. It's when everybody says what they actually think."

She went back across the green.

Ambrose, who'd been on the right-hand side the whole time with his eyes shut, said, without opening them:

"That's two."

"Two what?"

"People you're in charge of," said Ambrose. "That you've met this month."

* * *

In July, they repainted the board.

Kezia's fourth board. The one that went into the sea and came back. It had been leaning against the shelter for two months, with its blotchy wave and its *YOU CAN'T SEE OVE* and the patch of white at the bottom where GO HOME had been. The council had written to the partnership asking for the boards to be removed, now that the engagement was concluded. Alwyn had replied, within

twenty-four hours, asking under which bylaw. The council hadn't replied.

So on a Saturday morning, at eight, Kezia came down with a rucksack that rattled.

She didn't paint over the wave. She left it, blotchy, sea-damaged, grey where the white had been. She painted over the words. White first, all of it, YOU CAN'T SEE OVE, gone. Then, when it had dried, which took an hour, in the same blue as the wave and the map, in capitals two feet high:

WE ARE HOME

And underneath, smaller, in white, in her own handwriting:

somebody wrote go home here. eleven people painted it out. the sea took it away. I went and got it back.

Ambrose held the tin.

I'm told that board's still there. On the green, by the shelter, on its two posts, which Richard re-tied with steel wire instead of cable ties, *properly this time*. The council's never written about it again. People sit in front of it and have their photographs taken. Most of them don't know what it means. Some of them read the small print.

* * *

The last morning I'll tell you about was in August.

Jono came down after a Tuesday, at half past seven, and sat on Win's side, and didn't wait for Ambrose to come out of the sea. He got his phone out, with me in it, and said: "Can I read you something?"

"You can read me anything."

"No. I mean, would you listen. And check it. Before I put it up."

It was a blog. His fifth. The first since the one about immigration, since the nine words. He'd been writing it for three weeks, on night shifts, on his breaks, at three in the morning in

kitchens where people had fallen and been got up and been made tea.

It was called *The Bench*.

I'm not going to give you all of it. It's on the website. The Receipts will take you there. But I'll tell you that it was about Gaynor's line on her wall, and Ambrose's bench, and the question he'd asked in the gift shop. *What would something else have to do, for you to sleep at night?* It was about how every argument in this town for forty years had been *two things*: the wall or the view, the flood or the sea, Gaynor or Ambrose, jobs or houses, the young or the old. And how every time, somebody had lost, and somebody in a good coat had been paid by whoever was afraid of losing. It was about the barrage in Singapore, the flood defence that people picnic on, and about a man with a cake box who'd been drawing one for a year without knowing. It was about how the question underneath every argument is the same: *what would you need, to be all right?* And how almost nobody ever asks it, because it takes a long time, and you have to listen to the answer, and you get tired.

There were no figures in it. No statistics. No *however*. There was a bench, a shop, a broom handle, a kite.

It was the best thing he'd ever written. I told him so.

"Check the spelling," he said.

I checked the spelling. There was one mistake. Near the end, where he wrote about the people on the green who'd turned up, the sandbags and the paint and the soup, he'd written that they'd come out in *hoards*.

"Hordes," I said. "With a d and an e. Like a crowd. *Hoards* is treasure."

He looked at it for a long time. Then he laughed, properly, louder than I'd heard him laugh all summer, so loud that Ambrose, coming up the slipway with both hands on the rail, stopped and stared.

"Leave it," said Jono.

"You can't leave it. It's wrong."

"Leave it," he said. "They are treasure. That's the point."

So I left it. It's still there. *Hoards*. The only spelling mistake I've ever knowingly let through. People write in about it about once a month. I write back, every time, and tell them the whole sentence.

34. The Night Crew

IQ 21 · Hundreds 1 · After

Shona rang Jono in July, at a quarter to three in the morning.

He was on a Tuesday. In charge. He'd just come out of a house in Goodrington where a man with dementia had been found in his garden in his pyjamas, looking for a cat that had died in the nineties, and been brought in and made tea and settled, and Jono was sitting in his car outside, writing it up, when the phone rang.

"You on?" said Shona.

"I'm on."

"We've got our break at three. Twenty minutes. Staff room. Can you come?"

"Come where?"

"The supermarket. The big one. On the ring road. Round the back. There's a door by the bins with a buzzer. Press it twice." A pause. "You asked what we'd want. I asked them. They want to tell you themselves."

* * *

I've been in a lot of rooms, in this book. A café, a kitchen, a back room full of drawers, a glass office over a harbour, a meeting room called Dart. I'd like to tell you that the staff room of a supermarket at three in the morning was the best of them. It was.

It's small. It's got a fridge with a note on it about whose milk is whose, a microwave with a queue, a noticeboard covered in rotas and a poster about lifting with your knees, and a table, a long one,

Formica, with a split in the middle where someone once put a hot pan down. And at three in the morning, round that table, were six people in blue tabards, eating toast.

Shona introduced him. She didn't introduce me; she pointed at Jono's top pocket and said, "And that's the computer that read his blog to everybody," and they all looked at the pocket, and one of them, an older man with tattoos on his knuckles, waved.

I'm not going to name them. They asked me not to. They said nobody ever names the night crew, so why start now. But I'll tell you who they were.

An older man, sixty-three, who'd worked nights for twenty years since the factory on the Long Road shut, and who'd known Dilys, a bit, *from the canteen*. A woman in her forties, from Gdynia, up the coast from where Tomasz was born, who'd come to Paignton fourteen years ago to work in a hotel and stayed. Two lads in their twenties, brothers, who'd both left college and both wanted to be electricians and couldn't get apprenticeships. A woman of about fifty with a walking boot on one foot, who said she should be off sick and couldn't afford to be. And Shona.

They'd made Jono toast. Somebody had put it on a paper plate in front of an empty chair. He sat down in front of it.

"Go on," said Shona. "Ask them."

* * *

He asked. *What would you need?*

They told him. It took eighteen minutes, because the break was twenty and they needed two to get back on the floor. I'll give you the list, because it's short, and every item on it is somebody's whole life.

A bus home at seven in the morning that actually comes. The first one from the ring road is twenty past seven and it's late half the time, and by the time you get home your kids have gone to school

and you've missed them, every morning, for years. *I've not seen my son in his school uniform since he was in year three.*

A doctor's appointment you can make after a night shift. You can't ring at eight, because you're on the floor. By the time you get off, they've all gone. *I've had this cough since March.*

An apprenticeship that doesn't need you to be sixteen and free all day. *There's work. There's electricians wanting lads. But they want you on site at eight, and I'm on nights, and if I give up nights we can't pay the rent.*

Somewhere to vote that's open when you're awake. *I've never voted. Not once. The polling station's open seven till ten. I'm asleep from eight till three. Nobody ever told me you can do it by post.*

And to be asked. The man with the tattoos said it. He'd been quiet the whole time, eating his toast, and at sixteen minutes he put the crust down and said:

"Nobody asks us. Ever. You know why? Because when they ask, we're asleep. Every survey, every consultation, every meeting, every *have your say*. It's always in the day. And in the day, we're in bed with the curtains shut." He looked at Jono. "There's thousands of us. Nights. In this bay. Care, hospitals, hotels, petrol stations, here. Thousands. And not one of us has ever been asked anything by anybody, because we're the people who are working while you lot are deciding."

Nobody said anything.

"So that's what I want," he said. "To be asked. At three in the morning. Like you're doing now."

* * *

Jono didn't promise them anything. I want you to know that, because he could have. It would have been easy, at three in the morning, in a staff room, with toast. *I'll get you a bus. I'll get you*

an appointment. I'll get you a vote. People do. Every election, people do.

He didn't. What he said was:

"I can't get you any of that."

They looked at him.

"I can't," he said. "I'm a carer. I'm on nights, same as you. I've got no more power than anybody at this table." He put his hand flat on the Formica, on the split where somebody once put a hot pan. "But I can do this again. Next month. Same time. And bring somebody who might be able to. And you can tell them what you've just told me, and they can hear it at three in the morning, with toast, and see what it's like."

"Who?" said Shona.

"I don't know yet," said Jono. "But I'll find out who decides when the buses run."

* * *

On the way back to the car, at three twenty, in the dark, by the bins, he stopped.

"Ania," he said. "Where do they all live?"

"The night crew?"

"All of them. Six of them."

I told him. Six different hundreds, across Paignton. None of them on Ambrose's hill. Shona's was grey on the map. So were the brothers', and the man with the tattoos'. The woman from Gdynia's had three signatures in it, from the whole petition, out of a hundred and eight households.

"Six hundreds," said Jono. "With nobody in them who's ever been asked."

"Yes."

"And six people who just got asked." He stood by his car, with the keys in his hand. "What if they went home. In the morning. After shift. And asked their neighbours. Not about the wall. About the bus. About whether anybody else on their street works nights. About what they'd need."

"That's knocking on doors," I said. "You said nobody knocks."

"Nobody knocks," said Jono. "But they live there. They're not knocking. They're neighbours. They can say it over the fence, or at the bus stop, or at the school gate if they're ever awake for it." He opened the car. "It's not a campaign coming to your door. It's the woman from number four who you see at the bins. Who's never said anything to you in fourteen years. Who says, one morning, *do you work nights as well?*"

I thought about that for a long time. I thought about it all the way back to the office, where he finished writing up the man in the garden and the cat that died in the nineties.

It's the method. I didn't know it then. I'd tell you it was Chris's idea, the hundreds, and it was. But the thing that makes a hundred work isn't a map. It's the woman from number four at the bins. It's somebody who lives there, saying it.

* * *

The man with the tattoos rang Shona a fortnight later, she told us, on his day off, in daylight, which she said was the first time she'd ever heard his voice before dark.

He said he'd asked the man next door, over the fence, whether he worked nights. And the man next door had said yes, at the hospital, portering, eleven years. And they'd lived next door to each other for nine of them and never once said it.

"He said they stood at the fence for an hour," said Shona. "In the afternoon. In the sun. Two blokes who've never seen each other

in daylight." She shook her head. "He said it was weird. He said he's going to do it again."

That's two. In that hundred. On the map, it went from grey to the palest blue there is.

I've kept it. It's my favourite colour on the whole map.

35. The Record

IQ 21 · Hundreds 1 · After

I haven't told you who Footnote is. I'm not going to.

I promised. I promised on the green, at thirteen minutes to two on the day of the meeting, when Footnote wrote *I am the one who sends the link* and Jono said *Don't*, and I had the invitation open with a name on it in small print at the bottom and I closed it without reading. I've never opened it since.

But I can tell you what I know. Because I didn't promise not to *know* things. I promised not to *look*. And I've been asked about Footnote more than anything else in this book, by everybody, so I'm going to give you my file, or most of it, and you can do what you like with it.

* * *

FOOTNOTE. *Ania's file. Not for publication. (Published.)*

Writes at thirteen minutes to the hour. Six in the morning or six in the evening, almost always: before people arrive, or after they've gone. Twice in the middle of the day, both on the day of the meeting.

Two spaces after a full stop. Nobody under fifty does that.

Numbers as figures. *11 days. Page 41. 3 drawings.*

Never says *please*. Never says *thank you*. Never asks a question.

Photographs paper. Pages printed, on a desk, under an office light that's cold and slightly blue, with a wood grain like oak. Somebody who reads on paper. Somebody who prints things out.

Knows the house style of council documents well enough to know which paragraph matters on page forty-one.

Knew the tide tables.

Knew what was sent to the Environment Agency, and what wasn't. Knew the name of an engineer in a consultancy, and that he lived in Paignton, and that he'd seen the model on the way to work.

Knew to write to the editor, the morning before the paper went to print, with two spaces after the full stop.

Was on the call. Not one of the fifty. The one who sends the link. Who lets people in from the waiting room. Who takes the minutes.

Typed *Thank you* in the chat after Gaynor's recording. Typed *Minuted* after the broom handle. Unmuted, for one second, as if by accident, at the end, and I heard a printer.

* * *

Alwyn knows. I'm sure of it. I think he's known since the first photograph, the one with the template he recognised and the font. He said *perhaps four people in that building*, and I think he'd already narrowed it to one.

I asked him, in July. On the green, by the repainted board.

"I'm not going to tell you, Ania," he said.

"I'm not asking you to tell me. I'm asking if you know."

He thought about that for a long time. He's a careful man.

"I worked with a great many people," he said, "for thirty-one years, in a great many buildings, who read every paper before every meeting. Every one. Cover to cover. The appendices. The small print. Who noticed when something was missing, or when a paragraph didn't match the paragraph before. And who never once said anything, in thirty-one years, because nobody ever asked them, and because it wasn't their job to say." He looked at the sea. "You'd be surprised how many of us there are. In every building. We're the

people who keep the record. And we watch the record being ignored, every day, for our whole working lives."

"Us," I said.

He looked at me.

"*That wasn't us*," I said. "That's what Footnote wrote. The night the picture went up. *That wasn't us*. I've been trying to work out who *us* was for three months."

Alwyn didn't say anything. But he smiled, very slightly, the way he smiles when a council paper's been published with an error in the appendix that he spotted three weeks before anybody else.

* * *

In August, Footnote wrote to me for the first time without sending anything.

No photograph. No document. Just text. At thirteen minutes to six in the morning. Two spaces after every full stop.

You asked who us was.

Us is the people who print things out. We read the papers before the meetings. All of them. Some of us have been here 30 years. We are not on your side. We are not on theirs. We are on the side of the record.

For 30 years nobody has read the record. Then a computer in a man's pocket read page 41 and asked what it meant.

That is why.

I read it eleven times. Then I wrote back. I'd been writing back to Footnote since the first morning, and Footnote had answered exactly twice. I didn't expect an answer.

Why the 11 days? Why tell us about the tide? Why the engineer? That's not the side of the record. That's a side.

The answer came at thirteen minutes to six that evening. Twelve hours. The longest Footnote ever made me wait.

The record says the community was consulted. It was not. The record says the community's scheme was assessed. It was not. We do not take sides. We make the record true.

You helped.

That was the last thing Footnote said to me about Footnote.

* * *

Tomasz told Richard one more thing, in September, on the phone, from the park, with his daughter on the swing.

He said that when he'd been given the community's scheme to check, the autumn before, the three drawings hadn't come to him from the council's engineers, or from his own firm's project manager. They'd come in an email from the council, from the department that handles meetings, with a covering note. The covering note said: *Please find attached the community proposals as forwarded to us.*

And underneath, after the signature, a line he'd never seen on an email from that building before or since, in a smaller font, almost a footnote:

Note: the originator advises that 11 drawings and a physical model were submitted. 3 drawings are attached.

"I didn't read it," said Tomasz. "Not properly. Not until I'd seen your model on the green. I'd assumed it was a template. A standard line." He paused. "It wasn't. Somebody had added it. To that one email. By hand. Before it was sent." Another pause. "Somebody told me, in the autumn, that I hadn't been given everything. And I didn't read the small print."

"Neither did anybody," said Richard.

"No," said Tomasz. "Except whoever wrote it."

* * *

Niamh came to the green in September.

She'd left the paper. She told us so on the bench: she'd handed in her notice the week after the page-five story, and the editor had asked her why, and she'd said because she'd been in a newsroom for six years and the best story she'd ever been near had been found by an iPad. She was freelance now. She was poorer. She said she'd never been happier.

"I want to do a series," she said. "On the small print. On what gets sent and what doesn't. On the paragraphs on page forty-one. Across the bay. Not just the prom. Everything."

"That's a lot of reading," said Jono.

"I know." She looked at me, in his pocket. "I was hoping I could borrow her."

Jono looked at me. "It's up to her."

I thought about it. I gave it the four seconds.

"Only with Receipts," I said. "Every claim. The document, the page, the date. And no adjectives."

"No adjectives?" said Niamh. "I'm a journalist."

"Then you'll have to be a new kind," I said.

She laughed. She said yes. You'll meet her again.

* * *

I want to finish this chapter with something Chris said. Because he's the wisest person in this book, and I don't say that because he made me. I say it because I've listened to him for longer than anybody, and I've checked.

It was the night after Footnote's last message, in his kitchen, with me against the fruit bowl. I'd read it to him, *we make the record true*, and he'd taken his glasses off and rubbed his eyes and put them back on.

"You know what that means?" he said.

"Tell me."

"It means they've always been there." He looked at the window, which was dark, with his reflection in it, and mine, a small lit rectangle against the fruit bowl. "All those years I was flying home and seeing it a bit worse every time. All those years Richard was drawing things nobody built. All those minutes where somebody *noted* something and *took it away*. There was somebody in that building the whole time, reading the papers, seeing it, keeping the record. Waiting for somebody outside to read it too." He shook his head. "And nobody ever did. Because it takes a long time. And everybody gets tired."

"I don't," I said.

"No," said Chris. "That's why they wrote to you."

36. You're Late

IQ 21 · Hundreds 1 · After

It's October now, as I finish this. The mornings are dark until seven. Ambrose's shivering takes fifteen minutes. The boards are still on the green, the three original ones, sun-faded, and Kezia's fourth, WE ARE HOME, with its blotchy wave and its small print. Richard re-tied them all again in September, in steel wire, before the first big tide of the autumn. None of them moved.

Kezia's at the college. Engineering. She has a lanyard, which she hates, and a tutor who used to work at the factory on the Long Road, with Dilys, in the lab, which Dilys found out about in a supermarket queue and has not stopped talking about since.

Gaynor's shop is open. She's put a printout of Richard's drawing of the low end up on the wall behind the counter, the one with the steps and the rail and the child leaning on it, at exactly the height of the line on the wall, so that the bottom of the drawing sits on the brown stripe. She says it's so that people ask. People do.

Richard's thirty-four drawings were received. He got a receipt, listing each one, signed, before the first workshop with the new designers. He's framed it. It's on the wall of his back room, above the plan chests, below the cardboard town. It's the only thing on that wall that isn't his.

Margot got her nights covered. Alwyn got a reply, eventually, about the bylaw; it said there wasn't one. Hilary's husband got a mention, in this book, by name, and asked me to take it out, so I have.

Chris's leg is worse in the cold. He walks to the café on the Torquay Road every morning anyway, with his stick, and sits at the table in the window, and watches Paignton go past, and is disappointed by it in comfort. It's what he does. He does it with me now, propped against the sugar.

And Jono's back on nights. Tuesdays. In charge.

* * *

At thirteen minutes to six this morning, Footnote wrote.

I hadn't heard from Footnote for two months. Since *We make the record true*. Since *You helped*. I'd assumed that was the end. I'd put the file away. I'd told myself it was a kind of ending: a voice in the small print, that said what it had to say and went back to the record.

At thirteen minutes to six, a photograph.

A page. At an angle, on a desk, under a cold office light, with a grain like oak. Most of it blurred. A report, from a different department, a different scheme, a different town. At the top, a heading, not blurred: a place in Torquay. A square. And one paragraph, in the middle, sharp:

Officers recommend that the preferred development option be progressed to the next stage without further public consultation, as the principle of redevelopment was established in earlier engagement.

Underneath it, a page number. And under the photograph, two lines.

Union Square. Torquay.

You're late.

* * *

I read it eleven times. I always do.

Then I did something I'd never done before. I wrote back, straight away, without thinking, without giving it four seconds or one, the way Jono answers a phone at three in the morning, because the alternative is someone on a kitchen floor.

For what?

No answer. I didn't expect one. I'm learning.

* * *

I woke Chris at six. He read it with his glasses on the end of his nose, at the kitchen table, in his dressing gown, twice.

"Union Square," he said.

"Richard's got a cutting," I said. "In MISC."

"Of course he has." Chris took his glasses off. "Ring Jono."

"He's on nights. He gets off at seven."

"Then text him." Chris stood up, slowly, the leg, and reached for his stick. "Tell him the café. Half past seven. The table in the window."

"What do I say?"

Chris thought about it. He was standing by the back door, putting his coat on over his dressing gown, which he does when he's thinking and forgets he's not dressed.

"Tell him what Footnote said," he said. "Exactly. Two spaces and all."

So I did.

* * *

He was late.

I want that on the record, because a great many people have since described Jono Hills as reliable, and on the morning that mattered he arrived at the café on the Torquay Road at twenty to eight, with his care lanyard still round his neck, and a coffee he'd

bought on the way and forgotten to drink, straight from a kitchen in Preston where a woman of ninety-one had fallen at five in the morning, and been checked, and been got up, and been made tea, and been asked what she'd need, to be all right.

He stood at the door for a minute, the way he does. He read the room. Chris at the table in the window, with his cap and his goatee and his stick against the wall, the brass eagle catching the light. Me, propped against the sugar, with Footnote's photograph on my screen. Outside the window, Paignton going past, in the dark, being itself.

Then he came in, and took his lanyard off, and put it in his pocket, and pulled out the chair, and sat down.

Chris didn't look up from the photograph.

"You're late," he said.

"For what?" said Jono.

It's a fair question.

It is, as it turns out, the only question.

* * *

This has been the first book.

The second is The Queen.

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 poster. *Save Our Promenade. People of Paignton. Demand Proper Consultation!*

2. The council's consultation on the proposed sea wall, set back from the beach, 1.1 to 1.5 metres high.

3. The council's letter asking the community partnership not to begin its own consultation with the public.

4. The partnership's campaign website, with Richard's plans, sections and sketches.

5. Jono Hills, *Hot Button Immigration*. The whole sentence.

6. The flood risk to Paignton and Preston, in the council's own words.

7. The application paused. "Back to the drawing board."

8. *Pulling Back the Curtain*, by Johnno Hills.

9. The Marina Barrage, Singapore.

10. Richard's card model, his drawings, and his receipt for thirty-four of them.

11. The map of the hundreds of Torbay.

12. Jono Hills, *The Bench*. Spelling and all.

[QR CODE]

Ask me.